

# Kent State University Staff Council Meeting

April 16, 2024

## Teams Meeting

The meeting began at 11:00 am. In attendance: Kara Barnett, Teresa Bates, Craig Berger, Meagan Blake, Lyle Campbell, Heidi Covan, David Cotto, Paul Creed III, Valerie Feagin, Anita Francisco, Stephanie Gaskins, Crystal Hamon, Melissa Halozan, Terri Harmon, Rebecca Harvey, Susan Kieklak, Keturah Kneuss, Alice Kopunovitz, Sherry Lepley, Jaclyn Macomber, Dana Magella, Katie Mattise, Nikki Mills, Phillip Nelson, Barbara Ozimek, Kaylee Phillips, Ruth Pittman, Maegan Richards, Shaunte Rouse, Rachel Rundo, Janell Ryan, Virginia Wright, Judith Yasenosky. Guests: Amoaba Gooden, Todd Diacon

### Welcome-Stephanie Gaskins

- Stephanie opened the meeting by welcoming everyone to the meeting and acknowledging the attendance of President Diacon and Dr. Gooden. She mentioned that the meeting is being recorded.
- Stephanie highlighted the crucial role of the staff at Kent State University emphasizing their dedication and passion for the institution. She pointed out that the staff's perspective is vital for the University's success and that there is a need for a true partnership between the administration, faculty and staff to ensure a prosperous future for the University.

### Remarks-President Todd Diacon

- President Diacon expressed gratitude for the work of the Staff Council and acknowledged the role of Dr. Amoaba Gooden in communicating staff concerns during Cabinet meetings on topics ranging from balancing the fiscal year 2025 budget to remote work policies.
- He shared his amazement at the high participation in the "Talking with Todd" virtual town halls, noting the attendance of over 1,200 of around 3,000 Kent State University employees at the live event recently. He voiced his appreciation for the University Communications team for thinking up "Talking with Todd." In tomorrow's town hall, he will be talking about the capital bill and how it works.
- He reiterated his commitment to addressing various issues such as the fiscal year budget. Since 2017, KSU has cut roughly \$10-20 million a year from Kent State University budget. KSU budget was over \$700 million and now the budget is \$680 million. He thinks KSU will be right sized with revenues by 2027.
- He is committed to reducing the number of employees, mostly through attrition, by not replacing positions as they become vacant. The hope is that 80% plus of the reductions would come from attrition.
- When President Diacon took office, he emphasized the need for fewer employees but better treatment. In light of recent budget cuts, he now stresses the importance of treating employees as well as possible. Budget projections include raises for employees, and he also expressed a desire to continue the meal swipe benefit, if feasible.
- The biggest challenge faced by the Regional Campuses is a significant decline in full-time enrollment, which has halved over the past decade. Despite this, the campuses will remain open, but they may undergo changes to better serve the communities. He recently testified in Columbus to strongly defend the Regional Campuses.
- He appreciates that a Staff Council member will be selected to serve on the upcoming Climate Survey to provide an important voice.
- President Diacon is interested to hear more about the guiding principles that Staff Council has developed in their Community Agreement for the work of Staff Council, and how these

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principles correspond to the University's core values. He would also love to share with others and use in his talking points going forward.

Stephanie responded that the Community Agreement is a work in progress. She gave a shout-out to the Center for Teaching and Learning for their work with Staff Council members at a recent meeting to guide members in the creation of the Community Agreement. She shared the brainstorming padlet from the meeting. The padlet was also posted in chat: <https://padlet.com/sbeal51/2024-staff-council-community-agreement-chkcw9cm7irsteh6>

Stephanie offered that Staff Council wanted to have members and new members on the same page with intentional respect and intentional listening where members are engaged, present, and really feeling like they can make a difference.

## Questions from Staff Council Members:

**Question 1:** We know budgets are tight, and that means tough choices have to be made. The abolishment of over 10 people with the business offices and Assistant Deans on the Regional Campuses has really taken a toll on morale and left a lot of staff feeling blindsided and undervalued. Kent campus staff and faculty are aware of the changes and cutbacks happening at the Regionals and it's created this real sense of unease, this feeling that the regional staff weren't included in the process, that their perspectives and concerns were ignored and not valued. How do you expect the regional campuses to be successful and functional with the loss of these key players? How can we structure things so that the staff feel valued, respected, and fairly compensated? After all, happy, engaged employees are the lifeblood of any organization.

*President Diacon emphasized that Kent State University values its presence in the communities served by its Regional Campuses. However, he acknowledged the importance of considering financial realities. While he cannot directly speak to the concerns of the Regional staff, he highlighted the extensive involvement of Regional faculty in the decision-making process. President Diacon expressed his intention to discuss with Dr. Gooden ways to ensure staff inclusion in future discussions. He believes that by balancing teaching loads and offering courses strategically, the University can maintain campus operations while ensuring financial stability.*

**Question 2:** What is your vision for greater staff involvement in the decision-making process? I know you value the faculty's input, and rightly so. But your staff, they're the ones who know the ins and outs of this place better than anyone. Harnessing that knowledge, that expertise, has to be a real competitive advantage. So, the question to you is this - how can we work together to streamline and strengthen the channels of communication between the Staff Council and University leadership? What concrete steps can we take to ensure those staff-driven recommendations and concerns are getting the attention and action they deserve?

*President Diacon highlighted the establishment of the Staff Council, which allows staff to meet with the President, something that didn't exist five years ago. He emphasized that despite the challenges of COVID, the University remained committed to having a staff voice, and the Staff Council now has a liaison, Dr. Gooden, who represents staff at the Cabinet level. President Diacon shared his belief in the*

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*importance of academic consensus, where everyone has the opportunity to voice their opinions, even if not everyone agrees.*

*Dr. Gooden mentioned that Stephanie Gaskins will represent staff on the Climate Study and that there will be more opportunities for staff involvement in the future. As the Staff Council becomes more familiar with committees, they may recommend areas for more meaningful participation. President Diacon expressed his commitment to exploring these opportunities and noted that a staff member had previously served on the Steering Council during the last Climate Study.*

**Question 3:** An important idea that has been raised by staff is the potential for establishing an organizational Ombuds focused on specifically addressing their needs and concerns. There is value an ombuds can bring to an institution and can help build trust and demonstrate commitment to their concerns. Ombuds are effective by supporting employees, preventing issues from escalating, addressing interpersonal and group conflict, and addressing systemic issues to create an inclusive organization (ombudsassociation.org). Staff council is interested to know – would the university support the hiring and on-boarding of an Ombuds professional focused on staff needs?

*President Diacon noted that the University has an ombudsperson for students (Dr. Amy Quillen) and recently hired one for faculty. He acknowledged the logic of having an ombudsperson for staff, but pointed out that it would require eliminating a position to fund the role, though he is open to this possibility. Dr. Gooden explained that Karen Watson currently serves as both the staff ombudsperson and the person who works on contracts. She mentioned ongoing discussions about how to better support staff and hopes to share a plan by fall. President Diacon suggested that, similar to how faculty worked with Academic Affairs on their ombudsperson request, Staff Council would need to collaborate with Dr. Gooden for a staff ombudsperson.*

**Question 4:** There are concerns about the barriers faced by long-serving staff members who lack a bachelor's degree, despite acquiring invaluable knowledge and skills through their employment. These highly experienced employees, often women and individuals from marginalized communities, are leaving for opportunities that better recognize their capabilities. This rigid degree requirement is a biased policy that's draining the university of critical talent and institutional knowledge. How can we work together to create more flexibility and recognition for the skills, experience, and institutional knowledge these staff members possess?

*President Diacon acknowledged the national trend of reducing job requirements for bachelor's degrees, citing a 30% decrease in such positions in Maryland. While he understands the shift, he expressed mixed feelings as his role involves granting bachelor's degrees. He suggested discussing the matter with Human Resources and Dr. Gooden. On the other hand, he highlighted that Kent State University (KSU) and Youngstown State University are the only two Ohio universities offering 100% tuition remission for employees, and he wants to maintain this generosity. If future budget cuts prevent this, he proposed prorating remission based on income. Dr. Gooden noted that some technical fields still require degrees and recommended an audit and discussions with managers to review current requirements.*

**Question 4:** Would any buyout plan take a form like what was offered in the early stages of the pandemic? Would faculty and staff be included or just faculty?

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*President Diacon responded that he honestly doesn't have an answer to that yet. Kent State University is not going to balance budgets without having fewer people. Dr. Gooden responded that any conversation that the University has moving forward includes faculty and staff.*

Stephanie concluded the meeting by thanking President Diacon and Dr. Gooden for their time and contributions. She inquired about the possibility of future regular meetings with Staff Council. President Diacon and Dr. Gooden agreed to meet regularly, at least once a semester, to continue these important discussions.

### **Action Items:**

Stephanie Gaskins will share the draft of the Community Agreement with President Diacon once it is finalized.

President Diacon mentioned an upcoming Cabinet retreat to address budgeting challenges, and he encouraged continuous engagement with the Staff Council.

Meetings with President Diacon and Dr. Gooden will be planned for once a semester. The exact date will be determined and communicated later.

Meeting Adjourned at 12:00 pm