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Report of the Senate University Student Life Committee
On Student Well-Being at UIUC

December 2018

Overview

Since 2017, the University Student Life committee has invited individuals from offices whose central focus is the well-being of students on the Urbana-Champaign campus to discuss developments in federal policy and issues on campus. These guests have included:

- Martin McFarlane, Director, Office of International Student and Scholar Services
- Jorge Mena Robles, Interim Director, La Casa Cultural Latina
- Danielle Morrison, Title IX and Disability Coordinator
- Carla McCowan, Director, Counseling Center
- William Roberts, Associate Director, Counseling Center
- Alex Suñé, Associate Director for Student Success and Engagement

At its September 2018 meeting the USL decided to devote two meetings of the fall semester to a roundtable discussion with these administrators to discuss and generate a report on student well-being at UIUC. Our guests and members of the USL committee, including ex officio members Lowa Mwilambwe, Acting Vice-Chancellor for Student Affairs; Kathy Martensen, Assistant Provost for Education Programs; and Rhonda Kirts, Associate Dean of Students, were asked three questions:

1. What is your take on the state of student well-being at the University?
2. What do you see as the strengths of the University in responding to wellness issues?
3. What opportunities do you see for improvement?

In this report, we summarize the two very productive and animated roundtable discussions that were held in response to these three questions.

Question 1: On the State of Student Well-Being

The consensus of the Roundtables was that overall and especially this semester, the general state of well-being among the majority of students on campus was good. Mid-term national elections and homecoming came and went without serious disruption, and most students this semester seemed focused on their classes more than any overriding political, cultural, or social issue. However, our guests and members of the committee also identified ongoing concerns that could or will pose a threat to individual students and to the social climate on campus. These concerns are in three categories: Federal policy changes, stress and mental health, and social climate.

Federal Policy Changes. Changes to federal policies and guidelines with respect to immigration and undocumented students, international student visas, and sexual harassment and discrimination, either rumored or enacted, and their present and future impact on students were discussed at length by the Roundtables.

With respect to immigration and undocumented students, termination of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and work permits has had a serious effect on the emotional and financial stability of many immigrant and undocumented students on campus. Constant fear

by students of deportation, for themselves, family members, and friends weighs heavily on many students on campus, not only for Latina/o students but students from Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere, as well as for their friends, faculty, and staff on campus. These fears impact students' ability to focus on their studies and generally to function day to day. In addition, they create financial instability for students who are unable to apply for federal financial aid.

Although no specific or official changes in immigration and student visa policy have occurred at the federal level, international students at the University on visas and the Office of International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) remain on alert for possible future changes that could affect students' ability to obtain or renew visas or travel home and return without problems.

Unofficially, accounts of students who have been accepted for admission but unable to obtain visas in some countries (e.g., Nigeria) are increasing, suggesting that consular and other officials are enacting de facto if not de jure policy changes in students' home countries. The ongoing possibility of changes to immigration and visa policy, combined with stories of visa denials is creating stress for international students, scholars, and their advisors and associates on campus. A recent realignment within ISSS was intended partially to address these issues and will help that office to keep students and scholars informed and advised of any possible changes in regulations.

A third area of federal policy change has been in regulations for Title IX, which govern issues of sexual discrimination and harassment. These proposed regulations from the Department of Education include proposed changes in the definition of harassment, in which "assault" is included under the definition of "sexual harassment," the option for schools to change the burden of proof, along with other proposed changes around hearings and other topics. However, while there are new proposed regulations, especially with respect to what the federal government requires in reporting and accountability, the regulations have not yet been finalized or put into effect. The proposed regulations suggest there will be areas where the University will retain the option to create their own standards. The University will continue to look at state law as well as other laws and regulations in any future implementation of finalized regulations.

Sexual Harassment, Course-Related Stress, and Mental Health. Three issues that are having a negative impact on the emotional and cognitive well-being of a significant number of students on campus were discussed by the Roundtable: sexual harassment, academic stress, and general mental health.

Separate from changes to federal policy, the Title IX Office is reporting an increase in reports of harassment in excess of 100 over last year. Whether this is due to a raised awareness of harassment and discrimination from the MeToo Movement and elsewhere or whether it reflects an actual increase in problems on campus is uncertain, but it is in line with increases reported on other University campuses in the Big Ten and nationally. There has been a corresponding increase in the workload of staff who work with Title IX-related incidents, with a wait time of 5-7 days in the Women's Resource Center currently the norm.

The Counseling Center also reports that nearly all categories of activity and services, from student drop-in appointments to urgent appointments to hospitalizations, are up significantly from last year. These increases are greater proportionately than increases in enrollment, and in some cases are precipitous. More students are being seen earlier for problems, the problems themselves are more severe, and there are more students than ever using the Counseling Center's

services. There has been, for example, a 52% increase in “urgent appointments,” that is, in students who either show up at the Center or who are referred by faculty and staff, presenting problems that must be addressed immediately. Three years ago, there was one such incident per day; now there are on average five such incidents per day. Student drop-ins for less severe issues are also up from 25-30 per week to 25-30 per day. Finally, the number of hospitalizations—of students whose symptoms are so severe that they present a danger to themselves or others—is up 600%, from 1-2 per semester to 8 this semester. This is a general phenomenon across a broad range of students, both domestic and international, and all genders and cultural backgrounds.

Whether these increases are due to real increases in mental health issues on campus or are an effect of increased outreach by the Counseling Center through the embedding of counselors in colleges and schools on campus and other activities or perhaps some lessening in the stigmas surrounding mental health issues is unknown. However, this increase without a corresponding increase in staff poses both a short- and long-term challenge for the Counseling Center in responding to mental health and wellness issues on campus in a comprehensive and multifaceted way.

The Roundtables also discussed possible causes for the increased use of resources in the Counseling Center. It was noted that these are consistent with increases at other Big Ten schools and nationally, and that there seem to be three overlapping sources of the problem: an increase in cases of depression higher among university-aged students than the national population; general anxiety; and “academic problems,” most notably students feeling overwhelmed by due dates, the quantity and nature of course exams and assignments, and an increased sense of competitiveness and pressure to “perform” academically. The discussion turned to concerns about departments, programs, and individual course instructors who might be unaware of the extent to which iron-clad due dates and a concern for “academic rigor” accumulate when students are taking 15, 18, or even 21 hours per semester. These problems are likely to be exacerbated as both students and programs seek to add value to academic experiences through double majors and joint-degree programs that also add credit hours and/or double demands placed on students in terms of their time, energy, and financial resources.

Social Climate on Campus and in Classrooms.

The Roundtable also discussed two interrelated issues affecting the general level of comity and school spirit on campus. The first of these was the topic of “school spirit” itself, and how it has become increasingly difficult to define as the University student body grows and diversifies. Whereas in the past it might be assumed that school spirit focused on a university’s varsity sports teams (especially basketball and American football), including a mascot, the increase in students coming from abroad whose traditions do not include varsity sports, the addition of online (off-campus) programs, and the sheer growth in enrollment all have had an effect on how “unified” students are or could become around some symbol of the University. It was noted that concern about the Chief, for example, seems to be declining among the present student body as a whole, and that while creation of a new mascot might help the University community to “move beyond” its previous mascot, doubts were raised as to whether any new mascot or other icon could have the same impact on school spirit as in the past.

A second issue discussed was cultural exchange among international and domestic students, and within the diversity of cultures in the domestic student body. The extraordinary global and domestic diversity of the University presents equally extraordinary opportunities for

international, cross-cultural, linguistic, religious, and ethnic exchange and dialogue, and yet questions were raised about how much and how deep interaction is among student groups, both in and out of classrooms. It was reported, for example, that in one case, African-American and Chinese students sat on one side of a classroom and White students sat on the other in a course. The instructor responded by placing the students in heterogeneous groups for small-group discussions; but when these were concluded, the students returned to their original seats on either side of the classroom. How often, then, do Korean or Chinese or Indian students in Computer Science or LAS team with students from Illinois on group assignments? How often do students from different RSOs meet in forums to discuss issues of religion, culture, politics, or sexuality? How many close friendships do students from Illinois or the United States form with international students in the course of their university careers? It was observed that finding ways to bring students from diverse backgrounds together around sports and other University-wide events might help to build a greater sense of school spirit within the entire student body.

Question 2: Strengths in the University's Response

In addition to characterizing the state of student well-being and issues that are ongoing and possible challenges to that status, the Roundtable also identified a broad number of responses and sources of strength in helping to address concerns and improve the quality of life on campus for students. Perhaps the greatest strength of the University, however, is the vigilance of staff in thinking proactively and creatively rather than reactively to issues that potentially challenge student well-being.

For example, the recent realignment of three branches of ISSS will bring focus and improve outreach and the sharing of information with international students and scholars. The Title IX Office actively follows changes and proposed changes in regulations and is proactively discussing the response on campus to these changes and their possible effects for students.

The Counseling Center has identified multiple strategies for improving outreach to students. These include workshops across campus and presentations designed to engage students' attention regarding the Center's counseling resources; taking an innovative, proactive and preventative approach to mental health issues that makes the Center a leader nationwide; and embedding counselors in campus units, such as those currently in the College of Engineering and LAS.

La Casa Cultural Latina has become the coordinating point for the University's response to the termination of DACA. The Counseling Center also currently provides services directly at La Casa, and other units on campus, including the School of Social Work and the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities (IPRH) provide additional assistance. Training workshops for faculty and staff interested in becoming allies of undocumented and DACA students are also offered each semester. In addition, the students themselves and other groups on campus have formed networks to share information through Open Illinois (<http://open.illinois.edu/>) and the Illinois Coalition Assisting Undocumented Students' Education (I-CAUSE).

Question 3: Opportunities for Improvement

Multiple opportunities for improvement of services and programs that affect student well-being were considered by the Roundtables. These include:

1. Increases in staffing for both the Counseling Center, particularly for “triage staff” to meet and assess students when they enter the Center, and the Title IX Office to reduce wait time for an interview when a complaint of harassment has been made.
2. Greater articulation between the Counseling Center and the McKinley Health Center in responding to students’ needs for care.
3. Raised awareness among faculty and program administrators of the stress that students experience due to multiple assignments; rigid, changed, or short notice of due dates; or the scheduling, quality, and quantity of exams and other assessments.
4. An “international section” for students at sporting events and the creation of varsity sports teams with strong international followings, such as soccer, to bring international students into the University’s sports culture.
5. A new mascot. One suggestion made in discussions was to consider the University’s squirrels as a source of inspiration. It was noted that Sassy the Squirrel, who currently serves as the Office of Admissions’ mascot, has received favorable reviews, and that the presence of squirrels on campus and the story of their coming to the University is an official part of its history and predates its previous mascot.

Conclusion

In summary, the Roundtables found that the overall state of student well-being at the end of 2018 was good, but that significant challenges for a number of student groups on campus exist now and could increase in the future. Increases in complaints to the Title IX Office and visits to the Counseling Center are up, and staff in these units are struggling to keep up with those increases. The strength of the University in addressing challenges to well-being lies primarily in the proactive and innovative responses of administrators to these challenges. The Roundtables identified five opportunities for improving overall student well-being at the University in conclusion.