

Student Perspectives Series  
Autumn Quarter, 2017

Summary of Discussion on November 2, 2017

*Diversity and Inclusion at the University (with a special focus on the experience of students in the College)*

The Student Perspectives Series (SPS) was established in 2016 and is coordinated by the graduate and undergraduate liaisons to the Board of Trustees (elected positions in Student Government) in partnership with the Office of the University Secretary and Campus and Student Life. The SPS is designed to give small groups of students and University trustees an opportunity to have an informal discussion on topics of mutual interest. Student participants are selected by the student liaisons and the three to four trustees who attend are drawn from an appointed pool. Views presented by the trustees in these meetings are their own and do not represent the Board as a whole.

The autumn quarter, 2017 meeting of the SPS took place on November 2, 2017. The undergraduate liaison invited four students from the College to discuss the topic of diversity and inclusion at the University (with a special emphasis on the experience of students in the College) with three trustees. The graduate liaison to the Board was also in attendance. Ahead of time, the undergraduate liaison submitted three questions to help frame the discussion:

1. *Diversity is often seen as an end in itself, rather than as a means to a larger goal. What are some specific goals the University can achieve through increased diversity and inclusion efforts?*
2. *What are areas requiring improvement with regard to supporting students of color and low-income students?*
3. *How can the University better ensure that the resources and initiatives already in place will reach and be accessible to all students?*

During the initial round of introductions, the undergraduate students shared their reasons for attending UChicago. Financial aid and support for first-generation and low-income students were cited as incentives for attending the College. Students also mentioned small class size, ease of access to professors, the fact that students who attend really love what they are studying, the University's urban setting and size as appealing draws to UChicago.

In response to *Question 1* above, one of the students referenced her high school experience where she knew bright and talented students who missed out on the opportunity to attend college because they fell through the cracks or because they faced barriers to accessing information

about the college admissions and application process that discouraged them from applying. Universities should recognize that for many students attending college is not a given, and that there are many obstacles that can get in the way of students imagining that a college degree is possible. Another student pointed out that offering diversity alone is not enough; universities must also cultivate inclusivity, but it is hard to feel included if critical services are not functioning well (challenges with the College Financial Aid office last year were cited<sup>1</sup>) or if low-income students have to bypass co-curricular opportunities because of work requirements.

Not feeling included can manifest in the academic realm as well. First-generation and low-income students may find certain majors, particularly those in STEM fields, less welcoming and more difficult to navigate due to the dearth of preparatory courses at their high school and the cost of equipment and supplies. For instance, some UChicago computer science programming assignments are much more easily accomplished with a MacBook than with a PC; but the latter are less expensive and are more likely to be purchased by low-income students. While UChicago students are encouraged to speak up and self-advocate, this can be tough to do if you are only in your first- or second year and find professors intimidating or if you have doubts about your abilities (the “imposter syndrome”). Moreover, students may simply accept what they see and hear as the status quo and not realize that speaking up may bring issues to the attention of faculty who could take steps to address the underlying problem.

One student stressed the importance of building networks and support systems for first-generation, low-income and underrepresented students. Not only will these help students feel more connected to their peers and to those who can advise and coach them, but they will likely be exposed to more opportunities that will help them thrive at the University.

The graduate liaison was asked to comment on what she has experienced at Chicago Booth. As a Co-Chair of the Hispanic American Business Students Association, the graduate liaison mentioned that the Association is invested in making sure that prospective students of color feel that Booth is a community where they are accepted and can thrive. The goal is to make sure that Booth is always in the consideration set of students of color, which is not always the case because the larger minority communities of other schools beget more applicants. At business school, the relatively small number of female faculty is a very real issue that has a pervasive impact on women students and alumnae, particularly in terms of finding mentors and role models in professional life. There was general agreement among the students that achieving true diversity of thought in scholarship and academics is only possible if there is corresponding diversity of perspectives from individuals from a wide array of backgrounds.

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<sup>1</sup> Students also described having issues with the timing of notification of their financial aid awards in the 2016-17 academic year, along with delays in the payment of awards, difficulties communicating with the College Aid office staff, the application of erroneous late fees and challenges navigating the Admissions and Financial Aid websites to find information about the No Barriers initiative. Michele Rasmussen will follow up with the students as many of these issues were addressed and rectified over the summer.

The conversation then turned to the creation and goals of UChicago United, a coalition of several recognized multicultural student organizations<sup>2</sup> that came together in the spring, 2017 quarter around the following areas of mutual interest: 1) discriminatory and culturally offensive incidents on campus; 2) a recognized need for greater resources and support for minority students; and 3) coalition building and sharing experiences. UChicago United representatives have generated a list of priorities and areas needing attention by the University. These include offering a more diverse range of curricular options and the creation of comparative ethnic studies department(s) that could develop new undergraduate majors, and new and enhanced physical spaces for student cultural groups.

Acknowledging that the trustees do not direct curriculum or academic initiatives, the students pointed out that it can be challenging to approach faculty about making changes to what they teach. It was suggested that graduate students, particularly doctoral students who work closely with faculty, could be a good “bridge” for students in the College who are interested in a more diverse curriculum.

The undergraduate liaison noted that for many politically active students at the University there is a sense that when problems are presented to the administration it is difficult to get traction and follow-up and there is a perception that issues ultimately don’t go anywhere. She asked what the trustees would advise these students. The trustees agreed that it might seem like a long time for things to change at the University, especially when viewed through the lens of a four-year undergraduate experience, but that they have observed significant change in a number of areas over the time they have been affiliated with UChicago (as students, alumni and now trustees). These changes include the creation of No Barriers and the Odyssey Scholarship. The students were encouraged to keep engaging with administrators and trustees (through the luncheons and SPS meetings) and ensure ongoing communication. Because the University has many more competing demands than can be met with available resources, priorities have to be made; but this does not mean that there is a lack of progress, and much of the credit for this progress can be attributed to student efforts.

One of the students closed the meeting by emphasizing that fulfilling the University’s commitment to diversity is about more than just increasing the diversity of the student body. The University of Chicago needs to enable College students’ success throughout their entire four-year career, and recognize the ongoing barriers present in higher education. Additionally, recruiting and retaining a more diverse faculty is a critical component of reaching this goal.

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<sup>2</sup> Arab Student Association, Organization of Latin American Students (OLAS), MEChA de UChicago, PanAsia Solidarity Coalition, Organization of Black Students, African Caribbean Students Association.