Applying and transforming knowledge and skills across contexts

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Strategic Analysis: College of Social Sciences and Humanities

The Experiential Liberal Arts:
An Organizational Philosophy and Educational Model for CSSH

Strategic Goals 2017-2025

In Northeastern University’s College of Social Sciences and Humanities (CSSH), faculty, students, staff, and alumni are developing The Experiential Liberal Arts as an organizational philosophy and integrative educational model. The Experiential Liberal Arts (ELA) mission frames and integrates all three parts of the college’s mission: research, education, and outreach. It combines Northeastern’s signature focus on experiential learning, grounded in cooperative education, with the rigorous study of society, culture, politics, and ethics in a way that is mutually reinforcing. We define experiential learning as applying knowledge and skills across contexts, thus aligning with the university’s focus on applied and use-inspired research excellence. In this context we have articulated key commitments in the social sciences and humanities at Northeastern: (1) conducting community-engaged research and teaching, (2) posing and addressing policy-relevant research and teaching questions, (3) developing new, often collaborative methods for research and teaching in the humanities and social sciences, (4) engaging multiple audiences, from students to scholarly peers to the broader public.

CSSH faculty, students and staff are asking “How do we in the social sciences and humanities contribute to Northeastern and beyond?” , “How do our research, teaching and engagement help educate responsible local and global citizens and leaders?” And: “What unites our work in disciplines as diverse as Economics and English?” We continually refine the Experiential Liberal Arts model through collaborative processes. A variety of groups and committees are defining our mission in the ELA: the Council of Chairs; faculty and staff working groups in the college, such as the undergraduate research committee; the Experiential Liberal Arts Curriculum Framework Working Group; the CSSH Advisory Council on Diversity and Inclusion; college-wide student leadership groups, like the CSSH Student Ambassadors and CSSH Student Advisory Council; and the Dean’s Strategy Council (a group of alumni and parent leaders).

The Experiential Liberal Arts encourages the application and the transformation of knowledge and skills across a range of contexts, including in Northeastern’s signature cooperative education ecosystem, in which students undertake six-month research and work experiences with businesses, non-profits, and government agencies in Boston, across the United States, and around the world. Experiential learning encompasses more than co-op: in our ambitious research university, our faculty build multigenerational research teams, which means directly engaging students at all levels—undergraduate, masters, and doctoral—in research and outreach programs both on and off campus. Faculty and students take our work in campus learning spaces, apply and transform it in a variety of community learning environments—from archives, to NGOs, to the United Nations, to name just a few—and then bring that knowledge and those skills back to our campus learning spaces. Engagement outside of the university transforms the work in our classrooms and shapes our research questions.

A key characteristic of the ELA is the integration of traditional liberal arts capacities (e.g., critical analysis and critical thinking about culture, society and politics, cross-cultural communication,
philosophical debate, ethical reasoning, careful contextualization) with new, often digital proficiencies (e.g., data visualization, geocoding, text mining, social network analysis, or digital curating). This integration is key to many of our cutting-edge, multidisciplinary research efforts such as those fostered in our NULab for Texts, Maps and Networks, and to a number of our educational innovations, such as combined majors with Computer Science, the interdisciplinary undergraduate course on Bostonography: Texts, Maps, and Networks, our master’s program in Urban Informatics.

Through the perspectives, frameworks, and methodologies of the humanities and social sciences, members of the CSSH community aim to recognize and understand human diversity of various kinds in local, global, and organizational contexts. In research and engagement projects, and in courses, we learn and develop theories and perspectives of human difference, governance, and civic sustainability. We ask how social arrangements shape and are shaped by difference and the histories, cultures, and interactions of diverse groups. Students, faculty and staff work together to build inclusive environments, on campus and beyond.

In research, educational and outreach activities, we engage deeply with Boston communities and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and their national and global links in past and present. We see the urban and coastal environment of Boston as a laboratory for cultural, social, political and economic analysis, for innovations in culture and policy, and for comparative research. At the same time, faculty and students engage with cities and communities all over the world through research collaborations, educational programs such as five-week summer Dialogue of Civilization programs, global co-ops, and service activities such as Alternative Spring Break.

The dynamic learning that happens across these contexts is critical, we believe, to understanding our rapidly changing and complex social and cultural environment and to acting effectively and ethically in the face of ambiguity. In emphasizing the transformation of knowledge across contexts, the ELA encourages faculty, students, and community partners to collaborate across differences and to create inclusive learning environments dedicated to working together to understand, represent, and address the world’s problems.

**CSSH Areas of Strategic Focus**

Within the Experiential Liberal Arts model, we have defined three areas of strategic focus in CSSH, all of them in collaboration with other colleges at Northeastern, that support and organize our research, educational, and outreach mission in the humanities and social sciences. We began to build these strategic foci in the context of the university’s 2009 academic plan, which committed the university to three research areas—sustainability, security, and health. During the university’s 2015/16 strategic planning process, resulting in the new academic plan *Northeastern 2025*, CSSH faculty and students
were deeply involved. The plan envisions a global, networked university engaged in preparing life-long, adaptable, entrepreneurial learners and generating innovative, use-inspired research. With its emphasis on integration of knowledge across contexts, the ELA positions CSSH for a leadership role in implementing this vision. Our interdisciplinary research and teaching emphases speak to the urgency, highlighted in *Northeastern 2025*, to prepare students to encounter and shape continuing transformations in the interactions of humans and technology (“Humans”). CSSH’s strategic planning articulates core values for humanities and social scientific work in the context of the university’s themes.

I. Integrating Resilience and Sustainability

The College of Social Science and Humanities, together with other colleges at Northeastern, supports cutting-edge research, education and engagement efforts at the intersections of sustainability and resilience. Rooted in multiple disciplines, resilience studies seeks to formulate policy and technical solutions for dealing with crises ranging from sudden events such as terrorist attacks, severe weather, or cybersecurity breaches, to slower-moving threats such as climate change, environmental pollution, and social dislocation. In collaboration with other colleges, CSSH has led the effort to make resilience a university-wide theme for research, education and engagement. We have developed the concept of civic sustainability in order to highlight that research on the sustainability of natural environments, on human health and on resilient infrastructures needs to pay close attention to societies, cultures and modes of governance. Within these frameworks, social science and humanities scholars engage with communities as they respond to, recover from, and adapt to social changes caused by traumatic natural and man-made events. Civic sustainability requires us to ask how communities and institutions can build social and cultural resilience. Civic sustainability also means safeguarding essential social values, including a plurality of voices, and representing a diversity of perspectives and experiences as we seek to understand and address the world’s most pressing problems.

II. Cultural Transformations, Governance, and Globalization

From a great variety of social science and humanist perspectives, members of the CSSH community approach culture as an instrument for social change and innovation, while also studying how cultural canons, cultural formations, and aesthetic judgments were and are deeply intertwined with relations of power and social inequality. Our age of globalization requires careful cross-cultural and comparative analysis, as well attention to questions of social and cultural capital and citizenship, in order to help develop effective and just modes of governance across the broad range of political settings, from the local to the international. Through cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional collaborations, we engage deeply with cities and communities all over the globe, assess the forces that link or divide them, and study historical and contemporary Boston as an important urban and coastal hub of cultural, political, and economic activity.

III. Big Data and Digital Methods in the Humanities and Social Sciences

This third area of strategic focus fosters our efforts to integrate traditional liberal arts capacities with digital methods and to develop new tools for using large amounts of often unstructured data in order to answer key questions about societies, cultures and politics, including the ones articulated in our first two areas of strategic focus. At the same time, we also use humanistic and social scientific frameworks, methods, and perspectives to understand the human uses and consequences of new and emerging technologies. Key concerns in the uses of data are individual privacy, broad access to information, and the representation of diverse perspectives and backgrounds in the production of knowledge. Humanists and social scientists collaborate with one another, and with colleagues in Computer Science, Media
Studies, and Business to use these innovative analytic techniques to advance our knowledge of society and culture.

**The Experiential Liberal Arts as an Organizational Philosophy**

The three areas of strategic focus in our Experiential Liberal Arts mission shape our organizational structures. Over the last five years, we have aligned the college’s hiring initiatives with these foci, with an emphasis on cluster and leadership hires in Environmental Health, Resilience, Digital Humanities, and Big Data and Quantitative Methods. Departments contribute substantially to these foci with their disciplinary appointments and in encouraging collaborations. Over a third of our T/TT faculty have joined us since 2012, and about a quarter of our T/TT faculty hold joint appointments. The foci have brought major gains in funding streams and reputation to Northeastern. We have founded or contributed to the founding of new multi-disciplinary and inter-college research institutes and initiatives, including the Global Resilience Institute under Steve Flynn, the NULab for Maps, Text and Networks under Elizabeth Maddock Dillon and David Lazer, the Social Science Environmental Health Research Institute under Phil Brown, and the Network Science Institute under Alex Vespigniani. Research institutes such as the Institute on Race and Justice under Jack McDevitt and Amy Farrell, the Center for Atypical Language Interpreting under Dennis Cokely, the Dukakis Center on Urban and Regional Policy under Ted Landsmark, and the Humanities Center under Lori Lefkovitz foster community engaged research as well as multi-disciplinary and multi-generational research efforts and have been important for CSSH’s success in doubling external research funding over the last five years.

Each of the college’s nine tenure homes supports substantially at least two of our areas of strategic focus. Five of these tenure homes are explicitly multi-disciplinary units: the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice; the School of Public Policy and Urban Affairs; the Department of Cultures, Societies and Global Studies; the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, and the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies. The departments of History, Economics, English, and Political Science each have faculty members with joint appointments in other units, and the Department of English unites faculty members in literature, creative writing, and rhetoric. The Writing Program, housed in the Department of English, and the World Languages Center, newly housed in the college since 2015, support the education of all Northeastern students as well as our Experiential Liberal Arts mission. Interdisciplinary programs ranging from Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, to African American Studies, to Jewish Studies, to International Affairs provide intellectual homes for faculty and students as well as educational and engagement opportunities. Our emphasis on cross-disciplinary and cross-college strategic foci, along with aggressive hiring of faculty, and improvements in the funding and experiences of our students, have raised substantially the rankings of our eight Ph.D. programs—Criminal Justice, Economics, English, History, Political Science, Law and Public Policy, Network Science, and Sociology—although these do not yet match the reputation of Northeastern as a whole. Through research centers, departments, schools, interdisciplinary programs, and leadership in cross-college initiatives such as the Civility Series, we contribute significantly to co-curricular programs for the entire Boston campus and its surrounding communities, as well as Northeastern’s network of campuses.

We are building innovative educational programs in the humanities and social sciences that closely align with the CSSH strategic foci in the Experiential Liberal Arts model. These range from new combined majors between humanities and social sciences disciplines and Computer Science, to new masters programs in Security and Resilience Studies or Urban Informatics, to a new graduate certificate in Digital Humanities, to the expansion of experiential learning in our master’s and PhD programs, to participation in the multi-college PhD program in Network Science. Our faculty and students tackle
big questions and grand challenges from multiple perspectives. We have seen substantial interest in explicitly interdisciplinary majors such as International Affairs as well as Politics, Philosophy and Economics. Well over a third of our students are now enrolled in over fifty combined majors within the college and with other colleges. With our recently approved Experiential Liberal Arts curriculum framework, all students will encounter the key components of the Experiential Liberal Arts on their path through their undergraduate majors. Finally, we have built a substantial cadre of college-based professional advisors and co-op coordinators and integrated them with departments and instructional programs in order to support our mission in the Experiential Liberal Arts.

CSSH leadership was critical in the development of Northeastern’s new general education program, NUpath, implemented in Fall 2016. Dean Poiger was among the original architects who drafted a 2013 white paper that led to the creation of the new program. She co-chaired the Faculty Senate Committee to Revise the NU Core (2014-2015), on which Associate Dean Gallagher also served. Gallagher was also a member of the NUpath Implementation Team (2015-2016). NUpath is an important innovation in general education, eschewing both traditional distribution models and traditional core models. The program allows students to meet learning goals whenever and in whatever form best supports their learning trajectory during their undergraduate career. The liberal arts are well represented in NUpath requirements, which include interpreting culture, understanding societies and institutions, engaging differences and diversity, employing ethical reasoning, and writing across audiences and genres—all key liberal arts capacities. Among the undergraduate colleges, CSSH has by far the most approved courses for NUpath, and we continue to provide key learning experiences for students in other colleges—e.g., for Health Sciences students who take Social and Moral Problems in Health Care, for Computer Science students who take Technology and Human Values, and for Business students who take Microeconomics and Macroeconomics. In addition, all Northeastern students take at least one and typically two writing courses in our English Department to fulfill their NUpath writing requirements. At the same time, no program or college “owns” NUpath learning goals, so there are opportunities for liberal arts disciplines to participate throughout the curriculum. Students may learn how to analyze and use data in a Technologies of Texts course in the English Department or how to conduct formal and quantitative reasoning in an Introduction to Logic course in the Philosophy and Religion Department. In short, NUpath provides all of our units opportunities to participate in the education of Northeastern students, and it ensures that all Northeastern students have access to the liberal arts while providing significant flexibility and personalization.

Our Experiential Liberal Arts model has allowed us to refresh our college messaging and marketing and to sharpen our college “brand” for internal and external audiences. A key example is our college-wide effort to portray CSSH Student Pathways, in which all instructional programs, undergraduate and graduate, have participated. Our new multi-media CSSH Student Pathways website and the associated effort serve multiple purposes. One purpose is to help current CSSH majors reflect on and articulate their educational path in a way that alerts them to a wide range of post-graduation opportunities. The second purpose is to portray to prospective students and their families the variety of opportunities, intellectual challenges, flexibility and support systems that CSSH and Northeastern offer in the humanities and social sciences to prospective students. Over the next year, we plan to double the number of students portrayed, update the profiles of all students and alumni included, and expand the pathways to majors from other Northeastern colleges who take our minors.

In Spring 2017, our vision of the ELA allowed us to attract sizably larger cohorts of incoming undergraduate and master’s students. We find that our educational model prepares our majors very well for a diverse set of careers and graduate study.
With a solid foundation for the Experiential Liberal Arts established, we have articulated seven ambitious goals for the next few years to fully realize its promise:

1. Continue to foster research, including multi-generational research teams, in our strategic foci in the humanities and social sciences in collaboration with college and university research institutes.
2. In alignment with the university’s academic plan Northeastern 2025, continue to foster new and inclusive pedagogical models, methods instruction, and global opportunities for majors, combined majors, and non-majors in the humanities and social sciences.
3. Building on our strengths in Digital Humanities and Network Science, continue to lead in the integration of digital proficiencies with the liberal arts.
4. Enhance our instructional programs in Boston and Northeastern’s network of urban campuses in Seattle, Charlotte, Silicon Valley, and Toronto through integrating co-op and experiential offerings and building educational and research partnerships with key organizations.
5. Enhance the quality, visibility, and diversity of doctoral students through the experiential PhD option, which embeds PhD students for research experiences with external partners.
6. Shape national and international conversations about the value of the liberal arts in the 21st century, through research and public advocacy.
7. Continue to create a diverse and inclusive college through the hiring of diverse and accomplished faculty in strategic areas and expanding the professional development of current faculty.
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