STRENGTHENING ENGAGEMENT AND SCHOOL AFFINITY THROUGH ACADEMIC STUDENT CLUB FACILITATION

Don Cyr, Susan LeBlanc, Amanda Malkiewich
Goodman School of Business, Brock University (CANADA)

Abstract
Due in part to a projected decline in the university age population in North America and the associated budgetary challenges, many colleges and universities have placed greater focus and research on student retention, engagement and institutional affinity. Although student engagement includes, and can be enhanced with, student organizations and clubs, the explicit connection between student club engagement and subsequent alumni engagement has not been widely studied. This paper outlines the experience of the Goodman School of Business (GSB) at Brock University, Canada, in promoting engagement and affinity. In 2010 the GSB established a staff position with the goal of developing and implementing a strategic plan regarding student engagement focused primarily on student clubs. In collaboration with the school’s manager of marketing, communications and alumni relations, the initiative fostered a noted increase in student engagement, affinity and subsequent alumni engagement. The paper outlines the history and growth in student and alumni engagement over a six year period, and considers student clubs within the literature on working principles for the advancement of student and alumni engagement. Areas for future research are suggested.

Keywords: student clubs, student engagement, school affinity, alumni.

1 INTRODUCTION
Demographic trends in North America forewarn of a decrease in the typical university age population, with an estimated decline of 10% in Canada over the next several years, rebounding only by 2030 ([1], [2]). Along with stagnant or shrinking government funding, this poses significant budgetary challenges for many universities and colleges. As a result, student retention and institutional affinity have become of greater concern. Consequently research into the impact of student engagement and its effects on student satisfaction and retention, along with institutional affinity, has experienced a renewed focus ([3], [4] among many).

Student engagement, however, encompasses a wide variety of academic and non-academic activities. One somewhat limited area of the engagement literature concerns the impact of student involvement in discipline based student organizations and clubs. Although the degree of involvement has been noted to have a varied effect on student’s performance [5], engagement in student clubs appears to, in general, have a positive impact on academic performance and satisfaction [6], enhance related academic learning [7], and strengthen professional commitment [8]. Additional benefits such as an increased sense of belongingness for international students and the fostering of cross-cultural interactions has also been noted [9]. Personality traits, socio-economic and ethnic factors have also been found to play a role in student club engagement ([10], [11]) along with a variety of personal learning goals [12]. In addition, a student’s engagement typology ([13], [14]) and even the institutional typology would appear to impact the extent of a student's club/socialization activities [15].

The topic of alumni engagement and giving has also received a fair amount of attention with a particular focus on the factors that predict philanthropic contributions. In addition to cultural dimensions, important differences have been noted in terms of program of study ([16], [17]). Although a renewed interest in the relationship of student engagement and subsequent alumni giving ([18], [19], [20], among others) is noted, the impact of prior student club involvement on institutional affinity and alumni engagement appears to have received little direct focus.

This paper outlines the experience of the Goodman School of Business (GSB) at Brock University, Canada in promoting engagement, affinity and alumni involvement through student clubs. In 2010 the GSB established a staff position with the goal of developing and implementing a strategic plan regarding student engagement in collaboration with the school’s manager of marketing, communications and alumni relations. The initiative fostered a noted increase in school engagement, affinity and alumni engagement. Section 2 provides an overview of the GSB, the history and growth of student club involvement and subsequent alumni engagement. Section 3 examines the literature on
student engagement and couches student clubs specifically within that context along with the GSB’s experience couched within suggested guiding principles. Section 4 reviews the literature connecting student club engagement to alumni engagement while section 5 concludes and offers several suggestions for future research on the impact of student clubs on student and alumni engagement.

2 HISTORY OF GOODMAN STUDENT CLUB AND ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT

The Goodman School of Business (GSB) at Brock University is located in the Niagara Region of the Province of Ontario, Canada, in close proximity to Niagara Falls, Canada. The University has a current student population of approximately 18,000 and was established in 1964 primarily to serve the educational needs of the Niagara Region, comprised of twelve municipalities covering slightly less than 2,000 km² and a population of approximately 500,000. The institution is primarily liberals arts focused and consequently the GSB represents one of the few professional schools. Approximately 100 km from Toronto, Ontario, the largest metropolitan region in Canada, the University competes for students in one of the more competitive educational environments in Canada, with many large prominent universities and colleges nearby. The GSB in particular competes for students with a number of large, well established Canadian business schools, both in the greater Toronto area and nearby.

At the undergraduate level, the GSB offers three major degree programs. A Bachelors of Business Administration (BBA) with concentrations in many areas of business (accounting, marketing, finance, organizational behaviour etc.) as well as a more structured Bachelors of Accounting (BAcc) with greater depth and course work specifically in accounting. Within the BBA degree program the School also offers a duel degree program involving significant study at several European schools, providing students with both a BBA degree from the GSB, as well as an undergraduate business degree from one of the partner schools. With approximately 90 full time tenured or tenure track appointments along with full time instructional appointments, the GSB serves close to 3,000 undergraduate students along with a host of graduate students.

2.1 Student Club Engagement

As with many business schools, the GSB has a number of undergraduate business student clubs with a focus on various business disciplines (accounting, finance, marketing, human resource management, etc.). Prior to 2010, however, these clubs were primarily supported and organized by students and facilitated by faculty members in respective disciplines. Although numerous accomplishments on the part of the student clubs in terms of activities and participation can be noted, many of the clubs suffered from a lack of focus, leadership and often succession planning among club leaders. Consequently, from year to year, the success of the clubs in terms of their membership and activities varied. Despite this, one major accomplishment of the GSB’s student organizations was shortly after the GSB successfully achieved AACSB accreditation in 2002. At that time, it was noted that a requirement for accredited business schools was the establishment of a dedicated placement office and support. Consequently, the GSB devoted limited academic advising staff resources to support the clubs, and to establish an overarching business student organization called the Goodman Business Students’ Association (BSA). In 2007, along with academic advising staff support, the BSA was instrumental in promoting and achieving the adoption among business students of a monetary levy designed to provide financial resources in support of a dedicated placement office along with increased funding for student club activities. Between 2003 and 2010, however the strength of the BSA and related discipline based clubs remained somewhat volatile.

In 2010 the GSB secured funding to support a student engagement office (SEO) and the hiring of a dedicated student engagement coordinator (SEC). The role of the student engagement office was primarily to support and grow the engagement of GSB business students in terms of the BSA and the associated discipline based clubs. Primary responsibilities included helping in vetting student club initiatives with subsequent logistical and budgetary support, along with insuring that club activities were consistent with the University’s safety and related institutional policies. A significant responsibility of the SEO and SEC was in providing leadership training and logistical support and formal processes for club leadership succession on an annual basis.

In addition, the SEO was also tasked with helping to develop a greater engagement in terms of GSB alumni. Prior to 2000, alumni engagement was primarily the role of a centralized university office associated with university level development/fundraising.
A summary of the success of the SEO over a six year period can be seen in terms of the growth of the number of activities and accomplishments of the GSB student business clubs shown in Table 1. Although the number of student clubs did not increase dramatically over the six year period, the number of students engaged and number of activities undertaken saw a substantial increase. Indeed, although the GSB experienced a 10% increase in the number of undergraduate business students over the period (from 2,602 in 2010 to 2,852 in 2016), the number of student club activities and students involved approximately doubled. The current seven student clubs, housed under the umbrella organization of the BSA is comprised of those focused on accounting, finance, marketing, human resource management, entrepreneurship/innovation, DECAU – a chapter of a national case competition network for business students, and the Goodman Student Ambassador Association – a student club focused on promoting business education to high school students, non-profit community support events and the engagement of the local business community. Information on the clubs and their events including the BSA can be found at https://www.goodmanbsa.com/goodman-student-clubs.

Table 1. Summary of Growth of Student Club Engagement and Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Club Activities</th>
<th>2010-11</th>
<th>2016-17</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student clubs</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business student competitions and conferences</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of students involved in business student competitions</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Business School competitions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Club mentoring meetings</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Club organized events</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Business School competitions refers to business case competitions specifically organized by various business schools, nationally or internationally.

2.2 Relationship to Alumni Relations in the GSB

Prior to 2000, alumni relations at Brock University was managed by a larger university-level central alumni unit, which had little program or Faculty focus. In 2000, the GSB was assigned a development officer located within the School. It was clear, however, that with no prior dedicated business alumni focus on the part of the institution, and a relative lack of prior student engagement, alumni development and support was difficult to achieve. Over the time period of 2000 to 2007 several annual GSB specific alumni focused events were established (newsletter, alumni social, golf tournament, annual distinguished graduate award) however participation was notably limited.

From 2007 to 2010, however, a noted increase in the involvement of younger alumni in GSB based alumni events began to occur. This was anecdotally linked to the student engagement and affinity that was growing among students involved in the GSB’s student clubs, facilitated by the club coordination support provided by GSB academic advising staff. This evidence provided the impetus for the proposal for an SEO.

2.3 Impact of GSB Student Club Engagement on Alumni Engagement

From 2010 onwards, with the establishment of a dedicated SEO, the link to alumni strengthened considerably. In addition, the dedicated development position within the GSB transitioned into a full-time marketing, communications and alumni relations officer with a greater focus on alumni development and engagement, than fund raising.

A noted significant benefit of the SEO and dedicated SEC was in fostering the leadership skills of the various club leaders and executives. The growth in size and activities of the student clubs also led to a growth in executive positions (president, vice president, directors) within their respective organizations. Today close to 130 students are engaged with the clubs in leadership positions each year. Fostering leadership within such students was directly related to subsequent growth in alumni engagement. Indeed one of the former student BSA presidents, remaining actively involved with the...
school after graduation, subsequently founded a formal network of alumni called the Goodman Alumni Network (GAN).

A noted increase in attendance at alumni focused events has been one measure of the impact of the engagement of former student club leaders and participants with the GAN. Prior to 2007 attendance at an annual GSB alumni event would be in the range of 20 to 50 participants. Currently the same annual event now attracts more than 150 alumni, many having been engaged with one or more of the student clubs during their years as an undergraduate student. The active engagement of prior club student leaders, and the leadership skills they developed through student club involvement has also led to a marked increase in the number of alumni organized or initiated events. In 2016, alumni initiated 13 different events and the GAN formalized executive positions and developed a strategic plan.

The growth and increased structure and coordination in the student clubs, facilitated by the SEO, led to an increased engagement of alumni, specifically with respect to the students clubs. Annually three senior alumni are now appointed as members of the BSA board, providing advice in terms of the BSA’s projects and endeavours. Specific clubs have increased the number of keynote speakers at their events, many of who are alumni. In addition the increased number of business case competitions involved in over the past six years on the part of the student clubs has led to an increased number of alumni acting as advisors or judges. Alumni have also become actively engaged in student recruitment events for the University and the GSB, coordinating with GSB staff and the Goodman Student Ambassador Association. Prior to 2010 the number of active alumni volunteers engaged with GSB student clubs was almost non-existent. In 2016, however, the number of alumni involved in club related activities was close to 60. The increased engagement of alumni also led to the appointment of the chair of the GAN to the dean’s advisory council, as an ongoing appointment.

The subsequent growth of alumni engagement and the required coordination and facilitation required on the part of GSB staff has recently led to the development of a full-time position that would focus solely on alumni engagement. Given the strong correlation between student club engagement and subsequent alumni engagement growth, this position would now be housed within the SEO, to foster a greater connection between current student leaders and alumni network leaders and events. This strategic decision was also motivated by the increasing coordination between the SEO and the Manager of Marketing, Communications and Alumni Relations.

3 RELATIONSHIP OF STUDENT CLUB INVOLVEMENT TO ENGAGEMENT

Measuring the effectiveness of student clubs and the impact of the GSB’ strategy is complex in the sense that it begins with a definition of student engagement. For example, [21] and [22] define student engagement within the context of student success, facilitated by widening participation with the ultimate goals of high levels of course completion, facilitation of ultimate employment, and the development of a positive attitude towards lifelong learning. Several other definitions ([23], [24]) frame student engagement as active student investment and participation that ultimately builds an emotional commitment to quality learning. In a review of the extensive and complex literature on student engagement [22] synthesize the findings of the literature into ten guiding proposals for action, framed within four major conceptual perspectives on student engagement in the literature comprised of student motivation, transaction between students and teachers, institutional support for engagement and finally social, political and demographic factors. In this section we attempt to relate and measure the experience of the GSB and student clubs within this context.

The first of [22]’s ten guiding proposals or principles is the enhancement of student’s self-belief. This guiding proposal is based upon the concept of students constructing their own knowledge with self-perceived confidence as a key motivator for engagement. Institutions must create opportunities to enhance student’s self-belief. The engagement in student clubs has clearly helped GSB students develop confidence, social and leadership skills in many instances. With clubs focused on particular business disciplines in particular, many activities contribute to students’ self-learning.

The second guiding principle is that institutions should provide opportunities for students to learn both autonomously and with others; developing a sense of competence and ultimately leading them to likely be more motivated to engage and succeed. Student club activities in the GSB are frequently focused on group or team interactions between club members in achieving accomplishments and organizing events. In addition, however, responsibilities of individual executive members can lead to a sense of accomplishment from an individual perspective.
The third guiding principle [22] synthesize from the engagement literature is to recognize that faculty are central to engagement and that students are more likely to engage if supported by faculty. Therefore, promoting the engagement and recognizing the value of faculty for their contribution is critical particularly in light of the increasing pressure for publications for tenure and promotion. In the case of the GSB student clubs, one or more faculty advisors are often engaged, providing support and encouragement. In order to facilitate faculty engagement the GSB dean’s office provides financial research support for faculty extensively engaged with students in business case competitions, providing a valuable signal to faculty of the importance of such activities. In 2016-17, 35 GSB faculty members devoted time to student club activities. Much research, however, has yet to be done in terms of the motivations of faculty and specifically the importance and role they play in the promotion of student club engagement.

The fourth guiding principle suggested by [22] is the creation of opportunities that are active and collaborative and which foster learning relationships. [22] note that the findings of a number of studies ([25], [26], and [27]) indicate that peer interaction and learning communities had a strong predictive relationship to engagement and outcomes, including student gains in personal and social development, deeper engagement and an enhanced sense of student belonging. Discipline based student groups, although a co-curricular aspect of student learning, have the potential to make a contributions to many of the learning and development goals of students.

The fifth guiding principle [22] is the creation of educational experiences for students that challenge, enrich and extend their academic abilities. Many of the activities engaged in discipline based student groups such as business case competitions provide for opportunities that extend their academic learning and involve higher forms of learning such as analysing, synthesizing and evaluating. Such deep learning activities have been shown [28] to increase engagement.

The sixth guiding principle involves creating an environment that welcomes students from diverse backgrounds. In particular most institutions have experienced an increased number of “non-traditional” students who frequently lack a sense of belonging. [22]’s survey of the literature indicates a need for institutions to adapt and proactively engage the non-traditional student. The role of student clubs in promoting diversity and a sense of belonging among non-traditional students can be significant but, as noted in section 3.1 below, requires active guidance on the part of the institution and staff.

A seventh guiding principle [22] indicates the importance of investing in a variety of support services for students. In particular the creation of opportunities that provide students with the ability to connect socially with peers and in particular the matching of inexperienced students with more senior students in mentoring environments facilitates engagement ([29], [30]). Again student clubs and their guided activities, involving both lower and upper year students has the potential to provide a rich environment for such opportunities.

The eighth guiding principle relates to the need for institutions to adapt to changing expectations. Relating somewhat to the sixth guiding principle, [22] emphasize the literature focused on the non-traditional student and in particular the growing number of part-time students in many institutions, along with the growing proportion of full-time students engaged in part-time employment. The time constraints and life pressures of such students results in a need for institutions to recognize that student engagement is not a given. The implications for student engagement in student clubs can be significant and again active management and awareness of student clubs, their student leaders and support staff, is critical.

The ninth and tenth principles [22] suggests the creation of social and cultural capital, necessary for engagement but also learning beyond the classroom and potential workplace. In particular the development of active citizens and a sense of their ability to effect change in the world. Student clubs can contribute significantly to this element of student development. Many student clubs in the GSB, for example, are encouraged to undertake endeavours in support of non-profits and socially oriented organizations. A long list of such activities on the part of GSB student groups include fund raising for foodbanks, community support groups and stock investment challenges where proceeds are donated in support of youth services. Such activities not only provide students with social awareness but also introduce them to the concepts of giving which can, in the longer term, relate to their subsequent role as alumni.

In all of the above guiding principles, a significant role in terms of engagement can be played by the investment in support for active student clubs whose mandates and activities are consistent with the broader goals of the institution or School. In the case of the GSB the anecdotal evidence is consistent.
with these potential benefits. In addition the link between student engagement and subsequent alumni engagement has been documented in recent literature.

3.1 Student Clubs and Non-Traditional Student Engagement

Similar to many other Canadian universities, in light of demographic trends, a strategy of increasing the number of international students was adopted by the institution over the past ten years. The increase was, however, not evenly distributed across all of the University’s degree programs. Although international students now represent approximately 10% of the total undergraduate enrolment in the institution, the GSB’s undergraduate programs consist of close to 20% international students, stemming from the predominant desire for such students to enter professional programs.

One ongoing challenge for the GSB’s SEO is to increase the engagement of international students in the GSB student clubs. Although some progress has been made in this end, an attainment of the proportional 20% of international students participating in student clubs remains a challenge despite the SEO actively encouraging the student clubs to facilitate international student engagement.

The concomitant adjustment experienced by many international students has long been recognized ([31] among many others) and can be significant, dealing with loneliness and homesickness in some instances, in addition to language and cultural barriers. Student clubs and organizations have the potential to play an important role, often overlooked, in providing a life line and connection for such students to the institution and consequently their success and post-graduation involvement as alumni [32].

International students represent only one element of the broader goal of increasing diversity and fostering inclusiveness on university and college campuses. In many cases institutions have been at best perceived to be neutral to diversity and it has been suggested that it remains a significant challenge on many campuses ([32] among others). Diversity is of course more encompassing than that of only international students and any guidance and support to student clubs must take the broader institutional goals into account. In recent years, for example, Brock University has attempted to place a greater focus on inclusiveness and retention with respect to indigenous communities. Part-time students are also a distinct group that frequently suffers from a lack of sense of inclusiveness and engagement with the institution as does the mature student.

The proposed typology of [32], based largely upon the work of [33], is useful for guiding student clubs and organizations with examples of activities that would foster diversity. Their five classification typology of student clubs ranges from a Negative Relationship category where full participation of all students in the club is denied or neglected, a Null Relationship, whereby club activities are neutral or non-negative, a Contributions Relationship where club activities recognize multicultural events or celebrations taking place on campus and an Additive Relationship where club activities are more engaged and add diversity related content (club speakers etc.), but without changing basic structures. Finally the Transformational Relationship is where student clubs take deliberate actions to recognize and solve multicultural and diversity issues, consistent with the institutions goals. An example would be to engage in internationally related projects or addressing issues faced by indigenous communities.

To date the student clubs within the GSB have had varied success in terms of increasing diversity with respect to, in particular, international students. Like many students clubs at universities, their activities would place them in [32]'s Null or Contributions Relationship Category. Consequently the GSB has hired an additional staff member within its International Student Office, with the mandate of increasing international student engagement, in collaboration with the SEO. The work of [32] provides an interesting framework going forward, to increase the engagement of international students with student clubs and to support other diversity goals of the institution. An increasing focus on the attraction of international students and their subsequent role as alumni can be also significantly strengthened through student club engagement pre and post-graduation.

4 ROLE OF STUDENT CLUB INVOLVEMENT IN ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT

The primary goal of this paper is the couching of the experience of the GSB in terms of its efforts to increase student club and alumni involvement within the context of the literature. The paucity of literature on the specific impact of student club engagement and subsequent alumni engagement is, however, a call for future research, particularly in light of the increasing pressures faced by advancement professional to aid in meeting budgetary shortfalls.
The benefits of alumni engagement are many of course, and go behind direct monetary contributions with strong alumni engagement even linked to improvements in university or school rankings and consequently student enrolment [34]. The support of corporations, who frequently consider their employees’ alumni engagement in informing their specific school involvement and giving, is an additional benefit [35]. Broadly defined alumni engagement includes many non-monetary activities with direct and indirect links to ultimate monetary benefits and school advancement ([36], [37]). The experience of the GSB within this broader definition of alumni engagement has been extensive in recent years and, in many instances, specifically in support of student clubs as speakers, mentors, business case competition judges and advisors.

The literature connecting student engagement to alumni engagement has been relatively extensive with a primary focus on the linkage between student engagement/involvement and satisfaction or affinity and subsequent alumni engagement ([38], [39], [40]) Demographics, academic program, graduation recency, ethnic and physical distance from the university have also been variables of study with varying degrees of explanatory power. (see [20] for a review of the literature)

Only a few studies consider the direct connection and motivations between engagement in student clubs and organizations (including fraternities and sororities) and subsequent alumni engagement ([20], [41], [38]). More frequently the linkage in the literature has been an indirect one, with student club involvement as part of a composite measure of student engagement, linked to a positive student experience, with ultimately a positive impact on subsequent alumni engagement [20].

Understanding the connection however may go beyond student satisfaction and requires the explicit motivations of alumni. Motivational theories considered in explaining alumni engagement include social exchange theory, investment theory, expectancy theory and social identity theory [36]. Social identity theory might best explain the anecdotal GSB’s experience in terms of the connection between student club engagement and subsequent alumni engagement. Developed originally by [42] social identity theory postulates that individuals belong to social groups on order to place order to the social environment and their role within it. Individuals remain with a group or seek membership in new groups that contribute to their positive social identity. Students who have developed social networks and affinity to the school through their student club experiences may be less likely to distance themselves from the school after graduation in order to maintain connection to their experiences.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The process of enhancing engagement in discipline based student clubs is explored in this paper through a description of the activities and initiatives within the Goodman School of Business at Brock University over a six year period, and in particular the impact on subsequent alumni engagement. Given little research dealing with the impact of student club engagement in general more questions for future research are posed than answered.

One area of future interest is the impact of social media on club and alumni engagement. To date little or no research can be found that delineates the increasing importance of social media and student engagement with respect to clubs. The GSB has noted that social media is a significant contributor to the growth of engagement within student clubs, which appears to carry forward through to alumni engagement.

Differences in alumni giving have been noted across fields of study ([16], [17]) with some evidence that business alumni are among the strongest supporters [43]. Such results have however not in general controlled for the extent of administratively supported student engagement activities such as the fostering of student clubs. Such clubs, although frequent in business schools, vary in terms of existence and engagement across the broader institution and programs of study. Further research is required on the impact of such clubs, versus other forms of student engagement, on institution affinity and giving in other disciplines.

Delineating the various elements of how student clubs relate to student retention, success and alumni engagement, and in what context is also a fruitful area of research where little is known. Although many studies involving four-year degree institutions would suggest a positive effect of student club engagement on many student retention and success measures (see [44] for a review of the literature), the nature of the institution may also play a significant role in the impact of student clubs. [44], for example, finds an insignificant relationship between various independent variables such as of frequency of use of student clubs, student satisfaction with student clubs, student sense of importance, and hours spent and the dependent variables of retention and persistence for two urban
based community colleges where part-time and transitional students are engaged in shorter term programs of study.

In terms of alumni related research, one potentially fruitful area for study is the relationship of student club engagement and subsequent consistency in institutional versus alumni goals for giving. A disconnect between the priorities for monetary giving on the part of alumni and those of the university or school can be a source of difficulty [45] and indeed has been attributed as one of the reasons for the establishment of alumni associations [46]. In particular does student club engagement ultimately result in a greater affinity and alignment of alumni and school priorities?

In addition, an in-depth understanding and differentiation of the primary motivational theories that connect alumni involvement to prior student club engagement is required for the effective design of alumni events and engagement. Social identity theory holds some promise in this regard and is not inconsistent with a call for greater research into the social and emotional aspects of engagement as opposed to procedural elements as proposed by [47].

Finally the experience of the GSB with respect to both student club support and alumni engagement points to the need for further research into appropriate administrative organization structures in universities. Centralization versus decentralization is an ongoing debate in many universities with respect to academic administration units such as academic advising and alumni relations. Particularly in light of increasing budgetary constraints. The decentralized model, adopted by the GSB increased student and alumni support significantly, with many positive results.

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