

# Task Force on the Undergraduate Experience

## BACOW LEADS CHARGE IN CAMPUS REVAMP

by Ariana Milman  
photo by M. Edmundson

NEWS

Last fall, President Bacow sought ways to improve Tufts for undergraduates. He charged a new group, the Task Force on the Undergraduate Experience, with the delivery of a comprehensive evaluation of the undergraduate life at Tufts by the end of this academic year. The Task Force team is composed of two administrative faculty members, three student members, and six professors; these different perspectives help the Task Force to understand the opinions of the diverse Tufts community. According to Task Force Co-chair Dean Gilbert E. Metcalf, the report should answer some of these questions: What will it mean to have a Tufts education? Where do we need to be in 10 years? What are the re-

sources required to get there? as stated on its website: to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum and pedagogy and share these ideas with established faculty committees that are responsible for the undergraduate curriculum; to assess the contribution of residential and co-curricular life; to evaluate how each year of the undergraduate experience contributes to a distinctive, coherent, and thoughtfully designed transformation of intellect and character; and finally, to identify the resources necessary to effect the changes recommended in the report.

Many view the 150th anniversary of the college's founding as an appropriate time for such a project. The school will soon begin

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After spending almost \$40,000 a year, Tufts students expect to get more than just an undergraduate degree. In addition to receiving a paper diploma, students expect to grow intellectually, emotionally, and socially. In a time when competition to get into college is tough and highly qualified students must choose between many fine universities, Tufts distinguishes itself with what it can offer its students to fulfill their academic, athletic, residential and co-curricular needs.

The Task Force's assignment involves four responsibilities designed to help the university fulfill these various student needs,

a major new fundraising effort, and presenting a comprehensive vision will be helpful in attaining funds. Also, the reaccreditation review by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges is approaching.

“We have a very clearly articulated charge and this is an opportunity to figure out how to capitalize on momentum,” said Metcalf.

To accomplish its goals, the group divided its work into three phases: listening to opinions presented by faculty and students, organizing this information, and developing a final scenario to present to Bacow.

**Deans Reitman and Inouye with Professor Metcalf (L to R) listen intently to the opinions voiced by various Tufts students at a recent community outreach meeting.**



### Information Uptake

In the first phase, which occurred last Spring, the Task Force tried to gather as much information as possible as to how members of the Tufts community—students, professors, and faculty—felt about the undergraduate experience and how it might be improved. In over 30 community outreach meetings, the Task Force met with nearly 500 faculty, students, staff, trustees, and alumni to discuss elements of this experience. The Task Force also reviewed many faculty and student responses to surveys.

“It may look like we're painfully slow,” said Metcalf, “but we want to make sure we've talked to as many different people that want to contribute to the process so that groups feel like they own those recommendations. It'd be really easy for us to meet in a group and develop a list of really good ideas to give to the president, but we want to make sure the final recommendations emerge from what the community wants.”

In these meetings, Task Force members sought to give all participants the chance to voice their opinions. First, Task Force monitors began each meeting by giv-

ing the participants background information about the program. They then gave participants the stage during discussion, saying, "Tell us what you think." In this phase of the project, project coordinator Lara Birk said that the Task Force liked to think of themselves as sponges, constantly absorbing information.

"We're in listening mode. We'll continue to listen but this will change as we reach our scenario stage," said Birk.

Sometimes the Task Force met with specific groups of students and focused on themes that applied to them. For example, when it met with sororities and fraternities, the participants discussed the influence of the Greek system on campus life, and how it could be improved.

In the past, to access student opinion about Tufts, administrators turned to elected student leaders and asked them how the student body felt about specific issues. However, the Task Force is concerned that these students' feelings do not necessarily represent the attitudes of the entire community. Therefore, it hopes that students will share their feelings and ideas.

Dean of Students Bruce Reitman has recently joined the Task Force as Co-chair, replacing Dean Kristine Dillion. His presence strengthens the perception that the Task Force is especially concerned with issues important to students, such as residential and co-curricular life.

The Task Force will continue to hold community outreach meetings in the fall, to make sure it has heard from everyone who wants to share. At the "Task Force Open Forum for Students," held on Oct. 9, representatives of the Task Force presented what they had heard from students so far, and students had the opportunity to contribute additional feedback. During this session, students voiced ideas such as doing internships for course credit, having a "shopping period" rather than the add/drop process, improving facilities, and reducing distribution requirements. At "Cultural Climate at Tufts," held on Oct. 10 and Oct. 11, representatives and students explored ways to increase the benefits from the wealth of diversity at Tufts. At "Tufts Living at Tufts: Outside the Classroom," which will be held on Tuesday, Oct. 23, from 7-9 p.m. at Barnum 008, the Task Force will address residential and co-curricular life at Tufts.

The Student Advisory Committee is a subcommittee of students led by student members of the Task Force that helps to provide the team with a strong student voice. This committee advises the Task Force on student concerns, and helps to establish the Task Force's central focus on undergraduates. The subcommittee hopes to assume a more prominent role this semester in its first phase of launching a campaign that will focus on academic, residential, and athletic facilities as well as Tufts spirit and appreciation.

"The Student Advisory Committee

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is helpful because it is made up of a very diverse group of students who each have unique and interesting perspectives of Tufts," said junior James Blockwood, co-chair of the SAC. "I anticipate the Student Advisory Committee will play a significant part in building student consensus and providing scenarios based on student concerns."

#### **Organizing Information**

Over the summer, the Task Force began its second phase: trying to organize and evaluate all gathered information. The group typed and published all minutes from meetings and then faced what Metcalf comically called an "overload of information." Each member was given a ton of reading material and the group then discussed what they had read.

After processing this information, the group identified areas—such as curriculum, residential life, research, and athletics—that could be improved. In analyzing these elements, the group found that the important elements of the undergraduate experience were community, climate, and coherence. The Task Force's scenario will focus on improving these elements.

Once these themes were uncovered, the group set out to write scenarios of what might be done to improve the undergraduate experience. Each scenario is a package of ideas with an overall theme.

"Anything and everything is a possible scenario," said Blockwood, although he hinted that whatever scenario the Task Force comes up with will not be a surprise to the entire Tufts community, as it will be

something to which the community will have contributed.

For example, since Tufts is often described as a community of teaching scholars, the Task Force might form a scenario that would emphasize teaching and research. Another possible scenario might deal with the study abroad program. The Task Force has heard from students that the study abroad programs, while great experiences, pose a dilemma for the students because they are not on campus to plan their senior year. To improve this, one suggestion might be for students to prepare for senior activities, such as selecting classes or planning to write their theses, during sophomore year. These are, however, just examples of possible scenarios; they are not scenarios that the Task Force has

decided upon.

In this stage, the Task Force also set up a framework for discussing these scenarios with the Tufts community. They formed guidelines for how people should think about scenarios, evaluate why the like one over another, and identify their goals.

#### **Developing a Final Scenario**

In the third and final stage of the project, the Task Force will craft a final set of recommendations based on discussions. This scenario will be presented to Bacow. Metcalf says that this scenario will be a big picture recommendation.

"We don't want a set of resources that give a little bit to a lot of groups. We want to make sure that whatever resources we ask the president to obtain have the biggest possible impact. We're not going to focus on little issues, like mice in dorms. We want to focus on the big ideas that will move the institution," said Metcalf.

Blockwood feels that as a student it is often hard to distinguish between immediate wants and future needs.

"As a student many of my immediate concerns have a quick-fix resolution and sometimes the big picture becomes blurred. It's hard not to focus on what I would see as improving mine as well as many other undergraduates' Tufts experience right now. What I have found comfort in is the possibility that the efforts of the Task Force will provide future Tufts undergraduates with a better experience due to the input of its students now," said Blockwood.

Birk reminds students that recommendations for these "little issues" will not be

disregarded and thrown away, but will be passed on to the appropriate people.

Having almost finished with the information uptake phase, the team has heard positive responses from many members of the Tufts community. According to Metcalf and Birk, students and professors are happy with the unique blend of teaching and research.

“As an administrative person, I’ve been surprised by the loyalty of the administration and how much they love the students here,” said Birk.

Some students feel, however, that some of their needs have not been met at Tufts. For instance, according to student surveys,

uate the resources necessary to implement their recommendations, and it also asks them to build a consensus for change. If the Task Force is successful in building a community-wide consensus for its recommendations, I believe we will be able to raise the resources to support this effort in our next capital campaign,” said Bacow.

Task Force members are confident in Bacow’s support. “Since President Bacow created the Task Force and has been behind the Task Force and its efforts since day one, I am confident that he intends to use its suggestions as one of his focal points in his campaign for improving Tufts,” said

is that people feel like there’s no hidden agenda,” said Metcalf.

Student member Blockwood feels, however, that the many people incorrectly assume that Task Force’s job is greater than it is. “What I dislike most about the Task Force is the community’s perception that the Task Force and its members alone were created to fix all of Tufts problems. In fact, the Task Force is here to pull from Tufts’ most valuable assets—the students, faculty members, professors, and administrators—and in a collaborative effort push for the kinds of changes that would make Tufts a better place for tomorrow and add to the many positive attributes that Tufts already

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some feel that academics are not challenging enough, that they do not foster creative thinking, and that interaction with faculty is lacking. Faculty surveys showed similar opinions.

The results of the study will create a vision of Tufts’ future, help in fundraising efforts, and prepare the university for reaccreditation. The report may also lead to major changes at Tufts. How much the Task Force will actually cause changes to be implemented is unknown, but Bacow asserts that if the members are successful in answering his charge, their report will be influential.

“The charge to the Task Force asks them to do more than simply write a report with recommendations. It asks them to eval-

Blockwood.

In the past, similar studies, such as the Higher Education Initiative, which focused on everything about Tufts and not just undergraduates, have not been successful at effecting changes at Tufts. According to Metcalf, that project was framed in a way that caused anxiety by giving researchers the feeling that their purpose was to deal with a shrinking financial pie. There had been a fear that the HEI was a “cost-cutting project in the guise of improvements.” The Task Force feels that its charge is to evaluate with the idea of improving the undergraduate experience, not to find ways to cut funding.

“The faculty has convinced us that this is worthwhile. The feedback we’re getting

has,” said Blockwood.

The energy and enthusiasm of the Task Force also gives hope for its success. As a group, the team meets twice a month, but meets more often in subcommittees. Overall, the group shows an intense commitment to the project. Metcalf noted that of its members, many are already very involved at Tufts—two professors are also department chairpersons, one student is the editor-in-chief of *The Tufts Daily*, and another student is a resident advisor. Nevertheless, all manage to be strongly committed to the project and are excited about the role the Task Force is playing.

“It’s the first committee I’ve been on that has 100 percent attendance at almost every meeting,” said Reitman. ☺

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