In its meeting on February 19, 2021, the IBHE FAC Public University Caucus responded to a request to come up with specific recommendations regarding support for scholarship and research in the strategic plan.

The draft of the strategic plan states that strategies to address the priority areas (access, affordability, and credential/degree attainment) should align with six core principles. One of those principles is “Higher education is a public good that enriches life”:

Higher education is a public good that enriches life. We depend on higher education to preserve, expand, and transmit knowledge, offer solutions to society’s challenges, serve as a civic partner, and enrich life. Research at our institutions expands understanding and drives innovation and economic development. Learning is enhanced when students participate in research and hands-on experiences. Liberal arts and humanities ensure we support the whole student and better understand the human condition. Institutions are vibrant anchors of communities.

The emphasis on expanding early college in current drafts of the plan does not align with support for scholarship and research, for reasons we have described in earlier feedback. In particular, the exponential growth of Gen Ed courses taught by high school teachers reduces the student credit hour production of college and university faculty members in the liberal arts and sciences. The range of course offerings for dual credit courses also is limited to what can count for high school credit, especially when the range of offerings is further limited to what high school teachers can offer. This means a wider range of fields may be off-limits to Gen Ed exploration by high school students—fields like African American studies, anthropology, art history, geology, philosophy, religious studies, and women’s studies, among others. Many of these smaller liberal arts fields depend on Gen Ed courses, so there is further pressure to close programs in these areas, despite the increasing recognition (as stated in the core principle above) that the liberal arts and humanities are foundational to the meaning of higher education. Closing these programs means removing spaces for scholarship and research in these fields at colleges and universities. Moreover, students who enter a four year university with their General Education courses completed during high school will have less exposure to possible major and minors—possibilities traditionally explored through Gen Ed courses on a college or university campus.

We have described these concerns in our previous caucus recommendations, as well as in the FAC Dual Credit position paper and FAC Dual Credit Working Group responses to the strategic plan.

Here are some of our specific recommendations:

1. Add a design group whose specific aim is to assess the alignment of every strategic priority strategy with the core principle “Higher education is a public good,” with particular attention to each
strategy’s potential or likely effects on scholarship and research. This design group could also recommend alternatives that enhance rather than diminish the state’s commitment to scholarship and research.

2. Limit early college that can fulfill the General Education Core Curriculum (GECC) to no more than two courses, with no more than one course from any of the four areas (Communication, Humanities and Fine Arts, Mathematics, Physical Sciences and Life Sciences, Social and Behavioral Sciences). This provides exposure to college-level work (ideally in a college rather than high school setting), but limits how much college happens in high school itself.

3. Rather than diverting state resources to early college opportunities, invest in the institutions that support scholarship and research: adequately fund public universities and community colleges so that tuition costs can be driven down. This reduces parental pressure for “cheap” college through dual credit courses, and gives students the traditionally wider set of options for their college course work and degree paths.

4. Create public-private partnerships that connect research findings to the needs of industries, business, and local to global communities. At the same time, ensure that the academic freedom of researchers is respected, since universities have been the space in which knowledge is expanded and discoveries made without a purely applied end in mind.

5. Invest in opportunities for part-time independent scholarship and research by those without college or university teaching positions who are employed outside of academia. Create a task force to determine how university libraries can make their resources available to independent scholars in the humanities and social sciences, wherever they live or work in the state (currently only those employed by universities have full access to library resources). Explore avenues for scholars with terminal degrees who, lacking teaching positions, still seek to pursue part-time research in the sciences and in applied fields, and need connections to university resources.

6. If our above recommendations are not pursued, we suggest streamlining secondary to post-secondary higher education not only in the direction of credentialing, but in the direction of scholarship and research: expect high school teachers offering dual credit courses to contribute to scholarship and research in the fields they teach. Provide time and resources for high school teachers and community college faculty to pursue scholarship and research, and assist them in completing doctorates and other terminal degrees in their fields.

Our caucus identified additional harms that accompany expanded early college:

- Students who anticipate attending a 4-year institution, but who enter college with most or all of their Gen Ed requirements completed, will have a shorter time at a 4 year school, and so much less opportunity to be mentored by professors and drawn into undergraduate research. Research teams at universities often include undergraduate and graduate students along with faculty members. Faculty-undergraduate research programs are key to recruiting top-notch students to our institutions. These research programs attract some of the best students and help to keep them in the state of Illinois.
• Expanding **early college** in the name of equity **fosters new forms of inequity.** By limiting how many early college courses can transfer, highly selective private colleges and universities across the country that do not opt into the Illinois Articulation Initiative (which forces the acceptance of all early college courses) can now market themselves in the way that many of Illinois’ public universities increasingly cannot do: by promising to offer a full 4-year residential undergraduate education, with the opportunity to build meaningful social capital over time with faculty and fellow students, by taking courses taught by faculty members with terminal degrees in their fields who are actively engaged in scholarship and research.

• One might argue that early college still allows a commitment to the liberal arts and sciences, including the humanities and social sciences, because early college still involves taking Gen Ed courses. But for every dual credit Gen Ed course taken, a student’s educational engagement with the humanities, social sciences, or sciences is cut in half (since one course counts as two).

Members of the public caucus emphasized that scholarship and research are a public good, including scholarship in all the fields that help us “better understand the human condition.” One scientist said her motto is, “At most schools the STEM makes the living, but the arts and humanities make life worth living.” A mathematician pointed out that most patents are initiated by work done in universities, and added that humanities research is a national security issue. Another faculty member observed that in Korea, Samsung is training employees in the humanities, including philosophy and logic, because they foster the ability to see problems from new angles and to imagine alternatives; this increases innovation, even in technology. Several noted that many employers don’t want employees who come in with a specific skill set so much as with soft skills and with the ability to think independently and critically, “outside the box.” This ability to adapt is also crucial when most people are changing jobs and careers over the course of their lives.

Our caucus perceives that scholarship and research is taken for granted in the strategic plan, as something that exists in the background rather than foreground of educational policy strategizing. But the unintentional consequence of early college and alternative credentialing is a disinvestment in scholarship and research, and in the fields that are supported by these endeavors—including fields important for all the reasons stated in the core principle, “Higher education is a public good that enriches life.”