

## **Creating a Staff Council for the Libraries**

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### **SLIDE 1**

Hello everyone, my name is John Dewees, Senior DAM Specialist in the Digital Initiatives department at RCL, but that doesn't really have anything to do with anything because I'm here today to talk about the River Campus Libraries process of creating a staff council.

### **SLIDE 2**

Here's a brief overview of what it is we're going to talk about today. We'll start off by defining the term staff council, to ensure we all know exactly what it is we're discussing. From there we'll move on to how this idea came about at UR, talk about what the scope of the group is, and then the specific charge that the staff council will have in the libraries. After that we'll discuss some of the advantages that such a body might bring to an organization, how we're going about implementing the idea, and some considerations for the body after it gets out of its first year. Finally, we'll wrap things up talking a bit about the specific governing documents that will guide how the staff council functions.

### **SLIDE 3**

I've got here a couple of elevator-pitch-ey definitions of what is I mean by "staff council." The first is "An official mechanism by which the staff body can communicate and advocate directly with the libraries' leadership team, as a supplement to the standard reporting line from direct report to supervisor." Those two words "communicate" and "advocate" are really at the heart of this idea. This group isn't taking on projects or making decisions, but instead is providing a venue by which staff can ask for change to leadership. Conveniently, both UR and RIT already have bodies that do this sort of work, just at the university level. As such this group is acting "just like the university staff council but devoted to the River Campus Libraries."

### **SLIDE 4**

The idea for the staff council came out of the Direct Communication Community of Practice (or CoP). At RCL we've had a couple rounds of communities of practice, where staff are brought together to learn about and improve their practice on a given topic. Most recently those topics have included accessibility, project management, and direct communication. After a suggestion from the dean that our CoP seemed to be pretty interested in advocacy, we put together a proposal for the creation of a staff council and drew up some governance documents for how such a body might function. Once we had that foundation, this started a pretty lengthy process of discussion with a lot of different stakeholders which included the CoP, library leadership, past and current members of the Genesee Staff Council, as well as our Human Resources representative, and folks at University HR, among others. All in all, this process took about a year. A big shout-out to all the other members of the CoP who put in a great amount of work getting this over the finish line, as well as Katie Papas, Sarah Siddiqui, and Ashlee Huff.

## **SLIDE 5**

I just wanted to briefly mention the scope of this group. While the University of Rochester Libraries is composed of several different distinct library systems, including RCL, Sibley, Miner, and MAG, the scope of this staff council is explicitly only the River Campus Libraries. Assuming the group can meet the needs of the other campuses, it might be possible to expand the scope of the council over time, working closely with the other campuses to see if it is appropriate to meet their needs. However, in the meantime, we just wanted to get this staff council up on its legs and not overstep with our colleagues across town.

## **SLIDE 6**

Since this is a lightning talk, I'm not actually going to read the full formal charge to you, but if you skim it, I think it'll be fairly evident that it went through that process of negotiation and discussion. It is certainly a statement drafted by committee, but that's ok. What's more important is that you can see that the charge places an emphasis on advising and recommending new ideas, increasing staff wellness, creating an ever more positive culture, and reducing staff attrition.

## **SLIDE 7**

Continuing to push on those ideas of what advantages the staff council might provide, one of the things that we kept coming back to was fostering new lanes of communication. While the staff council is not quite yet up and running, one of the expected activities it will sponsor are staff forums, providing a place for staff members to come together and talk across departments, hitting that perennial goal of all libraries: to de-silo. The needs and recommendations that come out of such staff forums will then be able to be directly communicated to library leadership. Without this, the only official method of communication to the leadership team is through the reporting line. That can be a brittle process, rife with people editing themselves due to power dynamics or filtering information that is passed along, even if they might not be aware that they are doing it. Your understanding of an organization really depends on your position within it, and this body hopefully will allow those with unique perspectives at all corners of the org chart to share that point of view. Finally, this is really all about providing another mechanism to foster a positive culture. In my mind, organizational culture is something that requires constant care and attention, it's not something that is a binary, "good" or "bad", "broken" or "fixed." Instead, it sits on a continuum, and this is a mechanism by which a culture can benefit from some additional care, some additional maintenance.

## **SLIDE 8**

So, what actually happens next? Our discussions with stakeholders ended up being so robust that we sort of ran out of time. The goal here was to map the election cycle of this body to the fiscal year, which runs July to June, and we didn't quite have enough time left at the end to do a proper kick-off election. Instead, the first year of the council will have some unique characteristics. Nominations for the three open spots on the council were solicited from the staff body in late May to early June of this year. These could either be nominations of another person or oneself. Those nominated were contacted to make sure they were interested, had their supervisor's approval, and to ask for a short candidate statement talking about why they were interested. The RCL Senior Leadership Team is then going to select who they felt represented the best candidates from that pool and invite them to an interview to determine who would ultimately be sitting on the council, a process that is happening shortly. Skipping the election process is not ideal, and nothing I'm thrilled about honestly, but we just sort of ran out of time. Hence why this group is only getting one-year terms and will be charged with getting the body up on its feet. During that first year, the election process will get sorted out, they'll figure out if three people is actually enough to do the work, and establish the foundational activities needed to fulfill the charge.

## **SLIDE 9**

After that first year, three council members will be elected rather than appointed. These will be for either 2 year or 3 year terms, only for the first election. This is to ensure that the entire council doesn't turn over every time there is an election and instead provide some continuity of institutional knowledge, but past this first election, everyone will get 2 year terms. The first real election will run from April to June of 2025. Successive staff council responsibilities will be pretty similar to those of the first year, and will really be steeped in figuring out creative ways to foster more communication and advocacy across the organization.

## **SLIDE 10**

Let's talk a bit more about the governing documents themselves. There are two documents that describe how the staff council functions. We have a set of Bylaws that describes the council at a high level. These were approved by the dean of libraries and any modification of this document requires a vote of the full staff body. These shouldn't change often over time and are meant to be the stable foundation for the group. The Practices document on the other hand describes the day-to-day work of the group and can be changed as often as there is a need by the staff council itself. As an example of the difference here, the Bylaws dictate that staff council members will be elected, while the Practices detail that the election process kicks off in April. We want to make sure that the staff council is always an elected body, but vagaries of scheduling might mean in the future the process needs to kick off in March or May and making those sorts of tweaks are the kind of things the staff council needs to be able to do itself.

## **SLIDE 11**

I've uploaded my slides and talking points to UR's institutional repository along with the governance documents that define the nuts and bolts of how the staff council functions for anyone that might be interested, available at this QR code. Thank you so much for listening, and I hope everyone has a wonderful conference today.