

Minutes from SLC meeting on January 25, 2017

Attending: Ella Frazer, Poppy Fry, Eli Gandour-Rood, Megan Gessel (Chair), Jennifer Hastings, Renee Houston, Tyler Randazzo, Brad Reich, Dan Sherman.

Gessel began by first addressing issues of interest that were raised by student members in the most recent (Dec 7 2016) meeting regarding a) financial aid during study abroad and b) university support for undocumented students. Gessel stated that she plans on getting an update from the faculty committee assigned to assessing issues concerning the loss of financial aid during study abroad. Frazer added that ASUPS has recently begun to take action on this front, as well. Gessel stated that she would like to spend some time later in the semester, to address the issue of undocumented students and how the University will support them. She announced the upcoming teach-in event in the rotunda that is occurring on Jan 27th, as well as the Wednesday brown bag lunches at the Social Justice Center's Great Room.

Gessel explained that this day's meeting would entail a discussion of the flyers, the UPS3 and the issues that have arisen around this incident, with respect to student life. Gessel passed the role of discussion leader to Fry who had already led a campus discussion about the incident.

Fry began by stating all of the publically available information that has been made available by the University, local news organizations, and other public sources regarding the flyer incident. This includes the following: Flyers were posted soon after the presidential election with the names of several students and staff members with labels including racist, misogynist, and in one case racist. The President sent a letter to the campus community in response to the flyers. Three students of color were charged with violations of the integrity code. A group of faculty published a letter in response to the flyer posting, with the general intent to show support for the students involved, while also condemning the anonymous publication of names and labels. All three students were found not responsible for threatening behavior and responsible for harassment, disrespectful behavior, and a Wheelock policy regarding posting flyers. Their sanctions were an extended suspension of roughly 2.5 years. During this description, Fry noted that the faculty letter was signed by many faculty but not all. Some of the faculty who signed the letter signed agreeing with all of its contents, some agreed with part or most of its contents. Some of the faculty who did not sign the letter did so because they felt the letter was too harsh on the students and some did so because they felt the letter was not harsh enough. Fry explained that several faculty members worked over break to help with an appeal of the decisions. Some were working to repeal sanctions completely and some were working to address what they viewed as extreme sanctions, in order to reduce the sanctions and make them less punitive and more restorative.

Fry stated that many community members have expressed concern with the incident, and in these concerns, two main themes have arisen:

1. Concerns regarding the conduct process (for example, its restorative vs. punitive nature, specific procedural details, etc.)
2. Concerns about the campus climate (specifically how members of the campus community feel unheard, excluded, and/or rejected).

Regarding the first point, there are concerns that the SLC would not be a good body to review/audit the integrity code and conduct system. This is part due to many members' integral roles in the conduct process (faculty members of the SLC serve on conduct boards) and there could be potential conflicts of interests. Moreover, a review of the conduct system may not be the best way that the SLC can serve the institution. Fry noted that the idea of having an outside/independent group or person look at the code and conduct procedures had been brought up, with the goal of objectively assessing the conduct process from the prospective of higher education, more broadly. Hastings noted that if an outside group or individual is brought in to assess current conduct and codes/policies, that new policies and procedures that are currently being drafted would benefit from this same review before being put into place.

Gessel explained that because of this, the SLC's time (and the day's discussion) would likely be better spent focused on what the committee might be able to do in terms of the campus community and campus climate. Specific concerns about the conduct process (and questions) are welcome, but are likely best directed to either the chair of the faculty or the Dean of Student's office. This is especially the case until the Senate decides what actions it wants to take, in regards to the conduct process.

Fry then invited attendees to offer concerns or questions they had regarding these events and issues. A lively discussion ensued and is summarized below and organized by topic, for clarity:

Student perspective: Students on the committee shared their experiences and perspectives related to both the flyer incident and the conduct process in general. This includes the perspectives of their peers on campus.

- i. The students explained that although the flyers were taken down right away, a picture of the flyers was immediately and widely distributed via social media among students. As far as they knew, most upperclass students had seen the picture of the flyer and its contents, but hadn't seen the actual flyer.
- ii. Once the names of the students charged were announced (via the media) and the sanctions were made public (via the media and social media), students felt especially shocked. Many students know and respect the students who were charged, based on previous interactions and know them as campus leaders, which also affected perceptions of the incident.
- iii. Overall, there is a sense that the university did not seem to respond quickly and publically (aside from the letter from the president) in a way that might have initiated a constructive conversation/action. The faculty letter itself was seen as both too late (coming a month after the event) and also too academic in its tone.
- iv. Most students understand the need for a conduct process and why it exists. However, students question whether or not it really is restorative. A major issue for students are cases in which those found responsible for actions that harm others are kept on campus or allowed to return to campus after a brief separation. This creates a certain amount of distrust for the process.

- v. Additionally, students see different individuals on campus receiving different or disproportionate sanctions. Students compared the UPS3 sanctions to sanctions against other students and the outcomes of incidents involving faculty and staff.

Information flow

A common theme of the discussion was frustration with information flow between campus communities:

- i. Faculty expressed concern at the lack of information they had regarding the incident and the vagueness with which it was described. For example, many faculty did not know the contents of the flyers, while others did. While faculty understand that there are privacy issues, even basic information about the event and flyers (e.g. that the flyers named and labeled specific students and staff with labels including racist, misogynist, and rapist) was initially omitted. Rather, the university response was vague and the rest of the information trickled down through informal conversations among faculty members and/or social media (which many faculty are not part of). It was pointed out that those who had seen the flyer had been shown the flyer by students and that the majority of faculty had not seen the flyer.
- ii. Questions about the university's policy for distributing information (e.g. what information is released, with what detail) were raised. There was a consensus that official statements about the incident seemed to have not enough information and/or that the information was not pertinent or timely, and did not seem to change the conversation surrounding the incident. Members noted that this has been true of past institutional letters in response to campus events of bias/hate/harassment.
- iii. There was concern about the role of social media and of email list-serves in propagating misleading information and gossip. The members recognized that much of the issues surrounding the use of social media and devices is out of the university's control.
- iv. For faculty, there was concern about the use of the faculty listserv, giving many faculty the impression that select faculty (namely those that were most active on the listserv) were "in the know" and had special information, while others were left out. This perception is most likely false, but it did foster an environment of confusion, misinformation, and frustration among faculty members regarding this issue.
- v. One member expressed concern that faculty were re-posting narratives from social media with, and in sometimes it appeared without, the permission of the original student writers. Others shared this concern, as well.
- vi. One member pointed out that the faculty have much more information regarding this case than they normally would, due to the high level of publicity that it has received and, specifically because the students involved have disclosed details via the press and social media. This again emphasizes that most of the information that faculty receive about this incident and other incidents associated with conduct processes are coming entirely from students and the student perspective.

- vii. “Another member pointed the SLC should remember to focus on the information flow throughout the entire campus community of faculty, students and staff, as different groups on campus have different means of communicating amongst themselves (ranging from institutionally provided listserves for faculty, to unofficially official social media groups for students, with no mechanism for staff).”
- viii. One member brought up the fact that the University should better identify and consider all of the types of audiences who might be receiving information (e.g. students, staff, faculty, alumni, parents, the greater Tacoma community) and how the information flows between these groups.
- ix. Although the end of the year BHERT report is available, members expressed interest in receiving more regular reports at SLC meetings about incidents on campus, both incidents in progress and their outcomes. Of course, privacy issues would need to be taken into account.

Overall, there was a consensus that the ways that the University decides to communicate about an event are unclear. Are there policies? Are these decisions made by executive discretion? There seems to be dissatisfaction across all types of members of the community (students, staff, and faculty) with what information is shared, how it is shared, and when it is shared. While the committee understands issues surrounding privacy, most members felt that the communication with/between members of the campus community could be improved (again in terms of the content of the information, how it was shared and when it was shared). These issues arise again in discussion about the campus climate and university response (see below).

Campus climate:

The committee also discussed the role of the campus climate that led to the event and how this campus climate affects various groups on campus.

- i. Members acknowledged that despite university efforts, several groups of students do not feel that their voices are being heard by the university. Some members expressed a wish to better understand exactly what students mean by “not feeling heard”. It seems that the University creates forums for students to speak, but clearly this is not enough. What mechanism can we create to help?
- ii. A member pointed out that the SLC might want to consult generational literature to better understand the perspectives of the generation of students who are currently on campus. Much of it shows that this generation expects to be heard and also see a quick and visible change.
- iii. One member pointed out that although the university is making more recent efforts to support students of color, that there is a history on campus of these voices being left out and this history still has an effect on the campus climate.
- iv. Another member pointed out that the targets of the flyers also have legitimacy and need to be heard. The committee agreed that labels are not constructive. Instead these labels (especially when given anonymously and without evidence) are divisive and leave no room for discussion or dialog between groups.

- v. There was concern from some faculty members about the perception of faculty open letters and how these letters may affect students and their perception of the role of the faculty in the university. Student may not understand the nuances of open faculty letters (e.g. their significance, who is and is not a signatory, who authors them, who supports them and why, etc.). Moreover, students may not understand the difference between “the faculty” and “the administration”, the role of faculty in the conduct process, and the influence (or in some cases, lack of influence) that the faculty might have.

Overall, the committee wonders what structures could exist within the University to better empower students and make them feel heard. Importantly, this includes ways to support *all* voices, without alienating or stigmatizing counter viewpoints. Several members brought up the fact that issues related to information flow and institutional response may contribute to the perception that voices aren’t being heard. Communication of outcomes and progress could be more frequent, clearer, and more direct, while still maintaining required privacy.

Institutional response

A third (and related) theme was the dissatisfaction with the response in the immediate aftermath of the flyers. Some members brought up the fact that, had the response been better and faster, a more constructive dialog may have been possible.

The SLC discussed that it may be worthwhile to evaluate campus resources and procedures for in-the-moment response to events of discriminatory and non-discriminatory harassment. For example, looking at how incidents of harassment (discriminatory and not) are reported and responded to, the possibility of better advocacy and a supportive response for those affected/harmed (the inclusion of an ombudsperson was brought up), and providing better and more accessible resources for students who experience harm, in addition to possible structural components. The idea of a resource at a central location, like the library was brought up.

Conclusions

The committee members agreed that while the incident with the flyers represented a public and divisive event, the concerns that arise from this individual incident are not specific to this incident. One member pointed out that the SLC should consider the policies and procedures that exist on campus, rather than becoming too focused on this particular incident. The committee members agreed that the next steps would be to take the broader themes/concerns that were brought up in this day’s meeting and think about actions that the SLC could take to address them (including actions that might be taken by others or recommended to the senate).

Members decided to meet again in two weeks on February 8th. The minutes from the last meeting were approved by the committee at the end of the meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 9:34.

Respectfully submitted by Megan Gessel