MINUTES
April 11, 2007

Attending: Matt Boone, Joe Burke, Casey Carr, Janet Corson-Rikert, Betsy East, Greg Eells, Kappy Fahey, Ellen Gainor, Christine Holmes, Anne Lukingbeal, Tim Marchell, Alan Mathios, Susan Murphy, Angela Narayan, Andy Noel, Brendan O’Brien, Lisa Shaffer, Catherine Thrasher-Carroll

Guests: Jim Bisogni, K. Casey Carr, Jane Fajans, Diane R. Thompson

Upcoming meetings: TBD for the ’07-’08 academic year.

I. Updates
   A. College Pilot Study status – two important developments
      1. We (now) have structures in place to implement three key components of the USAF community based mental health/suicide prevention model:
         a. Gatekeeper training, which prepares community members to be “eyes & ears”, is being systematically rolled out for faculty, staff and students.
         b. The newly formed mental health policy workgroup will function as a conduit to the Associate Deans re: best practice and policy recommendations.
         c. The mental health research group has collected quite a bit of data from which themes around student mental health can be used to inform next steps.
      2. Federal funding for this project has been denied. Therefore, the University of Rochester needs to scale back on their involvement with individual colleges/universities.
         a. We, here at Cornell, will move forward with our efforts described above.

   B. Mental Health Policy Workgroup
      1. Began meeting this (spring ’07) semester; meets twice monthly.
      3. Working on scheduling so that Joe Burke is able to attend.

   C. Re-visit topics more deeply re: graduate and professional student support
      1. Possibilities for discussion include:
         a. Supporting gatekeepers
         b. Enhancing services
         c. Communication strategies for informing students
         d. Strategies for addressing faculty-graduate student conflicts
         e. Fostering “connectedness”

II. Discussion
   A. Stress
      1. What are the sources of stress?
         a. Meinig Research Scholars are currently engaged in a project to identify sources of stress for Cornell students. Findings will be presented on April 18th.
         b. It seems clear that the number one source of stress for graduate students is the power differential in the student-faculty advisor relationship.
c. The graduate student-faculty advisor relationship is stressful for the faculty member as well. Faculty feel a high level of responsibility associated with signing off on each step in the progression of requirements the graduate student must complete in order to proceed in their program.

2. Might we focus on reducing stress, thus reducing the need for services and the burden on the significant, yet limited resources we do have?
   a. There are “real” external stressors, e.g. parking and transportation, non-uniform procedures and program deadlines, bias/racism that contribute to student stress.
   b. Student perception of stress and self-fulfilling prophecy are also part of the equation.

3. Are there specific channels of communication to graduate students that we might not be utilizing that would be helpful for us to know about?
   a. Graduate students want to receive info:
      • By email.
      • Through the Graduate & Professional Students Association (GPSA).
      • On the Cornell University Graduate School homepage.
   b. Orientation materials from the Graduate School will go out earlier for fall '07 than in previous years. These include:
      • Guide to Graduate Study
      • Guide to Cornell University
      • The graduate study “fields” disseminate other info as well.
   c. Suggestion was made to send out a letter two months into the new academic year outlining what some of the issues & feelings might be at this time in the semester and offering resources for dealing with these.

B. Improving the graduate student-faculty advisor relationship
   1. Mentor program (senior graduate students, not faculty advisors)
      a. Mentor as support system.
      b. Senior graduate students support new graduate students through the power dynamic and the whole graduate program.
      c. Would start as soon as the new graduate student arrives; integrate through orientation.
         • There will be a series of events/activities to connect new students to resources.
         • The mentor will also serve as a guide to resources for student, spouse/partner &/or children.
         • The mentor will give “lay of the land” to new grad student.
   2. Print and web-based materials re: expectations and procedures
      a. Trying to make a cultural change re: ideas about what it means to be a graduate student and graduate faculty member.
      b. Available to both faculty and grad students.
      c. Transparent; both will have access to the others information.
      d. Hope that students can see the advisor relationship as only one of many who will be part of their grad student experience.
      e. Plan to have available for fall '07.
   3. Orientation to mental health issues and resources for new graduate faculty and students
      a. Important for faculty and students to know that we offer services through numerous portals of access.
      b. Need to clarify what each resource office actually provides.
      c. Need for ongoing communication/advertising of services to grad students.
      d. Have written materials for grad student office spaces.
         • Caring community card.
         • “Let’s Talk” bookmarks & posters.
         • Coupon book (for stressful moments) idea.
         • Dean of Students support/services information.
      e. Create opportunities for conversation with/among grad students about predictable academic challenges, before they occur.
      f. Graduate housing could publicize resource information more and offer additional resources. Possibilities might include:
         • Have graduate faculty living in grad student housing.
         • Graduate student EARS volunteers located and available to students in grad housing.
4. Need to remember post-docs needs as we discuss graduate student support.
   a. Have many of the same struggles and needs, but not as much support as grad students.
   b. Considered employees, but do not always get there needs met through the Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

III. Directions for the '07-'08 Academic Year

A. Topics for the Council to Re-Visit
   1. Environmental stressors and systemic issues.
   2. Meinig Scholars research data on sources of student stress.
      a. Review of data from other sources such as NCHA, ESS, Survey of Student Well-Being, etc.
   3. Best practices for assisting students in distress, supporting gatekeepers.
   4. International students needs.
      a. People with needs more than just who they are in the lab.
   5. Post doc support needs.

B. Graduate Student Life Workgroup
   1. Will address the GPSA proposal for a graduate student community initiative.
   2. Susan Murphy and Sunny Power will co-chair, and will identify graduate faculty members to be in group.
   3. Janet Vertesi and the GPSA will identify graduate students to participate.
   4. Will have an organizing meeting before semester’s end and will meet throughout the summer.
   5. Hope to have an action plan by the end of December 2007.

Minutes taken by Catherine Thrasher-Carroll