

University Senate Constituency Email Reform

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Purpose and Motivation

A comprehensive email rights system for the University Senate would bring the body's communications into the twenty-first century. Currently, there is no central policy that governs a Senator's ability to email his or her constituents. Each school has its own policies set by the Dean or appropriate office. As a consequence of these inconsistent policies, individual Senate constituencies receive a different amount of information directly from the Senate. Inequities of access exist, such that some Senators have extremely limited potential for communication, while others have broad access to their constituencies. The Senate should not have an ad hoc solution to communication needs that depends on the respective administrative policies of the various schools, informal workarounds, or intraschool politics. Instead, a policy that is consistent across schools and communities and that reflects the independence of the Senate is the only appropriate approach to communications.

The Senate was founded to give all the members of the University a voice in its decision-making. In 1968, communication was done primarily through public speaking and fliering. Now, students, faculty, and others expect communication to be done digitally. Indeed, people pay less and less attention to the paper posted on their walls and more attention to the inbox on their computer. Enabling Senators to communicate with their electorate would be the most effective way to improve understanding of and engagement with the Senate. Many members of the Columbia Community are unaware of what the Senate does and direct communication from those whom they elected may inspire higher levels of engagement.

The nature of a Senator's position frequently requires capability for public outreach. Spreading awareness of Senate events and providing timely and informative news updates via email are two ways in which Senators can increase the impact of the Senate's work and functioning. Moreover, surveys and polls of a constituency are important forms of information gathering, and can provide crucial data for Senators seeking to develop their positions on an issue. Additionally, the ability to receive feedback from constituents is critical for Senators to be able to better serve and represent the interests of their communities. An expansion of email privileges will enable Senators to better fulfill the demands of their office.

Certainly, expanded email privileges will require responsible use. The intention behind this proposal is not to create a individualized pulpit for each Senator, or a digital soapbox from which to advocate towards political or personal ends, but to provide a content-neutral toolbox to aid Senators in fulfilling their duties. To this end, it is not intended for Senators to be able to express individual political or partisan opinions in these communications, and any resolution would seek to ensure that an expansion of email privileges remains an apolitical enhancement.

Current Policies and Testimonials

At present, University Senators do not have a reliable or uniform method of reaching out to their individual constituencies and school communities.

Among students, access to school-wide email tools varies dramatically. Among the two Senators from the Business School, a University Senator always sits on their Executive Committee during his or her second year, granting that Senator the direct ability to email the student body regarding pertinent issues. However, this is a unique situation.

For all other student University Senators, email access is filtered through either a student council, or an administrator's office. At the Law School, the Executive Board of the Student Council has the ability to email the entire student body, and does so regularly. However, as the University Senator does not sit on the Executive Board, the capacity to email the student population rests in his or her personal relationship with the leaders of the Law School Student Senate.

Access through student councils exists in some form for Barnard College, Business School, Columbia College/Engineering, Dental School, GSAPP, GSAS, Law School, SIPA, and Teachers College.

These relationships are not always flexible to the varying demands of a University Senator. Periodic newsletters are one method of communication. GSAC issues a monthly newsletter, whereas Barnard and Teachers College both issue a weekly letter. These newsletters, being a compendium of news, generally contain a mix of social, academic, and political news. Such newsletters are not an ideal form of communication for University Senate business. With newsletters, there is a likelihood that Senate news will be buried among other issues, there is little potential for interaction between Senator and constituency, and the periodicity of a newsletter is unresponsive to the fluid nature of Senate issues. If a Senator wished to poll their student body regarding smoking habits or attitudes, as occurred last year at the Law School, or wished to issue a timely reminder about a University Hearing, a newsletter would not adequately serve the Senator's needs.

Student Councils also frequently retain the ability to send out independent emails, but in addition to the need for a student Senator to be on good terms with their Student Council, implementation is not always effective. As an example, Senators from GSAS who want to email the student population must contend with GSAC's reluctance to depart from their monthly format--a hurdle which complicated the ability of GSAS University Senators to poll their constituents for their views during last year's ROTC discussion. In GSAPP, communication breakdowns between the Senator and the GSAPP council required the Senator to devote time to follow-up on requests, and ultimately resulted in emails that only reached a portion of the intended audience/student body.

Some Senators have access to their constituencies through the use of informal email listservs. This is the case, for example, at SIPA and P&S. Informal arrangements of this nature are

beneficial in that they allow Senators direct access to their constituents, but suffer from their opt-in nature--while such emails may hit a large percentage of a population, they are unlikely to reach every individual as not everyone may belong to the listserv.

Senators can also reach their constituencies through working with the administration of their respective schools to send an email. Such emails have a benefit, in that they are more readily recognizable as University Senate business, and they are likely to catch more attention due to their official nature. There is no uniform process for sending an email through a Senator's school administration, and the release of such an email is ultimately not dependant upon the Senator's discretion. Such balkanization of access policies when it comes to Senator email access is entirely undesirable, as it subjects a Senator's ability to email their constituents to the vagaries of individual administrators and to inequitable means of email access.

For some senators, working with administration is their only means of broad-based email access. At the Nursing School, for example, there is no student government--resulting in a situation where the University Senator is frequently the sole voice of student representation. As such, emails from the Nursing Senator are supervised and must first pass through the administration. Release dates of emails are subject to the workload of administrators, resulting in variable turn-around time for emails, and the relationship contains an inherently unbalanced power dynamic--a vastly different situation from the individual agency and control that the Business School Senators possess.

Ultimately, whether email access is filtered through a student council or an administrator's office, the result is that University Senators experience inconsistency and inequality with the nature and scope of their email privileges, hampering their ability to effectively represent their constituencies.

It should be noted that, while the examples above involve students, expansion of email privileges is an issue of importance to all University Senators. The needs of faculty and other Senators to be able to reach out to their constituencies are no less pronounced. The revisions to the University's conflict of interest policy, the campus debate surrounding smoking restrictions, and the ongoing discussion of the structure of fringe benefits all eloquently highlight areas where University Senators of all stripes could profit from increased ways of interacting with their constituencies and gathering information.

Role of the Senate Office

The Senate Office has tools in place for reaching out to all members of Columbia University. However, their role has not traditionally been to email individual schools--most of their outreach coming under the aegis of the University Senate and necessitating communication across multiple schools and populations.

The Senate's role as an email facilitator has been utilized infrequently. Since the year 2000, the Senate Office has sent 9 emails, and these emails have been precipitated by large issues such as graduate student unionization (2000), Manhattanville (2006), and ROTC (2005, 2011).

The one notable exception has been the Senate Office's role in facilitating communication between Research officers and their constituency. Occasionally, the Senate Office has sent emails on behalf of the Research Officers Committee to their constituents (approximately 2000 individuals), with news updates, meeting announcements, and surveys on relevant issues such as teaching and work conditions.

The Senate Office does not currently have the toolset to regularly send emails on behalf of the various Senators to their constituents or to facilitate regular intra-school communication.