April 13, 2021 Meeting Minutes

Topic: Student Engagement in the Academic Environment

Meeting Called to Order: 6:00 PM

On the Topic of: Student Engagement in the Academic Environment

- A Fellow starts off the discussion with highlighting an app from a startup at UC Davis which allows students to collaborate in study groups, could be a way to connect students using technology even when we return back to campus
- A Fellow mentions the movie "Paper Chase", which provides some options for students connecting together through collaboration
- A Fellow mentions that the formation of study groups is common in higher education and professional degree programs, since each student can bring a different perspective to understand and analyze the material for the coming classes
- A Fellow brings up that more than half of the student population in the upcoming fall semester will not have taken an in-person course at Berkeley
    - Professors/Teachers should be accommodating to students who will not have taken any courses at Berkeley
    - This Fellow adds that a motivating factor was feeling connected to the physical campus, i.e., walking around and observing everything around them
    - If the University could provide some resources to help everyone get reconnected to Campus and the Campus Culture, especially since a majority of students will not have set foot on the campus yet
- A Fellow would like to address two points:
    - When the students come back, there might be a strong intimidation factor for those who have not been around the campus yet
        - It takes a while to get the idea of the campus culture and feel confident about being present on campus
    - The Fellow adds that at Berkeley Law, the first few days were structured around forming strong collaboration and connections between the students, use the sense of community to foster a sense of appreciation for learning
- A Fellow addresses a Warden's question about the rise of cheating during the online semester
    - An issue with the rise in cheating is that many students feel the need to cheat since they are under the assumption that other students are cheating (due to increased averages on exams and in courses)

- The overall amount of cheating will most likely go down when exams are back in person, since it is harder to cheat while being proctored in person
- The "Berkeley Burst", where people struggle together at first due to the difficulty of exams at Berkeley
- Exam averages will most likely be lower when we are in person
- A Fellow, a professor in Humanities, acknowledges that they do not experience as much cheating in their online courses due to TurnItIn, which automatically detects plagiarism in academic papers
  - The Professor also requires students to use material directly from the course
  - This Fellow advocates for the University to maintain Zoom, as it allows them to schedule/host office hours at odd times, and would not require them to be present on campus in order for students and professors to connect when they need help
- A Fellow notes that a majority of the cheating they have seen has been caught on Exams
  - In the Computer Science department, there is a reliance on Zoom proctoring, where students record themselves taking the exam and professors review the footage afterwards
  - Are their ethical lines being crossed when "Zoom Proctoring"?
  - Has zoom proctoring been effective in preventing cheating?
  - In contrast to strict proctoring guidelines, should Professors design exams in such a niche way such that students will only be hurting themselves if they try to cheat (loss of time struggling to find answers)
- A Fellow addresses a point from a previous Fellow regarding virtual engagements
  - What can we learn from this past year of virtual school that we can take forward into the future for the better?
  - Example: The University Library is starting a Virtual Study Hall session, since students cannot meet in person on campus to study
    - It has been fairly popular, sessions fill up frequently, as Folks enjoy seeing other people and having other people studying at the same time
    - Is this something that the University Library should continue even when Campus opens back up?
    - Could this help people with Social Anxiety feel more connected without having to be in person with a large number of people?
    - Could this be more convenient for people who might not be able to make it on campus?
  - Example 2: Guidelines for what kinds of work can be done remotely (either learning, teaching, or admin work), some Faculty/Admin enjoy working remotely, and they are able to do their jobs just fine
    - Remote Advising: Could this be more convenient for both students and advisors?
    - Possibly a hybrid system

- A Fellow addresses a few points:
    - Circling back to the topic of cheating: Professors have a responsibility to create unique questions, not just using textbook questions - could be a way to circumvent cheating
    - The University's obsession with grades - only one professor has addressed that the College of Engineering has relaxed the guidelines for grade distributions in each course
        - Could the University reduce the stress by de-emphasizing grades?
    - Could a hybrid system be possible? Could this increase engagement?
- A Fellow responds to the request for suggestions on how to use the remote process:
    - It has been much easier for this Fellow to attend and host lectures on campus when they are scheduled on Zoom
        - It has been easier to move from lecture to lecture on Zoom compared to walking across campus from building to building
    - Could the Campus move some lectures/meetings to Zoom in order to increase the accessibility for students/faculty to attend?
    - Could Admin move more presentations to Zoom so more members of the community could attend
- A Fellow addresses some concerns about cheating:
    - The Fellow notes that when students recognize a question from a book, they look it up
        - Why do Students do this?
        - Students see bookwork to be a waste of time
        - Courses are graded on a curve, they need to get ahead
        - Students feel that cheating is somewhat acceptable, it is swept under the rug more often than not
        - Students at the high school level are learning that cheating is ok and they don't have to do all the work in order to pass
        - Is cheating a cultural and systemic issue?
    - Student Engagement is a buzzword in the modern education world:
        - Students are not doing well enough because they are not as engaged
    - The University used to have recordings and transcripts of every lecture available and it has always been a benefit for students to review and understand material to a much greater degree
- A Fellow responds to a previous speaker's comments about the cultural issues regarding engagement and cheating
    - The Fellow asserts that we as Fellows have a responsibility to carry the conversations forward into public venues
    - For example, what is happening at the K-12 level? These same points can apply at any level, not just at the University level

- A Fellow points out the recent College Admissions scandal and how competitive the College application process is
    - There is a stigma about status and where your degree is from
    - Pressure to apply and get accepted to selective colleges and universities
    - The Fellow thinks that Berkeley is very Sink or Swim: there is not a strong sense of community in the academic sense (no cohorts for grouped majors), but rather people are competitive with each other
    - If you could foster a stronger sense of community across the years and reduce the notion of competitiveness, the number of students cheating might decrease
- A Fellow, an administrator, did not realize that so many students are cheating at Berkeley
    - The Fellow takes issue with a former speaker's point, this Fellow points out that students are not forced to cheat, they choose to cheat
    - The Fellow suggests support and guidance from the University to help students who feel the urge/need to cheat
- A Fellow questions why students are tempted/urged to cheat:
    - The feelings toward education have changed over the decades
    - The Millenial age group are realizing it is harder to make it into adulthood, they feel the pressure to do anything they can to get a job
    - Even at the High School level, students ask what a specific course can do to "get them a job"
    - Students are more concerned about what they earn versus what they learn
    - Students at all levels today are focused on trying to get a job after college
    - The "End Goal" for most students is what they can do to get a job and be economically stable
- A Fellow, a member of a Mentor program, states that most students are overly concerned with GPA above anything else
    - Students feel like they have to cheat in order to be successful in life
    - You do not need to get an A in every class to be successful in life
    - A Professor in the Biomedical Engineering program talked openly about her struggles with grades in the past and how she is still a Professor at Berkeley
    - Reduce anxiety that students need to get top grades in every class
    - This Fellow has reached out to Mentors and PhD students who are open about their struggles with classes before, and they realize that it is not uncommon to struggle
    - If a message could be conveyed to students that they do not need to be a 4.0 student in order to be successful, that could reduce the urge to cheat
- A Fellow agrees with the previous speaker that there is too much of an emphasis on GPA
    - This Fellow never once made a hiring decision purely based on GPA
    - Though GPA is a factor into getting into professional schools, it is slowly becoming less of a factor

- There are other ways of presenting yourself as an applicant for either a job or grad school program
- This Fellow agrees that students are not forced to cheat, it is a conscious choice
- Many students have not experienced failure and turn to cheating in order to avoid being a statistic
- Need to give students the support so that they will not bounce out if they do happen to fail
- Hold students accountable for their conscious choices
- A Fellow would like to build upon a previous speaker's point about GPA
    - The Fellow agrees that for many job listings, a good GPA might look good to some people, but it is not going to be the be-all-end-all
    - There seems to be a discrepancy between the hard sciences and the humanities in regard to cheating
        - History professors are able to design their exams in such a way that they can tell if students are answering their questions based on knowledge from the lectures versus taking material directly from the internet
    - How to combat the stress that GPA contributes to
- A Fellow would like to follow up on a previous speaker's point:
    - This Fellow, a lawyer, has never once asked a candidate what their GPA is, it is more important to focus on what they know and what they can contribute to the position
    - An experienced person in the field can tell if a new hire knows what they are talking about, if they don't, they are fired
    - You will never be fired because of your GPA
- A Fellow points out that the University is responsible for this pursuit of higher grades
    - The University publishes median GPAs as a show of status and prestige
    - There is a mania for grades, at the high school level with APs and at the collegiate level with academic citations and the University Medal
    - In the past, there was no stigma associated with taking a course Pass/No Pass, but now, students do not even consider taking a course P/NP
    - The true purpose here is the pursuit of learning, not the pursuit of money or awards
- A Fellow notes that Professors have a big responsibility for fostering this mania of high grades
    - They need to convey to students that they were not perfect students during their entire academic career
    - The University is also responsible for contributing to this high grade mania
- A Fellow recalls a previous Cal Day discussion with potential Chemistry Students
    - The speaker was fantastic in regard to speaking about her experience in failing a course her sophomore year but still powering through and successfully graduating

- The Cal Experience is collecting a range of accolades, not just collecting a 4.0
- The University should be aware of trying to raise its own "GPA" by focusing on accolades and awards
- We talk about GPA since it is a concrete number that we can put a finger on, but is it more counterproductive today?
- What are some other concrete aspects that we can share with students to make them stellar candidates for grad schools and jobs in the future
- If you can find other stellar opportunities to put on your resume other than grades, that would help students become more well rounded

Meeting adjourned at 7:25 PM