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Unprecedented opportunity

Guest column

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As a member of the Campus Culture Initiative Steering Committee, I spent the last several months (literally) banging my head against a wall. Having strongly conveyed my concerns about the CCI's process and recommendations to the committee, it is both troubling and reassuring to hear them now expressed with the public release of the Report.

To begin, the Report probably wouldn't have mustered a grade higher than a "C" in any course at Duke. Only two sources were directly cited in the entire document, one being Rolling Stone magazine. The most salient and controversial recommendation—the proposal to eliminate selective living groups—was justified in a mere half page that did not cite any supporting data or weigh any alternative solutions.

And to top it all off, the Report contains sentences like this:

"The University must work to recognize and empower those whose conduct of the conversation has been most enhancing for the community and those in whose lives and work the conversation has borne most fruit, and to identify and alter behaviors and habits that inhibit or devalue the conversation to which Duke aspires."

What?

In some respects, this is a good sign for those of us (myself included) who take issue with the proposed elimination of selective living groups, heightened enforcement of the alcohol policy and some of the other more controversial recommendations. The unfortunate thing, however, is that the CCI had the potential to be the most influential catalyst for change at Duke in easily the last decade. The 10,000-volt electric shock that was the "lacrosse incident" vaporized institutional barriers to addressing long-standing deficiencies in our campus culture and represents an unprecedented opportunity. But the CCI failed to grasp that opportunity.

The Report's triteness notwithstanding, changes to everything from residential life to dining services to faculty/student interaction still are desperately needed. "Changes" don't necessarily constitute the wholesale elimination of social outlets or selective living groups, a tightening of the alcohol or any other policy, or the excision of any portion of our community through changes in admissions.

"Changes" mean recognition by the University that students' experiences outside the classroom are just as important as those inside the classroom and should be prioritized accordingly. And at a place like Duke, institutional priorities are ultimately reflected in one thing: the allocation of funding.

Consider the following:

Amid hundreds of millions of dollars of new construction on campus, we still lack a viable social venue on West Campus that would allow groups without housing sections to easily host events. Constructing

such a venue would allow for a more diverse set of student groups to influence the social scene, facilitate the responsible, legal consumption of alcohol and generally improve the lives of students living on West Campus. Students and administrators agree that this would be an extremely positive development, and some progress has been made with proposed renovations to the West Union. But we're still not there yet.

Even when venues are available, inclusive, safe and popular, events such as DukePlays and Nasher Noir are few and far between, largely because they are prohibitively expensive within the existing funding structures that currently facilitate student programming. What would the social scene look like if 1,000 students partied (with faculty and others) in the Bostock Library or the Nasher at least once every weekend?

Beyond the social scene, day-to-day interactions could be significantly improved as well. The transition from ARAMARK, Corp. to Bon Appetit in the Marketplace on East Campus resulted in the majority of freshmen eating there on a regular basis, bringing diverse interactions and a sense of community. Additional support for Dining Services could have a similarly significant impact on upperclassmen, yet just last week DSG was involved with a significant conflict with administrators over whether or not the existing subsidy to Dining Services would continue.

The CCI didn't completely miss the boat on these and other means of improving our campus culture. Unfortunately, however, the Report and its recommendations were framed in such a way as to focus discussions on more controversial, intractable proposals. Had the CCI given other, more positive elements due consideration, the imperative for greater institutional support for undergraduate education and undergraduate social life would have been that much stronger.

Several months ago I asked in an e-mail to all undergraduate students, "So, what do you want Duke to be?" Despite the shortcomings of the CCI and some of the controversial questions at hand, that question is still on the table. What do you want Duke to be?

Provost Peter Lange is heading the effort to determine which and to what extent each of the CCI's recommendations should be implemented, and will be soliciting significant student input. As we engage in this conversation over the course of the semester, just be sure to fight not only against what you disagree with, but also for what you agree with.

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