

**Mergers**

**Acquisitions**

**Collaborations**



**GIVING  
INSTITUTIONS  
NEW LIFE**



**T**he number of colleges and universities facing precarious futures continues to rise, as lower birth rates are creating a smaller pool of traditional-age students entering higher education, resulting in reduced freshman class sizes at many institutions. Nathan Grawe, an economist at Carleton College in Minnesota, predicts that the college-going population will drop by 15 percent between 2025 and 2029 and continue to decline by another percentage point or two thereafter, according to a September 2018 article in *The Hechinger Report*. Moody's Investors Service reported in 2018 that the number of small colleges in the United States forced to close continues to climb from 2015 levels. In 2015, five institutions closed their doors compared to 11 colleges in 2017, and the closure rate is projected to increase through 2019. The increase in closures reflects a persistent challenge for many small institutions facing declining tuition revenues and increased costs.

Graduate student enrollments are also slowing, thanks, in part, to an improving job market, and international student enrollments have declined in recent years. Coupled with these shifts is the reality that small institutions often have a limited academic portfolio of high-demand programs and majors to attract new students. Rising costs and larger discount rates have created unsustainable conditions, and many institutions have been unable to successfully compete in today's higher education marketplace.

Despite limited donor bases, stagnant academic program development, and small and often restricted endowments, a number of colleges and universities have sought to improve their competitive positions by enhancing campus facilities, which has increased debt loads even further.

One of the trickiest parts of the higher education landscape is the fact that not all constituents—faculty, staff, trustees, alumni, parents, and students—truly understand this complex, economic situation. Therefore, changes in the higher education industry catch many constituents at fragile institutions unaware of possible or sudden closures. This unawareness was evidenced when Sweet Briar College in Sweet Briar, Virginia, decided to close its doors only to shift its calendar, curriculum, and pricing and remain open; when Mount Ida College in Newton, Massachusetts, closed in May 2018, sparking lawsuits from students who claimed they were misled about the severity of financial problems; and when Newbury College in Brookline, Massachusetts, announced in December that it will cease operations in spring 2019 after recruiting displaced students from Mount Ida. While each situation is unique, the EY-Parthenon Group, a national consulting firm, predicts that 800 institutions with 1,000 or fewer students will close or merge within the next 10 to 15 years. The group also predicts that the number of traditional-age students will continue to be low in New England until

perhaps 2033. The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education's 2016 edition of *Knocking at the College Door* projects that the United States is headed into a period of stagnation in the overall number of high school graduates it produces. The report cites two patterns: growth in the number of high school graduates in the South and West, and continuing declines in the number of high school graduates in the Midwest and Northeast.

### **Wheelock College Weighs Options**

When Wheelock College in Boston, Massachusetts, faced a precarious set of economic circumstances, strong leadership made the difference in the outcomes that led to its merger with Boston University. The enrollment and financial data were gathered, analyzed, and shared by the members of the Wheelock board of trustees to formulate a strategy for exploring possible options and pathways. The EY-Parthenon Group was retained to assist in mapping options, resulting in a request for proposals to a select list of higher education institutions nationwide. After a careful review of the proposals, negotiations began with Boston University. The announcement of the merger to the Wheelock community was made during the August 2017 orientation. The Wheelock leadership team quickly began managing unchartered territory with all members of the college community, including loyal alumni, steadfast donors, and community partners. The merger process was vetted by two committed boards of trustees and led by two presidents who were dedicated to ensuring that the interests of students, faculty, and staff were front and center during the process.

Given that no guidebook exists for mergers of higher education institutions, the experiences of the Wheelock College and Boston University communities included grappling with uncertainty. Specific details were unavailable for



# Five Elements of a Successful Merger

## *Berklee College of Music and The Boston Conservatory Join Forces*

BY BETSY NEWMAN

In June 2015, Berklee College of Music and The Boston Conservatory signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to explore a merger, as leadership from both schools realized that, together, they could create a visionary response to the rapidly evolving needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century artists. Berklee College President Roger Brown and The Boston Conservatory President Richard Ortner agreed that the combined institutions could offer students a truly unique environment in which to build the foundation for their life's work and discover their authentic voices. Following unanimous approval by each institution's board of trustees, the merger agreement was signed in a public celebration on January 20, 2016, at the Berklee Performance Center. The provisions of the merger were the result of a six-month exploration period undertaken by the two institutions after signing the MOU. Input was gathered from many key institutional stakeholders, including faculty, staff, students, parents, alumni, and industry leaders. The combined institution, located in Boston's historic Back Bay and Fenway neighborhoods, was to be called "Berklee," with the Conservatory becoming "Boston Conservatory at Berklee." The two institutions then began necessary regulatory and accreditation review and approval processes, which were completed in summer 2016.

There is no question that mergers are enormously complex undertakings and difficult to navigate from a leadership perspective. The merger at Berklee was no different, yet it has been overwhelmingly successful because both institutions approached the merger with an unwavering commitment to students first; a shared vision for a compelling future; a history of collaborative partnership; a position of strength from which to build; and a culture of innovation from which to lead.

### **A COMMITMENT TO STUDENTS FIRST**

Berklee College of Music and The Boston Conservatory shared the critical values of diversity, inclusion, and excellence that put students first. While Boston Conservatory and Berklee College of Music students collaborated informally for decades—as evidenced by the Berklee Indian Ensemble, the Neapolitan Orchestra, and the Berklee Silent Film Orchestra—the June 2015 announcement of the potential merger sparked a new surge in student-initiated collaborations that were fully supported by the leadership



at both institutions as a formal part of the merger integration work. The student government associations from both schools immediately created a joint group, Bridge the Gap, to program and publicize initiatives that brought students from the two institutions together, including various music and dance projects, instrumental duos, and musical theater stagings. In fall 2015, The Boston Conservatory students began hosting programs on the BIRN, the Berklee student-run internet radio station; in March 2016, the Berklee Equinox Festival explored the nexus of classical music and improvisation, with a series of concerts and workshops at both The Boston Conservatory and Berklee to celebrate musical commonalities and shared creativity. The united student communities put their hopes for the post-merger future on display for the entire campus community. As creative trailblazers, students were empowered to show administrators the way.

### **A SHARED VISION**

Shared values were supported by a shared, compelling vision that leadership believed could be fully realized. The strategic underpinning of the merger is the belief that music, movement, and digital technology are converging to give artists powerful new means of creative expression in the theater, on the concert stage, and through established and emerging platforms. The combined institution is now poised to become the leader in exploring new and original art forms, breaking down boundaries that isolate genres, and unleashing the tremendous creative potential of the global arts community. The vision recognized that the sum of the complementary strengths of both institutions would have far greater impact than the separate operation of each institution.

### **A COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIP**

Both institutions had an established partnership from which to build. With adjacent campuses located in Boston's Fenway neighborhood, The Boston Conservatory and Berklee College of Music had a decades-long history of collaboration. Founding members of the Pro Arts Consortium, the two institutions helped create the Boston Arts Academy and shared some administrative and academic services such as public safety and dining services. With the signing of a far-reaching MOU, the stage had been set for the creation of a pre-eminent international training ground for 21<sup>st</sup> century leaders in music, dance, and theater.



## A POSITION OF STRENGTH

Both institutions approached the merger from positions of strength and opportunity. Both schools experienced significant evolution in the past decade, building new facilities and performance spaces, strengthening community partnerships, and enriching academic programming. In fall 2015, both Berklee College of Music and The Boston Conservatory reported record enrollment. Berklee expanded its curricular offerings with online courses and degrees, multidisciplinary institutes, graduate programs, an increased focus on technology and entrepreneurship, and a campus in Valencia, Spain. Its alumni have won more than 300 Grammy and Latin Grammy Awards, while The Boston Conservatory's contemporary dance program was named "best in the country" by *OnStage* magazine. The Boston Conservatory's musical theater programs have also long been considered among the best in the nation, and its music programs—including opera—are renowned around the globe.

## A CULTURE OF INNOVATION

Leadership considered the merger to be its next pioneering idea—another among the many "firsts" that both institutions achieved—not a set of organizational negotiations or transactions. Both schools were considered radical at the times of their founding and pioneered many ideas that later became norms and models for other schools. The Boston Conservatory was among the first conservatories to admit women and African Americans; it founded the first professional all-female string quartet, the Eichberg Quartet. It was the first conservatory to: form a grand opera department; establish an integrated department of ballet and modern dance; grant degrees in music education, drama, and undergraduate and musical theater; present autism-friendly performances; and more. Berklee College of Music was the first college in the United States to build its curriculum around jazz. Among its accomplishments, it created the first college-level courses in rock and pop music; established the world's first undergraduate degree program in film scoring; launched the world's first college major in music synthesis (electronic production and design) and the first degree program in songwriting; and launched one of the first online schools, Berklee Online, which is now a leader of MOOCs (massive open online courses).

Today, every artist benefits from developing broad-based creative skills and an entrepreneurial mindset. These benefits now permeate the merged institution and are shaped by Berklee's shared vision to transform arts education and nurture the growth of the world's most inspired artists so they may fully realize their creative and career potential. Perhaps most exciting is the fact that students are leading the way, bringing the value and promise of one institution to life through their many artistic collaborations.

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*Betsy Newman is senior vice president for student enrollment and engagement at Berklee.*

approximately four months as planning conversations could only begin after all legal documents were signed by both boards of trustees. Wheelock College leadership team members, in particular, were keenly aware that written and verbal communications, including frequent campus meetings with each constituent group, were critical to update the community with timelines and to gather questions to be addressed by jointly staffed Boston University and Wheelock College work groups. As details were finalized, written communications and meetings ensured that students, faculty, staff, and parents received the most accurate, up-to-date information about the future.

## Managing the Planning Process

To assist in understanding and managing this incredibly challenging process, the Wheelock College leadership team read and reread William Bridges' *Managing Transitions—Making the Most of Change* (De Capo Lifelong Books, 2009). Bridges highlights the distinct difference between change and transition. He describes change as the actual event or circumstances while transition is described as the individual psychological process experienced by each person impacted by the change. His philosophy guided leaders as they worked with staff members during the 10-month journey, which accelerated in December 2016 after the final signing of documents by both boards of trustees.

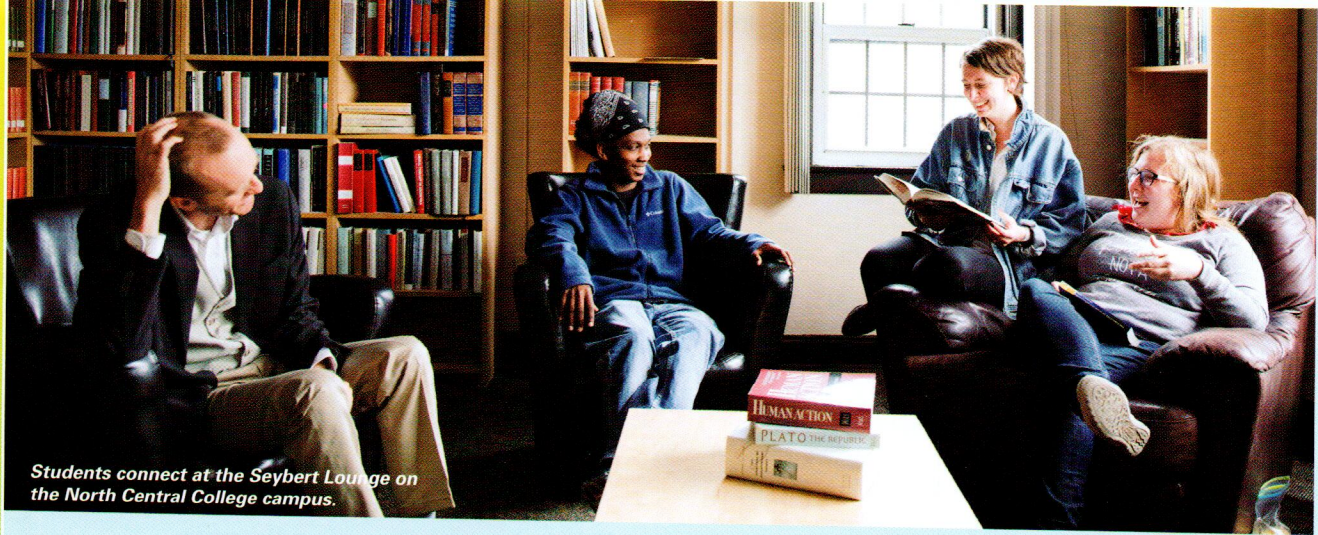
In fall 2017, Boston University and Wheelock College leadership announced a transition implementation structure that included the appointment of more than 20 transition teams. Each team's focus was a facet of academic affairs or administration such as accreditation and academic programs, student services, budget planning, facilities, and public safety. Each team included representatives from both institutions. An overarching transition coordination group developed a timeline for the work performed by each team, set transition goals, and facilitated communication and collaboration across teams. A single team decision often had implications for one or more teams, so consultation was important to ensure collaboration and avoid duplication of effort.

With each new piece of business, discussions occurred within the respective teams. Boston University staff would relate, "This is how we do it." Wheelock College staff had a chance to reply, "We can work with that, or can we compromise and try it this way." This democratic approach helped the teams advocate for students' needs. Decisions were frequently reached and procedures were established following an open dialogue and negotiation, which contributed significantly to a successful merger. Student interests came first, as they should. When decisions were made, information was communicated to each community separately via a website, especially designed for each institution, dedicated to the merger.

## The Transition Begins

Beginning mid-December 2017, Boston University Associate Provost and Dean of Students Kenn Elmore, Wheelock College Vice President for Student Life Cynthia Forrest, and Wheelock College Dean of Student Success Mary McCormack launched the detailed planning processes for





Students connect at the Seybert Lounge on the North Central College campus.

## Acquisition Preserves History of Great Books School

BY KIMBERLY SLUIS AND JAMES GODO

**W**hen North Central College in Naperville, Illinois, announced a plan to acquire the Shimer Great Books School in 2016, North Central President Troy Hammond viewed it as an opportunity to build on the college's financial strength and its great tradition and reputation in the liberal arts and sciences.

"This was a unique opportunity to add a distinctive academic offering to North Central's campus," says Hammond. "We felt we could provide a location and academic environment where the Shimer model of education could flourish."

At the time, Shimer College was located on the campus of the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) in Chicago, where it was renting facilities for an enrollment of less than 100 students. Shimer was a completely separate academic entity, and its students were not able to fully access the amenities and cocurricular offerings of IIT.

North Central College was approached in fall 2015 by Shimer College regarding a potential acquisition. In spring 2016, North Central College's faculty engaged in substantive discussions before passing a resolution supporting the potential agreement. The Shimer College's assembly, including students, faculty, and alumni, passed a similar supporting resolution. In May 2016, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) was completed between North Central College's board of trustees and Shimer College to initiate formal negotiations between the two institutions.

### ACCELERATING THE PROCESS

"Once an MOU was completed, we quickly began the process of writing the Higher Learning Commission's (HLC) Change of Control application," says Hammond.

"It was critical for the application to be submitted no later

than August 1, 2016, triggering a fall site visit and a winter 2017 review by the HLC board to meet our goal of completing the transaction at the end of the academic year."

Weekly, and often daily, conference calls between North Central College and Shimer College were needed to manage an extensive and wide-ranging list of requisite projects, the most important of which were ensuring an effective transition for Shimer's students and faculty, integrating nearly 4,000 Shimer alumni into the North Central family, and responding to countless legal and HLC requests.

It was determined that Shimer College would become the Shimer Great Books School at North Central College, and Shimer's students would become North Central College students if the Change of Control was approved and the deal was completed. The North Central College campus in Naperville serves nearly 3,000 students, providing many additional opportunities for Shimer students to participate in music, theatre, clubs, and study abroad activities while accessing a rich array of support services and facilities.

At the same time, North Central made a commitment to retain Shimer's distinctiveness as a "great books" school with all core courses focused extensively on reading classic texts taught using Socratic dialogue characterized by rigorous, engaging, and deeply analytical discussions.

"The acquisition allowed the Shimer name to continue as part of North Central," explains Hammond. "There has been resounding pride and support from the Shimer College alumni, many of whom have attended North Central's homecoming activities and other college events the last two years."

As part of a major upgrade of academic facilities in 2017, including construction of the \$60 million Wentz Science Center, the college made plans to renovate three



classrooms and utilize the distinctive octagon-shaped tables that are at the foundation of the Shimer Great Books pedagogy. A residence hall community and gathering space/lounge were also part of the facilities plan.

In June 2017, North Central announced that it had successfully acquired the Shimer Great Books School, after having navigated complex legal and HLC accreditation processes.

"I've been part of various mergers and acquisitions in the business world, but this particular process was challenging," recalls Hammond. "Completing the Shimer Great Books School acquisition required a skilled team with project management, academic, and legal expertise. It also required a campus community demonstrating compassion for a group of students and faculty who had endured an uncertain future."

### **SUPPORTING THE SHIMER GREAT BOOKS SCHOOL**

North Central immediately launched an extensive marketing campaign for the new Shimer Great Books School, including a four-color viewbook, video, blog posts, web pages, and social media campaign. The HLC had prohibited the college from any marketing activity until the acquisition was completed.

The Shimer Great Books School began offering four majors: humanities, social science, natural science, and liberal studies. Seven Shimer faculty were given visiting professor status and Stuart Patterson, a former Shimer professor, was named chair of the Shimer Great Books School. In addition, an admission counselor and one student affairs staff member from Shimer also joined North Central.

"I was so excited for Shimer students to be able to speak in a variety of ways with a variety of different people," says Patterson. "And I was excited for them to be in the broader community and in the world."

The first "Shimerians" graduated from North Central in June 2018. Among them was 63-year-old Donna Weems, who spent 40 years pursuing her undergraduate degree—representative of the unique students that Shimer College brought to North Central's campus. Weems plans to pursue a doctoral degree.

"It was very rewarding to shake the hands of the first Shimer Great Books School graduates in 2018," relates Hammond. "I am excited to have this rigorous and unique program on our campus as the result of an acquisition process I believe is more likely to occur for many colleges and universities throughout the country in the years ahead."

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student life and services. At this point, the focus shifted to managing change and working together to facilitate transitions by individual students and staff members. The student affairs leaders at both institutions benefitted from their work and shared experiences as members of NASPA Region I.

Boston University held a one-day orientation in January 2018, called Wheelock Transition Information Day, to familiarize students and their families with the campus, allow them to meet academic department chairs and key staff members, and learn the ethos of the university. The day was modeled on its summer orientation program for new students and their families. Several open forums and individual meetings were held throughout the year on the Wheelock campus for students to not only ask questions, but share thoughts, frustrations, and fears. It was important to allow students the space to heal and mourn their college. Many went through the steps of the grieving process, some quicker than others. As the months went by, healing and acceptance began to occur as students solidified essentials such as housing, financial aid, and academic pathways. Annual events at Wheelock took on greater significance as they were commemorated as the last of their kind.

The housing, dining, and residential life team studied the program at Wheelock College to understand its structure and culture. While the team was clear that Boston University procedures and processes would be introduced to the residences at Wheelock, the team acknowledged the transition would be facilitated by a deep understanding of the current Wheelock situation.

Guiding principles set for the Boston University representatives on this team included the following:

- ▶ Every step of the way, be sensitive to the Wheelock community coming to terms with the news that their institution is closing.
- ▶ Visit the Wheelock campus at the invitation of Wheelock colleagues. Do not impose yourselves on them. Let them guide you regarding your visibility on campus.
- ▶ View Wheelock staff as internal to Boston University, and manage their participation in staff selection processes in that way.
- ▶ Develop no separate processes that shadow those of Boston University.
- ▶ Modify timelines as necessary to allow full participation by Wheelock students.

For example, the resident assistant (RA) selection timeline allowed Wheelock students to learn about RA opportunities during Wheelock Transition Information Day and have sufficient time to complete and submit applications. The online application was edited after the application deadline was changed to a later date, and the interview schedule was moved back. Boston University applicants received a communication that outlined changes to the timeline to keep them in the loop.

Within the university's residence life program, professional positions opened in spring and summer 2018. Three professionals from Wheelock College applied and interviewed; all three received offers and joined the Boston University staff, including the former assistant director of residence life at





Students enjoy the Colleges of the Fenway 2018 Block Party.

## Collaboration Enhances Services, Reduces Costs, Builds Community

BY CLAIRE RAMSBOTTOM

**C**olleges of the Fenway (COF), a Boston-based consortium of five colleges and universities, has been collaborating since 1996 to enhance the student experience and help member institutions contain the rising costs of higher education. Its members include Emmanuel College, Massachusetts College of Art and Design, MCPHS University (formerly Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences), Simmons University, and Wentworth Institute of Technology.

Close geographic proximity, less than one square mile, allows for collaborative opportunities that benefit students, faculty, and staff. In the consortium's most recent student survey, 52 percent of first-year students said the consortium played a significant role in their decision to attend one of the COF institutions. "Through our unusual partnership, we are able to offer students an expanded and enhanced experience," says Patricia Rissmeyer, vice president of student affairs at Emmanuel College. "Our students truly have the best of all worlds—they enjoy the breadth of academic and social opportunities typical of a larger university, while receiving the individualized mentoring and support of a small campus community." Comprised of more than 13,000 undergraduates, in 2017–2018 COF

students took advantage of the collaboration in the following ways:

- More than **400** students participated in the shared performing arts program, which includes orchestra, theater, chorus, dance project, and jazz band.
- More than **3,200** students participated in the shared intramurals and recreational sports program, including leagues open to all gender identities.
- Some **5,200** students made connections with other students through the COF Block Party, After Party, Student Leadership Conference, film night, welcome receptions, Campus Movie Fest, and Center for Sustainability and the Environment programs and events.
- More than **800** students traveled abroad to 34 different countries.
- Some **175** residence life staff members participated in joint training.
- Through cross-registration, some **650** students took courses across the institutions, including those pursuing two unique COF minors: sustainability and the environment, and performing arts.
- More than **30** faculty worked together through the COF Center for Sustainability and the Environment to deliver programs including the Muddy River Symposium, Earth Day, and student mini-gastronomy.



On the administrative operations side, COF identifies and facilitates opportunities to share resources to enhance services and manage costs. Through joint contracts, purchasing, shared positions, and valuation of programs, the consortium collectively saved member institutions \$4.7 million last year. "As a strong supporter of the many ways COF has helped our institution, I believe we are better positioned to address the challenges before us," notes Robert Totino, vice president of finance at Wentworth Institute of Technology. The most significant effects are in the following areas:

- **Colleges of the Fenway Area Network (COFAN)** delivers internet access to all member institutions through a shared infrastructure.
- **Three shared positions:** director of environmental health and safety; director of emergency preparedness; and an information security officer focused on policy development, compliance, and risk management.
- **Some 35 shared contracts** cover services such as the employee assistance program, property/liability insurance, temporary staffing, online faculty and staff training, waste management, and travel.
- **The Fenway Card** serves as a common identification card and is required for access to essential campus services and facilities, including meal plans, libraries, and access to residence halls and campus buildings. It can be loaded with funds to spend on campuses and in more than 75 businesses in the local community. COF students spent \$1.5 million last year within the campuses and local restaurants and businesses.
- **A Global Education Opportunities Center** oversees a shared tracking and data management system, is the J-1 visa program designee for member institutions, and facilitates joint resources and programs related to both domestic and international travel, including the travel insurance program.
- **Joint training**, including leadership development opportunities, was provided to more than 2,500 faculty, staff, and students.

Guided by five strategic focus areas, the COF continues to emphasize helping member institutions differentiate themselves in the market. Through new joint academic programs, joint student opportunities, communities of practice, and shared positions, the COF looks forward with a thoughtful eye to the role of collaboration in the future of higher education.

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Wheelock College who lived on campus. He was assigned to oversee the three campus residences at Wheelock that would serve as Boston University housing for the 2018–2019 academic year, and he remained in his on-campus apartment. His knowledge and experience at Wheelock proved valuable during the transition. Nine Wheelock RAs applied to return the next academic year as Boston University RAs. All were appointed and placed within the university program. Seven Wheelock students participated in the university's selection process, and all were selected.

Students living in the Education House, a coeducational housing option for undergraduate students studying within the School of Education, planned two open houses for Wheelock to promote this specialty residence and to help Wheelock education students feel welcome in the university's education community. Tenured faculty and a few staff members in various areas experienced the merger along with students; and one position, housed in the Dean of Students Office, was designed to help students make a successful transition.

Over summer 2018, students who chose to continue their academic careers at Boston University were invited to attend an orientation session designed for transfer and continuing students. All students were encouraged to attend SPLASH!, the university's annual activities fair, to learn more about getting involved in their new environment. Students who were heavily involved in smaller, more intimate clubs and organizations at Wheelock often found it intimidating to create new social networks at a vastly larger institution. By the end of the fall semester, many students were enjoying the new extracurricular opportunities, while others found the academic rigor too difficult to pursue involvement outside the classroom. Larger class sizes, lectures, and a heavy focus on tests (as opposed to writing papers and completing projects), have been among the biggest challenges for former Wheelock students attending Boston University.

Administrators from various academic schools of the university now meet on a regular basis to discuss ways to support Wheelock students and help them succeed in their academic goals. Staff members are intentional in their efforts to provide the one-on-one attention that Wheelock students are accustomed to. The biggest difference at Boston University?

Resources and attention were given to students at Wheelock, regardless of whether they wanted them or not. At Boston University, these same resources and attention are available, but students often must take the initiative and seek them on their own. **LE**

*Darcy Dubois was associate dean of students and director of residence life at Wheelock College and is now special assistant to the dean of students at Boston University.*

*Kenneth Elmore is associate provost and dean of students at Boston University.*

*Cynthia Smith Forrest is former vice president for student life at Wheelock College and is currently a higher education consultant.*

*David Zamojski is assistant dean of students at Boston University.*

