Staff Advisory Council Seeks 'Bright Ideas' for Improving Life on Campus

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If you've ever thought to yourself, "Gee, the University really should think about (fill in the blank)," the Bright Ideas program wants to hear from you.

The employee suggestion program, which started in 1994, is responsible for some conveniences that many of us take for granted:

The giant initials on the color-coded front license plates of the CatTran shuttles, T for teal, G for green, and so on, came about after an employee suggested the letters would make it easier for color-blind people to identify the correct shuttles from a distance.

It's relatively easy to navigate the campus parking garages because another employee suggested better signs to tell people where to go for more parking, to pay or to exit.

A UA worker suggested a solution to control the waste of domestic water used by the autoclaves, devices that use high-pressure, high-temperature steam to sterilize equipment, in the Arizona Health Sciences Center. The idea resulted in annual savings of 34 million gallons of water and $99,000 in sewer fees.

Over the years, the Bright Ideas program has implemented about 100 ideas, said Monica Blancarte, a program coordinator for Athletics who also coordinates Bright Ideas for the Staff Advisory Council.

"It's had its gamut, of really simple stuff to really big things," she said.

When the program started, it was run under the auspices of the office of the vice president for business affairs, who offered monetary incentives to people for their ideas, she said.

Back then, a University-wide team of 10 to 13 people vetted the ideas that were submitted. In the early years, that amounted to 50 or 60 suggestions annually, although more recently it's tapered off to anywhere from five to 15 each year, Blancarte said.

Over time, people on the program committee began to retire, eventually leaving just two original team members.

When then-Vice President for Business Affairs Joel Valdez retired, Blancarte went to SAC and asked if the governance group would take on Bright Ideas, and it accepted.

Now when an idea is submitted, the Staff Advisory Council discusses the suggestion at its monthly meeting.
The team then decides which department would handle it and sends the idea there, with a goal of getting a response from that department within a month, Blancarte said.

That department responds to say whether it can carry out an idea, and if it can't, it tells SAC its reason, she said.

Then SAC responds to the person who sent in the idea to let the submitter know the idea is being put into action or to explain why it can't be.

For example, Blancarte said, someone might suggest that lines in a particular parking lot should be painted yellow. That would be sent from SAC to Parking & Transportation Services. Perhaps, because of safety reasons, the lines can only be painted white. Then the idea is declined, and SAC alerts the submitter and provides the reason the idea can't be implemented.

All told, the whole process, from idea submission to acceptance or rejection, should take no more than two months, and usually takes much less, Blancarte said.

The program no longer offers a monetary incentive, as it did when it was under the vice president for business affairs and had more funding.

Instead, employees whose ideas are used receive a certificate of appreciation for helping the University.

"It's important to be able to acknowledge employees' ideas even without funding," Blancarte said.

She's working to get the program back on track this year after she was on leave for part of last year, as was the SAC president at the time. The handful of suggestions that came in had to wait until Blancarte returned before they could get a response.

And many of those recent suggestions, she said, pertained to quirks with UAccess Financials [6], which went live in October. (Read the Lo Que Pasa story about the UAccess Financials launch here [7].) A lot of those issues have been resolved through the normal course of working out bugs when new technology comes online.

The Bright Ideas website [8] is going through some redesign to make it easier to submit ideas, but the online submission form [9] will be available during the change.

Any UA employee or group of employees, including student employees, can submit an idea, Blancarte said.

Submitters should include a description of the problem to be addressed or the area to be improved, a detailed description of the solution and an explanation of how it benefits the University.

One drawback to the financial reward setup, Blancarte said, was that employees felt pressured to come up with something really good that would be worth some money or else not submit any ideas at all.

"We can entertain more suggestions now that money is not on the line," she said. "People used to feel obligated to have multimillion-dollar ideas because money was riding on it."
Comments? Send them to lqp@email.arizona.edu. Emails must be sent from UA or UA Foundation accounts. Please include your full name and title.

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