

Background

Northland Community and Technical College (NCTC) campuses are in Thief River Falls (TRF) and, East Grand Forks (EGF), Minnesota. The current entity was formed in July of 2003 when the TRF and EGF colleges merged.

Like most university campuses, the COVID epidemic has changed operations dramatically at Northland and continues to impact the entire enterprise. Today, the colleges and aerospace campuses continue to feel nearly empty as students opt for virtual classroom settings put in place to accommodate stay-at-home and distancing requirements. When the current president arrived, COVID restrictions were still in place and over the next year, several very experienced senior-level staff and faculty resigned. NCTC's faculty reached out to the system office with their concerns regarding employee departures and claims that decisions about the institution were being made without their full involvement. Tuckner Consulting was retained shortly-there-after by the chancellor and college president to gather data and assess the situation.

Consultant Activities and Deliverables

- Confidential focus group meetings and interviews for the purposes of identifying to issues and challenges within NCTC.
- Confidential consultation and feedback to Minnesota State's System Office leadership as needed.
- A written report that summarizes staff and faculty's perceptions of the challenges facing NCTC and, consultant recommendations that ensure NCTC's sustainability.

Assessment Method

Interview and focus group questions were drafted and reviewed by the Chancellor and, Northland's president. It was agreed that virtual focus groups, one-on-one interviews and open forums would be set up to gather data. Northland employees who participated in scheduled focus groups or one-on-one interviews for their team or program were welcomed at open forums also if they wanted to convey more information or, listen to the discussion. The following breaks down the sample sizes further:

- Senior leadership n= 6
- Staff n= 60
- Faculty n= 25
- Subtotal n= 91
- Two open forums (including administrators, staff and faculty) n= 37. (Note, seven employees participated in one of the two forums and, one of the other groups identified above).
- Total sample size: n= 128

Summary: Patterns and Themes

A complexity science model was used to analyze the qualitative data in this report. Complexity science as a resource acknowledges that an organization such as Northland, is made up of a complex system of relationships and interconnections that interact in non-linear ways and hold the institution together. As work becomes increasingly unpredictable, members rely on the following conditions to be tended to as they respond to changing demands and unexpected events (Glenda Eoyang, Human Systems Dynamics Institute, Circle Pines, MN).

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1. **Adaptive containers** that hold the organization's purpose, organization structure and, leadership: If the container is too small and tight, internal competition and obsolescence ensue. If the container is too big and loose, there is lack of identity and diffuse efforts. ***Northland's container was disrupted and thrown off balance when a few of its long-standing administrators left. The organization's purpose, remained intact and continues to be held close for the college.***
2. Embracing **differences** in thought so creative ideas can emerge around perennial and difficult issues: If there are too few differences, group think and fanaticism sets in. If there are too many differences, the system cannot establish patterns to embrace and it will flounder and continuously shift direction. ***Northland has some loud voices who fear incorporating or giving voice to some differences will shift the institution too much. If some changes are instituted, it may make some jobs more difficult to execute or, render them obsolete.***
3. **Effective exchange mediums** that are developed within the organization that move information and resources in and out of the system: Some exchanges are not welcomed such as a pandemic that create significant amounts of adaptive practice and may have lasting effects. If there are too few narrow exchanges, then bias, isolation and misunderstanding will take over. Where there are many and wide exchanges, gossip, drama, and hysteria will take over the organization. ***Northland's informal communication network has fueled an atmosphere of fear and suspicion. Assumptions and hearsay prevails and resistance to new ideas is the norm.***

Below are the findings and themes associated with each of the conditions named above:

NCTC's Purpose, Culture and Leadership (Container Patterns—pages 4-6)

- NCTC's Purpose
- NCTC's Culture
- NCTC's Administrative Leadership
- NCTC's Shared Governance

Diversity of Thought, Creativity and, Conflict Management (Difference Patterns—pages 7-10)

- Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at NCTC
- Institution Creativity
- Challenging Topics
 - Programs and Competency-Based Learning
 - TRF's and EGF's Engagement Levels
 - Online Learning
 - Enrollment and Employees Departures Impact on Services
 - Employee Behaviors and Trust

Exchanges Within and External to the College (Exchange Patterns—pages 11-14)

- Employee Departures and New Arrivals
- Calamity-type Language
- COVID 19 Impacts
- Enrollment
- Decision-Making
- Useful and Missing Communication Loops
- Marketing
- Community Messages

[Recommendations \(page 15\)](#)

Themes Summarized within NCTC Context

This summary uses the terms “most,” “many,” “some,” or “a few” instead of reporting specific percentages of responses. Following each major category (Container, Differences and, Exchanges), there is a header titled “Organization Reflective Questions” These questions are intended to support deeper reflection on the corresponding theme.

NCTC's Purpose, Culture and Leadership

NCTC's Purpose

- Most described joy and satisfaction when they work with students. Guiding, supporting, teaching and investing in students' success at Northland and beyond, infuses pride in all parts of NCTC.
- Most see the importance of having institutions of this type in greater Minnesota and consider it a privilege to work for Northland and Minnesota State.
- Some believed students of lower income are most vulnerable at this time as costs have skyrocketed in all areas in life and, getting an advanced degree is critical for establishing a stable life.

NCTC's Culture

- Most described NCTC's culture as they view it on the two larger campuses (TRF and EGF). A few also pointed out the college has a third culture with the Aerospace campus.
- Most described an institution that was fearful and stressed right now with enormous vacancies and significant voids in basic services necessary to run a higher education institution. Those who have adopted additional duties to fill some of these voids reported that they were discouraged, stressed, and tired.
- Many recall a more collaborative and caring Northland prior to the pandemic and are saddened there is diminished goodwill, enthusiasm and joy at Northland.
- Many began by describing the EGF campus as situated in a larger vibrant community with the University of North Dakota (UND) less than five miles away. The culture is one cognizant of the competition for its students and know also, they are a critical feeder for UND.
- Many described TRF campus as rural-based, treasured, and beloved by the community. Most of those who work primarily on the TRF campus lament the 2003 parity effects with EGF relative to their technical programs; they believe it has changed campus enrollment significantly.
- A sense of loss persists at TRF as employees along with many of the surrounding community have an ongoing fear that the system office will shut them down.
- Some described the Aerospace campus as distant from the other two campuses despite its closeness relative to the TRF campus. Some outside of this community described a culture that was insular and separate in its dealings and, not integrated into the larger NCTC.
- Most of those working within the Aerospace program described an environment that was collaborative, rigorous, and rich with technology tools and know how.
- Many pointed out that a significant number of employees who work for NCTC graduated from the college. A few pointed out that this contributes to an insular mindset and what appears as resistance to adopt new ways of seeing, being and doing at Northland.

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NCTC's Administrative Leadership

- Many believe that the departure of several administrators, staff and faculty, was directly tied to the president's direction and style. A few disputed this claim and believe many who left were entrenched within NCTC and realized they were not in line for promotion.
- Some pointed out that there is naturally attrition when a new leader comes into an organization. The departures while numerous, spoke more to the impact of a new leader aboard and, opportunities elsewhere given the pandemic effects.
- Some described the previous administration as transactional in its approach. Leadership was reportedly focused on maintaining systems according to a few and, was hands off in its style, and empowered some cabinet members to make critical decisions.
- Some felt NCTC was ready for leadership that addressed several years of enrollment decline and, critical review of all NCTC's program offerings and services to ensure the college's future viability.
- Some described the current president as committed, sincere, and creative as she reviews and audits NCTC's functions for compliance and viability.
- Some others described the president's style as difficult where decisions are made unilaterally without consulting those closest to the project or program.
- Some would like to see a solid plan and change agenda from the president. In absence of a plan, decision are seen as reactionary and not strategic. A few suggested the strategic plan priorities have been difficult to focus on given staff turnover and numerous vacancies.
- A few believe it has been difficult for the president to be accepted because they are not from NCTC's region and came in from outside of the Minnesota State's system.
- A few believe the acting VP's leadership style might be more effective if she demonstrated patience, diplomacy, and conveyed impartiality and trust in those who have led their areas effectively.

NCTC's Shared Governance

- Difficulties between Administration and Shared Governance was acknowledged by many. A few described this as an ongoing feud that has been around for many years. A few observed that faculty leaders tend to adopt an aggressive and confrontational style relative to administration which is much different than the behaviors they exhibit as professional teachers.
- A few believe a defensive mode is required of Shared Governance leaders to protect faculty interests and jobs in an environment where decisions are routinely made without their input.
- A few observed that science and liberal arts faculty have been the dominant voices in the us versus them discourse while many technical faculty seem to be more willing to partner with administration. A few suggested technical faculty voices needs to be amplified in the shared governance setting.

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- A few would like to see more discussions that involve many faculty at the Shared Governance meetings and not just the officers.
- A few hoped Shared Governance will find a way back to its purpose and that the administration can demonstrate good partnership as the two entities cooperate and jointly find solutions for the institution.

Organization Reflective Questions: NCTC's Purpose, Culture and Leadership

- *What else might NCTC do to more fully leverage institution-wide employee commitment to its purpose despite these difficult times?*
- *What might members of all Northland's campuses do to promote attributes and features of their sister campuses?*
- *What might NCTC do to amplify campus differences while acknowledging their core commonalities?*
- *Where are there models of effective shared governance within Minnesota State?*
- *What does an effective model and authentic collaboration look like between shared governance and the administration at NCTC?*

Diversity of Thought, Creativity and, Conflict Management

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) at NCTC

- Some believed creating a festive mood with holiday trees across the campus, even if it was after Christmas, was unfortunate and symbolized the college's insensitivity to core DEI tenants.
- Some acknowledged that candidate pools for Northland do not yield much diversity. Many suggested that it is difficult to persuade persons of color and GLBT talent to live in the Northland region of the state given its small town ways, resources, lack of diversity and, political climate.
- Some declared that most faculty and staff are especially good at accommodating all students regardless of their cultural background and life circumstances and needs. A few added that many faculty have been critical in retaining and contributing to student completion rates regardless of the student's cultural background.
- A few provided examples of overhearing comments regarding students that they considered exclusive, demeaning, sexist, and biased. They were very troubled by these comments and the implication that the college was not a model of acceptance of all persons regardless of their background, language, and orientation.
- Some were critical of the lack-luster DEI attempts to educate and expose Northland employees to the meaning and purpose around honoring (DEI).
- Some believed many students of color did not return to Northland over the past several years because they felt subtle forms of exclusion and microaggressions, across the institution. This they believed was exasperated by the larger community's attitudes and behaviors towards new immigrants and persons of color. A few described overt racism within the larger communities that was painful, "ignorant", and felt dangerous.

Institution Creativity

- Many pointed out bright spots where staff have come together to link arms as they onboard new hires and work to complete vital tasks that they have not done before. Many remarked that new hires are providing enormous relief as the organization gets back on its feet.
- Some pointed out specific successes across the institution and key people in the faculty and staff ranks that keep plugging along despite the difficulties in the larger organization.
- Some suggested the current environment at Northland does not lend itself to creative solutions as it is mired in pessimism, entrenched thinking, behaving, and fear.
- Some suggested that the time is now to set aside the penchant to gossip and step up at all levels in the organization to help find solutions across Northland.
- A few provided examples of the current president's creative ideas and efforts. They added that many of these ideas tend to get "shot down" with little room provided to discuss alternatives, compromise, or create anew.

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- A few suggested the spirit to keep trying new things during these uncertain times is more likely to happen on the EGF campus. A few at TRF suggested that the spirit to link arms and solve problems together feels daunting given the current environment.

Challenging Topics: Programs and Competency-based Learning (CBL)

- Many reported the announcement that some programs would be suspended was shocking given the president's declaration earlier that no programs would be cut.
- A few noted that suspension of a program does not mean it will be cut but must be retooled to best fit the demands of the community and, draw more students to remain viable.
- A few referenced the CBL initiative as an innovative approach on campus.
- Some others believe CBL it is failing because it is not well thought through and in some instances, is not sequenced appropriately when courses need to build on one another. A few believe CBL should be better resourced or, eliminated.
- A few pointed out CBL was not approved for use and implementation by the Higher Learning Commission, the agency that accredits Minnesota State's colleges and universities. This could bring difficulties to Northland.

Challenging Topics: TRF's and EGF's Engagement Levels

- A few pointed out that at the EGF campus, there is generally a willingness among the employees to engage in ongoing challenges and sort through options.
- Some pointed out that at the TRF campus there is more an atmosphere of doom and an indifference or reluctance to professionally engage with ongoing challenges such as an empty campus and, continued enrollment declines on this campus. Declarations that TRF will not close is hard for many on this campus to believe.
- Many liberal arts faculty at TRF and a few at EGF described feeling increasingly vulnerable as enrollment declines precipitously in their classes. Reversing enrolment trends in liberal arts classes is not realistic according to some of them.

Challenging Topics: Online Learning

- Most acknowledged the advantages and disadvantages of online instruction. Identifying modalities and the right mix of in-person and virtual offerings to meet learning needs, provide students with a semblance of campus life, and manage the fiscal realities of decreased enrollment in some classes, is an ongoing challenge.
- Many believe creating conditions for more student to student and student to faculty connections in the future, is critical. Most of them noted that small classes and one-on-one contact with faculty has historically set them apart from other higher education institutions and is Northland's competitive edge.

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- Some noted that a few employees have never returned to campus since the mandatory evacuation of the campus because of COVID. Questions regarding their commitment to students and the college community followed this observation.

Challenging Topics: Enrollment and Employee Departures Impact on Services

- Some suggested that historically enrollment goes up and down and it will be up again. A few others believed the institution did not do enough to prepare for this day.
- Most staff reported of excess loads and added responsibilities given the departures of many. Despite their commitment to Northland and its students, these staff felt as if they were being taken advantage of and, taken for granted.
- A few pointed out that the service levels at the custodial level exceeds what is needed at a time when there are far fewer students on campus and less wear and tear on the facility.
- A few pointed out that the Aerospace campus is staffed for much higher enrollment levels. They pointed out this inequity relative to staffing configurations at the other two campuses and, the hidden costs incurred by Northland despite Aerospace's generous federal funding.

Challenging Topics: Employee Behaviors and Trust

- Some pointed out that some employees are uncivil at times and have outbursts or, speak ill of others in various settings with little consequence. A few said something akin to, "This is just not who we are."
- Some suggested it was not safe to speak openly in the focus group they were assigned to for this project or, within the open forum. They feared their remarks and opinions would be spoken of outside the meeting and come back to diminish them in some way.
- A few faculty members have reportedly been "punished" for speaking out and pushing back on a powerful cluster of faculty and some staff. Some described this punishing behavior as "bullying" and expressed disappointment that Northland does not embrace a basic higher education principal—amplifying all voices and differences of opinion while welcoming, vigorous debate.
- A few reported that confidential information regarding names within candidate pools, discussion of completed and impending interviews and other HR matters, are known by some members of the community outside of NCTC. Breaches of confidentiality was very concerning to them and speaks to gossip as a problematic cultural element.

Organization Reflective Questions: Diversity of Thought, Creativity and, Conflict Management

- *How might the institution ultimately leverage DEI awareness and sensitivities at Northland as an effective marketing tool to draw students?*
- *What conditions need to be in place to do meaningful and impactful DEI work?*
- *What might be done to dampen the fear that leads to anger and idea entrenchment at Northland?*
- *What would happen if conflict was reframed as shared exploration with students and the community at the center of the conversation?*

Exchanges Within and External to the College

Employee Departures and New Arrivals

- Most focus groups and one-on-one interviews spoke of the vast numbers of long-term employees with hundreds of years of institutional knowledge that left Northland in a short period of time. The departures were announced almost daily and were shocking and disorienting. This fueled fears that Northland was unmoored and headed toward ruin.
- Many acknowledged that the market did open opportunities for a lot of people as the work landscape changed and incidences of COVID infections decreased.
- Many questioned the reasons for the departures with some believing the president's style contributed to the reason for the large number of departures. A few believe the president dismissed employees.
- Some suggested that some of the departures were overdue as people needed to move on and promotional opportunities were more available elsewhere.
- Many noted departures due to the Board Early Separation Incentive (BESI) program would present another round of loss and potentially, add more work onto the plate of others. A few see the retirements as joyful for those who have opted to leave after many years of service to the institution. The ability to capture their knowledge is comforting to a few.
- Many believed the Dean of Student Affairs and Dean of Health, Business, and Technical Programs deserved significant praise as they have brought enthusiasm, hope, and some coherence to NCTC. Some expressed concerns that they may burnout given the loads they carry and the ongoing challenges associated with driving change in a contrarian culture.
- Most of the new hires reported being warmly welcomed at the college and are finding their jobs interesting. Some are just learning of the college's difficulties and worry about job security with Northland over time.

Calamity-type Language

- Most across the college described a turbulent, chaotic, confusing and dispirited culture. The language of "toxic" was used often and, some described an environment that has been changed forever.
- Many within staff and faculty ranks described an environment that was mistrusting, quick to judge, laden with gossip coming from everywhere, and where proposed change was mired in fear and anger. Some suggested that culture at TRF is more brittle and difficult than at EGF.
- Some pointed to an active gossip network that was consistently negative and at times, cruel. Many can name the persons who fuel and at times, revel in negative discussions and inuendo about anyone who may voice opposition to a faculty decision and direction or, show support of an administrator's point of view.

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- Some described disappointment with negative persons who take pride in blocking change and referring to the college as toxic and creating harm to the community. Such declarations are seen as an expression of fear with little room or willingness to problem solve on behalf of Northland.

COVID 19 Impacts

- The pandemic responses illustrated Northland's commitment to safety and, demonstrated how adaptive all employees could be. Most are struggling with the residual effects of the pandemic and believe things will never go back to the way it was before the virus arrived.
- Most miss bustling hallways on their campuses and the energy that comes with students building friendships, exchanging perspectives, vetting their choices, and learning.
- TRF has significantly more square footage than EGF which amplifies the abandoned and dystopian feel on campus. Most acknowledged that if student athletes were not in the hallways, the campus would be virtually empty of people save the staff who report to work in-person.
- Many described EGF as a campus that had more activity in the hallways than TRF albeit much less than pre-pandemic levels.
- Many understand the customer service side associated with online opportunities, but they fear a "traditional" higher education experience where the campus was the gathering space may be gone forever. Many hope Northland can find the right mix of in-person and online course offerings overtime.
- Some pointed out that accommodating students who desire in-person learning and personal connections with fellow students and faculty can be a lonely venture. They reported occasionally seeing a single student sitting alone in a classroom with a large screen delivering the class for the day.
- Some were critical of the way in which on-line courses were assigned. They reported not knowing their course was being offered with the various on-line options and pointed to this as another example when the administrators did not collaborate with them.

Enrollment

- Enrollment has been declining for several years and was mentioned as very troubling by most.
- Some pointed to enrollment declines as the dominant force that had created an environment of flight, hyper-criticism, and fear. A few believed previous administrators could have done more to prepare for the declines.
- Some pointed out that the pandemic also ushered in greater job opportunities in their communities. Committing to a job that pays an elevated hourly wage is preferable to many would-be Northland students.
- Some pointed out that TRF's campus has felt the brunt of the enrollment decline. A few said adding a women's wrestling program to the TRF's campus is a positive step however, additional creative strategies need to be identified to boost enrollment on this campus.

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- A few stated that increasingly, area business are essentially competing with NCTC as they entice would-be-students to work for them and promise free training and certifications. They also noted however, businesses have had a positive influence on NCTC program direction.
- A few others pointed out that they have observed Northland's enrollment go up and down over the years and now that society may have a better handle on the COVID virus, enrollment is likely to go up again.
- A few wondered what the college is learning about further education and career tracks associated with students who enrolled in postsecondary enrollment options (PSOE).

Decision Making

- Some reported of their disappointment and anger when administrators make decisions about their program without their involvement.
- A few pointed out that administration had to step in and make quick decisions without consultation as the resignations and departures created a backlog of work and critical processes needed to be refired to quickly maintain operations.
- A few pointed out that the data function staffing is new to NCTC and needs beefing up to adequately inform NCTC change agenda in the future.

Useful and Missing Communication Loops

- Some mentioned that the President's newsletter is a helpful piece of communication and that they rely on it to understand what is happening at the college
- Some wondered what the committee structure is at this time and, whether committees are meeting to discuss continuous improvement and change topics.
- A few wanted to know if Town Hall meetings were coming back. They would like to see some Northland-wide gathering that are informative, interactive and participatory.

Marketing

- Many believe the marketing function needs to play an active role in building relationships with the community to refine Northland's brand image, and celebrate the college's contributions to the communities they serve.
- Some are critical of marketing's spotlight focus predominately on aerospace and nursing as a marketing tactic. They would like to see other Northland programs features as well to illustrate the college's abundance of opportunities.
- Some pointed out that additional marketing staff focused on social media outlets, has been a plus for the college. Northland is now more visible on sites future students are more likely to visit.
- A few noted that the president has been very active connecting with the surrounding communities and is building relationship with community businesses, employers, schools, community clubs and, key contributors to Northland.

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- Many were complimentary of Northland's open house efforts and hoped the college would continue to hold events of this type.
- A few were critical of expenses used for the open houses as the administration purchased trinket-like props in a time when the college was fearful of budget shortages, enrollment declines, and potential layoffs.
- Many acknowledged community outreach programs such as workforce development and employee service within community-based chambers of commerce and local clubs has had a positive brand building affect for Northland.
- A few fear dwindling involvement of employees in community-based organizations will diminish the college's brand and reputation.

Community Messages

- Some across the college reported that they field questions from community members about Northland's well-being. Community members have noted that the considerable number of job postings suggests there is trouble at Northland. They want an explanation for the search activity.
- A few described solid, strong, and mutually respectful relationships with the community. A few noted their partners, like Northland, continue to worry about attracting talent of all levels to their organization.

Organization Reflective Questions: Exchanges Within and External to the College

- *What would a code of conduct list look like if it included the institution's purpose, DEI intentions, a place for rigorous and respectful debate, and openness and curiosity about an ever changing dynamic world?*
- *What would accountability to a code of conduct look like for employees and all their partners?*
- *What would NCTC look like if it committed to a series of professional development opportunities that embraced the larger world while preserving their own communities?*
- *How might a faculty and staff mobility, exchange, cross training and development opportunity with other Minnesota State institutions impact NCTC?*

Recommendations (Critical to tend to in today's climate at Northland)

NCTC's Purpose, Culture and Leadership (Container Patterns) Summary:

Northland's container was disrupted and thrown off balance when a few of its critical administrators left. This contributed to the perception that Northland lost its direction. The organization's purpose, remained intact and continues to be held close by employees.

1. **Revisit the overall change plan and resulting administrative organization structure** for Northland and articulate the intention and need to pivot and adapt given local and global demands. Include cabinet, senior staff, and faculty leadership to further articulate this plan. Review the plan for relevance three times a year.
2. Improve/mediate **relationships between the administration and Shared Governance** with the goal of embracing difference, conflict and, the commitment to jointly explore opportunities that work for students today.
3. Embrace and **market differences and similarities between campuses** to convey a comprehensive and cohesive Northland that serves a diversity of interests and career paths in this region of Minnesota. Tap "culture icons" for language and approaches that work best for conveying each campus's core competency and capability (CK Prahalad and Gary Hamel).
4. **Be realistic about TRF's future viability** under the present circumstances and develop a plan that seeks to change the campus's image as a vital, refreshing, and teaming with new ideas and possibilities.

Diversity of Thought, Creativity and, Conflict Management (Difference Patterns)

Northland has some loud voices who fear incorporating or giving voice to some differences will shift the institution too much. If some changes are instituted, it may make some jobs more difficult to execute or, render them obsolete.

5. **Identify decision making powers** of the administration and shared governance under various circumstances as a way of promoting further dialogue and understanding (See Metro State model).
6. **Ramp up diversity, equity and inclusive training** in all parts of the institution and in partnership with community entities that support DEI learning. Commit to working with individuals at all stages of DEI awareness.
7. Consider identifying and retaining **third-party neutral professional facilitators** that have experience leading difficult conversations between committed parties.

Exchanges Within and External to the College (Exchange Patterns)

Northland's informal communication network has fueled an atmosphere of fear and suspicion as judgements, assumptions and hearsay prevails. Resistance to new ideas is the norm.

8. Continue distributing the **President's newsletter** to update staff matters impacting the college and more effectively manage the current negative narrative.
9. **Continue the Town Hall meetings** to effectively manage Northland's internal narrative, support professional development, build campus camaraderie, and exchange ideas.
10. **Work diligently to retain talented staff** at all levels of the organization and reward excellence with community recognition cherished by the TRF, EGF, and Aerospace campuses.