Overview

At the start of the 2011-2012 academic year, President Frederick Lawrence launched a comprehensive strategic planning process for Brandeis University with the intent of creating a plan that will set the institution’s trajectory for the next couple of decades and provide a framework for decision-making for the next five years. He asked Provost Steve Goldstein to lead the effort. Committed to in-depth participation by the entire Brandeis community, Steve set in motion a series of input sessions for faculty, staff, and students from across the institution, including the School of Arts and Sciences, the Heller School for Social Policy and Management, and the International Business School. He also met with the Board of Trustees and with Brandeis alumni. Supported by Elaine Kuttner, planning consultant and Principal of Cambridge Concord Associates, the Provost played an active role in each session. All groups had the opportunity to discuss their perspectives on the strengths and weaknesses of the institution, current and expected external challenges, and hopes for the future of Brandeis.

This paper highlights the principal themes and findings from the discussion groups with staff. It is based on four meetings that included approximately 200 staff members from across the institution. Every session was well attended, and rich, vibrant discussions ensued. It was clear that Brandeis staff members care deeply about the institution. Even with very busy schedules, they are willing to contribute both time and insights to this important endeavor.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Each group was asked to identify what they believe to be Brandeis University’s greatest strengths, so that they can be built upon in the strategic plan. They were also asked to identify the institution’s weaknesses. As is often the case, all groups found that the institution’s greatest strengths were often simultaneously its greatest weaknesses.

Student Body and Staff

Brandeis students were cited often as the greatest strength of the institution. “Students who come to Brandeis are bright, inquisitive, and they take advantage of what Brandeis has to offer.” “Students love Brandeis. They are devoted to it, and have passion.”

The fact that Brandeis has students from all over the world was cited as both a strength and a challenge. While the campus and the curriculum have much to offer the international students, there is a sense that the support systems for this cohort could be improved. “If we continue to grow our international student body, we need to develop many more services to support them.”
Participants agreed that the Brandeis faculty is talented and committed. Staff were described as very bright, hard working, and dedicated. “Staff members are very willing to share, collaborate with, and support each other, across departments and programs.” Some participants said that there are actually more talents and capabilities among the staff than are utilized by the institution. “Brandeis is a great place to work, but there is untapped potential among staff.”

**Size of Campus Community**

The comparatively low student/faculty ratios are viewed very positively, as they allow for small classes and strong relationships between and among students, faculty, and staff. “We engage students in the life of the community, and they form relationships with adults and peers that make us feel like a family.” “Students feel connected to both faculty and staff.” Concerns were raised: if the student body grows, and this ratio changes, the tendency for these strong relationships could be at risk.

The comparatively small size of the student body and campus also enables students to develop many formal and informal groups, clubs, and other student organizations. In this way, students become connected and engaged and learn about leadership through experience. Some thought that the institution could do more to support these student-led entities.

**Social Justice Focus**

Social justice is at the heart of Brandeis University’s values and remains an important part of its identity. “Brandeis is a place that acts on its values more than any other institution I know. It tries to live its values, and it succeeds in ways that make people feel something different here.”

The focus on social justice was described as a core element of Brandeis, integral to its mission, and an area in which the institution was an early leader. “Our focus on social justice is a clear strength and one that Brandeis should build upon as it moves forward.” To do this effectively, “… the institution needs to define social justice for this day and age, and map out the direction it wants to go in this area.” This is an important topic with strategic implications that will require significant discussion and deliberation.

**Jewish Identity and the Brandeis “Brand”**

Many feel that the Jewish identity is one of Brandeis’s most distinctive features. Yet as several individuals noted, “There is an unsettled feeling about the extent to which we should focus on that as we move to the future. How will that impact our goals of diversity?”

Staff described Brandeis as “… a nonsectarian university founded by the Jewish community, and therefore an institution with Jewish roots.” Virtually all staff felt that that foundation should be honored. Several staff members stated that it is precisely the Jewish identity that makes Brandeis unique and that should be highlighted and built upon. Others felt, as one staff member articulated, “While it is an important part of our history, Brandeis would limit its potential if it were to brand itself as a Jewish institution per se.” Most staff talked about Brandeis as a school that provides opportunities for a wide variety of students. They also see the future of Brandeis as continuously increasing the diversity of its student body, staff, and faculty.
All of this presents challenges to Brandeis as it attempts to establish a clear “brand” in the higher education marketplace. “How do we define ourselves to the world? Brandeis means different things to different people, which is a strength, but makes it hard to brand and market.”

Infrastructure and Organization

Many people praised Brandeis as a place that supports and encourages cooperation. At the same time, some are concerned that there are too many “silos” across the campus. Different organizations may use different financial processes, for example, and it can be difficult to get information from one organization to another. Some staff members called for more consistent business practices and an emphasis on university-wide systems.

Internal communication was also cited as an area that could be improved. “We don’t always know what’s going on in different parts of the university. We sometimes find that we are reinventing something that already exists.”

Technology was discussed often. While Brandeis has made significant progress technologically over the past decade, the sense is that there is still a long way to go. The staff felt that this issue was of great importance. They pointed out that greater technological sophistication would provide the institution with a strategic advantage and that it should be a priority. The sense was that Brandeis was “behind” and that could present challenges in the future. “We’re not ready technologically speaking the way we should be — to face the changes in education that are coming.”

Brandeis University’s location was, for the most part, viewed positively. However, as one staff member stated, “There is room for a great deal of improvement in our facilities.” “Deferred maintenance is a big challenge.” The need for higher-quality student housing was also discussed. “The living situation for students is a big problem and is becoming an issue in our efforts to attract students.”

External Challenges to Consider in Planning

Economic Issues

Staff identified a large number of issues related to the economy. However, the one that rose to the top of the list at virtually every staff session was the increasing cost of higher education. The issue was discussed in light of the burden it is placing on students, as well as the financial challenges it presents to the institution. Participants acknowledged that the impact on students was multifaceted and that increasingly the cost of tuition is the major factor influencing college choice. Also, if students borrow money to pay for their undergraduate education, they leave school with debt that can impact their lives for a significant amount of time. This situation puts a great burden on Brandeis, as with other private institutions of higher education, to provide significant levels of financial aid. This is particularly important as Brandeis seeks to diversify its student body and honor its social justice values. In these uncertain economic times, such a commitment presents a serious financial challenge.
Also cited several times were the deep cuts to research funding. Staff acknowledged the challenges related to the current and expected levels of funding cuts that faculty and staff researchers are experiencing and how that will impact their projects and programs over time. They pointed out the fact that Brandeis is both a teaching and research enterprise and, if individuals and departments are unable to carry out their research effectively, it will no doubt impact the whole institution over time.

A number of concerns related to fundraising were also expressed. In this time of economic uncertainty, overall giving in the United States is down, which has a great impact on Brandeis University’s development goals. Also, as the institution’s traditional donor base ages, there is concern that the younger generation will not have the same sense of “financial loyalty” to the institution. What’s more, if new graduates are burdened with significant debt and/or taking lower-paying jobs in the public or not-for-profit sector, they may be limited in their ability to support Brandeis.

Changing Career Paths

As it becomes obvious that most college graduates will experience several careers in their lifetime, questions are raised about how to best prepare for this. Although most of those who attended the staff sessions feel that a liberal arts education provides excellent preparation for the future, they expressed concern that such a degree was losing its perceived value. “In today’s job market and given our economic situation, many people are questioning the value of a liberal arts education.” “Some of our graduates are looking at their hard-earned degrees and saying that they still can’t get a job.”

Changing Demographics

One staff member pointed out that demographic changes indicate fewer college-bound students in the northeast, Brandeis University’s traditional area of strength, and an increasing number of college-bound students in the south and mid-west. The groups discussed the implications of this for Brandeis University’s recruiting practices. Also discussed was the growth in the number of older citizens and the trend for non-traditional students to attend college and to pursue lifelong learning opportunities. The overall sense was that as demographic changes occur and diversity goals change, Brandeis may need to consider new programs and services. “We will also need to adjust our approach to recruitment.” This was cited as a challenge as well as an opportunity.

Competitive Environment

While many aspects of the competitive environment were discussed, a couple of issues rose to the top. Most often cited was the fact that delivery models in higher education are changing, particularly as they relate to technology and distance learning. Many institutions, most recently MIT, are developing and promoting new technology-based components of their curriculum and distance learning programs to complement their current approaches. Most of these efforts are designed to serve a different population of students than are in their classrooms. However, several people suggested that, over time, more programs are likely to feature a “hybrid” approach. That is, programs will use a greater mix of online learning with in-person classroom-based experiences. One staff member said, “The institutions that figure out how to do this in a way that lets students get the best of both worlds will be the long-term winners.”
Another competitive challenge noted was the growth in higher education in other parts of the world, particularly the proliferation of business schools and schools focused on the sciences. Many new institutions, and satellite programs of existing universities, are emerging in locations such as India and China. “These will provide a very real competition for Brandeis as it works to entice international students to attend the institution.”

Envisioning Brandeis 10 to 20 Years from Now

Although the strategic plan will address a five-year horizon, it will be developed in the context of longer-term vision. The specifics of that vision have yet to be determined; however, throughout the input sessions, many aspects of vision were introduced. Each group was asked to envision the future of Brandeis University 10 to 15 years from now. The results have been organized into topic areas and are presented below.

Establish a Strong Global Identity

It is expected that in the future Brandeis will be a far more international campus. “Looking forward, I expect we won’t even use terms like U.S. students and international students, because we will have done such a good job integrating the experience. All students are global students.” Staff would like to see all students have the opportunity to develop strong global connections — on campus, through study abroad, and via technology-based interactions with peers around the world.

Building on Brandeis University’s current global initiatives, some staff members described an internationally based campus that redefined what was “uniquely Brandeis.” “My vision is to create a way to synthesize all our global efforts — in the sciences, sustainable development, world, music, the arts — so they can all come together to define Brandeis.”

Continue to Strengthen Brandeis as a Leader in Social Justice

The importance of social justice as an essential aspect of Brandeis University was frequently cited in staff discussions. When discussing such topics as the future of undergraduate and graduate academic programs in the School of Arts and Sciences, the evolution of the Heller School and IBS, the student recruitment process, and hiring practices for faculty and staff, social justice was identified as a touchstone that should guide the institution. Virtually all participants saw it as an important element of the future, as long as it is actualized and not just used “as a way to make us feel good about ourselves.” “Building on that strength, Brandeis needs a strategic vision for what it means to be a liberal arts university with social justice at its core.” All felt that this vision should be an integral part of decision-making, to ensure that Brandeis continues to play a leadership role in modeling social justice and addressing related issues.

Position Brandeis as a Leader in Convening on World Issues

One suggestion was that Brandeis aim to be a recognized convener, sponsoring colloquia and other types of international discussions to address issues of international import. “We might begin
with a series of well-publicized debates about one current international issue.” One staff member, thinking broadly, talked about becoming known as an “intergalactic campus” by including emerging issues and topics about the entire universe, particularly scientific and research issues.

A specific suggestion was for Brandeis to take the lead, among institutions of higher education, in convening others in higher education and international experts to discuss the issue of peace in the Middle East. “If any institution takes a lead in that dialogue, it should be Brandeis.” This was discussed as a way to contribute to social justice in the world and also build Brandeis’s prestige and identity.

**Enhance Diversity**

Many times, staff members stressed the importance of building diversity at Brandeis. They defined diversity to include not only such things as race, ethnicity, sexual preference, and religion, but also learning styles and approaches. In addition, some staff would like to see an expanded commitment to Posse and the full integration of those students into Brandeis. A greater commitment to the Boston Public Schools was also identified as a potential strategy for building a vibrant and diverse campus, as was building a more integrated and reciprocal relationship with Waltham and making a Brandeis education more accessible to qualified Waltham students.

International diversity was also identified as an important direction to continue to pursue. Staff pointed out that this will require increasing support services to ensure that international students and their American counterparts are appropriately integrated and have the resources they need to succeed. In addition, staff cited the need for building on those international experiences to enrich life at Brandeis. “We need to emphasize the integration of what they are doing overseas and here back in the classroom so that everyone can benefit from it.”

Another aspect of diversity identified by staff relates to the growing number of older, non-traditional students. With a relatively large elderly population in the area, and in particular a large elderly Jewish population, there are opportunities to provide educational programs that would meet the needs of these audiences. “I’d like to see an intergenerational campus that is a living and learning center for the elderly.” In addition, some staff suggested that Brandeis reach out to veterans and encourage them to continue their education. This was seen as a way of increasing diversity on campus and also as an important part of Brandeis’s social justice mission.

**Assess the Potential of New Programs**

Many staff members had ideas for leveraging Brandeis University’s already strong academic offerings and strategically creating new ones. Program ideas ranged from developing a Brandeis engineering program to developing a high-end executive education and/or career-transformation program for students and alumni. Distance learning was also identified as a complex and strategic area for growth.

Many staff would like to see more experiential and community-based learning opportunities in the future. They also mentioned engaging students in “co-teaching” as a way of enhancing learning.
One staff group suggested that Brandeis might build on its strengths and develop a more explicit approach to preparing students for community engagement and impact. “Develop a structured program that would make Brandeis stand out as creating student leaders and citizens for change.”

The growth of the non-traditional student population and the fast-growing interest in lifelong learning were seen as opportunities for new programs. In addition, Brandeis could capitalize on its location and provide summer programs for talented high school youth.

**Strengthen Brandeis’s Financial Base**

In the future, staff would like to see the institution have the resources to cap student loans at a reasonable rate and provide more scholarship support. They acknowledged that ideally the economy would strengthen, the cost of running an institution of higher education would go down, and as a result tuition costs could go down. However, the reality is that Brandeis will need a good strategy to accomplish its goals. “I’d like to see Brandeis have the lowest tuition and the highest excellence so we have the best students and they don’t have a big debt load.” Increasing donations, particularly from alumni, was also identified as a key component of this process. “An important part of a financial strategy will be to develop a significant increase in alumni involvement and attract more major donors.”

**Enhance the Technological Infrastructure**

Many staff commented on the importance of technology to Brandeis University’s future and the need to make strategic investments in a technological infrastructure in a variety of areas. The library was cited several times as an important area for investment. “Enhance the library and raise levels of students’ knowledge of and use of technology for research and other purposes.” A desired outcome of these investments would be “library facilities that other institutions want to emulate.”

Often mentioned was the fact that technology offers important opportunities for academic programs. “We have to realize that our world is getting very small, and we need to think about the idea of virtual a little more. We need to look ahead to what classrooms and teaching will look like in 20 years.” Several people pointed out the likelihood that future learning models would include both off-site and on-site interaction and more opportunities for technology-based instruction. Some staff envisioned “students in a classroom with the latest technology, collaborating with a group at a university somewhere in the world to solve common problems.” Faculty and staff could also benefit from having more opportunities to learn how to best utilize technology in their work. At the same time, as one participant pointed out, we need to “make sure that students, faculty, and staff don’t lose what it means to interact with people, and that they have the skills to interact.”

**Strengthen the Brandeis Community**

There were many suggestions about how to build and nurture the staff community, enhancing communication and collaboration between and among staff, faculty, and students at all levels. A few staff members called for more recognition programs and ways to bring staff together and serve their needs.
Several people commented on the importance of these strategic planning discussions in providing opportunities for staff members across the campus to contribute to the process. At the same time, they would like to see more opportunities for faculty, staff, and students to meet together, across traditional boundaries, to discuss important issues. “We’re all part of the same university; we work off of the same ideas.”

Some staff members suggested developing and promoting incentive programs to encourage staff to collaborate and work across departments and divisions for the good of the entire institution. “Explicitly state, in our job description, that part of our job is to collaborate.” In addition, many indicated that benefits such as enhanced day care, flextime hours, or more opportunities for staff to socialize (both among themselves and with students) would strengthen the institution’s reputation as a top-quality employer. “We need to be a community that comes together in celebration more frequently — not just at orientation and graduation.”

As a result of all of these efforts, a desired outcome would be to see Brandeis on the list of the top 10 employers in the state.

**Build Alumni Support and Involvement**

Many staff commented on the importance of strengthening relations with alumni and engaging alumni more with the university. Increased communication with alumni to keep them informed of Brandeis news and developments was suggested as an important first step. Ultimately, the goal is to create a Brandeis community that begins when one is a student and extends throughout life. In addition, strong alumni relations are key to cultivating more major donors in support of Brandeis’s mission and to grow the endowment.

**Enhance the Campus and Facilities**

Many people felt that a new arts and cultural center would greatly enhance the institution. “This would lead to a rebirth of the arts at Brandeis and we would see the arts flourishing.” In fact, the staff frequently mentioned the importance of investing in the arts.

The concept of establishing a prestigious conference center was seen as enabling Brandeis to bring people to campus for colloquia, conferences, and seminars, while also promoting Brandeis in the wider world. “We need a beautiful and inspiring conference center for academic conferences that would provide a nice place to host guests.” This was discussed as an essential element for Brandeis if it wishes to move in the direction of being a convener on world issues.

Some staff also identified the need for a bookstore that would also serve as a venue for readings and other discussions. “As a center for learning, we need a large, beautiful bookstore where the public can come and writers can present their work.”