

NEWS

Newly created Staff Senate seeks to promote employee well-being

Transition away from separate councils intended to streamline leadership

By Caitlyn Seed (<http://www.cavalierdaily.com/staff/caitlyn-seed>) | 11/18/2014

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This past summer, the University's three Academic Employee Communication Councils merged into a collective representative body: the Staff Senate.

Since then, the Staff Senate has been working to get on its feet, hoping eventually to address work-life quality and general welfare issues which affect University staff.

Prior to the transition, there was a Council falling under the Chief Operating Officer, the Provost, and the Health System. Three co-chairs, one for each council, were established during the summer: Eric Newsome, Trish Reilly and Nina Morris. Trish Reilly has since stepped down from the associated duties of this transition period.

Co-Chair Nina Morris, who came from the Chief Operating Officer Employee Council and works in Facilities Management, said this phase is largely about organizing the Staff Senate into a functional, efficient group.

“We had a celebration in August to kick it off and our first real meeting in September,” Morris said. “What we’re focusing on now is the nuts and bolts, like organizing into staff committees for communications, advocacy et cetera.”

The Staff Senate represents more than 5,000 employees, with one elected member and one alternate representing up to 200 employees each. Elected Staff Senate representatives are full-time or part-time staff who have worked at the University for at least one year. The term of membership lasts for three years, beginning and ending August, and each representative may serve two consecutive terms.

A transition committee, led by former Chairs of Committee Margaret Weeks, Reilly and Lorie Strother, oversaw the creation of the Staff Senate this past year and currently officiate as part of an interim executive council while consolidation is underway.

In the first meeting, members were encouraged to raise issues they felt were important to discuss. Councils reviewed several topics, including educational benefits, streamlining practices and areas of inefficiency.

“The point of Staff Senate is to amplify the voice of the staff,” Morris said.

Co-Chair Eric Newsome, who came from the Provost Employee Council, said the creation of the Staff Senate will combine existing communities into an efficient representative body, and to communicate with other advocacy groups on Grounds.

“It allows the staff to speak with a single voice,” Newsome said.

According to their website, “The Staff Senate aspires to advance University excellence, to cultivate a positive and productive work environment for all, to support each staff member in the realization of his or her full potential, and to foster the highest possible quality of work life at the University.”

The Staff Senate hopes to work resourcefully alongside other University groups, including student representatives, to achieve their goals.

University President Teresa Sullivan supported the decision to consolidate the representative group, highlighting the need for effective governance in accordance with the University’s Cornerstone Plan, which outlines the strategic goals and initiatives for the University.

“The Plan is a multifaceted strategic initiative,” Newsome said. “One of the pillars [of the Plan] is leadership excellence, which is focused on in staff developments.”

According to the Letter to the Board of Visitors in the Cornerstone Plan, the primary goal of the initiative is to provide an improved learning environment with advanced technology, research and opportunities for all members of the academic community.

“The Cornerstone Plan is all about how we can achieve excellence through communication,” Morris said. “The creation of the Staff Senate embodies what we are trying to achieve in the Plan.”

The Staff Senate, which plans to meet monthly, will discuss and examine various staff-related issues at general body meetings, and likely disperse proposals and decision making authorities to a series of sub-committees — though the exact structure has yet to be determined.

“The Committee will look at the goal, create an action plan, find out what they need to know, and then they’ll be able to engage decision makers,” Newsome said.

Nina Morris said her real hope for this transition period is that members of the Staff here at the University take this opportunity to become more involved.

“This year, I just want to see people really engaged,” Morris said. “It’s a great time to see staff involved in positive change.”

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