

## **Goal #2: Enhance the Student Experience**

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS) provides instruction for almost 100% of all campus undergraduates, more than 12,000 of whom call one of our 70+ majors their intellectual home. In addition, the College offers 100 graduate degree programs and 18 certificates. Our college's priority on enhancing the LAS student experience will make a measurable impact on our entire campus and beyond. Through this current strategic planning process, our goal is to build on our strengths in the student experience, while responding to the ever-evolving intellectual, social, economic, political, technological and environmental needs of society. Our goal is to build on the valuable education our students receive such that they thrive in the life and career choices they make, while also contribute to the greater social good.

LAS adopts a holistic, integrative approach to educating students, recognizing how the three main components of the experience - academic, personal and professional development - are interconnected, interdependent. Any strategy to enhance the experience will necessarily need to be ambitious and mid- to long-term in scope, while detailing specific short-term objectives that advance us toward the larger ones. The goal of this white paper is to summarize major initiatives and provide questions, the answers to which will help identify LAS' priorities related to the student experience and propose focus areas for enhancements and goal-setting. We seek input on specific action items for executing goals, responses to broader questions to help further define those action items, and suggested metrics for assessing our progress toward achieving our goals during the five-year strategic plan.

### **1. Creativity and impact in curricular and co-curricular offerings**

LAS supports innovative instruction and programming to maximize students' learning, development and achievement. From interdisciplinary curricular offerings like CS+X and the in-progress Data Science initiative to an intentional method for life and career planning, to multiple learning-in-the-field experiences, such as study abroad, LAS is committed to supporting students' rich learning experiences as they prepare for post-graduation success.

#### *Learning Outcomes*

In Fall 2013, Illinois' Office of the Provost coordinated a set of campus conversations among faculty, staff and students on our collective priorities for the undergraduate experience. As part of this process, in 2015 the [Campus Student Learning Outcomes](#) were established, which outline broad objectives that all Illinois undergraduates should reach during their time here. Secondly, unit-level program outcomes for undergraduate and graduate degree programs now exist as part of reaccreditation preparations, including those which intersect with other units, or even other colleges (i.e., CS+, Teacher Education programs, and interdisciplinary majors). These degree outcomes are now public, as part of the [catalog](#) see as two examples the [BSLAS in Integrative Biology](#) and the [BALAS in History](#). Learning outcomes for each area of our campus General Education requirements are also underway in the Provost's office, with input from faculty, students, and staff across campus. Both undergraduate and graduate Academic Program Reviews (APRs) are based in part on these established outcomes.

Concurrently, LAS' Life + Career Design initiative - which uses design-thinking to assist students in creating multiple, viable post-graduation career options - also finalized its learning outcomes using the

ISLOs as the template. What remains to be done is to combine LAS units' and the [LAS Life and Career Design's initiatives](#) to define a college-wide set of learning outcomes, connecting the curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular experiences undergraduates learn from. By defining and communicating the LAS learning outcomes, we will better prepare students to articulate the value of their undergraduate education, and thus raise visibility of the impact of an LAS experience.

#### Questions:

1. Considering L+C Design learning outcomes and the outcomes for majors, how can we combine and refine them to make the college of LAS learning outcomes?

#### *Curricular Connections*

In recent years, the college has been developing programs of study that formally connect an LAS-based discipline with another discipline so that students learn to apply skills from one discipline to enhance problem-solving within another. CS+X, for example, is a hybrid undergraduate major that provides a computational approach to an LAS-based discipline, such as Mathematics, Economics, Anthropology and Philosophy. The Data Science certificate offers substantial quantitative skill training in statistics and data analytics so that students can analyze large, complex data sets when researching problems within their major discipline. Students are increasingly demanding opportunities to connect a discipline of interest/choice with another, more applied-methods-based discipline, a combination that will expand their problem-solving and creative skills to meet demands of contemporary work.

#### Questions:

1. What other opportunities might be highlighted or created to connect disciplines or make hybrid or multidisciplinary combinations in ways that expand students' creative and problem-solving skills, at either the undergraduate or graduate level?

#### *Experiential Learning*

Another area of strength LAS offers undergraduates is in the area of experiential learning. Faculty from almost every LAS department recognize the value of learning experiences outside of the classroom, as evidenced by their offering undergraduate research training, learning abroad experiences, field courses, service learning opportunities and internships. Yet, because our college does not have a coordinated support network and narrative around these high impact learning experiences, we miss the opportunity to highlight and strengthen these experiences. We miss an opportunity to demonstrate the impact of these offerings. Although the college has a central office, the Life + Career Design Lab, where students can learn about experiential learning opportunities available around and beyond the college, the office is underutilized because many of our students do not understand the value in such experiences or know where to go to learn more.

#### Questions:

1. How can the college better communicate its values around experiential learning?

2. How can we better support faculty to be more involved in offering out-of-the classroom learning experiences, including UG research or creative opportunities, field courses, programs abroad, and service learning?

### *Teaching and Advising Effectiveness*

Excellence in undergraduate education may be benchmarked against national standards, including high-impact practices. In a 2017 report, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences identified [three priorities](#) for strengthening the future of undergraduate education in the United States, among them to Strengthen the overall student educational experience, through "active student engagement in civic practices alongside workforce training, and re-committing to teacher training and excellence in instruction at all levels. Students must also be adept in the areas of human cultures and the physical and natural worlds; inquiry, analysis, and creative and critical thinking; personal and social responsibility; and integrative and applied learning." These areas are also reflected in the *Goal #2: Transform Student Learning Experiences* from the Campus Strategic Plan, with its multi-pronged emphasis on integrative and inclusive learning experiences; innovative curricular ideas; state-of-the-art learning spaces/structures; and accessible support mechanisms

LAS cares that our faculty and advisors make a difference in the lives of our students. Since 2000, the college has invested in the [LAS Teaching Academy](#) to support conversations on best practices in teaching, especially for new faculty and faculty interested in offering online courses or other instructional innovations. As the current Academy Director ends his term, the Academy is at a crossroads. As we envision an enhanced undergraduate experience, we have an opportunity to review the work of the LAS Teaching Academy to ensure it is advancing the college toward our goals for course and curricular innovation and teaching effectiveness.

### Questions:

1. What would an ideal college-based teaching academy look like?
2. What other resources are needed for the college to demonstrate its commitment to excellence in instruction?
3. What other new degree programs, or types of programs/initiatives, should be created to reflect new intellectual challenges and opportunities facing students in the twenty-first century?

In addition, recent years have seen a professionalization of the field of academic advising in response to the increasingly complex needs of undergraduates. Those needs are wide-ranging and include everything from accessible counseling for career development to knowledgeable support for mental health-related situations, especially as we and campuses across the country experience rapidly increasing mental health-related challenges. Academic advisors are students' first and most common point of contact for advice-counsel on their academic program. Academic advisors often tell us they would like to be better prepared to respond to the range of concerns students bring to their conversations, as well as the range of opportunities for students to grow academically, personally and professionally. In response to the student and academic advisor needs, LAS' Life + Career Design group is creating a semester-long Life + Career Coach training program for academic advisors. The first pilot semester for a portion of the program was offered in Spring 2019 to eight advisors and

included interactive, skill-building activities and observations. The goal for this program is to integrate life and career coaching into the academic advisors' skill repertoire to better prepare the staff most likely to meet one-on-one with students for life and career discussions. As we work through our current college strategic planning exercise, we must reflect on the critical role of the academic advisor in the undergraduate experience and what knowledge and skill sets will best prepare them to guide the students to graduation and post-graduation success.

#### Questions:

1. Does the college sufficiently train and support academic advisors for the general/'front-line' needs of current undergraduates and their success?
2. What kinds of student needs should training modules on life and career coaching help academic advisors prepare for?
3. How can we raise the visibility of the academic advisor's impact on the student experience and ensure advisors are encouraged/required by their unit of employment to participate in college-level training and conversations?

## **2. Community Outreach and Create new Partnerships**

The [Campus Strategic Plan](#) for 2018-2023 acknowledges the shifting role of land-grant universities in today's world, a role focused on building long-term relationships with community partners in mutually beneficial collaborations that "make a significant & visible societal impact" (18). In LAS, several units are actively involved in offering public outreach events to share their discipline with the general public. Units offer everything from short educational community outreach events, like the Chemistry Holiday Show and its REACT program that goes into schools, to multi-day, intensive programs that introduce a discipline-based topic, like SLCL's Intensive Foreign Language Instruction Program, Astronomy's [Girls' Astronomy Summer Camp](#) or Classics' "Meet the Romans!" and "Meet the Greeks!" camps. The SESE offers an ongoing newspaper/radio segment called the Environmental Almanac to spread awareness about topics that faculty in the School research. These public outreach events are valuable for raising awareness and understanding about disciplines we offer. The campus' goal, however, is bigger and requires a dedicated effort toward developing long-term and mutually beneficial relationships with people and organizations in the community. By establishing community partnerships as a clear priority, the College can invest resources to support faculty and staff to make those relationships happen.

### *Community Partnerships and Alumni Network*

Developing strong community partnerships would have multiple benefits for the college. In addition to raising the visibility and impact of our faculty's work, community partnerships can provide opportunities to get our undergraduates involved with actual businesses and other organizations, their systems, processes, cultures, challenges and opportunities. Presumably, students' involvement with the organization would be a valuable professional development opportunity, a chance to both learn what makes an organization successful, as well as develop a network of people who can support future career opportunities.

### Questions:

1. What might an LAS-based Community Partnerships Program look like?
2. What are ways in which we can encourage/support faculty and instructors to engage in such a program?

A major source of community partnerships could be our LAS alumni network, which is over 170,000 alumni strong, many of whom are actively involved in Illinois alumni organizations. We often hear alumni wanting to share their career experience and expertise to support current undergraduates' professional development and networking. Some LAS departments do have designated staff to support alumni mentor or similar programs that connect undergraduates with alumni and career opportunities. For example, the Statistics department's existing professional development team helps students find internships and interact with corporations on campus, through job forums and their annual [Datathon](#). Our launch of the new Humanities Professional Resource Center in LAS is a complement to this unit-level work and the efforts already underway in the LAS Life and Career Design Center.

Unfortunately, however, not all units have the resources to connect their students with their alumni, and, furthermore, for most of our majors, there is no one career path, and alumni from those majors enter a wide range of careers. In other words, an alumni mentor-network program could be coordinated at the college level to maximize opportunity for all LAS undergraduates to connect to an alumni, which is what our Big10AA peers do to ensure visibility and best practices in alumni-student relations for professional development.

### Questions:

1. Should the college invest in developing an alumni network to support undergraduates' professional development and access to opportunities? If so, what would such a program look like?

### **3. Expand Leadership in Diversity and Inclusion**

A core strength for the College of LAS is our diversity, and a core priority is to support that diversity through education and inclusive practices. In addition to the new US Minority Cultures [general education requirement](#), we value diversity and inclusion in our support of students' academic experiences overall, including leadership experiences.

#### *Global Leaders Program*

The LAS undergraduate student body is the most culturally diverse on our campus with 20.6% being underrepresented and 17.2% international. We are proud of this diversity and recognize that we have an opportunity to celebrate and promote the benefits of such diversity. One way we plan to do this is through the Global Leaders Program (GLP), a part of the Life + Career Design initiative. The GLP is both a first year experience for new students and a leadership development experience for advanced undergraduates. Its purpose is to bring together new international and domestic students in a team- and research-based project that designs solutions for challenges our communities face. The program will be led by a faculty member and supported by advanced undergraduates who serve as facilitators and

leaders of the new student teams. The challenges will be determined by the lead faculty member connected to a community partner who can serve as a resource for information as well as benefactor of research toward a solution.

Questions:

1. What specific team- and research-skills should be introduced in a year-long first year experience?
2. What incentives can we offer to encourage faculty engagement in such an initiative?

*Academic Support Services*

LAS supports its commitment to undergraduate diversity and inclusion by providing an intentional advising and transition program for first generation and/or ethnic or racial underrepresented students. One of the campus' flagship inclusion programs, the Access and Achievement Program (AAP) supports approximately 1900 LAS undergraduates, including 125 students who are undeclared, working to define a successful major focus. Our program sponsors merit sections in critical courses our students often pursue, such as courses in Mathematics, Chemistry and Biology. In order to ensure continued excellence in the recruitment, retention and graduation of African American and Latina/o undergraduates, AAP will be undergoing a program review of its advising, instructional support and admissions practices.

Questions:

1. What are the critical questions that we should be asking of/about the program during this review?

*Inclusive programming*

Populations underrepresented in higher education currently comprise about 20% of Illinois undergraduates and about 30% of the population of Illinois, but they are more than 40% of the population of Illinois under 18 (<https://suburbanstats.org/population/how-many-people-live-in-illinois>). It is essential for the College be boldly inclusive in providing education and opportunity for the next generation of Illinois students.

Questions:

1. How do LAS programs and curricula need to change to recruit, welcome, and retain the next generation of Illinois students?
2. What extracurricular activities are needed to support the next generation of students?
3. What college-wide activities and structures are needed to recruit, welcome, and retain the next generation of Illinois students?

#### 4. The Graduate Student Experience

Finally, graduate education is deeply entwined with our identity as a research university, and graduate students play an essential role in the university's research and teaching mission. The graduate student experience will thus figure prominently in any vision of excellence for our college. Our vision for graduate education in LAS will develop against the backdrop of emerging and intersecting national conversations about graduate education. To give some examples, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine recently released a report entitled "[Graduate STEM education for the 21st century](#)," which called among other things for 1) better teaching and mentoring, 2) more diverse, equitable, and inclusive graduate programs, 3) intentional engagement with the range of careers which graduate students will pursue, and 4) stronger support for graduate mental health services. The Modern Language Association (MLA) has also been active in addressing the changing landscape of humanities graduate education, most recently through its [Connected Academics resources site](#) for students and faculty, and its Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature, which produced [a comprehensive report](#) in 2015. Finally, work-life balance and mental health for graduate students across all disciplines within liberal arts and sciences is an ongoing national conversation, as documented in recent studies highlighting the widespread struggle with depression and other psychological issues amongst PhD students.<sup>1</sup>

Improving the diversity, equity, and inclusion in graduate programs is priority for our college as it is nationally. Making our graduate programs more inclusive and equitable involves changes in at least four aspects of these programs: 1) making the admissions process equitable and inclusive, 2) recruiting students to apply and to accept offers of admission, 3) making programmatic changes to enable students to succeed, and 4) providing a welcoming and supportive climate. These values are reflected on the national level in various projects sponsored by the [Council of Graduate Schools](#).

Graduate training necessarily reflects the needs and expectations of each discipline, and change and innovation must come from and with the support of the faculty. Nevertheless it is natural to ask questions at the college level that focus attention on institutional and state priorities and the national conversation about graduate education.

#### Questions:

1. What can we do to give our graduate programs a distinctive national identity, helping us to recruit outstanding students and enabling them to succeed and thrive?
2. Should LAS graduate programs be more intentional about preparing students for the diversity of careers that students will pursue after they complete their degrees?
3. How can we support and promote excellent advising and mentoring of LAS graduate students? How can we encourage departments to address concerns about climate, work-life balance, and mental health?

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<sup>1</sup> See Gisle et. al: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048733317300422> and Vanderford et. al: <https://www.nature.com/articles/nbt.4089>

4. How should our graduate programs adapt to enable graduate students with varying preparation and backgrounds to succeed?

5. How should LAS graduate student training and teaching evolve to reflect the changing nature of the undergraduate experience?

