This working group met together twice in the spring of 2015 to consider the status of the chaplaincy at Brandeis University in the wake of various university transitions. Andrew Flagel asked us to consider three issues: chaplaincy support for the Catholic community following Father Cuenin’s departure, how to move forward with the role of “head chaplain” which Father Cuenin held, and how to administratively include (or not include) other religious leaders who work on campus but are not currently called “chaplains” in campus religious life. We address each of these issues in turn. In conversation and comparison with our peer AAU institutions we offer a series of additional recommendations (that we came to unanimously) to bring the chaplaincy in line with norms in the profession and to restore it to its rightful place in the university’s history.

In his book, Brandeis University: A Host at Last, our first president Abram Sachar devoted more than a chapter to religious life on campus. Young people on a college campus, he stated, “should have some opportunity to confirm their faith, to link themselves with the enduring values of their tradition” (p. 221). Not restricting his vision to students from Jewish backgrounds he argued it was most appropriate for the first Jewish-sponsored university to be “especially sensitive hosts.” He outlined the building and dedication of the three chapels – specifically the decision to wait until funds were available to build all three rather than starting with the Jewish chapel and allowing the Protestant and Catholic chapels to follow in time. And he describes a rededication celebration held for the chapels ten years later, in 1965, which included panels, symposia and a banquet so large it had to be held in the athletic center.

Much has changed at Brandeis in the past sixty years as the student body has demographically outgrown the three chapels. Muslim students meet in a prayer room in Usdan, a Mormon staff member facilitates Mormon gatherings on campus, and
undergraduate Hindu, Buddhist and Jain students have a new prayer space on campus following several months of controversy. Student groups too numerous to list facilitate diverse religious life on campus supported by five part-time chaplains and a number of unpaid off-campus religious leaders. While the chaplains do important work they are staffed and administratively positioned mainly as chaplains to the undergraduates rather than to the university as a whole, positioning that restricts their vision and reach.

To strengthen religious life on campus and mark the 60th anniversary of the building of the iconic campus chapels, we first recommend that the university hire a Director of Spiritual and Religious Life who can convene and coordinate the chaplaincy via a clearly articulated vision statement. The current part-time chaplains are not administratively positioned to weigh in on issues that affect the university as a whole and to make changes and corrections to their work and vision as needed to serve the full university. Hiring a director who serves simultaneously as a chaplain will elevate the chaplaincy by letting the campus community know who to go to first and who is in charge of the chaplaincy. The Director will do outreach, serve as a liaison to major campus committees and constituents, help to promote religious and other forms of diversity on campus, and work with other areas of student life as needed.

Second, we suggest that the Interfaith Chaplaincy change their name to the Department of Spiritual and Religious Life and change their reporting structure so that the Department reports to the Provost with a dotted line relationship to the Dean of Students. Both of these changes will increase its visibility and scope. Most students at Brandeis, and nationally, do not know what a chaplain is and many, given shifting demographics, identify more with the term spirituality than religion. All of the current staff are not chaplains and the word chaplain itself has Christian origins making it not as inclusive as would be ideal. Shifting the reporting structure of the Department of Spiritual and Religious Life positions it in the university in a way that will allow chaplains to serve the university rather than only the undergraduates. As chaplains to the university, individual chaplains can work more closely with academic colleagues, assist with crisis management, serve on a broader range of university committees and promote and help to facilitate diversity efforts at all levels. Such a shift will enhance the Brandeis community as the chaplaincy will become more of the glue that helps to hold us together as an organization around our central values.

Third, we suggest that as one of her or his first tasks the Director address the question of how to administratively include other religious leaders who work on campus but are not currently called “chaplains” in campus religious life. Not doing this, we fear, puts the university at risk as non-vetted individuals are interacting with our students on our campus around religious and spiritual issues. We suggest that the Department of Spiritual and Religious Life create an “Affiliate” category and require religious leaders providing services on campus to be vetted and become affiliates of the Department. Vetting should include at minimum a CORI check, a meeting with the Director to review relevant federal and state laws and campus expectations, and an agreement to meet once a year as a group with other affiliates and campus chaplains to discuss relevant issues. Such a vetting allows the university to guarantee to parents that religious and spiritual services are being provided by known individuals who are accountable to university constituents even if they are not paid by the university.
Finally, we recommend following the wishes of the campus Catholic community, to continue with a lay Catholic spiritual advisor who will do pastoral work with the Catholic community that includes bringing a priest to campus to offer on-campus mass weekly. We hope that the off-campus Catholic community will continue to attend these masses. Given the other changes being suggested in this memo, it might be wise to appoint someone in an interim position for the 2015-16 academic year. At least one of the leaders of the Catholic Student Organization will be on campus through the summer and can assist on a search committee for a lay Catholic leader if needed. We would ask that a member of the off-campus Catholic community that gathers here also be part of any search committee for a Catholic leader.

Taken together we believe the changes recommended here will restore spiritual and religious life to their central place on campus. To do this, however, we make a final recommendation that the university gather systematic data about the religious and spiritual identities and backgrounds of current Brandeis students. Although we understand the challenges to doing so at all levels, Len Saxe and his colleagues at the Cohen Center have been conducting surveys about these issues on a range of other campuses and are ready to lead this data collection effort. In order for the Department of Spiritual and Religious Life to serve Brandeis students a better understanding is needed of the spiritual and religious life of our community. These data could be used to facilitate further discussion by this task force or a related group. Perhaps, as well, a series of events could be planned in the 2015-16 academic year to mark the 60th anniversary of the chapels and to facilitate broader learning about spiritual and religious life on campus.

We recognize that some of the changes suggested here will be easier to implement than others and welcome continued conversation about process and timeline. We also appreciate that Jewish life on campus will be significantly influenced by the appointment of a new Executive Director for Hillel. That appointment does not decrease the need for a strong campus chaplains across a range of religious traditions and we hope to continue this conversations about spiritual and religious life on campus along side that of the Hillel position.