Minutes: November 2, 2011

Attending: Tim Becker, Casey Carr, Ken Clark, Linda Croll Howell, Janet Corson-Rikert, Deborah Duram, David DeVries, Kathy Edmondson, Greg Eells, Kappy Fahey, Mary Beth Grant, Tanni Hall, Christine Holmes, Kent Hubbell, Catherine Kim, Libby Lewis, Neil Lewis, Scott MacDonald, Tim Marchell, John Mueller, Andy Noel, Kirsten Post Eynav, Natalie Raps, Rebecca Robbins, Keba Rogers, Lisa Ryan, Janet Shortall, Janis Talbot, Catherine Thrasher-Carroll, Don Viands, Elise West, Wai-Kwong Wong, Matt Boone, Mimi Stevens, Rahul Banerji

Upcoming meetings: February 29, April 2, 2012

Welcome and Introductions: Tim Marchell

1. Two items are on today’s agenda:
   - Health Leaves of Absence- Matt Boone and Greg Eells from CAPS will provide an overview of the process and structure of health leaves of absence. A panel of campus members who have direct experience with leaves of absence will then present additional information and support options available for students returning to campus after a health leave.
   - Update on means restriction project.

Overview of Leaves of Absence

1. All leaves of absence are granted by the student’s college.
2. There are three types of Leaves of Absence:
   - Required Academic Leave- when a student is failing courses and must leave the university.
   - Personal Leave- when a student requests a leave for personal reasons. Students can return when desired. Each college has different ways of granting these leaves.
   - Health Leaves- when a student’s ability to function successfully or safely is judged to be significantly impaired by their health (physical and/or mental). Health leaves of Absence (HLOA) are taken voluntarily and usually last 6-12 months. Some students may feel this is not their choice, but realize the only option if they stay is academic failure.
3. The Health Leave of Absence is a compassionate response that usually helps people through a difficult period so that they can return to be successful. About 90% of students who take a HLOA do not need to take a second leave.
4. At the center of decisions about whether to take a leave of absence, there often is ambivalence: the uncertainty of whether a student can stay on campus to meet their goals or whether he/she would be better able to meet academic goals by taking a leave and returning.
5. For further information on the process used in granting health leaves, the procedures students follow to return to campus after a leave, and the potential advantages of taking a health leave for the student and the University, please review the attached powerpoint slides that were presented at the meeting.

Panel Discussion on Leaves of Absence

1. Lisa Ryan, Director of the CALS Student Services Office, explained that in their college an Academic Petitions Committee comprised of faculty members oversees the leave process.
   - Academic (required) leaves are usually decided in January and June of each year.
   - Voluntary (personal) leaves usually are requested in advance during mid-semester, when students know they need to take a break from the university due to personal issues (i.e., financial difficulties, health reasons, etc.).
When a health leave is requested, students are asked to work with Gannett Health Services. Occasionally, a student may decline to use Gannett by explaining that she/he has medical/mental health providers arranged at home. In that situation, CALS generally will grant a personal leave. Clearance to return to campus will then be given by the community medical doctor or psychologist the student is seeing.

In CALS, when a health leave is recommended by Gannett before the course drop deadline, the student’s courses will be removed from their record. If the recommendation comes after the drop deadline, the record will show a withdrawal from the courses.

Students also may decide to take a health leave of absence when hospitalized. The process of applying for a health leave in this situation is simplified and less time consuming for the student.

Each undergraduate college follows its own leave process. There are similarities and differences to the CALS process for academic required and voluntary personal leaves.

2. **Casey Carr**, Assistant Dean of Students and advisor to Cornell Minds Matter (CMM) described how three undergraduate students created a support group for others returning from a health leave of absence. Their own experiences of talking with each other about what it was like taking a leave, how they fulfilled the requirements to return to campus, and the challenges they faced upon re-entry, were so helpful they decided to create a similar opportunity for other students. To that end, these students and CMM have created several options where returning students can connect with each other for mutual support:

- Events during Orientation designed just for them.
- A dinner meeting during orientation with a panel discussion on “Success at Cornell the 2nd time around.”
- Weekly drop-in meetings on Thursdays in WSH with the “Returning from a Leave” group. Members of this support group offer each other advice, tips and encouragement to ease back into campus life.
- “The Cornell Conscious: a Zine on Mental Wellness,” is an independent student publication that focuses on personal essays, poetry, and other information of relevance to those who have taken or are considering a leave of absence.

3. **Mimi Stevens**, an undergraduate student, shared her experience returning from a leave of absence and underscored how helpful it was to have a community of students who understood the issues she was facing and who were willing to help her through the challenges.

4. **Rahul Banerji**, the founder and former President of Cornell Minds Matter, discussed his experience taking two academic leaves of absence since 2001 as an undergraduate student. As a first year student and despite his doctor’s recommendations, he made the decision not take medications while on campus because of fear others would find out. He also didn’t share his mental health history with Gannett when submitting his health history form. By the second week of the semester, he had begun to socially withdraw, felt depressed and lost his roommate. He felt no one noticed how depressed he was until he had failed his classes. As he now prepares for graduation in December, he shared several reflections on his experiences which he hoped would help others better understand what students can encounter when taking and returning from a leave.

- Advising staff at his college were great, once he made contact with their office. However, the college never communicated with him while he was on leave.
- Students who come back after a leave often have great family support.
- The re-entry process can be quite stressful. The timeline for making decisions about whether the student has met requirements and is prepared to resume classes takes place one week before classes resume. This short timeline makes it more difficult to find housing, secure financial aid, and register for courses (not able to pre-enroll as other students). He also felt it was important for the colleges to welcome back students who had taken a leave as a way to show their support and encouragement.
- Currently as he is prepares applications for graduate school and scholarships, he is concerned that the grades he received from the semesters before his leaves will make acceptance more difficult.
- He stressed how important it is to identify students who are struggling early, and underscored the value of having Resident Advisors, faculty members and academic advisors check-in with students.

5. **Kappy Fahey**, Director of Student Disability Services, sees her office as a “preemptive service” where students can put into place the accommodations they will need to optimize their ability. When a student has a
condition that impacts her/his performance, Disability Services works to ensure equal access to educational services and safeguards against discrimination. When students connect with the office upon arrival or as soon after a disability is identified, assistance can be given with academic, housing, course scheduling, and transportation needs. For example, RA support can be arranged when living on campus or an advising office can be asked to help arrange a course schedule that will work for the student.

6. Discussion:
   - Some were not aware of the impact an academic leave has upon a student’s transcript and acknowledged that in these situations a student’s grades may not accurately reflect his/her true performance ability.
   - At the Veterinary College, students who received lower grades during a particular semester due to mental health or other personal challenges have received a written letter that went out with their transcript to explain that there was an issue, it has been resolved and the college has utmost confidence that the student will succeed in their future educational goals.
   - Another person working with a professional school admissions office acknowledged that his college is very cognizant that people have problems in their lives, deal with the adversity and then go on to pursue their goals.
   - If students identify a health problem on their health history forms when entering Cornell, Gannett sends them a letter with information about services and encouragement to contact Gannett upon their arrival. Early contact with support services, such as the health center, helps many students create a strong support network for the future. The Student Disabilities Office also contacts students before arrival on campus when they are notified a student may need accommodations. But many students want to have a fresh start when they come to campus and do not reveal their health concerns or needs.
   - It was asked if Cornell had a ‘watch list’ to ensure that students get support when needed. Gannett does not have such a list. Each of the undergraduate colleges has practices in place in order to identify students who are not doing well academically. For example, the dean of a college sends an email message at mid-semester asking faculty to send the names of students of concern (not showing up to class, poor academic performance, etc.) to the advising office who will in turn reach out to the student.
   - Another suggestion was to have RAs talk about mental health with residents and review resources for students when issues arise. Gannett does offer a training program for RAs to prepare them for one-on-one discussions with students. Ordinary People also has scenarios that address issues around mental health concerns.
   - We don’t have a proactive way to assess how students are doing across the colleges. This could be a report on the quality of life “outside” the classroom.
   - Every TA needs to go through a training program on how to systematize student attendance. This has helped faculty identify students who are not attending classes and/or having academic difficulties.
   - People need to find their sense of community on campus. It can be really challenging to find people who are experiencing distress if they are working very hard to cover it up. “We can’t check on a student, if we don’t know about the student. In addition to watching out for others who may be struggling, we also need to keep in mind that each person needs to assume responsibility for him or herself by learning self-help skills.
   - What is the ethical value of autonomy versus others reaching out to help? We need to create a culture of understanding to stop stigma.

Update on Means Restriction Project
   1. Tim Marchell reported that the city planning board has approved the new wire mesh designs for all 7 bridges. Approval from the City Council is still pending for the installation of the new designs on the two city bridges. Cornell is making the means restriction project cost neutral for the city by covering the expenses of installation, repair, training, etc. on the city owned bridges.
2. There is still a small, but very influential community group opposed to using means restriction on the bridges. Since there needs to be at least 6 of the 10 Council members in favor of the installations, there is still a need to write to Council members on the benefits of the project so they will see there is wide community support for means restriction. The next Council meeting is scheduled for December 7 and the issue will be discussed again.

Submitted by: Janis Talbot, Health Educator