

President's Council on BU and the Global Future Student Services and Student Life Subcommittee Report

With approximately 30,000 students Boston University generally faces the challenge of creating community. Many universities organize themselves around campus traditions and sporting events to bring their students together creating a sense of community pride and attachment to the institution. These issues also resonate with the 4,500 strong international student population at Boston University. The University is confronted with inherent structural problems which are an impediment to creating community, including the lack of community space, geography of the campus, and finances.

The lack of community space is central to this discussion. Other universities have focused their attention on creating an environment where disparate international groups have the opportunity to cross paths on a formal and informal basis. Georgetown University's International Center was noted as an example. The President's Council has already discussed the establishment of an Institute for Global Studies, which would be the guiding body in the University's realization of its global mission. BU students, faculty, staff, and visitors would all have a central place to learn and share information. As the focus of international activities on campus and around the world, the Institute for Global Studies would also cater to the specific needs of particular groups within the larger BU international community (possibly along religious, political, ethnic, or social lines). Providing a place where different groups intersect through academic, social, and cultural programming would greatly increase the flow of information that gets lost in the simple geography of an urban campus like Boston University. It would also allow for the greater pooling of financial resources for increased visibility/viability of programs.

Boston University's extensive network of "specialty housing", grouped mostly by language (Russian, Spanish, French, etc.), is an opportunity to bridge some of the gaps in cross-cultural communication. What is the role of these houses and how might they be enhanced to achieve institutional goals? Who lives there? Are they populated with domestic students or are they largely international? Additional programming and -coordination of activities in the specialty houses might be the first step in our globalization efforts until something like the Institute for Global Studies can be realized.

Financial aid for international students is also a major issue. Many of the brightest international undergraduate students cannot afford Boston University even with a half or full tuition merit scholarship. These students are highly sought after by competitor universities with greater resources. At both the undergraduate and graduate levels, it is important to find ways of increasing funding for international students. Additional financial aid for international students could be used strategically in recruitment and retention. It is suggested that a group of Council members meet with the new Vice President for Development about our concerns. Engaging parents early in the development process is key with many international students. There should also be regional development initiatives with perhaps a challenge/match scholarship program.

(The University would match scholarship funds, or alumni groups would match individual gifts.) It is extremely important to establish patterns of giving early. Even small amounts establish a pattern that may be developed into something greater. (It is noted that some BU Schools/Colleges have alumni populations who are heavily subsidized and may find it difficult to give back to BU, especially Theology and Social Work etc.)

This subcommittee also recommends creating two surveys; one for incoming international students to collect information about their expectations and needs; and a second for outgoing students to see whether these expectations have been met or have changed over their time in Boston. It is important to establish a systematic way of evaluating international student needs and our institutional response. In doing so, it is important to look at potential problems (alcohol, drugs, psychological, tutorial) and whether Boston University is culturally attentive. While Boston University has many programs to help students in general, does the University respond adequately to the needs of the international population? What early warning indicators are in place to assist this population? ISSO should be involved in developing the surveys given their extensive experience with international students.

There should be a focus early in student orientation that specifically helps international students deal with unfamiliar issues (health care and insurance for example). Boston University does not currently have specific orientation days for international students. Undergraduate international students are folded into regular orientation programming, which is intended to provide a sense of belonging to the whole BU community. However, an international student interviewed in a focus group discussed how lost he felt during the orientation and registration process, trying to negotiate in a foreign language and foreign environment with a completely different set of expectations. Orientation for international graduate students is left to each department, school, or college with no central oversight from any campus organization. Thus, orientation for these students is uneven. Departments with large international populations may have advanced programs, while small departments may have very little in the way of counseling.

The subcommittee thus proposes interviewing additional student focus groups, visiting international centers at competitor universities, meeting with the new VP for Development, creating surveys for incoming and outgoing students, and reviewing orientation/counseling programs on the BU campus for international students.