

# Office of the Dean

COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS & SCIENCES AT ILLINOIS

## LAS Strategic Plan Development Strategic Plan Working Group Report: Group #2 College Goal: Enhance the Student Experience

### A) Brief Summary of Working Group Recommendations

The group identified four **strategic objectives** whose pursuit will improve student experiences in the College substantially:

- Enhance the Student Experience Through Improved Advising
- Enhance the Student Experience Through Curricular Creativity
- Enhance the Student Experience Through Improved Inclusion and Access
- Enhance the Student Experience Through Improved Wellness

To attain each objective, we recommend several **actions**, and these are enumerated in the report below. The objectives and actions are highly interrelated. Undertaking even just one or a few of the recommended actions under each objective should yield positive outcomes for the other objectives. All of the recommended objectives and actions should better enable each student to create his or her own “**Illinois Trajectory**”: a path through his/her years here that is marked by meaningful intellectual, social, and psychological integration and growth in a diverse environment. The objectives and actions herein promote an LAS-specific vision of rigor and engagement.

We intend the pursuit of our four identified strategic objectives to benefit all students who take courses in LAS, not just those students enrolled in LAS. The barriers between colleges at the University are permeable, and rightly so. Many students in other colleges minor in fields in LAS; LAS frequently is also the ultimate home for students who find their original college was not an ideal match. We wish the strategic objectives and actions identified in this report to help enhance the experience of *all* students on campus because it is the right thing to do, and because it is strategically wise for the College: students who have a better experience have higher retention rates, decreased time to degree, and may become more productive alums.

### B) Working Group Process

The Dean convened our group in August 2019, and charged us to develop a report about the Strategic Plan goal of enhancing the student experience. We consulted the white paper on our goal produced by LAS leadership during summer 2019, as well as the [Undergraduate Education Strategy Task Force Report](#) of May 2018. We also referred to the campus-wide [Illinois Student Learning Outcomes](#) developed in 2015. We investigated best practices in advising, curricular reform, inclusion and access, and wellness at peer institutions (including Pennsylvania State University and Indiana University, among others). After generating our four main strategic objectives, the Group split into subgroups in order to focus more efficiently on developing actionable and measurable priorities for each objective. However, we continued to meet regularly as an entire group, in September and October 2019, in order to generate ideas and to give each other feedback.

## C) Recommendations

### 1) Strategic Objective #1: Enhance the Student Experience Through Improved Advising

#### Actions:

**1. Acknowledge that good advising is a high-priority College value, and institutionalize the value of high-quality advising for the student experience.** No matter the major, advisors should consistently communicate that students will graduate from LAS and Illinois with core skills that employers and professional schools want. The core skills are those listed under Strategic Objective #2 here below, and are aligned with the [Illinois Student Learning Outcomes](#).

- **Why:** All students should have equal access to comprehensive, quality advising. This includes advising on personal wellness and professional growth as well as on academic paths. The messages students currently receive from department advisors may be quite disparate. In addition, students may be overwhelmed by the many opportunities for personal and professional development on campus and in our large College; they need advisors to help them navigate these opportunities as they create a meaningful Illinois identity and trajectory.
- **How:** Conduct a thorough review of what is working well in advising in LAS (on the departmental and College levels), and identify gaps in the advising process; and devise ways to reward units for high-quality advising processes, while also assisting smaller units to provide high-quality experiences. Advising should remain personalized within departments, not centralized. However, communication between LAS and department advisors should be improved.
- **Measure of success:** All students will receive more consistent advising, as well as advising for personal, professional and academic issues.

**2. Prepare students broadly for where they want to go, even if their direction changes.** The goal is not to accumulate multiple degrees or certificates, nor to check courses off a list, but to create a meaningful Illinois trajectory into which students incorporate their very own intellectual and social identities. If students, together with advisors, have been creating a meaningful Illinois trajectory all along, they will be better prepared for a shift in direction that is still consistent with who they are and who they are becoming.

- **Why:** We live in a society where employment demands are rapidly evolving and skills such as dealing with data, communicating clearly, and managing people are as important as core disciplinary knowledge. A portfolio helps students track their experiences, build experiences toward their goals, and convey their achievements to future employers and graduate school opportunities.
- **How:**
  - a. Create a support structure for every LAS student to complete a personal and professional development portfolio. Scaffold the [Life + Career Design Lab](#) offerings out to more students. Within five years, provide more resources to the Life + Career Design Lab so that they can expand to support more LAS students. Alternatively, create additional, similar opportunities for students to learn to think holistically about their academic choices, and to create meaningful Illinois identities. Ideally all LAS students should participate in experiences similar to those offered by the Life + Career Design Lab.
  - b. Ideally all advisors should create a “meta-major map” with students early in the students’ Illinois careers, whether those students enter with a major or “undeclared.” The

map can start with students' broad interests and become more focused in successive semesters.

c. Although not directly in the purview of LAS, it would be desirable if applicants to the University of Illinois were *not* required to declare a major (or to note "undeclared") when applying. At the very least, the term "undeclared" is not very desirable. This requirement may be related to budgetary issues. True "value-centered budgeting" should prioritize students' ability to create holistic Illinois trajectories around developing intellectual identities, rather than prioritizing assigning a certain number of students to a certain college from the start.

- **Measure of success:** Measurably increase the number of LAS students served at the Life + Career Design Lab within the coming five years. Success also can be measured in terms of better retention of students, higher rates of graduation, and better job and graduate school placements. Continue to measure these quantitative as well as qualitative aspects of students' advising experiences via the [Chancellor's Senior Survey](#).

### **3. Create clearer communication channels between LAS and the Division of General Studies, and between advisors and Executive Officers.**

- **Why:** [Division of General Studies](#) (DGS) students take LAS courses and many eventually will be LAS majors; referring them to LAS advisors early on helps to build relationships that will support their eventual transition and ensure they are prepared. Executive Officers should have a clear understanding of how important the work of advising is: all faculty must be invested in good, holistic advising, not only the professional advisors.
- **How:**
  - a. Create an efficient channel of communication between DGS advisors and LAS/departmental advisors, taking into account in particular the more transient nature of the DGS student body, and making DGS advisors aware of the need to work together with department advisors (for instance, refer a student to the relevant department advisor when the student indicates an interest in taking courses in that department).
  - b. Ask Executive Officers to attend at least one advisor training or advisor forum, together with their unit's advisor/s. When departments request new hires, they should be asked to provide information about how many students they advise (not merely how many majors they have).
- **Measure of success:** Students will build connections with possible majors earlier, thus increasing support and reducing anxiety.

### **4. Work with the Graduate College to diffuse power dynamics for graduate students in LAS units.**

- **Why:** Students in many disciplines have a single advisor, which can lead to conflicts that leave the student without mentors to fall back on.
- **How:** Work with the Graduate College to develop a plan to increase mentorship diversity that is flexible enough to apply to many different types of units within and outside of LAS. Make a list of departments in the latter group for sharing with the departments that are following the "one-advisor" model.
- **Measure of success:** Better graduate student retention and departmental climates. Making the list itself is an easy measure of success. Having presentations on this topic in the regular Executive Officer workshops would also be helpful. Overall recommendation: We recommend creating a student focus group (not a survey) to solicit student input on this objective, in Year One, and following through with focus groups in Years Two through Five that give input on progress toward the objective.

## 2) Strategic Objective #2: Enhance the Student Experience Through Curricular Creativity

### Actions:

**1. Encourage less proliferation of degrees, and more focus on core skills that are useful in any degree.** We envision the core skills to be in line with the aforementioned [Illinois Student Learning Outcomes](#):

1. Intellectual Reasoning and Knowledge
2. Creative Inquiry and Discovery
3. Effective Leadership and Community Engagement
4. Social Awareness and Cultural Understanding
5. Global Consciousness

- **Why:** The undergraduate curriculum and atmosphere in LAS have become “additive”: students feel they must add more majors, more minors, more degrees, and/or more certificates. The “&” currently featured prominently on the [LAS website](#) is fine, as long as it is associated with multiplying possibilities; however, students should feel empowered to put these possibilities together into their own unique Illinois trajectory that represents a meaningful intellectual, social, and psychological development. Ideally the LAS experience would be one of taking the time to focus on what students truly enjoy and find most productive and inspiring. An Illinois trajectory is built out of a combination of *structure* (accessible, frequent, high-quality advising + curricular opportunities) and *contingency* (being present at moments when opportunities are offered and grasping those opportunities). Students are more inspired to see their work at the University as part of a coherent Illinois identity if they have time to think about what they are doing. We appreciate the fact that Illinois tuition is not insubstantial and that parents and students may wish to see concrete results from their work and degrees. But students do not need to do *everything*. They should do *a few* things well.
- **How:**
  - a. Do the actions recommended under Strategic Objective #1, which will create a climate of advising (by all faculty as well as by official advisors) that encourages students to focus on mastering the core skills and creating a unique Illinois trajectory.
  - b. Continue to encourage faculty to include concrete learning outcomes on their syllabi, and ensure that all LAS faculty are familiar with the Student Learning Outcomes/core skills listed here.
- **Measure of success:** Improved job and graduate-school placements at first-choice destinations; better retention and graduation rates. Within a few more years, better connections with LAS alums and improved donor relations.

**2. Make General Education requirements more consistent with Action #1.** Although the [current General Education categories](#) are perhaps fine, we recommend conducting a broad re-assessment of how those categories and the number of courses within the requirements fit the goal of a more holistic, meaningful, transformative undergraduate experience. How can General Education be more of a *meaningful base* for student construction of an Illinois trajectory? In other words, how can General Education inspire students to delve more deeply into a particular intellectual area, and to create their own intellectual and social journeys? The College and University are so large that students find it difficult to connect meaningfully with the intellectual offerings available during their first year.

- **Why:** General Education should be at the core of the LAS experience, and at the core of students’ creation of their Illinois trajectories, instead of a list of courses to be “fulfilled.” We believe that General Education has enormous potential to be a unifying and yet also self-actualizing structure within which students can explore their true interests.

- **How:**
  - a. Bring back Discovery Courses, and make a Discovery Course (or a comparable first-year seminar) a *required* part of the first-year or second-year experience in LAS. Run the Discovery program at the *College* level to prioritize LAS students. A required first-year Discovery course in one of the already-existing General Education areas would be part of a more meaningful and less additive General Education core. Discovery Courses also could be recruitment tools for high-achieving applicants to Illinois.
  - b. Discovery Courses *could* be part of a cluster of courses that are grouped around a particular topic; students in these courses would de facto be part of a *career community*. A potential model is the [FIGS](#) (Freshman Year Interest Groups) program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. For instance, a pre-med student could take an English Department Discovery Course on literature and medicine. Admitted and committed students could be asked to list interests (not necessarily a specific major) prior to attending freshman registration; LAS advisors could assign them to FIGS-type groups.
  - c. If the current General Education categories are restructured or even simply retitled, present/formulate those categories in a way that elevates and highlights the real skills that each category provides. Each General Education category and course should connect to the core skills listed in Action #1 here above (skills aligned with the [Illinois Student Learning Outcomes](#)). Ideally each General Education course syllabus should include language about these skills. The idea is to help students and faculty understand General Education as a skill-building resource at the core of each student's Illinois trajectory.
  - d. LAS may need to invest in more faculty hires because it currently suffers from some curricular gaps that harm the overall quality of education and of the student experience in the College.
- **Measure of success:** Students will make connections early in their Illinois careers between different disciplines in which they may be interested, and will be encouraged to think about work in their ultimately chosen discipline in a more creative way. The content of advising and mentoring conversations will be richer, and student classroom performance will improve.

### **3. Increase the number of students doing undergraduate research and/or participating in flexible learning opportunities.**

- **Why:** Students who have done meaningful and measurable undergraduate research enjoy better job and graduate-school placements. LAS and Illinois are well-positioned to offer excellent research opportunities to our undergraduates, particularly compared to non-R1 institutions. Flexible learning outside the classroom gives students the opportunity to consult with experts who are not part of the university - in other words, to not only talk with other students and faculty, but with members of the community.
- **How:**
  - a. In CIM, change the course title "Independent Study" to "Independent Research."
  - b. The College should help departments incentivize faculty to advise independent research by, for instance, encouraging departments to count 5 or more independent research students as a course. This potentially would also improve access and equity for students who might otherwise be unlikely to approach faculty to ask for research mentoring. Independent Research should be a course opportunity available to all, not just a way to earn additional credits for graduation.
  - c. Integrate discussion of research opportunities into LAS 101. This would fit well with the new orientation in LAS 101 toward design thinking, and toward encouraging students to create their unique and meaningful Illinois trajectories.
  - d. Departments requesting hires should be asked to enumerate the undergraduate research opportunities they offer (e.g., this should be another metric to evaluate hiring needs). A

box on the hiring request form could read: What is your department's plan for undergraduate research and advising?

e. Create more flexible learning opportunities for undergraduates, including on-demand internships that do not necessarily fit the semester-term schedule. This would allow students to explore internships and other opportunities without delaying graduation. For example, increase local corporate and other partnership opportunities for students in non-STEM fields. There are potential models already in place for this in numerous courses that currently have “service learning” components; however, non-STEM faculty should have resources in LAS that help them integrate such components into their syllabi. Creating such offerings may require more staff or flexible staffing, as some departments currently are so small that they struggle to offer the regularly scheduled on-campus courses required for their majors/minors.

We note, however, that LAS also is positioned to offer an alternative framework of value to the marketplace framework. Precisely because we are not defined by our connections to specific industries or to professional economies, we can offer our students access to nonprofit, charitable, and community-service organizations that represent alternative value structures. Models for such engagement already exist in certain departments, such as SPORT. We recommend investing *fewer* funds and resources on courting corporate partners, branding, and appearances, and *more* on helping students (e.g., hiring mental health staff, advisors, faculty, and others on the front lines of student engagement).

f. Offer learning opportunities to students who have already graduated, incentivizing students to return to LAS and Illinois for additional credentialing. This also could help build the active Illinois alum base.

- **Measure of success:** Improved job and graduate-school placements; greater student satisfaction with their College and Illinois experience. Better contact between alums and the College.

#### **4. Make “a transformative learning experience” a more visible part of curricular planning and the metrics we use to assess the LAS learning environment.**

- **Why:** A “transformative learning experience” is a campus strategic goal, but we currently do not measure it; existing metrics only measure inputs (“share of undergraduate students studying abroad/engaging in research”), and not outputs (“study abroad/undergraduate research was a transformative experience for me”). It is desirable to focus on the outcome of the student’s experience.
- **How:** Add an item to student evaluation forms, such as: “This course gave me a transformative learning experience.” Similar questions could be added to the Senior Survey. To help students better understand what “transformation” feels like, advisors and instructors should encourage students to reflect on how and why they are changing—often in subtle ways—as a result of the experiences they are having in and out of the classroom.
- **Measure of success:** Monitor changes in survey results over five years.

Overall recommendation: We recommend creating a student focus group (not a survey) to solicit student input on this objective, in Year One, and following through with focus groups in Years Two through Five that give input on progress toward the objective.

### 3) Strategic Objective #3: Enhance the Student Experience Through Improved Inclusion and Access

#### Actions:

#### 1. Create a College in which “diversity” is not just another attribute, but an integral part of each students’ trajectory.

- **Why:** Cultural diversity is one of the central missions of our University. We must critically engage with others so we can learn to trust, respect, and build understanding across cultures.
- **How:** Encourage faculty to: discuss the status of diversity in their fields; introduce historical approaches to diversity; add work by women, underrepresented minorities (including people of color and people of various gender identities) to their syllabi where possible. This will engage students with diversity throughout the curriculum (and not only in classes that already traditionally emphasize diversity).
- **Measure of success:** Improved College and campus climate, in part via the aforementioned documentable additions to course materials.

#### 2. Maximize diversity and its understanding through internationalization.

- **Why:** Many students entering higher education have not had exposure to cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity, and they have not trained to engage critically with diversity. The Study Abroad experience should be conceived as an essential component of students’ college experience and of their critical engagement with diversity, rather than as merely a semester away.
- **How:** Through the [LAS International Programs](#) office, improve connections between curricula and experiences in individual study abroad programs and the remainder of the curriculum. Build relationships between advisors and faculty members working on Study Abroad. Review and terminate Study Abroad programs that do not meet LAS and Illinois standards. Involve the Illinois international community (both faculty and students) in the construction and promotion of Study Abroad, for example via peer mentoring in LAS 101.
- **Measure of success:** Increased LAS student participation in Study Abroad, increased mentorship, internship, and volunteer opportunities.

#### 3. Increase access to an Illinois education.

- **Why:** As a State public institution, Illinois should be representative of the State population. Equity should be taken into consideration for both access and outcomes.
- **How:**
  - a. Devote staff to creating and nurturing more partnerships with Illinois high schools. LAS departments should offer more summer opportunities for high school students. (See for instance current day camps/academies offered by the Departments of Chemistry and Spanish and Portuguese, among others.)
  - b. LAS should host an Open House for potential applicants each fall that is structured somewhat along the lines of what the School of Music does currently (faculty mingle with potential applicants; Dean makes brief remarks; faculty showcase their work; students tour relevant buildings/areas of campus).
  - c. Expand the summer bridge program to serve more students prior to the junior year.
  - d. Advertise LAS in tandem with advertising the new [Illinois Commitment](#) program.
  - e. Via LAS Marketing, consistently promote justice and equity as land-grant values. Diversity is already the norm, not a goal to be achieved. LAS students should see themselves as part of the norms and expectations of a multiethnic, multicultural world.

f. LAS should actively recruit students from underrepresented backgrounds into LAS (rather than just into a major in LAS), thus enabling/encouraging more students to pick their majors after arrival, as they do at many top liberal arts colleges.

- **Measure of success:** Admissions data should approach parity with Illinois demographics; we should see notably improved retention between years one and two.

**4. Improve retention of students at risk of leaving the University prematurely (such as low-income, transfer, and/or first-generation students).**

- **Why:** We have a responsibility to ensure the success of all students we admit.
- **How:** Increase support services for underserved populations. Make services more visible and welcoming to create a culture of support:
  - a. Adjust course drop deadlines (for instance, create a sliding drop deadline).
  - b. Make the system of holds on student accounts more forgiving and flexible.
  - c. Students should have access to textbooks via their Library accounts.
  - d. Entering students should be assigned peer mentors if they wish, and this choice should be made clear to them.
- **Measure of success:** Improved retention from year one to year two.

**5. Leverage our ‘veteran’ international graduate students to create a better climate for international newcomers on campus.**

- **Why:** Dealing with language barriers, teaching and taking challenging classes can be overwhelming for incoming international graduate students.
- **How:** Partner with the Graduate College so ‘veteran’ international graduate students can act as mentors to newly arriving ones; provide some form of credit for this as an incentive.
- **Measure of success:** Better graduate student retention and acclimatization, faster passage of campus ESL requirements.  
Overall recommendation: We recommend creating a student focus group (not a survey) to solicit student input on this objective, in Year One, and following through with focus groups in Years Two through Five that give input on progress toward the objective.

**4) Strategic Objective #4: Enhance the Student Experience Through Improved Wellness**

**Actions:**

- 1. Increase student resilience through a number of evidence-based best practices.** The focus here should be on *prevention* of problems as well as on *treatment* of existing problems.
  - **Why:** Evidence suggests that, in 2018, nearly 60% of American college students reported overwhelming stress and anxiety within a 12-month interval, and over 40% said they had difficulty functioning due to depression. Despite the substantial proportion of emotional distress among students, most students, both undergraduate and graduate, do not take advantage of the traditional models of mental health treatment delivery provided by various campus-based counseling centers and health clinics. Receiving an appointment with a counselor often requires persistence and calling very early, which is challenging for students already suffering from mental health issues. The proportion of students using DRES services has recently increased. First-year students may be at the highest risk, and in this group loneliness is a particularly urgent problem.



Given the serious cost of psychological distress for students' mental health, academic achievement, and retention, there is a pressing need for solutions to increase resilience and reduce the detrimental impact of emotional distress.

- **How:**
  - a. Make counseling (embedded in LAS) more accessible, and communicate information about it to advisors, departmental faculty, and staff as well as to students. Increase the number of mental health professionals and counseling services, and encourage departments to have an ombudsperson or go-to partner for both majors and graduate students. Increase the visibility of information regarding mental health help, so that students can more easily identify the services that fit their needs: have such details available at centralized online locations, and/or through a campus-/LAS-wide app available to all students.
  - b. Following some of the recommendations above re: Advising and Curriculum may also positively affect students' mental health, as better, more holistic, quality advising and a guarantee of at least one small (25 students or fewer) course in Year 1 may help integrate students better into a large College and University, and should contribute to a sense that they are constructing meaningful Illinois trajectories. Courses offered in [iFLEX](#) format are excellent examples of small group learning and collaborative classroom activities. However, currently such courses typically are offered as small higher-level classes rather than for larger groups at lower levels.
  - c. Increase opportunities for learning about mental health and coping: Add a module on mental health and resilience to LAS 101, and/or to other courses taken by many LAS students (such as Chemistry S92). Create and offer 100- and 200-level courses on Resilience, Mental Health, and Coping (at present, such topics are often only discussed in, for instance, upper-level Psychology courses), as well as hands-on/lab components and workshops that offer students opportunities to acquire adaptive coping skills.
- **Measure of success:** An increase in the number of students successfully using and benefiting from mental health counseling services. As a result, faculty and staff should experience fewer issues with distressed and/or disruptive students, and this also should be reflected in reduced incidence of distress among students. In turn, we also should see improved retention and graduation rates within five years.

**2. Improve wellness through residential life.** Some [Living-Learning Communities](#) (LLCs) regularly inform their residents about mental health and wellness resources on campus. All University residences that house LAS students should do this. In other words, there should be more consistent wellness advising among all residence halls.

- **Why:** Students often first seek help, or make others aware that they need help, where they live. They are not in a particular class every day, but they are in their residence halls every day. The quality of wellness advising among the different residence halls that house LAS students currently seems to vary greatly, with potentially the best advising happening in the relatively cohesive Living-Learning Communities. Currently there are eleven LLCs on campus, and only four have themes explicitly related to fields within LAS (Global Crossroads, Intersections, Sustainability, and Women in Math, Science, and Engineering).
- **How:** LAS should help create more Living-Learning Community-style residence halls. Such halls should have themes that in turn promote LAS, by focusing on areas of intellectual interest represented by LAS. We also note the recently developed "Residential Experience" plan at Northwestern University, which recommends developing new residential hall identities in terms of "neighborhoods" in which students thrive intellectually, socially, and psychologically. One of the core recommendations of that plan is to incentivize faculty to interact with students "in non-evaluative contexts."

- **Measure of success:** Better retention of first-year students; decreased mental health crises, better and more frequent student-faculty interactions.
- 3. De-emphasize grades; emphasize the core skills listed in 2b above.**
- **Why:** Recent data suggests that employers, and possibly even graduate schools, are more interested in students' mastery of core skills (e.g. proven ability to do research) than in grades and test scores. In general, a specific major is often less significant than how well the student engaged with and performed in that major. Students tend to do better in courses and majors that they enjoy, and their performance across the core skills is also better.
  - **How:** Follow the recommended Actions under Objectives #1 and #2 here above, which promote skill acquisition over degree proliferation, and which promote the creation of a meaningful Illinois trajectory over earning specific grades in a specific major. Devote fewer resources to outcomes assessment, and more resources to high-quality instruction and rigorous feedback (both of which are easier to attain if student-faculty ratios are reasonable). If faculty list student learning outcomes/core skills on their syllabi, and gear course content toward skill acquisition, there should be less need for ongoing and energy-intensive outcomes assessment.
  - **Measure of success:** Improved retention and graduation rates; improved student performance in class on the core skills. We should also see a decline in the number of students who seek "easy" classes that supposedly give higher grades.  
Overall recommendation: We recommend creating a student focus group (not a survey) to solicit student input on this objective, in Year One, and following through with focus groups in Years Two through Five that give input on progress toward the objective.

Submitted on October 30, 2019

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