What Happened When the Dean’s Office Stopped Sending Emails After-Hours

By Andrew D. Martin and Anne Curzan  |  APRIL 12, 2018

"But nighttime is when I catch up on email," said a colleague, with some dismay, when we initially proposed our new approach to curbing email communications within our arts-and-sciences college.

"We're not saying you can't write emails at night," we reassured her. "You just wouldn’t send them." You can probably imagine the raised eyebrows and the you-can’t-really-be-serious tone of the other comments and questions we heard that day.

After a year of review and discussion, we adopted a new policy on when people in the dean’s office should send emails — and, perhaps more important, when they shouldn’t.

One of us (Andrew) is dean of the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts (LSA) at the University of Michigan, and the other (Anne) is associate dean for humanities. When Anne joined the dean’s office, in 2015, she — like many professors who take on administrative roles — was overwhelmed by the uptick in email traffic she faced.

It also became clear that the majority of people in the dean’s office — including members of the administrative staff — were swimming in email as well, spending hours every evening dealing with messages that had come in over the course of the day.
Many of us in higher-education administration are managing calendars with long blocks of back-to-back meetings during the week. Meanwhile, the messages pile up. We may find ourselves trying to stay on top of email during meetings (never ideal), or trying to catch up at the end of the day (read: at home in the evenings).

There are several problems with the catch-up-at-night strategy. One is the blurred line between work and personal time. Andrew felt strongly that we all needed sustained, significant, meaningful time away from administrative work. That’s a priority for us, and key to our commitment to building a positive place to work.

Also at the top of our list of concerns: the pressure that staff and faculty members can feel to respond promptly to emails from the dean’s office. We might just be trying to clean out our inboxes, but to the recipient, a late-night message from one of us can feel like an imperative to respond immediately.

Even if we tell faculty or professional staff members to just "ignore" emails they might receive at 11:30 p.m., not only does that put our colleagues in an impossible situation, but it also creates the impression that dedicated leaders are those who are available around the clock and tied to their electronic devices.

The email problem, we decided, couldn’t be as intractable as it seemed. Since we were part of the problem at times, we made a commitment to model the change we wanted to see. In addition to sending late-night emails, we also recognized that the two of us would be sitting in our offices right next to each other writing emails back and forth, rather than popping over to talk or just picking up the phone. We also were guilty of creating unnecessary email traffic when we, for example, sent an email to someone else to forward to another group.

What if we experimented with a policy that set some limits in the dean’s office? Here’s what we came up with:

- **Limit email traffic to working hours.** Except for emergencies, work emails are to be sent between the hours of 7 a.m. and 6 p.m., Monday through Friday. Use the
delayed-send function to ensure that emails to and from people working in the dean’s office arrive only within that window.

- **Try to communicate in person.** Whenever possible, associate and assistant deans should communicate with one another and with other professional staff employees in person or by telephone during the business day. Our administrative assistants can help us find quick drop-in times.

- **Avoid email forwarding.** Refrain from forwarding an email to chairs and directors and asking them to forward it to others. When possible, send it yourself directly to the audience you want to communicate with.

- **Respect working hours.** The dean and the associate and assistant deans should not expect — or request — support from professional staff employees outside of the 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. window. An exception is for emergencies, and then only from salaried staff members.

When we first brought the policy to the dean’s cabinet, there was a great deal of skepticism. Colleagues were concerned about how they could do their jobs responsibly with email curfews at night or on weekends. After some back and forth, and a promise that this was just a pilot, all senior administrators in the dean’s office agreed to abide by the policy. Without a doubt, some remained very skeptical that it would make any difference.

It has. We would go so far as to say it has been transformative — so much so that some people who manage their own teams have adopted these norms within their offices.

"I used to sign on after dinner and feel already behind, if not downright irresponsible, because I had missed 20 missives in a rapidly unfolding conversation," one associate dean reflected. "Now when I sign on at night, or on the weekend, I feel this palpable sense of relief to see that dean’s-office business has not been barreling along while I was spending time with friends and family."

Many of us are still catching up on reading and drafting emails at night or on weekends, but we’re using email programs that allow us to delay sending the messages until 7 a.m. the next (or Monday) morning. That’s made a difference in three key ways:
• First, it has sharply reduced the amount of new mail coming in at night, which means that we are not trying to process new situations in the evening. (The more obsessive among us use snooze or batch functions to keep emails out of our inboxes until the following morning.)

• Second, because we’re not beginning email conversations in the evenings (or on weekends), we are not getting embroiled in rapid after-hours exchanges with colleagues who are on email at that hour, while we’re also trying to catch up.

• Finally, we’re actually talking to one another much more during the workday as part of our problem-solving efforts.

Those three effects have contributed to the final important consequence of the policy: It is usefully slowing down email communication.

Very few issues cannot wait until morning, and that is an important message for any dean’s office to emphasize. It gives everyone the benefit of perspective that comes with more time to process a response. Problems often resolve themselves when they’re left alone for a little while. The new policy also clears time so that in a true emergency, we can quickly and effectively communicate with one another.

We have left the pilot phase behind, and these norms are now embedded in how the dean’s office operates. The change has been significant to everyone in the office — especially the skeptics — and has, in fact, helped us to do our jobs and live our lives more effectively.

This is by no means a uniform policy "enforced" across the college. Still, our approach to email in the dean’s office has been voluntarily taken up by some of the college’s other offices and departments. Having the support of leadership in the dean’s office to thoughtfully curb email has empowered department chairs, directors, and other administrators to feel comfortable encouraging a similar approach in their own units.

We certainly wouldn’t (and shouldn’t) mandate this for faculty and staff members across the college. We realize fully that this approach may not work for everyone (on occasion, we find it hard to adhere to it ourselves). But we’ve seen the difference this one
straightforward intervention can make and we are enthusiastically advertising the policy whenever we have the chance.

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