

Shared Services Online Feedback Analysis

December 2024

Phase 2 of the Organizational Structure Project



Executive Summary



This report provides an analysis of feedback submitted through an online feedback form and email regarding the University of Utah's shared services project, focusing on input from faculty and staff within four units: the College of Humanities, College of Science, College of Social and Behavioral Science, and the School for Cultural and Social Transformation. The feedback closely aligns with themes identified in prior listening sessions, underscoring concerns about the potential loss of departmental autonomy, strained relationships with central administration and low morale among stakeholders. New themes also emerged, including skepticism

about the necessity of an executive dean and a desire to include the College of Science in the shared services model to enhance interdisciplinary collaboration. While some respondents recognized potential benefits of shared services when thoughtfully implemented, overall sentiments reflected apprehension, driven by concerns about transparency, decision-making processes and resource allocation. Moving forward, the success of the shared services initiative will depend on thoughtful stakeholder engagement, clear communication and a commitment to addressing feedback.

Context & Methods

This report analyzes feedback collected through an online feedback form on the University of Utah Academic Affairs webpage, as well as feedback submitted via the Academic Affairs email inbox. The form was specifically designed to gather faculty and staff input on the shared services project, which is designed to improve the coordination of administrative and operational functions across four units: the College of Humanities, College of Science, College of Social and Behavioral Science, and School for Cultural and Social Transformation. However, feedback was not limited to the form, as individuals were also able to share their input by emailing the Academic Affairs inbox, which is publicly accessible. Both channels were open to submissions from any individual, regardless of their affiliation with the project or the university.

The form collected the respondent's first name, last name, role (i.e., faculty, staff, graduate student, undergraduate student, or other), and email address, along with a field for feedback

or questions. The prompt for the feedback field stated: "Please share your feedback on the potential for shared services and resources, as well as any thoughts on the ongoing planning process." Only the feedback field was mandatory, enabling anonymous submissions if desired.

A total of 45 submissions were received through the form and one submission was received via the Academic Affairs email, with responses ranging from anonymous to identified participants. This report is an analysis of submissions accepted over the course of two months, beginning on Sept. 30, 2024, and concluding on Dec. 6, 2024.

Respondents represented various university roles: 24 submissions came from faculty members, 15 from staff members, two from graduate students, and the remaining five participants did not disclose their roles. The feedback was reviewed to identify recurring themes and concerns that can inform the next stages of the shared services project.

Findings

The findings from the analysis of the feedback submitted through the online form and email closely mirror the insights gathered from 12 listening sessions, which shared the same purpose. **Participants raised similar concerns**, including key themes such as the potential loss of departmental autonomy, strained relationships with central administration and low morale among staff and faculty. In addition, as in the listening sessions, some participants expressed conditional support for shared services. However, this analysis also revealed two new themes: concerns about the addition of an executive dean as part of the shared services model and a desire to integrate the College of Science into the shared services organizational structure to address overlapping needs and foster interdisciplinary collaboration.

01. Concern About the Loss of Departmental Autonomy

The theme of concern about the loss of departmental autonomy emerged as the most

prominent issue across responses. Participants repeatedly highlighted the risks of shared services disrupting the strong, localized expertise that departments have cultivated over time. Participants noted that local contacts are important in large part because existing shared services centralized at the university are poor quality. Local contacts are thus critical to completing work – in fact, one participant recommended that it would be a better use of central administration’s resources to address poorly functioning centralized services that have resulted in the need for local experts.

Faculty and staff expressed concerns that removing or displacing embedded roles, such as academic advisors or IT support, would dilute the effectiveness of these functions, which rely heavily on specialized knowledge and close connections to departmental needs. For instance, one participant noted, “Our staff are exceptional and it is very important that departments keep their staff who have specialized knowledge about department needs, budgets, processes, etc. that are indispensable [sic] to chairs and faculty.” Similarly, another participant wrote, “...Programs know their own needs best, and the further the financial decisions get from the

people who will use and deploy the money, the less likely they are to make sense (and thus make efficient use of funds) for the programs to which the money is ultimately allocated.” Finally, one participant wrote, “Taking advising responsibilities out of departments creates distance and a lack of clarity between advisors and faculty and ultimately does not serve students well.” These examples underscore the belief that removing department-specific roles would dilute effectiveness and harm student outcomes.

Respondents shared examples of how autonomy has allowed departments to tailor their services effectively, such as advising staff building relationships with faculty or IT teams implementing proactive measures. These accounts revealed a strong emotional investment in maintaining systems that are already functioning well. The theme also touched on broader concerns about losing control over how resources are allocated. The potential erosion of autonomy was perceived as a threat to operational effectiveness, morale and institutional identity, making it a central concern that resonated widely among stakeholders.

02. Strained Relationships with Central Administration

Participants described frustration with central administration, including concerns regarding a lack of transparency about the shared services project, confusion and frustration about the meaning of the word “efficiency,” and exclusion from decision-making in the shared services project.

Participants described a lack of transparency about the goals, processes and impacts of the shared services project. Several participants noted they did not have the necessary details to engage meaningfully with the project. This lack of clarity fostered skepticism and a belief that the project would lead to staff reductions and resource centralization, with decisions already made before stakeholder input. One participant, for instance, wrote that they have observed a “noticeable decline in transparency from Central Administration.” Another, reflecting on shared advising, wrote that “upper admin



did not honestly explain what changes were being considered so that we could offer real, actionable feedback..." These quotes reinforce the perception that listening sessions were performative rather than genuine efforts to gather feedback. Without knowing which services would be shared, how implementation would proceed or how departments would be affected, participants felt disempowered.

The emphasis on efficiency as a guiding principle of the shared services model created confusion and frustration among participants. Responses indicated that participants grapple with understanding how central administration would define the word "efficiency" and/or questioned what "efficiency" would look like in practice. Overall, participants expressed fears that efficiency would come at the expense of quality and responsiveness. One participant succinctly articulated this concern, noting, "There comes a moment when efficiency is the enemy of effectiveness." Examples of existing inefficiencies, such as delays and errors in existing shared services like Travel Services, further fueled skepticism about whether centralization would genuinely improve operations. Participants worried that the prioritization of cost savings over effectiveness could lead to reduced services, heavier workloads and a loss of tailored support for faculty, staff and students.

Participants also expressed frustration about being excluded from meaningful decision-making processes. While listening sessions were intended to gather input, many felt that these efforts lacked authenticity and failed to engage stakeholders in impactful ways. One participant wrote, "I'm not sure how to provide this feedback because I don't know which parts of my job might become a shared service and which won't." Another participant suggested that fear of retaliation prevented candid feedback. Others criticized the lack of collaboration, with one participant observing, "Listening sessions

feel ineffective without a clear understanding of what those leading this initiative envision as the 'end goal.'" This theme reveals a disconnect between central administration's intention to involve stakeholders and how participants are experiencing the process.

Together, these sub-themes show strained relationships between central administration and stakeholders, driven by a lack of trust, unclear communication about what efficiency means and what participants view as limited opportunities for authentic engagement.

03. Low Morale

The theme of low morale emerged in feedback, reflecting concerns about job security, increased workloads and a perceived lack of support from leadership. One staff member wrote that the exploration of shared services left staff feeling "morose, undervalued, and expendable." Another participant noted, "The resignations of deans in two of the four affiliated colleges, coupled with a lack of consistent leadership to oversee this initiative, have further exacerbated feelings of skepticism and anxiety among stakeholders." Participants expressed that unclear leadership and the threat of losing institutional knowledge due to turnover were contributors to their anxiety and frustration.

04. Concern About an Executive Dean

The theme of concern about appointing an executive dean to oversee shared services revealed skepticism regarding the necessity and value of the proposed leadership role. Participants frequently described the position as an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy that could slow decision-making, increase costs and contradict the goal of improving efficiency. For instance, one participant wrote, "An executive

dean between the deans and the provost is quite an extravagance! At the same time, departments are being told to expect cuts to their capacity to teach.” Similarly, another wrote that the addition of an executive dean, likely with additional support staff, undermines the main argument for shared services – efficiency – and feels contradictory to the project’s stated goals. Two respondents suggested alternative leadership structures, such as a director or manager, that they believed would be more aligned with the shared services model’s goals, given the colleges will not be merging and the leader will not oversee processes such as curriculum management or faculty appointments, among other items. These responses underscored a desire for leaner leadership solutions that would directly support operations without adding unnecessary hierarchy.

05. Desire to Integrate the College of Science

The idea of excluding the College of Science from the shared services model was viewed unfavorably by respondents; omitting the College of Science was seen by these faculty and staff as a missed opportunity to address overlapping needs and promote collaboration across disciplines, particularly in STEM-related areas. For instance, one participant wrote, “Many faculty in our college, including myself, consider ourselves to be STEM faculty, with needs similar to those in the College of Science. It would be most efficient to have shared services for all faculty that do STEM.” Similarly, a participant expressed, “With respect to shared services, my grad students and postdocs (and the undergrads they mentor), frequently make use of facilities within the College of Science...Likewise, I have active collaborations

with faculty in the College of Science (both on grants and publications), so we have similar research administration needs.” Another participant summarized their feelings succinctly as “the exclusion of the College of Science from the shared service model will be harmful to staff and faculty morale and has the potential to lead to resource inequities and a hierarchy between units.”

06. Conditional Support

While much of the feedback highlighted concerns about the shared services project, some participants acknowledged its potential benefits under specific conditions. Several respondents noted that shared services could enhance efficiency and support when carefully tailored to meet departmental needs. For instance, two participants highlighted the success of collaborative advising models, which allowed advisors to share caseloads and institutional knowledge. One wrote, “Because I am part of a collaborative advising team I am not all alone. I get case load support and am able to share my institutional knowledge with a team of people so if (heaven forbid) something were to happen to me others would have enough information to do my job.” Others pointed to the opportunities for sharing functions such as IT, research administration, or marketing services, which could streamline operations across units and address gaps in staffing that smaller departments have experienced historically.

These comments underscore that shared services have potential to work effectively when implementation is thoughtful, localized knowledge is preserved and functions are selected for sharing based on broad applicability and need. However, these supportive perspectives were often framed as conditional and did not outweigh the predominant concerns expressed in the feedback.

Conclusion

Feedback collected through the online form and email submissions revealed that while some participants recognized potential advantages to shared services under specific circumstances, the dominant narrative was one of concern about the potential loss of college and departmental autonomy. In addition, participants described strained relationships with central administration, low morale, doubts about the necessity of an executive dean and the desire to integrate the College of Science in the shared services model.

Participants expressed a desire for transparency, more authentic opportunities to engage in decision-making and thoughtful implementation that preserves localized expertise and operational effectiveness. These findings mirror the findings of listening sessions, which were held for the same purpose of gathering faculty and staff feedback regarding shared services.

Moving forward, the success of the shared services project will depend on meaningful engagement with stakeholders, transparent communication about goals and project status and a commitment to addressing the specific concerns and recommendations raised through stakeholder feedback. By fostering collaboration and trust, the U has the opportunity to refine its approach and implement a shared services model that not only enhances operational efficiency but also strengthens institutional identity, morale and outcomes across the four units involved.

A Report Commissioned by the Project Team

The project team includes deans of the four participating academic units, staff of the Office of Academic Affairs, and the chair of the Academic Excellence Taskforce. The taskforce is composed of deans and provides recommendations and feedback on strategic initiatives and change management aligned with the University of Utah strategic planning process, Impact 2030.