INTRODUCTION

Like other institutions of higher education, College of San Mateo faces the challenge of reshaping its communications systems to accommodate the realities of the Information Age. How and what we communicate to one another is in a constant state of flux. To address this complex issue, a campus-wide survey of how all college personnel communicate and share information was conducted at the beginning of the Fall 2000 semester.

The survey instrument contained 40 items designed to probe what communication tools people use or would prefer to use, what information is exchanged and needed, and how to improve internal communication structures. The survey probed numerous communication issues, including: committee meeting agendas and notes; events and activities; operations; new programs; challenges; grants and external funding opportunities; local, state, and national educational issues; and sharing news about colleagues.

SURVEY RESULTS: THE RESPONDENTS

- Of the 550 surveys distributed to all college personnel, 175 responded, of whom 89 were full-time faculty (51%), 28 adjunct faculty (16%), 47 classified staff (27%), and 11 administrators (6%).
- Responses according to administrative unit included: 112 (64%) from Instruction; 37 (21%) Student Services; 16 (9%) KCSM; and 9 (5%) in total from Operations, President’s Office, Corporate and Community Education, Food Services/Bookstore.
- Figure 1 displays survey responses according to job classification within each administrative area.

SURVEY RESULTS: ACCESS TO COMMUNICATION TOOLS

Note: Survey results are based solely upon the participants’ responses. As with all standardized questionnaires, individuals may vary in terms of how they interpret terms used in the survey, such as “information,” “communication,” and “access.”
The majority of respondents report access to telephones (99%), computers (85%), email (85%), and web browsers (82%). Yet only 60% report access to a “network connection.” Similar results were reported for off-campus access.

As displayed in Figure 2, an apparent disparity exists between adjunct faculty and other populations: 61% of adjunct faculty report no access to a computer as compared to only 10% of full-time faculty. In addition, 11% report no access to a telephone on campus; however, it is unclear whether the reported lack of access refers to a telephone on a desk or to a voicemail account. In addition, the relatively low number of surveys returned by adjunct faculty [28 out of more than 400] raises some question about the representativeness of recorded responses for this group.

SURVEY RESULTS: INFORMATION CONTENT

All campus employees registered a strong desire for a wide variety of information about their own administrative unit and about topics and issues outside of their immediate administrative area. In general, they are most interested in and concerned about new college programs; activities and events; their colleagues’ successes and accomplishments; State and local higher education issues; challenges (e.g., problems and constraints); and grant opportunities. [See Figures 3 & 4] In short, campus staff want information.

SURVEY RESULTS: COMMUNICATION VEHICLES

As expected, employees currently rely upon diverse means to communicate information.

The following communication vehicles were identified by respondents as the primary means through which they send and receive information: memos, newsletters, email, telephone, and not surprisingly, the non-electronic mechanism of informal conversation with colleagues. Web sites were identified as the least common method of direct communication.

Table 1 ranks the various vehicles available for disseminating information—both in terms of distributing information as well as receiving information. This data indicates that email is overwhelmingly viewed as the most efficient means of both receiving and distributing information.

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

60% report some difficulty with managing the amount of information they currently receive. [See Figure 5]

Respondents are active users of email and the Internet at work and at home. On campus, for example, 43% search or retrieve information daily from the Web and another 29% use it weekly. Similar patterns were reported for off-campus use.

Consistent with the data presented in Table 1 regarding preferred communication vehicles, when asked if they were to send or receive increased amounts of information, respondents propose email as the most effective means.

CHALLENGES

CSM employees are eager for a variety of information pertinent to their workplace, particularly if the information is current and well-organized. They indicate especially strong preferences for electronic communication tools [e.g., email] that allow them opportunities to select and consolidate information. They do not, of course, discount informal avenues of sharing information among their colleagues.

While employees clearly want more information, many respondents report difficulty with existing systems of information communication. In the short-answer section of the survey, they cite problems with an overwhelming volume of email messages, prioritizing large masses of information, access to computers, lack of technology training or knowl-
edge, and delays in receiving campus mail. Respondents also cited an interest in receiving more information about budget and enrollment issues.

The majority are users of email and web sites, but some in this group also report that they do not have network connections. Several also report access to email, but not to the Internet. Since some type of network connection is necessary to support email and Internet access, users may not be familiar with the technologies which currently support their electronic communication.

The survey suggests some disparity between the current vehicles used for exchanging or retrieving information and those which may be desirable. For example, respondents report that web sites are among the least common means they now use. However, when asked about receiving or sending increased amounts of information in the future, a majority of respondents rate web sites as “effective” or “very effective.”

When proposing ways to address improving communications, respondents recommend: posting informa-
Providing campus-wide access to email; consolidating and centralizing information on one electronic site; using less paper; improving mail delivery; providing more computer training; establishing a campus newsletter; and finding a consistent and timely vehicle for distribution.

Table 1
Preferred Communication Vehicles For Information Dissemination

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Communication Vehicle</th>
<th>Level of Communication Effectiveness*…As a Means of Receiving Information</th>
<th>…As a Means of Distributing Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>3.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memos</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>2.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Sites</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>2.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsletters</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>2.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meetings</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>2.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal Discussions</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>2.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with Colleagues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>1.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Scale 1=Very Ineffective
5=Very Effective

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Figure 5
"Difficulty in Keeping up with Information Received..."
(n = 134)

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