GSA Facilities and Healthcare Committee Meeting 2nd October, 2013

Present: Michelle Kriner, Kristin Graves, Sarah Bowman, Elizabeth Lang, Chad Marion, Tim Altenhof, Wendy Xiao, Michael Parker, Paul Baranay, Angharad Davis.   
  
Apologies: Samuel Southgate

Meeting opened 8:10

Next meeting to be held before the General Assembly Meeting: 6:30pm, Wednesday, 16th October (due to GPSCY event to welcome new GSA delegates).

1. Project Updates
   1. Departmental Student Space
      * + EL obtained data from PB on currently available departmental student space, broken down by department. Unfortunately the data was somewhat confused (e.g. some departments indicated that they both did and didn’t have access to space). EL’s aim is to compile a list of departments with and without space and to submit this to Dean Pollard; a more definitive list might be created by inviting comment from department representatives.
          - MP suggested that this might be done in GSA rep-led department meetings, as long as there was a timeline in place for responses; SB commented that some meetings would otherwise be held late in the semester; KG noted that asking for responses directly from representatives at a general assembly might be easier.
          - WX enquired about the level of demand for student space; EL noted that it varies, but that in her department (Near Eastern Languages & Civilizations) demand is high
        + MP asked if it were possible, based on the answers from the whole of the GSA, to dig deeper into what kinds of departments are requesting further study space, and what kinds of study spaces are available – e.g. are there existing study spaces that aren’t sufficiently well known about or used?
          - KG notes that some study space is specialised – eg exchange students in her department have their own space (Examples like this may serve to explain some of the confused answers given to the GSA survey)
          - PB suggests that in some cases making study space available by building (e.g. in the med school), rather than by individual departments, might be useful
        + EL notes that, according to Lauren Tilton, Dean Pollard was very receptive to the idea of increased student space, which seems promising.
          - PB will filter the extant student space survey according to how much additional space was wanted and forward to EL so that those most in need will be prioritised in recommendations/requests to Dean Pollard
        + EL will write up a questionnaire and distribute to the committee for comment, with a view to emailing the completed form to the GSA before the next general assembly.
   2. Housing
      1. WX appointed to university wide housing committee; huzzah!
      2. Westville
         * MK: There is a GPSS representative who is very interested in picking up this issue; if there is someone from the GSA who would like to be involved, dialogue would be great. Expressions of interest to MK.
      3. Graduate Housing Office website
         * MK proposed possibly setting up a meeting with the housing office to discuss potential improvements to the Graduate Housing Office website (<http://gradhousing.yale.edu/>)
           + Some potentially useful sections are outdated and appear to be little used, e.g. the landlord review page.
           + AD noted that pricing information for university-owned apartment buildings is not always clear
           + AD noted that the off-campus search engine has limited filters (so that, for instance, you can’t specify whether you are looking to rent a single room or a whole apartment)
           + MK noted that classified advertisements run through the housing office are bought, rather than simply submitted
           + WX had found in the past that the housing office were not very helpful when she was experiencing housing difficulties; the office doesn’t give advice, but simply directs students with concerns to the GSA.
           + SB enquired whether some level of grad student participation would be possible on the website? Writing reviews, encouraging students to rate their landlord etc. MP suggested that it be made mandatory for landlords listing housing through the website to create a landlord profile, to which students could attach ratings and comments.
         * SB will perform an environmental scan to see what other universities are doing in this area and report back. (This is useful both for information gathering and can also be a helpful tool in persuading the administration about recommended changes.)
      4. Housing Fair
         * WX noted that housing is especially problematic in the area near the med school; students need to be located nearby in order to get to and from home at unusual hours, and a number of landlords with larger holdings down that way are known not to be very good.
           + A housing fair would not only create an information distribution funnel, but would also create competition as landlords would have to be upfront about their requirements, and direct comparison would be available.
           + WX also proposes having someone who specialises in tenant law available to answer questions at this event; WX will be in touch with such a person and report further.
   3. Tax advice
      * + MK notes that the tax information website (<http://tax.yale.edu/grad-professional-postdoc-tax-guide>) appears to have been updated, making a large amount of useful information available
          - The degree to which this information was easily accessible and comprehensible to the average visitor was a matter of some dispute among various committee members
          - AD suggested that a table of links or an overview of material on the opening page would be useful for navigational purposes.
          - SB noted that efforts should continue to be made to use plain language in these kind of websites, as large amounts of highly technical information can swamp non-specialists
          - KG suggested that a keyword search could be incorporated into the website to allow visitors to pinpoint information on specific topics
        + MK: Given the improvements that have been made to the website, should we still seek to organise a tax advice session?
          - Would it be better to offer one-on-one consultations with CPAs rather than general informational sessions?
          - WX noted that some general information for graduate students would be useful (e.g. your stipend counts as this kind of income, you can claim for these student expenses, the cost of your health insurance is deducted from your pre-tax income etc), but that it might be possible to distribute this as an informational PDF rather than having a public session.
          - CM noted that while the tax website gives you information about taxes, it doesn’t provide information about the kind of tax breaks that students might be entitled to
        + SB noted that there appear to be two options: 1. To suggest ways that the taxation office might develop their website, to turn it into more of a guide, or 2. To develop a separate GSA guide in addition to the tax website.
          - MK noted that Yale might prefer the latter for legal reasons, a question that might be raised with a CPA?
          - CM asked if it would be possible to contract with local CPAs in return for a student/group discount? That way, students could receive assistance/advice with their tax returns without the GSA having responsibility for the outcome.
          - MP suggested that GSA members representative of various categories (e.g. filing single, married, international…) could file their taxes with professional assistance (preferably at a group discounted rate, as financial assistance from the GSA would be unlikely) and then write a report; these could then be included in The Compass.
          - TA pointed out that some of these measures of assistance are already available for international students through the OISS, and ideally would be made available to all students. (EL and AD commented that in their experience, the personal advice on taxes available through the OISS was limited)
          - EL Queried the possibility of acquiring an institutional subscribtion to Turbotax, which could then be provided to students at no charge (although the cost is already minimal to individuals) in the same way that Glacier is provided to international students
          - EL reports, however, that some international students in her department have lost access to Glacier after their 5th year. A matter for further consideration/enquiry?
   4. Gym
      * + No further report
2. Concerns/ideas from the floor
   1. Mental Health Awareness
      * + AD noted her concern – which was echoed in the report prepared by the Mental Health ad hoc committee last year – about the campus culture of mental health, and in particular the lack of adequate information among graduate students and the circulation of misinformation among undergraduate students.
        + AD proposed a joint campaign with the undergraduate mental health awareness group Mind Matters, to raise awareness of programs that are available at Yale and to counter common myths about mental health issues at Yale.
        + PB asked about Mind Matters’ current programme of activities, which include guest speakers, social activities, and discussion groups, but which are not generally known about among the grad student community, and have unknown levels of market penetration among the undergrads.
        + CM suggested that the GSA Publicity committee might be a useful player in an awareness campaign; AD agreed, noting Ariana’s comment from last week about the extent to which some extant programs are unknown and/or underutilised
        + SB noted that she has seen stickers in the bathrooms in Bass Library identifying problems likely to pertain to students, and providing the number of a helpline to call. (Unsure of the organisation or the phone number)
        + PB suggested that if we did the groundwork, prepared posters and suchlike, then we might be able to co-operate with Student Health to enact a publicity campaign
          - MK noted that various different people and organisations are working on this topic (Mind Matters, the health and wellness fellows, etc) but queried the degree to which they communicate and interact with each other
          - Cooperating with the Health and Wellness fellows would also be constructive; made easier by the fact that both (Ariana Chao, Samuel Southgate) sit on the Facilities & Healthcare committee. Use this campaign as a way to get the various parties concerned with this issue communicating?
        + In addition to the proposed awareness campaign, a number of ongoing concerns with the mental health treatment system at Yale were raised
          - WX observed that within the medical school community, going to mental health is encouraged, but the system seems overloaded
          - PB noted that in working on the Mental Health Report last year, Dr. Siggins pointed out that there are highs and lows in the usage pattern, which explains why there are times over overloading. PB queried whether it would be possible for the mental health department operating within Student Health to take on additional staff during these times of peak usage
          - WX commented that a system predicated on treating people on an emergency basis is medically ineffective, and that more ought to be done in terms of preventative care.
        + KG commented that in her experience as an instructor, she has witnessed several students have breakdowns, but feels she lacks awareness regarding what resources are available to the students and how to recommend them. She queried whether it would be useful to integrate some sort of training on this topic into teacher training offered at Yale.
          - SB suggested that this might be the topic of an Advanced Teaching Workshop; PB noted that not everyone attends these, and that perhaps some basic information could be folded into the Yale Day of Teaching, which does not have compulsory attendance but generally attracts a wider range of beginning teachers.
          - PB noted that these suggestions point to a bigger question of changing university culture from a variety of perspectives. It would be useful to tackle this issue from the teaching angle; PB queried which other aspects we could cover it from.
        + EL enquired if there is a graduate version of Walden (peer counselling service). PB replied that there isn’t; about a dozen committed undergraduates run Walden Peer Counselling, and that kind of time commitment is difficult to ask of graduate students. EL queried whether this might perhaps be altered from a volunteer position to a student job, thereby making it more feasible for graduate students to get involved.
          - WX asked about emergency hotlines available to Yale students. PB noted that acute care is available 24/7, and that mental health has someone available on call. However, the closest thing to a hotline is Walden, which, as discussed, is an undergraduate-only service.
          - PB noted that the grad/undergrad division in Walden is problematic; queried whether grad student staffing would also open the lines to grad student callers.
          - MP queried whether the purview of SHARE (who are also contactable 24/7) might be expanded beyond sexual harassment and assault to incorporate other crisis situations
        + AD will be in contact with Mind Matters to ask about collaborating on an awareness campaign, and will report back.
          - Daniel Wald, from the School of Public Health, might be able to assist with contacts etc.

Meeting adjourned 9:09pm