

DiSCO — Department Safety Coordinators and Officers: Building Safety Culture

At the University of California, Davis, Colleges/Departments, Organized Research Units, and Administrative units are required to appoint a Department Safety Coordinator (DSC). DSCs share information from the campus' Safety Services/EH&S organization to their departments and facilitate compliance with California Occupational Safety and Health Administration (Cal/OSHA) standards and other regulatory programs. The DSC role, however, is often part-time, assigned at seemingly arbitrary percentages to people who do not, necessarily, have professional safety backgrounds. The role can be overwhelming, isolating, conflicting, and lead to burn-out, especially as the role often competes with other non-safety responsibilities. We introduce a grass roots effort to connect and support DSCs across the campus and how this effort has evolved into a thriving online safety community, with an impact beyond its own activity.

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INTRODUCTION

The overarching occupational safety and health program in California is the Injury and Illness Prevention Program (IIPP).¹ Key elements of the IIPP include:

- A system to ensure compliance
- A system for communication, including employee reporting of hazards without fear of reprisal
- Procedures for identifying and evaluating workplace hazards
- Recordkeeping of trainings and inspections

In the University of California, Davis (UCD) Policy & Procedure Manual 290-15² "Safety Management Program," compliance with the IIPP and other

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regulatory programs (Laboratory Standard and Hazard Communication Program, Emergency Action Plan, Bloodborne Pathogen Program, etc.) is described. The "Procedures and Responsibilities" sections of 290-15 describe responsibilities for department heads, principal investigators/supervisors, department/unit safety coordinators, and employees/students. Ultimately, safety management is the responsibility of the department chair or unit director, but this responsibility is shared with principal investigators and supervisors. The safety coordinators and officers work to keep leadership apprised of expectations, policy, and the wide range of health and safety activities.

Departments appoint a DSC to help manage the department safety program, including the IIPP. DSCs serve as resources to their departments by providing answers to questions, communicating information from campus Safety Services/EH&S³ and the wider health and safety community, providing or arranging for training, consulting on research as well as student projects, preparing for public events, preparing for campus and external inspections, and assisting in a variety of additional ways. The DSC assignment is usually a part-time appointment given to a staff member who may be a staff research associate, a

teaching lab manager, a museum scientist, a research and development engineer, a purchasing agent, or more infrequently, a principal investigator, a chief administrative officer, a department chair, or a center director.

Safety coordinators are also assigned at the school/college dean's office level. Their roles can be office safety as well as supporting broader safety in the departments of their respective college or school. They can also cover dean's office managed research and teaching facilities such as an engineering student design center, an electronics cleanroom, a core analytical lab, or a field site.

Some departments have full-time safety staff due to the size and scope of the department. Chemistry is one example. Biological and Agricultural Engineering has two part-time safety coordinators who oversee multiple facilities and broad range of activities. These activities include chemical, biological, industrial, robotics, agricultural and field work, and laser/radiological work. Other departments may have most if not all of these plus animal care.

CHALLENGES

By nature, a part-time safety role is challenging. Safety responsibilities compete with other responsibilities

for teaching, research and outreach. Issues may be outside the safety coordinators expertise and resources may not be readily available. For many years, Safety Services/EH&S has hosted quarterly Safety Coordinator meetings to share information and provide program updates. This tends to be a one-way communication over a 90- to 120-min session. Although there has usually been time for one or two questions after each approximately 15-min presentation, there never has been time to discuss the issue, implications, work-arounds, best practices and other important topics in greater detail. While useful, these seminars are not a good opportunity for networking and collaboration. Additionally, there has not been a place to confidentially discuss department-specific safety issues and questions with fellow DSCs since principal investigators or department leadership would sometimes prefer a safety problem to be solved internally.

COMMUNITY

There were significant requirements placed on the University of California system by the State following the UCLA research fatality.⁴ Consequently, there was substantial interest in how the Chemistry department and more broadly, other campus departments would implement those requirements. Although the Chemistry department was the one subject to the Agreement, a number of other departments that may or may not have been operating at compliant levels would be included in the University of California's broader response.

The Quarterly DSC Seminars and the questions and concerns expressed, led to a dedicated meeting for those DSCs with duties focused on chemical laboratories. That follow-up meeting afforded the opportunity for individuals to share details of their challenges, which warranted the attention of leadership. At the end of the first meeting, attended by about 20 DSCs, it was agreed these targeted meetings should continue into the foreseeable future.

These meetings, facilitated mostly by the campus Research Safety manager

were less formal and much more interactive becoming a real opportunity for DSCs to collaborate and to start to get to know each other on a more personal level. Some people began emailing and telephoning each other about topics outside of the settlement agreement. The shared challenges and the willingness to help each other, and in some cases, the willingness to ask or state difficult things, helped bring people together. An interesting group dynamic emerged.

A core group of DSCs recognized an opportunity. The SafetyNet⁵ outlining guidelines for DSCs includes "Networking for Assistance with Safety" which became the enabling language to move ahead with something without knowing exactly what.

As people kept being added to the distribution header on group emails, the need for an email listserv became obvious. An online collaboration tool available to all staff and faculty, without need for permissions, was accessed to create what the tool terms a Project. For a name, DiSCO was selected, incorporating "Department Safety Coordinators and Officers," with the "i" to create an acronym with a preferred pronunciation. In practice, the "i" represents interested, inquisitive, informed, interconnected, and internet.

GOALS

The overall goal of DiSCO was to capitalize on the expertise and obvious opportunity of a dedicated core of safety coordinators from all over campus by connecting the three communities which need to work together to support a culture of safety.

The communities are:

- Safety Services/EH&S with their many different units and subject matter experts
- Department Safety Coordinators with their many challenges and limited resources
- Department Chairs with their Chief Administrative Officers and control of resources

Understandably, all three of these communities are challenged with

resources. The safety conversations need to be happening among the DSCs, which is a critical element, as well as at the chair and administrative levels, where reputational and regulatory risks are at stake. The Deans' Offices also need to be fully engaged. The topics become detailed as well as broad, impacting many elements of student, staff, and faculty lives. This cannot be a deterrent to what needs to be done - rather a call to address it.

Although still in draft form, a Vision/Mission/Guiding Principles document provides an overall sense of the DiSCO project.

Vision: An injury- and illness-free campus

Mission: To eliminate injury and illness at UC Davis by raising awareness of and collaborating on occupational, environmental, and personal safety.

Strategies:

- Leverage the internet to improve communication and knowledge.
- Foster collaboration within the coordinator and officer community.
- Capitalize on existing expertise and solutions among colleagues.
- Inspire members to express concerns and needs to leadership.
- Augment the campus' own information dissemination efforts.
- Encourage pursuit of professional development opportunities.
- Reinforce campus communications with PIs and Chairs.
- Increase demonstrable commitment at the PI and Chair levels.
- Expedite risk identification and mitigation.
- Preview forthcoming changes in law, policy, and procedure.
- Expand financial and other resources for prevention and training.
- Assist with broader campus efforts to build a strong culture of safety.

RESULTS

Membership grew very quickly. All of the DSCs who were attending the lab-focused monthly meetings signed up. These members started inviting

Building on internal success, the DiSCO Monthly Update was made available to the broader safety community. Many DSCs who were not in highly technical departments were interested in receiving just the Monthly Update. Interestingly, many Safety Services/EH&S staff themselves were interested. A separate email list, configured to be announce-only, was created.

A natural next step was to reach upper management and top leadership throughout the campus with the Update. At this time, direct recipients include 19 whose job titles are sub-variations of Dean, Provost, or Chancellor, including one full Dean. One college dean's office forwards the Update to its department chairs and chief administrative officers. Another college dean's office forwards it to just its chief administrative officers. The Office of Research forwards it to their Core Facilities email list. The total direct distribution of DiSCO Monthly Update is 375 consisting of 75 in DiSCO and 300 on the separate announce-only list. The Core Facilities list is about 250, but the total indirect distribution when considering the other forwarding that is believed to be occurring is unknown.

A administrator provided the following feedback on an edition of DiSCO Monthly Update:

I think you've hit the mark very well in our attention-deficit/fast pace work environment. I really like the quick hit approach where someone can hyperlink to other pages to get more detail on only the topics the person wants to spend more time on.

Eventually, it became clear DiSCO needed a logo, shown in Figure 2, below. Three interlinked diamonds, reminiscent of the Globally Harmonized System pictograms, were suggested. The diamonds represent the three communities which need to work most closely together: safety coordinators and officers, department chairs and chief administrative officers, and Safety Services/EH&S. The colors are UC Davis.

DISCUSSION

Safety Services/EH&S staff and management were curious about this



Figure 2. DiSCO logo.

community and the conversations going on. It is believed a major concern was email would make it easier for people to complain about all sorts of things, based in part on the monthly meetings where sometimes passions ran high. To the contrary, email traffic has been remarkably positive and constructive, adhering to the UC Davis Principles of Community. Non-judgmental observations, solutions to problems, answers to questions, timely information, and interesting opportunities were and continue to be recurring themes.

The viability of DiSCO over four years has remained consistent. Although there are some slower months or a couple of weeks of no activity, someone will post something, and immediately there will be a number of people chiming in. The number of emails seems to be at a sustainable level where there are not so many that they just become ignored.

Sometimes a person who has participated infrequently will be one of the first responders to a question. Instances like this suggest people do take a moment to look at the emails.

The number of offline responses is unknown, but the occasional thank you message, shared by the person who posted the question, sometimes extends thanks to those who replied offline. These kind of activities are key to building relationships and networking.

Primarily through self-subscriptions, distribution of the DiSCO Monthly Update continues to grow slowly. The Update has subscription instructions along with a short

description of DiSCO in fine print at the end of each edition. Subscribers have typically unsubscribed for reasons of leaving their safety role, or leaving the campus, which has been fairly easy to determine in various ways including the main campus directory. Currently, there are no plans to transition to something like Constant Contact or Mail Chimp where open-rate tracking tools are available.

The Update is building a repository of references to communications that will be of value into the future. The publication has the potential to be a topic menu from which any department's safety leadership can pick. It is currently a standing item on the College of Engineering's departmental and dean's office safety coordinators monthly meeting.

The DiSCO listserv and the Monthly Update continue to be experimental models. They have evolved based on the configuration of the group, on the changes they have effected, and on the impact being made at higher levels of campus administration. The "experiment" has not been configured and managed with any kind of experimental design, which may be an opportunity for others elsewhere. Meanwhile, DiSCO can continue to be one important component of a culture of safety.

CONCLUSIONS

The role of the Department Safety Coordinator (DSC) in an academic institution comes with many challenges, including a sort of isolation that when combined with a highly diverse research environment can be overwhelming. When presented with the opportunity to network and communicate with colleagues, DSCs will take advantage of it. Detailed notes from meetings are highly appreciated by those who could not attend. Communication of safety information and requirements can be challenging. There is strong interest in a monthly curated digest of safety news, information, resources, and regulatory and policy changes. Through the on-line community, resources are identified and shared to comply with policy and promote best practices.

By leveraging the experience and expertise of safety coordinators and officers, we can influence policy to be understandable and able to be successfully implemented.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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and humbled by the energy and passion of our fellow safety coordinator colleagues and their commitment to a culture of safety.

REFERENCES

1. Title 8, California Code of Regulations, Section 3203: Injury and Illness Prevention Program. <https://www.dir.ca.gov/title8/3203.html>.
2. UC Davis Policy and Procedure Manual 290-15: Safety Management Program. <https://ucdavispolicy.ellucid.com/documents/view/273/active/>.
3. UC Davis Safety Services website: www.safetyservices.ucdavis.edu.
4. University Of California Reaches Agreement In Connection With Charges In Lab Researcher's Death. <https://cen.acs.org/articles/90/web/2012/07/University-California-Reaches-Agreement-Connection.html>.
5. SafetyNets are a group of short reports on various safety topics, developed and managed by Safety Services/EH&S. The SafetyNet referred to here is SafetyNet #125 "Safety Management Program Guidelines for Department Safety Coordinators" <https://safetyservices.ucdavis.edu/safetynet>.