MINUTES
March 31, 2010

Attending: Amity Anshumali, Allen Mathios, Alice Green, Sarah Bennedsen, Katherine Lai, Barry Perlus, Casey Carr, Kathy Edmonson, Kappy Fahey, Kathryn Gleason, Mary Beth Grant, , Kent Hubbell, Michel Louge, Scott MacDonald, Tim Marchell, , Janis Talbot, Catherine Thrasher-Carroll, Lisa Shaffer, Lisa Ryan, Betsy East, David DeVries, Lauren Wetterhahn, Bendan O’Brien, Anne Lukingbeal, Amanda Carreiro, Anne Lukingbeal, Kerwin-Michael Smith, William Horning, Christine Holmes, Kathy Gleason, Holly Lau,

Panelists: Susan Murphy, Joe Burke, Dave Nazer, Greg Eells, Tanni Hall

Upcoming meetings: Fall 2010, TBA

I. Welcome and Introductions – Susan Murphy
A. Discussion focused on things that have happened since the council’s last meeting in February in response to this semester’s student suicides, and on a review of plans being made for the near future to further develop the university’s response. After the panel review, the floor was open for dialog with members to share what they are hearing in the community and what questions are being asked about the university’s response.

II. Panel Presentation:
A. Susan Murphy reviewed response actions taken since March 12th. At this point in time, some may be wondering whether Cornell’s reputation as the “suicide school” might be well deserved or not. “The best data on suicide on campuses comes from a decade-long study of the Big Ten Conference, which includes mainly large, Midwestern universities. The study found the annual rate of deaths by suicide to be 7.5 per 100,000 students. But on a 20,000-student campus like Cornell, there will not necessarily be 1.5 suicides a year. Some years there may be zero, and others, six.” (Chronicle of Higher Education)
Looking back over the past ten years, Cornell’s overall average has fallen within these norms. From 2000-2005 Cornell had 10 suicides. From 2006-2009, there were no suicides. However, during the current academic year of 2009-2010 there have been 6 suicides. The university is taking a public health approach in addressing the current situation. The following is a review of actions taken since March 12th:

a. Henry Chung, M.D., Assistant Vice President for Student Health and Executive Director of the NYU Student Health Center came to campus on March 15 as a consultant to talk with several groups on campus and offer advice on public health approaches the university could use in its response to reduce risk of further harm within the community and to support those at highest risk of contagion.

b. Counseling and Psychological Services expanded hours and remained open Saturday and Sunday (March 13 and 14). Students were seen on a walk-in basis.

c. Faculty, teaching assistants and supervisors were asked to talk with students about maintaining perspective in stressful times and to encourage students to use support services.

d. The Campus Police provided monitors as a presence on all campus bridges until spring break. Their role is to provide safety and reassurance for all students, and serve as a deterrent for anyone at immediate risk. After the break, the police will continue to closely monitor foot traffic on the bridges through regular vehicle patrols.
e. Members of the Community Support Meeting teams, CURW and CAPS also were present for consultation at Libraries and other gathering places on campus.

f. Community Support Meetings were held for students, faculty and staff who worked closely with or knew the students who died.

g. The Faculty and Staff Assistance Program (FSAP) increased marketing on the new 24-hour service for faculty and staff; and increased outreach, programming, and support for units experiencing change/job loss.

h. On Saturday (3/13), student leaders from key organizations met with Susan Murphy and Kent Hubbell to offer input on how our community was reacting to the deaths, ideas on how to best respond, suggestions on policy changes to address student stress levels and ways their student groups could effectively offer the community support.

i. EARS peer counseling expanded hours during the prelim period to offer more support to those in need.

j. Residential Programs staff conducted a welfare check in each hall to ensure the safety of all residents and to offer support to those at greatest risk. Further inquiries were made after spring break in conjunction with visits about the census forms. RP also kept in contact with students who stayed on campus over the break and planned several social events to ensure there were opportunities for fun and relaxation. RP waived costs for events when needed. Co-Op leaders also provided outreach to students living in their houses; as did leaders of fraternity and sorority chapters.

k. Cornell Minds Matter has continued to provide weekly events and meetings and lead in the organization of large campus event call “Lift Your Spirits.” The Graduate School also held an event at the Big Red Barn for TAs and graduate students.

l. President Skorton, V.P. Thomas Bruce, V.P. Mary Opperman and Provost Kent Fuchs each sent an email message/video message to the campus community during the first week after the deaths to ensure that students, their parents, faculty and staff received key messages, knew about services and how they can offer support to each other.

m. The “Caring Community Website” was launched as another way to keep the community informed about the university’s responses and to serve as a link to key campus resources such as the “Notice and Respond” section of Gannett’s website. News articles, webinars and links to other web resources are also posted.

n. “Notice and Respond,” a workshop for faculty/staff on how to assist students in distress, has been scheduled for many departments on campus and with community partners.

o. Cornell Minds Matter, EARS and Gannett also offered workshops for student groups on “How to Help a Friend” and stress management. Emphasis is placed on the importance of reaching out to campus resources for support when needed.

p. The Community Coalition (I.C., TCCC, Cornell, and Ithaca School District) sponsored a forum for community members to offer updates on student mental health services at local schools and colleges.

q. Additional input from consultations with national suicide experts will help in planning for mental health awareness and suicide prevention in the near future and beyond.

B. S. Murphy also described the formation of a new planning structure to guide efforts on how we might support the community today and into the future (i.e. community relationships, outreach, clinical services). The structure will allow decisions to be made for the immediate (before spring break), short-term (March to the end of summer break), and long-term future (into next year).

a. The Executive Leadership Committee: Provosts, Vice Presidents, Deans

b. Incident Leadership Team: K. Zoner (CUPD), Peggy Beach (CUINFO), Jim Gibbs, Janet Corson-Rikert

1) Bridge Patrol team: coordinates staff for patrolling the bridges over the gorges. This group will end when a physical barrier is installed on the bridges.

2) Bridge team: will review and identify “more permanent” options to ensure safety on bridges.

3) Communications team creates and coordinates community messages and responds to public media requests.

4) Mental Health Strategies Committee: will look at clinical support; education and outreach activities (i.e. staffing needs, outreach to residence halls, Greek chapters, Landlords); fall
2010 orientation needs and system changes; and faculty/staff engagement (i.e. grading, advising, and educational programs).

C. Joe Burke: stated that two of the three students who died this spring were hall residents so their unit was directly affected by the losses. RHDs and RAs have conducted room checks to identify individuals who may be at risk. Residential Programs also worked closely with dining hall staff who knew one of the students. Faculty fellows, and Faculty in Residence have been more visible and in greater contact with students since the deaths.
   a. Over spring break, a roster was kept of students who stayed on campus. More programs than usual were offered along with a trip to Washington DC. Checks were run on students who didn’t show up for programs to see how they were doing. Staff also monitored Facebook, digital.com, friends of the bridge, post-secrets, etc. as another way to understand how these student deaths are affecting our students.
   b. Over the first three weeks in April, RP staff will distribute census forms to all students in halls. This will provide another opportunity to check-in with students.
   c. Programs for the rest of the spring semester will be smaller in scale as a way to show our concern for them.

D. Greg Eells: CAPS is working to increase its capacity and has hired 1.5 FTE counselors through the end of the semester to cover routine care and is looking at long- term staffing needs. The clinical task group is reviewing research on suicide and looking at other systems for screening and intake. We know that 80% of suicides are among people who do not seek counseling.

E. Dave Nazer: The CU police have arranged for staffing on the bridges for about a week after the student deaths. Now that fences have been installed on two of the bridges, staffing has been scaled back, but there will still be regular patrolling. There are 7 bridges crossing two gorges: four cross Fall Creek and three cross Cascadilla Creek. The foot bridge by Beebe Lake will be closed for previously planned construction. Most of the bridges are not owned by Cornell, so the university will work with the Mayor of Ithaca on long-term changes.

F. Tanni Hall: from the Dean of Students Office reviewed efforts of the crisis managers and the community support team.
   a. There are 9 crisis managers available to respond to campus emergencies. When a student death occurs, one of the crisis managers will contact the family and provide them ongoing assistance (i.e. lodging, coordination of press releases, arrangements to pack students possessions, etc.) throughout the time they are in Ithaca.
   b. There are 26 members of the DOS Community Support Team who are activated to reach out to those who are connected in some way with the crisis event. The group meets monthly and uses the latest research to guide their decisions and improve their sessions.
   c. Over the year, CSM sessions have been held with classes, student groups, athletic teams, residence halls, faculty and staff groups, and Greek chapters. Each team consists of 2-3 members who reach out to the group and offer a session commensurate with the group’s particular needs. They also connect with vulnerable students and make referrals for additional support.
   d. CSM members participated with “Lift your sprits” and had a presence in the Libraries after the student deaths.

III. Open Discussion, Suggestions, and Thoughts
A. Spring Break
   a. Does spring break occur at the right time to really give students a break from academic demands? It was noted that March and April are usually very stressful months for students.
   b. Others noted that the week before spring break is very hectic for students with many prelims offered during that week. Is there a way to change that practice so prelims can be spread out more for students?
   c. Concern was also expressed about the work some faculty assign that is due the week after the break.

B. Impromptu Mental Health Day
   a. Columbia University gives students, faculty and staff a mental health day each spring. It’s an impromptu day when classes are canceled, tests are postponed, etc.

C. Reduce unnecessary academic stress for students
a. One way MIT manages stress levels for first year students is to have all classes taken on S/U basis. Grading doesn’t begin until the sophomore year when students have adjusted to college workloads and exams. Could this work at Cornell?

b. Is there someone in each college who could help faculty make structured changes to reduce stress and improve our response to fragile students?

D. Other sources of student stress

a. Some of the sources of student stress cited by the group included: parental expectations; the breakdown in personal communication due to increased reliance on digital methods (i.e. advising is now all done remotely via the web); visiting faculty/lecturers who aren’t aware of college practices and plan course activities that are in conflict with these; financial burdens that increase as the use of computers, blackberries, phones, etc. now are seen as a requirement for students.

b. International students have the additional stress of having to learn a new social and academic culture.

c. Concern was expressed about social barriers that influence stress such as alcohol, marijuana and Adderall; these need to be included in discussion about mental health promotion.

E. Training for Faculty

a. Some faculty felt the “Notice and Respond” program was quite helpful in preparing them to talk with students on this subject. Others have heard from students that they appreciated professors’ comments and their acknowledgement of one’s wellbeing having more importance than course work.

b. EIO (Effective Interactions in Organizations) is another training program offered by Human Resources for faculty that reviews effective methods of offering support to others.

F. Faculty advising

a. Faculty advising should be made part of the annual review for faculty or be made part of some other academic system that can measure and recognize efforts.

Closing comments: Those present were asked to talk with students about the research behind putting up fencing on the bridges so they can better understand the reasoning or need behind this harm-reduction strategy. Talking points on this strategy will be shared with members after the meeting.