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### HSU Communicative Practices: Administration Must Include the Student Voice

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Fall Semester 2020  
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**HSU Communicative Practices:**  
*Administration Must Include the Student Voice*

## ABSTRACT

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This paper examines the impact of communication practices of university administration (openness and inclusion) on the student body's sense of satisfaction, value, and connectedness by focusing on a selected collection of past moments of communication from administration to students. A total of five current instances where official emails were sent out addressing a handful of the biggest impactful events at the university and the following reactions from the overall student body was used as the qualitative data to analyze the effectiveness of such communication choices. Results of the observations confirmed that the current practices of the university administration were no longer considered wholly acceptable or consistent with the values not only claimed by the university, but also those expressed and attached to the student body identity. More importantly, they showed the clear need for more value and inclusion to be put on student voices regarding big events and decisions made by administrators. The study concludes with the implications of what path the current practices will lead Humboldt State University if not addressed and altered to match the current organizational culture and environment.

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### I. Introduction

Humboldt State University, nestled in the heart of nature, prides itself on being a CSU of vision and progression to create members of society that will create change in the world. It is written right into the values of the university: "Humboldt State University values the following academic principles that represent attributes of an academically integrated university, and provide a framework for accomplishing our collective vision and mission." (HSU Office of the President) If you are on the outside looking in to the unique culture and setting of HSU, that is exactly what you will see. A campus where bikes are constant, plastic water bottles are banned, class sizes are considerably smaller than other CSUs, and with eco friendly waste, compost, and recycling available all over. Even their online presence screams these values over their platforms such as the official university website and Instagram account. Anywhere you find can find the very distinct H inside of a circle, you can be rest assured that there will be an air of social justice about it. The university excels at marketing themselves through different

organizational communication aspects, but the students are well known for doing the true work of having pride in their membership.

Once membership of the organization of Humboldt State University as an academic entity is gained, the metaphorical veil of the way it communicates itself to the rest of the world and the realities of their communication patterns is pulled back. Inside of the organization, one may begin to see the dissonance between the values portrayed to those not members of the university and the unrest that exists among the student body population. While potential members are drawn in by the values presented, inside of the system it is frequently murmured between disparate students that the flaws of the university are conflicting traits still prevailing. Often those of the student body that come here with the goal of creating wondrous change cannot help but unleash their cries of unhappiness and discontent with the lack of meaningful communication between university administration and students. From the occasional, poorly timed emails to the complete lack of information sharing at all, a criticized and unwanted classical approach to hierarchy within organizations is ever present. In the following pages I will closely examine the bureaucratic nature of communication at HSU through the particular lens of being a student within the organization, specifically focusing on the relations created and maintained between the student body and administration.

## **II. Literature Review**

The following literary review will include insight gained from various sources that discuss organizational communication practices, studies, and applications in connection to university campuses. This paper aims to shed light on the communication patterns and habits of the HSU institution, as well as the effects on the members of the educational organization. These sources will focus on different influential communication factors in a general focus and also more directly address important issues that apply to Humboldt State. All support the desire to reflect on and critique the way that information and communication interactions are currently dealt with among those a part of the HSU community.

In environments, such as within organizations similarly structured to HSU, it is common for the individual members to informally communicate and “gossip” with each other regarding work issues and situations. Often has this concept been frowned upon as it is seen to cause drama or negativity within the workspace. Jameson coined this type of discussion between workers as Critical Corridor Talk (CCT) and did a study that analyzed this discourse in higher education institutions. She took to asking the individual members about their experiences and won conceptualizations of CCT, concluding that they did it “in order to assist mutual survival in dysfunctional management situations, where effective levels of positional leadership may be largely absent” (Jameson, p.386) Though found to often be more beneficial for relations among the members of the organization, what happens when just CCT is no longer enough? At some point the need to be heard and valued by the organization itself with become too great to be dealt with or simply discussed casually.

With this need that arises, studies such as the Tracer Project become present and necessary for advancing understanding of how to best maintain the relations between members and the organization. In the Tracer Project findings we learn how “Integrating faculty development and student learning requires assessment of both kinds of teaching and learning,” (Condon, p.17) where efforts are made to better the interactions between student and teacher. Condon writes in depth about the approach, system practices, and joined efforts of creating stronger relationships between faculty and students, which benefits both groups in development. By encouraging a more collaborative exchange of educational styles and concepts between both groups, faculty can better format their learning plans in a way that their students will be able to comprehend and retain. Along the lines of these conclusions, the overall institution of HSU would benefit from examining studies such as these and working toward that open line of collaboration to bring administrators and students together.

Many studies, as Pope states in *Multicultural Competence in Student Affairs: Advancing Social Justice and Inclusion*, have found the need for administration and

leadership to evolve along with the rest of the institution as changes continue to come up, reshaping the nature of the campus. As with most evolution and advancement, systems must seek more complexity and development so they can continue to stay relevant in a larger culture that they exist in. "Student affairs administration and leadership require a complex and layered set of competencies that continue to expand and evolve as the academy changes." (Pope, p.86) Furthering the values emphasized by Pope's book, the leading concept of altering an educational system to fit the needs of its particular members rather than simply basing it off of other organizational models that involve totally different contexts and situations is expressed in the following quote: "It is important for universities not simply to mimic one model for higher learning institutions but to build on their own strengths and traditions, and that they strike a balance between training and forming the individual students" (Holm-Neilson, p.132)

In another analytical study that uses DACA as a focus, Squire critically analyzes the level of social justice that universities actually actively work toward helping promote. In the study, they looked into what they described as non-performative statements, which claim future action while absolving them from taking immediate action, and minority absorption, that gave just enough power to the minorities to feel represented yet not enough to give them real influence that might overthrow the already in place structure of power. At the end of it all Squire's findings lead to the conclusion that, "While higher education has the potential to advance social justice, our study reaffirms how it operates as a tool of social reproduction." (p.131) Despite the article of reflection, "Can a Green University Serve Underrepresented Students? Reconciling Sustainability and Diversity at Humboldt State University," being about the HSU claims of aiming to achieve social and environmental justice by promoting values among their student population, its conclusions ring true for the overall need for more open communication on campus. The way that Humboldt State University focuses its communication to surround a single topic of sustainability, yet ignores other issues that are present on campus, rose the issue that "It's easy to defend these goals and beat our chests about how progressive we are, but I think it's dangerously seductive to see them as inherently compatible." (Ray, p.16)

Overall, we have seen countless times in studies, similar to Meng & Berger's findings on the connection of the culture and leadership of organizations to engagement and trust, where there is evidentiary support to having value put on the relationship between high administration in entities and even the lowest members of the organization. Meng & Berger found links between the way that organizations structured their culture and the leadership performances they promoted to the satisfaction of employees, retention, and trust built. These are all key aspects to having a successful and lasting organization, but despite the multitude of researchers and data collected, bigger institutes like HSU choose to stick with the way things are and have always been. The following section shows a shortened compiled list of instances between the university administration and students which reflect the nature of the communication culture within Humboldt State.

### **III. Observations**

Going back to the last academic year (Fall 2019 to Spring 2020) and examining the current practices of the current semester (Fall 2020), there are countless observations to be made regarding the communication between HSU administrators and students which show a clear disconnect between the two. A very classical, as well as bureaucratic, approach to organizational management and communication behaviors makes up the core of Humboldt State University's system structure. There are clear hierarchies that are put in place and control the distribution of any information among the organization members, such as students and faculty. Fashioned like many large scale organizations in the United States, HSU maintains clear divisions of power and labor between its own departments. This has shown to be problematic for many who gain membership into the organization, as the incoming youth are growing in an external world that is becoming increasingly concerned with moving past old style structures and want more interconnectedness with the organizations they join.

As the new HSU President, Tom Jackson, came into the university as a leading member of the organization, there were many students particularly interested in parts of his past educational leadership history and how it would play into the decisions or visions he had for his leadership on campus. It was noted by many students that though he could be seen around campus occasionally stopping to talk to a student here and there, a more open form of communication among the entire student body seemed to be lacking. Out of the ever flowing nature of emails that students and faculty receive regarding the university, only a few instances can be called upon where President Jackson's can be found as the sender and his signature appears at the bottom of the email. Though otherwise typical of university institutions whose clear divide in positions and power correlate to the amount of communication and personal interaction that the individuals have with lower ranking members, the majority of HSU's student population finds it difficult to accept. It was such an issue for involved students who spent more time observing and interacting with higher up administrators, that it earned President Jackson a feature story in the school El Lenador newspaper.

Following this main event at the start of the fall semester of the 2019-2020 academic year, the HSU campus experienced multiple PG&E power outages implemented to be proactive in ensuring community safety during storm season. At this time, the HSU emailing system was a steady, constant update on the situation and informing the students of how it might affect them and the preparations or adjustments that the university was requiring of faculty and staff in order to handle it. The two main sources of information alerts and distribution, emails and text messages, were made a priority to keep active. During this time classes were still actively in session, not in person, but in regards to the fact that students still had due dates to meet. With that in mind, the active efforts of maintaining consistent communication between the university, professors, and students was a huge factor in helping HSU continue to function even amidst uncertainty.

Later in the academic year, the global pandemic COVID-19's effects in our society finally hit Humboldt State's front door, which gave a rare chance at insight on

how communication among the HSU organization across all departments and status rankings managed during a more chaotic time. The initial communication effects were seen as email notifications from the HSU NOTIFICATION update system began to center its focus more around the topic of the coronavirus and casual campus dialogue between students started to inevitably bring up the matter into their interactions. Some professors briefly touched on the issue with their students, whereas others like the communication department professors allowed and encouraged more discussion on the topic so that the students could be as best prepared to handle the looming change to their expectations. It escalated once spring break hit in March of 2020, when those students residing on campus were not emailed once, or twice, but three times, encouraging them to leave campus while also reassuring them that no one would be forcibly removed from the dorms. Once most students were back, scattered across the state or country to wherever their hometowns originated, communication among students nosedived. Group projects were either sunk through the lack of interaction between members or just made it if members managed to maintain some form of contact with each other.

Furthermore, once the Fall semester of 2020 and the new academic year, a huge dissonance occurred between the administration and rest of the HSU organization members when the campus was blindsided by the news of housing the San Jose State University football team, which included their staff as well. The campus-wide email was sent a day before the team arrived and had a varied response from the student body on the feelings regarding the event. The social media network of HSU students was rife with a mix of emotions, many of which were displeased with the decision. Students felt as though they were devalued and the administration had been deceitful in the way it was handled. As published in *The Lumberjack* October 9th 2020, one of HSU's top newspapers, "it was sprung upon us so suddenly...I know that it's not our decision as students, but we paid money to go here and this wasn't in the plan."

This moment where open communication was not present from the administration set off a domino effect of analytical views on communicative behaviors.

Within the next few weeks, memes were made, stories were released, and administration went as far as to claim misrepresentation within the news stories released regarding the situation, but the fact of the matter for a majority of the student body was upset and offended by the decision they had no part in. “Higher administration has different ideas of what to accomplish which leaves many needs of students out,” as expressed by a Communication major student of Humboldt State University.

A current and short list of communicative slights from the administration toward the rest of the HSU body, these incidents are just a narrow snapshot of representation on how the university as an entity has yet to truly and wholly practice the values stated in its mission statement: “At Humboldt, you'll explore new ideas while learning more about yourself. Your professors will know you by name, and your education will go beyond the classroom with original research and real-world projects. You'll be part of a campus known for its longstanding commitment to social and environmental responsibility. And when you graduate, you'll have more than just a degree – you'll have the skills to go far in life and make your community better.”

#### **IV. Conclusions & Implications**

Based on the information gathered in the development of this paper, it is evident that despite being one of the most forward thinking campuses, we have seen HSU still fall to lower standards than what is openly expressed and identified within the organizational values of the institution. As with any large system that is dictated by higher powers above it, the concept of being a blameless entity is an impossible task, but that does not mean that change cannot happen. The powers at the top level simply have to care enough to fight the system from within the system and that seems to barely be becoming the case. In a time of such chaos, misinformation, poor communication, and high emotional tensions, Humboldt State University has had countless times to show its character under pressure - something it has not done very well.

The purpose of this paper was to critically look at administrative to student communicative practices and shine light on the present need for students to feel as though their voices are heard, included, and making a difference. With Humboldt State being a campus with a student population that is so focused on and driven by the need for justice, inclusion, and equity in all its ventures, it is detrimental to the overall health of the university that administrators often make the decision to keep such big choices as private as they do. The questions are raised and personal conclusions are made. Do the administrators keep communication so secretive and stunted with students in order to keep their power and avoid pushback from them? Is this ignorance in the light of so many studies and evidence stemming from an idea that they believe they know what is best for the institution as a whole? Are the administrators fully supportive of many decisions made that have been seen as unsatisfactory by students or do they wish they could choose differently, but don't due to their own understanding of the greater impact on the university as a whole?

Many of the student body, especially after this semester would say that administration makes this continuing choice to keep students in the dark or out of greater influence for profit, power, and everything that is what the culture of HSU fights to advance from. The reality is, it is hard to say because of how distant and disconnected the administration chooses to stay. Whether the truth of their actions will be made light or factual in nature, the matter at hand is that administration needs to move past the current way of doing things and toward the future. Students are the lifeblood of the university. Yes, there are greater players at hand that the university also relies on, like investors, but there will always be those out there. Administrators may have particular ideals of what makes up HSU, but they are the narrow and distant scope of those not directly involved. The student body are creators of the true Humboldt State culture and rather than making decisions that are against what we stand for just to entice those who might give us money, they must work together with us and let the right kind of people see what we value and invest in it.

With this kind of research and the conclusions to be made from it, there is an obvious outcome to continuing down the current path the administration of Humboldt State University is walking on and it's not one any of us want to see. At the current functioning of how students are more often than not, simply told of the decisions made and that it will impact them, the feelings of muted outrage and offense will only continue to grow within the lower level of the university community. Bureaucracy, though one a valuable approach to leadership, has been shown to counteract the fostering of strong interpersonal relationships between leaders of an organization and the members they preside over. When looking at the greater societal system of bureaucracy that most universities still reflect in their structure and institutional approaches, there are parallels to be drawn in the way that those in power do not value the voices of those who are done with being left out of the conversations and decisions.

Though allowing supportive groups that foster more inclusive communication among those a part of the HSU organization community, the institution simply allows them to exist under their umbrella yet rarely give them an opportunity to function as equals to them, or allow for discussion above a certain hierarchical level. When does simply having a space for discussion and dialogue of shared struggles become not enough? When did it ever start being considered enough? Looking at the nature of our society during the time that this paper is representative of, we see unrest and upheaval in the population who have realized that they will do what it takes to be heard and valued. Students will not be content to forever exist within their struggles, only having their complaints heard but never truly acknowledged. It is time for the university to take more consideration of the student body voice in high level administrative decisions.

## **V. Limitations & Future Research**

As with any qualitative research that is a focused scope from one side of the issue, the conclusions of this paper should be interpreted in light of the limitations. Though I was able to view and gather significant observations from online media sources and conversations with fellow students which showed the various reactions

regarding inclusion versus exclusion, value, frustration and further dissatisfaction among the majority of students, the design of this paper was directly targeted toward the current feeling of discontent toward, and disconnected nature of, the administration. Within the confines of this paper, I was also unable to gather qualitative data regarding actual administration opinions or voices. This means that there is a gap of information valuable to the discussion missing and what is expressed must be acknowledged with the bias and limited data it's built off of.

Furthermore, the data and conclusions met in this paper are focused specifically around the nature of a handful of significant instances that reflected Humboldt State University communication practices and culture of the last year and a half due to the approach I took in writing it from the perspective of being a current HSU student. Two major influences to the conclusions and results of the findings in this paper are based around one of the biggest national events in history, the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving much open to variable interpretation and influence. As a result of this particular scope, the information gathered and opinions expressed are a snapshot of a greater understanding, and they might not withstand the test of time or be applicable to other organizations.

Future research into this topic of HSU communicative practices by administrators and the impact it has to the social health of the student body, could gather the qualitative responses and voices of the high positioned administration members, opinions from student alumni and current students not bothered by the communicative decisions. Consideration to how the pandemic greatly influenced current administration decisions in more complexity than is addressed in the current paper could also be included. Another route might be an objective, quantitative approach in order to eliminate bias. A representation of faculty and other staff could be a voice to include within this discussion as well, as they are also a large part of the organization. In conclusion, the observations and opinions presented in this paper show an ever growing need for students to be more included in administrative decision making when it comes to events that affect the university as a whole.

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