

# Survey of Communication Strategies of Members of the Arizona State University Senate

Report on Summer Research Project 2017

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## Introduction

This report presents findings from a preliminary study of Arizona State University Senators' communication practices. This study was undertaken to learn about Senate members' strategies for communicating with the constituencies they were elected to represent, these Senators' overall satisfaction with those strategies, and their satisfaction with their communications with Senate leadership and staff. The study was conducted from July through September of 2017 with the support of the Provost's office.

The study was conducted because there is a concern among current Senate leadership that some University faculty do not have a clear understanding of the role of the University Senate in implementing the shared governance model established at Arizona universities by Arizona Revised Statute §15-1601(B). One of the causes of this lack of understanding may be insufficient or ineffective processes for communications between Senators and faculty in their units. For example, practices for informing faculty of senate actions vary across departments, with Senators in some units regularly distributing written reports with commentary on Senate meetings, while senators in other units expect their departmental colleagues to seek out information on the Senate dashboard on their own. As a first step in exploring this issue, the study reported here aimed to identify the various processes and strategies Senators have used to communicate with their unit-level colleagues about Senate actions and to assess their levels of satisfaction with the efficacy of their various strategies. While needs and expectations obviously vary across departments of different size and with diverse collegial culture, the finding may be used to contribute to developing a set of recommended practices for Senators to consider implementing.

## Methodology

A survey of current Senators' communication strategies and their perceptions of the effectiveness of their own strategies as well as those of the Senate leadership and Senate staff seemed to be an effective way to get feedback from as many senators as possible. Follow-up interviews would present an opportunity to explore issues in greater depth.

A survey questionnaire (see Appendix A for a copy of the survey questionnaire) was circulated to all elected members of the Senate for the 2016-17 Academic year. Survey respondents were asked to indicate their consent as research subjects by answering "yes" to an initial consent statement. Any respondent who replied "no" to the consent quest was exited from the survey after that initial question. Survey participants' responses were anonymous unless they chose to identify themselves by listing their email addresses when volunteering for informal follow-up interviews. With the exception of a question about the campus assembly to which a respondent belonged, questions soliciting demographic information such as number of years of service as a Senator were optional, so that respondents could maintain their anonymity.

Before circulation, the survey was tested by two experienced Senate members, who made minor suggestions for clarification. The ASU Office of Research Integrity reviewed the survey and follow-up informal interviews and approved it as an exempted study (ASU IRB Study00006493)

Survey questions focused on strategies for seeking input on upcoming items for discussion on Senate meeting agenda as well as strategies for communicating the outcome of Senate votes on action items and reporting on other Senate agenda items. Other questions asked respondents to indicate their level of satisfaction with their own strategies for communicating with their constituents, as well as their satisfaction with the communication strategies of Senate leadership and staff.

### Data and Analysis

The survey was sent to the 104 Senators who were elected members of the Senate during the 2016-2017 academic year, excluding members of the University Academic Council (Senate President, campus presidents, presidents elect, and past presidents) and ex-officio members of the Senate, such as chairs of standing committees and university administrators. Although 56 respondents began the survey, only 48 (46% of Senators) completed it. As Table 1 shows, Campus representation among respondents relatively closely matched campus representation among Senate membership.

**Table 1: Survey Respondents**

Campus	# Senators	# Respondents	% Senators	% Survey Respondents
Downtown	22	9	21.10%	18.75%
Ply	9	4	8.70%	8.16%
Tempe	67	34	64%	69.39%
West	6	2	5.60%	4.08%
	104	49	99.40%	100.00%

Respondents were asked to indicate the name of the academic unit they represented, although this question was clearly marked as “optional,” as identifying the unit would compromise anonymity. Among those who identified their units, only two units were listed more than once: School of History Religion, and Philosophy Studies (SHRPS) and School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning.

As Table 2 shows, over two thirds of the respondents who provided information about the length of their Senate service were serving in their first senate term in 2016-17. Sixteen respondents (36%) had just completed their first year of service in the Senate, while 1 respondent had served for 12 non-consecutive years.

First Term	Second Term	Third Term	Fourth Term
31 (69%)	10 (22%)	3 (7%)	1 (2%)

### Results

Forty-eight participants responded to the question asking them to describe their strategies for informing their constituents about agenda items for upcoming Senate meetings and were given the set of choices listed in Table 3, from which they could select all that applied.

**Table 3. Most frequently used strategies for communicating about *upcoming* Senate business:**

<b>Strategy</b>	<b># using</b>	<b>% using</b>
Announce specific items on upcoming Senate agenda at a face-to-face unit meeting	31	64.6%
Announce specific items on upcoming Senate agenda via email	19	39.6%
Circulate Senate agenda document to members of the unit in advance of the Senate meetings via email	7	14.6%
Circulate link to Agenda on Senate Dashboard via email	4	8.3%
Do nothing	4	8.3%

Nine respondents selected “other” for this question, though only five provided additional information in comments, including the following:

- I focus on reporting on the meetings unless there is a specific issue on the agenda that needs unit input.
- I have communicated topics of the agenda to my director.
- for many faculty, service on the Senate is a kind of duty that representatives are elected to on behalf of their colleagues so that they won't have to engage it.
- Depending on issues raised in the senate I contact people (Dean, colleagues) and act what is meaningful for that particular case.
- It helps to have Academic Senate report be a standing item on department meeting agendas.

The two most popular strategies for communicating with constituent about completed Senate actions was announcing or reporting outcome of Senate meetings at subsequent meetings of the unit and to Write and circulate a summary report of Senate actions after the meeting (see Table 4) . The survey questionnaire prompted respondents who chose the latter response to email a sample summary report to the PI; however, no sample reports were received.

**Table 4. Most frequently used strategies for communicating with constituents about *completed* Senate actions**

<b>Strategy</b>	<b># using</b>	<b>% using</b>
Announce/report outcome of Senate meeting at a unit meeting	34	70.8%
Write and circulate my own summary report of Senate actions after the meeting	18	35.7%
Circulate Senate meeting minutes document to members of the unit after the meeting	9	18.8%
Do nothing	2	4.2%
Circulate link to Senate meeting minutes on Senate Dashboard	1	2%

Fewer than one in five respondents indicated that they circulated the Senate minutes document itself to constituents; and only a handful circulated the link to the minutes on the Senate dashboard. In follow-up interviews, some respondents indicated that the significant time lapse between Senate meeting

actions and formal approval of minutes at the next meeting prior to their wider distribution meant that circulating minutes was not a timely strategy for informing constituents of outcomes.

The most commonly used strategy for seeking input from constituents was to “circulate a general invitation for input to all my constituents via email,” although many respondents indicated they frequently contact individual constituents who they expected to have relevant interests or experience.

**Table 5. Most frequently used strategies for seeking input to inform a vote on Senate actions**

<b>Strategy</b>	<b># using</b>	<b>% using</b>
Circulate a general invitation for input to all my constituents via email.	25	43.10%
Contact specific individual constituents who I know have an interest or expertise related to a particular upcoming or current Senate action and ask them directly for feedback on that particular issue	21	36.21%
I do not seek input from constituents	3	5.1%

Several respondents also indicated that they seek input at face-to-face unit meetings.

Respondents offered the several additional comments about strategies for seeking input:

- “I will seek input only on matters that are relevant to my colleagues.”
- “The only input I get is from my department chair.”
- “Discuss topics at unit monthly meetings.”
- “Only when senators are asked to bring back input from our constituents do I seek input.”
- “Senate is a standing item at the faculty meeting.”

When respondents were asked to rank order reasons for choosing communication strategies, the most important was that they were using strategies that were customary within their units. Collectively, respondents ranked their reasons the following order, from most influential to least influential.

1. These are the customary strategies used by Senators from my unit
2. They are convenient
3. They are reliable
4. My constituents have request I use these strategies

Respondents were also asked to evaluate their level of satisfaction with their own strategies for communicating with constituents, using a “five-star” system in which one star indicted low satisfaction and five stars indicated high satisfaction. Though the mean scores both for strategies of reporting to constituent and for strategies for getting input from constituents were equal to nearly four “stars,” as Table 6 indicates, the scores suggest a degree of dissatisfaction worth noting.

**Table 6. Satisfaction with own strategies for communicating with constituents**

<b>Goal of Strategies</b>	<b>Mean score on 5-point scale</b>
Strategies for reporting to constituents	3.94
Strategies for getting input from constituents	3.80

*Senators' Satisfaction with Communication with Senate Leadership and Senate Staff*

Survey respondents were also asked to rate their satisfaction with their communications with Senate leadership, senate staff, and with other Senate groups.

As Table 7 below shows, regarding communication about the Senate's *upcoming* business, satisfaction was highest for communications with Senate Office staff and lowest for communications with Chairs of Senate Committees. This is perhaps not surprising, since Senate Office staff typically send out several email messages for each Senate meeting, while Senate Committee Chairs typically communicate with Senators about upcoming business only through mentions in oral reports presented at Senate meetings, and frequently give no report at all.

**Table 7. Satisfaction with Senate Leadership's Communication re *Upcoming* Business**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean score on 5-point scale</b>
Senate President	4.54
President of my campus assembly	4.07
Chairs of Senate Committees	4.00
Senate Office Staff	4.59

For satisfaction with Senate Leadership's Communications with Senators regarding *completed* business, communications with Senate staff again received the highest score for effectiveness, as Table 8 below shows. Presidents of campus faculty assemblies received the lowest score, although four out of five stars is a strong score.

**Table 8. Satisfaction with Senate Leadership's Communication re Completed Business**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean score on 5-point scale</b>
Senate President	4.36
President of my campus faculty assembly	4.00
Chairs of Senate Committees	4.16
Senate Office Staff	4.56

Respondents were also asked to rate their satisfaction with the effectiveness of their communication with other Senators and Senate groups. As Table 9 below shows, respondents as a whole were least satisfied with their communications with other Senators from their own campuses. Their dissatisfaction with their communications with other Senators from their own units is perhaps most surprising, as their access to colleagues at the unit level might be presumed to aid in communications.

**Table 9. Senators' Satisfaction with Communications with Senate Groups**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean score on 5-point scale</b>
University Academic Council	4.13
Senate Executive Committee	4.07
Other Senators from own unit or college	3.82
Other Senators from own campus	3.39

## **Interview Results:**

Although, overall, survey respondents indicated a high level of satisfaction with their own communication strategies and those of the Senate leadership and staff, several areas of communication-related dissatisfaction were articulated during follow-up interviews with six of the survey respondents. The six Senators who were interviewed had all responded “yes” to a question asking if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up conversation and had provided their names and contact information. These six interviewees represented a range of experience. Three were serving their first term, one was in a second term, and another in a third term (the sixth did not provide this optional information.) Three of the interviewees were from the Downtown Campus Academic Assembly and three were from the Tempe Campus Academic Assembly. None of the survey respondents from the Polytechnic and West campuses volunteered for follow-up interviews.

Several themes were repeated numerous times in the interviews. All interviewed Senators remarked that they believed that the faculty as a whole did not understand what the Senate does, noting that they themselves had had little to no understanding of the Senate’s role until they served on the Senate themselves. Several noted that they considered this a strong argument for making an effort to assure that opportunities to serve were rotated among unit faculty. All considered this lack of understanding of the Senate role to be fundamentally a communication issue.

Three interviewees spoke at some length about the need for Senators to have a more intensive or comprehensive orientation to their role. One suggested an in-person orientation to supplement the slide-show presentation that is currently circulated. Four of the interviewees indicated that the only guidance they had received for communicating with their constituencies about Senate business was the example set by previous Senators in their unit. One recommended that either specific guidelines be developed for Senators or a range of options be suggested.

Several of the interviewees noted that they felt they could do more to improve their own communications with their constituencies, including strategies such as always providing a written report, contacting specific members of their units who might have a special interest in a particular Senate initiative or topic of discussion in order to get input on an issue, and informally polling members of their units about issues under discussion in the Senate.

The interviewees discussed their own communication strategies at some length. One Senator gave an example of how the Senate could have input on something even when they were not in a position to make a decision. After circulating a written report on a Senate meeting in which she had passed along her concerns about an issue related to health insurance that had come up in a Senate meeting, her unit faculty decided to take a straw poll vote on the issue, which was passed along to the Senate President.

Two interviewees indicated that their Colleges maintain a space on Blackboard shell where reports from Senators are posted. One provided an example of her college’s blackboard shell where Senators’ written reports are filed for review by College faculty.

Reporting on Senate business at unit meetings is a common strategy. An interviewee who regularly gave a report on the Senate meeting at his unit meetings indicated that the report usually last five to ten minutes and there were rarely any questions. He noted that some issues, such as the discussion of a faculty-student fraternization policy, had prompted significant discussion in a unit meeting. JK noted

that in her unit the two senators take turn circulating written reports of senate meetings or giving oral reports at subsequent unit meetings. Reports from Senators are a regular part of unit-level meetings, and occasionally include mention of upcoming Senate discussion items, in order to get feedback to inform a Senate vote or discussion if an issue is of particular interest to faculty. JW indicated that she and fellow unit senators solicit input on upcoming Senate discussion topics through their Senate meetings reports, noting that this makes the “first readings” particularly important.

However, more experienced Senators are selective in what they report. One interviewee who had served as a senator for three terms indicated that he now had a good idea of which issues were likely to be of interest to his constituents and that he typically reports no more than 10% of Senate business to them. Another interviewee indicated that she regularly contacts “specific individual constituents who I know have an interest or expertise related to a particular upcoming or current Senate action and ask them directly for feedback on that particular issue.”

One interviewee explained that although she forwards Senate-related information to members of her unit, she had to do so through a staff members, according to unit protocol. She noted that this requirement occasionally created problems with delaying timely messages and also occasionally confused recipients as to who the original sender was, resulting in Senate-related communications appearing to come from university administration.

Several interviewees had suggestions for changes in the ways Senate leadership and staff communicate with Senators and with members of the Academic Assembly more generally. Three interviewees mentioned that they had expected more deliberation and discussion on the Senate floor. One remarked that he had expected more opportunities for input on issues during the Senate meetings. He suggested that the Senate President should explain expectations as far as discussions during the meetings.

Another noted that for the most part the Senate as a whole learns about what the committees are working only after the fact, when they make their reports or present items for a vote. This interviewee indicated that he was not aware of opportunities for communications with Senate committees prior to presentation of committee reports. However, he said that he trusted the committees to do their work responsibly and was comfortable with waiting until the meeting to get information about their work.

Another interviewee suggested that Senate committees use social media to post updates about their work between monthly senate meetings. He noted that, while committees would need to use discretion about what information they circulated, strategic use of social media could create an environment in which there was a sense that important things are happening. He saw the use of social media as a strategy for promoting the work of the senate, not as a channel of official communication.

Several other issues related to communication practices were raised by interviewees.

- One interviewee explained that she had never understood the Senate’s role in regard to the CAPC report and agenda items. She observed it seemed that the Senate was merely providing a rubber stamp.
- One Senator commented that there seemed to be no consequences for failure to attend Senate meetings.

- Another interviewee (CL) indicated that she has doubts about some of her constituents even knowing she is their Senator. Even though she regularly posts written reports on a Blackboard site, she doubts whether most faculty are looking at the Blackboard page on a regular basis.
- One (JW) noted that although the dashboard is well-designed and provides useful information, she doubts whether people actually open and review it with any frequency, and wondered whether it was in fact an effective medium. She suggested that ASU News could provide more coverage for Senate activities.
- One (JW) indicated that it was difficult to meet other Senators. She noted that as a Tempe senator, she had not served on many Senate Committees, which would offer opportunities for getting to know other Senators.
- An interviewee who had been a member of the University Academic Council observed that faculty often don't know that the Senate has been involved in important changes on campus because issues have not actually come to the floor of the Senate in the form of a vote. Some matters are confidential. While the Senate tracks many non-confidential issues through the Requests for Consultation (RFC) tracking document, faculty may not review that document. This senator suggested regularly announcing the results of RFCs on the Senate Dashboard, even when no formal Senate discussion or vote was in order.
- Another interviewee wondered why Senate leadership's communications with members of the Academic Assembly were typically routed through the Provost's office, observing that this gave the impression that the Senate was controlled by university administration.

## Implications and conclusions

### Recommendations for Senators:

- Develop specific guidelines for Senator's communications with constituents or suggest a range of options, such as the following:
  - circulating written reports via email and/or posting on a blackboard shell,
  - making oral reports a routine item on the agenda of unit meetings,
  - informally polling unit members on issues of high interest,
  - conferring with colleagues with special expertise or special interest in an issue that is before the Senate for consideration.

### Recommendations for Senate Leadership and Staff:

- Conduct an in-person orientation for Senators to supplement the slide-show presentation that is currently circulated.
- Investigate policies prohibiting Senators from using unit-wide email distribution lists for communicating about Senate business.
- The Senate President should explain expectations as far as debate of issues on the Senate floor and discussions during the meetings, as some Senators equate lack of debate with lack of interest or decision-making authority.
- Use social media to promote the work of the Senate. For example, Senate committees could use social media to post updates about their work between monthly senate meetings.



- Provide news releases and promote stories ideas for publication in the ASU News, in order to increase awareness and understanding of the work of the Senate.
- In addition to committee work, develop ways for Senators to get to know one another.
- Regularly announce the results of RFCs on the Senate Dashboard, even when no formal Senate discussion or vote was in order.

**Future Research:**

This study and report touches upon only a few of the communication matters that are relevant to the University Senate at ASU. Data collected from the survey can be sorted by campus if a more fine-grained analysis is desired. It may be that our Senate communications culture varies by campus, and if so, examining those variations could lead to additional insights.

It might also be useful to survey the entire Academic Assembly membership to solicit their awareness of and perceptions about the work of the Senate as well as their views on the effectiveness of the communication strategies of their Senators, Senate leadership, and Senate staff. Information about their perceptions and understandings could be very useful for evaluating the effectiveness and appropriateness of current Senate communication strategies.

*Report submitted to Arnold Maltz, President of the ASU Senate and Chair of the University Academic Council, September 30, 2017.*