Minutes
March 16, 2005


Executive Committee member: Charlie Walcott

Guests: Victoria Blodgett, Director of Graduate Student Life and Career Development
         Sharon Mier, UCAN/CAPS community based services team

Next meeting: Wednesday, April 6 4:00–5:30 p.m. Gannett Health Services, Moore Library

Topic: Academic Integrity
We will be joined by members of the academic integrity hearing board, the judicial administrator, and several interested faculty and staff members to discuss academic integrity violations as a “high risk situations” for students.

I. Introduction of new Council members
   A. Linda Grace-Kobas—Director, Cornell News Service
   B. Anne Lukingbeal—Dean of Students, Law School

II. Student members of the Council
   A. We are eager to enhance student participation in the Council.
   B. Please send nominations of undergraduate, graduate, and professional students who you believe might be active, interested participants in the Council to Sharon Dittman (SD15).

III. Updates
   A. Letter to new students/parents addressing student stress, resources
      1. The Dean of Students Office and the First Year Experience Committee have assumed responsibility for incorporating Council members’ feedback and further editing the letters and making recommendations re how/when to send them.
      2. Please send any suggestions you have about the letters to Chrissie Schelhas-Miller, Associate Dean of Students for New Student Support and Director of the Tatkon Center (CLS10).
   B. Executive Committee on Campus Health meeting on March 7
      1. Executive Committee members considered the element of “political will” (with “shared knowledge base” and “social strategies,” one of the three elements determined to be critical to the success of the US Air Force community-based suicide prevention model).
      2. They support the development of a statement from Cornell leadership around the issue/vision of “Caring Community,” an idea advanced by the Council and the Policies Working Group.
      3. They would like to link this to discussions about academic integrity that are underway across campus (Faculty Senate, University Assembly, Student Assembly, President’s staff). Academic integrity will be the focus of this year’s final meeting of this Council on April 6.
   C. The Academic Affairs and Campus Life Committee of the Board of Trustees met on March 10 and responded with great interest and concern to a presentation on student mental health issues by Janet Corson-Rikert (Gannett, Executive Director), Greg Eells (CAPS, director), and Rahul Banerji (Cornell Minds Matter, president).
IV. Graduate Student Mental Health and Welfare

A. Presentation
1. When the Council first discussed priorities for its work, we agreed that we would need to consider campus-wide strategies as well as the unique needs of particular populations. Our own data suggested that the populations we consider first should include students of Asian descent, international students, and graduate students. Wai Kwong Wong, co-chair of the Asian/Asian American Task Force (AAATF) presented at the September 27, 2004 meeting of the Council.
2. At this meeting (3/16/05), Ellen Gainor, Associate Dean of the Graduate School, gave a brief tutorial to the Council on the Graduate School, graduate students and challenges to their mental health and welfare, and the evolving case management structure at the Graduate School. Victoria Blodgett, Director of Graduate Student Life and Career Development and Sharon Mier, CAPS staff member who has worked closely with the Graduate School through UCAN (University Counseling and Advising Network), joined us for the discussion.
3. Please review Dean Gainor’s PowerPoint presentation. It is available at the Council’s web site: www.gannett.cornell.edu/campushealth/CMHW.html

B. Graduate School fields and faculty
1. 94 major fields of study
2. 16 minor fields of study
3. 1631 faculty members
4. Graduate faculty members may (and often do) also teach undergraduate students, but there is a separate graduate faculty member status that is conferred by the Graduate School.

C. Graduate School students
1. 5,965 graduate and professional students
2. Almost 50% of graduate students are international students from 120 countries of origin; the majority of international students are from Asian countries, so the findings of the AAATF are particularly relevant to the graduate student community.
3. The population of doctoral candidates has been steadily growing over the past 5 years.
4. The majority of doctoral students receive financial support from the University.
   a. Internal funding for TA-ships is stagnant at this point; this is particularly challenging as the graduate student population has been increasing.
   b. Potential for growth in the graduate school must be matched by growth in resources for support.

D. Roles within the Graduate School
1. Fields
   a. Fields are intellectual structures created and supported by faculty.
   b. Director of Graduate Studies (DGS)
      ▪ Every field has a DGS as its administrative leader of the field whose job it is to advocate for the program, the students in the program, the faculty in the program.
      ▪ The DGS is the student’s advisor until a special committee is formed.
      ▪ Ideally, students should know that the DGS is a resource in times of difficulty.
   c. Graduate Field Assistant (GFA)
      ▪ The GFA provides day-to-day support in the running of the field.
      ▪ Typically, the GFA is perceived as a safe resource for the students.
      ▪ The Graduate School often finds out about problems through the GFA.
2. Special Committee
   a. Each student must pull together a special committee, which includes one major advisor and one or more minor advisor.
   b. The special committee has enormous control over whether a student succeeds or fails.

E. Completing the Degree
1. The Graduate School is participating in a study being conducted by the Council of Graduate Schools (their umbrella professional organization) to address concerns about completion rates and time to degree completion. This study will gather comparative data and look to develop new strategies to improve these measures.
2. The Graduate School distinguishes between “bad attrition” (e.g., when problems get in the way of a good student completing the degree) and “good attrition” (e.g., when students realize that graduate study is not for them).
3. Victoria Blodgett works closely with students who are in a process of trying to figure out whether they want to be in graduate school, as well as those who decide to make a transition out of the graduate school to work or another kind of education.

F. Degree Roadblocks and Detours
1. Balancing life and work—graduate work can be extremely demanding, making it difficult for students to prioritize care for self, family, and other needs.
2. Family and stage of life issues—the lives of graduate and professional students may be more complex than those of many undergraduates (or than their own lives as undergraduates), as they may have partners, children, households, elder care issues, debt, etc.
3. Funding and time to degree
   a. Financial support is for a limited time period.
   b. Many students experience significant stress about how they are going to finish their degree if they aren’t done by the time the money runs out.
   c. Cornell is quite competitive with peer institutions in financial support (most students get tuition, health insurance, stipend); but the money is not enough to support a family or a student who has a major financial crisis (such as major health care costs).
   d. International students often have little idea what they are getting into in terms of costs of living, supporting a family, travel, health care, etc.

G. Graduate Student Stress Points
1. Causes of stress for students are many and varied, and not always predictable. The following are major stress points that we know can be “tipping points” for graduate students.
2. Chair resignation
   a. Chairs of a student’s Special Committee resign for one of two reasons:
      ▪ The chair perceives that student is not making progress
      ▪ There is a major communication problem that results in a relationship that is no longer viable
   b. The Code of Legislation has some mechanisms built into it that gives students some protection, avenues for redress.
3. Special Committee problems
   a. Difficulties creating a special committee (a member of the Council pointed out that sometimes faculty will even collude to get rid of a student by not agreeing to be on the student’s committee)
   b. Retirement, resignation, or serious illness of a committee member
   c. Perception about student is not making progress
   d. Communication problems
4. Loss of funding
   a. In the sciences in particular, funding is often tied to grants of the chair of the Special Committee.
   b. Even students who have a guarantee of support can have concerns about how they are going to be funded.
   c. If an assistantship doesn’t go well, the student may be threatened with loss of funding.
   d. Cornell has a language proficiency requirement for Graduate TAs that is mandated by the Provost. This is an “added” requirement for some international students that they must achieve in order to get their funding; if they don’t complete language work, they may lose their TA-ship and funding.
5. Exam or course failure
   a. Some fields require a “Q” exam (an indicator of whether students are able to converse in the discourses appropriate to the discipline; opportunity for early identification of potential and problems). Some fields may reject students who fail or take away their funding.
   b. The “A” Exam is a qualifying exam, usually given before students begin their fourth year of study, in which they are asked to demonstrate the breadth and depth of their knowledge in the discipline.
      ▪ It is the portal to beginning doctoral research
      ▪ Data not available about the number of students who fail
      - perhaps 15 to 20% fail in whole or part
      - another group of students pass but decide not to go further done
      ▪ Faculty may not allow a person to take the A exam until the faculty considers that s/he is ready—this can be a significant source of stress
      ▪ In other situations, students are pushed into A exam before they are ready as a way to terminate them.
H. Graduate School Case Management Structure

1. Gannett’s Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) data shows that representation of graduate students among CAPS clients is approximately proportionate to their representation in the population of Cornell students.

2. Clinical consultations provided by CAPS staff members working with UCAN (particularly Sharon Mier) and CAPS’ community based services team have become very important to the Graduate School.
   a. By their presence in the community (at the Graduate School, International Students and Scholars Office, Law School, College of Engineering, etc.), they create an alternative way to reach students who may be reluctant to go to Gannett to seek counseling services.
   b. They create a means of connection for students who may be afraid to deal with a “mental health issues” in addition to other stresses they might be feeling.
   c. They may use a language of “support” rather than more traditional therapeutic language, allowing connections to and intervention with students who may not be open to “counseling.”
   d. The intermediary role provided in this way has proved critical to effective early intervention.

3. The Graduate School case management structure is conceived of as an interactive circle of support that surrounds a student in distress. (It is based on Cornell’s crisis management structure and protocols.) It attempts to show graphically potential connections, but also what they hope to put in place as a process. (See Dean Gainor’s PowerPoint presentation on the Council’s web site.)
   a. Points on the circle include:
      - Graduate School (associate deans and director of graduate student life)
      - UCAN/CAPS
      - DGS
      - Special Committee
      - Department Chair
      - Other Cornell departments (e.g., International Students and Scholars Office, Judicial Administrator)
   b. Any one of the points around the student, as well as the student, can bring the issues to the attention of anyone in the circle. When contact has been made, the first contact reaches out to others as needed in order to draw in a circle of support for the student. The relevant faculty/staff members will determine together the information, communication, strategies, and collaboration necessary to resolve the problem.
   c. Most often, problems that require this degree of case coordination involve the academic experience and/or environment, as well as some other factor(s). The team tries to work with the student to prevent distress from growing into crisis.
   d. Goal: as early intervention as possible
   e. Experience is demonstrating that this evolving strategy is very effective, and the Graduate School wants to work with partners within and outside the School to nurture and build on this model.

I. Council Discussion

1. Proactive strategies
   a. Anticipating crises before they happen
      - Some fields are outstanding in anticipating crises before they happen; others are not.
      - With 110 fields with different philosophies and approaches, decentralization is an obstacle.
   b. Faculty orientation
      - The Graduate School has an annual orientation program for new Directors of Graduate Studies that seeks to develop an understanding the very important role the DGS has in fostering positive experiences for graduate students and assisting them before a problem happens and certainly when a crisis arises.
      - Every time someone is newly added to the graduate faculty, the Graduate School sends them information about the School, their role, etc. They hope to enhance materials provided to include information about how to be a good advisor or special committee chair, how to mentor well, issues that arise for students, resources available to assist faculty and students, etc.
      - The Graduate School is seeking to influence the entire climate through an education process that will change the way faculty think about their work with graduate students.
   c. Graduate student orientation
      - Orientation programs go on for about six weeks in the fall, one week in the spring.
      - The Graduate School works with ISSO to provide orientation for graduate students. This program focuses primarily on issues outside the field.
      - The Grad Student 101 series utilizes peer advisors from humanities, social sciences, hard sciences talk with their peers about what research is like, what it’s like to be a married/partnered person here, what it’s like to have children here; the Grad School deans give an overview of what students can expect to experience at Cornell.
Fields are expected to orient students to things they need to know relative to the field.

In the end, it takes time to really understand what it means to be a graduate student.

d. Pre-admissions—students considering Cornell and who are offered admission are encouraged to come, meet students in field, meet with faculty, sit in on classes, get a feel for what graduate student life is about.

2. Problems for Faculty Members
   a. New faculty members
      • Faculty members seeking tenure or struggling for grants are probably also under a lot of stress; many inevitably transfer that stress to the student
      • “I’ve gone through this, and succeeded”—you should too.
      • This dynamic can make it very difficult for grad students to acknowledge that they are in trouble.
   b. Problem faculty member
      • It is particularly challenging when faculty member behavior is the problem.
      • The case management approach can facilitate putting protections in place for student(s) before trying to address the problem(s).
   c. Over-extended Director of Graduate Studies
      • In a Field, the DGS has responsibility for a lot of students (all those who do not yet have a Special Committee, as well as those who are having problems with a chair and/or committee).
      • Need to engage the admissions committee to anticipate whether there will be faculty who are willing to work with students when they come.
   d. Broken relationship
      • The Graduate School is working with faculty to assume shared responsibility for students so that there is an understanding that if the primary faculty relationship doesn’t work out there are other faculty members who will step up to work with student.
      • This will involve a financial as well as personal commitment.

3. Information about Resources for Graduate Students and Faculty
   a. The Graduate School intends to provide information regarding support for graduate students on their web site.
   b. The Graduate School already receives career services questions through the web site; may consider adding an “Ask the Graduate School” section.
   c. As data from the study about time to degree/degree completion comes available, it will be posted on the web site.
   d. Dean Gainor distributed copies of the Graduate Study Guide and The Next Step, which provide information for graduate students (e-mail JEG11 for additional copies).

4. Help from the Council
   a. The Graduate School requests help from the Council and Council members in making sure people know about the case management structure they are working with.
   b. They ask our assistance in working with administrative offices across campus to help them become more aware of and responsive to the particular needs and challenges of graduate and professional students. The more doors that are open to graduate students in general, the better.

Minutes taken by Sharon Dittman