GSA Facilities and Healthcare Committee Meeting 16th October, 2013

Present: Michelle Kriner, Tim Altenhof, Consuelo Amat Matus, Sarah Bowman, Angharad Davis, Elizabeth Lang, Michael Parker.

Apologies: Chad Marion, Samuel Southgate

Meeting opened 6:27

1. **Topics reviewed for presentation at General Assembly**
	1. Department space – Elizabeth Lang
		1. EL reports
			1. It is valuable for students to have a ‘home base’ in addition to general grad student space that is currently available (e.g. the McDougal Centre)
			2. Priorities for requesting/campaigning for grad student space established according to the results of the GSA survey from Spring 2013. Highest priority given to departments which have access to neither grad lounge space nor study/lab space; next priority is to establish which departments would find additional space the most valuable
			3. This information is to be provided to Dean Pollard (who worked with GSA representatives in order to find department space for American Studies and History departments); EL will work with Dean Pollard on securing this for further departments
			4. In addition, EL is investigating the possibility of making 24/7 study space available to students, perhaps in the McDougal Centre or Bass Library, and ultimately in the proposed new student centre.
		2. Feedback from the floor
			1. SB provided additional information on the History of Science/History of Medicine department: they have their own tiny lounge in the med school, but also have access to the history lounge (although it is unclear how many students are aware of the latter)
			2. MP enquired whether said tiny lounge could be repurposed as study space; SB doubted that the space would permit this. EL noted that many humanities departments have lounges because they lack room for office space.
	2. Tax advice – Michelle Kriner
		1. MK reports
			1. Filing taxes is complicated for anyone, and further complicated for students by the fact that they represent so many different categories. To what extent, and how best, can the GSA help to provide tax advice for students?
			2. Two primary ideas:
				1. ‘Ask A C.P.A’ event (modelled after Ask A Lawyer). Would require a volunteer C.P.A. This event would probably occur once or twice early in the Spring Semester, and would encompass a general overview as well as time for questions.
				2. Connect with the Yale Tax Office to enquire about an institutional subscription to tax preparation software which could then be made available to students, and/or about the possibility of securing a group discount to local tax accountants
			3. In addition to these, request the updating and clarification of material presented on the Tax Office’s website.
		2. Feedback from the floor
			1. MK: Is there a way to encourage the distribution of information among students? i.e. to facilitate students sharing information on tax breaks, specific tax situations with which they are familiar, so that information can be disseminated without potentially rendering the GSA liable.
				1. TA: Existing social media platforms might provide an avenue for this, e.g. the GSA facebook site
				2. MP: People are generally wary of discussing their own tax situations in public; for this reason, an informational website might be preferable to social media
	3. Housing – Sarah Bowman
		1. SB Reports
			1. There are three primary issues currently under discussion with regard to housing concerns: the necessity of improving the university graduate housing website; the formation of a university-wide housing committee; and the securing of a student voice in discussions regarding the future renovation of HGS.
			2. An environmental scan shows that while a number of other universities offer significantly less information than Yale regarding off-campus housing, others offer significantly more. For instance, Penn, Stanford, Cornell, and MIT offer more comprehensive information on housing locations in proximity to the university; Penn also offers a landlord survey
			3. If the Housing Office is not receptive to suggestions for improvements to their website, the GSA could host its own website on the proposed Grad Station
			4. Nick Torsiello is now sitting on the HGS renovation committee, ensuring the presence of a student voice
		2. Feedback from the floor
			1. MP reminded the meeting about the ‘heat map’ illustration of residential areas favoured by graduate student shown at the last general assembly, which seemed to the committee to be a useful way of disseminating some information.
			2. SB noted that the MIT website offers lists of the advantages and disadvantages associated with residing in various neighbourhoods, and that Stanford has something similar.
				1. MP noted that some of this type of information is available in The Compass, but lacks detail; MK noted that in addition to this, it is not distributed to students before they arrive on campus.
			3. SB noted that Penn also runs webinars on housing, and sponsors a rental housing fair. SB suggested that a housing webinar might be useful for Yale students before they arrive on campus.
	4. Mental health – Paul Baranay
		1. PB being absent in order to prepare for presenting this report to the general assembly, this item was skipped.
2. **Project updates**
	1. Housing
		1. Updates on the housing project already having been given by SB, this item was skipped.
	2. Mental Health
		1. MK noted the recent publication of the Yale College Council’s report on mental health, and its intersection with many of the ideas and issues raised in the GSA/GPSS report on the same topic
		2. AD reports
			1. Proposed Mental Health Awareness Campaign
				1. AD has established contact with the undergraduate organisation Mind Matters, and has found them very receptive to the idea of a conversation and potential collaboration on a university awareness campaign
				2. PB reports that there has been some contact between the GSA and the authors of the YCC mental health report, although conversation was limited. Recently, contact has been re-established.

NB PB reported in the General Assembly meeting on 16th October that a meeting between the GSA and YCC had been scheduled, and general feedback and suggestions was solicited from the GSA representatives.

* + - * 1. AD asked for volunteers who would like to be part of forthcoming discussions with other groups, and for people to think of suggestions that could be raised
			1. Response to the YCC report on mental health
				1. The YCC mental health report addresses similar issues to those written about in the GSA/GPSS report, but often from a more ‘humanistic’ perspective. It is less concerned with the status of mental health care available at Yale comparative to other universities, and more concerned with the student experience, meaning that the two reports complement each other quite nicely.
				2. The YCC report has a greater focus on the holistic treatment of mental health issues: it does consider the role played by Yale Health - Mental Health and Counselling and offers suggestions for possible improvements (most of which are in sympathy with those recommended in the GSA/GPSS report), but also focuses on campus culture and peer resources to a greater extent than the GSA/GPSS report
				3. Observations about student organisations and peer-to-peer relationships are arguably less relevant to grad students than to undergrads. However, the YCC’s recommendation that a positive mental health culture be addressed at Yale from a top-down perspective is well made
				4. The YCC report identifies Freshman Orientation as a valuable site for reflection and the establishment of a healthy foundation for a university career; some parallels might be drawn to Graduate Orientation. AD queries whether mental health issues (including stress management, work/life balance etc) are adequately addressed in GSAS student orientation
				5. The YCC report notes that Yale puts a lot of highly driven people in a high-pressure environment, and seems to attribute many of the subsequent mental health problems to this combination. AD notes that it is important to continue framing mental health as a health issue, and not one of personal responsibility, especially since the decade from the late teens to the late 20s (when most students, including graduate students, are at university) is the age at which a number of serious mental illnesses most commonly present themselves. Addressing this as a purely health-related issue may help to reduce some of the stigma associated with mental illness or disturbance and persuade people to seek medical help when they need it.
				6. The YCC report notes the expectation that students place on themselves not only to be successful, but to make success look easy; to this end many conceal their struggles and do not seek help at the appropriate time. AD notes that this may be a particular problem for graduate students, as for many there are issues of professional reputation at stake (e.g. their faculty will someday become their colleagues, leading to a higher premium being placed on concealing difficulties)
				7. According to the YCC’s student survey, most undergraduates who sought help from their college dean or master had a very positive experience. AD noted that to some extent, the individual graduate department stands in lieu of the college for graduate students. However, while college deans and masters have student welfare as an explicit part of their responsibilities, it is not clear whether the DGS has similar responsibilities. Rather, individuals serving in that role appear to have a lot of discretion in shaping the position. Because of this, there is a real gap in the graduate student experience, and it can be difficult for a student to know who to turn to when experiencing problems.
				8. The YCC report discusses the various peer resources at Yale at some length (in fact, there are so many options that the report notes many students are unsure where to go for which problem!). Graduate students lack many of the peer resources that the undergraduates have access to; such resources as exist are often organised on a department-by-department basis and do not have the institutional structure that supports undergraduate peer counselling (e.g. leaders of undergraduate student organisations undergo training, as do freshmen counsellors, peer counsellors etc; student mentors within individual graduate programs – where they exist at all – receive no training)
				9. Due to time constraints, the remainder of the report will be forwarded in written form to the committee.
		1. Feedback from the floor
			1. EL pointed out that, in addition to contacting various other organisations who might be interested in collaborating on a mental health awareness campaign, it is also vital to bring the GSA Publicity Committee on board
			2. MP recalled that at his undergraduate institution, a health and wellness bulletin was posted on the inside of all the toilet stalls, incorporating a variety of engaging materials and useful information (such as relevant contact details, student testimonials, tips for healthy living, mythbusting etc.). These were rotated and refreshed regularly.
				1. SB noted that something like this is provided in the McDougal Centre emails, but it’s rather buried
				2. General agreement that an advantage to ‘bathroom advertising’ is the captive market!
			3. General agreement that the role of DGS is largely defined by the person inhabiting it – i.e. that while one DGS sees the general welfare of students as part of their job, another will lean more to the purely administrative side of the position.
				1. CAM noted that the DGS is already a fairly weighty role, especially in large departments, and that it might be difficult to add an additional item to their set of responsibilities
				2. SB queried whether there is a Graduate Dean for Mental Health, or some other figure responsible for graduate wellbeing; the committee did not know the answer to this.
	1. Tax advice
		1. Due to time constraints, this item was skipped.
1. **Concerns/ideas from the floor**
	1. Due to time constraints, this item was skipped.

Meeting adjourned 6:55pm