

Focus group themes

From Sept. 9-11, MOR Associates conducted 12 focus groups with 52 communicators and campus stakeholders representing 26 CSU units. Communicators and stakeholders participated in separate sessions covering six topics: collaboration and culture; recruitment; brand and creative; storytelling, content and channels; systems, technology and AI; and prioritization and change management.

The focus groups were designed to add context and depth to themes identified through the alignment surveys and other engagement opportunities. To preserve participants' anonymity, the findings focus on shared themes rather than comments from specific individuals or units.

What we heard

An integrated approach that values different types of expertise

Participants expressed a strong desire for communicators to be viewed as strategic partners whose expertise helps shape communications from the beginning. They described the value of combining the deep knowledge, relationships and distinct perspectives of college- and unit-based communicators with specialized expertise and resources that can be shared across the university.

The conversations did not point toward either a fully centralized or fully distributed model. Instead, participants described an integrated approach that supports one CSU brand while preserving the identity, voice and "local flavor" of individual colleges and units.

Clearer vision, relationships and processes

Strong relationships are at the heart of many successful communications efforts across CSU. Participants said collaboration works best when people know one another, understand their respective roles and have clear points of contact.

They also called for a clearer university-wide communications vision, more transparent processes and shared expectations. Ideas included establishing liaisons between central MarComm and colleges and units, clarifying how projects are prioritized and creating more opportunities for communicators to build relationships, share knowledge and learn from one another.

More accessible shared resources and tools

Participants expressed significant interest in a central hub where communicators could easily find guidelines, procedures, templates, contacts and other resources. Onboarding for new communicators was identified as an immediate opportunity, along with ongoing support for people navigating CSU's communications ecosystem.

Participants also identified opportunities to share platforms, licenses, equipment and expertise. Frequently mentioned examples included photography and digital asset management, newsletter tools, project management platforms, social media management, shared calendars, equipment libraries and communications-specific guidance for the responsible use of artificial intelligence.

Funding models that encourage collaboration and efficiency

Current funding and fee-for-service approaches can sometimes create barriers to using shared resources or lead units to duplicate work. Participants encouraged CSU to explore funding models that make commonly needed services more accessible, reduce the time spent transferring funds internally and establish clear expectations for service levels, costs and timelines.

Greater coordination around key audiences and priorities

Recruitment and research communications emerged as areas where stronger coordination could have a meaningful impact. Participants envisioned a more cohesive, audience-first recruitment experience that brings together university-wide messages with college-, program- and major-specific information.

They also saw opportunities to better connect and elevate CSU's research stories by coordinating across the Office of the Vice President for Research, central MarComm, colleges and units.

Investment in people, capacity and career development

Participants emphasized the importance of clearer career paths, professional development, equitable classification and compensation, and opportunities for advancement. They also noted the need to understand each employee's skills, interests and responsibilities before considering staffing changes.

Capacity was another consistent concern. Participants asked for realistic expectations, dependable backup support, clearer turnaround times and shared definitions of emergency and high-priority work.

A thoughtful approach to change that preserves what works

Participants want the alignment process to strengthen CSU communications without disrupting the relationships, creativity and effective practices already in place. They emphasized the importance of planning carefully, communicating clearly and focusing first on aligning strategy, resources and ways of working.

These findings will be considered alongside survey results, CommNet feedback and other campus engagement as the task forces develop recommendations for CSU's communications alignment.