TO: BOLD FUTURES

FROM: TABLE 3 FROM MARCH 24, 2014 BOLD FUTURES WORKSHOP (KARINNE BREDBERG, ROSANNE CORDELL, DEBORAH HALICZER, JOHN HULSEBERG, PATRICIA MAXWELL, ARIEL MCCLAY, ROBERT SCHNEIDER, JULIA SPEARS)

HOW CAN WE TRANSFORM NIU FROM A “SUITCASE” SCHOOL TO A 7 DAY A WEEK COLLEGIATE EXPERIENCE?

A student answers:

Wouldn’t it be great if there were a centralized office for information? And I mean centralized both in the sense of physical location and centralized in terms of its access to every kind of calendar and event.

The office would provide useful information for all students, but especially for freshmen and transfers. This would include information on different clubs, organizations and volunteer possibilities, and activities both on and off campus. The office should be able to publicize upcoming events and sell tickets. In addition, this office would serve as a “call center” where answers (or at least the contact information of someone who could answer) would be provided to the many critical questions that every student has.

Another student says:

NIU needs to commit more resources to ensuring that incoming students, both freshmen and transfers, are integrated into campus life. I know other universities have things like the “Office of Community Living.”

Some of the other students we interviewed felt there was no coordinated effort for information at NIU.

The students we interviewed feel a strong disconnect between the City of DeKalb and NIU. While this isn’t news to anyone on or off campus, it does show that the divide is strong enough that new students pick up on it quickly. The suggestions we heard included:

- Shows, expos and/or speakers that would bring NIU and surrounding communities together.
- Popular music concerts (other than country music) or more weekend concerts by University groups. The University Band currently has its concerts during the week, which is inconvenient.

There also seems to be a consensus from our students that special events are not publicized well or they are dedicated to only a specific group on campus (i.e. freshmen). The students recommend the following:

- Publicize, publicize, publicize!
- Hold a variety of social events for specific majors/minors so the students can get to know one another

A fifth year student recounted the following:
Here at Northern Illinois University, I’ve experienced many things. This list ranges from parties to difficult classes, making to breaking friendships, and switching majors from liberal arts to fine arts. I rarely go home, although I only live an hour away, but I can understand why people often do go back home.

First, the food selection in DeKalb and the surrounding cities are terrible. There are plenty of McDonalds and Subways, but nothing that visitors would like to eat. We (students) would love better restaurants surrounding the campus and city. Everything is fast food, fried, and brown. There are very few healthy eating places around here.

It struck us as significant that the student called local fast food “nothing that visitors would like to eat” (our emphasis). We understand by this that the student’s family and friends don’t (or won’t) come to DeKalb (at least in part) because there’s so little healthy, attractive food here. In consequence, the student leaves town to spend time with them elsewhere. The same student continues:

Also, there are no attractions nearby. Chicago is but an hour and a half away and it being under 10 dollars to travel by train on the weekends makes it tempting to go downtown and have fun there. DeKalb needs fun places like paintball arenas, batting cages, night clubs, more hangout spots like The House Cafe so students can relax or be active.

Lastly, Northern Illinois University needs more weekend events. Football games are barely keeping students here over the weekends to watch them beat other teams by 30+ points repeatedly. The convo parties only appeal to a certain audience, but more venues and departments affiliated with the school should have more lock-ins, game nights, movie nights, and simply opportunities for students to network and connect with each other.

In addition to better food choices, what could be done to make DeKalb a good place where family and friends get together? Although the student didn’t say so directly, some kind of student hostel or liberalized overnight visitor policy might help.

Another student makes a similar point by inversion:

There is an old Russian saying that parents use to send their kids to summer camp. Basically, it says if they don’t want to go, you (jokingly) make the conditions at home worse so the summer camp looks better. I think part of the problem is that things are just better at home. Free laundry. Better food. Quieter atmosphere (in some cases). To answer simply: the living conditions need to become more appealing at the university, which I understand is a tall order.

Having praised the sometimes-quieter atmosphere off campus, this student also faults NIU for being too quiet:

In addition, the university is quite dead on the weekend. Maybe NIU could hook students into staying by working with organizations in the area to give weekend deals/discounts to NIU students or just hold really enticing weekend programming.
It’s not clear what “organizations” she means, but the term is significantly broader than “restaurants and hotels.” It’s interesting to speculate on what kind of organization could offer a deal or discount on a stand-alone experience that would entice students to stay in town just for that experience. Perhaps the answer is not so much to schedule events on weekends but to consider the weekend itself as an event.