

Brown University Student Support Services External Review Committee

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarizes the findings of the review team following a two-day visit at Brown University on July 25-26, 2017, as well as an extensive examination of materials provided by Dean Almandrez and Dean Shiner. In our conversations we found that staff are extremely committed to supporting students. The reviewers were asked to assess Student Support Services (SSS), its resources and working collaboration with the larger campus community.

Among the **successes**, we note:

- A solid team of professionals who are committed to their work, each other, and their ongoing professional development
- Leadership of the office is strong- Associate Dean, Tim Shiner has brought order and structure to SSS and he has a solid understanding of how best to shape processes and systems
- A strong sense of collaboration both within SSS and with close colleagues and frequent collaborators
- Creation of a Diversity and Inclusion Action plan for the department

Student Support Services is positioned at the intersection of students' wellbeing and their academics. They collaborate with many other offices across the Brown community and are well known to SEAS, CAPS, Residential Life, Health Services among other offices. In the various conversations with the respective offices it became apparent that there are certain points where offices intersect that needs clarification in roles and responsibilities.

In particular, the following are some of the **challenges** facing SSS that should be assessed more thoroughly:

- **Identity and Scope of the Work of Student Support Services.** The overall view of the work that SSS does is unclear to external members of the community. In particular, students are confused as to why and when they should go to SSS for support.
- **Leave of Absence and Readmission Procedures.** While some work has started on this, both staff and students are unclear about the leave and return processes. Particularly, clarity is needed about the recommendations for medical leave taking and the responsibility for review of those recommendations upon return. Additionally, the separation of oversight for the medical leave and personal leave contributes to confusion and stigma.
- **Physical Location of the Office.** SSS should also consider repositioning themselves in a department where student support is more common and where students would use more than one office in "one-stop-shop". Some natural co-location partners include Counseling and Psychological Services, Dean of the College, and SEAS.
- **Education, Programming and Outreach to Brown Community.** Student Support Services serves an important role in the Brown community, yet some campus partners struggle

with knowing how to refer or connect with the office. Having a presence in the community outside of times of crisis will raise the visibility of SSS and its services.

- **Documentation of student interaction.** All student interactions should be documented in a centralized system, with guidelines for documentation that are standard across users. Again, some work has started on this but clearer guidelines would be appropriate.
- **Diversity and Inclusion.** The Diversity and Inclusion Plan implemented this year is a good start, but we heard from some campus partners that work still needs to be done to ensure that SSS is a safe and welcoming place for students of color.
- **Graduate Student Support Services.** There should be further examination about whether graduate students are best served by SSS.

MEMBERS OF THE EXTERNAL REVIEW COMMITTEE

Kristi Clemens is Assistant Dean of Student Affairs and Director of Case Management at Dartmouth College. In her role, she focuses on emergency response, behavioral intervention, and barrier removal for undergraduate students. Prior to this position, she has worked extensively in residential life, greek life, and academic advising. Kristi is a past chair of ACPA's Commission for Social Justice Educators and believes strongly in creating equity in our educational system.

Gerardo Garcia-Rios is an Associate Dean and Co-Director of Student Support Services at MIT. In his role, he manages 5 deans and the overall undergraduate academic and personal student support. He has worked in higher education since 2003 and his roles have ranged from admissions, academic advising to managing a federal grant project.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Identity and Scope of the Work of Student Support Services

Finding: Confusion about role of office. Certain constituencies including students feel that they do not know what they can go to SSS for. Other offices perceive SSS, SEAS and CAPS as similar offices but confuse SSS with SEAS. One student shared, "I did not know where SSS was located or why I should go there."

- Recommendation: Student Support Services needs to create a mission and vision statement that is accessible and understandable for students and colleagues. Development of talking points and an "elevator speech" is essential. Consider what SSS would want students, staff, faculty to say about SSS that is a unanimous message.
- Recommendation: Revamp of the website that includes information about mission and vision, goals of the staff, position descriptions, resources and services the office provides, and FAQ. Continue and expand student voice on the website through the blog.

- Recommendation: Identify a new name for the office that puts a finer point on the work that is done. Create marketing and branding materials such as a logo, tag line, etc. that would be appealing to students.
- Recommendation: Consider a shift to supporting undergraduate students only. It may clarify the work of the office significantly and free up time for the deans to do more outreach.

2. Leave of Absence and Readmission Procedures

Generally, there is misunderstanding and confusion surrounding leaves of absence, specifically around the medical leave of absence.

Finding: There is not uniform clarity on who should make recommendations for students taking medical leave of absence or who should hold them to those standards upon their request for readmission.

- Recommendation: When a student elects to take a medical leave of absence, a clinician at CAPS should work with the student and their provider to create recommendations. This recommendation should be provided to the student in writing, as well as verbally. A letter that is written to the student by SSS with CAPS input (for hospitalizations) would be ideal. For instance, the letter can spell out whether the student is expected to get treatment, volunteer, get a job, or take classes. This letter must also include key contact information as well as deadlines for readmission.
- Recommendation: When the student is ready to return, the medical support letters should be reviewed by CAPS staff and they can communicate readiness to return to SSS.
- Recommendation: Time away on medical leave should be revisited and consider one semester away depending on the time of departure, reason, leave's gravity or severity.
- Recommendation: Place all guidelines for readmission online so they are easily accessible, and consider an online readmission form.

Finding: Students with means are able to take a personal leave of absence more readily than students from a low-income background. It is a well-understood truth among students that they can take a personal leave easily even when they would be better served by a medical leave. They also understand that the return to campus process for a personal leave has fewer barriers.

- Recommendation: The personal leave of absence process should align closely, if not mirror exactly, the medical leave of absence process. This alignment will minimize legal exposure as well as better serve students.
- Recommendation: The personal leave of absence process should be supervised by Student Support Services, not the Dean of the College.
- Recommendation: Students should have a limit to the number of personal leaves they can take during their time at Brown. The number of medical leaves should be unlimited. This will incentivize students taking time away to manage their medical needs.

Finding: The graduate school leave taking process is more complicated than the undergraduate process due to graduate assistantships and research.

- Recommendation: All graduate student requests for leave taking and readmission should be managed outside of Student Support Services.

Finding: SSS staff and CAPS staff should continue discussing role clarity and delineation of responsibilities regarding student hospitalizations.

- Recommendation: If a student is hospitalized in the Providence area, CAPS staff should be in contact with treating staff at hospital and understand discharge recommendations. A student should meet with someone from SSS after discharge, not to re-evaluate the student, but to discuss options for returning to campus or alternatives if returning is not recommended.

Finding: Students are apprehensive and suspicious of the leave taking and readmission process, based on narratives heard from peers.

- Recommendation: Students who have taken a medical leave should be invited to either participate in a focus group to learn about their experiences and/or survey these students in order to learn more about their holistic experience.
- Recommendation: Communication of clear expectations and guidelines for return may help alleviate the confusion for the leave taking student.
- Recommendation: Normalizing the leave taking process for the student body at large should be a priority. Perhaps a messaging campaign to students, or simply embedding the language throughout orientation and advising.

3. Physical Location of the Office

Finding: Students stated that the office was not near the heart of campus. While much attention has been paid to make the current space welcoming and accessible, it is on the outskirts of campus and wouldn't be part of a students' typical route.

- Recommendation: There is an ideal location in the vicinity of the main campus buildings, in the J. Walter Wilson building or in the Stephen Robert '62 Campus Center. In our short walk around campus we observed a number of services and resources that students access regularly in that vicinity such as the mailroom, CAPS, SEAS, Dean of the College, and the Brown Center for Students of Color, to name a few. This area is a non-stigmatizing, easily accessible location for students to access.

Finding: Co-location with Student Conduct has an automatic connotation that students are "in trouble" and would prefer if SSS is not so aligned with these offices.

- Recommendations: SSS should assess their top offices that interact with them and reposition themselves within “support” offices such as Freshman Advising, SEAS, Dean of the College, BWell Health Promotion.
- Recommendation: Evaluate location near CAPS- would this foster better collaboration, or contribute to mission creep and role confusion? More examination is needed here.

4. Education, Programming and Outreach to Brown Community

Finding: The Brown community feels that SSS needs an identity, needs a presence on campus and that various stakeholders need to be more informed about SSS and its work with the larger campus community.

- Recommendation: Revise deans’ job descriptions and make adjustments on becoming “ambassador” to the community based on interest, responsibilities and strengths. This will increase campus visibility at events and programs.
- Recommendation: Intentional conversations, workshops or trainings for campus colleagues throughout the academic year are needed. These trainings and presentations should seek to inform colleagues of the resources offered by SSS, and provide a path to referral to the office.
- Recommendation: Training for Peer Educators/Res Life staff. Peers tend to talk to peers at a higher rate than anyone else about support services on campus, and their advice is valued highly by students. SSS should have more involvement in the training that is provided to these student leaders and provide conversations during orientation.

5. Documentation of Student Interaction

Finding: We did not find SSS guidelines that describes, for instance, how to document notes, how often to document them, what types of notes go in the database, where to enter them. More specifically, there is no guideline on what documented emails should be kept and for how long.

- Recommendation: Having written guidelines on how to maintain notes is important to implement, specifically in regards to the kind of information that needs to be included, and how quickly after the interaction it must be recorded. It is recommended to have consistency on length and note content. This is particularly helpful when entering sensitive notes that might be used by external parties such as Legal Counsel if needed.
- Recommendation: Centralizing all note entry for student contact. One database that houses all SSS note entry from one-on-one meeting, significant and important email, phone conversation and any correspondence that needs to be documented should be in one place. This would provide easy access to student notes whenever a new dean or staff starts a new job.

6. Diversity and Inclusion

Finding: Students and staff alike are thankful of the efforts that have been made to recruit SSS that represents the student population but voiced that SSS needs more representation from Latino/Hispanic, African American and Asian-American populations.

- Recommendation: Partner with local, regional and national recruiting associations to post jobs and have a wide network particular in diversity and inclusion platforms.
- Recommendation: In consultation with Brown's HR learn best practices for recruitment specifically underrepresented candidates. Is there a person in HR that specializes in recruiting these populations?

Finding: Some colleagues noted that they were reluctant to refer students of color to SSS based on poor prior interactions with some staff members.

- Recommendation: Partner with the Brown Center for Students of Color for programming opportunities. Make SSS a regular attendee at their events.
- Recommendation: Continue work on the Diversity and Inclusion Plan, and hold staff members accountable for their own ongoing education by including it as part of staff evaluations.

7. Graduate Student Support Services

Finding: The Associate Dean for Graduate Studies is a newly created role. At the moment there is only one person supporting graduate students and SSS supports graduate and undergraduate students. The reviewers did not have access to statistics on the graduate student traffic but they learned that SSS has over 2,000 visits.

- Recommendation: Increase support staff for graduate student support and medical school students; slowly decrease the number of graduate students SSS supports to provide more time for undergraduate deans to dedicate for student and community outreach and programming.