ReDI Cohort Challenge: Northeastern as a Citizen of Boston/Social Impact

Cohort: Prof. Rachel Jones‡, Prof. Carol Livermore‡, Prof. Marilyn Minus†, and Prof. Beth Molnar§

‡Northeastern University Bouvé College of Health Sciences, School of Nursing
†Northeastern University, College of Engineering, Department of Mechanical and Industrial Engineering
§Northeastern University Bouvé College of Health Sciences, Dept. of Health Sciences, Inst. of Urban Health Research & Practice

SYNOPSIS
This cohort challenge focuses on improving Northeastern’s (NU’s) citizenship in the surrounding Boston community, in particular by improving the effectiveness of pathways for students from underrepresented groups in Boston to enter and succeed at Northeastern. The surrounding Boston community includes the neighborhoods of Mattapan, Roxbury, and Dorchester, home to the city’s highest concentration of African Americans and the highest rates of unemployment. Accomplishing this goal requires that NU (1) strengthen concerted efforts to raise awareness and coordination regarding NU’s current programs to engage, recruit, and retain Boston community/neighborhood students from underrepresented groups, including outreach to grades 6-12; (2) rethink its day program admission process for this subset of students; (3) synchronize its funding at both University and College levels to support these incoming students within their various majors; and (4) ultimately create a new Office for Recruitment of Community Students dedicated to these efforts of coordination and advisement at all levels of engagement at NU (i.e., from Advancement and Enrollment to Deans to Department Chairs, Faculty, and Students). What are now segmented practices within many different offices will be centralized, thus maximizing success both for students and for NU.

RELEVANT BACKGROUND
Northeastern invests in its relationships with neighboring communities because robust engagement supports its values of diversity and community-based participatory research, enriches students’ education, and strengthens both the city and the university. NU’s pathway-to-enrollment programs for students in the community play a key role in NU’s community investment portfolio. By supporting talented students whose circumstances might otherwise hinder direct admission to the NU undergraduate day program, these programs develop community leaders and reinvigorate the role of NU as a key institution in Boston. Consider NU Crossing, where NU is fortunate to have brought in Marisa Luse from a leadership position at Discover Roxbury to contribute to shaping NU Crossing’s vision and mission. Marisa Luse grew up a few blocks from NU, came through Balfour Academy, engaged in extensive university and public service while earning her bachelor’s at NU, and has since deployed her talents and education to advance first the local community and now NU. NU’s pathway-to-enrollment programs not only promote budding leaders, but also support the community’s good will toward the university. Investing in good will by offering effective opportunities for community students complements and facilitates NU’s other community relations activities, including investments such as construction of neighborhood facilities and dormitories.

Within its portfolio of pathway programs, NU has several existing programs aimed at (i) strengthening students’ preparation in middle school and high school and (ii) providing supportive pathways for students who are facing challenges to enter NU and succeed. However, our background investigation has shown that the current portfolio is not well-coordinated among programs or across university administrative structures. As a result, a number of current NU efforts are duplicated, diluted, and in some cases lack adequate staffing/funding support. At present NU does not have a single person or office responsible for knowing the overall map of outreach programs and/or details of the multiple pathways for bringing students into the University. For this reason, neither assessment of the strengths of the current programs nor allocation of funds occur in a coordinated fashion. To address this challenge, we propose to create a new approach for information sharing and advancement through the development of an office that can leverage three main opportunities for NU.

The first opportunity lies in coordinating outreach and community contacts. As it stands, information about current NU programs is disseminated individually (i.e., piecemeal). For example, a student might hear about Foundation Year (first-year program in the College of Professional Studies (CPS) to strengthen students’ preparation for the NU day program or other four-year college) but not TORCH (the program offering direct admission to NU with wrap-around supportive services) or the Contract program (NU entry via Community College). The opportunity here lies in attracting students to the best-fit program for their success at NU. Uncoordinated dissemination of information to potential students can lead to
loss of students from the Boston community pipeline as well as the misleading appearance that NU does not care about or want to help these students. Improving this effort can ensure that each prospective student knows about as many options as possible, which may increase the yield of talent to NU.

The second opportunity lies in coordinating funding. Currently, some funds for the recruitment and support of students from the Boston community are typically left on the table each year. Examples of funds available currently include the 150 full scholarships (e.g., Boston Public High Schools Scholarships, Northeastern Boston Valedictorian Scholarship, Boston Housing Authority Scholarship, Northeastern Neighborhood Scholarship, TORCH Scholars Program, and Ujima Global Leaders Program) that are in some but not all cases earmarked for Boston students. With better coordination of programs, funding could be organized from a big-picture perspective to allow, where possible, for funds to be shifted to prioritize programs to respond to a particular opportunity or need. Central coordination of funding would also offer enhanced opportunities to gather the necessary resources to support these programs from the University level down to the College and Department levels. For example, additional resources could augment the availability of wrap-around services to increase students’ success at NU. This effort to enhance coordination is responsive to the new University Master Plan and involves flexible, dynamic, and bi-directional input between the city and NU.

The third opportunity lies in gathering and maintaining information centrally to evaluate the strengths, challenges, and effectiveness of all of NU’s existing pathway programs. For example, Foundation Year improves the college readiness of about 80 less-prepared students per year, of whom about 10 become full time NU students with extremely high (i.e., 100%) four-year persistence rates, while the others go on to other universities. Another example pertains to the current Balfour Program (i.e., working to strengthen grade 6-12 students early on), in which participants go through a 5-6 year program before attending NU. Their graduation rate is ~93% as compared to the overall NU rate of ~88%. Unified evaluation of best practices across all programs will allow for operation of the most effective possible portfolio of NU entry paths and provide more aligned match-ups between individual Boston community students and NU programs.

**CURRENT OFFICES INVOLVED IN FOSTERING NORTHEASTERN AND BOSTON COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS**

There is a wide range of offices across campus that house programs and/or initiatives aimed at developing various efforts between NU and the neighboring Boston community. The connections between these offices (in terms of these efforts) are sparse; this may be due to a lack of (i) resources, (ii) staffing, and/or (iii) awareness of existing programs. Figure 1 provides a generalized view of the current level of coordination at NU with regard to these programs. As described previously, our proposal aims to enhance connections among these programs. In particular, our proposal seeks to increase enrollment and retention of talented students from NU’s neighboring communities by creating a new approach for information sharing and advisement through the development of a new office.

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**Figure 1.** The schematic shows the current major offices and some key persons/groups involved in various aspects and/or programs pertaining to the Boston neighboring community students and their NU relationship (i) before application to NU, (ii) during the admissions process, and (iii) after entry to NU. The arrows represent established connections existing between the offices/branches. However, coordination is minimal, limiting the overall view of NU’s efforts and its ability to improve on this relationship as well as its ultimate impact.

It is useful to consider how the structure of the proposed office compares with the university’s existing administrative architecture (Figure 2). The functions related to recruitment, enrollment, community relations, etc. reside in different
administrative areas, each under the purview of a different Senior Vice President (a vertical unit in the university’s organizational chart). The present proposal is for a horizontal unit in the university’s organizational chart, one that enables elements from the various vertical units to work together with increased efficiency and effectiveness.

**Figure 2.** Chart showing the general relationship between the vertical orientation of the administrative offices and the horizontal arrangement of the ‘College’ offices. This arrangement enables the colleges to seek resources and support where necessary from senior leadership. This proposal is aimed at (i) creating a similar office that can act as a new home for the currently isolated recruitment and community outreach efforts on campus, (ii) filling the gaps to increase our recruitment and community efforts, and (iii) providing a platform that will increase visibility, resources, and support for recruitment, enrollment, and community relations.

**KEY GOALS TASKED TO THE NEW OFFICE FOR RECRUITMENT OF COMMUNITY STUDENTS**

1. **To address the current ‘Pathway’ into Northeastern for underrepresented students from the community.** The biggest challenge is related to the graduating Boston high school students’ academic level in terms of preparation for success at NU. Aside from Foundation Year (non day-program entry), how can NU expand criteria beyond academic measures (e.g., SAT scores) to accept promising Boston students into the day program? The proposed rethinking of admissions criteria is in keeping with national trends, and the current TORCH program may provide a model for discussion toward development of new/alternative pathways into NU.

2. **To provide a uniform NU purpose and vision regarding educational outreach to the community.** From high-level fundraising (i.e., Advancement) to boots-on-the-ground grant requests (i.e., by Faculty PI’s), NU’s efforts to reach the Boston community through outreach about educational opportunities are diluted, unnecessary duplicated, and not mutually reinforcing. This is primarily due to low awareness by the various entities at NU about what is actually accomplished by other units. The proposed Office for Recruitment of Community Students will bring more unity to NU efforts by raising awareness in the NU community about what is being done at all levels and providing support at various levels to ensure that these efforts are successful. This support will include:

- Providing aid and advice to help Faculty PIs frame their grant outreach efforts along a common NU vision
- Informing the funding goals for the NU Advancement Office in terms of general Boston community needs and initiatives
- Working at the College level with Deans and their Development offices to bring in funds to support Boston community students with their various majors (i.e., per Department distribution)
- Tracking College/Department-level grant-funded efforts to support educational outreach
- Building a bi-directional website portal from NU to Boston schools (i) for NU to share programs and (ii) for Boston guidance counselors to share initiatives with NU.
- Evaluate the program by establishing benchmarks of success in recruitment and retention
3. To work with the NU community in developing short- and long-term plans and strategies for effective engagement in the Boston community. On example includes informing contents for future NU ‘Master Plan Cooperative Agreements’, which outline NUs commitment to the city.

**Benefits to Northeastern**
Implementing the proposed office will realize key benefits for Northeastern as well as for the community, including the following:

- Improvement of student retention rates
- Increase in campus diversity in terms of student population, staff, and faculty
- Planned and equitable allocation of NU funds for Boston students (i.e., no money left on the table)
- Community benefits (i.e., meet objectives set in the NU Master Plan and in the challenge from President Aoun)
- Improvement in the relationship and reputation of Northeastern with the Boston neighboring community (e.g., pathways to NU have political implications that also affect the city’s support for the future growth and infrastructure development of NU)
- Engagement of donors who value community and educational programs/pathways
- Re-engaging the NU alumni population with ties to community and concern that their children are welcomed
- Aligning with national trends (see New York Times article “Rethinking College Admissions”, 1/19/2016)

**Costs to Northeastern**
The new Office for Recruitment of Community Students will incur operational costs determined by its size and scope of operations (see Figure 3). In the short term, start-up costs will need to be provided from existing university budgets. In the longer term, we believe that these costs will be offset by fundraising and by the role of the proposed office in NU’s overall strategy for university/city relations. The most direct means of supporting the costs of the proposed office is fundraising. NU administration and alumni themselves report that alumni value accessibility of an NU education for community students, and we believe that enhanced fundraising in support of this widely-held goal will (after a start-up period) support the operations of the office. More broadly, the costs of the proposed office should be viewed as one element of NU’s portfolio of programs for enhancing community relations. To the extent that community access to education can maintain strong university/city relations, the investment may reduce the need for more expensive interventions to restore university/city relations in the future.

![Figure 3. Example of possible operational structure for the proposed Office for Recruitment of Community Students](image-url)