

College of Arts & Sciences Strategic Planning Undergraduate Education Working Group Final Report

Executive Summary

Strategic efforts in first-year programming, high impact and experiential learning, and career programming can elevate the quality of undergraduate education in the College of Arts and Sciences. These proposed actions build from our academic excellence, rigorous degree programs, high quality academic advising, and strong connections between faculty and students. Some objectives require focusing our efforts on shared goals, such as improving the sense of belonging among first-year students and tapping the knowledge and experiences of successful former students. Other goals rely on identifying and sharing best practices across the Departments for high-impact and experiential learning and deployment of AI in teaching and learning. We recognize that some objectives and specific actions may face challenges owing to objections based on interpretations of facts and other experiences, which we aim to acknowledge. Assessment of our actions relies on data provided by the University and consultants, in addition to creating new baselines. The process of obtaining ideas that inform our objectives and actions included a student experience survey, retreat with Departmental leaders, and several stakeholder consultations.

Process

The undergraduate education working group's recommendations are based on several information-gathering moments. We reviewed findings of a student experience survey developed by an *ad hoc* College committee of experts and administered online by Hanover Research between October and November 2024 using the Qualtrics platform. The survey obtained 1,017 valid responses from ArtSci undergraduate students. Departments produced two-page summaries of their strengths in undergraduate education in advance of a retreat on 21 February 2025, which attracted 40 Departmental leaders. The retreat focused on five themes (curricular innovation and excellence; high-impact and experiential learning; student advising and career support; interdisciplinary and interdepartmental curriculum; first-year programming). Key ideas emerging from each theme were synthesized into an Idea Paper, which in turn served as prompts for two staff focus groups (27 participants) and two faculty focus groups (34 participants). The Working Group reduced the Idea Paper into a three-page list of draft recommendations, which served as prompts for a Town Hall on 22 April and the faculty and staff survey results available on 19 May. Feedback from the Town Hall and ensuing survey were incorporated into these Final Recommendations.

Opportunities

The College of Arts and Sciences has a unique opportunity to distinguish itself in undergraduate education by leveraging strengths in our research enterprise, affinity of former students to their academic departments, and the dedication of faculty and staff to student success and belonging. The results revealed excitement about involving undergraduates in faculty-led research and the excellence of our current degree programs. The Hanover survey revealed considerable strengths in the College's undergraduate education. Approximately three-quarters of students express high levels of excitement about academic excellence (72%) and real-world applications (71%) offered by the College. Additionally, two-thirds (66%) feel similarly about hands-on learning, indicating a strong preference for academic quality and the practical application of academic knowledge. Other noteworthy positive characteristics include the diversity of degree programs offered and the enthusiasm of faculty and staff dedicated to excellence in undergraduate education. Hanover analysts noted that less than half of the respondents feel very or extremely excited about the College being a place where they belong and recommended that the College organize events that celebrate the diversity of disciplines, such as interdisciplinary conferences, workshops, and social events.

Objectives

Objective 1: Improve first-year programming to align with departmental and University goals

Rationale: Hullabaloo U (HU), a University priority for improving sense of belonging and retention rates for FTIC (first time in college) students, attracted mixed views among stakeholders, with some arguing for abandoning HU and others arguing for the merits of HU. Recommended actions build on evidence from student respondents to the Hanover survey, which found that 47% of students felt strongly about the College as “a place where I belong” and 41% agreed that the College “offers big college opportunities with a small college experience.” 56% of respondents agreed that “my major has a close-knit, community feel” (with considerable variation among Departments), suggesting that strategic improvements to HU could improve the sense of belonging and overall first-year experience of our students. University-wide, the FTIC first year retention goal is 95%, with the most recent data, for the 2023 cohort, indicating that the university retained 94.4% of students and the College of Arts and Sciences retained 94.5%. The faculty and staff survey revealed strong and shared interest in programs that improve sense of belonging to Departments and the University and increase opportunities for advising and personalized student support. Qualitative data from the Office of Student Success (OSS) suggest that the most important factor in successful HU sections is instructor alignment to the stated goals of HU and motivation in using HU meetings to meet the stated goals.

Actions:

1. Identify mechanisms to increase compensation to HU instructors and peer mentors.
2. Support discipline-oriented, cohort-building, high-impact, and career-focused content in HU to demonstrate the value of HU to students.
3. Support departmental implementation of flexible approaches to meet University-wide HU guidelines, including counting HU toward faculty service.
4. Measure the efficacy of HU programming on a Department-specific basis in collaboration with OIEE staff.

Assessment:

1. Student responses to OSS appraisals for the question “HU helped me feel I belong at TAMU” will increase from 57% strongly agree/agree in Fall 2024 to 65% in five years.
2. Student responses to OSS appraisals for the question “HU helped my transition to TAMU” will increase from 59% strongly agree/agree in Fall 2024 to 65% in five years.
3. First-year retention to the University will meet the University-wide goal of 95%.
4. Student agreement with the prompt “my major has a close-knit, community feel” will increase from 56% of respondents to 60%, with increases observed across all Departments.

Anticipated Challenges:

1. We recognize numerous faculty concerns with HU, such as the claim that it must be credit-bearing to be taken seriously; that it is fatally flawed as currently configured owing to low compensation of instructors and peer mentors; that the apparent benefits are overstated; that Departments face difficulties in recruiting motivated faculty as instructors; that there is a wide gap between faculty and staff on the importance of integrating career programming in the first-year experience and providing information on academic expectations. However, OSS data indicate that large majorities of students in HU sections indicate that the course helped them feel as though they belong at TAMU, contributed to familiarity with campus and resources, and developed skills to achieve personal and career goals.

2. We also recognize that the faculty and staff survey showed low interest in embedding HU into degree programs and that additional Departmental ownership of HU may lead to negative outcomes, such as instructors seeking to use HU to keep students in their major and Departments assigning unmotivated instructors to HU sections. However, we did not detect stakeholder interest in placing responsibility for first-year programming with a centralized University office.

Objective 2: Support and amplify departmental high-impact and experiential activities

Rationale: Stakeholders expressed enthusiasm for high-impact and experiential learning. Obstacles identified by stakeholders included broadening possibilities for students who cannot afford study abroad or unpaid internships and scaling up capstone and other high-impact activities for large degree programs. Indeed, 69% of respondents to the Hanover survey have not participated in research activities with faculty, citing lack of awareness of opportunities (49%), being too busy (39%), and not being advanced enough in their degree program (39%) as reasons. Yet 31% of students engaged in faculty-supervised research equates to approximately 3,255 students at the time of survey deployment. Other Hanover survey results suggest that improving and broadening high-impact activities will build on a major strength of the College: 89% of respondents reacted positively to the statement that “coursework in my major challenges me intellectually” and 72% reacted positively to “academic excellence” as an attribute that made them feel excited about being a part of the College. Among the one-third who have engaged in research activities with faculty, 78% report gaining skills for their career path and 76% report making connections with faculty as outcomes. The faculty and staff survey revealed very strong support across disciplines for increasing opportunities for undergraduates to participate in faculty-led research, but mixed support for study-abroad opportunities across disciplines.

Actions:

1. Define high-impact learning and College-wide goals, develop a database for sharing best practices for undergraduate research experiences, and encourage sharing best practices.
2. Promote College-wide events or opportunities to raise awareness about high-impact opportunities and to provide students opportunities to share their experiences.
3. Recognize faculty for leading or innovating high-impact learning or research mentoring of undergraduate students through an award category and annual review process.
4. Identify means to compensate faculty for leading high-impact experiences such as field trips.
5. Identify funding for more students to participate in high impact and experiential learning.

Assessment:

1. Establish a baseline for the College by ensuring Departments are using course codes (484/485/491/492/497) to capture high-impact and experiential learning accurately, then establish goals seeking to increase student participation.
2. Identify any gaps between self-reported student participation in research with faculty (31%) and the actual number of students enrolled in 291/491, aiming to reach 35%.

Anticipated Challenges:

1. Difficulties in scaling up activities in large undergraduate programs owing to different bottlenecks, such as space, funding, and instructors.
2. Aligning all departments on the same course codes for high-impact and experiential learning.

Objective 3: Improve career programming through deeper engagement with former students

Rationale: Stakeholders emphasized the need for deeper engagement with former students for several reasons, including better understanding of career paths and potential for communicating the value of our degree programs. Stakeholders also emphasized the need to balance imperatives for workforce preparation and informed citizens who continuously learn by emphasizing career readiness and a commitment to lifelong learning. Improved career programming would build on considerable success, as indicated by the fact that 87% of respondents were positive about how their College and major “will help me meet my career goals,” according to the Hanover survey. However, 78% of respondents have not participated in an internship. Among these respondents, the primary reasons are lack of awareness of opportunities (46%) and not being advanced enough in their degree program (38%). Hanover survey results indicate significant potential to build on positive relationships between students and faculty: 62% of respondents feel comfortable or very comfortable approaching faculty members with questions or concerns, 63% of respondents can identify at least one faculty member in their department or major who knows their name or cares about their success. This important strength could be used to leverage stronger engagement with former students. Similar positive responses were shown in the faculty and staff survey.

Actions:

1. Encourage Departments to invite former students to serve on career panels and department-focused advisory councils.
2. Facilitate themed former student meetings and career panels that cross the College’s degree programs.
3. Departments should use social media to connect with current and former students to disseminate determine best practices for deployment
4. Create more ways of highlighting career pathways to students and embedding career readiness into the curriculum.
5. Compensate departmental internship coordinators and encourage internship coordinators to network and share best practices.

Assessment:

1. All Departments and interdepartmental programs will have active former-student councils.
2. A reporting process will allow us to enumerate results (e.g., events and meetings) and sharing best practices across the College.
3. Develop means for measuring engagement (e.g., self-efficacy) of council members.
4. Increase knowledge of career pathways among faculty and students as determined by future surveys.
5. All Departments and interdepartmental programs will include degree-appropriate career programming that shows improvement over baseline career programming activities.

Anticipated Challenges:

1. The College has uneven baseline activities in this area. Some Departments have long standing active councils, while others lack faculty and staff capacity, information, and a career-oriented mentality necessary to implement former-student councils.
2. Lack of a template for best practices in establishing and growing former student councils.
3. Gap between faculty and staff and across disciplines and longevity on the value of career programming, with some less enthusiastic views equating “career programming” with “vocational” or “technical” education.

4. Differences across Departments in framing basic science, social science, and humanities as career-ready skill development (e.g., critical thinking, teamwork, and communication skills).

Objective 4: Develop a robust student recruitment unit

Rationale: Stakeholders considered that one staff member charged with recruitment duties is insufficient to meet the multidimensional needs of the College. Stakeholders suggested that a rigorous plan is necessary, rather than hiring more staff.

Actions:

1. Support departments in developing outreach events for high school guidance counselors.
2. Develop and implement a plan for communicating with prospective and admitted students.
3. Generate an inventory of recruitment events (high school events; professional associations) for Department or College representation.

Assessment:

1. Determine return on investment of time and funds for recruitment travel and event participation.
2. Develop an engagement baseline in SLATE, the University's enterprise CRM, to measure future contact.

Anticipated Challenges:

1. Balancing recruitment efforts across over- and under-subscribed degree programs.
2. Accomplishing goals without hiring additional staff.

Objective 5: Address challenges and opportunities of AI in the teaching and learning process

Rationale: Stakeholders were concerned that the rapid growth of AI was creating new and unmet responsibilities for faculty to provide robust instruction for students. Stakeholders expressed that they "can't ignore it" and recognized that AI is part of many career paths sought by our students: "We need to understand how students and the workforce use AI." Stakeholders recognized that within disciplines there is wide variation in use of AI and that the technology is changing quickly, making it imperative that the College support faculty catching up with AI.

Actions:

1. Encourage instruction in appropriate uses of AI for specific course content.
2. Collect and disseminate best practices from faculty using AI in their teaching.

Assessment:

1. Compile an inventory of policies and statements among ArtSci faculty on teaching with AI and disseminate best practices.
2. Develop and deploy a survey construct to estimate student confidence in the ethical and rigorous application of AI to support student learning in a future student experience survey.

Anticipated Challenges:

1. AI in higher education is highly dynamic with students often well ahead of faculty in using AI.
2. It is not clear what the College can do to assist faculty beyond referral to the [University's resources on AI in teaching and learning](#).

Objective 6: Strengthen connections between academic advisors and departments/programs

Rationale: Stakeholders prioritized the need to more deeply embed academic advisors in departments and programs and for faculty and academic advisors to work as a team. Provost-approved centralized advising and a career ladder for academic advisors put parameters around suggested actions; moreover, the Working Group valued the importance of upward mobility, retention in the profession, and career autonomy of staff who begin their careers as academic advisors. A long-term relationship with a single advisor is ideal, but not always aligned with the career goals of academic advisors. The Hanover survey indicated considerable strengths in academic advising: 80% of students believe that their main academic advisor is well-informed about the specifics and requirements of their major and ~70% of respondents believe that their academic advisor is readily available when they have questions, is easy to contact or schedule appointments with, effectively directs them to additional resources, and provides valuable guidance in planning their degree and selecting courses.

Actions:

1. To the extent possible, academic advisors should be co-located with the departments and programs they serve and should be promoted without switching departments.
2. Department leadership and faculty should meet with advisors regularly to discuss career pathways, the trajectory of the department, issues that students face, and update faculty-approved policies and procedures for academic advisors.
3. Organize regular all-College briefings, presented by the faculty, for academic advisors in the College and external parties on curricular updates, high-impact experiences, and career pathways.

Assessment:

1. Perform an assessment of academic advising using the CAS standards for Academic Advising Programs self-assessment guide.
2. Perform a qualitative assessment every two years of the College guidelines for academic advising through a subcommittee of the Undergraduate Instruction Committee.
3. Maintain high student-reported metrics regarding academic advising (main academic advisor is well-informed; academic advisor is readily available, effectively directs them to additional resources, and provides valuable guidance).

Anticipated Challenges:

1. Some stakeholders have concerns with “centralized” advising, which may be summarized as “it’s hard to have a shared mission with different reporting structure,” arguing that academic advisors should report to Departments, rather than to an associate dean.
2. A small but vocal group of stakeholders expressed the desire to keep academic advisors in Departments for most or much of their career with the University.

Objective 7: Develop processes that motivate team-based interdisciplinary instruction

Rationale: Stakeholders were passionate about the need for the College to develop guidelines that encouraged team-taught interdisciplinary courses in the College, while also noting that the reason for team-taught courses must be student-centered, starting with the question, “how does team teaching benefit students?”

Actions:

1. Develop guidelines that incentivize team-based interdisciplinary instruction with clarity on compensation and process.
2. Revise annual review guidelines to encourage team teaching (e.g., include team teaching as a measure of teaching excellence) and offer recognition and credit to participating faculty.

Assessment:

1. Presence of approved administrative process or guideline after shared governance process
2. Number of new/revised courses; number of faculty; number of students taking these courses; course appraisals.

Anticipated Challenges:

1. Avoid the perception or reality that team-based interdisciplinary teaching takes resources away from Departments
2. Ensuring that incentives for developing interdisciplinary teaching produce courses that are aligned with student interest and degree plan requirements.

Objective 8: Enhance the digital learning experience for students and faculty

Rationale: Many stakeholders identified the need for greater access to instructional designers to maximize their use of the LMS (Canvas), while others noted that the College’s instructional designers, who offer consulting hours, are underutilized and eager to assist faculty. The Hanover student survey revealed that students overwhelming (> 90%) value faculty competence in the basic functions of Canvas. Timely communication, due dates, and regular feedback are key characteristics of an “excellent Canvas course.” Only 22% of respondents identified discussion or polling tools as “excellent” characteristics. Nearly half of respondents preferred asynchronous online delivery of summer courses.

Actions:

1. Enhance the visibility and expertise of College staff to support faculty seeking digital learning guidance, focusing on broad dissemination of basic Canvas competency.
2. Offer dedicated support for faculty teaching online summer classes to align with student preferences and course modalities in summer terms.

Assessment:

1. Student satisfaction with faculty use of Canvas will require a revised question in the student experience survey to establish a baseline.
2. Presence of dedicated office hours and workshop-based support for summer session instructors of record on best practices for Canvas sections.

Anticipated Challenges:

1. Attention to compliance with the Final Rule on digital accessibility may overwhelm faculty progress on implementing basic functions of Canvas and may encourage faculty to teach outside Canvas, in addition to overwhelming limited resources of the College's Digital Learning staff.

Synergies with Other Working Groups

Infrastructure: Stakeholders expressed infrastructure concerns, which appeared to be outside of our direct control and hence not included in our recommendations. For example, faculty told us that “world-class teaching needs world-class teaching spaces” in reference to many examples of classroom space. Another stakeholder told us that “Students need active interactions with each other but we do not have the infrastructure” and “our current spaces are not built for how we teach today,” meaning that classroom layout is not aligned with desired interactive teaching practices. Other stakeholders noted the need for space improvements for academic advising and student success programming.

Recognizing Faculty: Several recommended actions include recognition or compensation of faculty with regards to the first-year experience and to high-impact and experiential learning. Stakeholders communicated that faculty must be recognized for leading or innovating high-impact experiences for undergraduate students. A relevant finding from the faculty/staff survey is that 60% of faculty indicated as a top three response the need to “balance faculty workloads to optimize teaching quality and student learning” as a top priority for undergraduate education.

Communicating Our Value to External Stakeholders: Faculty stakeholders expressed significant concern over increasingly common external threats that challenge the value of certain disciplines and areas of inquiry that we consider to be fundamental parts of the College of Arts and Sciences. Faculty suggested developing protocols for communicating what to do, how to respond, and whom to contact when faculty are challenged, threatened, or confronted about the content of their course materials, in addition to protocols for handling media inquiries seeking information about curricular matters.

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