

Office of the Dean

COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS & SCIENCES AT ILLINOIS

LAS Strategic Plan Development

Strategic Plan Working Group Report – Group 1

College Goal: **Excelling in Research and Creative Activity**

- A) **Brief summary** Recommendations to excel in research and creative activity focus on six major objectives, including: 1) protecting and expanding core strengths of units, with a particular emphasis on the quality and quantity of faculty members; 2) initiating new interdisciplinary activities that address grand societal challenges; 3) support for emerging cross-cutting research and creative initiatives; 4) eliminating barriers that impede inclusion of underrepresented groups in research and creative activities; 5) promoting and supporting involvement of undergraduates and graduate students in research and creative activities; and 6) showcasing the value of research in the liberal arts and sciences to the university community and to the public. Specific action items to achieve these goals are included in the recommendations.
- B) **Working group process:** The foundation of our process was a series of weekly meetings extending over the course of eight weeks from the beginning of September to the end of October. Initial meetings focused on consultation of strategic planning documents from other Liberal Arts and Sciences colleges at peer institutions including Penn State, Ohio State, UC Berkeley, and the University of Minnesota. In addition, we reviewed the previous LAS strategic plan from 2006 and strategic planning documents from units in the College. We also requested and received from the college information on departures and new hiring of tenure-track faculty members by unit across the college over the past five years. Each member of the committee generated ideas about possible objectives to include in our report, and these ideas were discussed by the entire committee. Based on this input, a set of provisional objectives were identified and members of the committee were assigned to particular objectives with the task of refining them into definite objectives. Once the set of definite objectives was generated, members of the committee assigned to each objective generated action items for the objectives. Again, these actions items were reviewed and discussed by the entire committee. Following the roundtable intake sessions organized by the college, the committee reviewed the input by attendees and further refined both the objectives and actions items. Lastly, we developed some tentative ideas about possible methods of assessment of objectives and actions items, but we felt that details of assessment should be deferred until the college decides on the content of the final strategic plan. The committee is willing to provide further input on these details as the plan evolves if the college feels it is necessary.

C) Recommendations

1) Strategic objective #1: *Protect and expand core strengths in creative activities and research across the college through strategic investments that maintain or enhance excellence*

a) Rationale: The College recognizes that eminent national and international stature is based on broad distinction in the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. It also embraces the value of diverse approaches to advancing and disseminating knowledge across this spectrum, ranging from laboratory science to creative writing. Excellence stems from core strengths of units within the college. Through these core strengths the college attains world-class stature and distinguishes itself from other leading institutions. Maintaining and expanding core strengths is critical for sustaining excellence in competitive academic and extramural-funding environments.

b) Actions

1. Establish a formal program of communication and evaluation, in cooperation with units, to identify core strengths in research and creative activities of units within the college
2. Bolster research excellence through strategic hires based on identified core strengths, while also safeguarding core strengths against unanticipated high rates of faculty turnover (through retirements, recruitment by other universities, or other departures) through robust hiring levels, including senior hires as necessary, to sustain national and international visibility
3. Establish a proactive program to reward faculty for excellence in research and creative activities to improve retention and promote a culture that values research
4. Provide resources to maintain and improve infrastructure for existing core strengths in research and creative activities
5. Provide resources to support emerging areas of research and creative activity that are developing into new core strengths of units
6. Establish a research office, perhaps through a shared services model, to provide adequate levels of staffing and logistical support for all units, particularly those in the humanities and social sciences, to procure and service external research grants

c) Assessment: Develop baseline assessment of research and creative activity for each unit to determine core strengths (both “how much is going on” and its quality). Count people hired, funds dispersed to units for research/creative activity. Survey units periodically about their satisfaction with college-level support of research and creativity activity. If all actions are accomplished, research and creativity activity will rise and be more impactful due to both increased quantity and quality of faculty.

2) Strategic objective #2: *Invest in new creative activities and research programs that facilitate interdisciplinary partnerships to address grand societal challenges (e.g., provision of material resources, environmental change, health and well-being, demographic change and migration, energy supply and demand, water security, crime and poverty, sustainable cities, transportation infrastructure, globalization, and digital transformations)*

a) Rationale: The College is committed to generating new knowledge and understandings that contribute to the solution of society’s most challenging problems. Solutions to these

“wicked” problems are inherently complex, requiring interdisciplinary approaches that generate novel, effective synergies and that establish intellectual connections across the entire range of scholarship in LAS. These efforts demonstrate the value of our research and creative activities to diverse constituencies and maintain our position as a leader in addressing real-world challenges.

b) Actions

1. Engage in cluster hires within the college and with other colleges organized around themes relevant to grand societal challenges
2. Provide seed resources for collaborative research/creative initiatives that address grand societal challenges
3. Ensure that cross-cutting interdisciplinary research aimed at societal problems is appropriately valued in the promotion and tenure process
4. Establish a LAS Center for Interdisciplinary Research and Societal Engagement that promotes and supports interdisciplinary cross-cutting research, communicates the importance of this research to relevant stakeholders, and showcases the value of societally oriented research in the college

- c) Assessment: Conduct evaluations to measure research/creative output in these areas, starting now for baseline data, then measuring over time. Look for improvements in quality first and then quantity.

3) Strategic objective #3: *Provide resources and logistical support for emerging, cross-cutting creative activities and research initiatives within the college*

- a) Rationale: Positioning the college on the leading edge of research and creative activity means staying abreast of rapidly changing societal needs, cultural priorities, and advances in technology, methods, and tools. It is essential that the college provide support for emerging areas of research that address important research problems and foster imaginative creative endeavors. Emerging activities include topics identified by the recent LAS Faculty Excellence Task Force (Ethics & Social Responsibility, Cultural & Intercultural Competence, Social Inequality & Poverty, Understanding Data and Technological Transformation, Environmentalism, Social Connectedness, Human Sociogenomics, and Plant Photosynthesis).

b) Actions

1. Invest in a college-wide grant procurement office to position faculty to be competitive for external grants, contracts, and fellowships
2. Regularly organize and host college-wide events to facilitate connections among faculty across units
3. Develop working groups to identify emerging areas of research and creative activities
4. Offer seed funding to support faculty in developing new area of emphasis
5. Provide support for collaborative research and creative activity that cuts across disciplinary boundaries
6. Invest in state-of-the-art facilities to provide safe, productive, and stimulating research and creative environments

- c) Assessment: Conduct evaluations to determine whether cross-cutting efforts are emerging, starting now to establish baseline data, and then measuring over time. Look for improvements in quality first and then quantity.

4) Strategic objective #4: *Promote the inclusion of underrepresented groups in research and creative activity, and eliminate barriers that have traditionally impeded their entry and success in scholarly endeavors.*

a) Rationale: The College of Liberal Arts & Sciences is committed to enhancing diversity and inclusion in all aspects of its operations. The College is especially committed to increasing the involvement of researchers and scholars from diverse and underrepresented groups in science and creative activity. Underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, women, and persons with disabilities make up a disproportionately small percentage of researchers and scholars in many College disciplines, especially in the traditional sciences. Thus, the College will work to recruit diverse scholars (including students, postdoctoral fellows, and faculty), support their career development of their training and careers, and identify and eliminate barriers that have traditionally minimized their entry and success in research and scholarship.

b) Actions

1. Develop and support programs to recruit and retain faculty from groups that have been traditionally underrepresented in research and creative activity.
2. Promote inclusion of students from underrepresented groups, including first-generation students, in research and creative activity.
3. Develop and expand scholarly resources and infrastructure to support inclusion and diversity in research and creative activity, and work to eliminate barriers that have traditionally minimized the entry and success in research and scholarship by underrepresented groups.
4. Promote research that addresses diversity, equity, and inclusion.
5. Set a five-year target for increasing the number of faculty, fellows and students from underrepresented backgrounds engaging in research and creative activity, and for improving the scholarly climate.

c) Assessment: Develop survey and feedback tools that will gather the voices, concerns, and solutions from scholars from under-represented groups. Conduct a review of the current levels of faculty, postdoctoral fellows, and graduate and undergraduate students from underrepresented backgrounds engaged in research and creative activity. Furthermore, conduct a survey of these campus members about the current scholarly climate and factors that impede or facilitate entry and success in these endeavors. Periodically conduct follow-up surveys and reviews to determine whether actions have resulted in improved recruitment, retention, and climate.

5) Strategic objective #5: *Promote and support undergraduate and graduate student involvement in research and scholarship, given the formative role that these experiences play in their scholastic development and the essential role they play in advancing the College's research and scholarship mission.*

a) Rationale: Involvement in research and creative activity by undergraduate and graduate student scholars plays several important roles in the mission of the College. First of all, such experiences provide important introductions to research and creative endeavors for undergraduate students. Engagement in research and creative activities is often how

students learn about careers and opportunities in these fields, and often how students develop their interest and passion for these fields. Second, hands-on experience with research and creative activity is essential for undergraduate and graduate scholars' training, for developing their identity as scholars, and to prepare them to be competitive for the next phases of their careers (e.g., graduate school, post-doctoral fellowships, and professional employment). Third, in many disciplines, the involvement of skilled undergraduate and graduate student scholars is essential for the success of faculty members' programs of research and scholarship. Simply put, the College could not maintain its excellence in research and creative activity without the contributions of student scholars. Finally, studies suggest that undergraduate student involvement in research enhances student retention and graduation rates.

b) Actions

1. Develop and support funding for undergraduate and graduate research that includes stipends, scholarships, support for conference presentations, research funds, and training for submission of extramural student funding.
2. Support faculty in developing and submitting extramural training grants for undergraduate and graduate student researchers
3. Provide undergraduate and graduate students with information about intramural and extramural funding opportunities, and provide increased institutional support for students applying for these awards.
4. Students from underrepresented groups, and especially first generation students, may lack awareness of the importance and availability of opportunities for students to be involved in research and creative activities. The College should work with units to develop plans to inform students about such opportunities and their benefits.
5. Work with units to identify promising undergraduate scholars at the University of Illinois from underrepresented groups and encourage them to apply for graduate programs at the university.

c) Assessment: The College should conduct a systematic review of undergraduate student involvement in research and creative activities. Furthermore, students should be surveyed regarding awareness of opportunities and barriers for engagement in these activities. Follow-up reviews and surveys should be conducted to assess whether the level of participation of graduate students and undergraduates involved in research is increasing.

6) Strategic objective #6: *Showcase the value of research and creative activities in the liberal arts and sciences to the university community, alumni, the public, and other external stakeholders.*

a) Rationale: LAS is a leader in innovative and cutting-edge research and creative activities, and it is essential that relevant audiences are aware of the accomplishments of college faculty across the physical sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Today's information age demands familiarity with a variety of mediated platforms for showcasing accomplishments, but researchers often have little expertise or infrastructure for promoting their achievements through such platforms.

b) Actions

1. Be proactive in promoting the concrete societal improvements that LAS research offers

2. Work with development staff at the unit and college levels to promote research and creative accomplishments to relevant stakeholders
 3. Increase resources for external relations office to help faculty convey the importance of their research
 4. Enhance our social media presence to showcase accomplishments
 5. Train researchers at all levels to enhance their web and media presences to promote scientific and creative achievements
 6. Designate one of the theme areas of the LAS Center for Interdisciplinary Research to be exclusively about the liberal arts
 7. Create an LAS office to connect researchers to consulting, collaborative projects and other opportunities outside of the campus.
- c) Assessment: Determine how many events/donors/posts/feeds have been conducted, relative to an initial baseline that should be measured in the near future.

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