

Report from the Brandeis Task Force on Honoring Our Founding Values

DRAFT: April 24, 2019

I. Introduction

Seventy years ago, Brandeis University was founded by American Jews as a secular university committed to academic excellence and rigor, to scholarship in the service of the nation and the world, and to combatting bigotry and antisemitism. Our foundational values of openness and inclusion, combined with an admissions process based on merit regardless of race, religion, and gender, nullified the impact of quotas seen at other leading universities.

Since its founding, the University has evolved in significant ways. What was once an overwhelmingly Jewish undergraduate community became much more diverse, intentionally so, even as that Jewish community remained very strong. Brandeis students and faculty began to take pride in advancing social justice, and in debating its meaning. The University became known for hosting and producing social activists and leaders in public service, both in general and within the Jewish community.

Most fundamentally, Brandeis has come to appreciate the complexity of its identity. Early in its history, Brandeis employed the metaphor of “host”: Just as other communities serve as hosts at their institutions, the Jewish community would embrace the role of host at Brandeis. But that metaphor no longer resonates with the Brandeis community. All of Brandeis’ stakeholders—its students, its faculty, its staff, its alumni and friends—ought and deserve to feel at home, with a full sense of ownership, rather than being guests at someone else’s table.

As we look to the future, we intend to acknowledge, study, and build on this complicated history rather than leaving it behind. This is what we mean by “honoring our founding values.” We are not limited by discerning the original intentions of the University’s founders, and the future need not look like the past. The conversation about Brandeis’s founding values should not end with this report but must be ongoing. We are committed to pursuing a path that is distinctively Brandeisian, that represents who we are and who we want to be at our best.

In pursuing its charge, this Task Force empowered two working groups to consider and make recommendations about two distinct sets of sub-questions: a Working Group on Jewish Scholarship, Leadership, and Service, and a Working Group on Equal Opportunity, Social Impact, and Community Engagement. These two working groups generated a set of understandings and ideas that have informed this Task Force report.

Overall, the work of this Task Force was pursued within the context of three general interconnected questions:

1. How does the unique founding of Brandeis in 1948—created to provide access to those previously denied on account of bigotry and anti-Semitism—guide the university’s mission today?
2. How should the institution’s historic commitments to openness, inclusivity, and justice be defined today?
3. How do we weave together our commitment to an open and inclusive student body with our equal commitment to celebrating our unique Jewish founding and identity?

II. Reflection on the Brandeis Story

In carrying out the work of this Task Force, we had the opportunity to reflect on the history of Brandeis and the values that have undergirded it for the past seven decades—a history that incorporates several interwoven, complementary narratives.

There is an early Brandeis narrative about Jewish young adults, who found academic opportunities and a welcoming environment that were not available to them elsewhere. There is a story, in the African American magazine *Ebony* in 1952, about Brandeis operating “on a set of democratic principles which could easily serve as goals for every other university in the United States.” There is a narrative about refugees from Europe finding a home on the faculty, from which to make their scholarly contributions to the nation and the world, and another narrative about first-generation college students who found a home at Brandeis from which to make *their* scholarly and professional contributions to the nation and the world. There is a story about disruptive social activists, demanding that the University and the nation live up to its ideals, sometimes unappreciated in their own time but respected later on, and leading critical scholars pushing the boundaries of our thinking about social issues. There is a story about Jewish communal leaders, launched into the world from an environment that celebrated critical thinking as well as communal service. And there is a narrative, too, about students who experienced marginalization, sometimes all the more acute at an institution that claimed to celebrate inclusion as a founding value.

All of these comprise the Brandeis story.

Through one lens, for the past seventy years, Brandeis has proudly represented the contribution of American Jewry to American higher education. Founded by a group of American Jewish leaders in the wake of the Holocaust, as a refuge from the bigotry and antisemitism that characterized elite institutions of higher learning in the mid-twentieth century, Brandeis remains a “crown jewel” of the American Jewish community—not only as the only Jewish-founded secular university, and not only due to its excellence and scholarly contributions in general, but in particular, due to the University’s distinctive strengths in research and teaching on the Jewish experience throughout history as well as contemporary Jewish life, and its role in preparing leaders for service to the Jewish community.

At the same time, for the past seventy years, Brandeis has aspired to enact a set of founding values, sometimes identified as emerging from the distinctive historical experience of the Jewish people and thus particularly appropriate for Brandeis, even as the values themselves are not, of

course, exclusively Jewish. These values were never codified, and there has never been explicit agreement on them. But still, we can point to three:

1. *openness*,
2. *truth and critical inquiry*, and
3. *service and justice*.

And yet, the history of Brandeis is also one of tension, unmet ideals, and consistent room for growth—especially when it has come to realizing the promise of inclusion for historically marginalized and underrepresented groups. The assumption that Brandeis, because of its unique founding and Jewish roots, is an inherently inclusive and equitable university has sometimes blinded the University community to the ways that it is not.

These perspectives on Brandeis are all part of the Brandeis story.

III. Recommendations

With the above discussion as context, the remainder of this report will outline a series of recommendations designed to build upon the unique facets of the university’s history, celebrate the identities and achievements that make up Brandeis and its history, and move us closer to the promise of our community’s ambitious ideals.

These recommendations fit into three broad categories: Scholarship and Academic Innovation; Community-Building; and University Symbols and Traditions.

1. Scholarship and Academic Innovation

- a. Brandeis has a set of unparalleled resources and connections to provide an authoritative scholarly voice in conversations regarding the pressing issues that face Jewish communities around the world today. Scholarship on Jewish history, culture, and life—pursued in academic departments and research centers—has been a key expression of this historical strength at Brandeis. The following recommendations seek to build upon this legacy in order to have a deeper and broader impact on our students, on multiple fields of scholarship, on the Jewish community, and on the world.
 - i. Brandeis is home to some of the world’s premiere scholarship, expertise, and leadership on contemporary Jewish issues. The prominence of this work on “Jewish social policy” has been a long-standing asset to the University and should continue to play that role. This Task Force recommends developing a formal structure with the authority to increase collaboration and coordination among those units that currently focus on the study and teaching of these issues and concerns, to deepen their impact on policy, and to create new opportunities for scholarship and teaching. Such a structure would allow the centers and institutes to increase their role in leading the conversation—both on campus and among the broader public—on topics of interest to the American Jewish Community. This

connectivity” across departments, divisions, and schools on campus. The University should also incentivize and provide support for the diversification of the curriculum to include these topics.

2. *Community-Building*

In order to ensure that Brandeis can continue to grow and evolve as a community which derives its identity and strength from the many identities and groups that call it home, this Task Force has developed several proactive recommendations.

- a. Brandeis will thrive only if we can develop a strong pipeline to bring individuals into our community. We envision a robust *community of communities*—that is, a Brandeis community in which students find the support of a community of peers from a shared heritage or background (or more than one) within which they are most comfortable, as well as finding opportunities for meaningful interactions with members of their communities.
 - i. A large piece of this involves generating policies and practices to ensure that Brandeis conducts outreach and engages with prospective students whose interests match our strengths—including, but not limited to, an interest in the humanities, social issues, injustice and inequality, Jewish studies, and more—and who come from a multitude of backgrounds. Additionally, a remarkably diverse Jewish campus community has been and should remain a hallmark of Brandeis. A commitment to the vibrancy of the Jewish community should be matched by a commitment to the thriving of each individual and the diverse communities that support and nourish them.
 - ii. Brandeis now meets the demonstrated financial needs of all those we admit. But these goals require Brandeis to find even more financial support so that all students have the time and resources to take advantage of everything the university has to offer and to feel like full members of the campus community.
 - iii. At the same time, these goals require us to be conscious of the fact that the Brandeis experience is strengthened to the extent that our faculty, staff, administrators, and trustees reflect the growing diversity of the student body with respect to race, gender, class, culture, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, disability, and many others.
- b. Brandeis needs to do more than simply keep its door “open” to individuals of different backgrounds. It also needs to provide them with the resources to flourish once they join the Brandeis community.
 - i. In broad terms, for students, this means that Brandeis should ensure that its living and learning environments adhere to universal design principles,

and are tailored to the needs of individuals from a multitude of backgrounds and identities. While Task Force 1 addresses these student-related needs in its recommendations, we highlight these issues to underscore their importance as a direct extension of our university's ideals. More specifically, this Task Force recommends that Brandeis incentivize and provide support for departments and individual faculty members to embrace pedagogical best practices that ensure that all students have the resources and environment in which they can learn. This in part requires Brandeis to evaluate how expanding upon the Springboard funding for the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion might enable the university to meet these goals.

- ii. Students cannot fully benefit from all that Brandeis offers if they do not have the necessary mental health resources and support. The university should conduct a holistic review of student mental health services with the goal of finding ways, including collaborating with neighboring colleges and universities, to narrow the gap between university resources and student demand.
- iii. Brandeis should invest in, and seek out areas for synergy between, the offices that serve and support the groups that make up the Brandeis community—including Hillel and the many chaplaincies within the Office of Spiritual and Religious Life; the International Students and Scholars Office; the Prevention, Advocacy and Resource Center; Student Accessibility Support; the Gender and Sexuality Center; and the Intercultural Center.
- iv. One way that the university community engages across difference is through academic exploration, modeled by faculty and staff. This will begin in September with the introduction of “Critical Conversations,” which is part of the university’s new general educational requirements.
- v. Yet, these issues of identity and isolation extend beyond our student body. This Task Force recommends recommitting to increasing the number of faculty of color through cluster hires and other mechanisms such as retention packages.

3. *University Symbols and Traditions*

Finally, in the discussions and outreach of the Task Force and our two working groups, we were struck by the emphasis that many placed on the various symbols of Brandeis. This included symbols from our founding, such as the university seal, the Brandeis calendar, which is shaped around the Jewish holidays, and the figure of Louis D. Brandeis himself. Other notable symbols came from our history, such as the various student-led activist movements like Ford Hall and the many women and students of color who have gone on to become significant figures in academia and political movements.

This Task Force recommends that we embrace these many symbols and find new opportunities to use them to teach and learn about the distinct, sometimes conflicting, threads that run throughout the institution's history. Brandeis should also seek to develop new university-wide traditions—and ways of talking about our history—which employ these symbols to build community and instill pride in our multifaceted institution.