

Evaluation of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS) Business Operations

September/October 2008

Charge to the Committee

Develop a plan for better utilizing the personnel and resources used to conduct the business operations of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

Background

CALS currently has four budgetary, programmatic divisions – Academic Programs, Research, Extension, and Academic Support.

These four divisions are further divided into 47 departments or units. Twenty-three units are considered to be on-campus. Off-campus units include 15 county extension units, seven agricultural center units, the Arboretum Affairs unit, and the Ag Demonstration Farm.

CALS has two distinct state budget lines. One for the Extension state budget; and one for the non-Extension state budget. Due to our multiple program areas, units, and state budget lines, CALS currently has 81 department numbers to properly account for our budget activity.

CALS fund sources include research and extension federal formula grants (formally federal formula funds) and county appropriations which no other campus units receive.

A CALS headcount reveals an employee base of 277 tenure/continuing-track faculty, 209 appointed professionals, 634 staff, 220 graduate associates/assistants, and 353 undergraduate student workers.

CALS business operations are decentralized to the unit level. Each unit has an individual with a working title of lead business officer. Unit business operations staff sizes vary due to the level of business needs of the department, but all lines of reporting remain in the unit. CALS Administrative Services is the college-level business office that provides day-to-day business operations support to all college administrative offices. CALS Administrative Services also provides necessary business oversight, review, and reporting for the college.

Process

In the short amount of time allotted to its task, this committee started the process of engaging stakeholders and gathering the necessary data to make future informed recommendations.

- The committee used the CALS Business Officer listserv to provide transformation and reorganization information, as it became available, to college business staff. This listserv has 83 subscribers.

- CALS business operations reorganization was discussed at the regular monthly on-campus CALS Business Officer meeting on September 30, 2008.
- A follow up meeting for business officers was held by committee members on October 2, 2008 to continue discussion on issues raised at the September 30, 2008 meeting.
- Email comments were encouraged by recommending use of the listserv, anonymous sites, and direct communication with committee members.
- Committee members spread the word to their peers, attempting to solicit thoughts and ideas.
- All comments were compiled and distributed to the committee, the Business Officer listserv, and will be available for future use.
- A Breeze conference call is scheduled for October 9, 2008 as another way to reach our off-campus business staff. Off-campus unit heads are also invited to participate.
- Representatives from this committee attended all university forums on the university's transformation plan and reported back to the committee on the meeting highlights.
- Some committee members had discussions about business operations organization with peers at other universities.
- Over the last several years, CALS Administrative Services has collected college business activity data which can be expanded upon and used to further this process. These data were reviewed by the committee.

Stakeholder Input

There were some recurring themes heard from those who made comments.

- Units need, and want, some level of local administrative and business support.
- One business operations model will not work for all CALS units.
- The uniqueness of CALS must be considered – state-wide presence, land grant mission, diversity of research, access and proximity, client interaction, availability to the public.
- CALS business operations are currently accomplished with much fewer staff, when compared to other university units.
- Business staff personnel often perform non-business duties (especially at the off-campus locations).
- Staff personnel are very concerned about their futures.
- Adequate employee group representation on this committee was questioned.

Other selected comments:

“The University (or in this case the College) needs to strike a balance between what is best done at the local level and what would best be done with shared resources.”

“...by centralizing administrative functions, creativity, autonomy and local decision-making is minimized.”

“Services that were once “university” provided, have slowly decreased...and departments are picking them up.”

“We need to prepare for change, whatever it may be. Don’t sit there worrying about what might happen, be proactive and voice concerns, provide suggestions...”

“The Arizona Cooperative Extension county system is not broken so don’t fix it.”

Recommendations

Without knowing the outcome of all the other transformation, reorganization, and change processes in the works, it is difficult to define a dramatically new business organization structure or model for CALS at this time. However, while CALS is waiting for those outcomes, this committee recommends that a task force be appointed to take the next steps to formulate an appropriate, detailed plan. As improved business methods or structures are identified, they can be implemented. The following actions should be considered.

- Continue to solicit input from stakeholders (unit heads, faculty, appointed professionals, business and non-business staff, on- and off-campus units, university central business offices, and students).
- Continue to collect the business activity data needed to measure current activity type, volume, and distribution. Data are also needed to develop metrics for measuring success and supporting decisions.
- Create an accurate list of current CALS business operations staff (the university is operating on an inadequate list generated by job title).
- Create an inventory of all business activity currently performed at both the unit and college level. CALS Administrative Services has a business roles and responsibilities tool that could be modified to collect this information from units. This inventory activity should require input from unit heads and staff.
- Analyze CALS business activity processes, policies, and procedures to identify additions, deletions, or updates.
- Develop up-to-date, realistic job descriptions for CALS business staff. In doing so, establish core competencies that CALS business staff can be evaluated against.
- Examine alternate lines of reporting, supervision, and evaluation for CALS business officer staff college-wide to improve accuracy, accountability, consistency, and competency.
- Participate in and stay up-to-date on the MOSAIC project. If a shift to more electronic business processes and workflow is successful, CALS business staffing requirements may change.
- Examine business operations change implementation plans. The Plant Sciences/Plant Pathology merger transition plan is available as a reference.
- Consider and anticipate the effect of business operations change on other resources – location, space, equipment, etc.
- Consider and anticipate the effect of business operations change on continuity of service and record storage.
- Examine business-related training issues – university-provided, college-provided, mandatory requirements (for all employee types), and delivery options.
- Provide regular updates to stakeholders on the task force actions and results of those actions.

Conclusion

CALS business operations must respond to whatever structural changes result from campus transformation, budget reductions, enterprise system replacements, and unit reorganization. Current CALS business operations also must be evaluated to identify and address weaknesses.

To meet the needs of our diverse college, changes in the way CALS does business should be dynamic, flexible, inclusive, and thoughtful. The first phase of this change process has succeeded by bringing attention to the issue and outlining the next step.

Current business climate challenges will be met and CALS will retain its excellent reputation and record of success in all it does – including business.

Committee Members

Robert Casler, Educational Communication and Technologies

Cynthia Flynn, Pima County Cooperative Extension

Rhonda Hatzelis, CALS Administrative Services

Donna-Rae Marquez, Plant Science

Joy Winzerling, Nutritional Sciences

Sandra M. Pottinger, CALS Administrative Services (chair)