MINUTES
November 17, 2008

Attending: Joe Burke, Casey Carr, Janet Corson-Rikert, Betsy East, Kathy Edmondson, Greg Eells, Kappy Fahey, Kathryn Gleason, Linda Grace-Kobas, Mary Beth Grant, Christine Holmes, Tim Marchell, Alan Mathios, Susan Murphy, Brendan O’Brien, Porus Olpadwala, Barry Perlus, Bethsabe Romero, Lisa Ryan, Maryam Sajed, Lisa Shaffer, Janet Shortall, Fern Siew, Young Suh, Catherine Thrasher-Carroll, Don Viands, Brenda Wickes

Guests: Rosemary Avery, Kathryn Dimiduk, Bill Fry, Briony Horgan, Jayson Jones, Ashley Kirsner, Douglas Long, Beth McKinney, John Silicano

Upcoming meetings:
Spring ’09-TBD

I. Welcome and Introductions – Susan Murphy
   A. A list of things faculty members can do to help reduce student stress came out of the April 2008 CMHW meeting where a panel of faculty members shared some of their “best practices.” Today’s meeting will build on the April meeting by further exploring the role of faculty in relation to student mental health as well as considering how our academic culture and related policies potentially influence student stress.

II. Background on Student Distress – Tim Marchell
   A. Stress vs. distress
      1. A certain amount of stress can be a motivating force, however, when stress exceeds one’s ability to cope it becomes distress.
      2. 4 in 10 Cornell undergraduates report they have been unable to function due to stress, depression, or anxiety in the past year
      3. 1 in 3 reports they have received a lower grade (on a project, paper or exam) due to stress.
   B. Downstream vs. upstream
      1. We have good structures in place for assisting students in crisis (downstream) and we want to continue to strengthen our systems and practices for identifying students earlier before stress becomes distress (upstream) and get them connected to support resources. Moreover, we aim to identify and modify aspects of the campus environment/culture that unnecessarily contributes to stress.

III. Discussion: Academic Culture and Stress – Alan Mathios
   A. Role and value of this committee
      1. Can foster change university-wide by starting to question policies.
      2. One example is the recent change in Cornell University’s interpretation of FERPA re: parental notification when health and safety concerns arise about a student
         a. The council started the conversation, the council’s mental health policy group continued the conversation and took a recommendation to the Associate Deans, who took the issue to the Deans and a change has occurred in the way Cornell University views and practices communication with parents.
      3. A Google search on “Academic Policy on Student Stress” revealed the following which were not on the list of best teaching and advising practices generated at our April meeting :
         a. A grade forgiveness policy where a student who received an “F” in a course, could re-take the course and exchange the better grade.
         b. Tape all lectures so that a student who misses class can still hear the lecture.

   B. Discussion Questions
1. To what extent does the academic culture contribute unnecessarily to graduate and undergraduate stress (i.e., grading on a curve, make up exam dates)?
2. What practices/policies influence the climate of stress for graduate and undergraduate students?
3. To what extent can/should we modify aspects of this culture to minimize unnecessary stress?

C. Discussion themes and responses
1. Exams/Grading
   a. For undergraduates, curve grading and exams which result in mean grades of 20 or 30 are contributors to student stress.
      - Communicate with students at the beginning of the term that there will be a curve and that the mean score of 40 may actually equate with a “B”.
   b. Receiving an exam back with a “30” on it can feel devastating to the student. If the score is the equivalent of “C” couldn’t the exam be given back with the letter grade on it as well?
   c. Faculty need to consider ways to help students interpret the meaning of receiving a score of 20 or 30 on an exam within the broader perspective of the curve and the overall grading system used for the course.
      - Help students interpret the “meaning” of a “mistake” and learn from it.
   d. An exam with a mean grade of “20” or “30” may indicate a misjudgment in the difficulty of the exam. While this isn’t the norm, it does occur, and usually involves a new/young faculty member with limited experience preparing exams.
   e. For students, grading on a curve puts an emphasis on comparing themselves to others in the class, rather than focusing on how much they have learned.
   f. Errors in the exam itself
      - Have someone else read the exam before giving it to the students.
   g. Make-up exam practices vary from faculty member to faculty member; some seem too lenient, some too rigid.
      - The official policy is for make-up final exams only, and these exams must occur on the last day of finals.

2. Relationship with faculty advisor
   a. Some students have never been able to meet their faculty advisor in person.
   b. How do we improve faculty advising?
      - Evaluate and reward (For example, the Hotel School has started assessing its advising model.)
      - Encourage more faculty to involve undergraduates in their research
      - Create multiple points of contact and opportunities for faculty and students to interact

3. Academic expectations while here at Cornell University
   a. Students who were the top of their class in high school come here to find themselves among all top performers.
      - There is not currently an institutional mechanism for helping students learn life lessons such as accepting the fact that they are no longer in the top 10%, but still have much to contribute in the world.
      - Students who come to Cornell probably will not all get A’s, but they will get a rich and rigorous academic experience all the same.
      - There used to be a one credit course (called the Freshman Colloquium) in the College of Agriculture and Life Science (CALS) on life skills, resiliency and coping that all their first year students took. This continues to be provided by some departments.
   b. Isolation is an issue for undergraduates, graduate students and post-docs
      - Post-docs still want and need to be mentored by a faculty member, yet frequently feel alone and un-mentored in their work.
      - Grad students feel there is no one to talk to about progress toward their degree or about personal issues. The ongoing transition from student to peer-in-the-field with their advisor feels tricky and fraught with possible problems.
      - Undergrads feel such a high level of competition that they may not want anyone (peer or faculty) to know when they do not understand some bit of curricula, are having difficulties with time management, or are struggling with personal issues.
   c. More students are arriving with serious medical and mental health conditions
      - There is a need for more flexibility for make up exams and for when the student is having a difficult day in relation to his/her medical/mental health condition.
4. Strengthening teaching practices
   a. Students need help understanding the relevance the course has for more than one academic goal or career. In turn this can help students see the multiple career paths they could pursue and thereby decrease self-imposed pressures and single-mindedness.
   b. Faculty members could help students understand that some of the stressors they are currently experiencing in the course are the same stressors they will encounter in their field.
   c. Faculty can help students better manage their expectations by challenging notions that they must get into the best graduate school. Remind students that the most important thing is making the most of whatever opportunity one is given and getting the degree.

5. University-wide and college-based policies can both be addressed by this council
   a. Some institutions of higher education (e.g. M.I.T.) offer a P/F system for all first year students. Might we consider this here at Cornell? If so, where to begin?
   b. One policy the council might want to consider addressing is the current S/U Option deadline.
      - A year ago, the Associate Deans began a conversation about the possibility of changing the deadline from week 3 to week 6 of the semester. The undergraduate colleges went back and forth on the issue, which has yet to be resolved.
   c. Perhaps the council would recommend the Associate Deans consider measuring faculty advising in each of their colleges.
   d. A few of our colleges have an Associate Dean for graduate student education and research. Further examination of the possible benefits of such a position in each of the colleges might be warranted.
   e. Another policy issue to consider is the coordination of exam schedules (at least within each college) so that students don’t have them all within the same 48 hour period. What steps might be taken to further explore this possibility?

D. Closing comment – Susan Murphy
   There is no quick fix and no single solution for the issues raised today. We, as a council will continue the conversation. Our mental health policy group will also think about these ideas and take recommendations to the Associate Deans group. Our next meeting will be early in the Spring semester.

Minutes taken by Catherine Thrasher-Carroll