

Summary of Student Perspectives Series Meeting, February 27, 2020

Trustees in Attendance: Michael J. Klingensmith, Mary Lou Gorno, Gregory W. Wendt

Students in Attendance: Rohail Premjee (2nd Year MPP/MBA student in Harris and Chicago Booth, Graduate Liaison), Ridgely Knapp (4th Year College/MPP student in Harris, Undergraduate Liaison), Dane Christensen (3rd Year MBA/JD student in Booth and Law), Justin Douglas (2nd Year MPP/MA student in Harris and SSA), Lindsey Joseph (2nd Year MBA/MS student in Booth and PSD), Jena Manilla (2nd Year MPP/MBA student in Harris and Booth), Luis Torgal Miranda Dias Fonseca (2nd Year MPP/MBA student in Harris and Booth), Runmin (Miranda) Zhao (2nd Year MBA/MS student in Booth and PSD)

Guest: Beth Niestat, Executive Director, Administration & Policy, UChicagoGRAD

The topic of the February 27 meeting was the experience of students enrolled in **joint degree programs** at the University, with a particular focus on graduate programs that span two divisions or schools. In advance of the meeting, the Trustees received a memorandum that provided some details on the number of students enrolled in joint degree programs and that posed the following questions for discussion:

- How can academic units most effectively instill a sense of belonging and affinity among their joint degree students through orientation programs, co-curricular opportunities, and community events?
- How do joint degree candidates perceive the quality, consistency, and delivery of critical student services, especially with respect to advising and mentoring, career services, networking, and academic resource support?
- How would joint degree students characterize the administrative processes that support their registration, billing, and academic status as they move between the schools and/or divisions that house their programs?

Following a round of introductions, Mr. Klingensmith provided an overview of the role of the Board of Trustees. He noted that the Board's primary duties include oversight of major decisions and philanthropy and not day-to-day operations, which is the purview of the President and the Vice Presidents. Mr. Klingensmith also noted that the Trustees attending the meeting would be expressing their own views and not speaking for the Board as a whole. Finally, he stated that ideas and suggestions that emerged from SPS meetings would be conveyed back to key members of the administration for further discussion and action.

The graduate liaison opened the discussion with the first question listed above. Students noted that there are inconsistencies in how students in different programs are given access to amenities

and resources in the units, including even their physical buildings. While joint degree students in Law and Booth, for example, can access the Harper Center and participate in Booth student programs, joint degree candidates in Harris and Booth are restricted from activities at Booth during their first year. Joint degree students in Harris and SSA also find it challenging to register for their courses in SSA, because they are not considered to be SSA “residents,” even though they are part of the two schools’ joint degree program. These various residency rules and program restrictions are not easy to locate (if at all), requiring various workarounds by students and staff as they are encountered. Many times information is only obtained through verbal communications. As students are typically unaware of those rules and restrictions, they are unable to properly plan their next years – when new rules are constantly uncovered, the students’ plans also need to be constantly adjusted. There was general agreement that these obstacles are not in place to intentionally discourage students, but rather are the product of local culture (Booth and Harris are perceived as being distinct entities, independent from the rest of the institution, which can make registration in their courses difficult for all students) and the way in which student degree program information is recorded in University systems. Simply writing down all the rules and restrictions of each joint degree in an official document approved by the two schools would be a substantial improvement.

Indeed, the various “residency” rules of different units and their impact on student status can also lead to cumbersome administrative consequences for joint degree students, especially when it comes to billing. One student shared his unfortunate experience of having his loans canceled in error two quarters in a row due to changes in his residency status. While the mistakes were rectified, the situation created unnecessary stress and work for all involved. Students also spoke about the financial consequences of unclear residency rules beyond billing, explaining how confusion about tuition requirements, scholarships, and financial aid make it difficult to plan appropriately for the degree. For instance, joint degree students in Harris and Booth do not know what the financial obligations for their third year are ahead of time or what different curricular scenarios are possible, and are thus unable to plan based on that information.

Academic advising was also identified as an area for improvement. Depending on the program, advisers who understand the special needs of joint degree students can be difficult to access or are not sufficiently knowledgeable about courses and program requirements in the different schools. This can lead to costly errors if students need to register for additional courses because the ones they took earlier in their careers will not satisfy degree requirements. The lack of suitable advising can also lead students to combine courses in a quarter with a punishing workload. Students reported ambiguity in how specific courses count toward requirements and a general attitude of “everything will work out by the time you graduate,” which they did not find reassuring. Students also reported that in some units upcoming quarter course offerings are announced very late. This exacerbates the overall difficulties with degree planning.

One meeting participant pointed out that it seemed that a major challenge for joint degree programs was providing sufficient structure to help students navigate different schools and sets of requirements while maintaining the options and flexibility that UChicago is known for.

Students present agreed that they appreciated their programs' fluidity, which the introduction of more rigid frameworks might necessarily impede.

There was consensus among the students that joint degree candidates would benefit greatly from one or more program coordinators dedicated to overseeing advising, registration, billing, financial aid and communications for joint degree students. The University of Pennsylvania has created these roles for the joint degree students in their law and business schools and could offer a model UChicago could adapt. Program coordinators could also devise more robust orientation programs for joint degree students and work with staff in the schools and divisions to ensure that the full breadth of their benefits and resources are available to this population. In some programs, such as the joint MBA/MS in Computer Science program, students can drop in and out at any time, which makes community building among the participants quite challenging, particularly with respect to their connection to the PSD. Program coordinators could help address this through social events, communications and other engagement strategies.

Another area for potential improvement mentioned by the students was career services. Several participants noted professional advantages in having the joint degree credential but were concerned about a lack of specialized career advising to help them find opportunities in niche industries where their interdisciplinary degree would be especially valuable. It was pointed out that the small size of some joint degree cohorts limits the scale of specialized staff to support them, but that as these degrees are more heavily marketed and become more popular, there needs to be a corresponding expansion of services for them.

Students spoke positively about the value of peer support and advising as they work through their programs. Students seek course and degree planning advice from peers who are further along in the program and find this to be extremely helpful. Combining new program coordinators with a more formalized peer advising or mentoring program could be very effective.

Whether joint degrees at the University are the result of student demand for more interdisciplinary programs or represent a strategic direction for the divisions and schools was also discussed. The meeting ended with a call for UChicago to be more intentional about the value of joint degree programs, to find ways to reconcile the local autonomy of the divisions and schools with the need for operational efficiency around student services, and to highlight these academic opportunities as exemplars of interdisciplinary study.

Information in Preparation for the February 27, 2020, Student Perspectives Series Meeting

The Winter Quarter meeting will focus on graduate students. The session will be attended by Rohail Premjee, graduate liaison to the Board, and Ridgely Knapp, undergraduate liaison to the Board, along with a group of seven graduate students representing a variety academic divisions and programs.

The topic of this meeting is the experience of joint degree candidates at UChicago. Joint degree programs allow students to satisfy their interdisciplinary interests by pursuing two University degree programs concurrently. Joint degrees are distinct from “dual” degree programs, where students simultaneously pursue degree programs at UChicago and an outside institution of higher education. There are four categories of joint degree programs that are most commonly pursued by UChicago students: (1) Joint Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees, where students in their final year at the College complete the work necessary to earn a Master’s degree in addition to a Bachelor’s; (2) A combination of two Master’s and/or Professional degrees; (3) A combination of two related doctoral fields that yield a single interdisciplinary PhD (e.g., Linguistics & Psychology, Mathematics & Computer Science); and (4) the Medical Scientist Training Program (MTSP), where, on average, 55 students each year are admitted to the Pritzker School of Medicine to fulfill the course and clinical requirements of the MD in addition to the course, research, and dissertation requirements of the PhD. In recent years, the number of students who fall into category one has increased quite dramatically as joint degree programs have diversified and the Master’s options in computer science, humanities, social sciences and public policy have grown in popularity (Table 1). Annual enrollment numbers in the other joint degree categories have been more consistent, with the most significant cohort sizes appearing in the joint Chicago Booth MBA-Computer Science MS and MBA-Harris MPP degrees (Table 2).

The February 27 discussion will focus on the perspectives of students in joint Master’s and/or Professional degree programs. Earlier this quarter, the graduate liaison hosted focus groups of students in these joint degree programs and the feedback he received has informed the following strategic questions that the students will address:

- How can academic units most effectively instill a sense of belonging and affinity among their joint degree students through orientation programs, co-curricular opportunities, and community events?
- How do joint degree candidates perceive the quality, consistency, and delivery of critical student services especially with respect to advising and mentoring, career services, networking, and academic resource support?
- How would joint degree students characterize the administrative processes that support their registration, billing, and academic status as they move between the schools and/or divisions that house their programs?

Table 1. College Students in Joint Bachelor's/Master's Degree Programs, 2015-2020

Master's Program	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	Total
Chemistry	1	1	1	2		5
Computational Analysis		4		1	2	7
Computer Science	4	1	4	16	9	34
International Relations	1	4	3	6	3	17
MA Program in the Humanities (MAPH)	6	5	3	8	5	27
MA Program in the Social Sciences (MAPSS)		3	3	7	4	17
MA Program in Social Service Administration	1		2	2		5
MAT Program in Urban Teaching				2	1	3
Mathematics				1		1
Medicine		1				1
Middle Eastern Studies (Hum)	1	3		2		6
Middle Eastern Studies (SocSci)		1			1	2
MPP Program in Public Policy		1	2	2	6	11
Statistics	2		2	1		5
Total	16	24	20	50	32	142

Table 2. Graduate Students in Joint Master's and/or Professional Degree Programs, 2017-2019

First Program	Second Program	Aut 2017	Aut 2018	Aut 2019
Booth MBA	Computer Science MS	41	62	50
Booth MBA	Harris MPP	19	13	12
Booth MBA	Law JD	3	2	4
Booth MBA	Pritzker MD	4	4	5
Booth MBA	Social Service Administration MA	1	2	1
Divinity MDiv	Harris MPP	1	2	1
Divinity MDiv	Social Service Administration MA	3	6	3
Harris MA	International Relations MA	0	1	0
Harris MA	Law JD	2	2	3
Harris MA	Pritzker MD	1	2	0
Harris MA	Middle East Studies MA	0	0	2
Harris MA	Social Service Administration MA	5	6	5
Harris PhD	Pritzker MD	4	1	1
Total		84	103	87

The data represented in Table 1 and 2 was obtained from the Office of the Registrar, January 2020