

A nod to academics

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by Benjamin Gedan

There is still time for Ballou to silence Tufts' most senior critics, who have rightly protested the administration's lack of academic focus following the selection of the commencement speakers.

If the graduation ceremony is destined to lack an intellectual component, why not adjust Senior Week programming to leave students with the lasting impression that the sum total of four years in Medford cannot be measured by the number of beer bottle caps hanging on the wall.

The celebrated extracurricular activities here — and they are wonderfully diverse and enriching — often distract the administration from its primary role: fostering a community of students, superficially diverse in skin color, but fundamentally alike in their desire to be educated. The notion that at Tufts one learns more outside the classroom than inside should be banished from this institution's official vernacular. Though college is fun, it is not summer camp.

I have put forward various informal proposals to recalibrate the Tufts experience to its academic mission, but they have not been well received. One idea, to transform University requirements into a common curriculum to facilitate academic discourse amongst all types of students, is apparently too controversial, both in its lack of student support and the fear that course reading lists will not be politically correct.

Another idea, to mandate that each department hold an annual symposium, modeled after this weekend's EPIIC event, is dismissed as too expensive, too time consuming, and unlikely to attract even those students majoring in a particular discipline.

My last proposal, which will no doubt elicit a similar dismissal, is for Tufts to incorporate into Senior Week an interactive final exam that all aspiring graduates are forced to take. The logistics are simple; each professor submits to the Senior Week planning committee five questions from each

course they teach. Students arriving at the test submit their transcript — embarrassing statistics blocked out — and are given slips of paper with questions from a random selection of their courses, resulting in an exam testing the knowledge gained, and lost, of subject matter studied over 16 semesters.

The plan involves inviting professors to attend the test, so they may first shame their former students by watching them struggle, then review the material and engage seniors in some academically-inspired nostalgia.

"I'm sorry, Montserrat Texidor, but your calculus class was at 9:30 a.m."

"My apologies, William H. Waller, but is a black hole a 'cosmic heater' or 'cosmic cleaner?'"

The test would represent an eleventh-hour flash of academic salvation, one that could reveal Tufts' pedagogical shortcomings, celebrate lessons not only learned but retained, and bring all types of students and faculty together for a shared academic experience.

Tufts administrators play too small a role in the teaching side of this University. Notwithstanding the classroom contributions of the provost and former president, Ballou is more often associated with student-centeredness than student education. I've heard countless school officials discuss diversity, but not once discuss Aristotle. They've talked about citizenship, but never mentioned political theory or cited the development of US civil society.

Tufts' new president has earned at least three academic degrees post-high school, including a law degree from Harvard and a BA from MIT. It would be a colossal waste of the president's intellect for him to spend his time at Tufts as a fundraiser, cheerleader, and chief bureaucrat. Though the president plans to eventually teach a course on environmental economics, he should consider broadening his academic role. Incorporating a nod to academics in Senior Week would be symbolic gesture of that desire.

Memo to the Task Force on the Undergraduate Experience: Let the Senate worry about dining halls and dorm rooms. For if you don't focus on faculty recruitment and retention, classroom technology, and academic cohesion, no one will.

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