

## **Report of the Task Force on Research Communication**

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### **I. Purpose**

This report provides a plan for strengthening the University's ability to coordinate and effectively communicate the depth and value of the research conducted at the Medical Center and the Lawrence campus. By enabling all KU researchers to disseminate their research more broadly and to communicate the value of their work to more people who can benefit from it, the University will stimulate the culture of research and gain greater recognition as a leader in research, innovation and discovery.

### **II. Background**

This report was produced by the Task Force on Research Communications to respond to the following recommendations by the Discovering and Innovating Task Force of the Chancellor's *Initiative 2015*:

- Create novel communication forums to continually inform the state and nation that KU is a transformative leader in discovery and innovation.
- Use innovative and diverse communication formats and venues, including the Internet and advertising enterprises.
- Inform and impress Kansans, U.S. and world citizens, and the international community of scholars about KU research activities and accomplishments.

### **III. Mission and Goals**

*Final Draft for Comment*

*Research Comm TF Report March 4, 2009*

The Task Force defined its mission as, “To identify the opportunities, challenges and resources required to evolve the existing culture of research communication at KU into one that enhances the University’s reputation as a leader in research, innovation and discovery.” In simple terms, the overarching mission is to **Make KU Faculty Research More Visible and Consumable.**

In pursuing this mission, the goals for research communication are to establish:

- **Significance:** the importance of research in increasing or transforming the body of knowledge and improving lives in Kansas and throughout the nation.
- **Depth:** the aggregate of research experience and expertise within a given discipline.
- **Breadth:** the wide span of research across many different disciplines at the University.

#### IV. Objectives and Strategies:

**Objective #1: Achieve synergy among existing research communications staff so that their collective effort presents KU as a comprehensive international research university.**

##### Strategies:

- A. Establish a framework for a collaborative environment in which research communicators can reach diverse audiences with clarity and consistency.

##### *Rationale:*

KU has a small number of research communicators embedded within research units who hold responsibility for communicating their work. They are specialists among a large group of several hundred public relations staff (“KU Communicators”) distributed around the university, although not all major research units have a research communicator. The research communicators currently function independently to meet the needs of their unit, resulting in isolated and diffused messages and lost opportunities. Creation of a collaborative environment and coordinated university-wide framework would enable them to work together and maximize their efforts. This will help KU to “speak with one voice” and continue to build a reputation for leadership and innovation as a research institution.

- B. Provide centralized resources for research communicators to accomplish their unit’s mission while strengthening the University’s overall communications capability.

##### *Rationale:*

KU has invested significant resources in its highly decentralized communications environment. Research communicators need dedicated resources and guidance to augment their ability to develop consumable research stories and to deliver them in a coordinated manner for maximum effectiveness. Improving research communications will require restructuring or combining existing resources and investing in necessary tools and capabilities. The effort will be analogous to that of other University entities: the KU Libraries’ capability to provide not only common resources but also professional guidance for scholars to pursue and disseminate research, and the KU Web home page management team, which ensures a coherent user-experience for visitors to the home page and draws content from units and provides them with templates and other resources.

**Objective #2: Develop a systematic approach that allows both faculty and research communicators to understand and work within the existing institutional communications framework and, more broadly, that enables them to disseminate their research and communicate its value to those who can benefit from it.**

**Strategies:**

- A. Organize the University's "inbound" communication capability so that people who seek expertise can find it among KU's experts.

*Rationale:*

The communications environment has shifted from a sender-to-receiver model to a new paradigm driven by the receiver's search for information and largely propelled by the Internet. A modern research university needs not only the capability to disseminate information but also to aggregate its informational resources and be accessible 24/7 to those who seek it. This includes both the academic public (scholars in each discipline) and the general public (consumers interested in how this research affects their lives).

A systematic approach to communications will define roles and responsibilities for all KU communications staff embedded in units across the University and, perhaps more importantly, provide faculty direct assistance in developing the skills they need to broadly disseminate the benefits of their work.

Aggregating information about KU's many research experts and the content of their work will rely on the University's Web site for distribution. Aggregating this information on the KU Web site will require coordination between key Web content managers and Information Technology Web infrastructure managers.

- B. Ensure a robust external (or "outbound") communications program that allows the University to spotlight its research capabilities to targeted audiences.

*Rationale:*

Effective communications strategies use traditional and emerging media markets to broadly disseminate messages and establish a recognizable identity. The diversity of skill in the population of KU Communicators, who are responsible for internal and external publicity, is great. The individuals in these roles rarely communicate to the public about research in any depth, nor were they hired to do so. Their efforts are guided by the priorities within their organizational unit.

Faculty members whose allocation of effort includes research have a contractual obligation to publish their work. Communications on this peer-to-peer level are effective within specific disciplines but fail to inform the general public about the benefits of KU research.

Providing appropriate resources to support the integration of formal (institutional offices) and informal (embedded staff and faculty) communications avenues will help faculty researchers realize the benefits of broader dissemination of KU research.

## **V. Recommendations:**

The following recommendations are designed to create synergy among research communicators, provide training to enhance the ability of faculty to broadly disseminate the benefits of their work and maintain the centralized resources required for an effective research communications system at KU.

1. Clearly establish with deans and vice provosts that research dissemination and communication is a University priority. (*Objective 2, Strategy B*).
2. Clearly establish University priorities identifying those research disciplines that are part of the overarching KU message, business plan and strategy. (*Objective 1*).
3. Charge University Communications on the Lawrence campus and External Affairs at the Medical Center with developing a centralized communications framework that provides leadership, strategies, tools, resources and enhanced relationships with embedded research communicators and the institutional communications offices. (*Objective 1*)
4. Require research units and University Communications to develop a collaborative model for jointly funded research communications positions to cover strategically the full breadth of KU research. (*Objective 1, Strategy A*)
5. Encourage Schools and Departments to recognize the importance of public communication of research as an integral element of scholarly activities by explicitly including it as an element of annual evaluations and as one component in evaluations for promotion and tenure. (*Objective 2, Strategy B*)
6. Commit the financial, human and time resources required for University Communications at Lawrence and External Affairs at the Medical Center to successfully implement the recommendations of this report. (*Objective 2, Strategies A&B*).

### *Rationale:*

Successfully positioning the University as a leader in research demands that KU “speak with one voice” to meet the needs of its researchers and to elevate the importance of research communications. To accomplish this effort, University Communications is working with key research communicators as “early adopters” to demonstrate the potential of a collaborative, cohesive research communications framework.

Implicit in this coordination is the need to develop the capability for “niche communication” without diffusing the University’s overarching messages. Effective research communication is just one element in the overall communications strategy for the University. There must be a continued cultivation and professionalization of the embedded KU communicators who exist throughout the University. The model developed for research communications should have a larger application throughout the decentralized communications structure at KU.

The communications environment today and in the future will continue to evolve rapidly with emerging media venues and technology. Yet print and broadcast media, specifically trade and professional journals, will remain important resources for broad dissemination of research communications. The purpose of this report is to develop a systematic approach to communications that allow the University to anticipate, efficiently manage and better coordinate use of limited resources.

## **VI. Expected Outcomes:**

### **1. Research communications will provide a more comprehensive, cohesive image of KU and the KU Medical Center. (*Objectives 1 & 2*)**

KU’s reputation for transformative research has been built a brick-at-a-time on the foundations established by individual research units on separate campuses. As a result, communication efforts are decentralized and coordinated on an ad hoc basis.

A robust, systematic approach to research communications that engages formal (institutional offices) and informal (embedded communicators and faculty) resources will improve the internal exchange of information and provide a more comprehensive external perception of KU as an international research university. KU must aggregate the accomplishments of separate units into a cohesive whole. This is especially important for a university that receives high visibility for accomplishments in other areas such as athletics.

### **2. The benefits of research will be consumable and relevant to audiences. (*Objective 2, Strategy A*).**

The ability to communicate about research is central to KU’s mission. In addition to actively disseminating information, a modern university must promote its research to international research media as well as make it easily accessible to individuals and groups who actively search for information relevant to their needs. A systematic approach to aggregating information and packaging it so it is consumable, understandable and relevant to niche audiences will enhance KU’s reputation and expertise in direct and applied research.