

DEI Committee Meeting Notes Wednesday, June 9 -- 4:15-6pm

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

PEER Program Update:

The PEER program has 7 students who will be participating this summer, 2021.

Badroos Optional second advisor pitch:

The BBE-related option reps were invited to the meeting to discuss the topic.

Attended: Bil Clemons (BMB), Henry Lester (NB), Mitch Guttman (MD/PhD), Long Cai (BE), Thanos Siapas (CNS)

Absent: David Prober (Bi), Alex Sessions (Geobiology)

Second Advisor Write Up from Jean Badroos: With a diversifying campus, we need to provide more resources to ensure we do not just recruit students to watch them drown on campus. One approach that we could realistically implement as soon as next year is a check-system for advisors—providing the option of a second advisor to meet every two months.

Though one could hope an advisor could be personable and learn to understand their new students backgrounds and how it influences their work style, that of course is not the case and requires a lot of re-learning for an advisor. This becomes a problem because of the structure of graduate programs; students have an advisor above them and little else that they directly must answer to or could go to for advice, intensifying any already difficult and trapped feelings a student may have. This struggle exists for everyone, but falls disproportionately on students with diverse and historically unrepresented backgrounds. It can make their experience unfairly more difficult as they either struggle to work harder than their peers, take longer, face general discomfort, and can drop disproportionately more.

By offering incoming students the option to have either a faculty member or senior post doc 'second advisor' of sorts to meet with every two months or so, this problem could be mitigated. Not every student would even want this, but providing an option in itself is meaningful. This approach would also provide a way for someone as myself to encourage peers in BSEC to take advantage of this opportunity—as could be done in other identity-based groups and clubs. To offer this upfront and as a sort of advisor is also more meaningful than simply assuming students can find support and advice from elder grad students or post docs. It is a simple effort that shows Caltech itself is worried and supportive of *all* its students, and does not just expect certain groups to figure out and put in disproportionately more work. It also is different to think of an advisor as someone that Caltech recognizes as a legitimate source of support rather than a friend.

Prober's Thoughts:

Sorry, I can't make the meeting, but I like this idea (and have been discussing with Richard), especially since students with problems usually only come to option representatives as a last resort, and if they have a 2nd mentor who is more involved then it is more likely that small problems can be resolved before they become big problems that are harder to solve. I suggest that we ask faculty to self-identify as interested in serving as 2nd advisors to help ensure that students are not assigned to faculty who are not particularly interested or helpful. A faculty

member rather than a senior postdoc would probably be more effective and also would be a better sign that the faculty are committed to the success of our students.

Two ideas for the Option Reps and Richard Murray:

Idea 1: Instigating a Faculty advocates program (for Option Reps)

1) Survey faculty in your option to find volunteers to serve as a faculty advocate. The faculty advocate agrees to meet with the student two or more times during the fall term, and then quarterly (or more) thereafter. At the point that the student forms a thesis committee, the student could elect to have their thesis committee chair serve in this role or could continue with the faculty advocate.

2) Upon identifying faculty willing to serve as Faculty Advocates, Option reps meet with a compiled list of potential advocates and then assign no more than two students per faculty volunteer.

3) At beginning of fall term, each faculty advocate contacts their student to arrange to meet.

Idea 2: Reinstate refreshment gatherings (donut, beverage, tea, etc.) once a month in different BBE spaces (for Richard). (This would need funding.)

The gatherings could be sponsored by individual labs and then advertised with posters and announcements. It hasn't worked to assign this to students since this ends up being too much work for them. But with >60 labs in BBE, hosting monthly gatherings (e.g., every third Thursday or Friday of each month) would happen only once very several years for each lab. Donut hour could be at 10:30am and tea/beverage hour could be at 3pm or 4pm. Lauren Breeyear says she would be willing to plan these events.