

The College of Social Sciences

COLLEGE FOCUS Part Three Mission Statement

The mission of the College of Social Sciences is to foster a vibrant academic climate and to support outstanding scholarship.

The purpose of a mission statement is to capture the core academic elements that unite and give life and direction to a college. These elements guide college planning and decision processes as well as the implementation and evaluation of action plans and activities.

ANALYSIS

The mission statement declares the college's commitment to two interrelated goals, "a vibrant academic climate" and "outstanding scholarship." Together, these two themes define the mission of the college. In practice, the themes are functionally intertwined. A vibrant academic climate sets the stage for outstanding scholarship which, in turn, is integral to a vibrant academic climate. The analysis below amplifies and expands on these two concepts.

A Vibrant Academic Climate

A vibrant academic climate speaks to an ideal, special type of human interaction that is fostered under certain conditions. The main feature of this special interaction is students and faculty engaged in intense, intellectual dialogue. This dialogue occurs in various forms and forums. Civility, altruism, curiosity, logic, and knowledge are among its most consistent characteristics. The goal of the dialogue is no more nor less than a desire for greater understanding and a closer approximation to truth. The rewards for nurturing this interaction and for participating in it are not tangible. They stem from the joy and excitement of exploring, sharing, and creating new ideas in close association with one's colleagues. An exemplary college recognizes its vibrant academic climate as a truly remarkable and unique enterprise--a core dynamic to be sustained and cherished.

In a vibrant academic climate faculty are continuously improving both the content and delivery of their courses. They are fully engaged in research, looking for new paths that will lead to better understanding. In a vibrant climate, the translation of knowledge into application is important because it enhances the human condition, the greater good.

Outstanding Scholarship

Scholarship is the heart of the academic life of the faculty; it is the most important part of the academic experience of students. There are many paths that faculty can take to scholarship and many ways in which scholarship can be nurtured in students. The college encourages different forms of scholarship so that the unique talent and energy of each faculty and student are allowed to flourish. The college encourages the integration of scholarship across different disciplines and the integration of the scholarship of teaching, discovery, and application.

Scholarship of Teaching. Teaching is one of the most important ways to engage students in understanding the present body of knowledge, to enhance their spirit of inquiry, and to

encourage their continual pursuit of truth. A scholar is an individual who keeps an open mind, embraces the joy of discovery and continuously seeks the synthesis of new information. To encourage this sense of lifelong learning, the teacher must create a supportive classroom environment, one in which the teacher is a facilitator of learning and the student is an active participant in the learning experience. The climate of the classroom is marked by spontaneous, intellectual excitement along with a climate of mutual respect. It is in this setting that constant searching, questioning, and exploring are nurtured.

The liberal arts philosophy of education, to which the college subscribes, requires that students are exposed to a broad and profound base of knowledge which students obtain through their undergraduate and graduate academic experience.

Furthermore, it is important that students develop certain intellectual capabilities. One such capability is critical thinking which teaches students how to think for themselves and not to depend on arguments from authority alone. It helps students to discern between fact and fallacy and to realize that asking the critical question, at times, may be more important than giving the right answer. Critical thinking encourages wise and humane decisions when ideas and viewpoints contradict one another. It also facilitates the discovery of knowledge and the process of inquiry.

An important part of critical thinking is critical reading and the ability to share knowledge with others through written and oral communication and, most recently, through multimedia communication. Critical reading helps to point out the logic and illogic of statements while the ability to communicate effectively and eloquently lends greater significance and meaning to thoughts and viewpoints.

Integration is another important skill. It teaches students to understand the interconnection among disciplines and among seemingly disparate ideas. Integration is a way for students to learn how to put old and present information together into new, relevant, and meaningful ways. Creativity and integration, in these cases, are interrelated processes.

Students must be able to assess values. Values are defined as the principles, beliefs, or preferences that guide our lives. Without an appreciation for values, knowledge is hollow and disconnected, and thinking is pursued apart from any context or sense of responsibility. The examination of values helps students to understand themselves better, understand others, and understand those qualities that bind us as humans.

The college is committed to support the teaching efforts of faculty, their quest not only to improve the content and pedagogy of their courses but also to develop new courses and new approaches to teaching.

Scholarship of Research. Research is an essential element of scholarship and, thus, a central responsibility of the college. It leads to the creation of new knowledge by uncovering new facts and by the integration of isolated pieces of information into new perspectives. The outcome of research adds to the reservoir of knowledge and the process of discovery enhances the intellectual climate of campus by modeling the life of a scholar, one who continuously enjoys the process of inquiry and the synthesis of information. It is key that faculty work with students, whenever possible, on research projects.

We recognize that research in the College of Social Sciences is diverse, ranging across subject matter and methods. Faculty in the college are involved in work that contributes to our knowledge of people, societies, culture, and institutions. The methods of discovery vary across a number of dimensions: quantitative/qualitative, monodisciplinary/multidisciplinary, basic/applied, and nomothetic/idiographic, to name a few. It is this diversity in subject matter and methods that

gives the College of Social Sciences its richness and adds so much to the understanding of the human/social world.

Within this diversity there is a commitment to the search for truth. This means that while we must be completely open to new ideas, no matter how strange, we must be equally relentless in our scrutiny of all ideas, even long-held beliefs. The search for truth is an ongoing process with each step being provisional. But, by taking steps that are reliable and valid, we get closer and closer to the truth.

The college is committed to developing and maintaining an infrastructure that will support the discovery efforts of our faculty and students. This infrastructure must provide a climate for both individual and multidisciplinary work as well as provide administrative, technical, and fiscal support services that are necessary for the development and conduct of research.

Scholarship of Application. The relationship between the social sciences and the larger community is an important one. Much of what we know in the social sciences can be responsibly applied to consequential issues in our society. In many respects, the university is the only place in which there can be an open and frank forum on pressing social and community issues. To be considered scholarship, applied work must be directly related to the scholar's field of study, using her/his professional expertise to address practical issues.

While application can be considered as a separate element of scholarship, it is commonly related to teaching and research. Application in teaching is a way of demonstrating the relation between course material and world issues. This approach makes the material more meaningful for students and offers them an opportunity to stretch their minds beyond the boundaries of the classroom. Such experiences will help students understand that their education should be shared with others for the greater good. Faculty also can extend their reach beyond the classroom by disseminating important social science information and addressing community issues in various forums, e.g., newspapers, television, workshops, and legislative hearings.

Applied research can be an extension of basic social science work. By applying basic social science theory, method, and knowledge to community problems, we are able to bring better understanding to social issues. In turn, new theories, methods, and knowledge can arise out of the act of application. Like in all research, but especially in applied research, there is always a concern about objectivity and neutrality. The search for better understanding of and answers to social issues, therefore, must be free from personal ideology, self-interest, politics, and resources. While we may not be neutral in our perspective, we must remain rigorous, objective, and open in our approach. Conclusions and recommendations about applied issues must be based on critical analysis. It is the only way that we will get better understanding of and more useful solutions to social problems which, in turn, will lead to positive social change.

In recent times, much has been said about academic entrepreneurship, i.e., using our professional expertise for personal and/or institutional monetary gain. While such gain can be a proper reward for the services of a professional expert, there should always be an awareness that basic academic values (e.g., the search for truth) should not be compromised for the sake of generating income.

The college is committed to supporting our faculty in applying their scholarship. Support may come in different ways such as finding specific opportunities in the community for the faculty member or offering workshops to develop the faculty member's skills in applying her/his scholarship.