

General Student Affairs Committee 2020-2021 Report

Membership

Chair: Josh Epstein, Associate Professor of English

Members: Cheria Brown (ASPSU), George Colligan (Music), Leilani Hagen (ASPSU), Melinda Holtzman (MCECS), Heather Petzold (UNST), Bethany Potts (Enrollment Management), Elijah Roach (ASPSU)

Liaisons: Michele Toppe, Vice Provost for Student Affairs; Alex Miller, Executive Assistant

Committee Charge (from Faculty Constitution)

1. Serve in an advisory capacity to administrative officers on matters of student affairs, educational activities, budgets, and student discipline.
2. Have specific responsibility to review and make recommendations regarding policies related to student services, programs, and long-range planning, e.g., student employment, educational activities, counseling, health service and extracurricular programming.
3. Nominate the recipients of the Presidential Community Service Awards.

Report

The last year has been challenging for PSU students, faculty, staff, and administrators alike, as we have worked to keep the campus afloat during the COVID-19 crisis, and amidst a widespread climate of social protest and tension. The work of the GSAC this year has focused largely on how specific resources and policies that have come to the surface during the last year might be addressed in the long term. Our working question this year was as follows: how can PSU build on the struggles and successes of the University during the pandemic to clarify student needs once we return to “normal” (whatever that means *de facto*)? What needs, resources (that we have or wish we had), and support systems have come to the surface during COVID; how can we continue enhancing student access to them? That question, naturally, was too big to answer in one strange and disjointed year, but our conversations precipitated a few recurring topics, on which we encourage the Faculty Senate and next year’s GSAC to act.

- In keeping with President Percy’s recent calls to promote anti-racist teaching and community outreach, the committee discussed how matters of diversity and equity affect student life. In keeping with the work done by GSAC in previous years (e.g., in areas related to student employment, community service awards, visibility of public resources, cooperation with SHAC), we encourage the Senate to expand its focus on anti-racist and otherwise inclusive pedagogy. In keeping with our concerns about PSU communication with students (see below), we also encourage the Senate to work actively on promoting student access to university resources (e.g. GDI, the Academic Appeals process, Financial Aid, etc.) that remain difficult to navigate or insufficiently integrated into the frameworks that students use every day (D2L/Canvas, course syllabi, BanWeb, etc.).
 - Our student representatives observed that the COVID crisis pointed both to concerns about public safety (e.g., the extent to which campus buildings are often vulnerable and insecure, owing to PSU’s location), but also to possibilities for community interactions with respect to drug safety, social justice, and public

health. Some of these have been further highlighted by recent drug decriminalization legislation, which may create both new needs and new possibilities for public education on behalf of our academic departments, arts programs, cultural resource centers, and other campus organizations.

- We note that a Senate resolution on a curricular Race and Ethnic Studies Requirement, though beyond GSAC's purview, could lay ground for similar efforts in the matters that GSAC is charged to address (student life, extracurricular engagement, and programming). What form this might take is a potential area of investigation for next year's GSAC, but we call the Senate's attention to it now.
- The committee observed that **PSU communications with students** require swift and ongoing attention. Student members of the committee, who have been surveying PSU students in their capacities as ASPSU representatives, noted increasing concern about counterproductive "email fatigue." Overwhelmed by the quantity of emails, students tend to ignore them or lose track of the information in them. The COVID crisis, though hardly the beginning of this problem, certainly intensified it: amidst the email avalanche, students are prone to miss crucial and time-sensitive information about campus policies, the schedule for return, and opportunities to address specific needs (financial grants, emergency funds, housing resources, community partnerships, food bank, etc.).
 - The committee liaison, Michele Toppe, has created a task force to explore other forms of communication, such as D2L/Canvas, myPSU, a campus-wide text service, and the [Student Life Resources](#) (which—though invaluable in many ways—remains a well-kept secret for most of the PSU population, including not only students but the faculty and staff charged with helping them).
 - Colleges and departments should bear greater responsibility for providing multiple venues (D2L/Canvas, department websites, faculty advisors, speakers in major core classes, graduate student handbooks, handbooks distributed to faculty, etc.) for keeping students and faculty informed consistently about existing campus resources. Faculty perhaps cannot be mandated, but should be encouraged, to provide such language in their syllabi and course shells.
- The committee has suspended the annual President's Awards for three years now, since the realignment/breakup of EMSA, but believes that reinstating these awards is a valuable opportunity to celebrate students as "whole beings" who have excelled on campus and in the community, consistent with the PSU mission. We are confident that there are many needs not filled by the awards that exist already—specifically, awards for off-campus community engagement and university service.

To make these awards truly effective, however, they would benefit from substantive revisions. The awards need to take a form that is not redundant with awards already available at college/department levels (e.g. the [by SALP](#)). Efforts by Vice Provost Toppe and Alex Miller to communicate with departments about their past experiences with the President's Awards, or about the awards they have already, yielded limited information. However, there was a sense that (a) departments were reluctant to publicize or nominate students for awards, without a sense that the awards were truly "special"; and (b) there remains a welcome audience for the awards to be brought back in a new form, provided that there is real buy-in from the Senate and the President, and that the award recipients are given meaningful and public recognition (perhaps also a monetary prize) such that the process seems worth the effort.

The time to address this is now. The end (however provisional) of the COVID crisis, during which our students have worked so hard and have had so much asked of them, represents a timely opportunity to reignite these awards upon our return to campus in a more meaningful and publicly celebrated form. We recommend revamping the award nomination process, in dialogue with ASPSU, as a meaningful show of commitment on the part of the Faculty Senate (and, ideally, the University President) to show its investment in the work of students both within and beyond the classroom.

- The committee has worked closely with Michele Toppe, and will continue to do so.. Specifically, Vice Provost Toppe's collaborations with [PSU Landing](#), the Incident Management Team, the student communications task force, the "Persistence Network," and other student life offices have kept the committee apprised of ongoing efforts to promote campus community and student well-being.
- George Colligan has agreed to chair the GSAC beginning in Fall 2021.

Recommendations to the 2021-2022 Committee

- Reinstitute a set of PSU Community Awards and revise them in the most meaningful, visible, and student-supportive way possible. Investigate the awards that exist already at college and department levels; repurpose the nomination process and rubric formed by GSAC in past years; work closely with ASPSU and the Secretary of the Faculty Senate to refashion the awards' scope; and invite the University President to celebrate the awardees. Other logistical concerns (e.g. soliciting nominations earlier in the year) may also increase the number of nominations, and hence the reputation of the awards. The awards can be an important part of establishing a campus culture that many students would like to see at PSU, and that might support efforts in student persistence. If funds exist for monetary prizes, we encourage the Senate to invest in them.
- Continue collaborating with ASPSU, including but not limited to student members of the committee, on addressing the most pressing concerns that students face and the sense of campus culture and "belonging" more broadly.
- Continue working with Vice Provost Toppe's office on student communication, student resource publicizing, and possibilities for reinvigorating a Fall Convocation for new students (an effort that GSAC had begun but abandoned when campus went remote).
- Find new opportunities for public-facing education and engagement efforts that have emerged from the last two very difficult years; investigate ways of working with the surrounding communities on questions of public health, drug safety, and social justice.
- If campus safety issues intensify upon the reopening of campus in the fall, work with the Incident Management Team, the "[Reimagining Public Safety](#)" initiative, and other offices to address these issues proactively, since they inevitably affect student life and students' sense of campus community.