

Campus-wide council addresses issues related to mental health of students

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ITHACA, N.Y. – Cornell University Provost Biddy Martin and Vice President for Student and Academic Services Susan Murphy have established a campus-wide Council on Mental Health and Welfare, an initiative aimed at bringing broad-based and sustained attention to the mental health of Cornell students.

“Information from a variety of sources, nationally and here at Cornell, indicates that the number of students experiencing mental health problems has increased significantly over the past decade,” said Murphy, who chairs the council. “We are concerned by this trend and are committed to being proactive at Cornell in our efforts to understand and address it.”

The council has been charged with studying Cornell’s culture, policies, procedures and experiences, as well as exploring “best practices” from within the university and other comparable settings. The 34-member council includes the dean of students, the vice provost for academic programs, and the deans of engineering and architecture, art and planning; the executive director and counseling director of Gannett: University Health Services; the directors of athletics and the Office of International Students and Scholars; and representatives of the faculty, undergraduate and graduate students, and employees.

“Our commitment to the wellbeing of Cornell students requires a multifaceted approach,” Provost Biddy Martin said. “It is critical that the academic side of the university – faculty and deans – is engaged in understanding mental health concerns and creating strategies to address them.”

The council will advise the Executive Committee on Campus Health and other campus leaders on opportunities for improving the overall campus environment by reducing risks, enhancing networks and increasing support for members of the Cornell community facing mental health challenges. Their primary focus will be on student mental health, though they will consider issues related to employee mental health, as appropriate.

Like its peer institutions, Cornell has been experiencing a dramatic increase in student demand for mental health services and in the acuity of crises.

“During the past six years, we have seen significant increases in utilization of CAPS services, hospitalizations and medical leaves of absence for mental health reasons,” says Greg Eells, PhD, director of Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) at Gannett: Cornell University Health Services. “We need to reach students in distress who, for a variety of reasons, do not seek out counseling services.” Though the university has responded to these growing needs by expanding the professional mental health staff at Gannett, and CAPS has made system changes to increase efficiency and improve access to care, demand for mental health services continues to exceed the capacity for professional response, he added.

At the same time, increasingly challenging situations disrupt the classroom, residential environment and workplace. The community is impacted by mental health problems ranging from developmental difficulties to severe psychiatric conditions, including eating disorders, addictions, depression, self-injury, suicidal behavior and schizophrenia. These problems have serious implications for the health and welfare of individuals, for productivity in the workplace and for the climate and academic mission of the University.

“Mental health concerns are best addressed by medical, mental health and support systems that are integrated with each other and with the environment in which they are manifested,” observes Janet Corson-Rikert, M.D., executive director of Gannett: Cornell University Health Services. “This council is critical to our efforts to engage the campus community in identifying risks, reducing unnecessary threats and creating networks and services that support effective education and interventions. The cultivation of an environment that supports optimal mental health is a shared responsibility of faculty, staff, students, alumni, parents and the larger community.”

The Council has met three times since January. It will appoint on-going committees and short-term task groups, as needed, to conduct more specific work or investigation. A committee that will review institutional policies will begin meeting this month.