Minutes of January 24, 2014
Approved 2014

Student Relations Advisory Committee

Minutes of Friday, January 24, 2014
11:30 to 1:30 PM
Bates Room, Michigan Union, University of Michigan

Members Present: David Potter (Chair), Associate Vice President Simone Himbeault Taylor, Jean Krisch, Executive Associate Director Donna Hayward, Dr. Desmond Patton, Dr. Charles Koopman, Laurel Ruza, Aparajita Bijipurkar, Kyle Lady, Lisa Low

Absent: Ed Rothman, Sallye Ramsey, Avery Demond, Vice President Royster Harper, Dr. Nallasivam Palanisamy, Alex Rubin

Guests: Dr. Matt Kaplan (CRLT), Dr. Crisca Bierwert (CRLT)

Materials Distributed:
Agenda
November Meeting Minutes

Meeting commenced at 11:51 AM.

Chair Potter welcomed everyone to the SRAC meeting.

Chair Potter outlined that the purpose of the meeting was to continue the conversation from last meeting. He asked Dr. Matt Kaplan and Dr. Crisca Biewert from CRLT because some of the issues discussed were very connected with classroom events. He wanted to discuss the issue of a lack of coordination between teaching units and students outside the classroom. He asked if there was a way to increase collaboration efficiency in building a sense of community. He also wanted to discuss the topic of how many days a week people are in class.

Chair Potter suggested that we adjust the agenda to approve the minutes first before beginning the meeting topics. 2 changes were needed to be made to the minutes from the October Meeting. Executive Associate Director Donna Hayward moved to approve the minutes contingent on the changes. Multiple members of the committee seconded this motion. The minutes were approved contingent to the changes.

Chair Potter introduced Dr. Matt Kaplan and Dr. Crisca Bierwert and asked them to open the meeting topics. Dr. Matt Kaplan began by stating how this is an important topic on campus and is aware of the conversations through BBUM and the Provosts message. He discussed how CRLT is the teaching center on campus where all students can learn about multi-cultural teaching issues and diversity. They are happy to be a part of the conversation about creating an inclusive and welcoming space. Dr. Kaplan explained that he could give more information about the services provided at CRLT, but he wanted to hear from the committee what would be most
useful. Dr. Crisca Bierwert wanted to give the committee a better understanding of the depth of the involvement of CRLT. They chair a task force that runs and facilitates GSI training. Each GSI completes 20 hours of training before entering the classroom. CRLT trains 500 GSI’s and consults with departments to determine their own training. Dr. Bierwert indicated that teaching inclusively is a part of the training, but that it doesn’t mean that micro-aggressions are included in every training. The training does include strategies for building rapport across differences, active learning and inclusion practices. The overarching program is meant to help connect students with students. CRLT also offers workshops on diversity related topics, 6 week trainings on multi-cultural facilitation, STEM inclusion issues. New faculty are also invited for orientation at CRLT. New LSA tenure faculty are required to enroll in the teaching academy through CRLT. Dr. Bierwert went on to explain how CRLT works with IGR to address issues that are occurring in the classroom. They have not done a systematic study but have done surveys to hear student voices on their experiences. They are also working with student affairs to make sure the student voice has more resonance. The faculty could know more about what is occurring in student affairs. Dr. Bierwert is glad that SRAC exists to bridge the gap between the two groups. She agrees that more education on micro-aggressions, their definition, the widespread phenomenon and what it means to be an ally.

Dr. Matt Kaplan echoed Dr. Bierwert’s statements and highlighted some of the resources offered by CRLT. They supervise a theater troupe that provides education around diversity issues. The theater skits highlight some problematic issues that can arise in and out of the classroom and allow for an open dialogue to occur afterwards. CRLT also offers a variety of resources on their website that cover multiculturalism and diversity. They also have a blog that responds to issues that people write in and point them to the resources available to them. He is interested in ways to collaborate to bring resources to their work.

Chair Potter thanked Dr. Kaplan and Dr. Bierwert for their thoughtful information. He described the situation the committee heard about one student being asked to speak for an entire category of people. He asked how this can happen in the classroom when there is training. Chair Potter explained how this type of experience only has to happen once for it to affect the classroom for the entire semester. He asked if GSI’s understand how chilling one mistake can be for the rest of the term.

Dr. Matt Kaplan replied that there is a balance. He agreed that it is true on one hand there is anxiety for young GSIs. CRLT wants to make them aware but not so frightened that they won’t engage for fear of making mistakes. While they can emphasize the importance of some of these teachable moments, they do walk a fine line before fear paralyzes them. Transparency is important to rescue a situation.

Dr. Crisca Bierwert emphasizes that through the avalanche of information they receive, CRLT reminds them to focus on being themselves. She said that there is going to be a lot of mistakes but the conversation is about the intention and normalizing the conversation so it isn’t about breaking the rules. She suggested that it would be beneficial for the novice instructor to have someone to tell when they make a mistake and discuss the issues, as this would make it easier to discuss these issues.
Jean Kirsch asked if it would be possible to put the theater sketches online as the older faculty do not get a chance to see them. Dr. Matt Kaplan answered saying that they have thought about this, but the power of the sketches come from the conversations that follow. He said that normalizing the conversation is where the power comes from. He asked what some of the other venues for these conversations to occur among faculty. Dr. Crisca Bierwert worked with four departments to create case studies and vignettes to catalyze these conversations.

Associate Vice President Simone Himbeault Taylor highlighted how the stories the committee heard reflected a power differential in the classroom. She said there is a reluctance or fear of cost to raise the concern with the person who controls their grade or letter of recommendation. These conversations discussed by CRLT are not going to seasoned faculty who might need them.

Laurel commented that she took away a great deal from the last meeting. She suggested that maybe the GSI or Professor recognizing to the class if they did something wrong. People are people and they make mistakes. If the GSI or Professor acknowledge this mistake on an individual or class level, it opens the door for a conversation and does not create an uncomfortable space.

Dr. Matt Kaplan liked this suggestion because this turns problematic moments into learning experiences.

Lisa Low commented that it understandable that certain conversations are harder than others. She gave an example of how in her class they conduct week by week debriefs to prepare for harder conversations. She uses her space as a professor to open these conversations. She really utilizes the feedback from her students at the end of term to recognize any problem areas.

Dr. Matt Kaplan noted that a blog post highlighting these strategies to recover from issues and to normalize these conversations. He commented that testimonials are very powerful and would help to jumpstart the conversation.

Dr. Crisca Bierwert echoed this idea and suggested trying to find a way to put these resources in another place. This idea came from the fact that different departments have different climates, but the idea of give and take can be used across disciplines. Finding a way to translate the information across disciplines and finding out what does and doesn’t work can also be helpful.

Aparajita Bijipurkar gave an example of her experience as an international student beginning at Princeton in 2009. She highlighted micro-aggressions she has experienced throughout her time there, but how she just attributed it to ignorance. People do not necessarily know other people’s backgrounds and experiences. She agrees that it is important to come up with strategies and share these with faculty, but that it is also important for students to understand that not every micro-aggression is intentional and that they don’t all have to be discussed. She expounded on this statement by highlighting that many things can be perceived as micro-aggressions and while it is important to have these conversations not everything needs so much attention.

Kyle Lady commented that he hasn’t noticed these issues as much in the classroom, but he attributed this to not being in the classroom. He is glad to see resources coming out of CRLT. He
reflected on his experience in GSI training in 2009 and commented that there was not a lot of community building training but very nuts and bolts. He is glad to see that there are additional resources and especially online resources. He believes that offering more online resources would be even more helpful because of the complexity of everyone’s schedules. He is excited to see more thought and focus on these issues.

Dr. Crisca Bierwert wanted to thank Aparajita for her perspective and acknowledge her point. There are students on campus who do not want their education to be completely multi-cultural. Aparajita wanted to clarify that she did not want to mean that education should not be multi-cultural but that there will be no end if we fight every micro-aggression. Dr. Crisca Bierwert commented that there can be some resistance to this because students are at all ends of the spectrum. Aparajita responded to this by saying she has interacted with many people. She understands that many people could feel alienated when professors make mistakes, but she has developed a thick skin.

Laurel commented that students need to feel like they have a place to go if they feel alienated or marginalized without the power dynamic. She expounded on this by saying other resources need to be available because it can become dangerous if a student constantly feels marginalized.

Chair Potter framed a few questions around the student experience if these issues are occurring. What additional support networks do we have in place for students who feel disempowered? What places do we have for students to get together to discuss these issues? How easy is it to give feedback before the designated time for feedback? He commented on how people react in different ways to different things, so where can they go to talk?

Lisa Low commented that when micro-aggressions accumulate it can impact a student’s ability to learn. She questions how you allow a space for debrief after a difficult conversation without threatening the power structure? Where is the space for a debrief?

Dr. Matt Kaplan asked if an academic advisor plays that role at all. Laurel responded no. When she was in LSA, she would not go to her academic advisor. Jean Kirsch also commented, stating she is an academic advisor, and it has only happened once in her career. Dr. Crisca Bierwert asked Laurel or the other students their thoughts on a safe space and who it would be having these conversations?

Aparajita gave an example from her undergraduate experience where there were Peer Advisors or mentors that were other undergraduate students. Her school also had residential advisors who were undergraduate students. These students were the go to people for any issues. The residential college also had an office with professional staff completely dedicated to the student’s needs in any aspect of their life on campus. She wasn’t sure if this is possible at UM since the school is much bigger than where she completed her undergraduate work.

Laurel commented that this idea sounds great but again was not sure of the feasibility. She explained how in the school of public policy she has a senior mentor as a junior. She can go to her mentor for anything. She commented that this is a difficult question because she is not sure who she would go to or where she would go for these conversations. Talking with her friends can
be dangerous because they can get you riled up, so definitely talking to a professional would be better.

Kyle commented that the engineering honors societies have both undergraduate and graduate student members. Students are unlikely to go to faculty with issues like this, but more likely to go to peers or older peers that they might know from their organizations. He has been in this role where he has served as a sounding board for other people. He commented that there might be an opportunity to educate the leadership in student organizations about the resources available since students go to them. He knows that the Office of Student Affairs in Engineering has done this with officers of the student organizations in engineering, helping them facilitate these informal peer to peer interactions.

Dr. Crisca Bierwert responded by stating that students can be in different spheres of influences and the challenge is to percolate these messages into all the spheres so everyone gets the support.

Dr. Charles Koopman commented that advisors are hit or miss, they can sometimes be hard to see and they might not always have the time. He does not believe we should leave units alone. He suggested maybe providing a system of rewards for advisors that encourages productivity. He also believes that this has to come from the top down in order for it to be a possibility. He also commented that micro-aggressions are in the eye of the beholder. He could be offended by something and 199 other people may not be. He further expounded on this by stating that the comment may not have been intentionally hurtful, but someone could take it as a micro-aggression because of previous bad experiences.

Chair Potter said this is a continuing conversation and obviously an area where there is continued work needed to create a more developed network for students to talk through issues they have. It is apparent that students do not feel they have a space to talk or be heard. He liked the idea of student organization leaders receiving more training, as voluntary groups are where like-minded people meet. This can be built into how they provide support for their members. He commented that it would be important to combine experiences since people respond differently to situations and you can't homogenize humanity. He asked what role student organizations play in helping students? He further expanded this to ask what are the most important relationships that occur in the first few months on campus and are there ways to strengthen across the first year experience the inclusion of resources to make it easier for students? He also commented how student gathering spaces at UM are not the same as other places, so he asked if we provide these spaces to the students? On a campus where students are spread out, do we need to think about other kinds of spaces?

Associate Vice President of Student Affairs Simone Himbeault Taylor commented that these are themes that SRAC has had a voice in advancing student interest in the past. She continued by saying that it might take structural change to make cultural change. It is very important for students to have clearer points of access to support, resources and structure. She commented that when issues arise, students want a place to unpack outside of the classroom and this needs a structure in place. She believes that this is the kind of thing that SRAC is good at doing and wants SRAC to have a voice in this matter.
Dr. Charles Koopman thinks that it would be good to father information on how peer institutions have handled this issue of space. Chair David Potter agreed that it is useful to gather data to see if there are other ideas for structural change and cultural change i.e. dialogue.

Dr. Crisca Bierwert asked how CRLT can follow up on this meeting. They are already working to promote active learning and groups work where the instructor is a positive facilitator for learning outcomes. She asked if there was a space in the first year experience for CRLT to work or what are other ways for growth and networking.

Chair David Potter answered that this relationship can be potentially very useful because every place of support is important to promote more positive student interactions. Having these connections allows the community to see that there are solutions or conversations instead of just avoiding the problem.

Executive Associate Director Donna Hayward commented that many of the examples discussed were bottom up approaches to helping students, but that we only have vaguely discussed the top down approach to this issue. She asked if there was a way to inspire deans and chairs in the same way? Would it be possible for them to hear the same stories that the committee heard last meeting to inspire them to make change.

Dr. Matt Kaplan said this was a good suggestion and something to strategize and consider in the future. How do we get these conversations to the change makers?

Dr. Charles Koopman emphasized that we should work with central expectations, ABG needs to hear the student experiences because it takes the willingness of the top to create change.

Chair David Potter thanked everyone for the in depth conversation on this topic, but wanted to address one more topic for preliminary discussion. He discussed the days and time of classes, specifically Friday classes. Are there things that can be recommended for the class offerings? Is it a problem that we are a 4 day a week campus? Are there cultural impacts to not having classes on Fridays? Have other universities shifted class days? What is the trend and the effect on student life?

Dr. Matt Kaplan answered that this is not something he has ever looked into and does not know campus cultures elsewhere. He offered to put out a message to other institutions to see.

Dr. Crisca Bierwert agreed that she was not sure, but the closest thing she could relate to this was shifting first year seminars from 1 class for 3 hours to multiple days. She commented that it is a challenge to think about Fridays.

Chair David Potter replied that any information would be helpful. This is a committee that can give advice and recommendations going forward so it is best to have support.

Lisa Low commented that this issue could affect students from a distance because it allows students to go home on the weekend. It could also impact senior students who are in the interview process who have to miss classes on Fridays or get special permission.
Chair David Potter commented that this is a great point. Many law schools do not have classes on Fridays for 3Ls for this point exactly.

Dr. Charles Koopman commented that maybe this should be used when scheduling senior level courses. He gave the example of Northwestern where they offer introductory level courses on MWF and do not offer upper level courses on Fridays. It is a culture that has developed on that campus. Again, it takes the courage at the top to change the culture of the university.

Laurel commented that student life would be increased without Friday classes. A lot of student organizations meet on Fridays so this could allow more student involvement.

Chair David Potter thanked everyone for coming to the meeting and contributing to the conversation. At this point, he moved the meeting into Executive Session.

The faculty committee moved to adjourn the meeting.

**Adjournment:** Meeting adjourned at 1:20 PM.

Submitted by:
Allie DeFries, SACUA Student Support