April 30, 2007

Dear Colleagues:

By any measure, Boston University is a major private research university. Whether we look at the quality of our faculty, the quality and range of research and scholarship produced on both campuses, the qualifications and capabilities of our students, or the depth and breadth of our programs, there is abundant evidence of distinction and substance.

We stand at an important juncture in the University’s history, a place from which we can reflect on our legacy and set a course for the future. The planning process I set in motion in the winter of 2005 was intended to result in a strategic plan for the University—a plan that would establish priorities and provide the basis for programmatic decision-making and resource allocation. I am writing to report on the development of this plan and to outline next steps.

On April 14, I presented a draft strategic plan to the Board of Trustees. I am pleased to report that the Board endorsed this plan, which culminates a year of intensive community-wide discussion. This plan is described briefly in this letter and is available in the outline form I have used for presentations to the Board and other groups on my website at http://www.bu.edu/president/strategic-plan/. I invite members of the community to visit the page and study this document.

This online presentation document is the precursor to a more detailed written version of the approved plan that we will be preparing over the summer—but it is, as you will see—quite detailed in the definition of specific goals, actions, and metrics. A special meeting of the Faculty Assembly will be held Wednesday, May 2, at which I’ll be presenting the plan I presented to the Board.

I want to review the process that has led us to this juncture. We began with my request that the deans of our seventeen schools and colleges work with their faculties to develop individual school and college strategic plans. These were presented at a University leadership retreat held in April 2006. Following commencement, I asked a group of faculty members and University administrators to serve on a strategic planning task force. The task force’s charge was to think about the University as a whole, using the school and college plans as well as additional reports and briefings as the bases for its discussions. The group worked through the summer and submitted its report to me on December 1, which I then posted on the Boston University website. We solicited feedback via a variety of channels, including the online feedback “blog” and e-mail. Members of the task force and I visited schools and colleges for meetings with faculty
and staff. I met with the Faculty Council, the Faculty Council Executive Committee, and
the University Leaders’ Group for discussion of the task force’s report. And I made
presentations to the Faculty Assembly which provided further occasions for comment and
feedback.

I want to thank all the members of the University community who participated in
this important conversation about Boston University, its values, its priorities, and its rich
possibilities. The feedback we’ve received has been vitally important as we have moved
from the early work of writing individual plans for schools and colleges to the plan I
presented to the Board of Trustees. I also want to offer the observation that we have
traveled from the start to this point in our planning process (planning never really stops)
in a comparatively short span of time. Many university planning exercises take
considerably longer than the year and a half that we have used. But it was my view (one
shared, I believe, by my colleagues on the strategic planning task force and many others
in the University community) that it was critical to move forward expeditiously so that
we would have a sound basis for decision-making and for financial planning and
fundraising to support the priorities that emerged during our planning discussions.
Encouraged and inspired by the discussions we’ve had, I took the foundational work of
the plans from the schools and colleges, the report of the task force, and the many
thoughtful responses we received, and developed the plan approved by the Board of
Trustees.

The plan that I presented to the Board consists of five key elements:

1. A description of The Foundation of the University as it stands today.
2. Our Commitments—a refinement of the twelve commitments articulated by
the One BU report.
3. The Strategic Plan, which consists of a vision for the University (a
distillation of the commitments) and eight goals with specific accompanying
actions, investments, and metrics.
4. Critical Supporting Actions, which are not specific to the individual goals of
the plan but which are necessary preconditions for the successful
implementation of the plan.
5. A Financial Plan that describes how the goals of the strategic plan can be
achieved by a combination of annual deployment of new revenues and
increased fundraising.

During our “feedback phase” we heard the criticism that the report of the task
force was “aspirational.” I think this is true, meaning the report sought to define what the
University might aspire to become based upon shared values and foundational attributes.
But that aspirational quality was, I believe, a virtue.

The task force members came to agreement on a set of twelve “commitments”
that were the crystallization of common values and ideals. These, in turn, informed a
fairly general set of goals. The task force members consciously stopped short of
attempting an exhaustive prescription of choices. The Commitments will prove, I believe,
to be the enduring contribution of the task force. They provided the grist for our
University-wide discussions and are the core of the plan I presented to the Board of Trustees.

What should our Strategic Plan be called? The report of the strategic planning task force was entitled, *One BU*. Over the winter we talked a lot about this title, and its variant, *One Boston University*. Both prospective titles resonated within the University community because they described a way of thinking and working collaboratively, creating a university community with a unique focus on making the most of our intellectual and educational diversity. Although we will not lose the spirit of collective action and commitment described by the task force, the title *One BU* does not serve the broader purposes of the strategic plan, namely our presentation of the University to the outside world. The plan I presented to the Board was entitled *Forging Our Future by Choosing to Be Great*.

I believe that the Commitments described in our plan and the goals we set for ourselves can—with diligence and clear-eyed decision-making—raise the stature of Boston University so that it is counted among the great private universities in the world. The establishment of these goals will cause us to make difficult choices in virtually all operations of the University. The title *Choosing to Be Great* puts these choices in the context of the ultimate objective for Boston University. Having a plan is the first step, but it does not guarantee success. Success will come with the will to implement the plan or, at the very least, the discipline to assess ideas and initiatives not spelled out in the plan in light of the opportunity costs (to the timely achievement of planned goals) such ideas and initiatives might generate.

The Plan

Jim Collins in his book, *Good to Great*, writes about finding focus, suggesting that there are three key questions to answer in planning for organizational success.

- What are our core values?
- What can we be great at?
- What can we build an economic model for?

Collins suggests that it is when the answers to these three questions align, that an organization can have its most pronounced impact. Where do our values, our excellence, and our financial model align?

The Boston University that I have heard described by many people is a great, diverse research university with exceptional levels of collaboration among its faculty, students, and staff and with deep engagement with Boston and the world. Our faculty is composed of excellent teachers who are leaders in research, scholarship, and professional accomplishment. We are a university committed to rigorous, well-taught undergraduate education based on a foundation of the liberal arts and with modern opportunities for professional preparation. Our university has strong professional programs in law, medicine, management, dentistry, other health professions, and the fine arts. We have the foundations for excellence in research and scholarship with nationally recognized
programs led by our faculty in a growing number of disciplines, including the humanities, creative writing, physics, biomedical engineering, bioinformatics, and economics. We have developed a residential university in the heart of the city with aspirations to present itself to Boston through the performing arts and cultural life of the university community, and to work collaboratively with the city for the good of its residents. Importantly, we are a university with a tradition of inclusion, based on merit.

A university, by its nature, has a multitude of missions and a kaleidoscope of programs that support these various missions. Even so, the overarching view of Boston University as a great, diverse, residential, urban, research university defines the platform on which a multiplicity of missions and programs can be supported. Individual programs, viewed discretely, may not show either the perfect alignment of values, prospective excellence, or economic viability envisioned by Collins. It will be important to assess our various programs in these terms so we can articulate for ourselves their individual and shared roles in shaping the University we envision.

The Commitments

In articulating a set of commitments, the strategic planning task force offered the University community an answer to the question, “What are our core values?” These are summarized below as taken from the presentation on the website (more detail is described in that document).

1. Hire, promote, and retain faculty members who are excellent teachers and leaders in research, scholarship, and professional development.
2. Strengthen and enhance rigorous, well-taught undergraduate education founded on principles of the liberal arts and professional preparation.
3. Create unprecedented opportunities for all undergraduates by leveraging the strengths of our schools and colleges.
4. Enhance our professional schools and colleges, building on the pillars of law, medicine, and management.
5. Promote research and scholarship within and across traditional disciplinary boundaries.
6. Strengthen and expand the University’s connections and responsibilities to Boston and the world.
7. Expand and enrich the physical residential campus and the programmatic experiences for our students.
8. Align policies, processes, services, operations, and campus development with our values.
9. Align operating budgets, capital plans, and fundraising with the academic mission and the strategic plan.
10. Communicate with and engage all constituencies of Boston University, including our alumni, friends, and prospective students and their parents.

Most of these Commitments are self-explanatory. I would like to comment specifically on the subject of our responsibilities to Boston and the world. Today, as much as ever, Boston University students, faculty, and staff are engaged in the world
around us. We have never believed that our campus and the work we do here are isolated from our city or society. Our values impel us to seek to make a positive impact in the world and to have our policies and actions be exemplary for society at large.

Accordingly, as part of our commitments, we will develop on our campuses an ongoing process of energy conservation, along with other ecologically responsible measures that preserve resources for the future, minimize greenhouse gas emissions, and reduce—through recycling and conservation measures—our production of waste products. We will also pursue opportunities to engage in research, education, and outreach directed at the critical societal challenges of our time; our expanding initiatives in global health and infectious diseases research are strong examples of what should be an increased emphasis on the grand challenges for human development.

The Goals

The university envisioned through our commitments is aspirational; however, it can be achieved by a set of actions and investments for the coming decades. The Goals of the plan define these steps and are accompanied by specific measures of progress. In almost all cases, our progress will be measured by our selectiveness in recruiting students and faculty members—and by the enthusiasm with which accomplished individuals choose to join this community. The watchword will be yield, the fraction of people offered enrollment or a position at Boston University who decide to join us. This metric will be the most important criterion of our success whether we are examining either undergraduate recruitment, the recruitment of graduate students for our professional and research programs, or faculty hiring and retention. We will continuously measure the quality and number of our applicants in all these categories and our success at attracting the leading applicants to Boston University.

The eight Goals of the Strategic Plan are briefly summarized as actions that strengthen key parts of the university and, in one way or another, affect our selectivity.

1. Quality of the faculty
2. Excellence of our undergraduate education
3. The College of Arts and Sciences
4. The residential community and student experience
5. Targeted programs in graduate research and education
6. Key professional schools: law, medicine, management, and fine arts
7. Interdisciplinary programs in research, education, and outreach
8. Leadership as an urban and global research university

Each of these Goals is expanded on in the online presentation. I would like to offer a few highlights.

First, I would like to comment on faculty quality and the impact of the academic marketplace on compensation. As we continually increase the profile of our faculty in research and scholarship, Boston University will have to increase faculty compensation to
be competitive with our peer institutions. Implementing a long-term plan for increasing faculty compensation is one of the most important components of our plan.

To achieve the desirable level of integration and coherence in a Boston University undergraduate education will require an unprecedented amount of collaboration and coordination across our schools and colleges. I am calling for the University Provost to create the position of Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education who will be responsible for coordinating the general university requirements across our undergraduate schools and colleges. Our hope is that through the creation of this position and the recommendations of a representative faculty committee we can move to a uniform articulation and implementation of the core elements of a Boston University undergraduate experience.

The largest commitment to new resources proposed in the Strategic Plan is the growth of the faculty in the College of Arts and Sciences called for in the third Goal. This allocation has been proposed based on an analysis of the College’s current size, compared to the contributions to undergraduate education and the weight the College has in the reputation of the University in research and scholarship. We are proposing to increase the tenure-track faculty in the college by 100 over the next decade, while decreasing our reliance on non-faculty instruction in the College. Clearly, increasing the faculty in the College gives the University the opportunity to strengthen key disciplines and to create clusters of interdisciplinary excellence. The choices for deployment of these faculty positions will be made in the years ahead by the Dean of the College in consultation with the University Provost.

The fifth Goal of the Plan calls for strengthening graduate research and education in targeted areas. We have a very strong base for moving forward, with strong graduate programs and faculty-led research and scholarship in many disciplines and interdisciplinary areas. Even from this base, however, we will not have the resources to compete for the very best students across all disciplines. Thus, it is important that we carefully evaluate the impact and quality of our current doctoral programs and assess which of these either already are or have the potential to be among the best in the country. I will ask our new Vice President and Associate Provost for Research to form a faculty committee to accomplish this task for programs on the Charles River campus, using metrics to be developed by the committee. The results of this assessment will inform the deans and the Provost as they make plans for future resource allocations.

As a great urban university, Boston University must have leading professional schools in the key disciplines of medicine, law, and management. We have made significant progress toward these goals in the last decades and we will continue this emphasis going forward: this is the sixth Goal. The key needs for each School are described in the Plan. Both the Law School and the School of Medicine have significant facilities needs which will require fundraising campaigns, while the School of Management will require faculty growth to reach the next level of excellence (again this will be an opportunity for fundraising). The University will support the Law School renovation and expansion with a matching financial commitment.
Boston University also has an enormous opportunity because it is one of the rare major research universities that is home to a world-class conservatory for the performing and visual arts. We are seizing this opportunity to use the arts to build community within the university and to connect the University to our alumni and to the city through artistic and cultural events. The major investment needed to move the College of Fine Arts forward is the renovation and expansion of its facilities at 855 Commonwealth Avenue, for which we have started a fundraising campaign backed by a matching commitment from the University. We also are planning to increase support for performances and exhibitions within and beyond the Boston University community. In addition, we will be working to engage talented students in our other schools and colleges in the arts life of the University.

One of the most difficult topics discussed during the planning process has been the emphasis on interdisciplinary initiatives in education and research. Although there is clear acknowledgement of the need to bring faculty and students from across many disciplines together to have impact on some of today’s most significant problems, there are almost equally strong concerns that these efforts might detract from the core work of the University and, if not appropriately conceived and managed, fail to achieve their intended purposes. This concern has its roots in the number of interdisciplinary entities that exist today within the University, but which are perceived to have relatively small impact.

Our seventh Goal is to strengthen our interdisciplinary efforts. We should work towards this goal by first assessing our current interdisciplinary or cross-departmental initiatives and entities, and reorganizing them to include larger numbers of faculty and students. In deciding which initiatives to support with new resources we will weigh faculty, school, and college enthusiasm for an initiative, our ability to be excellent and unique, and, in many cases, our ability to secure external resources. We have enormous opportunities to excel in these efforts, as we are already strong in many key areas: a non-comprehensive list of our interdisciplinary strengths is included in the presentation. These range from key areas of life science and health science such as the well-known research efforts in infectious diseases, neuroscience, bioinformatics, and biomedical engineering that span the Medical and Charles River Campuses, to our strengths in language, literature, history, religion, culture, and politics in critical regions of the world. I am optimistic we can use these resources to build internationally recognized strength at Boston University.

Members of the community will note, in both this letter and in the plan, the explicit mention of key professional schools and the strong emphasis on an enhanced undergraduate program, based on the core strength of CAS. These emphases are not meant to—nor do they substantively—exclude other disciplinary, programmatic, or professional school emphases. They do, however, reflect what I believe is a widely held understanding about some of the key ingredients required to move Boston University to greatness. We cannot raise our overall standing without being very, very strong in undergraduate education. Similarly, many have recognized in our conversations this winter that while there are multiple possibilities for greatness in a large, comprehensive university, a university will not be seen as genuinely great absent very strong, recognized
schools of law, medicine, and management. Enhancing the quality and standing of these key schools helps float the bigger boat of the University higher in the water.

Next Steps

The Strategic Plan outlined above and in our online presentation material was presented to the Trustees along with a financial plan that would enable us to achieve these goals. The plan relies on the University’s continued ability to generate revenue from undergraduate and graduate education and to reinvest this income in the core mission of the University by supporting the Goals in the plan. Our hope is to create a virtuous cycle in which this reinvestment increases the quality of the University, which in turn leads to growing recognition of faculty and programs, increased attractiveness to prospective undergraduate and graduate students as well as prospective faculty, and to increased external support.

The plan will need to be monitored annually and adjustments made as circumstances change. Most importantly, when unforeseen opportunities arise, as they undoubtedly will, they will need to be measured against the Plan and the Commitments that are made in it. We should promise ourselves that deviations from these Commitments and Goals will be made only when a clear and compelling case can be made for the value of the initiative compared to the goals of the Plan. In this sense, a plan is as much about what you decide not to do as the initiatives you decide to support.

Commencement this year will mark the conclusion of my second academic year at Boston University. These have been hectic and exhilarating days. I am very optimistic about the future of our vibrant, complex, and ambitious institution. I believe we have a plan that combines key ingredients for greatness: deeply held core values, robust programs that can be strengthened and enhanced, and an economic model that realistically acknowledges the limits of our resources but that, if implemented well, will support our aspirations.

I look forward to seeing you at the Faculty Assembly on Wednesday, May 2, and to working with you to move Boston University forward.

Sincerely,

Robert A. Brown