

Student Success Center Network Strategic Communications Guidance and Model Plan April 21, 2017

OVERVIEW
Using this Document

Strategic planning is essential for communications because Student Success Centers do not have the resources (people, time, money) to communicate with all stakeholders about everything. Communications planning helps you make the most of your resources and be prepared for events that require communications activities.

Communications isn't an end unto itself. Every communications action should advance at least one of your organizational goals, and that takes thought and planning. This document provides step-by-step guidance for this work. The initial sections outline critical components of strategic planning. The final section puts the elements together in a model communications plan for a Center.

Use this document with these materials from JFF's [Student Success Center toolkit](#):

- The **strategic communications planning worksheet** (StratPlanWorksheet). The Key Elements of Strategic Communications Planning are aligned with this worksheet. Use it to outline the elements of your communications plan.
- **Examples of Center audiences** (SSC-audiences-1-24)
- **Internal messaging document** (SSCN-messaging-5-1-17)
- Various external materials that describe the Centers and the SSC Network

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ELEMENTS OF A STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

Put Family First

In planning for communications, many people jump to their external audiences before considering the needs—and the value—of their internal audiences. As you complete your planning worksheet and write your strategic plan, make sure you include internal audiences. Plan for how you will keep them informed, include them in your communications efforts, and enlist them as allies.

Specifically:

- Make sure you and your allies are on the same page and using the same messages. Even if you and your allies have agreed on a general course of action, make sure you are clear about your timing so you don't surprise them.
- Enlist your allies' support so they can be ambassadors for your work. They may be the best messengers to engage others in your work.

Who are your internal audiences? Having a small staff doesn't necessarily mean you have a small internal audience. Think about individuals on your advisory board and in your host organization who can champion your efforts. As you expand your inner circle (explained below), the people in that group also would become part of your internal audience.

Expand Your Inner Circle

In addition to leveraging the support of your existing allies, build your base by expanding your inner circle. Identify the people whose expertise and support you need (or already use), and enlist their help in sharing your messages with others.

You may already turn to particular people either formally or informally. For example, some Centers have identified guided pathways leads at all or some of their colleges, and those individuals connect them to others at their institutions.

If you already include a variety of people in your inner circle, think about what role they might play in communications. If you don't have a group, consider creating one. Or, if you have informal connections, consider the value of formalizing these relationships. Name the group (Center Advisory Board, Pathways Leads, Circle of Champions, or any name that you like) so you have a way to refer to it. Then ask people to join and tell them how much time you'll need from them, perhaps by month or term, so everyone has the same expectations.

This group can become your go-to team for gathering feedback, vetting ideas, and spreading the word about work to be done, achievements, and so on. While

membership may change over time, the group overall will have institutional knowledge so they will be able to discuss your work in context. Participants also can gather feedback from key audiences (discussed in the evaluation section, page 7.)

To make the most of your group, use their time wisely.

- Set priorities so you don't overburden them.
- Get their input as you make decisions about how to use the group (e.g., how best to share information, how often to send emails, and so on).

Set Goals

Organizational goals drive the train. All of your communications efforts should be in the service of your organizational goals. Toward that end, begin your goal-setting work by clarifying your organizational goals. Then align your communications goals with those organizational goals.

It can be tempting to align your communications goals to your organizational mission or general ideas about what you should be doing. While that approach will get you in the right ballpark, it won't ensure that you are targeting your communications resources in the most effective way.

The best goals are specific, action oriented, and measurable. For both organizational and communications goals, be as concrete as you can be. For example, steer clear of goals that focus on having people *know* or *understand* information. Instead, focus on what you want people to do with the information. Consider the progression of these sample organizational goals:

- **Abstract goal:** *Make sure faculty and staff understand the need for guided pathways reform.* This goal isn't associated with any action.
- **A more action-oriented goal:** *Encourage faculty/staff to get involved in reform efforts.* This goal has an action for the audience (faculty/staff), but it's vague.
- **A specific, measurable goal:** *Identify faculty/staff who will lead change efforts (e.g., take a lead role in mapping).*

We recommend listing your top three to five organizational goals and then setting communications goals that align with them. Write them side by side to make sure they align.

Below, you'll find a chart that shows sample organizational and communications goals presented side by side. As you establish your own goals, in addition to making them specific, action oriented, and measurable, consider the following:

- Sometimes you'll have multiple communications goals for one organizational goal. Sometimes the same communications goal will support more than one organizational goal.
- Focus on what you want people to do and the motivation, information, and tools they need to do it.
- Plan for best-case scenarios. What will happen when multiple colleges are scaling the same practice? What support will they need and what is the best way to deliver it?
- Plan for worst-case scenarios. What skepticism do you need to overcome? Who might be critics or naysayers, and what will their arguments be?

Sample organizational goals	Sample communications goals
Identify faculty/staff who will lead change efforts (e.g., take a lead role in mapping).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Expand the Center's inner circle.
Create funding streams so the Center is sustainable.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Expand the Center's inner circle. ■ Demonstrate how the Center is helping colleges and their students.
Provide guidance to colleges and identify practices that can be scaled statewide.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Give colleges information and tools to help them implement successful practices. ■ Create ways for colleges to share information with each other (listserv, quarterly group phone call, etc.).
Identify and meet specific training needs to support colleges as they implement guided pathways.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Assist colleges with internal communications about trainings to encourage participation. ■ Help colleges share information after the training.
Build capacity of Center and host-organization staff in priority areas such as data and analytics and communications.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Build communications capacity.

Define Audiences

Your target audiences should be connected to your goals. Consider each of your goals. Whom do you need to reach to attain your goal, and what do you want them to do? What actions do you want each audience to take to advance your agenda?

The document SSC-audiences-1-24 shows examples of audiences and desired actions. Use it as a starting point for determining your priority audiences.

Craft Messages

Current messages about the Centers and the SSC Network are spelled out in other documents, so we will not reiterate them here. We encourage you to use and build on the messaging developed by the Network.

Identify Strategies, Tactics, and Tools

Below are examples of strategies, tactics, and tools you can use to share information and inspire your audiences to act.

- **Expand your inner circle.** Explained on page 2.
- **Materials.** Includes one-pagers, fact sheets, brochures and other pieces that can be printed or made available for download. Also consider regular publications, such as e-newsletters or reports. If you want to involve others in your efforts, you might create a brief engagement toolkit to explain how they can help.
- **Website.** People have to take action to visit your site; you cannot deliver it to them. However, if you have a robust site, you can use other tactics, such as social media or an e-newsletter, to drive people to it. (An e-newsletter can have teasers with a link to the full article on your site.) You also can use your site to help people take action, such as signing a petition or e-mailing a legislator.
- **Listening.** Hearing what others have to say is a powerful communications tool. Listening begins with asking for input along the way, from everyone you work with. That type of listening, however, is limited to those who are already involved. Consider holding forums or focus groups if you want to include the voices of those who are not yet involved.
- **Presentations, conferences, and events.** These are helpful if you want to position your organization as a leader in the field or a key voice in policy. Becoming a recognized speaker helps you get a seat at the table where decisions are made, influence legislators, and raise money. As mentioned above, you also can use social media to host events.

- **Joint events.** Consider joining forces with higher education organizations, community organizations, and others to expand your reach.
- **Traditional media outreach.** Includes building relationships with reporters and editors, sending press releases, pitching stories and editorials, creating news events, placing op-eds, and generating letters to the editor. We expect that the Centers' need for media outreach, particularly in the short term, will be limited. If you are interested in media coverage, we recommend working with colleges' public information officers. That way, you will make sure you don't step on their coverage of their college, plus you can build on their established relationships with the media.
- **Social media.** For some audiences (e.g., students if they become an audience), social media is critical for building awareness, generating interest, and engaging allies to spread the word. It also is useful for promoting specific events and achievements. In addition to posting your own information, participate in the conversation (e.g., respond to and share others' posts), which helps generate awareness, build your presence, build followers, and establish your expertise. Finally, you can use social media for real-time events with live chats or town halls, Facebook Live, and so on.
- **Blog.** A blog is a useful tool for sharing information and a place to put all of your latest news. You also can post about the blog on social media and drive people to your website (where the blog presumably is housed).
- **Video.** If you have resources (or volunteers) to produce videos, they can powerfully communicate emotion and demonstrate impact. They also get traction on social media.
- **Podcasts.** Another tool for sharing information and posting on social media.
- **Contests, awards, and events.** If you want to generate attention beyond those engaged in your work, consider hosting a contest, developing an award, or holding an event. This tactic would be most useful if you wanted to celebrate a particular accomplishment. The contest would be most useful if you wanted to involve students. You also can boost participation by having a drawing for a gift card—everyone who participates has a chance to win. (These types of events also are perfect for social media campaigns.)

Implement and Evaluate

Implementation. The implementation part of your communications plan focuses on timeline, cost, and who will take responsibility for the work.

Evaluation. Communications work can be difficult to evaluate. Some options for evaluating communications include:

- **Feedback from key audiences.** You can get this feedback in multiple ways. For example, you can ask for it throughout your work, as described in the tactics section. You also can ask your expanded inner circle to gather input for you as they talk to colleagues in the field. You can formalize the process with an annual or quarterly survey or a quick two-question survey after a group phone call or event.
- **Feedback loop.** While you don't have to respond directly to each individual providing feedback, it's important to tell your audiences what you heard and what you plan to do with the information. This continuous flow of information is a feedback loop—key parties give you feedback, you act on it, and you report your actions back to the key parties so they know how their input was used. Creating a feedback loop makes it more likely that people will continue to share their thoughts when you ask for their input in the future.
- **Evaluation of your audiences' actions.** For example, if you are setting up ways for colleges to share information with one another, how many colleges are using it? If you are sharing materials with colleges, how many are using those materials? How many are using the same messages you are using?
- **Participation in events or activities.**
- **Website and social media metrics,** including analytics to measure traffic to your site, accompanied by adjustments based on what you learn.
- **Media hits** for traditional media outreach.

The more concrete your goals are, the easier it will be to measure success. For example, if you aim to place an op-ed, it's easy to measure whether that happened. That said, communications often is one part of a many-pronged undertaking, and it is hard to separate the impact of communications from the overall effort. However, as you evaluate success in meeting the organization's goals, you should be able to identify some roles that communications played in the work.

MODEL STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

Putting It All Together: Model Communications Plan

The earlier pages of this document address all of the sections of the Strategic Communications Planning Worksheet. Once you complete that worksheet in detail for each of your goals, you will have the elements of a communications plan. However, the worksheet format, while useful for organizing your ideas, is not an ideal structure for a communications plan.

The worksheet is organized by organizational goal so as you brainstorm and plan, you can make sure that every communications effort is driven by an organizational goal. When that work is complete, you'll likely find a lot of overlap across the goals. So the next step is to organize the information in a way that combines related elements so it is easy to use and update over time. Communications plans can be organized in a variety of ways, including by communications goal, timeline or priority, audience, or tactic.

The model strategic communications plan begins on page 9. As it is not about an actual Center, it does not have local information or specifics, but your plan will include detail about your state or Center. The level of detail you include is up to you. We strongly recommend, however, that you include timelines and implementation responsibilities for each item in your plan.

The model plan focuses on the first two rows of the goals chart from page 4:

Sample organizational goals from page 4	Sample communications goals from page 4
Identify faculty/staff who will lead change efforts (e.g., take a lead role in mapping).	■ Expand the Center's inner circle
Create funding streams so the Center is sustainable.	■ Expand the Center's inner circle ■ Demonstrate how the Center is helping colleges and their students.

Model Strategic Communications Plan	
XYZ Student Success Center	Date
Communications Goal #1 Expand the Center's inner circle.	In support of organizational goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Identify faculty/staff who will lead change efforts (e.g., take a lead role in mapping). ■ Create funding streams so the Center is sustainable.
Priority audience(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ College faculty/staff who will be leaders for change.
Desired audience actions (what the audiences should do)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Join the group you create, work with the Center on change efforts, and provide input into Center work. ■ Take a leadership role in change efforts on their campuses. ■ Lead peer conversations about change. ■ Share information about the Center's work and accomplishments with other audiences.
Strategies and tactics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Establish the size of the your group and the role of participants. Develop an agenda and set priorities. ■ Develop a one-pager that explains the Corps and participants' role/time commitment so potential participants have the ask in writing. (This is a simple piece that should not take more than an hour to create.) ■ Ask individuals to participate. ■ Enlist participants' help in gathering stories about progress and success to share with funders. ■ Revisit your group's agenda regularly to make sure the focus stays on the highest priority items.
Implementation: Timeline Month 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Define and name the group (number of people, roles and time commitment, priorities for their work, time for first meeting or phone call). ■ Develop one-pager ■ Begin talking with potential participants.
Implementation: Timeline Month 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Finalize participants; set agenda for the first six months. ■ Begin asking participants for action/input.
Implementation: Cost	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Staff time only.
Implementation: Responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ NAME/TITLE
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Feedback from participants (add specifics about how, such as a brief email survey once each quarter or semester). ■ Progress toward goals the group is supporting.

<p>Communications Goal #2</p> <p>Demonstrate how the Center is helping colleges and their students.</p>	<p>In support of organizational goal:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Create funding streams so the Center is sustainable.
<p>Priority audience(s)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ College presidents, faculty and staff, beginning with those in the group created in Goal #1. ■ Center advisory board ■ Funders ■ Policymakers
<p>Desired audience actions (what the audiences should do)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provide information about colleges successes. ■ Share information about the Center’s work and accomplishments with other audiences. ■ Provide financial support to sustain the Center over time.
<p>Strategies and tactics</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Identify areas of success, particularly similar successes at multiple colleges. ■ Establish a process for gathering real examples and, whenever possible, data from colleges. ■ Enlist allies who will be quoted in stories or provide testimonials. ■ Develop stories, including data whenever possible. ■ Package stories (written; photos; video, if possible; infographics for data. ■ Share stories through all available channels (website, as download, blog, social media, etc.). ■ Enlist the help of others to share stories broadly. ■ Reach out to funders and policymakers directly.
<p>Implementation: Timeline Month 1</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Identify areas of success for stories. ■ Establish process and begin gathering information.
<p>Implementation: Timeline Month 2</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Write and package stories.
<p>Implementation: Timeline Month 3</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Distribute stories. (Specifics for distribution will depends on end audiences and resources.)
<p>Implementation: Cost</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Staff time (moderate) or a consultant; possible expenses for video.
<p>Implementation: Responsibility</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ NAME/TITLE
<p>Evaluation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Review what your priority audiences are saying and sharing with others. Assess how well stories are being shared by others. ■ Listen for feedback from funders about the impact of the stories.