



BROWN UNIVERSITY

GET TO KNOW STUDENT
SUPPORT SERVICES



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Strengthening Support For Students	4
Our Mission	5
The Role Of Student Support Services	8
Diversity And Inclusion	9
Medical Leaves Of Absence	10

In recent history, there have been significant changes to the structure and staffing of the Division of Campus Life & Student Services which have impacted the office of Student Support Services (SSS). These changes, as well as advocacy from Brown students, has created momentum to better understand how best to serve our student body. The Student Support Services team has engaged in substantial work to update and improve both the ways in which we serve Brown students and the transparency of our work.

STRENGTHENING SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

During academic year 2016-17, Student Support Services engaged in a self-study that included benchmarking against peer institutions' best practices and a broad student survey. We held meetings with student leaders and with campus partners to better streamline our collaborative work and create seamless support for students whenever possible. In the summer of 2017, the office underwent an external review, and our efforts continue through academic year 2017-18 and looking into the future.

In response to this feedback, we have improved many processes and practices. Our main efforts have focused on three issues:

- Helping the community to better understand the role of Student Support Services and the ways in which we can support students.
- Improving the process of taking and returning from a medical leave of absence, including significant improvements to the transparency of the process.
- Demonstrating significant commitment to issues of diversity and inclusion, including serving students from historically underrepresented groups, continued staff education and competency improvement, and relationship building with various communities on campus.

OUR MISSION

The SSS staff is available to assist students with a wide-range of issues and concerns that might arise during their time at Brown. SSS deans provide 24-hour crisis services for undergraduate, graduate and medical students with personal or family emergencies and are available by appointment to consult with individual students about their personal questions or concerns.


We seek to understand the unique experiences of each student, keeping in mind the context of the student's identities. A student's race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic background, religious or spiritual identity, sex, ability or disability, country of origin,

documentation status, first-generation college student status and other aspects of identity may all impact how the student navigates academic challenges, processes moments of tension within the community or any other issue for which we might be providing support.

Although much of our work is with individual students, we also engage in education and outreach to students, staff and faculty on topics related to helping students in distress. We seek to educate community members about the ways in which a student may experience various challenges and crises, and how best to support them.

STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES:

- Serves as a sounding board to help students explore their options during difficult moments and to find a path forward
- Connects students to the right set of Brown resources
- Provides consultation for anyone concerned about a student
- Provides information on medical leaves of absence and other concrete support
- Works between the margins of the more clearly defined roles of other student resources on campus to fill in gaps between resources.



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THE ROLE OF STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

The work of Student Support Services is largely to facilitate the connection between students and offices such as University Health Services, Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), Student and Employee Accessibility Services (SEAS), Residential Life, identity-based centers and many others.

We work with students managing numerous types of challenges, such as health concerns, including mental health issues, concussions, hospitalization, illness and injury; family concerns, including challenges at home and loss of a loved one; Title IX concerns; experience of a bias incident; or concerns about a peer in the community.

We recognize that any of these situations may impact a student's ability to be successful and healthy in our community. Our goal is to work side by side with a student to explore options, facilitate

connections with the right set of resources at Brown and help to develop an action plan that maintains student agency.

To this end, we have a “dean of the day,” who is available each business day to meet with students who may be experiencing an issue. Deans are also available by appointment. Deans can write to faculty members on a student's behalf, help to set up referrals to other resources on campus and, when appropriate, provide a student an academic workload reduction. We have systems for supporting students who are ill, who have experienced a concussion or who have been hospitalized. SSS also oversees the University's administrator on call (AOC) system, which can assist students after hours with emergency situations.

In 2017-18 Student Support Services worked with over one fourth of all undergraduate students, as well as many graduate and medical students.

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

While our research identified examples where our service could be improved, data showed that almost all students from marginalized identities who sought our services felt their issues were understood compassionately, that the SSS team took into account the impact of their identities on their experience and that they were happy with support they received.

Nonetheless, a narrative persisted that SSS did not provide good support for some groups, especially students of color, first-generation college students and international students. This dissonance between the narrative and the experience of students who had utilized our services is very important to understand. Our departmental Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan seeks to address both the concrete issues identified and the narrative that exists on campus. We see it as our responsibility to proactively demonstrate our

commitment to these issues, while also recognizing that we will always have areas for growth and continued development.

Highlights of our efforts, which began in academic year 2016-17 and continue now, include: staff professional development opportunities related to diversity and inclusion; a review of all our protocols and processes to look for and remove potential structural inequities; a revision of staff job descriptions to include a demonstrated commitment to working with these communities; inclusion of individual goals related to diversity and inclusion in staff annual goal-setting; establishment of outreach and liaison partnerships with identity-based centers on campus; and a commitment to have staff attend more community events supporting diversity and inclusion.

SOME TOPICS EXPLORED DURING MONTHLY SSS TEAM PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

- White privilege and white fragility
- Experiences of trans/non-binary students
- Students with disabilities
- Issues facing undocumented and DACA students
- Barriers to seeking help for male-identified students
- Supporting students on the spectrum
- Experiences of Muslim students on campuses
- Mental health in Asian and Asian American communities
- Experiences of LGBTQ Latinx students

MEDICAL LEAVES OF ABSENCE

In response to feedback that the process of taking and returning from a medical leave of absence was difficult to understand and did not feel supportive to students, we have made significant changes. The new “Guidelines: Clearance to Return from Medical Leave” (brown.edu/go/guidelines-clearance) seek to address the specific student feedback we received.

TAKING A LEAVE

Medical leaves give students the opportunity to take time away from their studies to focus on their health and well-being, in order to facilitate a successful return to Brown. The decision to take a leave is never an easy one. SSS makes space for students to ask questions about the process and connects them to the resources that might help them fully explore their options.

WHILE ON LEAVE

It is common for students to report feeling disconnected from the Brown community while on leave. To address this concern, SSS deans now reach out to all students on leave at least once each semester. SSS staff created a new blog, Medical Leaves of Absence Demystified (blogs.brown.edu/mloa), which contains campus updates and narratives from Brown students who have taken leaves in the past, to help students better understand the challenges and benefits others have experienced.

RETURNING FROM LEAVE

Students had previously reported that the term “readmission” caused anxiety as it felt as though they needed to be admitted to Brown again. Recognizing the power of language, we replaced “readmission” with “clearance” to more accurately reflect the nature of the process. Previous versions of the process also indicated a medical leave was expected to last at least two full semesters. The new guidelines encourage students to take the time they need to address their concerns, which will vary based on each student’s situation.

The new guidelines also seek to be much more transparent in the timeline and the criteria the clearance committee uses to review petitions. Our goal is to have students see the deans as their advocates, working with them through the process with open communication. The new guidelines more clearly spell out the appeal process for students who are not cleared, and students are encouraged to petition again after a more sustained period of care.

During 2017-18, 92 students took a medical leave. During this same period, 75 students on leave petitioned to return to Brown; 71 were cleared to return.



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