

**Undergraduate Social Life Accelerator Task Force  
Significant Learnings  
January 2023**

The Social Life Accelerator Task Force has been gathering feedback and data from students, alumni, staff, and parents to understand the current state of social life on campus to provide a set of key findings for university leadership. Below are 16 findings that articulate the core challenges impeding social life on campus today. We understand that many of these findings are complex, span multiple areas of authority at the university, and that there are challenging trade-offs in addressing them. That being said, we believe it is critical to address these issues to (1) improve the happiness, well-being, and mental health of students and (2) reinvigorate students' sense of belonging and community to one another and the University.

The Social Life Accelerator Task force has identified five key principles that will be critical to a healthy social life on campus.

**Student Autonomy:** A student's time in college should prepare them to go out into the world independently when they leave Stanford. As much as is safe and possible, Stanford should create the core infrastructure for students so that students can easily create their own healthy and inclusive social life and traditions.

**Partnership:** In conversations with students, they expressed a core pain point of not feeling "heard" by the administration. Students also expressed frustration in feeling like the university is making decisions without explanation. Students would like to have a place to actively engage in, problem solve with and co-create their student experience with the administration. A core principle of co-creation and partnership between students and administrators will have a transformational effect on not only social life on campus, but the broader student experience.

**Diversity of Social Life:** Stanford should strive to support a broad diversity of social life on campus through infrastructure, funding, and planning. The diversity of interests and identities across campus is one of the qualities that has made and continues to make a powerful Stanford student undergraduate experience.

**Capacity:** Stanford needs to ensure it has the capacity to meet the demand for social life through venues, planning staff, etc.

**Past and Future:** Stanford has a unique and meaningful history and Stanford needs to build a campus for current and future students. Our findings and questions seek to honor the legacy of Stanford, while not being constrained by it.

**Observations**

**Students Currently on Campus Are Very Different than Previous Students**

The media is dubbing this cohort, different than Gen-Z (Zoomers) before them, as “the Covid Generation.” It is important to recognize and meet the current Social Life needs/life experiences of present students and not just resurrect “traditions” because that’s what alumni want to do and that’s what Stanford remembers how to do. What is unique about Stanford is a zany, quirky, irreverent, tongue-in-cheek atypical take on the typical, which should be nurtured and promoted. That history needs to be translated to make sense in a modern student’s social life.

Q: How can Stanford tease out the characteristics of experiences that current students really want to both satisfy their needs and create new experiences they might not have imagined were possible?

Q: Can Stanford envision something even better than it had in the past? Could it really innovate and lead 21st century campus social life, defining a vibrant social life, designing one and continually evaluating and improving it?

### **Incentives**

Responsible Campus Departments: Fraternity & Sorority Life, Office of Community Standards, Substance Use Program Education and Resources, Office of Campus Engagement

The incentive structures for student led events on campus are misaligned. Students report experiencing:

- Confusing and conflicting guidance from different university offices,
- Lack of clarity on what is needed for an event to be approved,
- Lack of timely communication and responses from administrators,
- Hosting inclusive events open to all students as a liability, and
- Lack of clarity on what is and is not “allowed”

Given these conditions, students have shared that they either:

- No longer host events,
- Host or attend events off campus, or
- That they have shifted to invite-only (or FOTH - friends of the house) events, which some students hypothesize is leading to divisions in the student body and increased feelings of exclusivity (or being left out) on campus.

Some students also expressed sadness about how their experiences of bureaucracy and “red tape” on campus, like waiting months for approval and/or funding for events, have dampened the spirit of spontaneity on campus.

Q: How can Stanford encourage events that are open to any student who wishes to attend while ensuring such events are safe?

Q: How might Stanford more clearly convey its expectations and incentivize the healthy social behavior it seeks?

Q: How might Stanford use education and training to help students know the university’s expectations?

Q: How might Stanford use educational interventions when something 'goes wrong' at a party?

Q: How can Stanford ensure that administration-to-student communication is consistently timely?

### **Infrastructure**

Responsible Campus Departments: Director of Student Unions, Stanford Arts, Rec and Wellness, Residential and Dining Enterprises, Office of Student Engagement

Stanford's campus has beautiful indoor and outdoor spaces that can be optimized to support social life on campus. Unfortunately, the ability to access those resources is prohibitive (cost, access to information, bureaucracy). Some students expressed that the lack of clarity of policy and processes for using spaces prohibited them from hosting events. Making resources on Stanford's campus easily available to students is even more important. All students live on campus and there are limited college-appropriate social options in Palo Alto.

Q: How can campus assets be deployed to easily support social connection?

Q: What blockages, processes, practices, premises are contradictory to shared goals, priorities, purposes?

Q: How might the university share these changes with students to ensure students know that the university is actively seeking to resolve these issues?

Q: Would the University support initiatives to build or create neutral social infrastructure on campus (e.g. another type of campus bar like the Arbor?)

Q: How can Stanford reduce the cost to students for using existing spaces?

### **Neighborhood Funding**

Responsible Campus Departments: Residential Education

Some students report very long lead times (multi-month) to obtain funding from neighborhood community councils, which discourage spontaneous or smaller event planning.

Q: How might the university empower RAs and neighborhood members financially to allow for better personalization of events and spontaneity?

Q: How can the university streamline or otherwise improve requests for funding to the neighborhood councils?

Q: How can the university better describe why and how neighborhood funding is intended to be used?

### **Communication Systems**

Responsible Campus Departments: Student Affairs Communications, University Communications, University IT

Students do not know what is happening on campus and when, making it difficult to fully participate in campus life. Stanford does not have a single calendar for social life events. Athletics has its own calendar; Frost has another; Arts has a different one; the Office of Student Engagement has another, etc.

Q: What kind of tool could be built/added to that can make this kind of information easily available to students?

Q: How might the university create a single, clear, comprehensive resource to guide students through all the university procedures, requirements, and limitations for hosting events?

### **Communication about Purpose and Decision-making**

Responsible Campus Departments: Student Affairs Communications, University Communications, & Stanford Alumni Association

Many aspects of a campus social life involve tensions between two sides of an equation: student risk taking vs. student safety; individual desires vs. community wellbeing; membership vs. inclusivity. These should be openly acknowledged to engage students in how to maximize satisfaction for all as part of restoring trust.

The institution does not clearly or frequently communicate community harm data and tie it clearly to social events and behaviors such as alcohol consumption. It minimally educates for broader community responsibility. It does not repeat the higher purposes of policy changes. Lastly, it mostly emphasizes what it doesn't want rather than promoting positive goals. As a result, the institution appears paternalistic and authoritarian; policy changes appear as edicts; enforcement appears uneven and unfair; rumors and speculation run wild; and alumni and students are skeptical of the institution's intent.

Q: How might Stanford use communication as an educational tool for teaching students about what is happening on campus, how the university problem solves, and the values behind its decisions?

Q: How might Stanford expand student learning (in NSO, residences, student organization trainings, etc) about the values that drive policies and community responsibility?

Q: How might Stanford ensure students and student groups know what is expected of them and why?

Q: How can Stanford encourage students to take broader responsibility for themselves and others as part of their social development?

### **Neighborhood Spaces**

Responsible Campus Departments: Residential & Dining Enterprises, Dean of Students, & Residential Education

The availability and focus on all-frosh housing appears to be a great success in the launch of Neighborhoods. In addition, the majority of sophomores being in buildings with 12+ students from their frosh dorms shows some of the opportunities for connection that the neighborhoods provide. That being said, the physical infrastructure does not, yet, support the concept of neighborhoods.

Q: Can we dispatch a design team to extend, elevate, modernize and capitalize on the common indoor spaces for decor, furniture, outlets, food available in the dorms.

Q: Can we ensure that neighborhoods have a good collection of common area spaces that are available for spontaneous events and other spaces that are available to reserve? How can we ensure these spaces are open late (2am)? How can these be hubs for parties, dances, and even alcohol service for of-age students?

### **Neighborhood Events & Identity:**

Responsible Campus Department: Residential Education

Neighborhoods were created with high hopes for improving the residential life of students. As of spring 2022, the number of neighborhood-based activities has been small, and students do not report feeling connected to their neighborhoods. That being said, 2022-2023 has seen a significant uptick in events and activities. As of Halloween weekend, each neighborhood council (made up of students, RFs and professional staff) will have hosted five neighborhood events for their neighborhood, for a total of 40 neighborhood events in the past six weeks.

Q: How might the university ensure that neighborhood programming is being driven by students and student interests?

Q: How can the university continue to scale up the number and quality of neighborhood events to build a sense of community?

Q: How might the university look to create opportunities for cross-neighborhood programming?

Q: How does the University plan to incentivize students in the creation of neighborhood identities?

Q: Does the University plan to track and keep data on the satisfaction of students within neighborhoods, and reevaluate the assignment system depending on the responses?

### **Row Houses & Social Life**

Responsible Campus Department: Residential Education

Row houses have traditionally generated a large percentage of student driven social activities. These events are primarily thrown by fraternities and theme houses. There has been a decrease in the number of registered social events on the row.

Q: How might the university incentivize more row house events (e.g. financing, adding more row themes, organizational support, incentives)?

### **RAs & Positive Social Life:**

Responsible Campus Department: Residential Education

The RA role at Stanford is significant. At their best, RAs can have an outsized positive impact on the social and emotional life of a residence, pass on Stanford traditions to the next generation, establish the character of a residence and cause it to flourish, instill a sense of belonging in the residents, and serve as a powerful ally to each student. Some students have shared that their experience with RAs has great variation with some having very active and engaged RAs, while others report having RAs who are not meaningfully invested in the role.

Q: How might Stanford clearly define what “good” looks like in the RA role? How might that look different for frosh houses, upperclass houses, apartments, and row houses?

Q: What training and support do RAs need to ensure they know how to meaningfully invest in the role and in their residents?

Q: How might RAs easily access funds, resources, and approvals for events to be able to easily support social life in the dorms?

Q: Is the RA role the right person to do all of the programming? How can residents be incentivised to lead social programming?

### **RA Role & Alcohol Policy**

Responsible Campus Department: Residential Education & Dean of Students Office

The university’s policies need to align with federal and state laws and have the required mechanisms to enforce those policies. The new alcohol policy and its enhanced enforcement expectations of RAs reflect these obligations. That being said, students shared concerns that

the shift in expectations for enhanced RA enforcement of the policy compromises the ability for Stanford RAs to serve as trusted student mentors and facilitators of student connection. This is exacerbated by the fact that nearly all students live on campus at Stanford. Some students also expressed feeling “policed” in their dorm, which some students from over-policed home environments was additionally concerning. Balancing the university’s legal obligations and the cultural concerns of students is a significant challenge for the university.

Q: How can the university measure the costs and/or benefits of the changes that have been made to the RA role in regard to the alcohol policy?

Q: How can the university measure the success or failure of the policy changes it has made?

Q: How can Stanford meet its enforcement obligations using resources other than RAs?

Q: How can the university sustain the strong value of the RA role at Stanford without turning it into a fulltime job and while meeting its legal and care obligations?

Q: How can the university work with other universities and government entities to learn about and advocate for ways to make our campus healthy and safe?

Q: How can the university measure the effectiveness of the changes it has made?

### **Data for Decision-Making**

Responsible Campus Departments: Institutional Research & Decision Support and Student Affairs

While it is evident that social events on campus significantly declined in the last few years, there are not clear metrics to help diagnose the problems and inform solutions. The undergraduate student cohort on campus is very comfortable sharing their satisfaction and dissatisfaction online.

Q: What resources are needed to build a robust data gathering and use infrastructure to help the administration to be able to more quickly respond to emerging needs - while not overly taxing students?

Q: How can the university build student satisfaction feedback systems that would provide quick input to help the university make timely pivots/changes?

### **“Stanford Hates Fun” Student Movement**

There is a student and alumni movement discussing social life under the banner “Stanford Hates Fun”. The group shares a list of demands and documents perceived limitations placed on free speech when advocating for these demands.

Q: How can the university more quickly and constructively respond to address student concerns resulting in a win-win path forward?

Q: What action(s) is the University taking to change this negative narrative and perception by the students?

### **Feeling “Trapped”**

Responsible Campus Departments: Fraternity & Sorority Life, Office of Community Standards, Substance Use Program Education and Resources, Office of Student Engagement, Residential Education

A lack of event diversity of events and capacity for events on campus, combined with a suburban location campus have led students to feel constrained and “trapped” on campus. Some students have started to create social opportunities off-campus, which can limit access to students who are not financially able to participate. Science indicates that [choice is key to happiness](#): “Simply put, autonomy is the sense of wanting to take action instead of being coerced to do so.”

Q: Can Stanford increase the number of events such that students feel they have more choices?

Q: Can Stanford increase student options or ease restrictions in arenas or policies that have low cost to the institution?

### **Stanford Has a History of Eliminating Elements of Social Life and Not Replacing Them with Equivalent or Better Elements**

Overtime, as one would expect, the student experience has changed at Stanford. One pattern that was recognized by the task force was that there have been a collection of things that have been removed over the last few decades, like Secret Snowflake, Language and Culture houses, all campus parties, etc, that have not been replaced. Eliminating without replacement has had a direct impact on the smaller number of events presently offered.

Q: How can the university establish a review process that considers the effect on social life when eliminating activities and elements that affect social life, and potentially a process to propose attractive replacements when elements must be eliminated?

Q: How can the university communicate clearly the reasons for and data that support their decisions?

### **Departments at Stanford Are Not Aligned With the Urgency or Vision about Social Life Goals**

The decentralized nature of the institution means that departments are unequally invested in solutions. Some are very invested; others not at all; others unintentionally undermine efforts.

This appeared early in the year with some first-week of school events with a lack of clear messaging from the party approval process, the conduct processes and the Fraternity and Sorority Life office, SPOT counselors undermining the Neighborhood system messages, etc.

Q: How can the university align all departments with the goal of creating a vibrant, safe, supportive student social life?

### **Funding**

Significant short-term expendable funding has been given by the President, Provost, Vice Provost of Student Affairs, and donors to launch the return to campus and to support the “quick wins” for fall quarter. It is clear that significant funding for infrastructure and events to support a robust social life on campus are needed long-term.