Considering the Perceived Strengths, Weaknesses, and all aspirations for the future

The General Student Body of Brandeis University - STRENGTH

During almost every interview, when asked about the strengths of Brandeis University, students said themselves. We instantly recognize the excellence and energy of our current student body. We recognize the cohesive, collaborative and active environment that our actions create. There are no words to describe the genuine nature of the student body except for saying, Brandeisian – meaning unbelievably nice and genuinely kind-hearted.

Students spoke fondly of the friendly culture that uniquely only seems to fit Brandeis. Our extensive array of clubs and organizations is impressive, especially when considering how productive and active they are on campus. There was much appreciation for our Orientation Leaders, Community Advisors and Roosevelt Fellows – student leaders who are the first wave to greet and welcome all new students. These programs were applauded, and many students consider these positions to be the hallmark of leadership on campus.

Currently, we feel too cramped on campus. We want a smaller student body, and we feel that the continued increase in class sizes have infringed upon our collegiate experiences. The long lunch lines and the fact that there are no free seats in the biggest of lecture halls do not fit Brandeis. The university simply isn’t built for the numbers of students currently being enrolled. We are a welcoming student body, but we think the acceptance rate at Brandeis is much too high than we deserve. Brandeis is a top-ranked school; we should admit students that fit that bill.

Many students currently feel that the new admissions practices treat them as statistics and not individuals. Some students feel the university is going out of its way to accept international students just to “diversify” the student body. Diversity and international presence is great, but we want the accepted students to be people who will actually care about Brandeis and what is going on here – not just students who are coming to get a degree and move on. That leads to a separation between international students and the rest of the student body. Some members of the Transitional Year Program even feel that they were accepted just to be presented as examples that Brandeis is progressive and encouraging diversity. We need accepted students to be those who are right for the character of Brandeis, and feel that our university is right for them.

We are sometimes criticized for having no school spirit, but most students will argue that we have a special flavor of spirit. It comes in our belief that we matter at this university. This school empowers students to follow their passions. We don’t think there is any student body that is as excited about what they do, as there is at Brandeis. Outside of school, people say we are awkward – but that’s just a misinterpretation of the friendly,
wonderful and engaging student body which is charismatic and interesting. If we are awkward, it’s the coolest awkwardness ever.

Facilities - Weakness

There are six areas of campus that students are truly satisfied with: the Shapiro Campus Center, the Shapiro Science Center, the Admissions Center, the Mandel Building, the Village Quad and the Ridgewood Quad. A part from that, the number one thing that came up in all conversations was that Brandeis is due for many renovations, especially when it comes to residential buildings (see Housing).

Students involved in the fine arts, humanities, theater arts, social sciences and math all complained about poor classroom facilities. The building most often mentioned was the library, which students say needs to be updated to reflect the current time period. There is a craving for more technology help around campus. Students appreciate all of the help from the UNET Help Desk, but that is not enough. We want the academic buildings to be outfitted with more up-to-date computers and projectors.

Speaking of up-to-date, all students have said that our university must make vast improvements to its disabilities service. It is the common opinion of most students that Brandeis is not a good school for anyone with a disability to attend. How will they be able to get across campus? The university architecture was not built for the disabled, and students think this fact is appalling. The university was founded on the idea that anyone could attend Brandeis, and our facilities need to represent that philosophy.

Students are very happy that the swimming pool is back, and many mentioned their appreciation for the Rose Art Museum and the Heller/IBS buildings. However for the most part, students feel unimpressed with Brandeis facilities. They feel that there is a vast disconnect between what is being sold to prospective students, and what really exists at the University.

Housing - Weakness

Building off of the points brought up in the facilities section, the main consensus is that students feel they are not getting the housing they paid for. We were promised an incredible college experience enriched by the services of Community Living. Instead, students feel like we are being forced to settle with cramped rooms and poor utilities. Many students mentioned that they thought real campus housing had been hidden from them when they were still considering Brandeis. Now students feel housing is presented to them with an apologetic gesture, asking us to be flexible with where we are living. We invest four years of our lives in Brandeis, and we deserve better housing. We shouldn’t be settling.

Students do have positive experiences in their residence halls. The lounges are frequently used and often students meet some of their best friends on their first year residence hall. However, students are confused by the housing lottery service. Upperclassmen should not be going into the lottery worrying about not getting to live on campus. If we are willing to pay, there should be enough housing. Students came here with the intention of living on campus for all four years, and it is strange that Community Living staff members have to ask them to move off-campus or go on a waitlist for housing.

Students would be interested in the establishment of Living Learning Communities. There were also a few students who would like to see a better advertizing
of gender-neutral housing. Regardless of the improvements that need to be made, students agree they are still enjoying their experiences while living in residential halls.

**Dining - Weakness**

We are confused as to how the entire dining program is set up. Many students question the reasoning behind such high meal plan prices, and the most common complaint was that students are not being given an explanation as to how prices are determined. A dining services system should not be so hard to explain, yet our tour guides do their best to avoid the topic. We agree that the food quality has improved, but it does not feel worth the price being paid. In fact most students complained that the “Fair Pricing” sign by the store in Usdan should be taken down.

Students feel that Aramark hasn’t shown much interest in communicating with the student body, and it seems that Dining Services doesn’t feel much of an urge to change. When small changes happen, Aramark over-celebrates these, and insists it is responding to students, when in reality it stalemates advocates such as the Student Union. Students often angrily say Aramark should be kicked off campus, but these exclamations are often a result of confusion about how Dining Services is set up.

It is frustrating that small requests such as more kosher options in upper campus, a slight change in hours for Einstein’s, diversifying salad options or adding more forks to Usdan is such a challenge for students to work out with Aramark. We appreciate the services of all of their excellent workers, and our dining environments are friendly and open. However the consensus of the student body is that we are once again being asked to settle. Students who want sustainability, vegan/vegetarian food or even gluten-free have to make due with what students call the bare minimum of options. The student body needs to see more transparency from Dining Services and Aramark.

**Admissions and Outreach**

Most students feel that Admissions met their needs as prospective students, and many participate in Admissions’ activities such as being a tour guide or host. We believe we should be even more involved in our university’s admissions process. Admissions Counselors should be our own alumni, since no one can sell Brandeis like a former student. As stated before, we believe ourselves to be the primary strength of Brandeis. We are what Brandeis should utilize in all of its campaigns: admissions, raising money and expanding its reputation. Take students on fundraising trips or to college fairs! It is our strengths and actions that draw students in; that’s why Admitted Students Day is so successful – because new students meet us! Right now it seems that students take a back seat in University publications. Because of that, our community and the world lack knowledge of what we do on campus. Our activities should be the dominant features of Brandeis. What our alumni, staff and faculty accomplish is terrific, but any form of Brandeis outreach should be highlighted with both undergraduate and graduate student accomplishments. As the majority group on campus, we provide the current definition of Brandeis. That should be shown to the outside world. Gear your publications to who you are trying to attract.

We should also have a renewed brand. Ollie the Owl could use a makeover, and we need to see some kind of Judge Mascot at our events. Students believe that our university lacks an internationally known symbol. We want to help change that.
Social Justice

We like it, but some students don’t know what it means. Social justice doesn’t seem to have a real definition, and students struggle to identify with the concept. We have a strong group of students who want to transform the world. They define themselves as activists, and they appreciate all of the university’s efforts to highlight social justice. There is a thirst to separate Brandeis from other schools when talking about social justice. We need to own it. Events like ‘Deis Impact should continue and grow. Our social justice mission needs to be redefined and remembered. There was a time when the National Strike Center was housed in Perlman Hall. There is a group of students who want the establishment of a Social Justice office run by undergraduates. Many students agree with the Brandeis’ banner of social justice, but we would like to see it more defined. We want more definitive examples of how Brandeis is committed to social justice. If ever a law school was to be started at Brandeis, students hope that it would have a considerable focus on non-profit law, public defending and other social justice themes in the legal world.

Ties to the Jewish Community

The student body was divided on the issue of being tied to the Jewish community. Some students argued that outside of Brandeis, the Jewish roots are seen as a stigma. The most popular question on campus tours is about whether Brandeis is a Jewish school. Our friends and non-Brandeis associates assume we are Jewish or less diverse. They do not realize the importance or growth of our interfaith community. Many students recommend that we translate our Jewish roots into a focus on social responsibility, equality and acceptance of others, as promoted by the Jewish faith. We must remember that we are not a religious university. We can’t be a place that is unpleasant for students of other faiths during Shabbat. Shabbat should not cause everything to be shut down early on Fridays. Other students really appreciate the connection, though they feel that clarification is needed as to Brandeis’ relationship to Israel and the Jewish faith. Ultimately it’s a nice story to tell, and most students are proud of the University’s Jewish legacy.

Administration & Staff

We are grateful to have an administration and assembly of staff with so many close ties to the student body. Compared to our neighboring schools, we consider ourselves very fortunate. President Lawrence has a good relationship with the student body, and everyone enjoys seeing him at events. Students are very hopeful that he and the Steering Committee for Strategic Planning will bring forward the changes everyone is hoping for.

Students still feel like there is a sense of secrecy about the administration. While every student has the ability to eventually meet with a certain administrator, we feel that change occurs to slow with the university administration (especially in recent years), and when it does happen – students are not connected with the decision process. There used to be the feeling that Brandeis was great at cutting corners, and that the administration was quick to make decisions about student life without consulting with actual students. It is the hope of many students that the new administration will fall in line with the current staff and communicate constantly with the undergraduate body. We want to see transparency. We want to hear about decisions being made. Most importantly,
students have little knowledge of how their tuition is spent. It would be greatly appreciated if undergraduates could be educated as to where exactly their tuition goes.

Faculty
Brandeis promised us professors who cared more about teaching us than they did about their research. We need to see more of that. Our faculty members are always accomplished. They always have long resumes of publications and projects. We appreciate the chance to interact with so many great minds, but we want to be assured that we are our professors’ number one priority. Many students report that they sometimes never feel that way, and at Brandeis that is just wrong.

Research is a great thing about this university, and it should continue. However professors shouldn’t be side tracked by their studies instead of interacting with a student during office hours. We want to see more of that commitment! The commitment to us! Many students seem to find that lacking in the sciences and a few social sciences departments.

We do not understand the tenure process that well, but we feel it is preventing us from securing some of the best professors there are. As students we hear complaints about the tenure program, and we feel frustrated that some of our favorite teachers have to leave Brandeis because they haven’t published enough. It seems to us that this ideology is against the idea of Brandeis. Shouldn’t we have the professors who rather than put their name on a book, commit half of their week to teaching and interacting with undergraduates? One outgoing professor reportedly said it best, “I am looking to get married and Brandeis isn’t proposing.” We don’t want our favorite young professors leaving so soon. What if student opinion and rankings could help influence the tenure decision?

First years are still having issues connecting to professors. The feelings are split amongst the upperclassmen. Some seniors and juniors have barely utilized their faculty advisors, concluding that there is not much support their professors can provide. Other students proudly recognize a mentor amongst the faculty, and many of them find ways to interact with their professors outside of class. We want to see more professors outside of class on campus!

Academics
Academically, Brandeis is a very comfortable environment. Our atmosphere is competitive, but all Brandeis students understand that we do not compete against others in the classroom, we compete against ourselves. This kind of work ethic is productive and appropriate. We are a small school with a diverse array of classes, lectures and discussions. We are extremely appreciative of the fact that at Brandeis: one can mix, match and add majors and minors all throughout an undergraduate career. The ability to earn a degree in so many areas at once is unique to Brandeis. Other students don’t believe us when we rattle off our majors/minors. This is a characteristic that really needs to be promoted!

We were promised (in addition to the occasional lecture) small and cohesive class sizes. Unfortunately we don’t see what’s so special about that at Brandeis as compared to other schools. In our opinion, class sizes are becoming way too big. It’s gotten to the point where students are actually afraid that they might not be able to register for a certain class before it fills up. Is that really the culture that should exist in Brandeis’
academic setting? We believe that Brandeis was much better off when it was smaller. It provided a true liberal arts experience when there were less students around.

We were also promised a healthy array of discussions and seminars, but many students feel that more and more students are being plunged into huge lectures. There is nothing wrong with that except for the promise that students could utilize different approaches to education. That being said, experiential learning is huge! It needs to continue, and we would like even more student leadership in that realm. Many students voiced a want for co-op programs like those at Northeastern. We want to explore different class structures!

In terms of academic advising, many students seem unsure how to interact with their faculty advisors and the university academic advisors. Much of the assistance students reported receiving was not very helpful (especially when it comes to transfer credits). Like admissions, we recommend that future academic advisors and staff members are Brandeis alumni. No one is able to explain the academic culture better than former students. According to students, the most highly touted group of academic advisors/tutors was the Roosevelt Fellows and leaders of Brandeis Undergraduate Group Study (BUGS). Many students didn’t feel comfortable interacting with their Undergraduate Departmental Representatives (UDRs) and had little to no interaction with them.

Student Life

Brandeis doesn’t have the reputation of a party school, and that’s okay because we don’t want it. However, it sometimes appears that we do not have much fun on campus outside of our extracurriculars. Brandeis should still be a great place during the weekend! There is a want for more school sanctioned parties and campus-wide events that are guaranteed to bring in students. We need to add traditions and campus celebrations to the small list which includes 24 Hour Musical, Culture X, Jr/Sr Formal and Springfest. Students want parties, and many undergraduates are looking to organizations such as the Student Union & Student Events to plan them. Students would benefit from the involvement of the administration in planning more campus-wide, student-friendly events. This way, we don’t have to work so hard at finding something fun to do on campus.

We appreciate the Department of Community Living trying to have students register their parties on campus, but at the same time students feel that prevents them from being spontaneous. We understand that some of these measures are in place because of a concern on students and alcohol. In terms of alcohol education, we recommend building off of the work of Dawn Skop and her Health & Wellness presentation shown during Orientation. All students walk away feeling educated, aware and satisfied that they were spoken to as adults who are capable of making decisions. Rather than focusing on prohibition, we would appreciate a renewed effort by the University to teach us how to drink and act responsibly.

Greek life has been a frequent topic of our conversations. Students are split on the issue. Many don’t want to see or hear of Greek life at all. The absence of recognized fraternities/sororities is one of the reasons students come to Brandeis. On the other hand, many students argue for recognizing Greek life, and they often bump heads with administrators who are unsure as to handle the situation. There needs to be some kind of middle ground found. Recognized or not, the fraternities and sororities are alive and well.
There is a small but strong amount of students who participate in them, and each organization is very active. Many of our fellow students involved in the Greek community surprisingly said they felt somewhat discriminated against by the University, to the point where they feel judged and criticized for choosing to add a Greek component to their Brandeis experience. Our students, Greek life or not, should not be feeling this way. We propose that Greek organizations be acknowledged by the campus, and that they be allowed to hold non-rush philanthropic events. Some kind of agreement must be established with the University; otherwise this uncertain relationship may spiral out of control.

In terms of planning events and reserving spaces, students who go through that process think it’s a nightmare. There are so many event calendars which are disconnected, and many students have to jump through hoop after hoop to try and make an event happen. There is also a lack of space on campus. To start fixing the problem, Brandeis needs a universal campus calendar. All of information about what goes on around campus should totally be merged together. This system should always be on display, so we can easily share our events with the outside community. We also need to find ways to bring similar organizations, departments and groups together to coordinate events on their related issues.

Students would also like to be more aware of cultural programs going on. The Intercultural Center is a terrific resource, but it is hidden on the edge of campus by East Quad. In the future, we recommend the Intercultural Center be moved towards the center of campus. Otherwise we are structurally isolating those students.

We do an incredible amount of community service at Brandeis. Despite that, we still feel some disconnect with the town of Waltham. Many students would like to see Brandeis reach out more to the Waltham community.

**Transportation**

We are close to Boston and that is very nice. We like the commuter rail, and the free shuttles that take us into Boston and Harvard Square. However, the Waltham shuttle needs to add the Riverside station to its route. Furthermore, the buses into Boston and Harvard Square are often cramped and unsafe. An extra bus now and then is necessary. The BranVan service is excellent, though occasionally students get upset by the delays.

We rely on the communication from Escort Services and Public Safety. If their communication is not clear, then we have problems with our transportation. Should MBTA service be cut or eliminated, Brandeis will have a serious isolation problem. Being close but not too close to Boston is a big draw for many students. We should make sure that students can get into Boston if they want to.

Many students are upset that they cannot have cars on campus until their junior year. There is already a very limited supply of parking spaces, and students are frustrated with the arrangements. We would support the building of a parking garage and/or ramp anywhere in and around campus. Students should at least be able to have a car on campus during their sophomore year.

Many students are also interested in setting up some kind of campus shuttle system with other nearby campuses (Bentley, Babson, Boston University). We want to be able to interact with other Boston area schools. With the various (limited) commuter rail and shuttle times, sometimes it is hard for students to plan a trip into Boston. Any extra kind of shuttle would be effective. The Zip Car service is also very popular.
Athletics

Athletics is not our main outlet to express school spirit, but many members of our community do support our athletic teams. Basketball is our most popular sport, and the stands are often filled for home games. We want to increase our student body’s support for the varsity teams.

To do this, we recommend using the television screens all around campus. Currently they show random slides and advertisements. Instead they should be broadcasting/replaying varsity games, and have announcements about various competitions coming up. We also need to try and integrate the athletes more closely with the student body. Campus wide-initiatives and events promoted in part by the university administration could be helpful in connecting students with athletics.

Students who want to work out are always able to find what they need in the Gosman Sports and Convocation Center. Students have expressed an interest in expanding some of the mini gyms around campus (i.e. Village and Rosenthal Quads), since those areas are open 24 hours a day, and Gosman has a more rigid schedule of hours. We would encourage adding permanent stands to the soccer field and baseball fields, so that our students will actually feel welcome to sit down and cheer on the Judges at a home game.

Students are very excited that the pool is back! It was one of the student body’s biggest concerns in past years, and almost every student interviewed said that they wanted to see the pool continue to be maintained. Students mentioned the idea of starting a football team, but most undergraduates don’t really care. However, there is a big push for Brandeis to build a boat house along the Charles River for our crew teams.

Arts

Art definitely has a presence on this campus. Many of our students would like to see improvements on all of the facilities. The rooms are cold, barren and falling a part. Besides the facilities, students take pride in the university’s arts culture. The Festival of the Arts is a beloved staple in the Brandeis year, and hundreds of students end up participating. The undergraduate club level of acapella groups, improv comedy troupes and theater shows is incredible and vibrant. The arts make up some of the most active student organizations on campus.

However, students involved in the arts feel like they are always under pressure from the university. Many students believe the arts departments are on the “chopping block,” and they believe the university pays too much attention to the sciences. Students need to be shown that the university is much more comprehensive instead of being science heavy. We want people to know that research happens in all fields, not just the sciences.

Health Services & Safety

Brandeis Emergency Medical Corps (BEMCo) is an incredible resource on campus. However it is being paid for out of the student activities fee and we believe a potential life-saving service should be funded through the university.

For the most part, students feel safe and healthy on campus. We have heard some concerns that the Psychological Health Center is not as open to students, and
undergraduates are unsettled by some of their experiences with that area of campus. Our other Health Center seems to fit most students’ needs, but many undergraduates have reported several difficult appointments with the health center, where the staff was really unable to provide assistance.

We are happy to be in close vicinity to several of Boston’s major hospitals, but we don’t think our campus is adequately suited to handle many medical emergencies. We have seen what happens when Brandeis Public Safety, BEMCo and the Health Center run out of staff (Pachanga Fall 2010). We also believe that many public safety officers, while doing their job, lack an understanding of campus culture. This leads to uncomfortable interactions with students, where officers might interpret a student’s action as something being done wrong. We believe that public safety officers should have more of an introduction to the student body before beginning at Brandeis. Our Health Center and especially the Psychological Health Center should expand and be more open to students. We also would be interested in giving BEMCo more funding.

After Brandeis: Career Services and Relationships with Alumni & Trustees

As undergraduates, we don’t feel like there is much interaction with the Trustees. Most students are not aware of what the Trustees do, and when asked about the subject – the majority of students were indifferent.

As for Alumni, students want to see more on campus. We want to connect to the alumni in fields of our interest, and learn how their Brandeis experience helps them now. Most importantly, as soon-to-be-alumni, we’d like to leave Brandeis knowing we have a solid network of support behind us – one that isn’t all about asking us for money.

For the students who have had interactions with multiple alumni and trustees, they reported that their elders always seemed so surprised to learn of various events and initiatives on campus. When we tell trustees or alumni what we are doing here, why are they so surprised? Shouldn’t they expect excellence? Shouldn’t they already know about what is going on around campus? As students, we really want to be the face of Brandeis. We want to be the connectors to the trustees and alumni. By being the primary connectors, we will keep everyone in the loop on how Brandeis is doing every day.

Last but not least is the Hiatt Career Center. Student opinion was very split on this, especially the opinions of seniors. Many students have had positive experiences with Hiatt, and they appreciate the one-on-one support of the staff, as well as all the resources offered. On the other hand, many students complain that it is difficult to get acquainted with Hiatt, and that all of the appointments always fill up. Many students complain that Hiatt lacks the ability to counsel undergraduates considering futures in arts, humanities and social sciences. Students who pursue careers in science, medicine, business and year-in-service organizations often have a better experience. The general consensus is that the Hiatt Career Center needs to expand and be more active in the life of an undergraduate (starting during their first year). Students right now feel that companies (of all fields) don’t come to recruit at Brandeis. We need a more comprehensive layout of employers and services from the Hiatt Career Center. We eventually all leave Brandeis, but the Hiatt Career Center is meant to be that one lifetime guarantee of support and excellence from the university. It’s time for Hiatt to grow into that position.
Envisioning Brandeis 10 to 20 Years from Now

- A better name recognition – The Brandeis Brand
  - Calling ourselves a Global Liberal Arts University sounds nice, but what does that really mean?
  - People should know who we are
  - Recognizable symbol and mascot
  - Most importantly: students are the chief ambassadors, representing what is going on at Brandeis!
- Major renovations and brand new residence halls on campus. No more deferred maintenance!
- Parking Garage/Ramp on Campus
- A clear and efficient Dining System.
  - Students should know that their voices/suggestions are being heard.
  - Dining Services should attempt to be more sustainable and labor-friendly.
- A library building which is up-to-date, and full of the newest technology for research and multimedia activities (open 24 hours)
- Much better disability services/handicap access
- A campus which is among America’s most environmentally sustainable schools
  - More solar panels
  - Increase in “green initiatives”
- A user-friendly, comprehensive campus calendar of all events going on around campus
- A clear definition of what social justice means at Brandeis University. And several annual examples of it being put to action on campus.
  - Perhaps a student-run Social Justice Center
- A Board of Trustees which is frequently on campus, leading events and interacting with the student body
- An Alumni Association which stays in touch with current students, and is up to date with all of the happenings of campus.
- A stronger undergraduate connection with Brandeis Graduate Schools
- Nationally recognized for research outside of the sciences.
  - Humanities
  - Arts
  - Social Sciences
- An institutional agreement with Greek Life, that has reached some kind of middle ground.
- Brandeis Law School, with a curriculum especially focused on social justice and non-profit law
- Brandeis Boat House along the Charles River