



March 2021

Meaningful Student Consultation

Empowering Engagement and Co-creation

INTRODUCTION

STUDENTS REGULARLY CONTRIBUTE TO THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO COMMUNITY BY SHARING THEIR:



EXPERIENCES



THOUGHTS



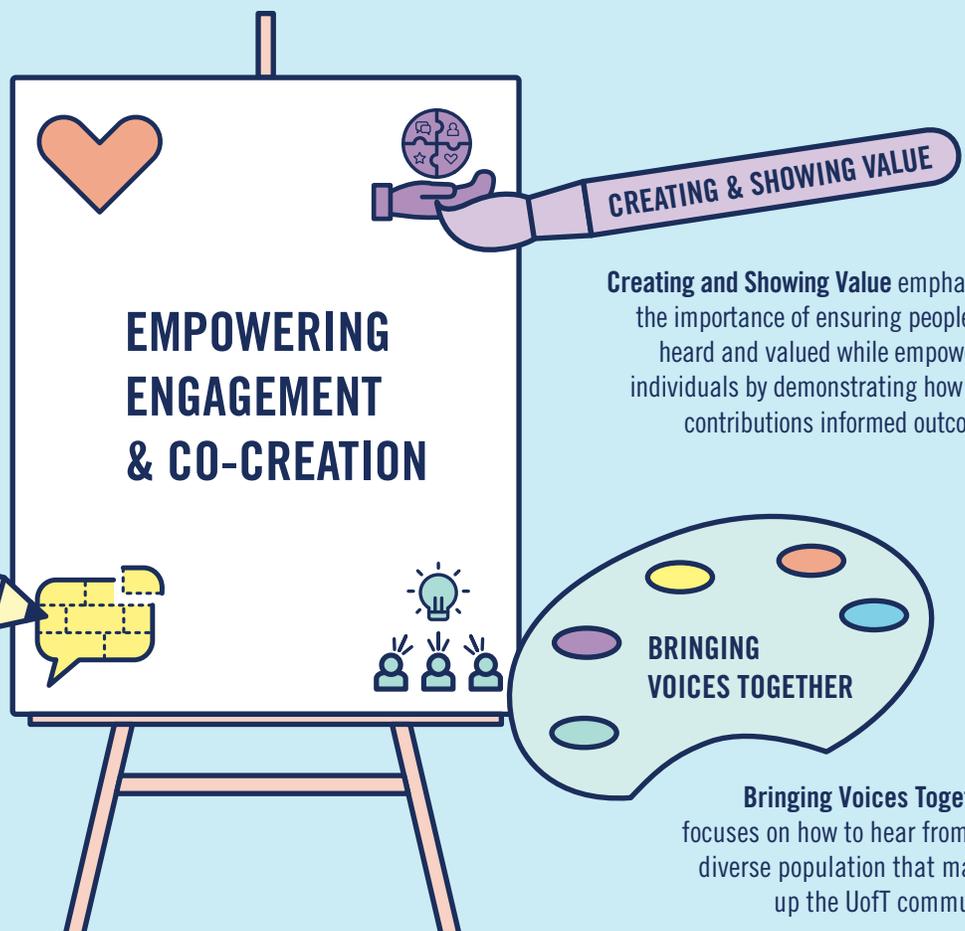
AND IDEAS

Using empathy-based interviews and journal entries conducted with students, staff and instructors, this research project aimed to better understand what makes student consultations meaningful for all involved.

We learned that a well-planned student consultation process empowers engagement and co-creation between students and decision-makers. Students want to participate as active participants throughout the consultation process, providing feedback but also engaging in an ongoing conversation. A well-planned process provides the scaffolding to frame a conversation that incorporates students as informed and knowledgeable co-creators throughout the process.

This report highlights three main themes that inform all stages of meaningful student consultations. These themes are supported by insights that raise important questions for planners to consider, and are followed by a process framework, supplemented with best practices, designed to support all involved.

Building the Conversation addresses the complexity of creating conversations that have the direction, flexibility and time to generate meaningful insights.



Creating and Showing Value emphasizes the importance of ensuring people feel heard and valued while empowering individuals by demonstrating how their contributions informed outcomes.

Bringing Voices Together focuses on how to hear from the diverse population that makes up the UofT community.



BRINGING VOICES TOGETHER

The population of UofT is comprised of a diverse body of students, staff, and faculty with varying identities, experiences, abilities, and priorities. The goal of effective student consultation is to hear from as many of these diverse voices as possible, actively seeking out marginalized groups, and embedding this diversity in the design of the consultation process.

LOOKING BEYOND THE TRADITIONAL REPRESENTATIVES

While the student body is large, currently, a small group of students offer consistent feedback. Both staff and students identified certain individuals, such as those involved in student government, as better able to offer substantive and actionable feedback. These individuals were more knowledgeable about the university system and able to understand its limitations. However, a focus on expertise and feasible input amplifies the same set of voices and concerns. How can we equip non-traditional representatives with the knowledge to contribute meaningfully?

“You’re dealing with an extremely diverse student body and that also challenges the traditional modes of representation because then there’s the question of who gets involved and who chooses to speak on behalf of the other students.”

“So how could we help people get up to speed quicker or differently so that their participation could be more meaningful?... It’s not problems with the students themselves, it’s problems with the way that we’ve prepared them to do this work.”

WHO’S NOT IN THE ROOM

Students are keen to offer feedback but can face barriers that prevent them from participating in the consultation process. These barriers range from a lack of awareness of feedback opportunities to multiple competing priorities and responsibilities, such as finances and academic obligations. Searching out and participating in feedback events is time consuming, which can limit students’ ability to participate. How can decision-makers recognize the barriers students face and creatively compensate participants to recognize their contributions?

“People are going to share their time and insights with us. What’s in it for them? And the answer to that I think will be different in different contexts.”

AMPLIFYING UNHEARD VOICES

Issues of accessibility or inclusivity were identified as barriers to participation. Some students did not identify as being part of the intended audience, questioning their ability to contribute meaningfully in a process that they saw as targeted to specific groups. Staff noted that reaching out to trusted groups can promote engagement and draw in marginalized voices, as they can help students navigate these barriers. How can we reach out to marginalized groups while affirming their knowledge and expertise to participate?

“We need to think about equity as we do this work, it should be front and center and whose voices are being heard and how we’re listening to those voices and doing that in a meaningful, authentic way, but also not tokenizing people to sort of put them in a box.”

“International students may also not be as aware of these consultations because, at times, they are not familiar with the processes or the impact of consultations.”



BUILDING THE CONVERSATION

Student consultations are complex. There is a tension between the needs of the designers to elicit useful feedback in a timely manner, while simultaneously allowing the time and space needed for students to share their experiences fully. Ideal consultation builds a conversation that is both directed and flexible; designers have a clear sense of what they need to get out of the conversation while creating the flexibility to allow others to drive the conversation at key points.

CREATING DIALOGUE

Our data highlighted the importance of two-way conversation that allows decision-makers to understand the root of the problem and the deeper needs of students, while avoiding directed questioning that confirms expectations and assumptions. Students were frustrated when consultations did not appear to be designed with meaningful feedback in mind, such as a lack of time for adequate discussion or questions that limit the breadth of feedback, merely confirming the expectations of the consultants. How can decision makers design a targeted process without predetermining the responses?

“So that's an issue where, if the lines of communication and the system of feedback becomes so sclerotic or institutionalized that students organize and they say, “this is what we want” and you're basically in a yes or no position, that's not a good system because the issue, of course, isn't the desk. The issue is how you're constructing the academic experience. The desk is a piece of infrastructure that brings this to light.”

“The survey system... Some people do it well, at a high level, but people who don't do it well, it tends to reinforce existing biases and...It makes the squeaky wheel louder.”

“I find that the more you will allow the student to lead the consultation, I find the more useful and productive it is.”

MANAGING COMPETING PRIORITIES

Decision-makers reported having competing priorities, such as time crunches, funding constraints, and political pressures. The decentralized nature of the university can result in multiple requests for feedback from individual students, often resulting in feedback fatigue. How can decision-makers design feasible and time-effective consultation processes that work within the constraints of the system to get the most substantive and meaningful feedback and allow students to feel heard?

“Sometimes at the university, we think about getting information from students is like a bit of a checkbox... I have not met a university administrator that doesn't deeply care about students...But people get busy and they have competing priorities and to get feedback from students can take time. So, it's often the way that it's done. What I find is that it doesn't necessarily always leave students feeling valuable.”



BUILDING THE CONVERSATION

OPEN AND AUTHENTIC CONVERSATION

Students reported that they didn't always feel comfortable sharing their voices or perspectives, and sometimes felt intimidated contributing to the consultation process. Creating a safe space ensures that all parties involved do not feel intimidated in contributing their ideas, experiences, or concerns. Different factors affected each student's comfort level in sharing their perspectives openly and honestly, such as power dynamics, not feeling heard, defensive responses, and concerns about the potential interpretations or implications of their comments. How can decision-makers design consultations that mitigate these factors to improve efficacy in the process and reveal true needs?

"Sometimes it can be really intimidating depending on who's in the room. For example, if there is a manager or those who are actually running the services, you don't want to give them feedback because, at the end of the day, I am not trying to diss their service."

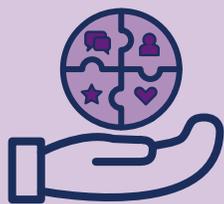
"Instead of being open minded and listening to our concerns, they were just kind of being defensive over their decision."

FEEDBACK IS HARD

The consulting process is highly emotional for all individuals involved. Students reflect on their own experiences, placing themselves into an emotionally vulnerable position to benefit the broader community. Decision makers noted the emotional burden of listening to students and feeling unable to respond sufficiently. How can decision makers design and make available supports for all participants throughout the consultation process?

"But just like regular student consultations, I've never gotten anything or so much as a thank you for bringing this up...No acknowledgement, nothing about our emotional labor anything like that."

"It's frustrating for someone to ask "how can I help you" or "what do you need" and then having zero power to [do anything] ... I also think that without any sort of empowerment or ability to take action, or even a forum to, then, put it up the chain to someone who will listen, it's again just sort of useless."



CREATING AND SHOWING VALUE

Our data showed that students and staff genuinely want to contribute and make UofT a better place. Students want to participate in a process that has value for them personally and benefits the university community, while staff are excited to see changes that positively improve the student experience. Acknowledging the personal and emotional efforts of all participants in both tangible and non-tangible ways can motivate a further desire to participate in change making.

BEING HEARD IS BEING ACKNOWLEDGED

Students and decision makers want to feel like their voices are heard at every stage in the process. When a consultation process creates and sustains an ongoing conversation between students and staff throughout the process, students feel that their voices are heard and valued. How can the consulting process acknowledge and validate different voices?

"It was like they were meeting with us, but not necessarily listening to us."

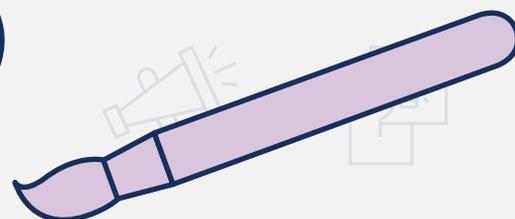
"I've never like left a meeting with admin or someone who's trying to consult with students where I'm just like 'wow I really felt heard and I really felt seen, I really felt like my opinions were valued'."

DEMONSTRATING IMPACT

Both students and staff want to feel like their efforts will create change, but the ultimate result of the process may not be immediately visible for students. Staff and students note the importance of transparent and open communication for demonstrating how their feedback impacted the process and the final outcome, but also managing the expectations of multiple participants. How can designers communicate the rationale behind the outcomes to students and staff as a means of demonstrating that there was value to their feedback, even when there are no immediate results or outcomes?

"I think that in terms of consultations, a lot of them are a one time thing and there is no follow up. It's kind of like checking off the box of involving students and not a process. Once the conversation is done, results, feedback should be provided."

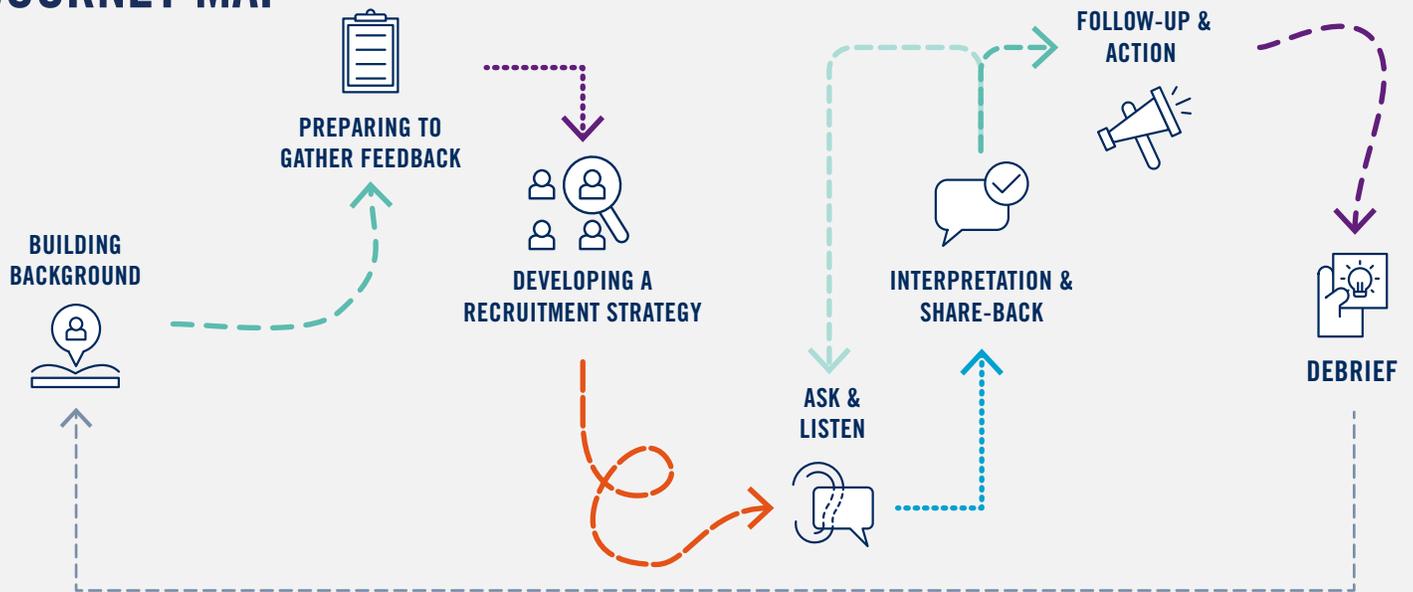
"Sharing that back with the community showed transparency, and built trust, I think, with students."



PHASES OF MEANINGFUL CONSULTATION

This section divides the consultation process into key phases with relevant best practices, which are practical principles that can be used to guide consultations to be as effective and thoughtful as possible. This section draws upon insights from our data and resources relating to stakeholder consultations more broadly.^{i,ii,iii}

JOURNEY MAP



BUILDING BACKGROUND

How can we gain an overall understanding of what is already known, the consultation environment and stakeholders to best support the final vision?



PREPARING TO GATHER FEEDBACK

How can we collect feedback in the most inclusive and effective way possible?



DEVELOPING A RECRUITMENT STRATEGY

How can we ensure we're hearing from the right voices?



ASK & LISTEN

How can we create an atmosphere which is the most conducive to honesty, security, and authenticity?



INTERPRETATION & SHARE-BACK

How can we ensure that we are interpreting feedback from the perspective of the representative?



FOLLOW-UP & ACTION

How can we communicate to students that they were heard and that their feedback is important to the process?



DEBRIEF

What is the best way to ensure that every phase of the consultation process was conducted as effectively as possible?

ⁱ Kvam, R. (2017). Meaningful stakeholder consultation: IDB series on environmental and social risk and opportunity. Inter-American Development Bank.

<https://publications.iadb.org/publications/english/document/Meaningful-Stakeholder-Consultation.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Pollard, B., Nabavi, M., Lyon, K. & Bravo, M. (2015). Conducting Focus Groups: A summary of Best Practices & Support Available for UBC's Flexible Learning Initiative.

University of British Columbia. https://wiki.ubc.ca/images/3/3c/VP_Students_-_Focus_Groups_Guide%2C_March_2015.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Meyers Norris Penny. (2009). Best Practices for Consultation and Accommodation. New Relationship Trust. <http://www.newrelationshiptrust.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/consultation-and-accomodation-report.pdf>



BUILDING BACKGROUND

This phase involves researching the area of interest to understand what is already known about the topic at UofT and beyond, gaining insight into relevant student groups, and developing an early understanding of how their experiences add value to the process. It addresses the desired outcomes of the consultation process and limitations of the project.

- Review previous consultations, academic research and white papers to determine what research has already been done to inform the current process.
- Develop an understanding of the cultural context of the consultation topic. This involves understanding the unique experiences of affected student groups and addressing the economic, political, and social barriers that impact them in the consultation process.
- Clearly define the goals of the consultation process and identify a consultation process that matches the goals.
 - Design data collection methods that take into consideration the amount of time available for the conversation and include questions that are clear and phrased in plain and accessible language, address your overarching goals, and are meaningful for the students in the room.
 - Consider the benefits and disadvantages of different consultation methods (ex. structured, semi-structured, unstructured interviews or focus groups, surveys).
- Acknowledge and address the limitations of the project, and how these will shape the outcomes.
- Determine who needs to be part of the consultation. Consider their role, biases, priorities, interests and power and how this may influence the participation of others in the room.
 - Ensure that the voices heard from reflect the varied perspectives of representatives that are directly impacted by the topic of consultation.
 - Identify and address potential barriers to participation.
 - Identify processes to address accommodation requests by individuals for whom the process is not easily accessible.
- Recognize your role at the University, why it is important to be actively involved, and the power of change over which you have influence.



PREPARING TO GATHER FEEDBACK

The aim of this phase is to plan the collection of student input. It involves designing consultations that are time-effective and allow students to feel knowledgeable and welcome in the consultation space, whether it is physical or virtual.

- Be thoughtful and clear when developing questions:
 - Avoid redundant questioning to indicate to others that there was thoughtful planning in the process, and to collect more unique/unheard feedback.
 - Plan for an open-ended conversation that reduces confirmation bias and encourages student-directed responses.
- If students need institutional knowledge to contribute meaningfully, consider the best ways to provide this information (prior reading, orientation, etc.).
- Ensure the consultation space is welcoming and receptive of all student voices.
 - Ensure that these physical or virtual spaces reflect an inclusive, universal design to accommodate for various barriers to participation. In confirmation of participation, ask students to share any accessibility requests, such as:
 - Gender-neutral washrooms.
 - Childcare accommodations for student parents.
 - Accessibility needs (accessible physical spaces (including bathrooms), clear wayfinding and explanation of what to expect, screen reader compatible formats, captioning, multiple modes for participation, built-in breaks, etc.).
 - Translation services and captioning.
 - Options or workarounds if there is limited internet access.
 - Consider and involve students with diverse, intersecting needs in evaluation of the space to assess its suitability.
 - If unsure of how to create an inclusive space, consult guidelines (ex. AODA) or experts (ex. Accessibility Services, Family Care Office, Center for International Experience, student groups that represent particular groups of students, etc.) to ensure that the consultation space is as inclusive as possible.
 - Consider creating multiple modes of participations, such as multiple time slots and platforms (virtual, in person) for consultation to address time or accessibility barriers faced by students.
 - Consider the number of students in a session to allow time for all students to share their perspectives.
- Consider who will be moderating and listening to the consultation and their role, biases, priorities, interests and power.
 - Consider using student facilitators to reduce perceived power imbalances or external facilitators to increase trust and reduce impact of students feeling like there is a particular response the facilitators are looking for. How can you use mediators to address potential disconnects or needs?
 - If discussing a challenging topic, ensure that the facilitators have appropriate training and that supports are put in place for the students participating.
- In order to cultivate a welcoming environment, minimize the number of people overseeing or observing the consultation session. This strengthens the connection and builds rapport between trusted facilitators and students.



DEVELOPING A RECRUITMENT STRATEGY

This phase narrows the focus to determine how to bring together those whose input is most valuable. It focuses on overcoming barriers to recruitment.

- Ensure that targeted student groups include the perspectives of student leaders and non-traditional representatives.
- Determine a gesture that recognizes the time and effort students/decision-makers put into the process.
 - Consider what form of compensation or acknowledgment is meaningful for those involved (financial, resume building, co-curricular record, etc.).
- Develop a communication strategy to effectively recruit participants.
 - Familiarize yourself with recruitment processes at UofT.
 - Develop numerous strategies to address the various barriers to outreach/recruitment and consider which methods of recruitment will best attract students of interest.
 - Tap into existing resources to promote recruitment (ex. newsletters, trusted networks, student groups, social media, academic circles, UofT services, tv screens/notice boards in faculties and departments, etc.) and plan to recruit the students of interest in frequently visited areas/through their channels of communication.
- Familiarize yourself with the constraints of the different methods of recruitments (timelines and required information for newsletters or social media channels, costs of different recruitment options, frequency of meetings of student groups, etc.).
- Develop an ongoing relationship with key groups or stakeholders to build trust.
- Explain to students how their efforts will contribute to overall University improvement.
- Inform selected participants of what to expect (time commitments, how to access the session, any prior reading, compensation, guidelines for the session, etc.).



ASK & LISTEN

This phase addresses the tone and atmosphere of the consultation. It involves creating an environment that encourages students to share authentically and leaves them feeling valued and empowered.

- At the beginning of the consultation, clearly outline the goals of the session, how this consultation will make a difference, any prior knowledge needed for the conversation and guidelines for participation.
- Acknowledge and validate all responses to ensure that students feel safe and welcome in sharing their voice. Provide students with the reassurance that their responses are anonymous, valid, and can be withdrawn at any time.
- Ensure all participants have equal opportunities to speak.
 - Allow space for silence to ensure students have time to think about their responses.
 - Be aware of who is contributing – ask quieter folks to share their thoughts and remind everyone to be aware of the space they are taking up.
- Maintain a balance between keeping the conversation open-ended and realistic. Let students drive the conversation but make sure they know what is feasible.
- At the end of the session, ask students if they would like to share anything else that has not been addressed.
- Ensure more direct forms of data collection, like surveys and questionnaires, include open-ended questions to allow respondents to share authentically based on their complete knowledge and understanding.
- Consult with students how they would like to be contacted for share-back and follow-up purposes.
- Consultations can be highly emotional. Provide information about how to access relevant supports or services available to students.



INTERPRETATION & SHARE-BACK

This phase involves ensuring that feedback received from students is being interpreted and represented accurately, both in the moment and before final actions are taken. In this phase, stakeholders also have the opportunity to reflect on and share their input on the consultation process.

- Share-back understanding with participants to confirm their input is correctly interpreted during the consultation itself. Clarify anything you are unsure of or ask follow-up questions to further understand their perspective.
- Reach out to participants post-consultation with a summary of general findings to create an opportunity for them to add more feedback, such as “This is what we heard, have we missed anything?”
- We all have biases. Be aware of your own biases, opinions, and interests when prioritizing and analyzing feedback. How are we framing the data?
- Encourage students to share their thoughts on the consultation process by asking:
 - What worked? What didn't work? Why? Is there any advice you would give to someone holding a consultation in the future?
 - If students want time to reflect, consider options such as journaling.
 - Consider options for feedback that allow anonymity, such as MS forms or anonymous surveys.



FOLLOW-UP & ACTION

This phase addresses the outcomes of the consultation. It involves communicating the outcomes of the feedback to those involved, indicating specifically what action was taken as a result of the consultation, and deciding on a suitable format in which to share this information.

- Provide a thorough follow-up to each student that contributed to the consultation project, with details on what action was taken or not taken, the reasoning, as well as how their feedback was incorporated.
 - Follow-ups can take the form of a short report, a personal email, a brief meeting, an online post, etc.
- In the final report or public communications, provide an explanation about how the consultation contributed to the outcome.
- Consider the most effective ways to share the final report or communications to communicate the results of the consultation with the broader UofT community or affected population.
- Provide a platform to the general student body where they may give feedback in response to the follow-up. This might include questions or specific comments relating to the information they just received.



DEBRIEF

This phase takes place when the consultation is complete. It evaluates the methodology, the kind of information obtained and from whom, as well as what information was not provided and who was not present in the process.

- Create a detailed summary of the consultation process including any suggested changes for future adaptations, as well as a list of who was heard from/who was not and potential barriers to participation.
 - Ask and discuss:
 - What did you learn from this consultation?
 - What are the next steps? What did this uncover that we don't fully understand? What do we want to know more about?
 - Who did we hear from? Who did we not hear from? Why?
 - What worked?
 - What didn't work?
 - Any advice you would give to someone holding a consultation in the future.
- Consider sharing this information with others in the UofT community engaging in consultation processes, such as in an online repository, through Community of Practice forums or other university-wide forums.

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