In recent years, both the number and the quality of NYU’s undergraduates have increased dramatically. Our students are now routinely winning major national scholarships, and more of them are making it to the final round of these competitions. But there is still some progress to be made in this area, since the annual number of scholarship winners (especially of high-profile scholarships, such as the Rhodes and the Marshall) is still somewhat lower than it should be, given the size and quality of our undergraduate population. This is an issue of interest to the University, not only because a high rate of success in winning national scholarships is a marker of institutional excellence, but also—and more importantly—because we believe that our students deserve these recognitions and because they will benefit from the opportunities afforded to recipients of Rhodes Scholarships and other distinctions. As a large, organizationally complex, and tuition-driven institution, however, NYU faces challenges that are not faced by most of the institutions that historically have done very well in these competitions. We are, for example, unable to offer financial aid packages that fully meet most students’ need. Consequently, many of our undergraduates find it necessary to take on part- or full-time jobs during the academic year, as well as during the summer, and they have less time to devote to the kinds of leadership activities that selection committees value. To raise the University’s profile in national scholarship competitions, we need to think about how we can be more creative in identifying and supporting potential candidates.

This year, the Undergraduate Academic Affairs Committee (UAAC) took up the charge of exploring how national scholarship candidates are identified and prepared, with an eye towards suggesting ways of enhancing these processes at NYU. To that end, the committee consulted with Richard Kalb (CAS Associate Dean for Students) and Kim Germain (Director of NYU’s Office of National Scholarships, which is housed in CAS but serves students in all of the undergraduate schools). The committee also met with Shawn Abbott (Assistant Vice President for Undergraduate Admissions). Discussions then continued both in a subcommittee and in plenary sessions.

Three main, interrelated points emerged from these conversations. First, national scholarship organizations place great importance on applicants’ demonstrated leadership. To be successful, candidates for these awards need to demonstrate passionate engagement with and commitment to something beyond their own academic success and/or professional goals. Their leadership activities must also be substantial, creative, and original (i.e., not limited to important but routine positions in student government or residence halls). Undergraduate Admissions can play an important role in identifying applicants to NYU who have already distinguished themselves in academics and in leadership roles while in high school. Then, once students have
matriculated, the University has a responsibility not only to foster leadership but also to help support students’ innovative initiatives.

Second, early identification of potential candidates is crucial to the process. By the time they apply for national scholarships, students need to have developed an impressive portfolio of curricular and co-curricular achievements, which requires guidance and tailored academic advising. Faculty play a key role in bringing these students to the attention of the Office of National Scholarships, and in encouraging students to pursue these opportunities. Often, however, the structure of the first-year academic program in many of our undergraduate schools poses an obstacle, since first- and second-year students are typically in large classes in which they have little individual contact with faculty. By the time that many students are able to take small classes, in their junior and senior year, it is often too late for the outstanding students whom faculty identify to be groomed for national scholarship competitions.

Finally, the committee agreed that NYU’s experience in these competitions is a reflection of the state of undergraduate mentoring on campus. That improvements can be made in this area is perhaps most apparent when it comes to letters of recommendation, since most applications require faculty letters that demonstrate strong familiarity with the candidate’s intellectual development as well as achievements outside the classroom. But both survey data and anecdotal evidence demonstrate that, in general, NYU undergraduates have not built strong mentoring relationships with faculty. Responses to the 2010 Student Experience Survey, for example, indicated that a disturbingly large number of students do not know faculty well enough to ask for one (let alone two) letters of recommendation.

With these general points in mind, the committee makes the following recommendations:

1. **That the Office of Undergraduate Admissions consider strategic ways of targeting potential national scholarship candidates in its recruitment efforts.** To attract the kinds of students who might eventually be competitive scholarship candidates, the recruitment materials used by Admissions should convey to applicants that NYU is a place where they will be supported in their pursuit of these opportunities. These materials could present profiles of scholarship winners or could showcase the Office of National Scholarships and the various leadership opportunities available at NYU (on which, see bullets 6 and 7 below). Then, the Admissions process should look proactively for applicants with “markers” of distinctive academic excellence and leadership.

2. **That the undergraduate deans discuss and put in place strategies for early identification and mentoring of potential national scholarship candidates in each of the undergraduate schools.** It seemed to the committee that efforts to identify students early in their career and then to customize advising and programs for them are quite variable from school to school. For that reason, the undergraduate deans may wish to review what is in place in their schools and, where necessary, to consider creating curricular programs which put students in small-group contact with faculty early in their academic careers. Examples include the Freshman Honors Seminars, the Collegiate Seminar Program in CAS (which offers four years of faculty mentoring to incoming students), and the Scholars programs in the various schools. In some cases, such programs may require additional funding, either from the school or, if the school
can’t afford it, from the University (since this is a University-wide priority); such funding might be used, for example, to replace a faculty member in a large routine course so that s/he may teach a small seminar.

3. **That the University do more to publicize and to celebrate winners of national scholarship competitions.** Celebrating national scholarship winners publicly is an easy way to promote interest in these competitions among both faculty and students. Ideally, these winners would be announced and profiled on the main NYU webpage; other possible media venues include *NYU Today*, the NYU Minute, and the University’s Facebook page, as well as student publications like the *Washington Square News* and the *NYU Local*. Other possible ways of calling attention to these awards would include receptions not only for winners, but also for nominees and finalists.

4. **That an effort be made to spread awareness among our faculty and departments about the value and availability of competitive national scholarships.** Faculty need to know that these scholarships not only create meaningful opportunities for our undergraduates (including funding for graduate study), but that our students’ success in these competitions will enable us to attract high-quality applicants to NYU in the future.

5. **That more faculty members be recruited to serve as advisers to national scholarship applicants.** These faculty advisers could not only consult with students who are interested in external scholarships but could also provide guidance to students who are in the process of applying. To this end, the deans of all the NYU schools (not just the undergraduate schools) could be asked to do an inventory of former national scholarship recipients among their faculty. Since students typically have more contact with their school advisers at the beginning of their undergraduate career, the various advising centers could also play an important role in coordinating outreach and in connecting students with the relevant faculty members.

6. **That more leadership development opportunities be created for undergraduates.** The University Leadership Honors Course, which is taught by Diane Yu (Chief of Staff and Deputy to the President) and which debuted in spring 2011, is an example of a curricular program that gives sophomores from across the University the opportunity to reflect seriously on leadership and to meet prominent local, national, and international leaders in various fields. (Diane had earlier taught a very successful Freshman Honors Seminar on leadership for first-year students.) A co-curricular example is the Reynolds Program in Social Entrepreneurship, which identifies student leaders from across the University in their sophomore year, and then provides these students with mentoring and summer funding to pursue their entrepreneurial ideas. As we continue to develop these and other leadership-training opportunities, we need to think about leadership in areas outside of business and politics, such as the sciences and the arts.

7. **That more funds be made available to support meaningful experiential learning projects during the summer that demonstrate creativity and original leadership.** For many national scholarship competitions, candidates’ summer leadership experiences (especially between junior and senior years) are crucial to the strength of their applications. Universities with strong recent records in Rhodes and Marshall competitions, for example, have funding mechanisms in place to ensure that their top students are financially capable of pursuing summer
leadership experiences. Individual schools, such as CAS (through its Dean’s Undergraduate Research Fund) make money available for undergraduate research projects. This is excellent, but we need to develop additional ways of funding more ambitious programs that may require more support and that are focused not only on research but on other meaningful projects. An example of such a program is the recently inaugurated Gallatin Global Fellowship in Human Rights, which offers funding for experiential learning projects over the summer.

8. That the Office of National Scholarships be expanded to enable greater coverage of NYU’s large undergraduate student body, both on the Square and at our Global sites. At present, the University’s Office of National Scholarships consists of a full-time Director, who reports to the Associate Dean for Students in CAS and who works with counterpart administrators in all of the other schools who have been identified as their schools’ national scholarship liaisons. For NYU to become more successful in these competitions, it is crucial that additional staff positions be created in this office. This has become particularly important since the advent of the GNU. As the University expands, it will also need to be decided how the Office of National Scholarships will coordinate the identification, preparation, and nomination of candidates at NYU branch campuses outside of Washington Square. If we do not extend these services to the other campuses, outstanding students will be excluded from national scholarship competitions. (On the impact of the GNU on undergraduate education, see the other advisory that this committee prepared this year.)