The transfer of knowledge is power. Alexander Graham Bell knew it when he invented the telephone while trying to invent a hearing device for his deaf mother and his wife. Harriet Tubman also knew this when she concocted coded communications that would actualize the Underground Railroad. Steve Jobs knew it when he invented the Apple technology that would seemingly be glued to every American's hand. As a community college, we too are in the business of knowledge transfer, but our responsibility extends to imparting knowledge *about* the institution.

It is with this focus in mind that we hired Clarus Corporation to perform a thorough audit of our internal and external communications. Clarus has a national reputation for conducting audits specifically of community colleges; in fact, throughout its history, Clarus has worked with more than 150 community colleges. Clarus CEO, Dr. Kathi Swanson, is a nationally-renowned speaker for educational organizations, including the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE).

The need for an audit review grew out of the College's employee engagement survey. While the survey recommendation supported an introspective review, we decided to expand the audit in order to examine the state of both our *internal* and *external* communications. The external audit is currently underway, and includes initial interviews with external stakeholders, with that report anticipated in the coming year. Meanwhile, the internal audit is further along and we already have received some initial feedback. I hope my report here will provide insight into the motivation behind conducting such an audit, the methodology used, and initial findings to date.

Motivation

Regarding the motivation behind the study, as a multi-campus institution with both students and employees stretched across Montgomery County, collegewide communication continues to be a challenge. While we have a wealth of institutional information that we need to share, and a wide array of available communications tools and channels, it is imperative that we take a hard look at *what, how,* and *when* we communicate. But the real purpose of the audit is to dig deeper in order to explore the *effectiveness* of current communication; the *efficiency* of our formal communication channels; and the impact of our *informal* communication channels, such as the "rumor mill" and our social networking sites.

Methodology

As with any communication, listening is essential. Therefore, for two weeks the centerpiece of the audit focused on listening to nearly 500 members of our community. Clarus Corporation hosted more than 60 meetings, visited all three campuses, plus four off-site locations including 40 West Gude, the Office of Information Technology Building, the Gaithersburg Business Training Center, and Westfield South. Their auditors held both small sessions, including one-on-one discussions, and larger group meetings. They also interacted with all of our constituency groups including College leadership, faculty, staff, students, and members of the Montgomery College Foundation Board. The goal was to make sure that specific departments were represented, from meeting with me, to meeting with faculty members in various disciplines, as well as the College's shift workers. Beyond the internal participants, media representatives, high school students, and alumni also participated. These moderated sessions focused on day-to-day communication and perceived issues, and also explored the successes and challenges of the current communications strategy.

Initial Findings

The auditors culled through a large amount of information, and have initially identified two underlying issues:

1. **"Growth in communication modalities has not mirrored the growth of the organization."**

    As our College has evolved, our communications channels have not followed suit. The audit indicates that some employees likened the College of the past to a family, where the major form of communication was face to face. The initial report explains:

    > *As the family grows, there are not enough chairs at the table; the family adds in-laws, multiple generations, and significant others to the family and suddenly the communication breaks down because of the number of people and the inability to interact face to face. When members of the family leave the house, families then send out a 'Christmas letter' to keep those not at the table informed of what is happening, and utilize e-mails, texts, Facebook, phone calls, and other communication channels to keep family members informed.*

    In other words, to compensate for lost face-to-face contact, families find a *variety* of other ways to communicate. The general sentiment is that the College has not effectively found a variety of communication channels, choosing instead to rely primarily on e-mail. This has made it difficult to separate out the critical messages from the gratuitous.

    Specifically, Clarus Corporation breaks down institutional communications into three distinct categories, all of which converge in employee in-boxes:

    - **Mission-Critical—**"strategic, mission altering items that need to be communicated to everyone." This includes information relating to the College budget or laws impacting the College, such as the Dream Act and the College and Career Readiness and College Completion Act.
    - **Job-Critical—**"time-sensitive information that is imperative to employees performing their jobs at the College," such as change in department practices or performance-evaluation memos or required training for College supervisors.
    - **Organizational Information—**"information that is good-to-know, but if employees did not receive the message, then it would not impact the organization or employees' work performance." Examples could be news of a College event or on-campus fundraisers or death notices.

The challenge now is to figure out a way to effectively distinguish and treat messages differently among these categories, and then find an appropriate communications channel that would best suit each type of information. The audit reveals that the current communication strategy in place has led to an overload of information, and an inability to sort mission-critical from the other types of communication. That results, in the words of the auditors, in the "'I didn't know' so often heard across the organization."

2. **"Communication styles differ among the generations, and are influencing the success of the College's communications."**

I often talk about the collision of diverse generations within our classrooms, but the reality is that our workforce is just as diverse when it comes to generational divides. The audit has broken down that make-up of our employees as follows:

- **Traditionalist**—The four percent of our employees who are 67 and older who typically prefer formal, face-to-face communication that appeals to the greater good.

- **Baby Boomers**—Fifty-three percent of our employees are between 49 and 67 years old, and generally prefer verbal communication, whether in person or over the phone, to electronic communication. They respond to communications focused on brainstorming and fairness issues.

- **Generation X**—Thirty-four percent of our employees fall into the age group of 34 to 48 years old. This generation is known to prefer informal and electronic communication, where messages focus on the task at hand.

- **Generation Y**—The final 10 percent of our employee population is in the age range of 33 and younger. They communicate through a variety of channels, mostly all technological. They gravitate toward constant feedback and reinforcement, and on outcomes, not protocol.

Reaching members of our community under the age of 33 to those over the age of 67 using the same communication style is bound to create communications challenges. As the initial report explained, "the communication styles of the generations are at odds with one another. Long formal communications, typical of the traditionalists and the Baby Boomers, are at odds with the 'short tell-me-what-I-need-to-know' communication style of Generations X and Y." We must find a way to distribute information that reaches all different generations, and one that resonates with members of each group.

What's Next

Clarus Corporation is crafting a summary report that evaluates our key communication channels, as well as breaks down what our employees identify as communications that should be mission-critical, job-critical, and that which would be considered organizational information. The final audit will include a look at the key issues that were uncovered, and current communication deficits and the areas where we need to focus on corrective action. To supplement the in-person listening groups, Clarus will conduct an all-College survey, soliciting feedback from students and employees, in order to statistically document the way employees respond to current communications. The goal is to distribute the survey next month, with a target completion date of late February 2014. Later in the year, we plan to wrap up the study with our external communication audit.

Lastly, I am deeply grateful for the hard work of our communications team. Being the messenger has always been a historically-precarious role, and our communications staff members are masters at what they do each and every day. This audit in no ways reflects on the talents of our employees, but rather focuses a spotlight on our increasingly-complex communications landscape, in an attempt to ensure that the College is maximizing these efforts. Although the transfer of knowledge can be challenging, it is also is the single most powerful function of an institution like ours. In closing, I look forward to successfully transferring knowledge about ourselves to ourselves, just as effectively as we transfer all sorts of knowledge externally to our students and our community each and every day.

Monthly Discussion Questions[1]

1. **Institutional needs.** What kind of change, if any, does our institution need?
2. **Context and competition.** Do we understand our institution's competitive position?
3. **Consequences of no change.** What are the consequences if we do not engage in a change process?
4. **Leadership capacity.** As a board and as individual board members, are we able and willing to work with our president to bring about positive change?
5. **Change process and players.** Based on this discussion, what is the right role for the board to play at this time?

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[1] Adopted from MacTaggart, Terrence J., *Leading Change: How Boards and Presidents Build Exceptional Academic Institutions*, AGB Press, 2011 (pp. 21–22).