Summary of Student Perspectives Series Meeting, May 25, 2017

Trustees in Attendance: Thomas A. Cole, Andrew M. Alper, Michael J. Klingensmith, John Liew

Students in Attendance: Megan Beck (graduate liaison), Kenzo Esquivel (undergraduate liaison), Laurel Meng (College), Katherine Ordonez (College), Renita Ward (Divinity), Christina Uzzo (incoming undergraduate liaison), Erica Watkins (incoming graduate liaison), Nick Williams (PSD).

The final Student Perspectives Series (SPS) meeting of the 2016-17 academic year focused on student mental health. The graduate and undergraduate liaisons identified this as a topic of interest last fall in an early planning meeting with Tom Cole, given its relevance to a broad range of students in the College, schools and divisions.

The materials shared in advance of the SPS meeting included responses to an informal survey administered to graduate students by Grad Council on mental health; background information and summary statistics from the University’s Student Counseling Service (SCS); and two recent articles on college student mental health from the Chronicle of Higher Education and Inside Higher Ed. These documents informed much of the discussion at the May 25th meeting, which converged on three main themes.

First, despite the progress made in demystifying mental health issues and providing greater access to treatment (especially on college campuses), significant barriers to seeking help still exist. The students described several of these barriers: fear of being perceived as weak or not “good enough” to be a student at UChicago; an ethos that prescribes students to “suck it up” because stress and anxiety is par for the course if you are to be academically successful; difficulties in scheduling appointments at times that don’t conflict with academic obligations; and not knowing that services even exist. The perceived stigma of seeking counseling may be particularly significant for some international students who come from areas of the world where conceptions and attitudes toward mental health are different from those in the U.S.

A couple of the students who attended the meeting are members of the recognized student organization, Active Minds. Started by a University of Pennsylvania student after her brother committed suicide, Active Minds (http://activeminds.org/) advocates for the de-stigmatization of mental health issues on college campuses and promotes resources and services that help students address psychological wellness. The students at the meeting said that at UChicago, Active Minds takes on a “myth-busting” role in its efforts to encourage students to visit SCS before their problems become a crisis. One of these students cited Cornell as an example of a peer institution that has been innovative in its approach to promoting mental health to its community.
A second theme that emerged in the meeting was the impact of UChicago’s academic culture on student mental health and overall wellbeing. Does the University’s reputation for rigor and academic excellence translate to an excessive workload? Does this, in turn, lead to disproportionate levels of stress and anxiety in students? While there was general agreement that UChicago is demanding, the graduate students in attendance did not believe that the expectations placed on them are greater than what their peers experience in comparable programs at other universities. For the most part, the College representatives agreed that the pace and intensity of the quarter system, especially when taking Core courses, could be challenging but they faulted the inconsistency of their academic advising (and ensuing poor guidance on course load and sequencing) for this rather than unreasonable expectations of their professors.

The third theme of the discussion related to the role of faculty and other instructors in promoting student mental health. There was consensus among the students that providing spaces on campus for students to speak freely about their personal struggles is very important. While such spaces exist, they may not be as available or accessible to some students as for others. For example, it is very common for doctoral students to have limited opportunities to meet with peers outside of their P.I.’s lab or their cohort (which in some programs may be quite small). If these students do not have a close relationship with their faculty adviser, they may quickly feel very isolated and disconnected. Ensuring that these students know about opportunities to meet with other graduate students and staff who can be supportive (whether via Graduate Council, UChicagoGRAD or SCS) should be a priority. One of the undergraduates suggested that there be greater awareness among faculty and other instructional staff about mental health resources available to students, who ideally should also be equipped to recognize the signs of mental distress and refer students appropriately. It was pointed out that the reward structure for faculty at research universities often does not recognize skill and effectiveness in advising and mentoring students; could there be a role for adjunct faculty or other teaching staff who lie outside the traditional tenure and promotion ladder?

This SPS discussion made clear that administrative offices (particularly those in Campus and Student Life, the area deans of students and UChicagoGRAD) must continue to find ways to promote the availability of mental health resources to students and lower the afore-mentioned barriers to accessing help. In the short- to medium term, assessing the feasibility of expanded hours (evening and possibly weekends) in the Student Counseling Service and developing more effective educational and promotional materials about services should be priorities. Additionally, exploring the use of technology (beyond the existing therapist-on-call, who is available by phone after hours) in delivering services is another area of potential innovation at UChicago. Finally, co-locating student health, counseling and wellness services in a single physical space would likely address many students’ privacy concerns (since it will be less obvious what services a student is seeking), as well as expose more students to mental health resources and make it easier and more convenient for them to access the help they need.