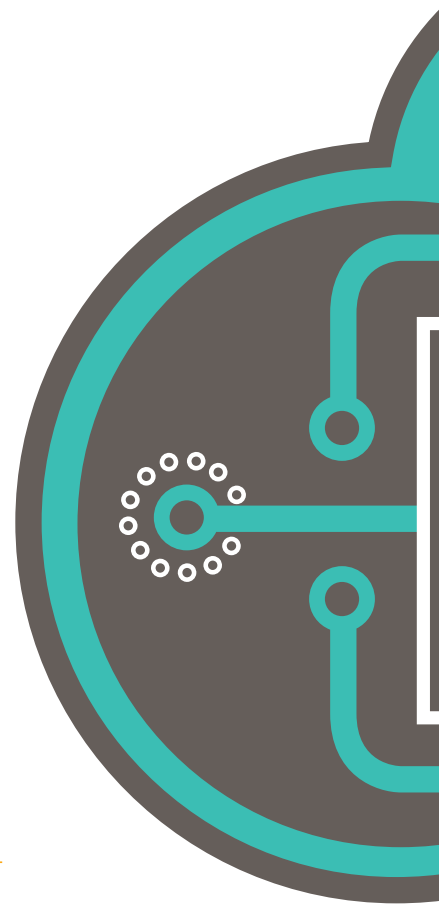


# Reimagining Undergraduate Education



**P**urdue’s new Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts program aspires to redefine the first-year student experience and reimagine a contemporary liberal arts education for students by offering introductory, faculty-taught classes that challenge students intellectually and nurture lifelong learners.

As part of a broader national effort to redefine liberal arts education in the 21st century, the 15-credit certificate program, intended for students in all fields of study, launches this fall. Cornerstone students will develop an understanding of historical contexts, communication skills, an appreciation of the complexity of human problems, and a learning orientation that will make them strong business and industry leaders as well as good citizens. Students who enroll in the Cornerstone program will take at least one of two foundational courses titled “Transformative Texts” and then continue with three courses focused on one of a series of themes: Science and Technology, Environment and Sustainability, Healthcare and Medicine, Management and Organization, or Conflict Resolution and Justice.

Through the Cornerstone certificate, students fulfill many of their University Core Curriculum requirements while exploring themes that complement majors in science, engineering, technology, management, and other disciplines through the lens of the humanities and the social sciences. Cornerstone enables students to pursue a well-rounded education alongside their areas of specialization.



**CORNERSTONE**  
**INTEGRATED LIBERAL ARTS**



The first generation of Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts Faculty Fellows: Antonia Syson, associate professor of classics; Jeffrey Turco, assistant professor of German; Mary F. (Molly) Scudder, assistant professor of political science; Patrick P. Kain, associate professor of philosophy; Yvonne Pitts, associate professor of history; Christopher J. Lukasik, associate professor of English and American studies; Kim Gallon, assistant professor of history; and program director Melinda S. Zook, professor of history. Photo by Charles Jischke.

“The liberal arts combine intellectual and self-development in a way that other disciplines, by design, do not—allowing students to continually reshape and re-educate themselves over the course of their lives,” says Jeffrey Turco, assistant professor of German and a Cornerstone Faculty Fellow. “Simply put: The liberal arts are essential for teaching you *how* to think, not simply *what* to think.”

In the Transformative Texts sequence, students study classic texts from across the world—ranging from Shakespeare to Plato and Aristotle to the Quran. The courses are taught by award-winning tenured and tenure-track professors, says Melinda Zook, Cornerstone director and professor of history. Zook worked with seven “first generation” Cornerstone faculty to develop the introductory sequence and the overall program.

“We have these fantastic mentors, these fantastic scholars, who can turn these young people on to history and political science by looking at classic texts,” she says.

The initial Transformative Texts courses, SCLA 101 and SCLA 102, give students a chance to dive into some of the “big questions of the past and the present, and grapple with some beautiful and dangerous ideas in their first year . . . as they begin work on their major,” says Patrick Kain,

associate professor of philosophy and a Cornerstone Faculty Fellow. He believes students will appreciate the purposeful paths outlined through the Cornerstone themes. “It can be tough for students in other colleges to know where to begin with liberal arts or how to connect it to their own major,” he says.

Cornerstone is a new program that embraces an old idea, says Turco. “The sciences are part of the liberal arts in a bold and original way,” he explains. “The classical and medieval *artes liberales* included disciplines we now locate among the sciences, such as mathematics and astronomy, in addition to the study of logic, rhetoric, and grammar. The liberal arts traditionally shunned the *artes mechanicae*—applied sciences and training for the professions—that form an important part of Purdue’s mission as a land-grant university. Cornerstone combines these two visions.”

Yvonne Pitts, associate professor of history and a Cornerstone Faculty Fellow, points to immense benefits to Purdue students who enroll in the program. “On one level, the experience will give students exposure to historical and contemporary texts and ways to think that will encourage them to take active, informed roles in their civic and professional lives,” she says. “It also provides a heavy emphasis on developing oral and written communication skills in different settings that complement their primary disciplinary training and increases their desirability to prospective employers.”

Zook believes the Cornerstone program can only help students as they prepare for a competitive job market. “The societal implications of the things they do—that’s what liberal arts teaches these students,” she says. “Then they are able to work across disciplines, and that shows [future] employers they can read and write and have all those critical thinking and communication skills needed to move up the ranks.”

Liberal arts courses can bring out even more fully the imagination, empathy, and intellectual adaptability that Purdue students throughout the University already possess, says Antonia Syson, associate professor of classics and a Cornerstone Faculty Fellow. “Curiosity, flexibility, and analytical rigor are what employers look for,” she adds. “Whether or not students pursue majors in liberal arts, there is no substitute for devoting part of their undergraduate experience to the humanities, social sciences, and arts.”

David A. Reingold, Justin S. Morrill Dean of Liberal Arts, believes Cornerstone will be an important part of the Purdue experience. “I am very excited about the opportunity Cornerstone offers to enhance the educational experience of all Purdue students,” he says. “The liberal arts can be an integral feature of what defines Purdue graduates and reinforces the centrality of the liberal arts to a comprehensive university education.”

In 2015, Purdue President Mitch Daniels sent an open letter that challenged the University to reassess not only its practices but also its basic operating philosophies.

“Our land-grant assignment, and frankly that of any institution claiming to deliver ‘higher education,’ is not limited to the teaching that produces scientific or technical expertise. Our task calls up to produce citizens, men and women who are able to think reflectively and creatively not only at the workplace but also to thrive in those domains of well-being,” Daniels wrote.

In touting the value of liberal arts education, Daniels noted that Purdue leaders were working to redefine the current core curriculum to “make sure future Boilermakers do not leave West Lafayette without having encountered the essential facts and ideas central to the preservation and success of a free society.” Disturbed by the large percentage of Purdue students who graduate without courses that explore these ideas, for the past two years, he has encouraged incoming students to HELP themselves during their time at Purdue. The mnemonic stands for history, economics, literature, and philosophy. Daniels charges all Purdue students to take at least one course in each of those areas.

### Enter the Cornerstone Program

Pitts points out that even though many students come to Purdue to study in the “hard sciences,” this new certificate option facilitates the well-rounded coursework Daniels is advocating.

“Often amidst their difficult programs, [these ‘hard science’ students] have little contact with the arts and humanities, the social sciences, or the disciplines of philosophy, political science, and history,” she says. “Obtaining a Cornerstone certificate ensures purposeful and in-depth exposure to problem-solving skills that deal with global problems they are already studying, but from a different perspective.



Purdue president Mitch Daniels welcomes University advisors to a luncheon previewing Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts. Photo by John Underwood.

“Practically, Cornerstone does not require much additional coursework because many of the courses are in the University and other colleges’ cores.”

There are benefits for the faculty involved in Cornerstone, too. Kain says most curricular initiatives happen at the disciplinary, departmental, or program level—for good reason. “Yet working across units to imagine a new integrated option in the liberal arts, for students of quite different majors, has given me a broader perspective on undergraduate education, and a deeper understanding and appreciation of my colleagues in other departments,” he says.

One main reason faculty involved believe that Cornerstone will be successful is that it is integrated into a student’s chosen course of study.

“Learning how to learn and collaborate effectively is the ideal preparation for the varied and unpredictable career paths that are normal in the 21st century,” Syson says.

Kain points to the profound changes and “disruptions” that shape life in the 21st century. “As much as we need highly trained experts in various professions, we need leaders of all kinds that are reflective and creative and wise, and as individuals, we better be prepared for complicated career trajectories that we haven’t yet imagined,” he says. “An integrated liberal arts education can inspire us, teach us how to grapple with puzzles and disagreements and crises, and prepare us for a lifetime of learning.”

By Dorothy Wallheimer. Artwork by Jarrod Hurt (page 21).