

Social Concerns Committee
January 27, 2020
Minutes of the Meeting

These minutes reflect discussion and debate at a meeting of a committee of the University of Minnesota Senate; none of the comments, conclusions or actions reported in these minutes reflect the views of, nor are they binding on, the senate, the administration or the Board of Regents.

[**In these minutes:** Honors Spotlight Series 2020-21; Working Group Reports; Systemwide Strategic Plan]

PRESENT: Aseem Kaul (chair), Leif Anderson, Katherine Arnold, Jeff Bieganek, Linda Frizzell, Becca Gercken, Hyunjoo Im, Mary Kurth, William Larson, Katsumi Matsuomo, Nicole Smiley, Jim Stemper, Boris Volkov, Sonja Zbinden

REGRETS: Ingrid Nuttall, Roselin Victor

ABSENT: Zachary Fischer, Rachel Miller, Leah Peterson, Sarah Sexton, Molly Schwartz

GUESTS: Matt Bribitzer-Stull, director, University Honors Program; Michael Goh, vice president, Equity and Diversity

OTHERS: Julie Reuvers, special assistant to the vice provost and dean, Office for Student Affairs; Megan Sweet, assistant to the president, Office of the President

1. Honors Spotlight Series 2020-21

Professor Aseem Kaul, chair, called the meeting to order and introduced Matt Bribitzer-Stull, director, University Honors Program, who was present to talk about the Honors Spotlight Series. Bribitzer-Stull informed members that previously, the program was a lecture series, and was highly successful. In 2020-21, he continued, the lecture format will be modified to include discussions and the topics will focus around polarized identities. There will be three events per semester, and they are free and open to all.

The first event, on September 24, 2020, will focus on political polarization, said Bribitzer-Stull. They are partnering with Better Angels, an organization that works to encourage healthy political dialogue between people with different viewpoints. A red/blue pair from Ohio is slated to speak on how polarization has affected them.

Other topics during the year will include dance, race, and cultural appropriation; generational differences; urban and rural identities; and religious identities.

Kaul thanked Bribitzer-Stull and asked whether Social Concerns would like to host any events in conjunction with these topics, especially the political polarization topic, which has been discussed multiple times in the committee.

Linda Frizzell expressed concern that none of the topics related to American Indian communities. Bribitzer-Stull replied that they had not yet identified speakers for the subsequent topics, and that they had ideas on how to involve indigenous communities in some of them. Notably, he remarked, there are often stereotypes about the urban versus rural dichotomy, and considering indigenous communities in this conversation could help break down these stereotypes.

Bribitzer-Stull added that the current lecture series is on environmental justice, focusing on different marginalized communities and how climate change and policy affect these groups.

Kaul thanked Bribitzer-Stull for his time, and he departed.

2. Working Group Reports

Next, Kaul asked the working groups to provide updates to the committee.

Reporting for the Voter Turnout working group, Jim Stemper told members that President Gabel had signed the University onto the [Big Ten Voting Challenge](#) again. The University was one of the two winners in the midterms a couple of years ago, he stated.

Stemper reported that the working group had done a few case studies, looking at what the [University of Minnesota](#), the [University of Wisconsin](#), and [Northwestern University](#) have done in terms of encouraging student voter turnout. All three are utilizing leadership from student government, emails from the president, social media, and events, summarized Stemper; and some are doing outreach during Welcome Week and/or in the residence halls, and encouraging early voting.

Kaul noted that there is a budget assigned for the Voting Challenge, and recommended reaching out to the Office of the President to see what their plans are. Possibly, he said, the Social Concerns Committee could come up with a list of initiatives or programs to recommend, ideally by the end of spring 2020.

Kaul then asked committee members their thoughts on putting together an event to coincide with the Honors Spotlight Series event on political polarization. He reminded members that campus culture and bullying had been one of the proposed agenda items for the year; even though the committee did not select it as one of the three main initiatives to work on this year, this could be an opportunity to take action related to that issue. Nicole Smiley observed that the Honors Spotlight was scheduled for 3:30 - 5:00 p.m., so organizing another long event afterwards may be inadvisable. She suggested organizing a conversation in a small group setting. Mary Kurth asked whether expanding the discussion was where the committee wanted to focus its attention, rather than, for example, bringing voter registration information to the Honors Spotlight event. Kaul suggested possibly organizing a tabling event for student groups and other voting-related information in conjunction with the Honors Spotlight would be a good activity.

Kurth asked if there was time to organize something before the presidential primary in March; members felt that there was not, but noted that the committee could provide some

recommendations to the University regarding future primaries. Smiley asked whether the University would send any communication to students regarding the primary. Stemper said he did not know, but speculated that there may be some concern around that in terms of appearing partisan. Anderson reflected that he had not heard a lot of talk amongst students about voting or the primary or registering to vote, and suggested engaging students around this issue through tabling in the residence halls.

Boris Volkov noted that Northwestern University has student ambassadors making classroom presentations and suggested that that would be a good idea, if there is not already such an initiative at the University of Minnesota. He also recommended engaging faculty in an effort to create a culture of voting. Kaul said that having resources that faculty could direct students toward would be useful and proposed that if such resources already exist, the president or provost's office could send an email directing faculty to them.

William Larson said he would like to work with the University of Minnesota Alumni Association to encourage alumni to vote, also.

Becca Gercken expressed frustration that the conversation thus far had focused on the Twin Cities, adding that [Government and Community Relations](#) was working on getting the student vote out. Kaul remarked that he felt this issue would apply across the system. Gercken informed members that the Morris campus has greater than 80% voter turnout and emphasized the importance of finding out what the other system campuses are already doing and how to coordinate efforts. Kaul acknowledged that it would be good to hear what has worked at Morris and whether similar initiatives could be effective on other campuses.

Frizzell noted that many students are afraid to declare their party affiliation, and emphasized that faculty should serve all political groups, not just two. Stemper agreed, referencing a [recent article](#) in the *Star Tribune* on that subject.

Kaul proposed that the working group present a list of recommendations to the full committee at the committee's next meeting.

Kaul then announced that the Mental Health working group was waiting on the results of the systemwide mental health environmental scan, which will be presented to the Board of Regents at the February 13th meeting of that body.

Smiley reported that the Environmental Issues work group had not yet met. She distributed notes that she took in a meeting with Shane Stennes, director, Sustainability, regarding transportation. She added that Professor Scot Adams, who originally [brought the Put a Price On It Initiative issue to the committee](#), had asked whether the committee had decided to move forward on that front. She said that the working group would discuss and bring a recommendation to the full committee at its February meeting.

Kaul commented that the benchmarking work the Voter Turnout group had done was good, and recommended that the other work groups do that, as well.

3. Systemwide Strategic Plan

Finally, Kaul welcomed Dr. Michael Goh, vice president, Office for Equity and Diversity (OED). With the aid of a [PowerPoint](#), Goh gave the committee a status update on the Systemwide Strategic Plan and sought feedback on the draft goals under Commitment #4, Community & Belonging. The draft goals presented were:

- 1) Inspire belonging within a community of diverse people and ideas.
- 2) Advance understanding and enduring partnerships.
- 3) Foster an inclusive and positive campus climate.

Frizzell mentioned that many of her students do not like the word “diverse,” and would prefer more specificity about what that really means. Goh said he understood; he emphasized that the definition of diversity is broad, but that OED does have an official definition that specifies what it considers to fall under that umbrella term.

Kaul suggested that exploring the balance between inclusivity and the free exchange of ideas could be an action item. He told Goh that the committee has had numerous discussions on this topic, especially around conservatives feeling unwelcome in what is traditionally a liberal environment. Goh confirmed that there will be some action items that address this issue; an example might be helping equio faculty to facilitate, welcome, and encourage difficult conversations. He added that the Center for Educational Innovation has training around this.

With regard to the first draft goal, Gercken proposed including a reference to multiple ways of knowing.

Larson suggested including a reference to fostering a safe, in addition to welcoming, campus climate.

Megan Sweet, assistant to the president, Office of the President, stated that the plan would not be final until the regents vote on it at their meeting in June; she encouraged members to reach out with additional feedback. She added that once the goals are formed, someone will return for consultation around action items. Finally, Sweet said that the commitments are not meant to be interpreted as separate or linear; rather, they are more like cogs or a network that all must work together to reach actualization.

Kaul thanked Goh for his time and adjourned the meeting.

Amber Bathke
University Senate Office