Report of Residence Life Taskforce

Executive Summary

Mission Statement for the Specialty Communities Program

A Specialty Community is a floor or house where students with similar interests live, study, and socialize together. Specialty units are communities created and continued by faculty and students with the support and involvement of University departments and administrators. Specialty Communities provide environments that encourage in-depth exploration of academic disciplines and/or special interests. A key component of a specialty community is the essential involvement of faculty and academic programs in partnership with student affairs personnel to provide the best possible context for integrated learning across the curriculum.

Proposals:

- The physical residences should be targeted for an ongoing process of renovation designed to enhance the academic atmosphere of the community.

- A full-time Specialty Communities Administrator position should be added to the Residence Life staff, whose primary responsibility is the day-to-day management of the Specialty Communities.

- A Specialty Communities Advisory Board should be created, reporting to the Director of Residence Life, which will oversee the progress of the Communities. Its members will be faculty, staff, and students.

- The process for managing existing communities should be formalized and clarified for all participants. Each community will propose a charter which specifies its theme and mission, its relationship to the sponsoring academic unit, curricular and co-curricular programs, typical yearly calendar of events, and measures of success. Charters will be of finite duration, typically renewable after three years. Regular assessment of the houses will be conducted.

- Every effort should be made to support the engagement of faculty in the Specialty Communities. The role of faculty should be defined with a job description and training and evaluation procedures should be developed. Resources and support structures for faculty should be clarified and the specific involvement of the sponsoring department should be defined carefully.

- Proposals must provide a plan for outreach and publicity, and Residence Life must make it a priority to raise the profile of the program.

- The Specialty Communities program should have a budget of $30K/year managed by Residence Life. This will include discretionary funds for programming and funds for professional development of the staff.
Introduction

This report represents the work of the Residence Life Taskforce, convened by Executive Vice President Joseph Mercurio in Fall 2009, and co-chaired by David Zamojski, Director of Residence Life and Assistant Dean of Students, and Wayne Snyder, Associate Dean for Student Academic Life in CAS. The charge for the task force was to recommend future directions for our Specialty Communities. After surveying the current program and comparing it with best practices at peer institutions, this program will present a list of recommendations for changes to our Specialty Communities program, and a budget and timetable for their implementation.

Specialty Communities at Boston University

The Specialty Communities program at Boston University has been in existence for 20 years; it is a program managed by Residence Life with the assistance of academic departments (see Appendix 1 for a list of current Specialty Communities). At the time this program was created, Boston University was at the cutting edge of the learning-communities movement (see next section); although this report is suggesting a framework for revitalizing this program, it is important to build on the traditions of the Communities as they exist as we provide more current, vibrant, inspiring learning communities to instill in students the values of the educational mission of Boston University.

Two types of residential models for specialty communities exist at Boston University. First, we have an academic or programmatic model where students apply to live in a residential community which supports an academic focus by providing programs, activities, speakers, field trips and other resources such as media that enhance students' educational experience. A commitment to certain programmatic goals is part of the experience. Current examples of this program include the WISE (Women In Science and Engineering) floor in Warren Towers or the CAS language houses on BSR.

**WISE:** This floor houses female students who are either entering freshmen or current students with sophomore standing and declared majors in a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) discipline; they commit via signed floor agreement to attend programming activities twice a month. (See [http://www.bu.edu/prostars/wise/](http://www.bu.edu/prostars/wise/) for further details.)

**Language Houses:** Any student with a major or minor in the appropriate language or demonstrated commitment to learning the language by enrollment in a foreign language course may reside in these houses; each student must commit to speak the language at all times in the common areas of the house.
The second model is less tightly linked with an academic focus, where students apply to live in a residential community that supports academic, social, environmental, or community interests. These specialty community houses or floors may not have specific academic outcomes, but they will have learning outcomes determined by the community residents and supported by a sponsoring academic unit and the Residential Life staff. Examples of these programs are the following.

**Earth/ Environmental House:** Strong interest in the environment and environmental issues is expected, as well as participation in the campus-wide recycling program, and involvement in Earth Day programs.

**Writer’s Corridor:** Student must exhibit an interest in writing and in sharing their work with others, and in submitting original work for floor publications.

**Living-Learning Communities**

More broadly, our specialty communities may be viewed as living-learning communities. These are defined as residence communities with a dedicated staff, linked with academic programs. In most cases, there is faculty supervision or sponsorship and a theme defining the community, which may be simply the identification with an existing academic program (e.g., our Core Curriculum House), or a non-program-specific theme (e.g., environmental awareness). The linkage with academic programs may be tightly linked with the curriculum (e.g., all students in the house are in a specific cluster of courses) or simply defined by the theme and the extra-curricular programming for the house.

The motivation for such communities is simple: the collaborative effort between faculty, administrators, residence life professionals and RAs, in the context of the common bond created by the academic, lifestyle, or interest of the community enhances the overall student experience. Learning becomes a 24/7 experience with multiple dimensions rather than something that just takes place in classroom and library.

The National Study of Living-Learning Programs ([http://www.livelearnstudy.net/](http://www.livelearnstudy.net/)) last run in 2007, provides a context for thinking about our specialty communities. Of the 617 institutions surveyed, most LLPs were relatively new (17% were in their first year, 38% were from 2-4 years old). The “typical” program involved a single house (18%) or single floor, or reserved portion of a floor (71%) of a residence, with a median size of 52 participants. The mean budget per residence was $21K/year and a median of was $5K/year. Half the programs defined themselves as “selective” and used an application (usually with an essay) or restricted participants to relevant academic programs.
Programs reported that a key component of their success was collaboration between student affairs and academic units. Faculty were involved in 77% of the programs; 33% involved graduate students, and 84% used peer mentors. The most popular co-curricular aspects of the programs were cultural outings, multicultural programs, study groups, various team-building events, non-curricular community service, and career workshops.

One clear message emerges from the survey: the development of quality LLPs takes time and commitment from the institution. In comparing newer and older programs, older programs typically had more faculty involvement, more connections with academic units, the most diversity in options, and the most specific educational goals. Qualitative and quantitative assessment of these programs reveals the expected outcomes: students involved in living-learning communities report higher levels of satisfaction, increased academic performance, higher levels of participation in student leadership roles, and higher retention than the general population.

**Proposals for the Future of Specialty Housing at Boston University**

The following proposals were developed with several themes and principles in mind. First, although we certainly would like to follow the best practices exhibited by successful programs elsewhere, the Specialty Communities must reflect the best of the BU experience, proceeding top-down from the key institutional initiatives of the BU Strategic Plan and bottom-up from the daily experience of our students. We understand that one paradigm can not reflect the diversity of the BU experience, and encourage the creative involvement of faculty and students in defining the individual houses. Secondly, the success of any living-learning community depends on the appropriate blend of academic and residential experiences, with faculty engagement in forming academic connections an essential part of the recipe. Finally, the success of the Specialty Communities is directly dependent on the improvement of the administrative and physical infrastructure supporting the program.

**Proposal 1: The specialty community program should adopt the following mission statement:**

A Specialty Community is a floor or house where students with similar interests live, study, and socialize together. Specialty units are communities created and continued by faculty and students with the support and involvement of University departments and administrators. Specialty Communities provide environments that encourage in-depth exploration of academic disciplines and/or special interests. A key component of a specialty community is the essential involvement of faculty and academic programs in partnership with student affairs personnel to provide the best possible context for integrated learning across the curriculum.
Proposal 2: The physical residences should be targeted for an ongoing process of renovation designed to enhance the academic atmosphere of the community.

To foster and encourage connections amongst students in the residence halls, it is vital to reestablish the common spaces in each specialty community. Common spaces create one area, accessible to all residents, where students can readily gather to build the necessary connections that are vital to the academic and social life of specialty communities. We must provide convenient space where students can gather without regulations, policies or restrictions. Consistent with their age-appropriate development and innate desire to build connections, the common spaces will quickly become the central gathering space for all residents and activities. These areas will foster study groups, guest lecture opportunities, social gatherings, productive work toward programming goals, etc.. Without this space, residents will not have a place to congregate and can not be expected to sufficiently build the relationships or programming desired in these residences.

Additionally, these spaces must provide the amenities and resources needed to promote the goals of the specialty community. For example, certain areas will require whiteboards, coffee stations, comfortable furniture, networking, or A/V equipment including flat screen TVs and computers. Not all of these are needed in each residence. Rather, resources should be consistent with the mission of the housing unit in order to promote appropriate community building and programming. The communities themselves will need to include the resources needed in their proposals and should be reviewed and approved by the Advisory Board.

Proposal 3: A full-time Specialty Communities Administrator position should be added to the Residence Life staff, whose primary responsibility is the day-to-day management of the Specialty Communities.

If specialty communities are to thrive as critically important links between academic life and student life, a full-time Residence Life professional must be dedicated to leading the program. Therefore, we propose the creation of a position, based in Residential Education, that would include the following responsibilities: serve as Residence Life’s liaison to the schools, colleges, and departments that sponsor specialty communities for the purposes of implementing, sustaining, and growing the program; provide support and develop training programs for specialty advisors and resident assistants; lead assessment efforts, including collection and interpretation of data about learning outcomes, student satisfaction, and retention; lead marketing and communications efforts, including development of annual reports related to specialty communities; serve as administrative liason to the Specialty Communities Advisory Board (see next item); serve as liaison to BU Housing with regard to room assignments and room selection in specialty communities; oversee budget line related to programmatic activities in specialty


communities; and represent Residence Life to various University committees and project teams that promote academic life – student life collaborations.

Proposal 4: A Specialty Communities Advisory Board should be created, reporting to the Director of Residence Life, which will oversee the progress of the Communities.

The Advisory Board will consist of three administrators/staff, three faculty, and three students; terms will be one year for students and three years for all others. The day-to-day management of the programs will remain with Residence Life, but the Director will consult the Advisory Board on any major issues facing the programs. The Advisory Board will work with the Specialty Communities Administrator to implement the administration of the programs (as defined in the next item). They will provide long-term leadership and vision for the program, as well as advising the Director on any aspect of the program that affects its success as a vital part of the Boston University experience.

Proposal 5: The process for managing existing communities, developing new communities, and phasing out ineffective communities should be formalized and clarified for all participants. Each community will propose a charter which specifies its theme and mission, its relationship to the sponsoring academic unit, curricular and co-curricular programs, typical yearly calendar of events, budget, and measures of success. Charters will be of finite duration, typically renewable after three years.

A group wishing to develop a specialty community will present a proposal to the Advisory Board on a yearly cycle; such a proposal will develop a theme and set of goals which have been developed as a collaboration between a sponsoring department or departments and Residence Life staff, and must present a plan for achieving the goals for the community as explained above. At the beginning of each academic year, each house should have an introductory meeting at which a mission statement for the year, and a schedule of events, is developed between the participants. While the meeting will be initiated by the RA, the decision about actions and outcomes will be determined by the specialty community residents and supported by the faculty advisor and residence life staff. The charter should also specify the leadership roles within the community that are responsible for ensuring goals are met and success is attained. At the end of the academic year, a meeting should be held to reflect on the year and its successes. The main outcomes from each of these meetings should be communicated to the Advisory Board by the student leaders of the house, in consultation with the faculty advisor.

Assessment of programs will take place by using surveys and reports of outcomes (as in the preceding item). Yearly feedback should be given by the Board for each house. The advisory board will review existing houses, and when appropriate, terminate programs and accept new houses from submitted proposals.
Proposal 6: Every effort should be made to support the engagement of faculty in the Specialty Communities. The role of faculty, including advisors and fellows should be defined with a job description and training and evaluation procedures should be developed. Resources and support structures for faculty should be clarified and the specific involvement of the sponsoring department should be defined carefully.

Faculty involvement is essential if we are to seamlessly integrate living and learning in specialty communities. Currently, fifteen professors live in residence as part of the Faculty-in-Residence Program. Residence Life leadership is currently exploring new and innovative ways to engage the faculty-in-residence in specialty communities. We suggest it would enhance the specialty communities to have more faculty members living in residences in order to attend programmatic events that occur nights and weekends. In addition, each specialty community is expected to have a specialty advisor – a faculty member – who engages in community life to enhance the learning that occurs in the living centers. For example, Professor Ted de Winter from the College of Engineering may be seen each week in the East Campus dining rooms enjoying conversations with students. We propose that the deans of the schools and colleges find ways to validate and appreciate the important work of both the faculty-in-residence and the specialty advisors in facilitating informal contact between students and professors outside the classroom. These interactions enhance the overall academic experience for students.

Faculty advisors should be in regular contact with the RAs of specialty housing and encourage and facilitate contact between the house or floor and the sponsoring department. To this end the faculty advisor should be involved in the selection of the RA, the approval of residents for the house or floor, and the evaluation and assessment of the housing. Faculty advisors should also be involved in at least one house or floor activity each semester and encourage the use of the house for activities connected with the specialty, such as lectures, study groups, review sessions for classes or specialty-related school club activities as a way of creating connections with the department and making the role of specialty communities more prominent.

With the support of the deans and departments, we should seek to clarify the “service credit” gained by faculty who participate in the specialty communities. It should be viewed as equally important with advising and other service commitments in the department and the schools.

Proposal 7: Public relations and outreach are critical to the success of the Specialty Communities program; proposals must provide a plan for outreach and publicity, and Residence Life must make it a priority to raise the profile of the program.
The web page for the Specialty Communities must be redesigned to facilitate the *branding* of the program and the involvement of students and academic units in the programs. The specifics necessary for involvement of students and academic units should be clarified on the web page for the program. Launch Dates for updated information regarding applications, program updates / proposals / changes, websites must be implemented by Dec. 1st for the following academic year to include room selection period (this assists those students planning to study abroad during spring semester).

Every effort should be made by the individual schools and academic units to publicize the Specialty Communities program during recruitment events such as April Open Houses, during Summer Orientation, and in an ongoing way for continuing students. Advisors and faculty should be provided with all necessary information and training to facilitate student involvement as participants, RA, and peer mentors.

For outreach to the overall BU community, Residence Life will work with BU Today, alumni relations publications, and local media to highlight the work, activities, programs and opportunities afforded to students involved in the specialty community. This could highlight faculty, students, donors, alumni, and staff that contribute to the community in an extraordinary way.

Key BU leaders such as President Brown, Mrs. Brown, Provost Campbell, Dean Elmore, and Deans of the various colleges will be invited to visit specialty houses/floors and hold informal “fireside chats” with the residences. This “road show” will help build a presence of leaders at the specialty houses/floors. Photographs will be taken and hung in strategic locations after the visit.

**Proposal 8: The Specialty Communities program should have a discretionary budget of $30K/year managed by Residence Life.**

The initial budget should include $25K/year of discretionary funds, managed by the Specialty Communities Administrator, for events and programs in the houses; $2500/year for training expense (bringing in outside consultants twice per year for training and education); and $2500/year for travel to participate in national conferences and workshops.

**Timeline:**

**Year One:** Form Advisory Board, hire Specialty Communities Administrator, consolidate existing programs and implement prototype of chartering process, with rotating schedule of renewals. Redesign web page.
**Year Two:** Begin training and travel components for Residence Life and academic unit participants; accept proposals for new houses and review 33% of existing houses. Emphasize outreach and PR elements of program.

**Year Three:** Full implementation of program as specified in this document; review next 33% of proposals.

**Year Four:** Review final 33% of proposals and continue yearly cycle henceforth.

**Task Force Participants**

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