Graduate Diversity and Inclusion Committee   
Meeting Notes 1/30/17

In our December meeting we met to prioritize five goals and recommendations from the Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Report. Richard was able to share and discuss these priorities with the Dean of the Graduate School, Mark Wallace.

To make it easy to follow these notes and since I like to color code things, I’ve color coded the discussion points below. Each of our five priorities is listed in black. Notes from the discussion Richard had with Dean Wallace on these priorities are in blue. And below those discussion points are the comments from our committee meeting on 1/30/17 in green. Action items for the committee are summarized at the end of the document.

* Institutionalize and scale up successful, bridge programs through which Vanderbilt is already a national leader, such as the Fisk-Vanderbilt Bridge Program, the Initiative for Maximizing Student Diversity (IMSD) program, and the Vanderbilt-Meharry Alliance.
  + Ifeoma Nwankwo from the office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion is spearheading this initiative.
  + Yay! Should we send her an email showing appreciation for her work and letting her know that we are excited about this?
  + Because Dr. Nwankwo is taking care of this we are not taking further action at this time.
* Establish annual assessment of cost of living in Nashville, particularly within nearby commuting distance to Vanderbilt. Ensure that students are paid a living wage that can support the costs of living in an increasingly competitive rental market. (*Addition: This assessment and adjustment of pay in accordance with cost of living should be holistic in order to include factors such as the cost of health insurance, child care, and travel.*)
  + Dean Wallace thinks this might already be in practice or is going to be in practice soon.
  + If we wanted to look into this in more detail we’d have to check in with the Provost.
  + I know from my research as Student Life Liaison for the Graduate Student Council the School of Engineering, the School of Medicine, and the College of Arts and Sciences does consider the cost of living when deciding their minimum stipend.
  + As of right now, we are not taking further action on this.
* Sustain and expand the Diversity Recruitment Office for Graduate Education (VU-EDGE), and increase collaboration with programs such as AccessStem (pairs students with disabilities with faculty mentors) and The KC Potter Center.
  + Right now VU-EDGE focuses mostly on recruitment but they want to expand their focus on retention. Dean Wallace has tasked our committee with suggesting ways to do this.
  + Why are students leaving?
  + Check Graduate Student Perspectives Survey to see if we can find reasons as to why students leave. Also check department resources, I know some departments send out exit surveys so maybe someone has data on this.
  + We need to know what the scope of Don’s office covers and what things they can implement effectively in order to make useful suggestions about retention. What dimensions of diversity does the office focus on? We need to set up a meeting with Don Brunson.
* Provide best practice training on the appropriate use of GRE scores to reduce reliance on these measures, which can lead to a severe constriction on the pool of women and minority graduate students. Adopt best practice approaches in holistic admissions as recommended by the Council of Graduate Schools, including holistic admissions toolkits developed at Vanderbilt, enabling greater graduate diversity and greater measures of excellence in graduate education such as PhD completion rates.
  + As we know, GRE scores tend to cut out people from historically marginalized populations and they often are not accurate. Dean Wallace has information and data showing this that he wants to share with DGSs to show them that using GRE scores is a problem.
  + How should Dean Wallace present this as a problem to the DGSs?
  + How should we use GRE scores and what are some alternatives to GRE scores?
  + We want Dean Wallace to ask departments how they use GRE scores at the moment. What do GRE scores mean for the departments? Knowing this will help understand current practices and think of alternatives.
  + What have other universities done about this issue? We aren’t the first ones to address this issue. We need a volunteer from the committee to look into this question and report back! See list of Vanderbilt’s aspirational peers in other notes section to know which schools to look into first.
* Create an introductory or orientation session through PCC that is geared towards issues specific to graduate students, particularly self-care and stress management. Informing incoming graduate students that these are common issues can help to reduce stigma around the PCC and help students to recognize the resources available there. (*Addition: The PCC resources should also be more representative.*)
  + There is a slot reserved in the upcoming student orientation for this purpose.
  + How should this session be presented? Who should present it?
  + Is this a 3 minute slot or do we get a little longer? We would like to have a little longer of time if possible to show that this is a priority for Vanderbilt and an important issue for them to consider.
  + We want to say “This is ok!” and reduce stigma, how do we do this?
  + Right now we are leaning towards having students present this because the message might have more impact on the incoming class if it comes from students.
  + We need more input from the committee before deciding how to move forward with this. This might be a good summer initiative but we don’t know who is going to be around this summer.

Other notes:

* Erica and Lucy need to get the survey data from the diversity section in our Graduate Student Perspectives survey to the committee ASAP!
* In this current political climate some students may request that the GSC or the GDI make a statement or take a stance on political issues. GSC is an inclusive organization and we will support all students. GSC is happy to make a statement expressing this. We are choosing not to take a political stance because we don’t want to alienate any student. At some point students may approach GSC or the GDI committee and ask that they form an active group that promotes community. Due to our limited capacity as involved graduate students we do not want to assume that our committee can balance this additional workload. If students ask for an active group GSC will work with the GDI to recruit a new committee of students to serve as this active group, modeled off of Vanderbilt Students in Solidarity.
* If you know of an event that is geared to support students GSC is capable of co-sponsoring this event. For example: If ISSS hosts an event where they provide students a quite space to take a break from the chaos that they might be experiencing, GSC could provide refreshments for this event. We feel this is one way we can support students. Please let GSC know about any of these opportunities.
* Also, Dean Wallace wants to meet with us once a month! Woot! That is really cool because it will help us be more effective and hold both our committee and him accountable for our goals.
* There is a lot happening in the realm of diversity and inclusion but there is not a lot of connectivity between schools and departments. How do we connect people and get them to these great resources?
* Vanderbilt’s aspirational peers (according to Wallace and google):
  + Duke
  + Emory
  + Northwestern
  + Wash U
  + Case Western
  + U of Chicago
  + Harvard, Stanford, Yale – might be very inspirational…

IMMEDIATE ACTION ITEMS:

* Should we send Dr. Nwankwo an email showing appreciation for her work and letting her know that we are excited about scaling up the bridge programs?
* Erica and Lucy need to get the survey data from the diversity section in our Graduate Student Perspectives survey to the committee ASAP!
* Erica will set up a meeting with Don Brunson to discuss VU-EDGE.
* We need a volunteer from the committee to look into alternatives for GRE scores that other universities have implemented and report back!
* We need more feedback from the committee on the mental health conversation at orientation before knowing how to move forward.