Summary of Student Perspectives Series Meeting, November 5, 2020

Trustees in Attendance: Michael J. Klingensmith, John Liew, Gregory W. Wendt

Students in Attendance: Itzel Velázquez (4th Year, College, Undergraduate Liaison), Steven Wendeborn (2nd Year MBA student, Chicago Booth, Graduate Liaison), Mohsen Ehab Amiri (2nd Year MBA student, Chicago Booth), Ryan Choi (3rd Year, College), Max Freedman (3rd Year, Law School), Joseph Haydt (7th Year PhD student, Humanities Division and Divinity), Kimberly Liu (3rd Year PhD student, Physical Sciences Division), Summer Long (2nd Year, College), Anton Outkine (1st Year, College), Alessandra Veinbachs (4th Year, College)

The topic of the November 5 meeting was the virtual learning experience of UChicago students during the global COVID-19 pandemic and its lasting impact on the University. In advance of the meeting, which was held over Zoom, the Trustees received a memorandum from the student liaisons that included a summary of data obtained through related surveys administered by Student Government and Graduate Council earlier this year. The memo also proposed the following subjects for discussion:

1. **Advantages and disadvantages of virtual learning:** The nature of the pandemic required the University to take urgent action and implement Zoom-based classes on an extremely compressed timeframe. Now that we have the advantage of direct experience with virtual learning, what has worked well, what challenges have we faced, and what will endure once the current crisis has passed?

2. **Long-term effects regarding on- and off-campus life:** The pandemic has called long-established assumptions into question, such as the emphasis placed on centrally locating the student body in a physical campus. How have the University’s plans and objectives for undergraduate and graduate housing in Hyde Park shifted as a result of the pandemic? What other aspects of the higher education model will be reexamined as a result of COVID-19?

3. **Mental and physical health:** Data collected from both undergraduate and graduate students have shown a significant impact on mental health since the beginning of the pandemic, although in varied ways (e.g., feelings of isolation, increased stressors associated with family duties or financial hardship, etc.). What additional measures would be helpful to support students, both during the current crisis and beyond?

Mr. Klingensmith opened the meeting by noting the very unusual nature of 2020 and the trustees’ interest in hearing about how the year’s circumstances have affected student life. He then briefly described the role of the Board versus that of University administrators: Trustees
provide institutional oversight, help make strategic decisions and are important in philanthropic efforts, but are not involved in the day-to-day campus operations and management of the University. He also stressed that the trustees present at today’s meeting may offer their own opinions and perspectives, but do not speak on behalf of the Board or University. Mr. Klingensmith then invited the students and trustees present to introduce themselves.

Following these introductions, the student liaisons remarked on the diverse experiences of the assembled students over the past nine months and asked how the virtual learning setting has been received? Several of the students agreed that, overall, academic life has not suffered. For some courses, especially foreign language classes, Zoom and its features (e.g., breakout rooms) function particularly well from both the instructors’ and students’ perspectives. The pivot to open notes and recorded lectures was touted as helpful to many students, giving them more freedom to learn at their own pace and schedule. The proliferation of online recordings for courses and co-curricular events was also mentioned as an advantage, especially as it opens up access to academic life for those students who are currently abroad or far from Chicago. Faculty and other instructors are often willing to stay on Zoom after class meetings and other sessions to chat informally with students, which can be very helpful for professional development.

Academic life has not been without its challenges, however. Courses in STEM have been less satisfying because of the absence of hands-on learning in the laboratory. For those graduate students with instructional roles, access to the right digital tools, such as iPads and other devices, is essential for effective teaching but may not be uniformly available. Student research in the sciences has also been affected; some students have been cut off entirely from research opportunities or have seen a decline in overall camaraderie in lab settings because so few researchers are able to work simultaneously.

One student noted that a full day of classes on Zoom is exhausting in ways that a similar schedule in-person is not. Another commented that successful learning on Zoom depends on the quality of the physical space students have around them. Some students lack quiet, distraction-free spaces to fully engage online, and may also be hindered by poor Wi-Fi or a sub-optimal computer. Synchronous courses on Zoom can place students who are in different time zones at a real disadvantage if their classes and professors’ office hours take place very late at night (or very early in the morning).

Many of the students present have at least one in-person class in their autumn schedule. The College, Law School and Chicago Booth School of Business have been particularly keen to offer in-person learning experiences for their students, and all courses in the Pritzker School of Medicine are in-person. Nevertheless, the health and safety precautions necessary to make in-person learning possible are not conducive to students socializing in the minutes before and after class meetings, and in “hybrid” classes where some students attend in-person and the others via Zoom, the other students in the classroom may not be individuals you know. For these reasons, socializing is completely removed from the classroom for many students this quarter.
The students described a variety of perspectives on the advantages of being on campus versus learning from afar. For some, not seeing their friends or even spending much actual time on campus made being in Hyde Park not so different from being back at home. Others said that it was still preferable to live off-campus with friends than to be alone at home, which can be very isolating. For those students who have permission to return to their P.I.’s lab, the advantages of being able to stay on track with their research outweigh the social challenges imposed by the pandemic. Unlike continuing students, who already have a network of friends to rely on and with whom to potentially share an off-campus “Zoom House,” first-year students have had to make special efforts to meet new people and make friends this fall. In the first few warm-weather weeks of the Autumn Quarter, campus grounds have served as their “common room,” with the actual congregation spaces in the residence halls being largely off-limits. Shared meals with a close friend circle and walks to class have been important social outlets for new students. In some degree programs, it is extremely important to network and get to know classmates who could be important contacts for future professional endeavors; for these students, the potential health risks of moving to Chicago and taking advantage of whatever in-person options are available are worth it.

When asked about the University’s libraries, the students were generally satisfied with access and services. Law students can reserve space in the Law School library to study and also have access to the Green Lounge and auditorium in the Law School building. The Mansueto Reading Room, Regenstein Library and Harper Memorial Library Reading Room all offer students three-hour reservation slots. Students reported that because these spaces are heavily de-densified and supplied with self-service cleaning carts, they feel safe. The Libraries have expanded their digital resources and pick-up options, so accessing needed materials has not been an issue. While there are fewer on-campus spaces for students than in typical quarters, the temporary tents that have been erected in key locations (e.g., Quad Club tennis courts, Hutchinson Courtyard, Bartlett Quad, Ratner) have been popular and are generally easier to access since they do not require an advance reservation.

With respect to RSO and other co-curricular student activities, the trustees heard that some student groups have been hard to sustain remotely if their mission and activities do not translate easily to a virtual platform. Others have been more successful; one RSO held a consulting webinar for its members and used its funding allocation to provide guest speakers with honoraria, and the UChicago Grill Club organized a virtual grilling demo with a master griller. Generally, many RSO budgets are going unspent as they cannot hold their regular activities, many of which involve providing meals and refreshments to members and event participants. Current University restrictions on permitting student groups to provide food delivery subsidies or restaurant gift cards to members has dampened involvement in many cases. The students noted that peer institutions have figured out ways around the tax implications of subsidizing food purchases for students who participate in virtual events, so why UChicago cannot also do this is a source of some frustration.
To the question of whether students would still choose to come to campus or take a gap year (or similar break in their studies) if they could do it all again, responses were mixed and appeared to depend on the students’ class year. First- and second-year students have faced the greatest dislocation in terms of their anticipated (pre-pandemic) versus actual experience. For these students, social life and extra-curricular opportunities have been so limited that it has been really tough to form relationships. In retrospect, a gap year would have been the better option. Students in their final years are more likely to want to graduate and move on with their lives. They also have the benefit of established social networks, so meeting new people and making friends is less of an issue. However, they are very cognizant of what they (and new students) are missing out on – including annual traditions like Summer Breeze and June convocation.

The students expressed satisfaction with the University’s implementation of health and safety measures to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 exposure and spread. Students feel physically safe on campus and both the mandatory and voluntary testing programs are working well with fast turnaround times for results. Resident assistants in the residence halls report high confidence in the isolation housing and contact tracing set up to respond to positive student cases. However, Chicago Booth students would like to see a voluntary testing depot at the Gleacher Center, citing the inconvenience of the currently available Hyde Park locations for students who live and take classes downtown.

When prompted, the students shared several observations and suggestions for the University moving forward. Some of these focused on the importance of transparency in communications and providing more details in campus-wide announcements; the recent decision to alter key dates in the academic calendar and the outbreak of COVID-19 cases among Chicago Booth students were cited as two examples. The College’s decision to bundle Autumn Quarter Humanities core classes with housing assignments apparently led to angst and unhappiness among some first-year students, many of whom felt their concerns were not adequately addressed. The University was also urged to take steps to level the playing field for students learning remotely given that virtual instruction exacerbates differences and inequities. Instructors should follow standardized processes for effective online pedagogy and all students should have access to adequate Wi-Fi and learning technology. Finally, both graduate and undergraduate students present commented on the extremely challenging job market for graduates and the need for those offices that provide professional development and career support to take the steps necessary to alleviate the stress caused by job insecurity and economic uncertainty.