

March 29, 2022 Meeting Minutes

Topic: Mental Health at Cal

Meeting Called to Order: 6:04 PM

Items for the Good of the Order:

- A Fellow reminds the Fellowship of upcoming nominations and elections - Nominations for new Fellows and Order Council Members are due on April 12
- A Fellow brings up a discussion about eligibility of Fellows for leadership positions within the Order, specifically, the by-laws affecting Transfer Students

Items for the Good of the University: Mental Health at Cal

The Warden opens the floor with anecdotes and reviews some questions sent out to the Fellowship prior to the meeting.

*On the Topic of: Mental Health at Cal*

- A Fellow opens up the discussion with conversation about the innovative nature of Campus and what can (and should) be done by the University to provide better resources for all members of the community
  - The Fellow continues with discussion about the relationship between socio-economic status and the various levels of stress and mental health effects
- A Fellow continues with their personal image about this topic, and how COVID has affected this
  - Prior to COVID, there was a toxic atmosphere surrounding certain classes, specifically ones with curves where students don't feel inclined to help others
  - The COVID-19 Pandemic has made everyone in the community more sympathetic towards everyone else
  - This Fellow, a transfer student, felt as though there was a general negative sentiment towards this Campus
    - The culture of the campus feeds into student's general mental health
  - This Fellow mentions that their department (Geography) is really small and this allows for activities for students and faculty to foster relationships and generally care for members of their department
- A Fellow mentions that they have not experienced "vulture-likeness" in their classes, but they have felt a sense of burnout and isolation just after two semesters
  - This Fellow mentions that they do not feel as bad anymore due to finding a solid community and lifting the weight and pressure they put on themselves for a good GPA or good grades

- Is there a connection between high personal academic performance pressure and negative mental health effects?
- Cross-generational feelings of burnout and high stress on Campus?
- A Fellow mentions that they have recently lost a friend due to suicide, and how they remember their experiences on campus
  - This Fellow mentions that the culture in the late 90s-early 2000s was “How much can I do with such little amounts of sleep” - late/no sleep nights, high stress, burnout
  - This Fellow mentions that academic memories were the most negative of their time here at Cal
  - The experiences that helped the most were those that involved connections to other students, specifically the Cal Band
  - On the topic of grading, how would “team”-grading change students’ outlooks on courses and collaboration
  - This Fellow mentioned that when they were here at Berkeley, no classes ever discussed mental health and how students were affected
  - Possible pre-orientation seminar on Mental Health, similar to the current alcohol awareness courses that incoming students need to complete?
- A Fellow continues on points made by previous speakers:
  - Certain majors require GPAs for declaration (e.g. CS, Economics)
  - It is very competitive to declare some majors, this leads to unhealthy behaviors for many students
  - For example, 61A plans its first exam prior to the drop deadline, and the exams themselves are more puzzle-like and confusing rather than focusing on actual course material
  - This Fellow, a junior, is still not aware of many of the resources available to students for Mental Health
    - Many of these services are reactionary (already going through something) versus preventative
  - Is there a spectrum of severity for students’ mental health? Services undergo fast turnover for students because there are so many different cases
  - You shouldn’t have to be in crisis mode to qualify for mental health services on Campus
  - Students should not need to actively look for these resources to find them, they should be placed well within our reach from day one
  - MIT does not calculate GPA during the first year - helps with transition from high school to college
  - Excessive and unnecessary amounts of competition felt from day one
- A Fellow responds to a common trend in the discussion

- Mental Health looks very different for everyone, is there a specific system or baselines?
- E.g. If someone is doing well in school, does that mean that their mental health is ok?
- Importance of having resources for every level of mental health
- A Fellow mentions that they feel as though mental health is tied to who you surround yourself with
  - This Fellow felt very anxious coming into Cal, but they have felt so much better after finding communities here on Campus
  - Do people have the preconceived notion of Berkeley being a “Depressing” campus before even setting foot here?
- A Fellow discusses the culture that they have noticed here Campus
  - This Fellow, a grad student, notes that they found a GRE prep book in a freshman dorm study hall - Are they already feeling pressured to prepare for the next step even though they just got here?
  - Students don’t approach the classroom as a place to learn, they see it as a place to get the best grades that they can
  - Just because they have good grades, that does not mean that they really understand the material
  - There is academic hazing in academia and especially here - Professors who went through this hazing are taking it out on students
    - Just because one generation went through academic hazing does not mean that it has to pass on to the next generation
  - Are Berkeley courses not designed to have students actually learn?
  - Does this level of “hazing” continue in the workplace?
  - This Fellow mentions that they have heard that some workplaces might place you in GPA brackets and higher GPAs get paid more
  - The current system is creating clones/copies versus fostering uniqueness and innovation
- A Fellow connects a previous speaker’s point to the University’s Vision
  - What is the goal of this UNiversity?
    - This Fellow mentions that they would first and foremost want to provide a place to care for students
  - How can we shift away from the “test scores” mindset and realize that there is more to the experience than just focusing on the numbers?
- A Fellow mentions that we should also focus on the students that are not ready to go to mental health services
  - Distinction between the Campus as an Institution and the Campus as a Community

- What are the ways as an individual you can check in with someone and ask “how are you doing today” and be prepared to not know what to do with the answer?
- This Fellow suggests that GBO should have a tent on campus throughout the entire year
  - GBO is a form of community that you experience when you first get here and then it just goes away
- This Fellow recalls back to their time at Cal
  - A few decades ago, it was not as stressful as it is now
  - During this time, many underrepresented groups were going through much more stressful situations (more isolated)
- There are many moments throughout the year where many students might feel isolated for the first time
- A Fellow acknowledges previous points, regarding the Culture of Campus and the resources available for mental health
  - This Fellow mentions that they did not have many fond memories in the College of Chemistry, and it was primarily due to the way other students interacted with each other
    - One of the Fellow’s first memories was from meeting with one of the advisors prior to attending to get some insight
    - This advisor had many doom and gloom stories about the College, and this was so contrasted by the material presented by the admissions notices
  - When you go to take those first few midterms, they are trying to convince you that you are not good enough for that major
  - Many of the students latched onto negative attitudes and turned into vultures
  - There were many subtle negative behaviors by students and faculty alike
  - There was a stigma of asking questions and being judged by other students
  - This Fellow continues with discussion about allocation of resources for mental health for students
    - This Fellow felt as though if you were not actively seeking these resources out prior to needing them, you would have a hard time finding them when you actually needed them
  - Many financial barriers for students to access communities
- A Fellow continues discussion of the various stressors of students at Cal
  - There are very high highs and very low lows, and then there are sustained highs and lows
    - The cost of college is a financial barrier, it is no longer a ticket to a better life
    - The stress of student debt post graduation looms for many students
  - We can’t feel constantly stressed by background stressors, we need ways to almost pause everything

- Housing is another big stressor for many students and faculty
- Multiple generations with various ideas of what the college experience is like
- How do we reconcile sending people out into the world with 6-figures of debt
- Are we ok with a growing concentration of wealth with a shrinking number of people with it
- Students are putting themselves through tremendous amounts of stress just to get here
- We need to ability to focus on rigorous items, but we can't do that all the time with so much background noise
- A Fellow states that they are fairly disheartened and provides some perspective
  - Some students need a lot of time to mature, and many students may not be at the same levels as older students or faculty
  - Everyone's issues are different, "My mental health may not look like your mental health"
  - Grit can help students get through the things they are going to see on this campus and what they are going to see in the future in the workplace
  - Anything the University can do to instill grit in their students?
- A Fellow mentions that they have had different life experiences than previous speakers but they have arrived at the same conclusion
  - One of the first responses for crisis is making sure resources are available
  - A second response would be awareness of these resources
  - Reduction is a form of stress management, but it shouldn't be the only one
  - Resiliency training (a military concept) - can we both reduce the amount of stress and train students to better handle the stress they experience
- A Fellow discusses their experience as an international student and student athlete
  - Important to give people space to share their stories
  - Is there a platform for students to share what they need to share?
  - Stress reduction courses on campus - not many of them, but they are always full and the waitlist is maxed out
  - There is at least a month-long waitlist for seeing a therapist on campus (even for student athletes who have their own specialists)
  - Provide tables on Sproul for different avenues of mental health care
  - Open the discussion of mental health, especially with professors - stop the stigma of opening up about your struggles
  - Highlight the importance of enjoying life
  - Emphasize the importance of having outlets
  - Is Berkeley a catfish? - Looks really good on the outside, but when you are here, is it just constant levels of high stress?
- A Fellow closes out the discussion with suggestions for a Center for Wellness on campus?

- Centralize all mental health resources for all campus members here
- Do people who would benefit from mental health resources choose not too because of previous stigmas?
- How can we be proactive versus reactive?
- I-House used to force all members to have a meal plan so that they could all share meals together

Meeting Adjourned: 7:32 PM.

The Meeting Closed with Song, and all notes are recorded by the Chronicler.