Report of the Senate Committee on Students and Educational Policy
(SCSEP)

Background

The Faculty Senate Committee on Students and Educational Policy (SCSEP) oversees and advises the Executive Committee on matters relating to the University's policies and procedures on the admission and instruction of students, including academic integrity, admissions policies and administration, evaluation of teaching, examinations and grading, academic experiences, educational opportunities (such as study abroad), student records, disciplinary systems, and the campus environment/climate. In general, the committee deals with the matters covered by the following section of the University's Handbook for Faculty and Academic Administrators: IV.

Campus Climate 2020-2021

Student mental health and well-being have been SCSEP's focus for several years. With the COVID-19 pandemic, student learning and programming went online in March 2020, and continued longer than anticipated through the end of the summer 2021. High-need students were permitted to live in the College Houses for the remainder of spring 2020 and fall 2020. First year students were given the option to live on campus from January 2021, with classes mostly still held online. The mental, social-emotional, and physical health of students specifically related to the COVID-19 pandemic necessarily became the focus of Wellness at Penn efforts for the year. In addition, with a summer of racial justice protests and increased focus on police brutality in minority communities across the United States, the University publicly responded to these concerns as they pertain to our student body in a variety of ways, largely through calls for proposals, public programming, and a multiyear financial gift to The School District of Philadelphia. Almost all the programming has remained online, with a mixed capacity to reach Penn students, many of whom suffer from a variety of social-emotional stresses brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

While SCSEP's plan had been to gain understanding of program evaluation for all forms of well-being activities for students this year, and we did do so to some extent, we necessarily shifted more of our attention to more pressing issues pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic: the Student Campus Compact, COVID-19 testing, student non-compliance, the COVID-19 vaccine rollout, and the social-emotional health of students on and off campus. In other words, some of our goals pertaining to wellness program evaluation (which expand into issues of racial justice) will have to wait for a return to some level of post-pandemic normalcy on campus if we are to capture a sense of the efficacy of the programs. This will enable us to consider what has happened and what measures will be the most effective.

2020-2021 SCSEP Specific Charges

1. Assess and evaluate ways to change University structures, practices, and biases (at the University, school, departmental, and individual levels) that perpetuate systemic racism as they apply to the committee's general charge.
2. Facilitate the changes identified in the previous charge.
3. Collaborate with the Senate Select Committee on Planning for Post-Pandemic Penn (P4) on matters related to pandemic response and recovery and their effects on student well-being.
4. Consider any policy and procedural changes to emergency preparedness and other mechanisms implemented to support student wellness throughout the pandemic response.
5. Evaluate the efficacy and value added by the rapid shift to online learning, including the long-term impacts on Penn.
6. Evaluate the impact of the College Houses and Academic Services (CHAS) pandemic response and identify ways that the Faculty Senate can provide support.
7. Examine the wider set of programs that can address and support student well-being (including but not limited to the Sachs Program for Arts Innovation, faith-based initiatives, and community engagement).

Report

Addressing student mental health and wellness has been a priority for SCSEP since September 2015. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, many of these wellness policies and practices – including mindfulness about student social and emotional well-being, allowing for a student to elect a pass/fail grading option without unexpected professional consequences, urging faculty to create the best possible environment for course completion, exam scheduling, and so forth—were prioritized by Deans in communicating with faculty once learning went remote, and this continued through the 2020-2021 academic year. The sheer challenge of moving instruction online revealed, in ways that might not have been obvious in regular campus life, how challenging living and learning can be for all our students, but particularly so for resource limited, or first-generation, low-income (FGLI) students. It is clear now that while we had hoped the pandemic would end more quickly, and we could return to campus sometime in academic year 2020-2021, that simply did not happen. Rather, this was an academic year in suspension. SCSEP will have to assess the evaluations in order to understand the full impact of the pandemic on our students (through data collection and evaluation over the summer and the next academic year, 2021-2022) and then suggest appropriate permanent changes.

In the context of limits imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, we pivoted instead to what we were able to accomplish within the limits of Zoom conversation and a campus (not including Penn Medicine) largely remote and online. We welcomed the new Vice Provost for University Life, Mamta Accapadi, to discuss her charges and vision for the position; we heard from several presenters about wellness, social, and racial justice initiatives put in place in the past year or two by Penn Medicine; the Paideia Program; the Sachs Program for Arts Innovation leadership regarding the Mellon Foundation's "Just Futures" Request-for-Proposals (RFPs) and the team who led Penn's Just Futures proposal. We asked for the results of campus wellness program evaluations; we heard from a Penn Psychology doctoral student, Anna Franklin, and her faculty advisor, Ayelet Meron Ruscio, associate professor of psychology, on student mental and behavioral health evaluation on college campuses; and from engineering students and their professor, James Won, lecturer in electrical and systems engineering; and we heard their views on student well-being in the midst of COVID-19, a project supported by SNF Paideia, and fruitful in its conclusions.

Committee Findings and Questions

1. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, in March 2020 the challenge for the VPUL team coordinated by its Student Intervention Services team and the offices of Student Financial Services and Penn First Plus, was to get students moved home safely and the campus depopulated as quickly as possible. If that was not an option, students were housed in selected campus buildings and were given access to available Penn Dining resources. The challenges were significant, but Penn stepped up to support the transition in every possible way. Financial and emotional needs, as well as travel arrangements, computer repairs, internet access, and food security, were key concerns. The Center for Teaching and Learning and the Online Learning Initiative support teams kicked into high gear to move all face-to-face instruction online as quickly as possible. In Academic Year 2021-2022, we hope to have the evaluations of the numbers of students who successfully managed the transition and provide support to those who were not as successful.
2. Through much of summer 2020 the administration hoped students would return to campus for fall 2020, but it became clear by August that doing so would constitute significant risk of COVID-19 infection in the absence of a viable vaccine. Most research and learning for students remained remote and online in fall 2020. In spring 2021, with the possibility of a several vaccines receiving FDA emergency use approval, first-year students were invited back to campus, and a Student Campus Compact

(https://coronavirus.upenn.edu/content/student-campus-compact) was required for signature by all students in CHAS to mitigate against the spread of the disease. CHAS developed plans to keep students socially distanced, with one student per room and small clusters of students in shared bathrooms. We will need to learn from CHAS about the successes and challenges of the spring return to campus, COVID-19 testing, adherence to the Student Campus Compact, and the ultimate rollout of the vaccination program. What was the impact of social isolation? How did first-year students fare academically versus in regular academic years?

3. In response to our questions about how best to evaluate student wellness and mental health programming on college campuses, and our own campus, we heard from Anna Franklin, a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology, and her dissertation advisor, associate professor of psychology Ayelet Meron Ruscio. Ms. Franklin's central research question is how colleges can best support student wellness. She suggests that mental versus behavioral health interventions are more successful, though the cost-benefit of the more individualized versus group programs must be considered. Ms. Franklin and Dr. Ruscio recommended that Penn implement a series of "universal" interventions based on cognitive behavioral principles after surveying the student body to ensure these interventions will benefit Penn students. We are curious about the efficacy for international students of these "universal" interventions. What are the possible cultural differences and even stigmas associated with seeking mental health support across our student community?

4. Dr. Accapadi explained that since Penn was in a "recovery" year, she was not instituting new programming for students but rather providing what students need in the current moment. "Zoom burnout" among students, a year of complicated grief and recovery for all (https://www.jedfoundation.org/covid19-tips-and-resources/), especially first-year students, who missed out on marquee events such as high school graduation and traditional welcome activities at Penn. There is also concern about the emotional impact of racial and social justice issues in the news (e.g., Black Lives Matter protests), and their impact on student well-being. She outlined eight areas of student well-being: physical, emotional, social, intellectual, environmental, financial, occupational, and spiritual. Our question pertained to how VPUL's student-focused remit might extend to communication with faculty about student needs and concerns. Could VPUL become a "bridge" of communication between students and instructors?

5. The Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF) has provided initial funding for Penn's new Paideia Program, a program concerned with student wellness in three ways: service, citizenship, and dialogue. The goal is for every Penn undergraduate to complete one Paideia-sponsored class before they graduate. We inquired about the processes in place for evaluating a rapidly growing program in Penn undergraduate education. In conversation, we received a recommendation for evaluation from SCSEP member Marilyn Schapira: "I [recommend] that the evaluation process of new initiatives could use an implementation framework. The first level of outcomes would include reach, uptake, and feasibility. Specifically, these would include awareness of and participation in the programs (reach and uptake), faculty time and effort, space, and cost (feasibility). Following these implementation outcomes, efficacy outcomes such as wellness (psychological, physical, emotional, spiritual) could be assessed. Efficacy outcomes are more expensive to assess (student surveys, use of health services, educational outcomes) and will require a longer period of time to assess (months to years following the initiatives). The efficacy outcomes would be strengthened by having baseline measures as a comparator group. There are specific frameworks for implementation research that could be used but these are some of the principles."

6. At the recommendation of the Paideia Program, we heard from James Won and two teams of undergraduates who had conducted research surveys on "Student Wellness and Burnout: The Effect of Pass/Fail (P/F) on Student Wellness" and the Paideia Wellness Project that examined the tendency for Penn students to mask emotional struggle with the "Penn face." Students examined the P/F grading option in the COVID-19 pandemic context, asking their peers why they selected or refused that option, and how Penn leadership might change the option's implementation in the future with a goal of reducing student stress over the decision. Students made recommendations to Paideia on how they might improve their presence and visibility pertaining to wellness program-

ming on campus. We are wondering about the impact of P/F options under COVID-19 as students post-COVID apply for jobs, internships, graduate degrees and so forth. Evaluation of how to support students in these processes through messaging from Penn leadership will be useful.

7. In addition to the focus on the challenges of remote learning and social and racial justice, the campus theme for the year was civic engagement (https://www.nso.upenn.edu/theme-year/theme-year-2020-year-civic-engagement-full). We addressed that theme by welcoming John McInerney, executive director of the Sachs Program for Arts Innovation, who facilitated conversation with faculty and staff around an RFP from the Mellon Foundation called "Just Futures" (https://mellon.org/initiatives/just-futures/). The faculty group constituted itself as CARE, the Coalition for Action, Reinvestment, and Education, led by Deborah Thomas (SAS) and Toorjo Ghose (SP2). Their vision was to leverage the arts for community engagement, dialogue, and social-emotional healing, primarily through teaching and community projects that are student driven. They critiqued a tendency for grants at Penn to serve University interests but less so the interests of the communities with which Penn partners. Our question is how can Penn "listen well" to our community partners as a mechanism for building meaningful relationships?

8. We finished the year by welcoming Lisa Bellini, professor of medicine and PSOM Senior Vice Dean for Academic Affairs. Dr. Bellini described Penn COBALT (https://www.pennmedicine.org/news/news-releases/2020/may/new-mental-health-platform-provides-support-for-healthcare-workers), which was implemented as a mental health and wellness resource for the Penn community in response to COVID-19. Penn COBALT curates personalized wellness content based on a brief assessment tool. Three areas for assessing individual wellness include self-care, culture, and working environment. Users are promised anonymity and the capacity to opt out of the system and that the system will not be used for research purposes. We wanted to know if the COBALT program could be replicated across Penn to benefit more students, staff, and faculty. SCSEP members have observed that several peer institutions have produced evidence suggesting that students are best helped by having a mentor to whom they can convey their concerns and problems. Further investigation of the extent to which similar initiatives could be implemented at Penn is merited.

Recommendations for 2021-2022 SCSEP

1. Collaborate with the Senate Select Committee on Planning for Post-Pandemic Penn (P4), which was established in April 2020, on matters related to pandemic recovery and their effects on student well-being, as necessary.

2. Consider any policy and procedural changes to emergency preparedness and other mechanisms implemented to support student wellness throughout the pandemic response based on the evidence on effectiveness that emerges.

3. Evaluate the efficacy and value added by shifting to remote learning. What has been the long-term impact on Penn of such a radical shift in medium of knowledge transmission? What changes will remain in place?

4. Evaluate the impact of CHAS's pandemic response and identify ways that the Faculty Senate can provide support.

5. Examine the wider set of programs that could address and support student well-being (including but not limited to CHAS, SPAI, faith-based initiatives, and community engagement), and advise the development of guidelines and strategies for effective program evaluation for all wellness programs on campus.

Members of the 2020-2021 SCSEP Committee

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Marilyn Schapira, PSOM/Medicine
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