



COLUMBIAESC

ENGINEERING STUDENT COUNCIL

February 3, 2017

ADDENDUM to “MENTAL HEALTH, SUICIDE PREVENTION, AND OUR COMMUNITY”

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SUBJECT: *The Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science – Mental Health, Suicide Prevention, and Our Community*

Introduction

Following the recent string of tragic events that have struck the undergraduate community, and in light of the alarmingly high rate of confirmed and unconfirmed suicides at Columbia, the Engineering Student Council feels compelled to provide this addendum to the *University Senate Student Affairs Committee*’s memorandum to the Offices of the President and Provost.

We write to address suicide prevention and the university’s response to unexpected campus tragedy. Of course, no student should ever feel that their only escape from the pressures and stresses of Columbia is to be found in death, but, sadly, the recent passings of our colleagues are part of a recurring pattern. These deaths are symptomatic of a deeply troubling culture of stress and reflect a challenge of epidemiological proportions, requiring immediate action from the central administration. In the past ten years, the rate of confirmed suicides on Columbia’s campus has been 11 per 100,000 students, nearly 50% higher than the national average of 7.5.¹

Currently, the university employs Sexual Violence Response, Alice Health, Stressbusters, Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS), and residential advisor (RA) connect conversations in an effort to improve student wellness and cultivate feelings of community. These resources are generally insufficient for promoting wellbeing in an otherwise stressed and anxious student body.

¹ Holmes, Aaron. “Suicide at Columbia and the urgency of prevention.” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, 2 Feb 2017, New York, NY. Web.

Overview

The Engineering Student Council believes that the university must take greater steps to prevent student suicide by institutionally reducing stress, anxiety, depression, and isolation among undergraduates. Moreover, we believe that in its current state, the administration's response to unexpected tragedies is impersonal and insufficient. Here, we address concerns pertaining to campus-wide tragedy prevention and the university's response to such losses. We first discuss suicide prevention through the lens of student wellness in three key areas: (1) exorbitant student academic stress, (2) a lack of student spaces dedicated to mindfulness and identity, and (3) widespread feelings of student isolation. For each of these three issues, we provide recommendations for future investigation. Second, we discuss the university's current campus-wide response to tragedy, and how we believe it may be improved. Acknowledging that the administration does a great deal of outreach to the families of unexpectedly deceased students, we believe a similarly robust response for students on campus could better serve as the impetus for healing so desperately needed following the tragedies that shake our community.

The recommendations in this document are the result of countless hours of conversation with current students, alumni, student leaders, and administrators. We have worked to include the voices of the Mental Health Task Force, Nightline, the University Senate, and our colleagues in Barnard's Student Government Association, the Columbia College Student Council, and the General Studies Student Council. We support the efforts of all organizations striving to improve mental health on Columbia's campus, and we fully endorse the respective addenda of our three collegiate undergraduate councils and the memorandum provided by the University Senate.

Recommendations

§ 1: On Prevention

I. Academic Stress

Academic workload has been found to be a large contributing factor to student stress.² Poor academic advice often leads to increased workload, and thus to increased anxiety. The Engineering Student Council has found that the majority of students trust their peers to give sound academic advice more so than their advisors in the Center for Student Advising (CSA). We have found that as a consequence students are more likely to turn to their peers for academic advice.³ Among engineers, stories of the results of bad advice from advisors in the CSA are not

² Kausar, Rukhsana. "Perceived stress, academic workloads and use of coping strategies by university students." *Journal of Behavioural Sciences* 20.1 (2010): 31.

³ Kebudi, Izzet. "Breakdown of Survey Results on Efficacy of Center for Student Advising and the Need for Additional Portals for Student Advising." *Columbia University Engineering Student Council*, 26 Jan 2017, New York, NY. Web.

hard to come by. Students within the Engineering Student Council itself have had to take upwards of six to seven courses per semester to correct for poor advice on academic scheduling from CSA advisors. We recommend radical changes to the way that academic advising is conducted on Columbia's campus and call for a comprehensive online platform for academic advising, directly interfacing the voice and advice of students with oversight by CSA and departmental advisors. Students will receive information from the peers they trust the most, and those parties responsible for the enforcement of graduation requirements will be available to confirm or dismiss correct and incorrect advice, respectively.

In addition to poorly conducted advising, there are particular classes—typically large lecture-style courses within the premedical and engineering curricula—that can feel overtly and unnecessarily difficult. These courses include, but are not limited to, *Introductory Biology I & II*, *Organic Chemistry I & II*, *Organic Chemistry Lab I & II*, *Mechanics*, *Thermodynamics*, *Advanced Programming*, and *Operating Systems I & II*. We do not object to the rigor of these courses, but rather to how they intentionally make students question their own abilities, often leaving students feeling inadequate. It can be said that a certain degree of callousness has been woven into courses like these ones, with the result that students feel their professors to be distant and at odds with their education. In general, we suggest incentivizing all professors to be more empathetic toward the experiences of their students by demonstrating leniency in times of late assignments and missed exams, as well as having flexible grading weights for exams, homeworks, and projects such that students may be better assessed on their optimal performances. Moreover, the administration should look for creative ways to incentivize faculty members to interact with students outside of academic settings. For instance, one possibility would be to require professors to have a meal plan in order to be eligible for tenure. By motivating faculty to share meals at dining halls with students, we believe Columbia could create institutionally-backed opportunities for enhanced student-professor interactions, the building of rapport, and the bolstering of academic support in non-academic contexts. It is clear that academic stress pervades our campus and we believe the above changes are a necessary start towards fixing the problems we face.

II. Student Spaces

Outside the classroom, Columbia lacks a shared space where students can relax and take a moment out of their stressful lives to rest and reflect. With a lack of public spaces for mindfulness, students retreat to the more insular spaces of their dorms, only serving to exacerbate feelings of loneliness in students feeling already out of place in the competitive and demanding environment of Columbia. In addition to the spaces suggested below for various identity groups, we recommend the creation of a space or spaces for quiet reflection, meditation,

prayer, and mindfulness. We recommend that this space be located in a building not only devoid of administrative presence, but also located in a building wholly devoted to students. The chapel, for instance, does not suffice for this purpose, given that St. Paul's is not solely devoted to students. The institution of a wellness center in Lerner, for instance, would be preferable and would help further define it as a student center.

Beyond general mindfulness rooms and wellness centers, we recognize the salient need for student space for identity groups. The Columbia administration has been theoretically supportive of identity groups, but has failed to deliver sufficient security and resources to these groups on a practical level. This lack of follow-through is demonstrated by the dearth of dedicated student spaces for identity groups on campus. Recognizing that many of the students who have committed suicide since 2000 have been members of underrepresented groups such as the LGBTQ+ community, the councils recommend the institution of greater support for various identity groups on campus. This process will not be complete without the foundation of student centers for LGBTQ+ students, international students, students of color, student veterans, and first generation and low income students. Additional space supporting students with children should be sought in the form of childcare centers. Such centers are common at large universities (see Cornell University's Childcare Center,⁴ and Boston University's Child Centers⁵).

In addition to lacking identity-based student centers, the student body needs a centralized student union open 24/7. Currently, Lerner fills this role, though imperfectly. The building features bookable rooms, hallways, and ramps, all of which are used for student meetings in one way or another. However, the building suffers as a student union in that there is an ever increasing presence of administrators; administrative offices actively compete with the comfort and inclusion of students. Thus, we advocate for the total conversion of Lerner into a student union. Given the unique opportunity the Manhattanville Campus affords us, administrative offices could easily be relocated to other spaces on campus, such as Uris Hall. We note that there are additional challenges surrounding Lerner, given its dysfunctional layout and suboptimal use of space. The Engineering Student Council would thus be happy to see a student union located in a different building, such as Uris, so long as whatever hall is designated be *wholly devoted to students*. A redesign of Lerner would also be received by our council with praise.

⁴ <https://hr.cornell.edu/wellbeing-perks/parenting/cornell-child-care-center/>

⁵ <https://www.bu.edu/family/childcare-centers-on-campus/>

III. Student Isolation

We have seen that many of those affected by suicide are either beginning or are concluding their time at Columbia.⁶ One of the largest challenges to students adapting to the environment here is the lack of community already in place upon arrival on campus. In order to facilitate this process we recommend that the Columbia Outdoor Orientation Program (COÖP) and the Columbia Urban Experience (CUE)—pre-orientation programs available to first year students—be expanded for all incoming students. Currently, due to funding restrictions, fewer than 20% of incoming first year students have the opportunity to participate in such opportunities, which have been shown to improve the mental health and wellness of incoming students. We note that there is more institutional support for these programs at our peer universities. At Dartmouth, for example, pre-orientation trips are mandatory and financial assistance is available for all incoming first year students.⁷ Seeing as these activities build communities more effectively than almost any other program on campus, we further suggest that similar opportunities be extended to returning students as well. We believe that expanding COÖP and CUE would serve to create new ties between otherwise unaffiliated members of the community, creating greater bonds that span across the divides of campus and reducing student isolation.

Immediately following these pre-orientation experiences, the New Student Orientation Program (NSOP) is offered to first year students. Our recommendation is that NSOP be expanded to include mandatory gatekeeper training, emphasizing healthy ways to deal with stress, identifying signs of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. We recommend that (1) this training ultimately be expanded into a pass/fail semester-long course for first year students and that (2) yearly one-day refresher courses be made available to returning students during NSOP. These courses should be mandatory for student leaders, RAs, administrators, and tenure-track professors. In addition, semesterly meetings should be automatically scheduled with CPS for all students.⁸ These meetings would be opt-out, and would serve to destigmatize mental illness on campus and proactively address stress culture.

In a similar vein to the proposed yearly re-orientation programs, we further suggest that all students gather once per semester with faculty and staff to touch base and celebrate their shared community. A greater allocation of funding to the Office of Undergraduate Student Life and to the undergraduate deans may encourage greater programming for large-scale, fun, non-academic

⁶ Ryan, Sean. “Memorandum on Suicide Prevention and Student Wellness: Appendix A.” *Columbia University Senate Student Affairs Committee*, 24 Jan 2017, New York, NY. Print.

⁷ <http://outdoors.dartmouth.edu/firstyear/registration.html>

⁸ Interview with Columbia alumnus currently at Mt. Sinai

social events, such as athletic training on South Lawn, a fall concert, and other administration-sponsored events that are distinctly lacking in the Columbia experience.

In addition to undergraduate-wide programming, the Engineering Student Council believes that funding ought to be allocated towards building the specific school communities as well. We look to our peer engineering schools of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and California Institute of Technology and wish to emulate their strong student community which celebrates the joy and creativity of engineering.

To ensure that residential communities are available for all students, on-campus housing should be guaranteed for any undergraduate student enrolled at Columbia University. Furthermore, to make these residential communities more active and engaging, we propose the addition of more lounge space to student dormitories. Additionally, students should be placed in residences in consideration of their shared interests and potential to bond. A system wherein students interested in science and engineering are more likely to live with one another may lead to feelings of solidarity and floor unity. Such a system ought to be considered in tandem with the current housing lottery, which allows students to choose to live with their close friends. The Engineering Student Council believes such a reform would be instrumental to curtailing isolation and would promote student community.

Finally, there are certain communities on campus that feel particularly isolated. Specifically, many engineering 3-2 students are placed in Carlton Arms, which, being on 108th St., is far from the rest of the student body and further isolates them. These are students who have very little social capital to begin with. By making the living spaces of students in transition, such as 3-2 students, less insular, the administration can ensure that there be more support for these communities.

As a final recommendation, the Engineering Student Council requests that the University appoint a “Mental Health Czar” from outside the university with meaningful authority⁹ to evaluate the university’s relationship with mental health. These fundamental issues of suicide prevention and mental health awareness clearly deserve a structural reevaluation, as the existing self-evaluation by the administration has failed. We envision such a consultant reporting directly to the President, the student leaders on the Senate, and the Student Councils. The office of the President has the ultimate authority to implement recommended solutions, while the students have the firsthand experience that will inform such solutions. The Mental Health Czar will thus act as the

⁹ Criteria for hire must include experience in dealing with mental health in clinical or public health contexts. Merely appointing a well-renowned professor is insufficient in the eyes of the Engineering Student Council.

interface between these two otherwise separate bodies and will expedite a long overdue reform of Columbia's policies on the prevention of and the response to student suicide.

§ 2: On Response

Currently, in response to tragedy at Columbia, the university releases school-wide emails. These emails feel impersonal and often resemble form letters, which only serves to make students feel angry at and disregarded by the administration. Moreover, these emails may not reach the entire affected community. For example, the passing of a Barnard student may only be communicated to Barnard students, though we have a united undergraduate body. Overall, this limited response leads to students feeling heartbroken, overlooked, and defeated.¹⁰

Other academic institutions have much more rigorous responses to suicide. At Mt. Sinai, when a student committed suicide in the summer of 2016 during the orientation week for MD students, all classes were canceled for 24 hours and there were several mandatory assemblies. These assemblies were staffed by faculty members in psychology and follow-up breakout sessions were available to students.

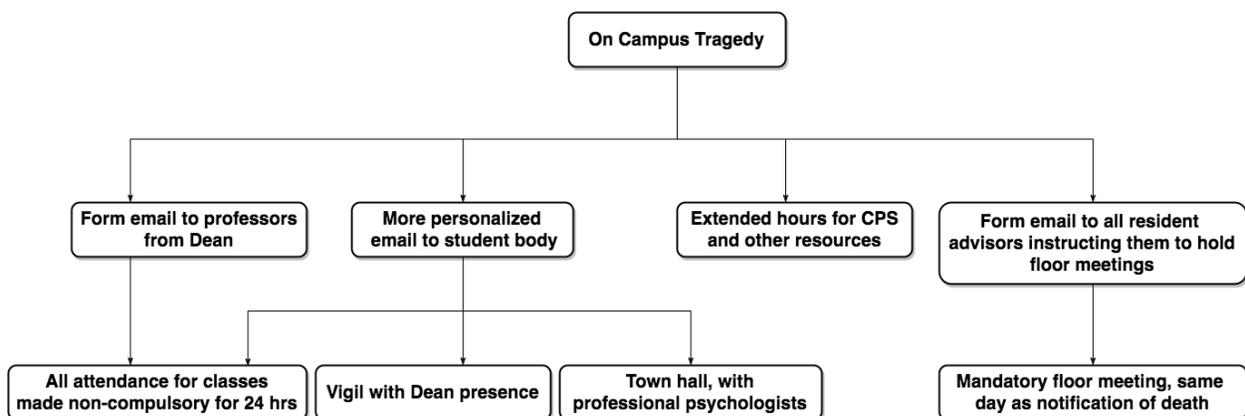


Figure 1. Proposed stronger administrative response to an on-campus tragedy.

Our council recommends a similarly aggressive response, designed to communicate to students that the administration cares deeply about the effects of student death on the community. From our research,^{11,12} we believe that a response more aligned with Mt. Sinai's would bolster our community and prevent cluster suicides. Of course, the university should consult experts in the

¹⁰ Interviews with Columbia students in Nightline, recent alumni from CC

¹¹<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/preventing-youth-suicide/preventing-suicide-guidelines-for-administrators-and-crisis-teams>

¹² <http://universitylife.columbia.edu/blog/office-university-life-blog/2017/01/responding-loss>

field of suicide prevention and response when considering the ultimate implementation of these recommendations.

First, the response to tragedy will require some form of stock email to the student body from the administration outlining the resources available to students, but this is the bare minimum—a necessary but insufficient condition. The complete response from the university must be greater than a stock email in order to stem the feelings of disdain, frustration, and immense sadness that students feel following the death of a peer.

We suggest a response that cultivates healing; our proposed response is diagramed above in Figure 1. Within one week of a student death, a vigil and a town hall with psychologists should be planned. The dean of the deceased student should be compelled to attend these vigils and town halls. We want students to trust and connect with administrators, so they will pursue the resources that have been laid out for them. Having administrators attend these vigils would testify to their empathy and reduce the perception that administrators are not involved in the wider undergraduate community. In addition, this would give the deans a chance to connect with their students in a time of great need. As an additional step, the president's or dean's office can offer to meet more privately with individuals to understand causes. The details surrounding these events must be communicated in the aforementioned form email to the student body in addition to the resources that are typically enumerated in post-tragedy communication.

Moreover, the university should waive mandatory attendance for all lectures and labs on the day of and the day following the student's death, as is done at other schools.¹³ While some students may take advantage of this policy, the benefit of reducing immediate stresses on campus during a time of grieving would outweigh any such drawbacks. This policy should always be communicated in the aforementioned form email to students and to professors following campus tragedy. Along with the form email sent to the student body, emails should be sent out to RAs requiring them to hold floor meetings that are optional for their residents on the same day as the death.

Additionally, the administration, in collaboration with CPS, should make a greater effort to identify those students more affected by a death in the community. We recommend assigning this task to an individual administrator and using a more proactive approach of directing resources to individuals in the same class, year, and student organizations as the deceased. An institutionally mandated and more targeted outreach to students with a relationship to the victim, rather than just blanket emails, would better mend the deepest wounds of our community.

¹³ Mt. Sinai Icahn School of Medicine

It is important that a genuine response reach every student, especially those that are not involved in student organizations and may feel that they are on the fringe of the university. A significant fraction of recent student suicides were by students who had recently come to Columbia and may not have been integrated fully with university life.

Following the immediate response by the administration and community, we believe demographic information about students who commit or attempt suicide should be collected and analyzed in order to better understand mental health stressors at Columbia. Friends and close colleagues of the victims should be able, but not mandated, to give statements that might further elucidate the circumstances surrounding such a tragedy. Moreover, personal identities, living conditions, and professional interests should be examined for trends. From a student's perspective, a tragedy in the community is a chance for further discussion, but it often feels that the administration moves on all too quickly without a chance for deeper reflection. We believe that more data on these deaths would better inform future policy decisions, and we believe that reports to both the Columbia administrators and student leaders would help to identify the risk factors that lead to suicidal ideation.



Figure 2. Airport kiosk used to determine flyer satisfaction.

On the subject of data collection, we feel that additional data about student sentiment ought to be collected in order to better assess stress levels as well as bridge the barrier between student and

administrative perspectives. Currently the main source of this data is the Senate's Quality of Life survey. While this is an incredibly valuable resource, more sustained data collection is also required. As an example, RAs in dorms have semesterly 'connect conversations' with each student, and it would be possible for data from these meetings to be collected in aggregate. Further, kiosks similar to those used in airports could be used to assess service quality to determine the general level of happiness of students (Figure 2). Such kiosks to record mood could be placed near dining halls and other frequently commuted areas.

The recommendations throughout this section are rooted in the fundamental belief that resources should be easily and immediately accessible to those students who are grieving. The onus should not be on the aggrieved to make excessive requests from professors and from the administration. We must, therefore, actively work to diminish the stress that these students are already feeling following the loss of a classmate, peer, and friend by making the implicit response to a death one of caring, understanding, and empathy.

Conclusion

Broadly, the recommendations within this document address two principal concerns: that our campus identity is predicated on stress, and that the university's response to campus tragedy is insufficient. Our Engineering Student Council writes with utmost urgency and implores your offices to address the systemic challenges we have outlined above. We eagerly await action from the central administration, and we hope and pray that our efforts may help save the lives of our peers, colleagues, and friends.

Acknowledgements

The co-authors acknowledge the invaluable support from the members of the Engineering Student Council's Policy Committee. Without their assistance in research, drafting, and editing, this document would not have been possible. The co-authors further recognize the related work of our collegiate undergraduate student councils. We believe that the unanimous devotion toward the improvement of mental health on our campus highlights the urgency with which these issues must be addressed.