New campus protest policy causes anger among student activists despite reassurances

TechNews sat down with Dean of Students Katie Stetz on Friday, September 16th for an interview prompted by these changes, spanning nearly an hour and a half of thorough questions directly and indirectly related to the policy itself. Stetz's office is ultimately responsible for the text of the Code of Conduct, and changes to the Student Handbook in general. Stetz is also the public face for any policy changes, and interfaces with students directly when questions arise from those changes. As she stated while first turning to the topic of the new behavior policy, "I'm the spokesperson for it, and I'll own it."

While Stetz's Office of Student Affairs bears primary responsibility for the content of the Code of Conduct, she did not work alone when revising the university's rules for students. The entire code was revamped this year, spurred by the need to update the university's rules for Title IX compliance (which covers gender discrimination and sexual assault cases at the federal level), and the significance of those changes brought Illinois Tech Provost Frances Bronet and General Counsel Anthony D. D'Amato to the table to forward a policy that would benefit the university and its students while fulfilling all necessary legal obligations. Bronet has been popular among student activists for her humanistic demeanor, often serving as a perceived balancing force for those who see university administration as excessively pragmatic when taken as a whole. Last semester, she spoke highly of the concept of student activism at the Spring President and Provost Forum.

When asked directly whether any portion of the revised Code of Conduct was written as a reaction to the protests last semester by USA, Stetz answered emphatically in the negative. The new Section 9 of the code was a piece of a larger expansion of the vocabulary of many sections of the text, she asserted, and was simply meant to clarify and detail the university's pre-existing policy. "This exists so that we have a way to hold people accountable if there's disruption in the university," she stated, adding that the key word of focus for the language's enforcement was in determining whether an action was "unsafe." She also explained that her office would typically not decide to enforce the policy on its own, and that the majority of disciplinary actions under the Code of Conduct stemmed from complaints by students, faculty, and staff. The previous, shorter disruption policy held people accountable "mostly when there was violence", Stetz professed, and the new policy was intended largely to serve the same purpose.

TechNews asked specifically whether either of USA's two demonstrations last semester would have led to punishment if the newly expanded policy had been in place at the time. Stetz answered that the group's initial event and March was certainly within the bounds of the policy, since it did not obstruct the regular business of the university or disrupt any university functions. She stated that a very strict interpretation of the language could have seen the group running afoul of the code, since USA's large slate of speakers during the President and Provost Forum prevented students not associated with them from bringing their concerns forward during the time-limited event, but stressed that such application of the policy "would be student-driven". If no students saw USA's actions as disruptive and no reports were made to that effect, no disciplinary proceedings would be initiated. On this point, Stetz expanded by asking "who am I to decide what is important to the students?"

Part of the overarching issue, Stetz claimed, is general student knowledge of how the investigation and disciplinary process takes place. "Complaints open up the conversation," she said, but a complaint itself is not destined to result in punishment. While the new policy is very broad in scope, it is theoretically only intended to be applied in extreme circumstances.

TechNews questioned Stetz about the university's plans to pass down that interpretation of the policy to new administrators over time so that it would not be used overzealously in the future to stifle dissent, and compared the relatively brief and vague statements in Section 9 to the vast set of enforcement guidelines used by the University of Chicago to supplement its Code of Conduct. Stetz said that no current plans were in place for such guidelines to be drafted, but "if there's a proposal to change the language in this particular number 9, I think between PSAC and SGA I would be more than happy to review whatever it is [those organizations] believe is better for the student body", referring to the President's Student Advisory Council and the Student Government Association, both of which are tasked with being a voice for student input. The biggest challenge to such an action, she added, was that "when there's a group of people who don't trust, I don't know how to respond in a way that will build that trust." For those groups of students who inherently distrust administrative actions, Stetz feared that any step could be interpreted in a negative light, a problem that perhaps could not be totally solved.

TechNews sought comment from a number of student activists, leaders, and others to share their stance on the new policy and the conversation surrounding it. One, who preferred to remain anonymous, focused on the university's private nature, and its ability to restrict speech rights on privately-owned property: "Most of us are paying thousands of dollars for an education and expect the best possible product for our money. We don't come to IIT to listen to protests; we don't want to be blocked from going to classes because of a certain cause . . . IIT has an obligation to provide their customers with the best quality product, and preventing disruptions to the learning environment is part of this obligation." Ibrahimovic, on the other hand, referred to his original Facebook post: "This was not even communicated to students who had been here for years, but rather slipped into the student handbook, thinking that we would not notice. This is malicious intent. When you tell students that you are promoting protest for the sake of bettering the school, and then simultaneously making it against the rules of the university to publicly gather, you are setting up an environment where students risk being kicked out of the school because you have a problem with what they want to say."

Most opinions fell somewhere in the middle, expressing deep concern about the broadness of the expanded policy and the lack of published rules for how it should be applied while also remaining hopeful for an ethical approach to its application. While some remain convinced that Illinois Tech drafted Section 9 to prevent actions like those taken by USA last year, others believe that the definition of "disruption" will be narrow, and this campus will remain open to protests and demonstrations as long as they remain peaceful. As one commenter opined, "only observation over time will demonstrate whether the policy is enforced as heavy-handedly as its language allows, but what's most important is how we as students react. If we allow ourselves to feed into the assumption that this school's leadership is out to get us and are incapable of productive dialog, we won't ever be able to effectively push for changes to the policy. If we put some faith in our administration's care for its students, however, and sit down at a table to figure this out, then we might find a compromise that benefits us all."

Staff Spotlight: Carolyn Nivling, School of Applied Technology

Khaleela Zaman
TECHNEWS WRITER

Riding up the elevator in the Tower is usually not very exciting. Wouldn't it help to be greeted by a smiling face while walking into the office on the 14th floor after turning right? Entering the School of Applied Technology (SAT) office in Suite 14B of the Tower, no one can help smiling back to Carolyn Nivling. She is the one sitting behind the desk, ready to greet anyone who might stop in. Nivling is currently the SAT Assistant Director of Student Services, also dealing with alumni relations. Nearly a year ago, Nivling was promoted from her previous position with Illinois Tech as the Information Technology and Management (ITM) Assistant Coordinator. ITM is a department within the School of Applied Technology, and the SAT needed someone to assist with events. Since Nivling has a background in event planning, marketing, and mentoring students and volunteers, she stepped right up to the plate, assisting with commencement planning for the SAT in the spring of 2016.

In her current role as SAT Assistant Director of Student Services, Nivling handles the event planning for all SAT-wide events. Some of these SAT events include the New Student Breakfast, Alumni Day, Annual Barbecue, Haunted House during Family Weekend, Senior Week, and Spring Commencement. Approximately 50% of the events Nivling plans are new, some of which are alumni-related as well as the

Photo by Khaleela Zaman

Haunted House. Nivling also deals with the SAT ambassadors, who are students in good standing that mentor younger students in the college and act as representatives of the School of Applied Technology.

In her position, Nivling is able "to wear many hats." Not only does she enjoy being involved with planning all these events for students, she also loves "really getting to know students, interacting and empowering them to get more involved in their school."

Nivling likes being busy as well, and since this position is constantly evolving and changing, it's perfect for her. "Probably the other huge thing" for Nivling is her ability to work with a team to get these projects done, which she really enjoys.

No job is completely perfect, and this position also has its difficulties: "There's a perception that events will just presto magic *snap* happen." However, there are a lot of details involved in event planning. There is another challenge with events, though, as they depend tremendously on volunteer participation: "Without that my job would not be successful."

Nivling truly appreciates how "the university as a whole seems very open to innovative entrepreneurial advancement of students." She also likes how Illinois Tech is very supportive and open to event ideas, as the SAT works to achieve their goal to create events that enhance the experience of its students. For all Illinois Tech students, Nivling advises that "if you have an opportunity to get involved in something you're passionate about or volunteer for, IIT is a great opportunity for that. You shouldn't be afraid to try something." She also understands how, especially "in this digital age," events provide a great and unique opportunity for students to create new relationships and collaborations with other students and even alumni.

If anyone is interested in volunteering with the SAT and Nivling for their Haunted House during Family Weekend (on Saturday, October 15), please contact her directly by email at cnivling@iit.edu.