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NC STATE

PURSUING OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE  
**Task Force Report**

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Pursuing Operational Excellence

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# TASK FORCE CHARGE

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The Pursuing Operational Excellence Task Force is charged with creating a report to address themes relevant to the task force. The task was asked to:

- Describe the central challenges facing NC State University that are key to our success.
- Provide a brief overview of where we stand relative to facing those challenges, including initiatives that were started in the Pathway to the Future Strategic Plan.
- Propose and prioritize two to five themes to be addressed in the next strategic plan.
- Create initiatives or strategies that would make progress within those themes.





## What is Operational Excellence?

When the task force members first gathered to begin deliberations, one of our first discussions was about how to define operational excellence. This initial discussion was key as we started on our journey to carry out the charge entrusted to us. It was important for each member of the task force to have a common understanding of operational excellence as we began to discuss the content for this report.

The Business Dictionary describes operational excellence this way:

“A philosophy of the workplace where problem-solving, teamwork and leadership results in the ongoing improvement in an organization. The process involves focusing on the customers’ needs, keeping the employees positive and empowered and continually improving the current activities in the workplace.”

Here are a few examples of how our task force members defined organizational excellence for NC State’s strategic plan:

- Meeting or exceeding the standards of the university as a whole.
- Promoting team-oriented and collaborative processes and a customer-centric strategy.
- Developing ways to make the university’s core missions of instruction, research, extension and economic development function more effectively by leveraging actionable intelligence.
- Focusing attention on three areas — customer service, employee engagement and resource management — and establishing key metrics and benchmarks to measure success in those areas against peer and best-in-class institutions.

## Customer Service

- Provide outstanding services and products as cost-effectively as possible to faculty, staff, students, and our other campus constituents.
- Recognize that operational excellence involves continuous and constant improvement.
- Assess the quality and return on investment of programs and initiatives, including an assessment of the student experience and student success outcomes.

## Employee Engagement

- Develop a culture of collaboration to eliminate organizational silos.
- Synchronize processes, policies, and systems across colleges, departments, and units as much as possible.
- Understand how our roles and functions play an important part in accomplishing the NC State's strategic goals

## Resource Management

- Utilize all resources efficiently, including people, material, equipment, energy, systems, etc. Eliminate waste and remove redundancies.



Source: *The Acuity Institute*

# Why Is Pursuing Operational Excellence Important at NC State?

Pursuing operational excellence will enable NC State to more effectively accomplish its mission, vision and strategic goals. In addition, it will allow the university to gain a competitive advantage over other institutions, improve its rankings and reputation as a premier public research land-grant institution and increase the university's operational effectiveness and productivity. Examples of how the university can achieve operational excellence include conducting a comprehensive review of strategies that generate institutional cost savings by leveraging economies of scale, implementing continuous process improvement initiatives and eliminating repetitive support processes.

Research in the [Harvard Business Review](#) found that organizations with peak operational excellence had 25% higher growth and 75% higher productivity than organizations that had not implemented operational excellence initiatives. If NC State makes the pursuit of operational excellence an initiative in its next strategic plan, the task force anticipates the university will:

- Be more agile and flexible and able to adapt to changes (like those caused by COVID-19, market competition and trends in higher education) and the evolving needs of our students, faculty, staff, the University of North Carolina System and the state of North Carolina.
- Utilize actionable intelligence to engage in more strategically focused planning and decision-making activities.
- Attain greater efficiency and effectiveness in our processes and service delivery to our diverse array of constituents.
- Deliver great value to our customers.
- Increase and diversify revenue streams to ensure the university's operations are fiscally sustainable in the long-term.
- Continue to build a strong institutional culture that enables us to more effectively attract and retain a diverse and talented faculty, staff and student body.
- Continue to promote a culture of collaboration, engagement, innovation, recognition and reward.



# Central Challenges That Threaten Achieving Operational Excellence

## Impact of COVID-19

Since early 2020, the state, our nation and the world have been grappling with the devastating and lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like our fellow higher education institutions, the public health emergency has had an extraordinary effect on our ability to provide a world-class educational experience for students and work environment for faculty and staff.

Many great leaders have said we should never waste a serious crisis, and we should view them as an opportunity to do things we could not do before. With that in mind, the task force evaluated the negative and positive impacts of COVID-19 on NC State's ability to achieve operational excellence now and in the future.

While there are numerous challenges and opportunities resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, the following were highlighted by our task force members:

Area	COVID-19 Challenges	COVID-19 Opportunities
<b>Health and Safety of Students, Faculty and Staff</b>	Constant changes to federal, state and UNC System guidelines and recommendations related to COVID-19. Faculty, student and staff anxiety and concerns about returning to campus. Challenges related to balancing remote work with family demands (i.e., school and elder care).	Rethink and adapt workplace practices (i.e., the use and configuration of workspaces, the revision of outdated policies, the implementation of new work practices and the encouragement of greater use of virtual technologies).
<b>Physical Campus Infrastructure</b>	The difficulty of assessing the conditions of buildings during the stay-at-home order. Constraints our faculty and researchers have faced due to labs and classrooms being closed.	Assess ways to repurpose the use of campus buildings and spaces to more readily adapt to a pandemic and post-pandemic environment (i.e., reconfiguration of offices to open work spaces, etc.) Enhancements of our emergency management protocols for working with our Centennial Campus partners and extension partners across the state.
<b>Fundraising and Donor Relations</b>	Complications related to fundraising, including the need to coordinate fundraising staff and activities across campus, facilitating the implementation of best-practices across all colleges and units and aligning performance standards.	The utilization of video technology (e.g., Zoom) to reach and engage donors.
<b>Financial Impacts</b>	Concerns regarding the drop in state appropriations and loss of revenues, enrollment and operational costs to run a university during a global pandemic. Declines in housing and dining revenues. Anticipated impacts to facilities and administrative receipts due to the scaling back of research activities.	The reevaluation of our business models and strategies, including finding creative ways to maximize the efficient use of our financial, physical, technological and human resources.



Area (cont'd)	COVID-19 Challenges	COVID-19 Opportunities
<b>Technology</b>	<p>The negative effect of Zoom fatigue on the well-being of our students, faculty and staff.</p> <p>The need to ensure our students, faculty and staff have the technological tools and knowledge to conduct their studies and/or work remotely.</p>	<p>The use of virtual technological platforms, such as Zoom, Goto Meeting, etc.</p> <p>The continuation of our efforts to ensure students, faculty and staff have the necessary technological tools and equipment, such as laptops and internet access, to complete their work.</p>
<b>Work Culture</b>	<p>Quickly adapting to a hybrid (on-site and remote work) work environment during the pandemic resulted in a steep learning curve and lots of adjustments for many of our faculty and staff. Faculty and staff concerns about performing their duties on-site during a pandemic.</p>	<p>The continuation of our efforts to create and promote a culture of unity.</p>
<b>Actionable Intelligence</b>	<p>Units across campus were collecting data (through surveys and various other means) on student and faculty experiences related to the transition to remote learning and returning to campus, as well as on staff experiences and needs related to working on campus. The duplication of efforts, asking faculty, staff, and students to provide the same information multiple times, and the limited sharing of data creates an unnecessary burden on both those collecting and those providing the information, and does not allow for a coordinated response to identified needs.</p>	<p>The use, coordination and integration of the plethora of institutional data we have at NC State to enhance campus decision-making and strategic planning across campus.</p>

Area (cont'd)	COVID-19 Challenges	COVID-19 Opportunities
Extension Services	The strain the pandemic has had on extension and its ability to continually pivot and adapt as COVID-19 cases continue to rise in the state. As a result, some extension programs have been canceled, which negatively impacts the communities that extension serves in many ways as well as our ability to financially sustain those programs in the short and long-term.	The development of stronger partnerships with other public agencies and private industry to help provide critical equipment to schools across our state. The extensive use of virtual platforms to deliver and promote extension services across our state and to a diverse array of constituents.
Online Instruction and Student Advising	The university's varying degrees of success with online advising due to the unavailability of the internet for some students and other student needs. Some students perform better when they can receive in-person advising and instruction.	The extensive use of virtual technological platforms to deliver student advising and instruction online.
Strategic Planning	COVID-19 will reshape the future of many industries and sectors, including higher education. Many of our task force members anticipate a long road to recovery after the pandemic ends.	Rethink the value of higher education and the ways to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness in a new normal. Opportunities for mind-set changes in the following areas: organizational excellence, institutional functions, models, workforce strategies, use of physical space, technologies and student-centered academic experiences and instruction.

In spite of COVID-19, we have an opportunity to develop new strategies for how to do things differently in the future and increase collaboration with our campus partners.

"Working together is important," said Leda Lundardi, a task force member. "It's what we do at NC State, and it's what we do well. We still are a magnet for opportunity."

## Institutional Bureaucracy and a Complex Decentralized Structure

The task force cited various forms of institutional bureaucracy and the university's complex decentralized structure as significant challenges that may impede efforts to implement its operational excellence and university effectiveness recommendations. Furthermore, those challenges are compounded by the university's organizational structure and its struggles to achieve the right balance of decentralized, hybrid and centralized functions. As a result, physical, financial, technological and human resources are duplicated and/or used inefficiently throughout our institution. Shared governance is extremely important, but decision-making can be time-consuming due to the many people that are involved at each layer of the organization.

Another challenge that the bureaucracy and complex decentralized structure creates is an inability to be highly agile and innovative. For faculty and staff, it is very taxing trying to be innovative or entrepreneurial. As a result, our employees aren't motivated to implement needed change and innovations.

Also, many of our university enterprise management systems and technological tools are not user-friendly, compatible with other systems or agile, making it increasingly difficult for faculty and staff to do their jobs in an efficient and effective manner. For example, there is a critical need to standardize operational systems, data collection, reporting and analytics across the university.

## Cultural and Operational Issues Between Colleges and Units

Cultural and operational issues between colleges and administrative units across the university have hampered attempts to implement continuous improvement initiatives. In addition, these issues can cause challenges in fostering a cohesive and consistent culture across the university, leading to the creation of silos, limited knowledge and resource sharing and challenges in collaboration, coordination and communication.

These cultural and operational challenges affect the university's ability to have a consistent approach to implementing diversity and inclusion initiatives. In addition, these challenges have impacted the university's efforts to increase the diversity in university leadership, faculty and staff across all areas of campus. Performance and accountability inconsistencies exist across colleges and units.

# Resistance and/or Reluctance to Embrace Transformational Change

Many task force members cited a concern that some colleagues have a “we have always done things this way” mindset. They worry that this sort of thinking will circumvent NC State’s efforts to foster transformational change as it implements its new strategic goals and will limit organizational willingness to adopt new initiatives that the university would like to pursue.

# Disconnect Between Strategic Goals and Resource Investment/Funding

At NC State, there is a perceived disconnect with the strategic goals that the university decides to pursue and the allocation of funds necessary to successfully implement those initiatives. Although NC State is strong in embracing its Think and Do attitude, there is also a need to support programs by implementing a well-resourced Think and Do funding strategy. By doing so, it will not only support the university’s strategic plan but also help to ensure that NC State has the financial flexibility to fund its innovative initiatives and ideas to fruition.

Furthermore, in support of NC State’s stellar research, teaching and scholarly activities, the university must find ways to reward faculty and staff who are creative and innovative in their pursuit of operational excellence. In addition, NC State should align its actions, desired goals, visions and values with existing performance measurements and rewards.



# Themes and Associated Strategies for Achieving Operational Excellence

As noted above, NC State is limited by a complex organizational structure that can impede collaboration, efficiency and innovation. Different organizational units with different goals or metrics to define success can lead to our working inefficiently or in overt conflict with each other. Cultural or historical differences across units may exacerbate these differences. At the same time, there is a sense among task force members that the existing strategic plan has done much to begin to align the university in service of key goals. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has compelled a rapid and substantial increase in cross-unit communication and collaboration as the university manages the myriad of challenges associated with this crisis. For members of the task force, NC State's response to the COVID-19 epidemic has highlighted the strengths of our organization as well as the opportunities to improve our collaboration, agility, data-driven decision-making, efficiency and communication.

Ultimately, we believe that achieving operational excellence is dependent upon stakeholders engaging and identifying deeply with goals that are shared university-wide. A key task for unit leaders and managers must be working collaboratively within and outside their units to articulate how their group's work ties into those shared goals, and how the people within specialized units are able to contribute in measurable ways towards those overarching goals. Other efforts that will contribute to success include creating a common language for our shared goals and for the outcomes that we will emphasize and measure in our work; developing mechanisms that allow us to visualize our progress; and rewarding units and unit leaders who reduce divisional barriers and promote collaboration. This holistic approach offsets a more siloed and individualistic approach that prioritizes the individual unit's success in accomplishing its own defined goals. Rather, we believe each unit's ultimate success is rooted in its ability to collaborate with other units in service of shared university goals.

This emphasis on shared goal-setting, cross-unit collaboration and the development of shared language and tools for collaborative work form the basis of our recommendations. As the task force examined the central challenges, the group also brainstormed a plethora of proposed actions and approaches to addressing those challenges and achieving operational excellence. Those actions and approaches were then organized into five themes, each with several associated strategies, that the task force recommends emphasizing in the coming decade. The themes and strategies are as follows:

- **Theme 1: Enhancing Inclusivity and Collaboration**
- **Theme 2: Creating and Supporting Agile Work Environments**
- **Theme 3: Leveraging Technology and Data**
- **Theme 4: Advancing University Efficiency and Effectiveness**
- **Theme 5: Improving Internal Communications**

# Theme 1: Enhancing Inclusivity and Collaboration

At NC State, we aim to cultivate a collaborative and diverse workforce. The inclusion of diverse viewpoints in all aspects of our work builds strong, adaptive communities and encourages critical thinking. As a global leader in higher education, we value all forms of diversity. Our goal is to attract and retain a thriving and diverse workforce. We can achieve our goal by building a culture of transparency and trust and empowering our employees through opportunities for growth and development. Increased inclusivity and collaboration also result in an engaged and productive workforce that is attuned to innovative ideas. As an institution, nothing makes us stronger than when we accomplish things as a united Pack. We should reward and highlight intersectional, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work that advances our strategic plan. We also should encourage our students and employees to pursue more collaborative projects within and between units that support and advance university-level goals.

The strategies that we propose to support this theme are:

- **Reconceptualizing diversity and inclusion as a prerequisite for good decision making.**

Diversity and inclusion are important goals, but they are not ends unto themselves. We believe decision-making and planning are hampered when teams are not diverse and inclusive. The involvement of community members with different backgrounds and experiences allows us to develop richer and more robust plans and strategies. We encourage the university to focus not only on diversity and inclusion as critical goals but also to develop and implement strategies to assure the inclusion of diverse voices in every aspect of unit planning and self-evaluation.

- **Rewarding collaboration explicitly and publicly.**

We should celebrate the myriad of successes of NC State's individual units. However, supporting a culture of increased collaboration requires that we recognize the interdependence of our units when it comes to achieving university-level goals and that we publicly reward units and their leaders when they cross organizational boundaries to work on complex problems and interdisciplinary challenges. Building and consistently reinforcing incentives that encourage a focus on shared goals, cross-unit collaboration and productive partnerships can help to break down what is often described as a highly decentralized, siloed culture within the university.

- **Enabling more upward mobility within NC State.**

Faculty and staff are more likely to engage deeply with the university's mission and goals if they are rewarded for doing so. Improving our internal processes for the promotion of successful faculty and staff; eliminating barriers to internal promotions (within and across units); providing opportunities for faculty, students, and staff to engage in cross-unit or interdisciplinary collaboration; and enhancing opportunities for faculty, students, and staff to engage in leadership are critical if we want to develop and retain the best members of our community. Developing and implementing strategies that encourage and support upward mobility and reduce barriers and disincentives to seeking such advancement should address the needs of faculty and staff at every level and career track.

## Theme 2: Creating and Supporting Agile Work Environments

Agile work environments are empowering, productive and flexible when priorities, policies and crises dictate change. We are committed to creating and supporting agile work environments at NC State so we can quickly adapt and respond to disruptions that threaten the efficient operation of our university. To ensure business and academic continuity, we will work to build resilience in our business and academic operations through the use of new technology, improved processes and the removal of barriers and roadblocks.

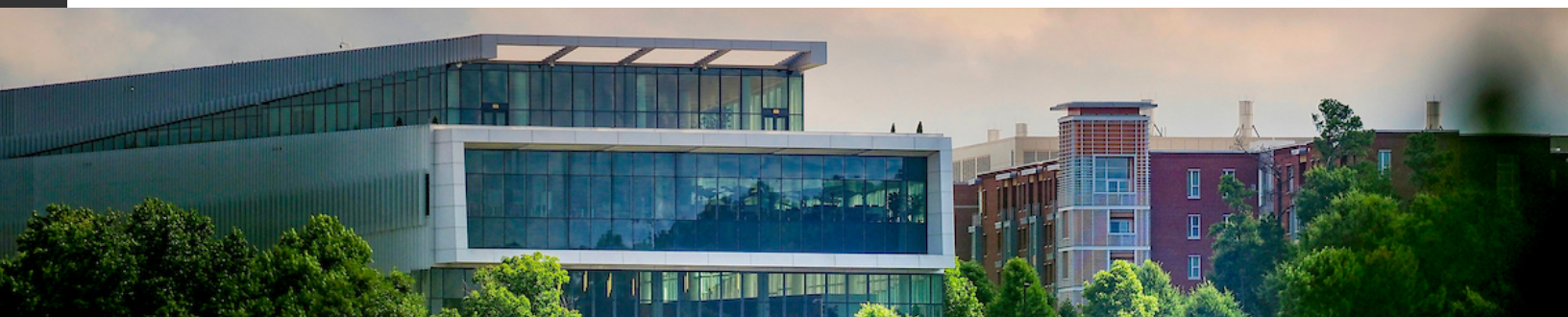
The strategies we propose to support this theme are:

- **Implementing more flexible work strategies and schedules.**

The COVID-19 epidemic forced much of the university's workforce to work remotely or work on campus with significantly adjusted schedules or use of work space. Faculty and staff were advised to limit their time in campus facilities and use technology to facilitate communication and collaboration. As a result, managers and unit leaders have an opportunity to reevaluate work-at-home arrangements and alternative work schedules. Supervisors should also use this opportunity to rethink their use of university space, particularly if the university continues to encourage remote work arrangements and alternative work scheduling strategies for on-campus staff. The university should make such problem-solving an institutional priority to increase agility and resilience, manage fiscal challenges during and post-pandemic and to retain productive faculty and staff. The university, where applicable, should consider permanently moving positions to remote working roles. This would free up valuable space that could be used as classrooms, research labs, or other collaborative space.

- **Rewarding faculty, staff and managers who streamline processes and remove barriers.**

We believe the university should create more opportunities to publicly recognize and reward university community members who improve operational flexibility and reduce unnecessary regulatory or process barriers. These improvements often have significant effects on the morale of those affected by cumbersome processes or inflexible rules and may result in more fiscal efficiencies, especially in faculty and staff time. Publicly recognizing positive changes will help to foster a culture of continuous improvement as well as potentially engage more members of the community in problem-solving roadblocks and barriers that they routinely face.



## Theme 3: Leveraging Technology and Data

Our university leaders need tools that provide reliable information so they can make well-informed and timely decisions. As a university, we should invest in these much-needed tools and update available tools, as needed. It is critical that we continue to invest in data, technology, analytical tools and training that will improve institutional data integration and analytical capacity. These tools are needed because they provide actionable intelligence that members of the university community can act upon more easily and efficiently. Developing and disseminating mechanisms that improve and democratize the sharing and utilization of institutional and external data will help create a shared vision and language for goal-setting, planning, tracking our progress and providing our external constituents a cohesive and empirically-supported narrative about the reach and impact of our work.

The strategies we propose to support this theme are:

- **Increasing the reliability of and access to data and data definitions.**

At NC State, we have a vast amount of data about our community, its work, and the outcomes and impact of our efforts. These data may be quantitative or qualitative, but too frequently different versions of the same data may exist across units, definitions of key variables are unclear or vary across units and access to data may be restricted when broader access would facilitate communication and collaboration. Because of this, we miss opportunities to identify and solve problems within our community. The Data Governance Workgroup has begun addressing some of these challenges. The university should continue this important work, encourage data stewards to be innovative in seeking shared definitions and reduce the proliferation of overlapping datasets when a shared and cohesive dataset would be more efficient and promote collaboration.

- **Rewarding data-driven planning and decision-making.**

The university is well-known for being a data-driven institution, and we believe the university should continue to invest in this approach. We encourage leadership to develop and implement strategies to highlight and applaud the ways in which unit leaders and managers are using quantitative and qualitative data not only to make decisions but also to evaluate their progress toward unit goals and university-level goals.

- **Developing data dashboards for key metrics.**

Although we believe qualitative and quantitative data are equally important, the use of data dashboards for visualizing key quantitative data and understanding changes in those data over time can be an important way to create a common focus for units that share responsibility for university goals. Creating powerful and comprehensible data visualizations that help units see their progress toward goals, can encourage cross-unit collaboration, foster engagement between faculty, staff and students and help us share our progress with internal and external constituencies. The university should develop and implement a comprehensive strategy to create and standardize official university dashboards.



- **Providing education on the use of data for decision-making and reporting.**

NC State is fortunate to have faculty and staff who are among the best in the world at analyzing and using quantitative and qualitative data to make decisions and recommend changes to programs and policies. We need to foster the use of data-based tools among a much larger breadth of our community. We recommend developing and implementing a range of educational and training opportunities for staff across units and organizational levels that will enhance our community's shared understanding of the data we use for evaluating our work and deciding next steps.



## Theme 4: Advancing University Efficiency and Effectiveness

The efficient and effective operation of our university and the use of resources are key to our continued success, especially in uncertain economic times. Our employees and students expect the university to pursue efficiency and effectiveness in equal measure to maintain excellent stewardship of the public trust. This includes reducing unnecessary bureaucratic processes and outdated regulations, identifying operational weaknesses and strengths and implementing continuous improvement strategies. It also includes the strategic and coordinated use of university resources (e.g., financial, physical and human), rethinking some institutional structures and models, leveraging internal expertise, and pursuing efficiency in the context of environmental stewardship.

The strategies we propose to support this theme are:

- **Identifying and eliminating redundancies in regulations and/or processes.**

As mentioned under theme 2, we encourage the university to support a careful analysis of existing processes, policies and regulations with the explicit goal of identifying and reducing (if not eliminating) redundancies and inefficiencies. Under the university's previous strategic

plan, many unnecessary regulations and rules were eliminated. This work should continue, and community members who propose or implement more streamlined and efficient approaches to work should be recognized publicly for their contributions to our overall success.

- **Identifying shared goals to promote efficient use of resources.**

One of the most important messages that our task force wishes to convey is our belief that we are stronger as a university when we have a sense of how each of our disparate and highly successful units contributes to the university's overarching goals. Unit leaders should be held accountable for connecting their unit-level goals to the university's strategic goals and for working with other units on goals that are shared or overlap. This type of goal setting is an important part of fostering a unified focus on the university's overall success.

- **Streamlining and maximizing facilities and administrative funds to support the research enterprise.**

Members of our task force emphasized that a critical aspect of our effectiveness is bringing external support to the organization. Increasing the extent to which facilities and administrative funds are being used not only to support the scholarly and research efforts of our faculty and staff but also to expand our funding base is an important way to achieve this goal. Considering ways to use facilities and administrative funds to support interdisciplinary and interunit collaboration is also crucial. As funders seek to support investigations into complex scientific and social problems, the university must leverage its resources to incentivize scholarly collaborations across disciplines and units.

## Theme 5: Improving Internal Communications

When our employees are well-informed and engaged, they feel a sense of connection and investment in our university community. We often excel at creating and sharing data within units, but we sometimes need to improve our internal communications efforts, particularly in sharing information and ideas across units. We should engage our university community in those efforts, review our internal communications tools (including shared data that help us visualize and prioritize our progress) and make the necessary investments to strengthen our communications efforts.

The strategies that we propose to support this theme are:

- **Reducing the redundancy of internal communications.**

The COVID-19 pandemic required the university to communicate large amounts of information and frequent changes to that information. The result of this has been information overload for many in our university community. Although a crisis such as COVID-19 may drive organizations to overcommunicate, this is an opportunity to learn from our experience, find ways to streamline communications, and reduce redundancies. Delivering stronger messages to our community will require units to work together to develop shared communications, rather than each developing similar but related messages. The result, we believe, will be messages that will receive more attention from our community and reduce confusion.

- **Focusing communication on providing actionable information.**

The university's motto of Think and Do should be embedded into our internal communications just as much as it is into other aspects of our work. Too often, internal communications are written from the viewpoint of administrative units and are less focused on the specific actions that will help members of the university community do their work more effectively or get needed support. Working with unit leaders to improve communication strategy, specifically helping them focus their messages, will result in communications that are valued and read by faculty, staff and students. The university should increase access to and provide training on the use of multiple communication tools (although email and memos will likely continue to be core approaches to internal communication), including tools that encourage brief messages that will help the organization be more nimble, especially in times of crisis.

- **Sharing best practices in multiple realms of the university's mission.**

One of the cliches that suggest a breakdown in communication within an organization is "we keep reinventing the wheel." Our university is large and disparate, but as we have noted throughout this report, many units work towards very similar goals and the units' work overlaps considerably. We encourage units to consider opportunities for sharing best practices that may translate well across units. This type of internal communication, specifically sharing best practices in various realms of the university's work, is another way to foster collaboration, reduce redundancies and continue to foster a spirit of shared purpose.

- **Increasing opportunities for feedback on internal communication.**

Another lesson we've learned from the COVID-19 pandemic is that we can improve our internal communication processes by deliberately seeking feedback. Closing the communication loop requires confirming with the intended audience that the message was received, evaluating the extent to which the message was understood, and understanding the effect of the message on the recipients. The university has robust structures that could support this kind of feedback, which would ultimately improve communication institutionwide. If we engage Student Government, Staff Senate and Faculty Senate about our communication efforts (both in composing messages and in evaluating their impact), we can deliver more focused and effective messages.

