To: Trustees and Members of the Boards  
From: Lawrence S. Bacow and Jamshed Bharucha  
Re: The Role of Trustees and Board Members in the Admissions Process  
Date: October 2010

Each year some new and returning trustees and members of the Boards raise questions about the appropriate role for them in the admissions process. Admission to Tufts has become very selective: Last year, we accepted only 24 percent of first-year applicants; transfer admission was even more selective, with an 11-percent acceptance rate. The typical admitted student ranked in the top 6 percent of her class and had SAT scores of 722 verbal and 726 math; accepted students in Engineering had a mean SAT math score of 755. As a result, all of us find ourselves barraged each year by applicants, parents and relatives of applicants, friends of applicants, and others seeking to gain advantage in the competitive admissions process. We have agreed that it would be useful to have guidance about appropriate involvement in admissions matters. This memo lays out some guidelines that we hope you will find helpful both in dealing with these requests and in working with our Admissions staff.

We invite input from you if you know an applicant personally. Admissions decisions are difficult. We like to have as complete a picture of an applicant as possible. If you personally know an applicant, by all means please share your views with the admissions staff. Knowledge of an applicant’s relatives is far less useful than first-hand knowledge of the applicant. Family information can be helpful when it puts the applicant’s qualifications and experience in context. For example, we would be interested to know that an applicant had to overcome a difficult family situation prior to applying to Tufts. We also like to know if Tufts is unambiguously an applicant’s first choice. All too often we expend great effort on behalf of a potential student only to learn later that they really wanted to attend another institution. Before you invest your time and ours on behalf of an applicant, please try to ascertain whether they really intend to enroll at Tufts if admitted. From experience we can tell you that parents will often say that their kids want to attend Tufts when in fact the preferences being expressed are those of the parents.

Try to communicate your knowledge of an applicant in writing. To make the best use of your information, please take the time to either write a short note or an email on the applicant’s behalf. To ensure that your comments are noted in the applicant’s file, please send them to either Paul Tringale in the Trustees Office, Michelle Hinkle in the Office of the Boards, or Brian Lee in Advancement. We process close to 16,000 applications annually. Each has multiple letters of recommendation, transcripts, essays, etc. There are massive amounts of paper associated with the admissions process. If you want to make sure that the entire committee incorporates your
comments into an admissions decision, please put them in writing and send them to Paul, Michelle, or Brian.

Never forget that your role is limited to providing input into the process. Trustees and members of the Boards do not make admissions decisions. We ourselves make it a point never to intervene in an individual admissions decision. If we ever did, word would get out and everyone would beat a path to our doors to plead their case. (To underscore this point, Larry’s niece was denied admission to Tufts this year, her first choice. She was a strong applicant, just not strong enough. She got into Brandeis, Tulane, NYU and BU. Larry did not even mention to the admissions office that she was applying or related to him.) We have a professional admissions staff that does a wonderful job. Please respect the process. Also, while you may think you have sufficient information regarding a particular candidate to judge his or her qualifications for admissions, you rarely get the whole story. While people may report to you an applicant’s grades and SAT scores, they often remember grades selectively and may even omit scores that are less than competitive. Many neglect to indicate whether a GPA is weighted or not (e.g., a 3.7 on a scale of 6). Each of us rarely gets to see essays, letters of recommendation, reports from our alumni interviewers, or the report of the secondary school. Finally, we never get to see the true opportunity cost for admitting a particular applicant. It is very difficult to admit a student known to you when it means that we must deny admission to another student from the same high school who is unambiguously superior. Such decisions wreak havoc with our reputation with guidance counselors and other “gatekeepers,” especially at highly selective secondary schools.

Experience tells us that applicants who have the strongest advocates are invariably among the weakest in our pool. Please keep this fact in mind when you get approached by your friends and relatives. People rarely lobby on behalf of academically superior students.

Never suggest based on your own review of an applicant’s qualifications that an applicant is “likely” to be admitted. Such statements can only come back to haunt you. It is hard enough for the admissions staff to make such predictions without reviewing a prospective student’s full admissions profile and comparing it to those of other students applying from the same high school. Any prediction that you make may only place you in an awkward position later in the process if the student is denied admission. In such situations, we always emphasize to parents and friends how difficult it is to predict the process. We encourage their kids to apply, say that we will try to ensure that the case will get a good read (see below), but in the end, whether the student gets in will be up to the student.

Never promise admission or suggest that an applicant’s admissions prospects would be enhanced if the family were to make a donation to the university. At some point you will receive a call from someone who either hints strongly or even openly offers a donation in return for admission of his or her son or daughter. We have been on the receiving end of many such calls. We always tell people that while we appreciate their desire to support the university, they will have plenty of opportunities to support Tufts in the future, after the admissions process has run its course. You should never assume such conversations are private. We hope never to read in the New York Times or the Wall Street Journal about a Tufts trustee or Board member negotiating for admission of an applicant in return for a gift.
Please be kind to our admissions staff and understanding of the difficult job that they do. Each year the admissions staff disappoints thousands of students and their parents. They must field phone calls from young men and women who had their hearts set on attending Tufts but who did not get in. People sometimes fail to understand how much effort the admissions staff puts into these decisions. Admissions decisions are not easy. The job is not made easier if any of us take offense when the staff decides a case differently from the way we would like them to do. Their responsibility is to admit an entire class. This job is far harder than advocating for one or two applicants. Please be understanding.

It is perfectly reasonable to request that a case receive a close read and to ask for a heads up on the disposition of the case. Given the large number of applications we receive, you can provide assistance to an applicant by requesting that his or her file gets a “close read.” This request ensures that a senior member of our admissions staff will review the file. It reduces the chance that any important information will be overlooked. It also ensures that the file will be closely compared to other applicants from the same high school, or to applicants with similar academic credentials. Many people who call you may be satisfied with “a close read.” Moreover, we always tell them that this is all we can do, and that after the close read the rest is up to the student. Also, we will be happy to provide you with advance notice of the admissions decision so you can alert the family to the good news, or soften the blow, as you wish. Please let Paul, Michelle, or Brian know if you would like to receive such advance notice. Typically, Early Decision Round I notifications are mailed by December 15; Early Decision Round II notifications are mailed by February 10; and Regular Decision notifications by March 30. Transfer applications are reviewed and selected on a “rolling” basis from mid-April to the end of May; please remember that opportunities for transfer admission are very limited (typically 50 places or fewer per year). Similarly, the Wait List may or may not activate each year. For example, we did not admit any students off the wait list this past year.

We can arrange for applicants to meet individual faculty or students who share their interests. Some of the best assistance we can provide is to arrange for applicants to meet students or faculty who share their interests. Similarly, we are also happy to help make arrangements for students to receive a special tour. This is another way that you can be responsive to those who are seeking your assistance without compromising the integrity of the admissions process. You can make these arrangements by contacting Brian Lee or Paul Tringale or Michelle Hinkle.

For those of you who are alumni, when you applied to Tufts, you did not have trustees or Board members advocating on your behalf. All you had to recommend you were your academic record and your personal accomplishments. We want to make sure that every Tufts class is populated with students like you.

There is an art as well as a science to admissions. Our staff, when admitting the class, seeks to achieve diversity across a broad range of factors. They seek to assemble a class that will meet the challenge of a Tufts education and be successful in their studies. None of us wants to see a student come to Tufts and fail. We run that risk if we don’t hold all students to the same high standard in our admissions reviews. Similarly, many candidates are highly qualified and fine
distinctions must be drawn. Individual cases must be considered carefully. We always try to do what is best for the individual student and for the institution as a whole. Your understanding and cooperation will help to ensure that we have a strong class where each student is capable of contributing significantly to our academic community.

Many thanks.