

Council of Principal Investigators (CPI)

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, February 17, 2021, 4:00 p.m. – 5:30 p.m., Microsoft Teams

Members in attendance: Armen Akopian, Gregory Collins, Lynette Daws, Katherine Dondanville, Charles France, Bess Frost, Randolph Glickman, Asma Khan, David Libich, Daniel Lodge, Susannah Nicholson, Adam Salmon, Susan Weintraub

Members Absent: Mark Shapiro, Darpan Patel

Guest: David Weiss, Dean, Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences

Dean Weiss met with the CPI to discuss GSBS initiatives to support graduate students impacted by the COVID pandemic, as well as GSBS strategic plans. Dr. Lodge opened the meeting by outlining CPI concerns related to the effects the COVID pandemic has had on graduate students. He then turned the meeting over to Dean Weiss, who noted that this was his first-time meeting with the CPI.

1. GSBS Updates

- Dean Weiss began by describing turnover of key personnel in the GSBS office.
 - A search has started for a new Associate Dean of Student Affairs and Admissions following the departure of Dr. Niquet Blake.
 - A new position was created for an Assistant Dean of Doctoral Training and Development to help students with training grants and be a resource to assist with other aspects of doctoral training.
 - Mary Bradley left as Director of Career Development. The position has been renamed “Assistant Director of Student Success.” Student input is being solicited to enhance the value of this position, so that it will provide services in addition to career development.
 - Charlotte Anthony has left as marketing specialist for the GSBS to take a new position in the EDGE initiative. A search is underway to find a replacement. Since Ms. Anthony was the editor of the *Pipette Gazette* a new editor will be recruited soon.
- Activities are being planned to recognize the 50th anniversary of the Graduate School, such as featuring the Graduate School on the Science Fiesta float. Other activities will include graduate students.
- Dr. Lodge asked what roles the new Assistant Director of Student Success position might have beyond career development. Dean Weiss stated in the past, the office would bring in alumni to talk; feedback from students indicated they were more interested in receiving practical advice on creating CVs, preparing grant applications and related skills, in addition to using social media such as LinkedIn.
- Dr. Libich asked whether the new marketing specialist being hired would be as engaged with the students and faculty as Charlotte Anthony was in view of constraints associated with the EDGE Initiative. Dean Weiss was confident that there will be no issues in this regard.
- Dr. Collins asked about the growth of the graduate school. While many new faculty are being brought in, graduate student enrollment remains about the same as in the past. A

major question is whether the size of the student candidate pool is a limiting factor, because only about 40% of applicants ultimately enroll in the program. Dean Weiss agreed there is a need to grow the GSBS program and said that he is committed to recruiting more applicants, as well as supporting the faculty responsible for attracting students to the program.

2. Strategic Plan

- Strategic planning for the GSBS this year is being called a “refresh,” since many of the previous and current initiatives are working well, but some improvements and/or enhancements are still needed. The individual Schools have been given the go-ahead to update the strategic plans that were developed in 2015.
- There are three strategic pillars for the refresh: research, education, and healthcare. The fundamental tenets of these updated plans will include community engagement, operational excellence, and “our people.” The stakeholders will be faculty, staff, students, and alumni.
- Dr. Weiss said that the priorities for the Graduate School will be education and research. The Graduate School has two faculty members involved in development of the Strategic Plan in the School. A working group is developing an initial draft of the plan. They will then seek input from the entire Graduate School community. The goal is to send the completed plan up to the institutional administration level by April 1. It was noted that the timeline is tight for completion of the plan. A meeting facilitator has been hired to assist the stakeholders with plan development.
 - Dr. Glickman suggested getting input from outside the institution; however, it is likely that there isn’t sufficient time for this.
 - Dr. Lodge asked what we need to add or do better to increase the number of applicants. Dean Weiss said that the plan has broad goals and that implementation details will be developed in stakeholder meetings as a part of finalization of the plan.

3. COVID Impacts

- Dean Weiss acknowledged that COVID has been a serious challenge. He observed that paradoxically, many students managed better in the early days (possibly due to fear of the unknown) than now (due to pandemic fatigue). In the early months of the pandemic, there had been weekly town hall meetings. In addition, Dean Weiss personally called graduate students to ask how they were doing. He found that at the time, most students reported they were doing well, were in good communication with their mentors, were working in shifts, and appreciated being able to continue their research.
- Dean Weiss stated the data indicated that student progress in their degree programs is currently about on par with past metrics such as progression to the qualifying exam.
- Dean Weiss said that the GSBS had received feedback and advice about managing the impact of the pandemic on students, for example, from Dr. France and Dr. Kokovay who summarized the ways that they managed their trainees and provided counseling as needed.
- Dean Weiss added that the Counseling Center has been essentially operating at capacity due to a 3 – 4-fold increase in visits. Dr. Weiss has maintained an ongoing discussion with Dr. Mok (along with other Deans) to provide funds to hire more staff for the Counseling Center.
- The interim GSBS Associate Dean is currently creating a series of events to help graduate students with life-work balance and give them a chance to interact with each other. Ideas for these activities are welcome.

- On the general topic of student counseling, Dr. Lodge suggested using a service that provides virtual visits; Dean Weiss will bring this idea up with Dr. Mok. Dr. Dondanville acknowledged the national shortage of counselors due to low salaries. Dr. Frost added that it would be very helpful if in-person counselling could be made available on the Greehey campus because there are many students there. Dr. Dondanville noted that many health insurance plans will cover virtual counseling. Dean Weiss said that our Wellness 360 also offers mental health-related services, but this may not be widely known by students.
- Dr. Lodge noted that while some students may be meeting their program milestones, this does not necessarily mean they are in good shape coping with the pandemic from a mental health perspective.
- Extensive discussion ensued about various topics related to the impact of the pandemic on our graduate students. Dr. Collins emphasized the importance of consistency in communication in letting students know of the various opportunities for mental health services. Dean Weiss agreed and said that he would get more information and send it out to the students.

No other issues were presented to Dean Weiss, and he left the meeting.

4. CPI Business

- The January 2022 meeting minutes were approved.
- Dr. Lodge reported on a follow up email he received from Ginny Gomez-Leon regarding the changing travel policies, providing feedback, and answering questions raised in the previous CPI meeting.
- There was also an update from Dr. Schmelz.
 - A new SharePoint site on the VPR office lists the LAR per diem rates so that the necessary information is available for budgeting purposes.
 - Researchers who are facing increased per diem charges have been notified that they will be subsidized until new grants covering the increased fees are funded.
 - Any new grant submissions should use the new rates.
 - In the past, the per diem rates for animals that were purchased with VA funds but housed at HSC facilities were three times the in-house rate. This policy has been revised and the per diem rates are now the same for all funding sources.
 - Dr. Schmelz indicated that there is some interest in software called Lab Archives, which is an electronic lab notebook application). The CPI agreed to invite Dr. Schmelz to a future meeting to give a presentation about the software so the CPI could provide feedback on its suitability for general use.
- **IMS – Spam/Junk mail filter (Dr. Libich):** Dr. Libich stressed the importance of checking junk email folders. The filters implemented by IMS may mark some non-junk messages as “Spam,” causing important emails to possibly be missed. Currently, there is no option to disable the junk folder, which limits the ability of users to automatically rectify the problem. Dr. Weintraub said that she would bring up this concern to the Computing Resources Committee at their March meeting.
- **IMS – Electronic Data Storage for large data sets (Dr. Libich):** Dr. Libich discussed the need for solutions at the institutional level to meet large data storage needs. In addition, he noted a separate challenge to provide high-performance computing as an institution-wide resource that can meet the needs of individual users. He suggested assembly of a working group with representation of different interests from across campus to address this matter.

Dr. Weintraub suggested that Dr. Potter and the VPR's Office should be brought in to help because substantial funding would be needed.

- Dr. Lodge mentioned a suggestion by Dr. Potter for a community of scholars to foster interaction among researchers—particularly between clinical and pre-clinical investigators.

5. New business

- Dr. Kay Oyajobi, Director of the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs, will be the guest for the March CPI meeting.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:44 p.m.