



# Revitalizing the Role of the Humanities in General Education

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**CORNERSTONE**

Learning for Living



NATIONAL  
ENDOWMENT  
FOR THE  
HUMANITIES

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## The Purpose of this Toolkit

At many institutions of higher education, the humanities have been languishing, with declining numbers of students choosing humanities majors and declining enrollments by non-majors in history, philosophy, literature and language courses. The impact on a society that devalues a liberal education is a frightening one. It raises a specter of generations of adults who have lost their sense of the past, their civic responsibilities, and any shared vision for the future.

How might this trend be reversed? How can the humanities become once again the center of higher education, revered and valued, the very roots from which all other intellectual explorations arise?

*The future health of the humanities lies in general education.*

The future health of the humanities lies in general education. These courses should be the foundation of any education, regardless of students' major or professional aspirations. General education is where students have the opportunity to cultivate the skills and dispositions associated with humanistic inquiry—strong communication and analytical skills along with the intellectual agility to navigate a variety of perspectives—that are essential for democratic participation and effective citizenship.

In September 2020, the Teagle Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities launched the *Cornerstone: Learning for Living* initiative to revitalize the role of the humanities in general education. The initiative is inspired by a successful model developed by Purdue University to make the humanities an integral aspect of a coherent general education program. Over a four-year timespan, Purdue's College of Liberal Arts reversed its decline in credit hours and raised morale and teaching opportunities for participating faculty, and heightened the status and visibility of its College through its Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts certificate program. The gateway sequence for the certificate engages college students with significant texts under the mentorship of Liberal Arts faculty, strengthening their creative thinking and communication skills, challenging them to grapple with big questions, and seeing their degree program, whether computer science or aviation technology, through a wider lens. This gateway sequence creates a common intellectual experience—where first-year students read a set of texts in common with their peers, building community not only among students taking the course but also among the faculty who are teaching them. Purdue also identified thematically related clusters (e.g., "Technology and Society") of new or existing general education courses that help students confront technical issues from humanistic perspectives while meeting existing distribution requirements. Students who complete the gateway sequence and three upper-level courses earn a certificate that goes on their transcript with no detour away from timely degree completion.

This toolkit shares lessons learned from Purdue’s experience to serve as a guide for adapting the program model at institutions committed to reinvigorating the role of the humanities in general education. As more institutions join the *Cornerstone: Learning for Living* initiative and adapt the model to their settings, this toolkit is periodically updated to capture lessons from a broader array of participants. As of September 2021, [over 30 institutions](#) are participating in the initiative in the planning or implementation phases. This toolkit has helped these institutions work through the nascent stages of their projects, which aim to expose students to the power of the humanities; strengthen the coherence of general education; and increase teaching opportunities for humanities faculty committed to helping students achieve a sense of belonging and community.

The toolkit offers practical strategies for faculty leaders to engage their colleagues, secure administrative and faculty buy-in, attract students, and plan for the longer-term sustainability of their program. It draws from an in-depth case study of Purdue’s experience, as well as from other funded projects that have used different approaches and curricular formats in alignment with their institutional strengths and priorities. All involve a common intellectual experience anchored in transformative texts for entering students and coherent pathways through general education that help students connect the humanities to their professional aspirations.

We hope this toolkit sparks constructive conversation on your campus about adapting the Cornerstone program model and making the difficult work of curricular reform more manageable. Faculty leaders interested in adapting the Cornerstone approach to general education at their campuses should reflect on the guiding questions that follow.

1. How will you engage faculty colleagues to ensure the program has longevity and can be delivered at sufficient scale?
2. How will you build faculty consensus around transformative texts as part of fostering a common intellectual experience for students at the outset of their undergraduate experience? How can such texts reflect variety in terms of authorship, era, geography, and genre?
3. How will you prepare faculty with various areas of specialization to teach in a general education program with students from a range of backgrounds, lived experience, and professional aspirations for their post-college careers?
4. How will your program be structured to reach a significant proportion of your undergraduate student body? Will it involve components that are required for all students or meet general education distribution requirements? Will it be set up with an incentive of some kind (e.g., certificate) to attract students?

5. How will you engage administrators to ensure the program is financially sustainable and supported across the institution?
6. Will your program necessitate approval of new curricular structures (e.g., approval for mandatory first-year seminars)? What considerations must be addressed as a matter of academic governance at your institution (or at the state level for public institutions) for your program to launch?
7. What other constituents should you be thinking about given your campus context to ensure the health of your program (e.g., professional academic advisors at large institutions)? What partnerships could you establish to raise the visibility of your program to students?

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## Purdue's Experience with the Cornerstone Approach

The Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts at Purdue University (henceforth, Purdue Cornerstone) is designed as a 15-credit hour certificate program. It begins with an enriched first-year experience anchored in transformative texts, followed by a pathway through which students can fulfill two-thirds of their general education requirements as they earn the Cornerstone certificate by completing Liberal Arts classes. The program is designed to fit into every degree program offered at Purdue.

*Transformative texts are works of literature and philosophy that have transformed the world and continue to transform individual lives. They are wide-ranging in terms of authorship, era, and geographic origin.*

Students who embark on the Purdue Cornerstone certificate take a two-semester sequence in their first year in which they read powerful and influential works of literature and philosophy that have transformed the world and continue to have the power to transform individual lives. These works are wide-ranging in terms of authorship, era, and geographic origin: from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Homer, and Plato to Shakespeare, Thomas Jefferson, Edmund Burke, Frederick Douglass, Langston Hughes, Hannah Arendt, Eileen Chang, James Baldwin, and Chinua Achebe, among others. At least half the reading assignments in all sections of this sequence are drawn from a faculty-created list of major texts and authors—with a resulting degree of commonality that helps create a sense of belonging and intellectual community for students. These two courses fulfill three of Purdue's core requirements: oral communication, written communication, and information literacy.

Through subsequent enrollment in three upper-level courses to complete the certificate, students draw connections between the humanities and social sciences and their professionally oriented academic majors through thematically organized clusters. These courses—under such topics as “Healthcare and Medicine” and “Science and Technology”—complement the STEM, management, and health sciences majors. The topics are designed to appeal to STEM and pre-professional students, who now dominate undergraduate enrollment at many institutions. They are intended to help them appreciate that seemingly technical problems cannot always be addressed exclusively through technical solutions. The courses also provide a purposeful and coherent path for completing their general education requirements.

For example, engineering students can take coursework on the scientific impact of the Italian Renaissance, the philosophy of science, and constitutional law undergirding the regulatory framework for technology in American society. Nursing and pharmacy students can take courses on biomedical ethics, global perspectives on health, and the history of medicine and public health. Majors in business

administration are offered courses on communicating in the global workplace, the history of capitalism, or the sociology of developing nations. See the Purdue Cornerstone Plan of Study (Appendix A) for a complete list of all the courses in each theme.

*There are various curricular formats that institutions could use to adapt the Cornerstone approach that engage students with transformative texts in the first year and have the potential to reach a significant share of the undergraduate student body.*

This program offers undergraduates, particularly STEM majors, the opportunity to hone core communication and analytical skills while gaining a broad-based understanding of the world. It also gives them a purposeful path for fulfilling general education requirements. In this respect, the Purdue Cornerstone curriculum functions as a “core within the core.” The Purdue Cornerstone certificate is noted on students’ transcripts to incentivize them to pursue this path for fulfilling general education requirements.

The Cornerstone approach to reinvigorating the role of the Liberal Arts in general education can be delivered in a variety of formats. The two principal components are:

1. Gateway courses in which first-year students engage transformative texts
2. A purposeful pathway through which students can complete most or all of their general education requirements and link the humanities to their professional aspirations.

There are a variety of ways colleges and universities could structure such a program, including mandatory first-year seminars for incoming students coupled with intensive advising to develop tailored pathways through general education; integrating transformative texts into existing courses that meet distribution requirements; or most ambitiously, using transformative texts and questions as a unifying mechanism to develop a coherent general education program for all students. All of these curricular formats involve engaging students with transformative texts in the first year and have the potential to reach a significant share of the undergraduate student body.

It is equally important to carve out a method by which students can continue to take courses in the humanities beyond first year. Thematic pathways which complement a range of degree programs at your university or college is one method, whereby students can fulfil their general education requirements, hone their communication skills and broaden their perspectives.

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## CREATING A GATEWAY EXPERIENCE THROUGH TRANSFORMATIVE TEXTS

Gateway courses anchored in transformative texts are key to a successful program that will truly encourage students to appreciate the humanities and social sciences and enroll in additional coursework in the Liberal Arts.

These gateway courses should also be designed to be attractive teaching opportunities for faculty in the humanities and social sciences. At Purdue, Liberal Arts faculty—from the sociologist to the musicologist—teach the texts that they wish to teach, often the very books that inspired them to pursue a life of learning. The readings they choose—whether fiction, poetry, great speeches, novels, philosophical and scientific texts—provide the foundation on which faculty teach basic communication and research skills.

Purdue's new gateway sequence consist of two 100 level courses:

- **SCLA 101 Transformative Texts, Critical Thinking and Communication I: Antiquity to Modernity** (*emphasizes Written Communication and Information Literacy*)
- **SCLA 102 Transformative Texts, Critical Thinking and Communication II: Modern World** (*emphasizes Oral Communication*)

While both courses stress critical reading skills and oral and written communication, the first half of the sequence places a special emphasis on writing instruction and information literacy, and the second half focuses more on public speaking. Nonetheless, the full year sequence keeps students reading, writing, researching, discussing and presenting throughout the course.

These classes also emphasize mentorship, giving first-year students across the campus a meaningful experience with a full-time faculty member, someone who could guide them, foster their talents and interests, and continue to be a resource throughout their college career. Cornerstone faculty are also trained to handle students in crisis. The goal is to introduce students to an adult on campus to whom they can turn for any reason.

Purdue's Transformative Texts sequence places Liberal Arts faculty in classrooms filled with mostly STEM students—students who they might otherwise never teach. These courses act as an onramp to the Liberal Arts in which faculty can attract these students to take their next course or even minor or major in their discipline. Since launching the program in Fall 2017, over 10,000 students have taken Transformative Texts and as of Fall 2021, 710 students have signed up to complete the certificate.

Making these courses both intellectually and pedagogically appealing for faculty is not difficult. At Purdue, faculty teaching Transformative Texts often select their readings around a concept, such as Citizenship, Friendship, Solitude,



Utopia/Dystopia, the Supernatural, or Gods and Heroes. Faculty point students to the beauty, poignancy, and the wisdom of words and ideas. They challenge them. They make them think about themselves and others. And they do so while reinforcing students' ability to express themselves, listen to others, and inspire others to listen to them. Transformative Texts seeks to enrich the minds and the lives of Purdue students and instill a love of learning and all its related virtues: empathy, perspective, knowledge, and joy.

Transformative Texts provides first-year students across the campus with a shared intellectual experience. Additionally, it cultivates community among faculty across disciplines, allowing them the opportunity to collaborate outside their departments and to discuss how to strengthen undergraduate teaching.

Purdue faculty take their students to theatrical performances, galleries and museums, hold film fests and fiction writing contests, making art, opera, film and theater part of their experience in Transformative Texts. The creativity of the faculty and the students in Transformative Texts has been extraordinary. Students hold political debates and make Shark-tank product pitches. Students design video games based on Dante's *Inferno*; graphic illustrations of Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry; modernized versions of *Antigone*; photographic essays on Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale;" short stories in the style of the Tang dynasty tales; and poetry imitating Edgar Allen Poe. The faculty, unbridled by their discipline, have found new ways to get students reading, speaking, listening, writing and even performing.

Faculty as well as students might be reading the Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji*, de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, or Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* for the first time. But this is never a drawback—rather an opportunity for collaborative learning. And it offers the excitement that always accompanies discovering something new and majestic.

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## Lessons Learned

The sections that follow distill key takeaways for campuses interested in developing programs as part of the Cornerstone initiative. The goal of this program is to provide students with a gateway experience anchored in transformative texts and help students link the humanities to their professional aspirations. Successful implementation and longer-term sustainability will depend on fostering faculty leadership and buy-in; engendering support from senior administrators; creating a common intellectual experience that encourages student identification with the program; and raising the visibility of your program to a range of campus constituents.

*Your program should be faculty developed and driven.*

### **CREATING FACULTY BUY-IN**

Your program should be faculty developed and driven. Why should your colleagues be interested in joining such a program?

1. **Outreach.** Teaching gateway courses like Transformative Texts allows your faculty the opportunity to reach first-year students from across your campus, particularly those in the STEM disciplines. Your faculty can inspire these students to enroll in their departmental courses or even minor or major in their discipline.
2. **Mission.** Faculty want to be part of the solution, revitalizing the humanities, increasing their visibility, and helping your institution provide all students an enriched first-year experience.
3. **Collegiality.** It brings them out of their departments to discuss teaching and mentoring in an interdisciplinary environment.

The success of your program depends on faculty participation. Incentives such as stipends for preparing to teach your gateway courses help but there are other equally important, if less tangible, benefits. At Purdue, what Liberal Arts faculty enjoy most about the program is the camaraderie and fellowship it fosters, allowing the sociologist and the political scientist, the classicist and the philosopher, an opportunity to meet and talk about books, teaching, and students.

Creating such a program also provides your faculty the opportunity to solve the most pressing problem plaguing the humanities (as well as the social sciences and interdisciplinary programs): declining enrollments. Your faculty have invested their lives in perpetuating liberal learning. They want to be part of the solution but are rarely given the opportunity to do so. This program gives them the ability to bring

students into their discipline, raise the status and visibility of your college, and work across disciplinary boundaries.

These gateway courses recruit students, which is particularly vital for instructors having trouble attracting students to their courses simply because students do not understand what they are teaching or why it is important. Students who encounter an inspiring teacher at the outset of their college career will continue taking classes with that instructor.

These gateway courses give your faculty the freedom to be dynamic and creative teachers, designing enriching experiences for young adults and putting together various media that bring alive the great ideas of the past and the grand challenges of the present.

Finally, this is also a chance to build bridges, to reach out and collaborate with colleagues across campus, particularly in the STEM disciplines. In short, it brings the campus together with one mission in mind: advancing the education of undergraduates.

*Administrators  
want solutions.*

#### **LEVERAGING ADMINISTRATIVE BUY-IN**

To build a successful program, one that becomes engrained in your college culture, support from your administration is vital. At Purdue, David A. Reingold, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, initiated the development of an integrated liberal arts program to change the way the College delivered general education requirements and to establish an outreach program to STEM students that would bring them into Liberal Arts classrooms. Before Purdue Cornerstone was created, President Mitchell Daniels spoke publicly encouraging more Purdue students to enroll in history, literature, and philosophy courses.

Clearly, administrators want solutions. Your program is a solution. It has the potential to reverse declining enrollments in the humanities, re-energize your faculty, break down the disciplinary differences, bring disparate parts of your campus together in a shared mission, and above all, enrich your students' lives, refine their skills, and inspire their minds. Far-sighted administrators who also want the best for their institution and students will understand these lofty but by no means unrealistic goals.

Reaching out to administrators in other parts of your campus is equally important. Purdue Cornerstone was developed in dialogue with deans, faculty and advisors in the colleges of Engineering, Science, Management, and Technology (Purdue Polytechnic Institute), in addition to the College of Liberal Arts. For example, it was a faculty member in Engineering who suggested Purdue Cornerstone build a "community of learning" and hold annual dinners for administrators and faculty across the campus to learn about Cornerstone; it was an administrator in Civil

Engineering who suggested the subtitle of the Transformative Texts courses: “Critical Thinking and Communication.” From the outset, they were brought into the conceptualization of the program and have remained involved. They are invested in the success of the program.

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### HOW THE PROGRAM WAS ROLLED OUT AT PURDUE

In the case of Purdue, following upon the work of a committee of department heads appointed by Dean David A. Reingold, the inaugural director, Melinda Zook, Professor of History, was charged with creating an integrated Liberal Arts program in 2016. That spring and summer, she reached out to administrators and faculty in Engineering, Nursing, Pharmacy, Technology, Science, Management, Health Sciences, and Veterinary Medicine. Sometimes she was given the names of likely STEM allies and sometimes she simply emailed them cold. With few exceptions, most met with her. Her goal was to listen, asking them, what gaps they saw in their students’ foundational knowledge and skills? How could the Liberal Arts better educate their students and help prepare them for their future careers? Across the board, they pointed to the students’ weak communication skills and their lack of knowledge about the wider world.

Professor Zook also showed them early plans for the new program. She had designed the pyramid shape of the program with the three Levels, placing 200, 300 and 400 level Liberal Arts courses in the Themes suggested by Dean Reingold. What impressed her STEM colleagues was the purposeful pathway it gave their students to fulfill their general education requirements.

In the summer, she enlisted the help of seven other Liberal Arts colleagues (Christopher Lukasik, Associate Professor of English; Kim Gallon, Assistant Professor of History; Yvonne Pitts, Associate of History; Jeffrey Turco, Associate Professor of German; Patrick Kain; Associate Professor of Philosophy, Molly Scudder, Assistant Professor of Political Science, and Antonia Syson, Associate Professor of Classics). Dean Reingold offered each a stipend for one year (AY 2016-17) to help design the new gateway sequence.

The Director and this small working group of faculty developed the Transformative Texts sequence that was guided through the curricular process in AY 2016-17. They created the learning outcomes and objectives for the courses in alignment with Purdue’s University Core Curriculum. They agreed on the title and course description; and the initial List of Authors and Texts from which faculty would choose at least 50% of their readings. They also created sample syllabi and spent considerable time discussing the best practices for the teaching of oral and written communication. They were aided by instructors from Purdue’s Center for

Instructional Excellence as well as faculty in the Brian Lamb School of Communication and the Purdue Writing Lab.

The List of Authors and Titles is a living document and revised annually. Naturally, creating such a List has the potential for controversy. Where the working group of faculty lacked expertise, they consulted their colleagues, particularly in Native American, African and Asian literature and philosophy. The List is a collaborative and inclusive project.

Currently, the Cornerstone Steering Committee evaluates new authors nominated by faculty members once a year. The criteria they use to judge is simple: is this an author whose work is truly transformative (“original, unexpected, and innovative,” in the words of Italo Calvino)? Is it inspiring and accessible to incoming first-year students?

The Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education helped guide both the certificate and the Transformative Texts sequence through the curricular process at the College and University level. As a state university, it was also vetted by the Indiana Commission for Higher Education. The program was approved in April 2017.

In addition to securing approval for the certificate, the Transformative Texts courses were submitted for consideration as alternatives to fulfill University Core Curriculum competencies in oral and written communication and information literacy. This component of the approval process enabled broader enrollment and positioned the certificate as a genuine path to complete core requirements.

Even with all of these approvals complete, a next step to enable adoption of the Transformative Texts courses was to work in partnership the colleagues across campus to update their plans of study to include them as options. The Dean worked extensively with other campus academic deans to advance the program. Both the Director and the Senior Associate Dean collaborated with campus colleagues to spur these changes and then to communicate those changes among University staff and campus academic advisors.

### **RAISING THE PROGRAM'S VISIBILITY ON CAMPUS**

At Purdue, communicating the importance of Cornerstone began at the outset. In 2017, the Marketing and Communications team in the Liberal Arts Dean's Office developed the Cornerstone brand and laid the foundation to promote the program on campus and beyond. This included the development of all Purdue Cornerstone-related flyers, banners, advertising, giveaways, etc. to raise awareness of the program. Subsequent events and collateral materials were designed by the Marketing and Communications team in support of the program. The College of Liberal Arts began to sponsor a series of events aimed at faculty, academic advisors, students and

parents. Behind the scenes, the Dean of the College, the Director, and administrators from the College of Liberal Arts continued to meet with Deans, faculty, administrators, and advisors across the campus, particularly with those colleges yet to embrace the Transformative Text course options.

To assist with managing the logistics of Cornerstone, a full-time academic program manager was hired in 2018. The College's schedule deputy works with that staff member to build the academic schedule for the growing number of sections offered.

In August 2018 Purdue Cornerstone held the first annual Community of Learning Dinner for representatives of the higher administration as well as Deans of colleges and administrative units such as Admissions, Residential Life, Convocations, Galleries and Libraries, and local large employers (particularly, GE and Subaru). These dinners were about apprising everyone on new program developments and having Cornerstone faculty mingle with individuals from across the campus, extolling the virtues of Transformative Texts and the Liberal Arts more generally.

Reaching out to other units on campus and working with them on either short-term projects or to build long-term partnerships has been vital to Purdue Cornerstone's success. Among the most enriching relationships for Cornerstone faculty and students have been with Purdue Convocations for the Performing Arts. In 2018, Convocations brought a theatrical production of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to campus. They provided all Transformative Texts students reading *Frankenstein* free copies of the book as well as discounted tickets to the show. In return, Cornerstone faculty brought their students to see the show and gave a pre-performance lecture. This has been a winning partnership for both Cornerstone and Convocations. In 2019, 900 Transformative Texts students went to a theatrical performance of Homer's *Odyssey* and another 300 to one based on Orwell's *1984*.

Other units on campus have worked with Cornerstone on special projects. The Center for Brain-Inspired Computing funded a short-story contest on *Frankenstein* and AI in 2018. C-SPAN Archives works with faculty who want videos of historic speeches for their Transformative Texts sections. Both the Writing Lab and the Presentation Center have helped Cornerstone develop its instructional materials. Film and Video Studies has held evening film fests for Cornerstone students.

Such partnerships are important for any program. Big campuses are often like small cities, with so many different departments, centers, and programs that it is difficult for any student (or faculty member) to take advantage of all the opportunities available. Working with different areas of the campus has significantly benefitted Cornerstone faculty and students. These campus units learned about Cornerstone and Cornerstone faculty learned about them. They attained access to large numbers of undergraduates, and in return, can provide them with unique opportunities (e.g., private gallery showings, free books, funding for contests, etc.). These are winning



**Taylor Sinicropi**  
Major in Computer Information Technology, Purdue Polytechnic Institute. Winner of the Frankenstein/AI fiction writing contest for her short story, "The Miracle."  
Photo Courtesy of Purdue University.

relationships that will help build and ensure the health of your program.

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#### **FOR ADMINISTRATORS AND FACULTY:**

- In November 2017, a conference on “Reviving the Liberal Arts” for faculty and graduate students from Purdue and regional campuses, featuring keynote speakers, workshops taught by Cornerstone faculty, and information on the Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts program for everyone in attendance.
- In December 2018, the College of Liberal Arts sponsored a luncheon for every academic advisor across campus. President Daniels addressed the participants and an artist entertained everyone on what advice Shakespeare would give students. The advisors were also given fliers and thumb-drives with information about the program. Similar lunches have been held for the past three years to advance awareness of the Purdue Cornerstone courses.

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#### **FOR STUDENTS AND PARENTS:**

- Fall pizza parties for students about spring registration
- Digital ads, created by the Marketing and Communications team and run as a campus geofence during the summer new beginner registration program
- An event-specific Snapchat filter was created by the Marketing and Communications team for promotion on campus.
- Flyers provided to Colleges across the campus, Residential Life, and all academic advisors for distribution during summer registration
- Display cases in various halls featuring Cornerstone
- Through the Marketing and Communications team, articles on Cornerstone were published in the student newspaper, the THiNK Magazine (a publication of the College of Liberal Arts), and through the Purdue Alumnus magazine
- Social media promotion (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram)
- Cornerstone promotional materials for students: stress balls, pens, tech tattoos and t-shirts
- Cornerstone information table at campus fairs
- Cornerstone promotional materials and flyers for recruitment at Indiana High Schools
- Cornerstone video featuring interviews with current students; currently found on our webpage but also on YouTube
- A series of events held around the theatrical production of Frankenstein, including a special pre-performance lecture, a fiction writing contest, and a film fest.

- A brunch with all academic advisors across campus wherein students talked about the program
- Free Cornerstone t-shirts for every student in Transformative Texts
- Cornerstone faculty also began working with “Destination Purdue,” University-level Admissions office weekend visit program for underrepresented minority students who have been admitted to Purdue.

### PREPARING FACULTY AND SCALING UP

In the pilot phase, Cornerstone offered six sections of SCLA 101 (Transformative Texts I) in fall 2017 and four sections of SCLA 102 (Transformative Texts II) in spring 2018. By fall 2018, all 33 sections of Transformative Texts filled with 997 students, seeking to fulfill their oral and written communication requirements. In Fall 2021, Purdue is offering 136 sections of Transformative Texts and enrolling over 4,000 incoming students.



The second Academic Advisors' Lunch in 2019. Three students who had taken Transformative Texts talked to the advisors about how the courses helped them grow. Photo courtesy of Purdue University.

In the pilot phase, Purdue Cornerstone was not yet on any plans of study throughout the university and had to assure academic advisors that the courses were accepted on the University Core Curriculum and their students would receive credit for Written Communication or Oral Communication.

In AY 2017-18, the Director recruited and prepared more Liberal Arts faculty to teach Transformative Texts and this process has continued ever since. As the program grew in visibility, faculty themselves asked to join. So as not to burden the faculty, they were allowed to pick when and how many sections they would to teach per semester working in conjunction with their academic unit.

In 2018, Purdue Cornerstone hired three Visiting Assistant Professors from a nearby Liberal Arts college that had closed. That institution had a core similar to Transformative Texts. Those three instructors each began teaching four sections of



Transformative Texts per semester. In 2020, their visiting faculty lines were converted to teaching professor positions.

In 2019, Dean Reingold mandated that virtually all new tenure track faculty hires in the College of Liberal Arts would fulfill 50% of their teaching obligations in Purdue Cornerstone. The opportunity to teach in Cornerstone became part of Purdue's attraction in faculty recruitment.

Faculty joining Cornerstone are given a stipend for one semester. During that fellowship semester, they attend meetings and workshops to help prepare them to teach Transformative Texts.

Three meetings are designed for the new cohort of faculty joining the program:

**Meeting 1: Introduction.** Led by the Director, this meeting focuses on the program as a whole (origins, goals, and current developments); then more generally about what to expect when teaching incoming STEM students, the resources available to faculty, how to choose readings. Much of the time is spent discussing best teaching practices.

**Meeting 2: SCLA 101.** Led by a Purdue Cornerstone faculty member who teaches SCLA 101, this meeting focuses on the first half of Transformative Texts. Their syllabus is distributed, and they discuss how they designed it, the readings they chose, and the assignments they use to meet the learning outcomes.

**Meeting 3: SCLA 102.** This meeting serves the same purpose as the second meeting, only it is led by a Purdue Cornerstone faculty member who teaches SCLA 102, the second half of Transformative Texts.

In addition, three workshops for all Purdue Cornerstone faculty who wish to participate are held every semester. The **“How I Teach This Text”** workshops are led by a Purdue Cornerstone faculty member who wishes to discuss their experiences teaching a particular text, such as Thoreau's *Walden* or the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*. All Cornerstone faculty are invited, 15 to 20 usually attend.

All these workshops and meetings emphasize community and fellowship, seeking to break down the barriers between the disciplines around a common goal: good teaching practices. Breakfast or lunch is served.

*The “How I Teach This Text” workshops are led by faculty members who wish to discuss their experiences teaching a particular text, such as Thoreau's Walden or the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave.*

With more faculty joining the program, Purdue was able to continue to offer more sections of Transformative Texts.

**ENROLLMENTS IN TRANSFORMATIVE TEXTS:  
SCLA 101 AND SCLA 102 (TO DATE)**

	Number of sections: SCLA 101	Number of sections: SCLA 102	Total Enrollment
Fall 2017	6	0	100
Spring 2018	0	4	64
Fall 2018	20	13	990
Spring 2019	13	20	990
Summer 2019	5	1	180
Fall 2019	39	23	1869
Spring 2020	29	30	1710
Summer 2020	6	5	303
Fall 2020	41	35	2280
Spring 2021	34	33	2010
Fall 2021	72	64	4080

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## Adapting to the COVID-19 World

In spring 2020, Purdue's 59 sections of Transformative Texts transitioned to online and Cornerstone faculty meetings became virtual. The lessons learned from that experience were profound and mostly positive as both students and faculty rose to the occasion. It is important to acknowledge that much of the goodwill that Purdue Cornerstone generated around campus was centered on face-to-face meetings, including meals or coffee, before the COVID-19 pandemic curtailed such gatherings. While the strategies described in the Purdue case study were developed pre-pandemic, we hope the toolkit offers ideas for adapting to our new normal for the medium-term, to at least lay the groundwork for the program during a planning phase.

In the case of Purdue, faculty sought to retain the vitality of the in-class experience in their online versions of their courses like faculty across the country. Purdue faculty teaching in the first-year Transformative Texts gateway sequence experimented with a wide array of online platforms and other tools: Zoom, Hotseat, Discord, OneDrive, and Camtasia among others. Faculty discovered that delivering content was not an issue. But maintaining lively discussion and connecting and mentoring students was a source of concern. Many faculty scheduled synchronous meetings with students and phone calls on Facetime.

Over time, faculty became increasingly inventive in their efforts to keep the dynamism of the Transformative Texts alive. One termed his thrice-weekly lessons "Wilbur Radio" after his cat, whose antics were already known to the students. Starting their day with "Wilbur Radio" (a mix of lecture, close reading and analysis, and cat pictures) was so agreeable to students that even parents became fans. Another professor seeking new ways of reaching the students in lieu of face-to-face interaction filmed her lecture in a nearby park on John Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" to emphasize the importance of nature to the Romantics. This was met by students creating and sharing their own videos and photos of their favorite corners of nature that reminded them of what Keats was trying to express. Another instructor, conceding to the simple fact that what was most on the minds of the students was the virus, had them each produce a shareable work on the medium of their choice with the broad theme of coronavirus. Students created short films, infographics, public service announcements, comics, trailers, and animated works.

Purdue Cornerstone also held an essay contest for all students enrolled in Transformative Texts. The "[My Quarantine Story](#)" contest asked them to write about their experiences since the shut down by relating them to a character or scene in one of their readings. Monetary prizes (Amazon gift cards) were provided for the first

and second place winners along with three honorable mentions. Seventy students submitted work. The range of literature they cited was vast: Cormac McCarthy, Michel de Montaigne, Mary Shelley, Franz Kafka, Edgar Allen Poe, Robert Frost, Margaret Atwood, and M. T. Anderson, among others. From their readings, they found the words and images that helped them think about what was happening to them and their world. Odysseus's long trek back to Ithaca in Homer's *Odyssey* became a touchstone for many, feeling as they did, stranded on Calypso's island. The results of the contest, shown in the clarity of the students' writing and their creativity, reinforced the success of the program. But it also pointed to a need to provide the students with more outlets for their thoughts, their artistry (especially through digital mediums) and inventiveness. To that end, Purdue Cornerstone launched an online student journal, *The Cornerstone Review*, in order to publish the best of the student work.

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## Looking Ahead

As of September 2021, over 30 institutions are participating in the *Cornerstone: Learning for Living* initiative in the planning or implementation phases.

The experience of Austin Community College (ACC) in adapting the Cornerstone program model is illustrative. ACC faculty created the “Great Questions Seminar,” a gateway course fulfilling the “student success course” requirement that is increasingly the norm at community colleges. Students in all sections of the seminar encounter a common set of readings, starting with the *Odyssey*, as aids to reflection on the personal journey on which they are embarking. The Great Questions Seminar grew from a pilot of 30 students in fall 2016 to over 625 students in AY2020-21. Faculty made the choice to establish a common syllabus across all sections of the gateway course to help orient new instructors to the course in an adjunct-heavy teaching environment. Through an annual faculty institute, regular workshops, and an online clearinghouse of teaching resources, instructors are certified, onboarded, and supported with teaching the seminar. Fall-to-spring retention for GQS participants, at 92 percent, is the same as other student success course options at Austin Community College and is 20 percentage points higher than for students who do not enroll in any student success course at all. Community college students often have mixed levels of academic preparation; it is important to note that the high rates of retention in the Great Questions Seminar are being achieved even for students who are otherwise deemed as needing remediation in reading or writing. ACC’s Great Questions Seminar demonstrates the power of the humanities in fostering the skills and practices that support effective learning, critical thinking, and clear reasoning as well as time management, study skills, and career exploration for first-year college students.

Inspired by the success of the Great Questions Seminar, ACC faculty have decided to roll out a designated track through distribution requirements called the “Great Questions Journey” in Fall 2021. All courses in the track, which span government, history, Mexican-American studies, theatre, and speech, focus on primary texts and make general education more coherence for students. In other words, ACC has adapted the two components of the Cornerstone program model to its campus context. Read more about the Austin Community College project in this [profile](#).

The table that follows demonstrates how the newest cohort of implementation grantees are meeting the “gateway” and “pathway” components of the Cornerstone program model, underlining its adaptability in a wide range of campus settings.

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**Gateway to create a common intellectual experience anchored in transformative texts for a significant share of the incoming class**

**Pathway to make general education more coherent and help students link the humanities to their professional aspirations**

**How planning grant support was used**

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[American University](#)

Project leaders are scaling “The Examined Life,” a subset of First-Year Seminar (FYS) sections with a single common syllabus focused on transformative texts (FYS is required of incoming first-year and transfer students; typically, each section is focused on a topic of the instructor's choosing). All sections in this subset of FYS sections have the same title and all sections read the same texts, chosen collaboratively by faculty teaching the course. Readings include Plato's Apology, Augustine's Confessions, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, and Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. By the end of the implementation grant period, the "Examined Life" subset of FYS sections course is expected to enroll one-third of the incoming class.

AU's 15-credit “Lincoln Scholars” certificate, where students are required to complete four 3-credit general education courses with an emphasis on core texts, and three 1-credit courses that help students see the connections between the humanities and careers in government and politics. The courses in the main sequence are “The Examined Life”; “Literature and the Ethical Life,” where students read Homer, Austen, Baldwin, and Ellison; “Individual Freedom vs. Authority,” where students read Plato's Republic, DuBois' Souls of Black Folk; Descartes' Discourse on Method; and “Roots of Political Economy,” where students read Locke, Rousseau, Wollstonecraft, Smith, Marx, Keynes, and Hayek. The first course in the sequence for the certificate meets the First-Year Seminar requirement and enables a significant share of the incoming student body to participate in a common intellectual experience. The next three courses in the sequence meet general education requirements (or are expected to meet general education requirements by the end of the grant period).

During the planning grant phase, project leaders obtained curricular approval for “The Examined Life,”; recruited and prepared instructors to teach from the common "Examined Life" syllabus; and laid the groundwork to add additional sections to the main course sequence for the "Lincoln Scholars" certificate.

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[Austin Community College \(ACC\)](#)

ACC is scaling the Great Questions Seminar (GQS), a gateway course fulfilling the “Student Success Course” requirement that is increasingly the norm at community colleges to orient students to the institution and its resources and learn the skills and dispositions to be successful in college. All sections of GQS share a uniform syllabus with four major readings that have been selected as aids to reflection on the personal journey on which students are embarking: Homer's Odyssey, Plato's Meno, Euclid's Elements, and selections of religious poetry from around the world. GQS now enrolls over 650 students annually.

The "Great Questions Journey" through general education distribution requirements, where students can take courses, spanning government, history, Mexican-American Studies, theater, and speech, with an emphasis on primary texts.

During the planning grant phase, project leaders obtained curricular approval for "The Great Questions Seminar"; ensured the course was accepted in virtually all departments' degree plans as meeting the college-wide Student Success Course requirement; and established the professional development model (a combination of an annual summer institute and ongoing workshops over the academic year) to recruit, certify, and prepare instructors to teach GQS.

<b>Gateway to create a common intellectual experience anchored in transformative texts for a significant share of the incoming class</b>	<b>Pathway to make general education more coherent and help students link the humanities to their professional aspirations</b>	<b>How planning grant support was used</b>	
<a href="#"><u>Stanford University</u></a>	<p>Stanford has established a yearlong requirement for “Civic, Liberal, and Global Education” to be completed by all incoming first-year students. The sequence of three seminars for the requirement is as follows: “Why College” in the fall quarter; “Citizenship in the 21st Century” in the winter quarter; and “Global Perspectives” in the spring quarter. Sections of the fall and winter seminars are designed around common lists of readings: the list for the fall seminar, ranging from Plato’s Allegory of the Cave to Ta-Nehisi Coates’s <i>Between the World and Me</i>, explores the purpose of a liberal education and the claim that only the examined life is worth living; the list for the winter seminar (e.g., Rousseau’s <i>Social Contract</i>) aims to encourage reflection on the challenges of a fully participatory 21st century democracy. The common reading lists for the fall and winter seminars are determined annually by faculty, with instructors expected to have at least 75 percent of their assigned readings to come from the list set for each seminar.</p>	<p>Stanford has a single set of general education distribution requirements for all students regardless of major. Faculty are devising curricular “roadmaps” to satisfy distribution requirements with coursework in the humanities that are grouped by students’ professional aspirations (e.g., “liberal education and the engineer,” “global perspectives on science and technology”). These general education pathways are designed to ensure that all students, regardless of major, have significant exposure to humanistic questions and incentivize students to pursue a humanities certificate or minor.</p>	Not applicable
<a href="#"><u>SUNY Onondaga Community College (OCC)</u></a>	<p>OCC is scaling Introduction to the Liberal Arts (LBL 195), a newly developed student success course required of incoming liberal arts students. The syllabi for all sections of LBL 195 draw from a common list of 80 core texts devised annually by faculty; representative readings include the <i>Odyssey</i> and <i>To the Lighthouse</i>. Instructors for each LBL 195 section are expected to draw at least half their reading assignments from this common list.</p>	<p>The “Enduring Questions” pathway through general education distribution requirements, where students can complete at least 12 credits of coursework that draw on core texts. The common reading list developed for LBL 195 serves as the inspiration for this stream of general education courses that emphasize engagement with core texts.</p>	<p>During the planning grant phase, project leaders designed and obtained curricular approval for LBL 195; began the process of having the course accepted by a variety of degree programs to meet graduation requirements; and developed a professional development plan to recruit and support faculty with teaching the course.</p>

	<b>Gateway to create a common intellectual experience anchored in transformative texts for a significant share of the incoming class</b>	<b>Pathway to make general education more coherent and help students link the humanities to their professional aspirations</b>	<b>How planning grant support was used</b>
<a href="#">University of Nevada-Las Vegas (UNLV)</a>	<p>UNLV created the Great Works Academic Certificate (GWAC) program comprised of four courses in 2004: World Literature I, Great Works of Philosophy and Literature, and two electives from a list of courses that devote at least half of the course to transformative texts. UNLV now seeks to make transformative texts more widely read by their students by developing the program in two directions: (1) the Great Works Path the General Education and (2) a Minor in Great Works. With either track, the Path to General Education or the Minor, students will meet most of their general education requirements. In other words, UNLV will focus on increasing the number of students who meet general education requirements with transformative text courses by having students simultaneously fulfill general education requirements and earn a certificate or complete a minor. The project is expected to reach 500 students annually.</p>	<p>The Great Works Path to General Education track will involve regularly offering two additional courses, one of which is the US Constitution/Great Works 350 focused on the fundamental principles of U.S. government and politics, and the other is a "Great Works" course/Great Works 300 that compares one book of ancient philosophy or literature with one book of modern philosophy or literature. For the Minor, in addition to the two courses in the Great Works Path to General Education, students will be required to take six credits of electives with an emphasis on transformative texts.</p>	<p>Not applicable</p>
<a href="#">University of Notre Dame</a>	<p>Notre Dame requires a University Seminar and College Seminar for all first- and second-year students respectively. All students are also required to complete an Integration Course as part of general education, where a topic or issue is tackled by two or more distinct disciplinary perspectives. The project will target these three courses to develop two "tracks"—in health, humanities and society (HHS), and in science, technology, and values (STV)—for meeting general education requirements, while also ensuring commonality of experience for incoming students in the participating sections of University Seminar. Texts range from Plato's Timaeus to Shakespeare's The Tempest to Aldous Huxley's Brave New World.</p>	<p>The three-course sequence as part of general education for the HHS and STV tracks is designed to incentivize students to complete a variety of certificates and minors in the humanities.</p>	<p>Not applicable</p>



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# Appendices

[A: Plan of Study for Purdue's Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts Certificate](#)

[B: Sample Syllabi](#)

[Sample 1](#)

[Sample 2](#)

[C: Sample Assessment Rubrics](#)

[Sample Presentation Rubric](#)

[Sample Research Paper Rubric](#)

[D. In the Press](#)

