

DEI Committee Meeting Notes
Wednesday, March 3 -- 4:15-6:00pm

Attendees: Pamela Bjorkman, Michael Dickinson, Mary Kennedy, Shelley Diamond, Derrick Morton, Matthew Alexander, Jean Badroos, & Leo Green

Invited Attendee: BBE Faculty member

Sink or Swim Culture in BBE:

In a previous conversation with the invited BBE faculty member and Mary Kennedy, the faculty member brought up a trend that they see with how some faculty treat their graduate students. Within the division, there is a sink or swim mentality that some faculty have toward their graduate students. Students that are left alone to figure things out on their own or with minimal guidance from their PI's are left alone to fail. The faculty member stated that, "It's important to fail within the first two year but if the student keeps failing, it's on their PI". This could become problematic for URM graduate students. If a PI were to take on an URM, there has to be an important level of commitment. Is it possible to have some faculty not take on graduate students?

Mary Kennedy commented on how within the past couple of decades, science has become hypercompetitive. Journals expect more and more from papers compared to how it was maybe 15 years ago. This mentality has/can create a hypercompetitive environment for graduate students to publish in good papers, which in turn can lead to good postdoc positions.

With that being said, being a graduate student now is very different now then it was back then PI could make the decision that their style of mentoring graduate students would be to let them go and find their own projects and get it started on their own. This doesn't work anymore and has caused some graduate students damage. There's no way we can tell faculty what to do or how to treat their grad students but there can be a discussion on how the environment is now.

** Action item: The invited faculty member talks to Richard Murray (BBE Chair) about this discussing this topic in the next business meeting.

Pamela Bjorkman mentions that in committee meetings the student PI is asked to leave the room and the rest of the committee interview the student about their PI which is a new policy. The invited faculty member has heard mostly negative comments about PIs from the students.

-Pamela asks for feedback about this from Jean, Matthew, Leo and Derrick on this mentality. Before they answer, the invited faculty member mentions how when they were a postdoc, their mentor was very hands off but was upfront about that in the beginning. The invited faculty member further states that since we cannot bar faculty from taking on students, we can strongly encourage them to do the research and due diligence on how their potential PI is and how they treat their lab members.

Jean Badroos, a graduate student in BMB, being an ultra-cautious person herself knowing what projects she wanted to work on coming from a previously bad experience, she chose her PI and the ones she rotated with very carefully. Stated she prefers a PI is slightly off her back. In one of the graduate options, there is one PI who is notorious for not getting along with their grad students yet people still rotate with that person. Even the idea of being warned may not be as effective because in grad school, students can be hopeful that you'll do good and get past any issue.

Pamela asks, what could we do to help this situation? Shelley Diamond suggests mentoring for professorships for URM students and for the students on how to communicate their problems/needs. The invited faculty member suggested another PI to talk with the student, possibly over food or coffee.

Mary mentioned that the PI that needs mentoring won't do it. Having a discussion will put this out in the open.

Michael Dickinson adds that Caltech faculty have the most power and are less resilient to feedback. Other university where he's worked at has a person whose job it was, within the graduate program, to look out for situations.

The idea of having faculty members, who may or may not be as active, within the division be a person who meets with graduate students casually to see how they're doing. If an issue would be presented, they could step in to help. Having a person to ask "how are you doing?" is important.

Derrick Morton mentioned during his time at Emory University, it's important for URM students to have a cohort to rely on for scientifically, moving to a new city, being on campus, and resources for help if needed. Having programs as such can help. He was an Institutional Research and Academic Career Development Awards (IRACDA) fellow where he mentored URM students.

Leo mentioned that Caltech is a small campus but isn't ready for an influx of URM students because it lacks resources to support them. Developing those types of programs can aid in their success at Caltech.

Leo's Purdue Black Trailblazers in Engineering Conference:

Four day & all day conference with workshops and panels the faculties perspective on being faculty and a minority faculty member and discussing some of their success/failures and strategies on overcoming those failures. Other workshops included: getting ready for the job market.

Pamela asks if there was anything during the conference that would be good at Caltech? Having attended the event Leo is now a BTE fellow and getting recognition from Caltech would be great. To do this as a department to recruit undergraduate students that are interested in graduate school, have juniors come out for lab work over the summer to transition them into the grad program with a fellowship/recognition. Having past grad students speak on topics such as the ones from the conference.

BBE has a Rosen fellowship that has a Biotech aspect to it that is similar.

Caltech Shines:

This is an event for prospective grads who have already been admitted to Caltech to further discuss the institute and what it has to offer a grad student. The event will have three sessions, one of which will introduce the attendees to all the campus resources, a welcome from the president of Caltech, the head of the graduate program, a town hall on student life and other topics created from a survey sent out, and a gather town style meetup to discuss the culture at caltech.

GE 298:

Is a 3 unit credit class to do science outreach. The student can take this class as many times as they want. This class is an option to have outreach with minimal to funding required to the person; the exchange would be credit. Pamela has brought this up to Richard to be added to the catalog. This can be helpful for the student that would apply for faculty positions. Nowadays, some universities are asking for diversity type statements.

Website:

The committee names, the charge, the committee email address, the dei reps proposal and a table listing them will be added to the DEI site.

As time progresses, more will be added such as Derrick's PEER proposal.

**Ask WiBBE for images.