

# **Commission on the Liberal Arts**

## **Executive Summary**

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Submitted to Provost Claire Sterk by the executive council:

Robyn Fivush (Chair)  
Deborah Bruner (Vice-Chair)  
Karen Stolley (Vice-Chair)

### **Preface**

The primary mission of Emory University is to build the intellectual and creative foundation for its students and faculty. The core principles of a liberal arts education remain decisive for societal, institutional and personal achievement for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A vibrant society needs individuals effectively engaged in critical thinking and writing, creative and collaborative problem-solving, and an understanding of culture and diversity. A liberal arts education further presents opportunities for students to explore and reflect in ways that encourage personal growth and civic involvement. A leader among residential liberal arts research universities, Emory University offers a transformative interface between the student, the institution, and the larger local and global community. Through innovative programs and dynamic educational experiences, Emory University promotes individual flourishing and ongoing engagement that inspires a fully realized life.

Emory University -- an excellent residential liberal arts college situated within a Research One University, in a richly diverse, historically important city -- is uniquely positioned to provide a 21<sup>st</sup> century liberal arts education. Being residential means that Emory offers students experiential learning, combining scholarly interactions with residential and community experiences in teams of engaged faculty and peer learning communities that unite undergraduate, graduate and professional education. Being a Research One University provides Emory students with unparalleled access to discovery and creativity, working with world renowned faculty, in the laboratory, the library and the local and global community, across the humanities, social sciences and sciences, in the pursuit of inquiry driven scholarship.

The Commission on the Liberal Arts (CoLA) engaged in dynamic interactions with students, faculty, staff and administrators to define and sharpen our goals and provide guidelines that will invigorate our learning, our teaching and our research, positioning Emory structurally and intellectually among the best residential liberal arts research universities. The work of the Commission of the Liberal Arts (CoLA) over the past year has highlighted the multiple ways in which Emory University already provides innovative and exciting opportunities for undergraduate students, graduate and professional students, and for faculty. In our

recommendations, we suggest *partnering with existing programs* and initiatives in ways that *expand their impact across units and constituencies*, continuing to engage students in ways that maximize the potential synergies of Emory's unique position as an Atlanta-based residential liberal arts research university. We emphasize that, throughout this process, we have found students, faculty, and staff to be highly engaged; students are enthusiastic about intellectual engagement and novel, experiential learning, and faculty are passionate about our mission and seek ways to be more creative in research and teaching. Two major themes have emerged. ***One, to build intellectual community, we must prioritize and value those activities that create spaces for intellectual engagement across units and among students and faculty. Two, we must work to create more dynamic and flexible structures that unleash the creative potential of our students and faculty.***

## Executive Summary

In Spring 2013, Provost Sterk re-energized the Commission on the Liberal Arts (CoLA) that had been created in 2011 by then-Provost Earl Lewis to develop a vision for Emory University as a residential liberal arts research university with deeply engaged students and faculty. CoLA, and its three sub-committees, *Learning through Instruction*, *Learning through Innovation* and *Learning through Integration*, connected the entire Emory community through forums, lunches, websites, and a survey. Hundreds of faculty, students and staff were involved in these discussions in various formats. Through this process a vision of Emory emerged:

*Emory University is a leading residential liberal arts research university. Fundamental to our vision of Emory's future is the creation of dynamic, permeable and flexible structures and processes that unleash the creative potential of our students and faculty. We envision Emory University as a destination university for students and faculty engaged in innovative interdisciplinary learning and scholarship that crosses traditional boundaries of discipline and school, that integrates a liberal arts education across the entire university, and crosses into the local and global communities. To achieve this vision we must be bold in facilitating students and faculty to create learning and research communities in ways that may disrupt traditional classroom structures and calendars, and we must align our strategic priorities with this vision.*

This vision is already being implemented across the university in many exciting programs, centers and initiatives that integrate students and faculty in innovative learning environments. We see our recommendations as building on what Emory already does well in ways that will leverage existing resources to enhance and expand this vision across the university.

Across the year, several recurring themes emerged:

1. Ongoing and open communication. We need more efficient and more effective online and print communication that will take advantage of new technologies to create more dynamic and interactive communication in ways that will enhance dialogue among students, faculty, and staff and about the value of a liberal arts education.

2. Create synergies and leverage existing programs. We should work to create synergies among the many exciting pedagogical and learning communities and initiatives already in evidence across the university in order to leverage existing structures in ways that will enhance opportunities for student engagement.
3. Evaluation and assessment. We need to set clear strategic priorities and align assessment and evaluation of educational and scholarly programs, evaluation of learning outcomes, and evaluation of students and faculty with this vision. Clear and transparent metrics must be established for evaluation.
4. Changing the infrastructure. There needs to be more permeability and flexibility for multiple curricular activities that cross schools within the university to better allow learning initiatives to take advantage of all the Emory University offers.

The general themes point to multiple possibilities for integrating a liberal arts education across the student experience within the whole university. In addition to these general ideas, CoLA is making three specific recommendations. Each of these emerged from and contribute to the general themes, but we underscore that these specific recommendations are proposed as initial steps in a longer process of transformative change. The three specific recommendations, each tied to a series of concrete action steps, are:

1. To facilitate intellectual engagement by creating more opportunities for sustained conversations among students, faculty, staff, alumni and the Board of Trustees. This can be accomplished through three interrelated activities: a) creating a common intellectual experience through organizing orbit events around one to two major university events per year; b) facilitate interactions among students, faculty, and staff with common interests through dinners, coffee hours, and dynamic mapping of research interests; and c) create a culture of celebration of student, faculty, and staff achievements.
2. To create of a new kind of cross-unit course that would integrate scholarly and experiential learning with an interdisciplinary, cross-unit team of undergraduates, graduate and professional students and faculty that would provide an integrative liberal arts educational experience. We envision developing student-faculty learning communities that will cross traditional boundaries of disciplines, schools, and even academic calendars to create innovative learning spaces that will integrate the principles of a liberal arts education.
3. To expand and coordinate mentoring programs to provide structure and best practice guidelines for specific mentoring programs across the university, and provide a dynamic interface for students to find mentors and collaborators within the Emory community.

CoLA further recommends a series of long-term strategic initiatives:

1. Facilitate a university wide conversation to clarify and emphasize the significance and evaluation of faculty activities critical to building intellectual community, including annual faculty evaluations and tenure and promotion processes that genuinely value intellectual engagement with the Emory community, mentoring and institution building.
2. Re-visit how teaching is defined and how teaching credit is allocated with some consideration of number of contact hours and number of students. Metrics and guidelines

should be developed and teaching load should be determined as fulfilling a certain number of teaching “credits” rather than as number of courses or lectures.

3. Re-think the academic calendar to allow greater flexibility in course scheduling; expand the possibilities for faculty to develop courses of different lengths, contact hours and credits, and have a metric for defining teaching credits based on these instead of “courses,” to allow maximal flexibility for creative curricular innovations.
4. Allow individual faculty to create multi-year plans that would flexibly allow faculty to meet their commitments to teaching, research and institution building across their career.
5. Develop an “Emory tells its story” project across campus, in which students and faculty would engage in story-telling focused on their experiences at Emory and/or their professional lives that would create a shared personal and intellectual experience for the university.