**Graduate & Professional Student Center**

*Introduction*

One of the primary recommendations of the 2007 GCI was that Cornell invest in the construction of an expanded graduate and professional student center that could “better accommodate and foster both academic and social interactions among graduate and professional students”. The proposed student center was re-imagined to be both a centralized community space with flexible multipurpose rooms, but also to serve as a hub for graduate and professional student services.

Cornell’s current graduate and professional student center, the Big Red Barn (BRB), is a well-loved institution among the graduate and professional community. Unfortunately, the BRB struggles to meet the needs of Cornell’s graduate and professional student population. It is too small to accommodate more than one special event at a time and is consistently filled to capacity during weekly Tell Grads its Friday (TGIF) event. According to a survey of a representative sample of graduate and professional students, conducted by the GPSA in 2011, 36% of respondents had attended an event at the BRB in the previous month[[1]](#footnote-1). There are few substitutes on- or off-campus for the reliable and consistent social programming available at the Big Red Barn.

The former Dean of the Graduate School, Sunny Power, and Vice President Susan Murphy had been charged with exploring the possibilities of a new location of a graduate community center as part of longer term strategic planning. However, further planning was put on hold as a result of the financial crisis. In an update on the Progress on the Graduate Community Initiative (GCI) presented to the GPSA in September 2012, Barbara Knuth, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School, stated that the Graduate School has worked with Facilities to ensure the continued upkeep on the BRB to maintain current services for the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, the graduate & professional student center continues to be one of the major structural factors limiting the development of a sense of community across our constituency.

There remain several significant challenges.

1) *Food service & atmosphere*

Several historical and structural accidents have contributed to the under-utilization of the BRB space by graduate and professional students during the hours of 8am to 2pm on weekdays, when the BRB is operated by Cornell Dining. For nine years, the BRB Dining did not accept undergraduate ‘meal equivalency’ payments for food service at the BRB. However, during the 2002-2003 academic year, BRB Dining began accepting undergraduate ‘meal equivalency’ payments for food while Trillium was being renovated. In the fall of 2003, the undergraduate form of payment accepted at the BRB changed to ‘Big Red Bucks’, which continued the influx of undergraduate students using the BRB during dining hours. At the same time, graduate students had a disincentive to participate in a Cornell Dining meal plan; the only meal plan offered to graduate students not living in on-campus housing, the ‘Meals By Design’ debit meal plan, included a non-refundable $50 administrative fee, which was offset by the 8% tax exempt discount only if a student purchased $750 in Big Red Bucks per year. Thanks to GPSA Resolution 4 passed in September 2012[[2]](#footnote-2), this is no longer true. The new and improved ‘Meals By Design’ plan first offered in January 2013 has no administrative fee, allowing students to benefit from the 8% tax-exempt discount and offers an additional 5% discount for purchases at the BRB.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Despite this notable improvement in affordability, it remains to be seen whether there will be a significant increase in the utilization of the BRB space by graduate and professional students during dining hours as a result. This is largely an issue of demand for the food and beverage service offered at the BRB and the general atmosphere of the space. To a limited extent, the menu at the BRB has been changed in response to student input. Over the years, Cornell Dining and the BRB staff have conducted several trials and surveys to identify opportunities to expand and improve food service in BRB to meet grad student needs, but the outcomes have been mixed. However, several recommendations have emerged. Both a recent Cornell Dining Consultation[[4]](#footnote-4) and the 2007 GCI suggested that the BRB space would be improved by creating a tavern or coffee shop atmosphere, with a reading lounge and a recreation space. Furthermore, the 2007 GCI proposed extending food and coffee service hours at the BRB through midnight, as graduate and professional students are often on campus outside typical course hour blocks and often late in the evening.

GPSA Resolution 13 passed in March 2012[[5]](#footnote-5) stated that graduate and professional students should be given the opportunity to articulate their core values for their community space and to re-imagine alternative approaches to the food service at the BRB, including issuing a Request for Proposals (RFP) which would allow vendors to submit proposals and bid to provide the food service at the Big Red Barn. In response, the Graduate School formally created the BRB Advisory Board[[6]](#footnote-6). The BRB Advisory Board purpose is to provide input on food and programming, as well as look for opportunities to serve the graduate and professional student community.

2) *Programming spaces*

Since the 2007 GCI, there has been no increased allocation of flexible space for meetings and events for graduate and professional student organizations. In general, there is a lack of data on the usage of Willard Straight Hall (WSH) and the demand for alternative programming spaces by graduate and professional student organizations. Officially, space in WSH is available to graduate and professional student organizations, although scheduling difficulties frequently occur. WSH is perceived as being less accessible for graduate and professional students than for undergraduate students. The Student Union Board (SUB) oversees policy, space usage, and booking decisions in WSH[[7]](#footnote-7). Graduate and professional students do not sit on the SUB, although there has been a history of communication between the SUB and the GPSA. Thus, there continues to be a need to explore access to flexible, multi-purpose programming spaces for graduate and professional students.

3) *Virtual versus Physical Resource Spaces*

To address the demand for a centralized physical space for graduate student initiatives, the Office of Graduate Student Life website envisioned as a “virtual” hub with content designed to fulfill goals of providing career and family resources, mentoring materials and event announcements across departments, fields and programs. The new Graduate School website[[8]](#footnote-8) launched in April 2011. However, it is unclear whether a virtual resource is sufficient in the long-term and there remain opportunities to improve access to information about graduate and professional student services.

The recommendation of the 2007 GCI represented a novel vision for what an ideal graduate and professional student community space could look like. We understand that many of those original recommendations are not realistic or feasible in the short-term. However, there is simply no substitute for a physical space when it comes to developing a sense of community. There remain many opportunities to make significant progress toward the vision for graduate and professional student community space articulated in the 2007 GCI.

**Objective 1: Enhance the operation of the Big Red Barn to better** **foster both academic and social interactions among graduate and professional students**

*Rationale*: Modest changes to the current operation of the Big Red Barn may profoundly impact the progress toward the vision for graduate and professional student community space articulated in the 2007 GCI. The BRB should focus on creating an environment that serves the needs of the graduate and professional student community.

Actions:

1. Empower the BRB Advisory Board to suggest substantive changes to the BRB Operations.
2. Improve communications about BRB Events and programming, including the availability of beverage service after 2pm on weekdays.
3. Continue funding maintenance at an adequate level and building upgrades as needed until an expanded Graduate and Professional Student Center can be created.
4. Expand programming throughout the day to increase the usage of the space by graduate and professional students.

**Objective 2: Expand usage of Willard Straight Hall and enhance graduate student access to flexible programming spaces on campus**

*Rationale*: There continues to be substantial demand for flexible programming spaces on campus. In practice, there is a clear disconnect in access to Willard Straight Hall programming spaces between undergraduate and graduate students. Despite recent efforts to improve usage of the space by graduate and professional students, it is clear that a seat on the SUB does not represent meaningful involvement in the operations of Willard Straight Hall.

Actions:

1. Increase opportunities for graduate and professional students to have meaningful oversight of scheduling and operations in WSH.
2. Broaden the marketing of WSH as a student programming space among the graduate and professional student community without taking away from programming at BRB.
3. Improve access to programming spaces in other buildings with appropriate technology for multimedia presentations, film screenings, or video/teleconferencing.

**Objective 3: Re-imagine the food and beverage service provided at the Big Red Barn**

*Rationale*: The Big Red Barn’s centralized location on campus makes it an ideal space to purchase food and beverages, relax in between commitments, and to spend time with friends and colleagues throughout the day. A functional and relaxing space which supports lively interactions among students can help to foster a sense of community. Of course, access to convenient and affordable food and beverages are important for graduate student general well-being, but this is especially true when the same space also serves as the primary hub of social and community life on campus. A re-imagining of the food service offered at the BRB represents an opportunity. A thoughtfully-designed eatery or coffee shop at the BRB could serve as a pick-me-up between classes, a reward after a long day, a stimulating environment for creativity and productivity, or simply a place to relax and spend time with friends.

Actions:

1. Explore ways to create lively and interactive atmosphere at the Big Red Barn.
2. Emphasize quality and value, rather than simply affordability, in the food and beverage offerings.
3. Expand the availability of socially- and environmentally-conscious food and beverage offerings.
4. Consider ways to enhance the atmosphere and comfort of the BRB space, including upgrades to the furnishings, lighting, and heating and cooling systems, etc.

**Objective 4: Create a centralized physical space on campus for students to access information about graduate and professional student services**

*Rationale*: Even though it is not physically possible to host staff offices at the BRB, there are still gains to be made from creating a physical space that serves as the hub of graduate and professional student services, such as professional development, family services, teaching and mental health resources. A virtual resource requires that students seek out information, often with little awareness of the plethora of resources that are available at Cornell.

Actions:

1. Consider creating a small resource center with well-stocked brochure stand and computer kiosks in the BRB designed to direct students to the many resources available on campus.
2. Consider ways to increase the consistency and reliability of programming, workshops, and events on campus, both in terms of timing and location, with the goal of increasing attendance at and awareness of events.

**Objective 5: Continue to explore the long-term goal of an expanded Graduate and Professional Student Center as a centralized space for Graduate Life Initiatives**

*Rationale*: The 2007 Graduate Community Initiative stated the GPSA’s desire to see an expanded center for graduate and professional students that includes space and resources for families, mentorship and teaching workshops, recreational facilities, places for cross-departmental lectures or workshops, flexible multipurpose spaces, offices for graduate and professional student group leadership, and a place that creates a sense of identity for graduate and professional students at Cornell. Currently, the Big Red Barn provides many services that the 2007 GCI called for, but is limited by space, availability, and lack of small rooms. While the current financial situation of the University is not promising for new construction, the University must begin discussions about the long-term prospect of creating a true Graduate and Professional Student Center that meets our community’s needs.

Actions:

1. Continue to consider the creation an expanded graduate and professional student center with the resources listed in the 2007 GCI in long-term strategic planning, long-term capital financing, and alumni affairs and development.
2. Gather input from the graduate and professional student community on what community space exists in departments and what community space is needed additionally.
3. Emphasize interactivity and creating a community space where chance interactions and inspirations can take place in the design process--a similar approach to that taken in the design of the Cornell NYC Tech Campus.
4. In the absence of an expanded Graduate and Professional Student Center, identify other spaces on campus that an expanded Center would have to help student groups find appropriate programming spaces across campus.
1. [GPSA Comprehensive Report on the 2011 Student Activity Fee-Funded Services Consumption Patterns Survey](http://www.cornellgpsa.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/GPSA-Ad-hoc-Survey-Ctte-Final-Report.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [http://assembly.cornell.edu/GPSA/20120924R4](http://www.google.com/url?q=http%3A%2F%2Fassembly.cornell.edu%2FGPSA%2F20120924R4&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AFQjCNHxi9a_lSYVehb2qjgQTngedffxCw) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://living.sas.cornell.edu/dine/mealplans/mealsbydesign.cfm> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Big Red Barn Focus Groups Report, October 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <http://assembly.cornell.edu/GPSA/20120326R13v2> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <http://www.gradschool.cornell.edu/about-us/newsletter-fall-2012/big-red-barn> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <http://www.cornellsa.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/WSH-SUB-Fall-2011.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <http://www.gradschool.cornell.edu/> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)