

Bacow forms undergrad life taskforce 2/4/02

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University President Larry Bacow, no stranger to task forces during his tenure at MIT, is using his experience to create a taskforce at Tufts that will evaluate the undergraduate experience. In the works since last semester, students and faculty heading up the Taskforce on Undergraduate Education say it is still searching for its mission.

According to Dean Kristine Dillon, the taskforce is a rare opportunity to provide the University the chance to examine students' first four years at Tufts in detail.

"I see this as a mandate to examine all aspects of what creates a unique undergraduate degree at Tufts," Dillon said. "When we as a community complete the assignment, not only will Tufts have a blueprint of what we still need to work toward; we will have a common language about how to work on those goals."

The taskforce, whose initial meeting took place the first week of this semester, has not yet reached a consensus regarding how it will accomplish its goals, and committee members remain vague in describing the group's plan of action.

Taskforce member and

professor James Glaser said it is premature to guess what the taskforce will do, or what its actual role will be. "This such an early stage in the process that it is difficult to say what our roles are or how they will evolve," he said.

Professor Gilbert Metcalf, who chairs the taskforce, said its job would be to develop a clear agreement on the qualities that make a Tufts education distinctive.

"I see the taskforce as a catalyst for a campus-wide discussion of our future," he said. "Out of which emerges a consensus of...what we need to

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add or change to achieve our goal of continuing to provide a world class education."

This taskforce follows on the heels of three other initiatives that have had varied degrees of success. In 1993, the Task Force on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues recommended several major proposals that have strongly impacted University policy in recent years, including the anti-discrimination policy.

In 1997, a taskforce on race recommended the addition of at least three new tenure track positions in ethnic studies, and that faculty of color be sought for these positions through focused recruitment searches.

Finally, from 1997 to 1998, a higher education initiative intended to identify current issues of debate within the

University was organized by the vice president's office. The committee put forth various recommendations on better communication and connection within the curriculum. That taskforce's ideas are still being discussed.

This history suggests the taskforce's impact may eventually be felt, and President Bacow was involved in a successful initiative at MIT that evaluated that institution's undergraduate experience. According to Metcalf, it led to a "transformation of the first year experience, among other things, for undergraduates there."

Metcalf warns, however, that the different natures of the institutions may effect the Tufts taskforce's success level. "The institutions and issues are different here at Tufts so we should not predict any outcomes based on the MIT experience," he said. "But the president has

stressed the need for a consensus building effort here at Tufts that is in the spirit of the MIT work."

Bacow agreed, saying the committee's work would be similar in style but different in substance. "Tufts is different from MIT so I expect that the focus of our group will be different from that at MIT," Bacow said. "I hope we will succeed in building consensus for how we can strengthen the entire Tufts undergraduate experience in the years ahead."

What remains to be seen is how rapidly the group will begin its mandate, and what long-term effects its recommendations will have in the long term. Bacow said he would "release the charge" to the taskforce following this weekend's Trustees Meeting.

Administrators Charles Inouye and Dillon are heading the committee, which includes six professors and three students.

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