

# **Changing the Culture: Advancing Communications and Training in a University Environment**

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## ***Abstract***

*The administrative leadership of Texas A&M University-Commerce recognized the need to improve communications and strengthen training within the university*

*The Budget Users Group (BUG) was created in FY2005 as an avenue to meet this commitment. The original charge of the BUG Group was to provide training and to receive input from users on various budget and accounting issues. During FY2007, these meetings evolved into an arena for continuing the training opportunities for various areas on campus and as a means of increasing communications to support staff, consisting of administrative assistants and clerical employees.*

*What began as a way to provide training evolved into a method of communicating much needed announcements and updates to support staff on campus who would not normally receive the information. The result has been a change in culture concerning how we provide training and information on campus. In addition to the monthly BUG meeting, we have added annual year-end meetings and department head training sessions. The monthly BUG meetings communicate such items as legislative updates, highlights of the institutional budget, facility project updates, personnel changes, software updates, and reports from the President's Cabinet. It provides an opportunity for new staff to be introduced to other employees for networking. In addition, the strategic plan for the university is stated, discussed, and explained at the monthly meetings.*

## **Introduction of Texas A&M University-Commerce**

Texas A&M University-Commerce began as East Texas Normal College in 1889 when founder William Leonidas Mayo opened the doors to a one-building campus in Cooper. His creed, which continues today, was "ceaseless industry, fearless investigation, unfettered thought, and unselfish service to others." The institution's history of dynamic change began in 1894 when "Mayo's College" moved to Commerce. The State of Texas took over the campus in 1917 and the name was changed to East Texas State Normal College. In 1923, the school was renamed East Texas State Teachers College. The graduate program was added in 1935, and in 1957 the Legislature, recognizing that the purpose of the institution had broadened from teacher education, changed the name to East Texas State College. Following the inauguration of the first doctoral program in 1962, the name was changed to East Texas State University. In 1996, the institution entered the Texas A&M University System and became Texas A&M University-Commerce. Today, the University meets the undergraduate, graduate and professional needs of the citizens of Northeast Texas and beyond on its Commerce campus, as well as through the Metroplex Center in Mesquite, the Universities Center at Dallas, the Navarro College partnership, and through state-of-the art distance learning. Its mission is achieved through teaching, scholarship, and service activities on its campuses, and in the community and region.

## **Statement (restatement) of the Problem/Initiative**

Providing consistent, up-to-date training has been a challenge for many years. This need was further evidenced by several audit recommendations in various audits on campus.

Improved communications continues to be a personal goal of our institution. Our challenge was to find a way to reach those employees who were not a part of the higher administration to meet the training needs and reach the institutional goal of improved communications.

### **Design**

In 2005, the Vice President for Business and Administration charged our division with the task of presenting recommendations to improve training on campus. The recommendation to create a monthly meeting with the individuals who prepared the individual budgets for the various academic colleges was considered. During the development of these meetings, it was determined that we would expand the meetings to include review and training on various accounting processes.

The Budget Users Group was launched in mid 2005. Information about the group and the associated meetings was disseminated via e-mail and through the appropriate reporting levels in the various departments. A university website page was devoted to maintaining the meeting agendas, handouts, and associated training materials. Since the information is posted on the BUG website, there are no additional costs related to copying, etc.

The meetings were designed to share various accounting and budget processes and receive input from the attendees. The original intent was a train-the-trainer concept with the participants sharing the information they received by holding their own meetings.

No additional personnel, capital equipment purchases, or electronic systems solutions were required. The main requirement was the time spent by the administrator/leader of the meetings and the different presenters at the meetings.

### **Implementation**

Attendance at the meetings was by invitation only and consisted of the various individuals within each division and/or college who worked on budgets. The meetings began with discussions of various accounting processes on campus and requested input from the attendees. The attendees were surveyed and requested to provide topics of discussion for future meetings. The attendees were requested to share the information they obtained at the BUG meetings with their departments. A few of the departments created mini-BUG meetings. As word spread about the BUG meetings, we were frequently asked how others could attend. It became obvious that everyone was not sharing the information they were receiving from the meetings. Due to the increased interest, we expanded the meetings to include additional staff. The early meetings consisted of two thirty-minute training sessions. We found ourselves being challenged to come up with additional topics for training and decided to have one thirty-minute training session and ended the meeting with university and departmental updates. Suddenly, we were bombarded with people asking “Can I attend your BUG meetings?” The word had spread that there was finally a way for the support staff on campus to receive updated information on what was happening at the University.

### **Benefits**

The benefits of the BUG meetings are multiple. In addition to providing much needed training for the attendees and satisfying various audit recommendations, the change in morale and personnel performance improvements has been remarkable. The information shared at these meetings has greatly improved communications at Texas A&M University - Commerce. We have taken a group of employees who were not receiving timely communications on university issues and empowered them by giving them information and making them stakeholders. We have tied the BUG meetings into the strategic planning process by explaining the goals of the University, informing the attendees of our plans for the future, and providing information on growth and enrollment.

Some of the comments from the various attendees are included below:

“The BUG meetings are a great source of information. It helps keep departments up to date on what’s happening on Campus and it provides the opportunity to get answers on issues we might be facing in our area.” – Rene Barrett, Administrative Assistant, Financial Services

“I have been a member of the BUG group from its inception. As I have seen the attendance increase, I have become keenly aware of the value of a group such as this. Information distributed through the BUG is always valuable to the day to day functioning of offices across campus. It broadens ones perspectives of how job functions in the various divisions impacts one another. The BUG process has become an extremely useful tool for individuals to stay up-to-date with quickly changing technological advances across campus, both for faculty and staff, as well as for students.” – Dr. Sandy Weeks, Assistant Dean, Education & Human Services

“From my perspective, I appreciate having two of our administrative assistants having the opportunity to network with their peers on campus and to receive detailed information that is valuable to helping them perform at a higher level. This leads to more efficiency for our department and gives them more ownership and satisfaction in the performance of their duties.” E. Thayne King, Director, Department of Residence Life

“The BUG meetings are a great source of information. Several months ago I began sending one employee from my office to each BUG meeting. They return to the office and share information with the other employees. These meetings provide a means for disseminating valuable information across the University campus.” – Lisa Blackwell, Director, Payroll Services

“Participation in the BUG meetings has given enlightenment to areas of our university community that I would not have known existed. It creates networking across the university campus, the informational instruction and handouts provided have proven to be of exceptional use.” - Judy Edelhofer, Operations Officer, Department of Residence Life

“The BUG Meetings are our best way to stay in touch with what is happening on campus. I have learned a tremendous amount of information at them which has helped me with my day to day duties. They have introduced me to several of my fellow co-workers on campus and let me put faces with names and made me more comfortable calling and asking for help or information. The information we come away with is factual and not campus gossip. The meetings really help to make my job easier.” – Liz Powell, Administrative Assistance, Department of Residence Life

“The BUG meetings are the most informational meetings that I have attended at TAMU-Commerce in a long time. The people that have given the updates about things on campus have been excellent and the professional manner which these subjects have been presented have been so helpful and after being at this university for over 16 years, these BUG meetings are truly educational for people that have been here one year or many years.” – Cathy Haynsworth, Administrative Assistant, Office of Diversity & Cultural Affairs

“The BUG meetings have given the Assistant Dean of Student’s office the opportunity to share with other departments things that are taking place in our division as well as taking back information that other departments are doing that we might not be aware of. This is very helpful in that, sometimes academic issues and events do not get shared with the student affairs division. Overall, the BUG meeting has made us all aware of changes, updates, etc. that are taking place around campus.” – Joan Lawrence, Administrative Assistant, Office of the Assistant Dean of Students

“The Budget Users Group (BUG) meetings are an invaluable resource in keeping staff informed of current practices. Meetings are run efficiently, follow an agenda and are kept within stated timeframes. The information provided is factual, concise and consistent across university departments.

Topics covered are relevant and timely and include information that is then disseminated to real-time cost savings through properly informed staff. (Simply put, BUG meetings provide up-to-date information for university staff, keeping us informed of current budget practices and procedures, as well as letting us know what is happening across campus. When the staff are informed, they function well. The BUG meetings provide that information in a clear, get-it-done format without wasting our time.)” – Ricia Montgomery, Administrative Assistant, Academic and Student Affairs

“These BUG meetings have provided the kind of information everyone on campus needs to know. Even those employees who don’t work directly with budgets benefit by the updates on campus concerns. In addition, these sessions are effective deterrents to grapevine rumors and offer monthly training to new and long-time staff. Please continue!” – Paula Elliott, Administrative Assistant, Advancement Services

BUG has become a common acronym on our campus. In addition to the comments above, the meeting held at the end of the year greatly improved the year-end close-out process. When new processes are developed, they are brought to BUG to provide information. Reinforcement of existing policies, procedures, etc. are presented at BUG. During a recent audit from the State Comptroller’s office, we were asked if we had provided training in our Purchasing department. We were immediately able to show them our BUG meeting website with documentation for this training. The top administrators at Texas A&M University – Commerce recognize the value and need for these meetings.

In summary, the BUG meetings have created a better, more efficient, customer friendly environment at our university.

## **Retrospect**

In retrospect, we should have recognized the need for employee communications and training on campus many years ago. We should have used these meetings as a way to disseminate information and should not have limited the attendance at the beginning.