December 1, 2020

Academic Support & Services Committee

November 2020 Report

Dear Executive Committee Members:

The Academic Support & Services Committee has had a busy month, and we wish to report four items to the SEC for further action.

1) **Counseling Center issues.** It has come to the Committee’s attention that two of the full-time counselors in the university counseling center will be leaving the university as of December 31, 2020. This leaves an active staff of two full-time and one part-time counselor to serve the entire student body. While there have been some voluntary measures put into place by the Office of Student Life and the Department of Educational Counseling (see attachment), suffice it to say that we will be severely understaffed going in to the new semester – a semester in which we can anticipate some of the most stressful situations in our country and our area in recent memory. As it is, we have the anecdotal impression that more students than usual have withdrawn from courses this term mid-semester, citing emotional difficulties. As professors we are well aware that even in the best of times there is a long waiting list for students to see a counselor (often extending into the next semester), and we are very concerned that many students will be unable to access services as needed. This will have an impact on academic performance as well as retention, in addition to the clear toll on emotional wellness.

We would like to see the Senate discuss this as an agenda item, and we welcome suggestions, resolutions, or motions for the Administration to address this situation before the start of the next term. We are unaware whether the positions have been advertised or whether there are plans to hire at least two new counselors. We have heard perhaps unsubstantiated rumors that the Administration is planning to outsource counseling services rather than provide services through university staff. We are requesting clarification on what the university’s plans are to provide services in the coming semester as well as to expand them.

We had planned to address this question throughout the academic year in the belief that this issue could help with retention and student wellness. Our concerns have been made more urgent by the departure of two valued practitioners with years of experience with our student body.

Whether this results in a sense-of-the-senate resolution, or something more concrete, that is up to the SEC. We did not, however, want this to pass until the February meeting to put it on the Senate agenda. In the worst case scenario, lives may be at stake. At a minimum, retention is jeopardized by this loss in capacity.

2) **COVID-19 survey and university services.** We are returning a revised motion to the SEC for consideration at this meeting, based on feedback in the discussion at the last Senate meeting. Please see the attached revised resolution.

3) **Meeting with BAAFSSO.**  On November 20, the Committee met with six representatives of the BAAFSSO for discussion on how the university and the Senate in particular could move forward with the items identified in the BAAFSSO letter of last spring. At the most basic level, we were in agreement that we would like to see an open discussion in the Senate of the ways we can move forward to build a more diverse and inclusive campus. While the university is hiring a diversity and inclusion officer, as a matter of shared governance, the university community, through the Senate, would also need to remain in open communication with this member of the administration, in order to keep the channels of communication open and flowing both ways.

Specifically, we discussed a number of possible options that we believe are worth discussing and exploring further. These include the following:

a) A Senate committee – whether a standing committee or an *ad hoc* committee – on diversity and inclusion, with the express charge of working with, advising, and responding to the new diversity and inclusion officer; and to work on implementation of ideas, projects, and programs that may be within the domain of what the Senate has the authority to execute, and to be engaged in oversight and accountability in such areas as hiring, faculty and staff support, and student services;

b) The implementation of a program of anti-racist training, similar to that of the N.J. Anti-Racist Alliance held at the university several years ago; including deciding how this could be made available, whether it should be required or recommended, and when. Both the committee and the BAAFSSO felt that this should be more than a web-based interactive training but should be interpersonal, and both intensive in its practice and transformative in its goals;

c) The establishment of support systems for student, faculty, and staff retention;

d) A Senate committee, perhaps *ad hoc* but open-ended, on community relations. The BAAFSSO leadership emphasized that though we are in one of the most diverse cities in the nation, and near a predominantly African-American neighborhood, our openness to the community and our awareness of the culture and concerns of the local community can be a more central part of the educational work we do, and specifically this can include outreach to identify and recruit local students to increase enrollment. There is no Senate committee that has community relations as part of its charge, and given that we are not only an urban campus but primarily a commuter school, this seems to be a real absence;

e) A means of gathering data on factors that are important in promoting a more diverse and inclusive campus.

None of this means, however, that discussion of these issues should not also take place before the full Senate. These are merely some suggested means to developing goals and objectives we can reach as a university.

4) **Converting the campus to solar power.** Attached is a resolution calling for the establishment of an *ad hoc* task force to look into the feasibility of converting the campus to solar power. While this could be seen as an issue for the Budget and Facilities committee ultimately, our committee felt that the ability to carry out the instructional mission of the university will benefit from affordable power and the reduction of costs in this area that can be redirected to academic costs, while creating research and professional opportunities for students.

Our resolution calls for the establishment of this task force to audit the university’s current energy needs and situation, to look into the feasibility – both practical and financial – of converting the campus to solar power, and to report back to the Senate within one year of its establishment. The resolution is also attached.

We felt that given the slow but accelerating pace of the government response to climate change, there is a real opportunity for NJCU to come out in front as a leader in urban solar power, and that there would be extraordinarily positive publicity opportunities as well as revenue opportunities in becoming an urban solar farm ahead of the curve. Jersey City is one of four global cities that has been selected as pilots in urban vertical farming, so this also would be a complementary project that would benefit Jersey City and the university’s position within the city as a good citizen. It also affords curricular opportunities through a number of university departments.

The Committee thanks the SEC for your consideration of these issues.

Sincerely,

Dr. William Westerman, chair

Dr. Dennis Lin

Dr. Jennifer Musial

Dr. Erin O’Neill