

**Public Communication, Alumni, and Institutional Relations
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Committee Members

Sandra Gardebring
Margaret Carlson
Jan Morlock
Billie Wahlstrom

The overall goals of this council will be to incorporate public engagement as a permanent priority throughout the university and to enlist support for public engagement among all segments of the university and in the larger community.

Through a confluence of web initiatives—including the development and deployment of a University of Minnesota web portal, the development and implementation of a viable systemwide e-newsletter (U of M E-News), the development of an e-interface facilitating community/University interaction, and an upcoming redesign of the University’s homepage—the University is uniquely poised to integrate public engagement as a permanent priority more strategically, meaningfully, and effectively, both centrally and at the departmental level. Put simply, the University now has e-communications tools in place to strengthen communications by providing consistency in themes and messages while also having the ability to deliver unique content of interest to select people about an array of issues, and through a multitude of tools and connection points.

Key to the integration of public engagement at the University is the ability to both customize and personalize communications between the University and the public. With tools such as the myU portal (where users can choose content and stories of interest to them) and E-News (where personalized information can be sent to individuals; e.g., contact information for legislators in an advocacy story), technology is now available to tailor communications to core groups and/or key individuals. In essence, the University has the ability to target communications about key public engagement initiatives to select groups and, in addition, units throughout the University can more effectively communicate with key constituents about targeted issues. Public engagement can be integrated at every level of the University through the use of these new tools.

But this is only half of the challenge. For public engagement to be truly effective, the public must be given means to communicate as well. MyU has been created with this exact need in mind. Central to this initiative is the ability for users to create their own content, thereby providing a forum to communicate about any variety of issues. With the ability to facilitate “communities of learners,” myU will provide an opportunity for individuals both internal and external to the University do the real work of public engagement; i.e., share ideas, discuss issues, collaborate, raise awareness and concerns, and work together to create solutions. Important as well is the community’s ability to access the University’s intellectual resources both in their digital formats—as they will be increasingly able to do through the portal—and in their physical formats. The e-Interface project uses digital technology to make the University’s resources more accessible by “mapping” public buildings. Specialized software allows portal visitors to “see” where they can find the resources they need and get to them, making the University of Minnesota more accessible, more navigable, and more transparent to.

But these tools are only that, tools to facilitate communications. If there is no content, if messages are not consistent, if relationships do not exist, the technology is nothing more than a hollow shell. This is the great challenge for COPE and similar University committees, and one that must be carefully addressed. If the portal, E-News, and other technologies are considered panacea for communications issues, they will only fail. To be truly effective they must be used in tandem with other tools for communications.

In the near future, there are several areas in which COPE can prepare to leverage these tools. These include:

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- Identifying whether there is a centralized (online) presence for COPE-related activities, and then working with University Relations to integrate that presence throughout the University of Minnesota Web site;
- Identifying a few key activities and programs where communications could be, in part, transferred to the portal to begin using this tool as a way to develop targeted messaging and enhance two-way communications;
- Developing an editorial calendar for online communications to include myU, E-news, and the University's homepage content areas;
- Begin communicating with key public engagement activities and initiatives around campus about the online communication tools available to them to encourage them to "centralize" some of their communication efforts; and
- Developing messages that can be incorporated into E-news and the University's homepage about the importance of integrating public engagement throughout the University.

The University of Minnesota Alumni Association's suggestion for strengthening connections with alumni, friends, and community decision makers would be to significantly expand the "Great Conversations on the Road." This programming can highlight the best and brightest faculty and their ideas in an in-depth way, including exemplary civic engagement initiatives. A prototype of the U on the Road was held in Red Wing, Minnesota this year. A series of three, free discussions on "Issues in Aging," featured faculty from the College of Continuing Education, the College of Pharmacy, and an alumnus who is a specialist in housing options that facilitate aging. The sponsors were the UMAA/AR and the Red Wing Senior Center. The UMAA and COPE could expand this approach to offer similar "Great Conversations" around the state, if funding were available to support it.

Another key project is the University of Minnesota and Community E-Interface Project. The goal of this project is to use digital information technology to increase the ability of individuals, groups, organizations, and communities to access to University of Minnesota resources, events, and services and to leverage existing technologies, in particular the kiosk system and the University portal.

People coming to the University of Minnesota for the first time or visiting infrequently for a medical appointment or a trip to the Weisman Museum sometimes find the University a confusing environment. Public opinion surveys report that people in the state see the University as large and difficult to navigate. Making the University of Minnesota more accessible, more navigable, and more transparent to visitors by using digital technology effectively is the goal of this project. Other universities, including Stanford and large public institutions, have used specialized software to help people find their ways around campus and have worked with their facilities management and technology units to create detailed campus building maps for visitors. All public space at the University of Minnesota—from medical clinics, to museums, to sports facilities—should be easy to find and explore.

As the portal can increase access to the digital University, it can also increase access to the physical University. Any visitor to the University will be able to find clear directions to public space online through the portal or the University's homepage and can print out or save this information. Clinics, sports facilities, and museums will be able to email the URL to visitors and those coming to the University for a medical or dental appointment, a lecture, or a concert. Such technologies will also benefit others on campus. Linked to existing technologies such as the portal and WebCT, mapping software can be used to provide students with the locations of their classes and labs.