May 15, 2017

To: University of Chicago Student Body
From: The Student Perspectives Series Graduate Committee
  ● Megan Beck, Graduate Liaison to the Board of Trustees (Booth ’17)
  ● Kenzo Esquivel, Undergraduate Liaison to the Board of Trustees (College ‘17)
  ● Renita Ward (Divinity ’18)
  ● Nick Williams (PSD ‘18)
RE: Discussion Prompts for May 25th Student Perspectives Series Meeting on Mental Health & Wellness

Summary:
Mental health and wellness is a topic of increasing importance on college campuses. The intellectual rigor and culture at UChicago makes this a particularly important topic on campus and one that affects students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. While the university has done a lot of work to improve resources and ensure coverage for as many students as possible, students still struggle to know where to turn when they need help or how to intervene if students around them show signs of distress. While mental health is certainly less taboo than it once was, students still feel a stigma exists for those seeking treatment.

Prompts for Discussion:
  ● How should the university think about balancing a rigorous curriculum with students’ mental health?
  ● How could a comprehensive student health center help improve utilization of mental health resources among students?
  ● What types of resources and programming should be available to help train students and faculty about helping students in need and directing them to appropriate resources?
Appendix

**Exhibit 1: Summary Graduate Student Survey Results**
The information below comes from a survey that was circulated among the divisions in May 2017. There were approximately 120 responses representing 11 divisions (no responses were received from Harris students). Please note that many students also shared positive perceptions of the mental health resources on campus, but the more critical feedback is summarized below.

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<th>Anecdotal Evidence</th>
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| UChicago’s culture negatively impacts students’ mental health | ● “Current mental health resources are implemented as a secondary solution to problems created by excessive demands of our academic culture. The resources offered as compensation are invaluable, but widespread wellness requires a reevaluation of academic expectations and priorities.”  
● “I do think there is a real culture at UChicago, among undergrads and grad students that stress is proof of being hard working and proof that you belong. However, I think it breeds anxiety, depression, and a great deal of imposter syndrome.”  
● “The school does a good job of addressing the symptom side of mental health. From the casual side, they do not. They are the cause.”  
● “I've found it incredibly difficult to be a graduate student at UChicago. The pressures of this environment drove me to a mental breakdown that nearly destroyed my family, my career, and my life. If I didn't have the resources to find a qualified therapist, I would have dropped out a long time ago—and quite frankly, I'm not sure I'd be alive today. I realize it's unrealistic to expect an entire university culture to change, but I want to emphasize just how serious the emotional costs of being a graduate student at this institution can be.”  
● “I don't feel the campus environment promotes a particularly healthy perspective on mental health. Stress, anxiety, overwork, etc. are all kind of like badges of honor on this campus in a way that is often worrying. I feel like my professors have no concept of what students' mental health lives are like, and students seem to egg each other on and play "misery poker." I obviously have no statistics about mental health among the student population, but I would not be surprised to find it worse than at peer institutions, let alone the general public.” |
| It would be helpful to have more open and honest dialogue about mental health at UChicago | ● “A more open discussion about the impact and importance of mental health. Destigmatization. Highlighting the potential flexibility within coursework for those dealing with mental health issues.”  
● “I think that mental illness is still quite stigmatized and seen as a sign of weakness. This is particularly the case with women. The campus environment is cold and intense, and while intellectual rigor is crucial, this value often comes at the expense of students' mental health. I have seen this in the undergraduates I've taught and have experienced it myself. One concrete tool that I would have appreciated as a graduate instructor was more training in |
| Terms of how to deal with students experiencing mental illnesses. While of course we are not therapists, professors are often the first to see when a student is declining and/or in distress.
| - “I wonder if more could be done on campus to address the pervasive stigma surrounding mental illness--perhaps through the cooperation of more faculty (seeing as how faculty really set the tone of the environment at the University)
| - “The latest studies show that mental illness in grad students is VERY common (source: http://www.sciencemag.org/careers/2017/04/phd-students-face-significant-mental-health-challenges). We need to change this by normalizing therapy and medication. Professors and staff need to be involved in this cultural/institutional shift as well as the students.”

| More needs to be done to make students aware of the resources that are available
| - “I’ve never used them, but it seems poorly advertised. I don’t really know what kinds of services they offer, or how quickly one can get an appointment, or if they see students who don’t have USHIP.”

| Longstanding preconceptions about mental health assistance still exist on campus
| - “The confidentiality of those at Student Counseling is compromised. More than once students have struggled with funding or invasiveness of the University because they sought emergency help. No one should be penalized for ensuring they are not a danger to themselves, especially given the wait to see someone at Student Counseling.”

| Resources need to be expanded to meet the needs of the broad graduate community (i.e. specific international student resources, dates and times when graduate students could utilize services).
| - “If UChicago truly cared about medical student wellness, there would be easier access to therapy (with evening and weekend hours) and advising that incorporated an understanding of medical students as people (not simply people to get into residency).”
| - “Perhaps this is just a chemistry and physics department issue, but I think that faculty expectations of graduate students are so high that they can, for some faculty members, be impossible to achieve while also prioritizing personal wellness such as annual physicals, dentist appointments, counseling appointments if needed, exercise, or simply staying home if sick. How are we supposed to make time or find professionals who can assist us, if we are expected to be in lab from 8am-7pm Monday-Saturday? I can’t find a dentist open on Sundays.”
| - “Support specifically for international students, and for students working or training off campus for field work or study abroad, could be a lot better. Right now the options are limited because the policies don’t account for the sheer variety of conditions students in these situations deal with.”