

Report of the Brandeis University Strategic Planning Task Force on Academic Innovation

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I. Shaping a Brandeisian Education: Strategic Goals

On his deathbed, Rabbi Zusya of Hanipol told his followers, “When I stand before the heavenly court, I will not be asked, ‘Why were you not Moses?’ I will be asked, ‘Why were you not Zusya?’”

It is often said that Brandeis was founded to be a Harvard free of quotas and closed doors. Like the best research universities, Brandeis produces creative ferment and cutting-edge research and combines high intellectual standards with an ethical imperative to make a difference in the world. But Brandeis has always been distinctive in vision, character, and opportunity. As the country’s smallest comprehensive Research I university, Brandeis not only combines a deep commitment to the liberal arts with a wide range of doctoral programs, but offers graduate-level challenges to its undergraduates and expects serious intellectual commitment from all students and faculty.

Today, when the doors of Ivy League institutions are as open as ours, it is even more urgent that Brandeis *be* Brandeis, focusing on the distinctive advantages of our small size, our research orientation, and our founding values in order to promote sustained inquiry and engaged learning. Ironically, for all the ways in which Brandeis is unique, the shape of our curriculum is not among them. The vast majority of undergraduate courses are single-semester experiences rigidly scheduled within traditional classroom settings, and it is possible for a student to graduate from the university without demonstrating excellence in any particular area.

Yet the intellectual experiences that our students most often cite as life-changing or career-shaping are the ones that transcend this model: research collaborations, field work, intensive seminars, internships, senior projects. Often, students must discover or create these (usually one-time) opportunities on their own. The Task Force on Academic Innovation believes that such transformative experiences should become the norm rather than the exception. Our ten-year goal is for Brandeis to set the benchmark for intensive, engaged, and effective liberal arts education in a research university. To that end, we propose strategies designed to ensure that a Brandeis education:

- **fosters intensity**, sustaining high levels of investment, energy, and creative participation;
- **provides flexibility**, permitting the conditions of time, setting, and opportunity that best suit a particular course of study;
- **structures progress**, providing shared and sequenced experiences across the four years;
- **focuses on complex problems**, addressing “real-world” intellectual, social, and ethical challenges from diverse disciplinary and cultural perspectives;
- **expects and cultivates excellence**, enabling all students to achieve and demonstrate strong communication skills, broad knowledge, and expert accomplishment in one or more areas.

Such goals would allow us to offer a uniquely Brandeisian education, one that only a handful of colleges and research universities could even hope to parallel. In what follows, we present strategic recommendations for pursuing an institutional commitment to each of these goals. Although we focus primarily on undergraduate studies, our proposals would benefit graduate students as both learners and teachers, and we encourage graduate programs to consider similar strategies.

II. Five-Year Recommendations

1. Fostering Intensity:

Our students say that the best Brandeis experiences involve an intensive engagement with ideas. Such engagements are most successful when they draw strength from an active and collaborative campus community, promote original work, and immerse students in worlds that reflect and gain strength from diversity. While our curriculum offers a few intensive, high-impact elements, most students do not yet experience such extraordinary educational opportunities. We aim to *raise the stakes* of teaching and learning, drawing on the resources and expertise of the campus community to build on and expand our best practices, making intensity the hallmark of a Brandeis education.

Intensive programs not only improve conventional learning outcomes; they provide *qualitatively different* academic experiences. Students participating in existing Brandeis initiatives such as Schiff Fellowships or Justice Brandeis Semester programs consistently report that these experiences transform their understanding, expand their minds, and give them a sense of their own goals, capacities, and agency. These responses are typical:

- “Everything is interconnected, and having a class... that made us see the issues first hand, talk about them with experts, and relate them back to our own lives...was very beneficial. Every single student was engaged, had to participate, and got the freedom to make the learning and experience their own - which I find essential to making the learning stick.”
- “We all worked extremely hard towards a goal that was something we all wanted to accomplish. It allowed minds that have similar interests to bond, learn, grow, and teach with one another.”
- “I just want to stress how much this opportunity has allowed me to grow intellectually and emotionally. It has changed how I think about the past,...about myself and about my own abilities.... I have learned tremendously from the example set by teachers and the stories shared by...the community... [T]hank you for this once in a lifetime experience. I will never forget it.”

Our proposals provide a blueprint for embedding such exemplary outcomes throughout the Brandeis curriculum, lowering barriers to the expansion of best practices and providing new educational opportunities. Our plan to raise the stakes of teaching and learning draws on our unique strengths as a small and vibrant research university. In particular, we emphasize the ideal of collaborative research in which undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty work collectively on original approaches to challenging problems. Such collaborations interweave research, teaching, and mentoring into holistic shared experiences that both develop and affirm expertise.

The sections that follow propose new initiatives to realize new goals, but they build on successful current practices. For instance, student internships might be augmented by involving more Brandeis alumni as mentors and hosts. The “signature” courses that we outline below (#3) create intensity by fostering conversation among students campus-wide. And embedding collaborative assignments in a problem-focused curriculum will create greater potential to form interdisciplinary networks of expertise.

While some intensified learning opportunities will be revenue-neutral, others will doubtless carry attendant costs. The testimony of students tells us, however, that the kinds of qualitatively distinct experiences that intensity enables carry a value beyond price. Our challenge, then, is to raise the support that will increase our students’ access to transformative experiences, knowing that as we make education at Brandeis more intense and more diverse, we are also increasing its value.

2. Providing Flexibility:

As we aim for intensity, we need a schedule that supports rather than constrains innovation. The vast majority of Brandeis courses, like those at most universities, are traditional lecture or discussion classes taught for 2.5 hours per week across a thirteen-week period. Although this schedule works well for many courses, it greatly restricts the teaching practices, learning formats, and intellectual goals that professors can build into the curriculum. To better support the full range of learning and teaching options, we need facilities and scheduling options that allow us to offer courses with more hours per week or more weeks per course; shorter, highly focused courses; and distance-learning options for students who are in the field, studying abroad, or working at home over the summer.

We already offer courses that hint at the potential for more flexible scheduling: Justice Brandeis Semesters, with their integral 20-30+ hours per week; Heller and IBS half-semester modules; year-long courses such as the Life Science and Physical Science Scholars first-year seminars; and the 1- or 2-hour-per-week Experiential Learning Practicums that accompany semester-long courses. We would further advocate the development of (a) “double courses” meeting 6-8 hours/week, probably team-taught, allowing greater depth and interdisciplinarity; (b) short, highly focused courses, such as full-credit/half semester courses or 3-4 week intensive summer courses; and (c) online delivery options for various courses and formats (see the Flexible Learning Through Technology Task Force).

This wider range of options would allow faculty, departments, and programs to create the course structures that best fit their educational goals and pedagogical practices. Such a system would also follow the recommendations of the 2009 Block Scheduling Committee, which proposed a clearly defined weekly schedule that would provide new latitude in scheduling classes. Automated scheduling algorithms will be needed, of course, to make such flexibility feasible.

We also need the ability to add blocks of experiential learning or special sessions to classes taught in standard formats. By shifting to a more traditional weekly schedule, with most classes meeting in the more intense 80-minute sessions twice weekly on M/W or Tu/Th and only a few courses meeting three times on M/W/F mornings, we could free up Fridays to enable field trips, one-day workshops, research collaborations, and special events. This schedule would greatly increase experiential learning opportunities and provide “bonus time” to enrich our courses without interfering with a student’s other scheduled classes. Such a M/W + T/Th schedule would also simplify cross-registration at consortium schools, functionally expanding our curricular offerings.

In addition to creating flexible time structures to meet the diverse needs of programs, professors, and courses, we must also consider the spaces where teaching and learning take place. Current room designs—lecture halls with fixed seats or seminar rooms with long tables—constrain the pedagogies we utilize. Flexible arrangements of furniture and ready availability of technology offer possibilities for group work, performance, and inclusive discussion. This fall, part of the library is being reconfigured to foster more experimental learning spaces. Similarly, “lab/studio” facilities will allow humanities and social science classes to experience learning in ways that have been restricted primarily to the natural sciences and creative arts.

Removing time and space constraints will allow greater flexibility for pedagogical innovation and experiment. We believe that investing in experimentation with new learning spaces and new schedules will go a long way toward providing the intense and Brandeisian education we advocate.

3. Structuring Progress:

Colleges and universities display a broad spectrum of approaches to the “general education” that typically precedes an undergraduate’s deep focus on a major field. Some schools delineate tightly defined core curricula (e.g., Chicago and Columbia); some offer options from a specific menu (e.g., Georgetown); and others such as Brandeis have more loosely defined expectations (e.g., our school distribution and non-Western requirements). While we do not think that learning can be ensured through requirements, we do believe we can achieve stronger results through a more guided experience.

The Brandeis education we advocate is structured as a coherent, shared, and sequenced process that will allow students gradually and successfully to fulfill their potential. Such a progression reflects our core pedagogical principles: that a Brandeis education be intensive, integrative (transdisciplinary), centered on fundamental university values such as social justice and diversity, advancing students’ acquisition of key proficiencies, and nurturing their aspirations for excellence.

We envision three types of academic experiences that would anchor this progression:

- **First-year seminars:** small, intensive courses taught by a single faculty member that introduce students to college-level expectations, foster the skills and approaches to learning that a Brandeis education will require (similar to the USEM model).
- **Signature courses:** shared intellectual experiences organized around interdisciplinary approaches to large themes, structured for large groups of students (up to 200 in each section of the course) studying with three or four of the university’s outstanding teachers. In these courses, faculty from the four divisions of Arts and Sciences (Creative Arts, Humanities, Science, and Social Science) will engage students in considering ideas and problems organized around broad core topics or problems (for example, “Justice in Law and Culture,” “Water, Development, and Peace,” “Reading The *Times*” “Humanity and Nature,” “On Beauty,” or “How Do We Know What We Know?”) Each signature course will foster critical thinking, teach diverse intellectual methods, and address issues of social justice. These common intellectual journeys will become a key piece of the Brandeis experience, will typically be taken during the second year, and will build on the proficiencies acquired in first-year seminars.
- **Capstones:** culminating experiences such as senior seminars, research projects, academically supported internships, Justice Brandeis Semesters, and other formats that provide students with the opportunity to apply integrative approaches to an engaged problem or topic of their choice. These would typically be taken in the third or fourth year.

This progression could replace some current university requirements and become an effective vehicle for helping our students acquire proficiencies, hone their skills, and develop their talents (see #5 below). These anchoring experiences are designed not only to achieve individual student goals but to create a uniquely Brandeisian learning community. Such venues might also integrate graduate students (for example as section leaders and research team mentors) as well as alumni and faculty in our professional schools (for example, as resources for capstone experiences).

Challenges presented by this proposal include the cost of a universal first-year seminar experience; the need to reassign faculty time; investment in developing new interdisciplinary courses; and training doctoral students for new educational roles.

4. Focusing on Complex Problems:

As Albert Einstein famously argued, “problems cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them.” We recommend that the Brandeis curriculum be organized around problem-solving courses or course clusters as much as it is organized around disciplines and area studies. In order to address the complex social, scientific, and cultural issues of the twenty-first century, both rigorous disciplinary expertise and creative multidisciplinary approaches are needed. A problem-focused curriculum would more readily confront significant real-world challenges that require more than one person, more than one disciplinary perspective, and more than one semester to address.

Such a curriculum would promote opportunities for “hands-on” experiences from experiential learning to original research to design projects and creative performances that put students in a position to make a difference in the world beyond the campus. Problem-focused courses could draw on the expertise and mentorship not only of Arts and Sciences faculty but of alumni, doctoral and postdoctoral fellows, and faculty in our professional schools, and could include public events that engage a broader audience in topics of interest to the class.

Problem-focused teaching also promises to bring together faculty, students, and methodologies from across the four divisions of the Arts and Sciences. Courses could address diverse aspects of a phenomenon; for example, a thread such as “Our Brains, Ourselves,” could focus on understanding the neuroscience of autism while simultaneously dealing with the societal and educational problems faced by families with an autistic child and seeking ways to redress cultural misperceptions in and beyond the United States. A course cluster on conflict resolution could draw on the perspectives of fields ranging from political science to psychology to literature and theatre. The problem of religious intolerance could bring together scholars of history, religion, art history, sociology, psychology, economics, anthropology, literature, politics, and area studies, and could foster student projects that increase cultural sensitivity, enforce second language skills, and inaugurate new initiatives in and beyond the university.

A problem-focused curriculum would enable a closer alliance between classroom education and faculty research than the traditional “coverage model,” since faculty research is usually a problem-oriented enterprise and rarely driven by coverage. Faculty would be better positioned not only to teach within their current research interests but to involve students in the research itself. The focus on problems also builds on our long tradition of action in the service of social justice and could benefit from the resources of such units as the Heller School; IBS; Health: Science, Society and Policy; Environmental Studies; Peace, Conflict and Coexistence Studies; Women’s and Gender Studies; and numerous centers and institutes. Since many of our student organizations also address specific issues, a problem-oriented educational emphasis would be an innovative means to connect students’ co-curricular activities with the formal curriculum.

The shift in curricular emphasis that we are proposing supports and aligns the learning and research missions of the university. “Raising the stakes” in this manner will intensify our students’ investments in their education and elicit their deepest intellectual commitment. We also expect a problem-focused approach to create efficiencies for faculty and programs and to foster new, often collaborative research projects that stand to raise the profile of Brandeis as an innovative and integrative research community.

5. Cultivating Excellence:

The measures of a successful education lie in our graduates' ability to pursue critical questions, to make informed judgments, to contribute knowledge and understanding, to communicate effectively, and to advance justice and truth in a diverse world. These abilities need to be fostered beyond the achievement of passing grades or the fulfillment of requirements. Achieving basic proficiencies during the first two years of undergraduate education would launch students on a path to pursue advanced projects that require and demonstrate excellence. Where a student needs more time to achieve a proficiency, further instruction could be targeted to the student's objectives.

In keeping with the other values that guide our report, we propose a flexible, outcome-oriented approach to the acquisition of knowledge and understanding. While certain proficiencies are best achieved through specific courses, others are more effectively honed throughout the curriculum, and still others require independent student initiative. In our view, Brandeis could best foster achievement by reducing the current number of required courses and integrating general education goals into the "progressive" curriculum we have outlined above (#3). We also support experiments in shifting emphasis from end-of-term summative to ongoing formative evaluations of student work. To these ends, we propose the following combination of practices:

- **Specific skill-building courses:** Brandeis undergraduates should reach a high level of accomplishment in writing clear and persuasive English prose; in speaking, writing, and reading a second language; in using, configuring, and interpreting numerical data; and in understanding creative expression. Some of these proficiencies may be best achieved in specialized classroom settings; foreign language immersion is one such arena. Retaining requirements for intensive writing seminars or for creative arts might also best position students for strength in these areas.
- **Integrative learning:** Our proposed common curriculum would develop abilities in critical thinking, problem-solving, writing, reading, responsible research, cultural diversity and social justice, and create opportunities for collaborative engagement across different disciplines, while exposing students to the methodologies of all four divisions within Arts and Sciences.
- **Diversity across the curriculum:** Our students need support throughout their education in deepening knowledge and understanding of cultural and social differences. We would engage diversity through our shared curriculum, through collaborative problem-solving in diverse group settings, and through hands-on projects in diverse communities. These approaches will provide a more profound understanding of diversity than our current non-Western course requirement.
- **Individual demonstration of expertise:** excellence can be further developed and demonstrated through projects in students' fields of specialization. We imagine the following pathways for pursuing such advanced expertise: (a) an original research project developed under faculty guidance; (b) a creative production by an individual student or student group; (c) "keystone" seminars in which students undertake advanced work as the structure for producing high-level innovative research or cultural production; (d) participation in a humanities lab, arts studio, science lab, or other "hands-on" setting in which students contribute meaningfully to a faculty-led research or artistic initiative; and (e) the creation of a self-reflective portfolio of cumulative student work in a particular field or area of specialization.
- **Emphasis on formative evaluation:** As research confirms, summative evaluation at an early stage in a project or process is more likely to close down than to foster student improvement. Where students are working cumulatively toward an excellent outcome in a project, paper, or exam, constructive feedback is far more effective than grades in enhancing learning and supporting experiment. We recommend a campuswide shift to greater use of such formative evaluations.

III. Toward a More Brandeisian University

The academic innovations that we propose are deeply Brandeisian: they embed our guiding values, take advantage of our concentrated research capacity, extend our interdisciplinary traditions, and they benefit from the connectedness of our small faculty. All five recommendations support our long-term goal: to make Brandeis even more Brandeisian by better integrating our missions of research, liberal arts education, social justice, and creative problem-solving for the common good. Certainly these innovations will make us more distinctive. They require some logistical retooling but no major financial investment so long as faculty efforts toward these innovative paths are appropriately recognized, supported, and rewarded. Indeed, these changes should give faculty more flexible teaching options and new opportunities to align their research and teaching practices.

If there is one quality that already characterizes Brandeis, it is **intensity**, the natural outcome of our small size in relation to our large mission as a research university and our continuing history of passionate intellectual and social engagement. We propose to make our curriculum as intense as our campus environment has always been, thereby also extending our ability to deliver on our social justice commitments, which have never been sufficiently embedded in our academic programs. The curricular **flexibility** we propose will be critical to fostering intellectual intensity, to creating a progressive and problem-focused curriculum, and to providing pathways for student excellence.

The strategy of **progress** through common educational experiences has multiple benefits for making Brandeis more Brandeisian in both intellectual and social ways. Our students tend to be voraciously interested in multiple fields. First-year seminars and second-year signature courses would give students access to a wide range of disciplinary approaches while honing basic skills and integrating diversity and justice as core emphases in ways that honor the spirit and improve the letter of our ability to teach these values. Moreover, Brandeis students value our close-knit yet diverse community; providing the opportunity to take courses as a cohesive group will strengthen the collective spirit of our students and thus of our alumni, while creating new ties among our faculty.

A **problem-focused** emphasis will be enormously beneficial, providing high-stakes opportunities to think in complex and integrative ways about social and intellectual issues in relation to justice and truth. Integrating into this curriculum what are now isolated requirements will also give students a greater motivation to develop their intellectual strengths and a more integrative approach to their education, creating intellectual syntheses that students now usually have to undertake on their own.

Our **expectations of excellence** and the creation of infrastructure to support original student projects and research collaborations will offer immeasurable benefits both to our students and to Brandeis itself. If we imagine multiplying the accomplishments of our current honors students, we begin to see the intellectual ferment that our proposals aim to foster in and beyond the university.

Brandeis already attracts students who are energetic, motivated, ambitious, intellectually curious, and committed to making a difference. Our proposed innovations should make Brandeis even more likely to be a first-choice institution for just the diverse community of students we want to draw. We should also be better positioned to recruit the best faculty and to raise excitement from a new cadre of donors. As we renew the spirit of visionary innovation that brought Brandeis into being, we can become a model of the twenty-first-century liberal arts university, renowned not only for our intellectual excellence but for the problems we courageously and collaboratively address—and sometimes even solve.