MINUTES
February 26, 2007


Guests: Diane R. Thompson, Graduate Student Life; Jaideep Chatterjee, International Graduate Student; Janet Vertesi, President Graduate & Professional Student Assembly; Jim Bisogni, Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering; Jane Fajans, Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Anthropology

Upcoming meetings:
Wednesday April 11, 2007 3:30–5:00 p.m. Willard Straight Hall, 5th floor lounge

I. Panel on Graduate and Professional Students
   A. Panel members were Anne Lukingbeal – Law School; Jim Bisogni – Engineering College; Kathy Edmondson – Vet School; Jane Fajans – Arts & Sciences, Anthropology; Cathy Dove – Business School.

   B. Each presented on what is unique to their particular college or program, common stressors/challenges for their students, resources currently offered, and what is needed to better support their students.

   C. Law School
      1. Environment
         a. 3 yr program (JD).
         b. 185 students each fall.
         c. Highly competitive admissions process.
         d. Most students fund themselves and end up with approximately $100,000 of debt by the end of the program.
         e. The law student population is prone to self-medicating with alcohol. This is thought of as “the norm”.

      2. Known stressors
         a. 1st year courses are a pre-set package; students have no choice about which courses they take.
         b. Teachers use the Socratic Method (calling on students and continually probing into a subject with questions).
         c. There is a forced grade curve and therefore students are very competitive with each other.
         d. There is only one exam per semester and it is at the end of the term.
         e. 2nd year stress revolves around securing permanent employment during the first semester of this year.
            • 90% succeed, but the 10% who do not, often label themselves “losers”.

      3. Positive aspects of program
         a. It is a small, close-knit community.
            • Faculty know all the students. Because they are lawyers, they have a high level of vigilance for liability concerns.
            • Students are collegial, protective of each other. They tell a faculty member or student services staff if they notice a fellow student struggling.
         b. There is a Dean of Students (Anne Lukingbeal), an Assistant Dean of Students (John DeRosa), a half-time academic support position and a half-day/week liaison from CAPS to provide support for law students in the law school itself.
D. College of Engineering Graduate Program
   1. Very different structure for the graduate students in the College of Engineering.
      a. Students are assigned a faculty advisor, related to common research interest between student and faculty member.
      b. Students receive funding for their graduate program from the advisor’s research project.
      c. If the student and the advisor have a falling out, then a problem arises.
         ▪ Students often experience unmanageable stress levels when this type of situation occurs.
         ▪ There is not a process in place to deal with this in a manner that is satisfying for the student or the faculty member.
      d. The PhD and MS (5 year) programs are where problems seem to occur most. The MEng program does not experience problems very often.
      e. Directors of Graduate Studies (DGSs) and Graduate Field Assistants (GFAs) serve as a form of support for graduate students.
         ▪ There is no set protocol for resolving the academic, practical, or psychological issues that arise when a graduate student and advisor develop a strained relationship.
         ▪ There is no set protocol for addressing suspected environmental stressors.
      f. Students do not seem to socialize much or to share a sense of camaraderie, as described in the law student population.

E. College of Veterinary Medicine
   1. Environment
      a. Average student age is 23 years, although often students are in their 30’s or even 50 years old.
      b. The student population is 75% female, quite driven and perfectionistic.
      c. They bring real-world problems with them
         ▪ Spouses, families may or may not come with the student for the 4-year program. Each situation comes with its own set of stressors which the student must deal with.
      d. Admissions competition
         ▪ There are 850-1,000 applicants for 86 placements. Two thirds of these 86 slots are for New York state residents.
         ▪ Some applicants are re-applicants and they may feel there is dishonor in this.
      e. Being in the program
         ▪ Some students go through a lifetime of “always wanting to be a vet”, get through the process of admission into the program, and then realize they actually do not want to be a vet.
         ▪ The program is a very rigorous curriculum.
         ▪ Grading is criteria based and referenced, meaning that in theory everyone could get an “A”, but in actuality, only about 10% do.
         ▪ Students work in small groups of 7-10 and have a faculty member as a facilitator. This is a significant challenge and transition point for most students.
         ▪ Courses are large blocks of time, by discipline.
         ▪ Exams come at the end of a long period of time and are a significant portion of a semester grade.
      f. Stressors
         ▪ Students usually incur a lot of debt, about $86,000. Most get financial aid, but must take on some debt as well.
         ▪ Starting salaries for vets are lower than other professions.
   2. Resources
      a. Faculty and students get to know each other fairly well.
      b. It is a compassionate and caring environment where they will call each other if someone misses class or a group meeting.
      c. There is a team of support for any student who gets a “D” which:
         ▪ Helps the student problem solve what’s not working and identifies steps in a plan toward success.
         ▪ Identifies the type of learner the student is.
         ▪ Offers approaches to studying.
         ▪ Encourages use of resources outside of the vet school (e.g. Gannett, Student Disabilities Office).
      d. Student Services include:
         ▪ A Director of Student Services
         ▪ A Director of Multicultural Affairs
         ▪ An on-site counselor 1 day per week for walk-ins
         ▪ Workshops on how to manage debt
F. Department of Anthropology Graduate Program, College of Arts & Sciences

1. Environment and stressors
   a. This PhD program takes 6-10 students per year, many of whom are international students.
   b. They have been told to expect a minimum 7 year educational experience.
      - This involves doing field work and then coming back to Cornell to put their lived experience into writing (dissertation).
      - They get funded because they won’t get jobs with salaries that will allow them to pay back huge debt. They do still have to take out some loan money.
   c. These students are typically in their mid-20’s to 30’s.
   d. They have never known academic failure.
   e. They have families, here with them or in their home country.
      - Spouses often have to take menial jobs to be here in Ithaca with their partners. This can lead to disgruntlement and the spouse trying to hurry along the student to finish program.
   f. These students have many difficult transition periods to go through, including arriving here in Ithaca from their home country, going into the field, leaving the field & returning to Ithaca, and [possibly] returning to their home country.

2. Resources
   a. This degree program is probably the least defined of all the programs represented by the panel.
   b. The Director of Graduate Studies for this program attempts to create a cohort with social activities.
   c. Additionally, the DGS encourages the use of counseling services provided by the university.

G. The Johnson Graduate School of Management

1. Environment
   a. There are 550 students in the 2- year MBA program.
   b. Average student age is 27 years old.
   c. One-third of students are married, although many partners do not come to Ithaca with the student.
   d. International students make up 25-35% of the school’s population.
   e. Under-represented minorities make up 20% of the population.
   f. There are no faculty advisors assigned.

2. Stressors
   a. First semester is regulated and includes a rigorous finance course.
   b. Internship and job search are a major stress and begins immediately upon arrival at the program.
   c. Academic integrity violations and stress seem to correlate, although it is unclear which causes the other.
   d. Recently, deaths of family members was been noted as a source of stress for these graduate students.

3. Strategies/Resources
   a. CAPS therapists present information on mental health resources and coping strategies during orientation.
   b. A group of student support staff have formed the Johnson Support Network.
   c. “Let’s Talk” free, confidential walk-in consultations with a CAPS therapist currently take place in Sage Hall one afternoon a week.
   d. The Office for Diversity and Inclusion works with under-represented minorities.
   e. Currently looking into contracting for “EE Pulse”, a self report survey which measures energy level of an organization and then translates that into the stress level of the organization.
   f. What seems particularly needed is a grandmother figure; someone who is kind, listens and can give full attention to the student. A few staff members currently have such relationships with students.

II. What is needed to better support graduate students? Discussion themes:

A. The student/faculty advisor relationship seems to be a significant factor in graduate student success and satisfaction.
   1. Need for better matching process.
   2. Need for protocol(s) or procedures to handle conflicts in this relationship.
   3. Need for academic support other than one faculty person.
   4. Need to address the faculty member’s side of the equation.
      a. The Graduate School is developing a set of materials on mentoring, with the purpose being to clarify ideal communication between faculty and graduate students.

B. Expectations and realities of being a graduate student need to be communicated clearly.
1. Funding may be given for a year or two and then no longer available even though a student might need another 1-3 years to complete the degree.
2. Students need to hear about the specific program expectations of the first year and subsequent years.

C. There is a need for social support resources/sense of community.
   1. Graduate students typically do not know students in disciplines other than their own.
   2. Currently, Graduate Field Assistants (GFAs) are the “go-to” person for anything from program-related information to community resource referrals to being an informal counselor to the graduate student.
      a. Peer mentoring (e.g. in Vet School) is similar to GFA role.
   3. The Graduate and Professional Students Assembly has drafted a Graduate Community Initiative.
      a. One recommendation is to look at the fragmented social structure of graduate students and develop ways to facilitate a more integrated experience of graduate student life.
      b. Another suggestion is the creation of a Graduate Student Center, where informal and more formalized gatherings could take place, and where student and community services specifically for graduate students could be housed.

D. Dedicated staff, facilities, policies and protocols seem imperative.
   1. The graduate school is in the process of encouraging a shift in philosophy and practice regarding the student-advisor relationship.
      a. Rather than bringing in a student to work with just one faculty member, they want to move toward having a student work with a group of faculty.
   2. The Office of Student Support within the Dean of Students Office is available to all students, not just undergrads.
      a. Jamie Sorrentino, one of the assistant deans from this office will be a liaison to the graduate school.
      b. Most of the assistant deans are social workers/counselors and can be available to graduate students.
      c. How can we communicate this resource to the grad student population?
   3. An academic advising center model similar to that in the undergraduate colleges does not seem viable for the graduate school given its structure of over 100 fields of study among the seven colleges/schools.
   4. The “Let’s Talk” walk-in consultation sites across campus are equally available to graduate as well as undergraduate students.
      a. A “Let’s Talk” or other student services type office might be even more utilized if located in graduate housing.

III. Closing Comment – Susan Murphy
   A. There are no simple answers. Issues have been surfaced. The dialogue will continue on the topic of graduate student support.

Minutes taken by: Catherine Thrasher-Carroll