



Proposed Strategic Initiatives August 31, 2020

Introduction

With a genealogy dating to a one-room Nashville schoolhouse in 1785, Peabody College today is a world-class college of education and human development. Our mission is to enhance the human condition, focusing particularly on children's learning and development and the institutional, community, social and policy contexts of learning and development. Through the preparation of teachers, scholars, and leaders; through cycles of research, implementation, and refinement; through service to families, schools, and communities; through addressing inequality and honoring diversity; and through external engagement with professionals, leaders, and policy makers, Peabody helps to position Vanderbilt as unique among top-tier research universities.

The Peabody faculty is an amazing collective of scholars working across a breadth of social science disciplines that is unusual for schools of our kind. Educators, learning scientists, psychologists, child development experts, sociologists, economists, political scientists, neuroscientists, lawyers, geographers and anthropologists, historians, and quantitative methodologists are all included. Having faculty trained in the methods and theories of core social science disciplines and applying that expertise to issues of learning and development has become our distinctive edge. Collectively, Peabody's faculty share a national and international reputation for excellence and work purposefully to create opportunities and to improve lives, especially for those with intellectual or learning disabilities as well as those historically disadvantaged by poverty, race, gender, religion, or sexuality. Many faculty members engage prominently in public discourse around social issues and policies. Others serve as editors of the top journals in their disciplines, participate on expert panels, lead professional associations, or conduct programs for children and youth. Our work is highly recognized, with essentially all of our programs ranked in the top five and two ranked No. 1 in the nation by *U.S. News & World Report*.

Research that Matters for Practice, Policy and Knowledge

Peabody's historic foci on teaching and learning, educational leadership and policy, children and families, community development, special education, cognitive science and the neurobiology of learning have defined the college. To each of these, the college has brought intellectual rigor and an empirical orientation that distinguishes it from many of its peers. Annual research expenditures at Peabody approach or exceed \$40 million, greater than those of most of our competitors. Moreover, we are one of the top producers of PhD graduates for academic and research institutions.

Peabody's Strategic Values

Peabody strives to infuse all of our endeavors with a set of core values that inculcate, guide and inform all that we do. It is through these core values that our work brings meaning and impact to individuals, communities and constituencies, as well as the Peabody and Vanderbilt communities themselves. Through our proposed initiatives (presented below), we will continue to infuse our work with these values.

In the pursuit of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, Peabody works to

- Confront biases around race, disability, gender, sexuality or culture by preparing educators, leaders, scholars and policy makers who will challenge systemic inequities
- Create a climate on our own campus where every student is valued, every voice may be heard, and students and faculty members from marginalized groups can find ready allies
- Understand and disrupt inequality and expand opportunity, learning, empowerment, and resilience via individual, family, community, institutional, organizational and policy interventions

In Dialogue with the World, Peabody works to

- Engage with global contexts and communities
- Learn from and with international partners
- Expand academic and programmatic reach beyond our borders
- Educate students who will become leaders in their own international contexts

Through Learning and Development to Enhance the Human Condition, Peabody strives to

- Empower children with skills and positive dispositions
- Help those who have learning differences or face challenges due to poverty and other compromising situations
- Offer personalized support for academic and social learning and development for all students to achieve their fullest potential

By Contributing to Knowledge through Applied and Basic Research and Scholarship, Peabody

- Honors knowledge about the place of culture and context in education and human development
- Establishes a high methodological standard in knowledge discovery and dissemination
- Engages with communities, policy makers and practitioners to translate research into practices that have impact
- Evaluates what works, under what conditions, and for whom
- Creates new quantitative methods to handle ever more complex and sophisticated research designs
- Examines learning and development from all vantage points, including neurobiological factors, so that our models are not under-determined

Five “Big Sky” Initiatives

As Peabody considers how it can best contribute more at an historic moment of disruption, we propose five specific, new initiatives.

1. Trans-Institutional Center in Public Policy

Vanderbilt has considerable strengths in public policy, with expertise resident in Peabody, the College of Arts and Science, and the School of Medicine, as well as the Law School. At Peabody, the college offers the top-ranked PhD program in Leadership and Policy Studies; the master’s degree in public policy (MPP), with a focus on education policy; and the master’s degree in international education policy and management. There is also a policy track in

Peabody's undergraduate major in human and organizational development (HOD). In May of this year, a committee, convened by Deans Camilla Benbow and John Geer, drafted a report describing Vanderbilt's current policy landscape and suggesting opportunities for expanded curricular offerings, notably in health and social policy. The committee's report ambitiously examined potential options for growth, including a new, trans-institutional institute or center that would create an infrastructure to expand Vanderbilt's engagement and impact with policy at the international, federal, state and local levels. An institute or center would serve as the incubator and coordinating hub for all things public policy related at Vanderbilt, including cross-school teaching.

2. Disrupting inequality through research and partnership—a research-practice partnership with the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools

The goal of this initiative would be to establish a research-practice partnership between Peabody and Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) focused on eliminating disparities in educational outcomes linked with race, poverty, and disability – disparities which emerge before elementary school and continue to grow. Now is an especially opportune moment to come together to tackle an issue that drives both institutions and to disrupt structural inequalities, which are becoming more evident and likely increasing as a result of COVID-19.

The partnership would create the needed infrastructure, as well as the affordances, for collaboration of a kind where framing and pursuing research questions is done jointly and where the shared research agenda is pursued over long periods of time. It would build upon and expand two current efforts: the Initiative for Race Research and Justice (IRRJ), which is led by Rich Milner; and the Nashville Longitudinal Study of Youth Safety and Wellbeing, led by Maury Nation. The RPP also would encompass service initiatives like the recently proposed Vanderbilt Tutors Program, which will be designed in partnership with MNPS and could include a design-based research component to enable continuous improvement and impact.

The first new partnership project, identified in conversations with MNPS leaders, would be focused on dramatically reducing racial disparities in discipline by addressing the needs of students who experience the most severe behavioral challenges while maintaining a supportive learning environment for all students. Peabody's team would bring expertise in behavioral support and intervention, community-based health intervention, trauma-informed practice, race in education research, and learning sciences. Working side by side with educators and other district stakeholders, we would co-design assessments, intervention processes, and professional development, building school and district capacity to meet the needs of Nashville's students. This initiative also would house a series of research methodology workshops on Disrupting Inequality in and through Research. We are resubmitting a highly-rated proposal to the William T. Grant Foundation to help fund some of this work.

3. Alternative learning models—an incubator for the application and study of digital learning

COVID-19 has made clear just how much is still to be learned about conducting online education effectively. This is true at every level, from K-12 to undergraduate and professional and graduate education. In the higher education sector, there is a need to both experiment and develop new

approaches to meeting the academic and social emotional needs of diverse learners, and the imperative to develop a scholarly agenda that addresses questions such as how do we structure effective and supportive learning experiences online, how do we assess learning and social and mental health outcomes across broad populations, and how can we understand, assess, and address equity. By drawing on faculty across Peabody (and elsewhere in the university) with expertise in higher education, instructional design, the learning sciences, and cognitive psychology, we propose to formalize the study of how best to conduct hybrid and online learning in the higher education space. This effort has broad potential for Vanderbilt to stand out as institutions are increasingly seeking to reimagine education for social and transformational change. The intent is to position Vanderbilt to offer leadership in program development and delivery that is tightly coupled with research focused on effective instruction, student impact, equity and access, and education policy.

The incubator would allow for a ‘plan-design-implement -research -revise’ cycle of learning and development for higher education innovation. The COVID-19 experience suggests new directions for degree programs, stackable credentials, short-courses, certificates, and continuing education that currently are not widely available at Peabody or Vanderbilt. By utilizing new learning platforms and simultaneously capitalizing upon opportunities to study them, we could increase access to outstanding content provided in our degree programs and foster greater reach and access to communities not currently reached, including international students and practitioners. With an incubator in place, we could mount a unit of continuing education to offer short courses both domestically and internationally. Founded upon the results of our research, such a unit could transform learning at Vanderbilt by conferring credentials and certificates in new and evolving formats.

4. A center for early childhood development and education

Under this initiative, Peabody would create a trans-departmental, Early Childhood Education Research Center. Early childhood education, learning, and policy are critical, as evidenced by the myriad challenges families, employers, educators, and elected officials are facing during the current pandemic. Peabody College has a long history of major contributions to research on early childhood development and education, dating back to the 1950s when it launched an experimental preschool for disadvantaged children. That preschool inspired the founding of Head Start and eventually evolved into the current Susan Gray School at Peabody. In recent years, the college gained considerable attention for studies of Tennessee’s Voluntary Pre-K program in light of revived debates around the topic of universal preschool. That said, while Peabody has a large and strong group of faculty members interested in these issues across multiple departments and in the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center, most are working separately. Some focus on behavioral issues, others on autism spectrum disorders, developmental disabilities, language and vocabulary development, preschool curricula, mathematics learning, teacher training and credentialing, or cognitive development. We need to make the whole greater than the sum of the parts, as the cliché goes, by expanding engagement with marginalized communities and families, both in the U.S. and beyond. An R&D center could bring considerable recognition to Vanderbilt, along with a potential cross-departmental Ph.D. and other curricular offerings, and also expand trans-institutional collaborations at Vanderbilt, such as with VUMC’s Center for Child Health Policy.

5. Computational thinking in K-12 education

Peabody faculty members are taking part in and leading a Vanderbilt trans-institutional Computational Thinking and Learning Initiative:

Computational thinking is the cornerstone of the modern Information Age: the capacity to frame, analyze, disaggregate and reconfigure problems to best leverage ever-expanding computational capability. Every field and K-16 subject area has different approaches and needs that define their disciplinary knowledge and practices, and thus computational thinking in each discipline is a hybrid creation, connecting general computational methods with specific disciplinary ways of thinking and inquiring in generative ways.

Peabody faculty members in mathematics and science education are leading the K-12 components of this project by conducting research on how to better incorporate computational thinking skills into the curriculum and creating new learning experiences for students. Given the power of computing to aid learning, we are failing students by not training teachers to wield computational thinking in whatever subjects they teach and by not developing robust curricula for them to use. This initiative would enable us to modify and expand curricular programs to better prepare teachers, develop new initiatives to serve education practitioners, and design and expand research about how computational thinking is developed and can be applied. Computational thinking is changing every dimension of society, but it is not equitably assessed and implemented in schools and classrooms. The education sector must incorporate computational thinking in its ambitions to close gaps, as well.

Conclusion

Through our strategic planning in FY20, we identified five new directions that could define Peabody's future. Each of them would incorporate and build upon resident faculty strengths, while tapping expertise and interests in departments both in Peabody and across the university. Peabody, especially with additional resources from Vanderbilt, is positioned to move any or all of these initiatives forward with success.

Importantly, Peabody's historic values inform each of these initiatives. For example, our commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion cuts across all five, in some instances quite explicitly. This commitment has only grown over time. Other values, such as our ethos of conducting rigorous, empirical research, would drive each of these initiatives. Peabody's long-running efforts to strengthen communities are also at the heart of our proposed future.

We live in a time of dramatic, transformational change. Many of our actions are unprecedented. Yet this much is certain: at a time when society is crying out for leadership and justice in the education sector, Peabody and Vanderbilt must respond by deepening our work, sharing it widely, and demonstrating our capacity for innovation.

PEABODY COLLEGE

STRATEGIC VALUES

→ STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

Trans-
Institutional
Center for
Public Policy

Alternative
Learning
Models—
Incubating
Applications

Disrupting
Inequality
through
Research &
Partnership

Center for Early
Childhood
Development
& Education

Computational
Thinking in
K-12 Education

STRATEGIC VALUES



Equity, Diversity
& Inclusion



Dialogue with
the World



Learning &
Development



Basic & Applied
Research



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