

Goal #1: Excel in Research and Creative Activity

The College of LAS is home to the disciplines that have defined what it means to be a university throughout the long history of that institution. Fundamental research in these core disciplines creates new knowledge and sustains our mission to provide all University of Illinois students, regardless of their majors, with information and skills that are essential to their success in life. Whatever our strategic plans for promoting excellence in research and creative activities, they must rest upon a commitment to preserve the strong disciplinary research and creative activity that have always been central to our intellectual identity. Excellent scholarship emerges from all areas of the college; we must build on the strong foundations that exist in all of our disciplines.

Profound and seemingly permanent changes in the funding of public higher education in the USA have forced us to adjust our approach to maintaining preeminence as a comprehensive research university. Like most of our peers, we no longer have the necessary resources to recruit and retain faculty in every one of the traditional subfields, much less each newly emergent one. Our path forward lies with seeking ways to make the best possible use of the still considerable resources of the college and the campus to accomplish our core missions. In choosing this path, we aspire to lead a paradigm shift in the research enterprise of a liberal arts and sciences college at a public university.

Guiding principles

To achieve this goal, we will have to identify the existing research strengths that are most characteristic of LAS and have the greatest potential for building future excellence. As a starting point for this process, we propose three guiding principles that could be the basis for the college's strategic objectives in research:

1. Creative interconnectivity

LAS is defined by the breadth of its intellectual pursuits across a wide range of disciplines, from Classics to Chemistry, English to Entomology, Philosophy to Political Science. Our diversity in turn defines Illinois as a comprehensive research university. One of the ways that we magnify the scope and the impact of our research is by collaborating across disciplinary boundaries, both among faculty in different units within LAS and with faculty in other colleges. The college and the campus have made substantial investments in institutes, centers, and programs designed to foster interdisciplinary research collaboration, and a strategic faculty hiring plan for LAS should encourage creative ways to exploit the interconnections that already exist and develop new ones. Cross-disciplinary connections can help to compensate for smaller faculty numbers within individual disciplinary units and build and strengthen the local communities that are so crucial for retaining top-notch researchers.

2. Cultural and intercultural competence

Much of the research conducted in LAS investigates the factors that define and distinguish human cultures, such as climate, topography, and material resources; language; race and ethnicity; gender and sexuality; shared histories and traditions; and religious and political ideologies. Such research allows us to understand and appreciate the multiple cultures to which each of us belongs, to recognize the actual and potential tensions among cultures within the USA and across the world, and to discover strategies

for overcoming the cultural conflicts that stand in the way of a successfully pluralistic society. LAS units do most of this work for the entire university. From campus diversity and inclusion to global impact, the university cannot accomplish its strategic priorities without the wide-ranging cultural expertise of LAS researchers. We should do all we can to maintain and enhance our leadership in this crucial area.

3. Societal impact and engagement

All the research we do—whether 'pure' or 'applied'—contribute to bettering the lives of people in Illinois and around the world; but the research done in LAS that aims directly at solving real and pressing social and economic problems is closely aligned with the land-grant mission of the University of Illinois. Many of our faculty members and graduate students are engaged in this type of research, which frequently encompasses various forms of outreach to local and national communities. Whether it is investigating the causes of bee hive die-off, developing more environment-friendly energy sources, spotlighting the health-care challenges faced by specific minority groups, or studying the neurological bases of social behavior, scholarship that has an immediate and obvious societal impact demonstrates the value of the LAS research enterprise in ways that are easily understood by the constituencies upon whom we count for support.

Examples of Strategic Objectives

While it has been some time since LAS has conducted a college-wide strategic planning exercise, every year the Dean and his staff engage in several activities that require strategic thinking. Chief among these is preparing the annual budget report submitted to the Provost. Two others—the evaluation of requests for faculty hires and the ranking of Investment for Growth proposals—can provide good examples of actions we have taken that are consistent with the research emphases described above.

Example A: 'digital transformations' as a 2019 hiring priority.

In this year's call for hiring requests, the Dean identified two areas that would be given high priority. Digital transformations—the first of these priorities—potentially encompasses research in any LAS discipline and encourages connections with units outside LAS. Like the 2017 Investment for Growth proposal in data science, which the college ranked highly and the campus funded, this hiring priority clearly emphasizes creative interconnectivity; but the research of faculty members hired in this area could also involve cultural and intercultural competence and, especially, societal impact and engagement.

Example B: 'diversity in society' as a 2019 hiring priority.

The second priority area is most closely aligned with cultural and intercultural competence; but faculty hired in this area are often housed in interdisciplinary studies units or have split appointments and generally conduct research with high potential for creative interconnectivity and significant societal impact and engagement.

Example C: 'microbiome' as a highly ranked 2019 Investment for Growth proposal.

A proposal to build faculty strength across LAS and four other colleges, this is an excellent example of an investment in creative interconnectivity. Research in this area also can have high societal impact.

Example D: 'Illinois Neuro/Behavioral Assessment Laboratory' as a highly ranked 2018 Investment for Growth proposal.

A program to simultaneously provide behavioral assessments for the campus and local community and advance research in the neurological bases of behavior, this laboratory is a powerful example of societal impact and engagement.

Example E: a building to house the four Ethnic Studies units and Gender and Women's Studies as a highly ranked 2017 Investment for Growth proposal.

Research done by faculty members in these units is crucial for promoting cultural and intercultural competence. A building that brings all five interdisciplinary units together will further enhance their impact by facilitating creative interconnectivity, including the creation of a joint PhD program to train future researchers in these crucial fields.

These are only a few examples of the strategic investments LAS has proposed during the past few years. Our hope is that the working group will identify strategic objectives and actions that will build and improve upon what has been done already.

Questions for the Working Group to Consider

1. Do you think the three guiding principles we have described and illustrated adequately represent the college's actual and potential strengths? Are there more effective ways to capture what is distinctive about LAS and guide the use of our resources to maintain and build upon our excellent research and creative activity? Are there other areas of untapped potential that could produce new strengths?
2. In your own research, what are the institutional factors that encourage and support great scholarship? Are there things the college can and should do to expand or add to those factors? Conversely, what are the factors that can inhibit your scholarship? What are steps the college can take to mitigate those factors?
3. What are some emerging areas of scholarship that can cut across parts of the college and campus? Should LAS invest in developing research or creative activity in those areas? Will such investments allow the college to reduce spending in other areas of the college?