

## **Project Title**

Catalyzing a Universal Culture for Life-Transformative Education at UConn: A Roadmap to Scale Across the University

## **Project Abstract**

The University of Connecticut is committed to providing all its students with a life-transformative education to prepare them to meet the challenges of the 21st century. To this purpose, a team of visionary leaders from all levels of the university will be prepared to lead their peers in creating grassroots, bottom-up change with institutional support. The ultimate goal is to make life-transformative education the foundation of UConn's educational philosophy.

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## **Lead Applicant/Contact Person (name, title, institution, address, phone, email)**

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## **Who: Tell us who will be working together on this project. Include names, titles, and the role each person will play in the project.**

This project has several sets of participants, including:

- In the first phase of this project, a team of approximately 150 life-transformative educators, including faculty and staff, will participate in an initial day-long collaborative workshop in spring 2020, with a follow-up series of peer-led groups. This coalition will form the central “who” of our project; will create a long-term vision and ideas for what life-transformative education means at UConn, and will become the centrifugal force of change. After this first phase, which is characterized by this central core leadership team, the project's goal is effect change by inspiring and empowering life-transformative educators at all levels of the university to embrace this opportunity and to provide grassroots leadership for change.
- Working with recommendations from the Deans, the Provost Office will concurrently launch a taskforce on life-transformative education. The taskforce will include faculty and staff who are recognized for their leadership, creativity, and innovation in the life-transformative education space. Specifically, the taskforce will be charged with identifying areas where UConn is already strong and where it can improve, as well as recommending the bold new areas to extend a life-transformative educational experience to all 24,000 UConn undergraduate students. The taskforce will then suggest specific working groups, which will include taskforce members along with additional faculty and staff selected depending on the specific working group focus. The taskforce and working groups will work in parallel and will inform this proposed project, and many of the taskforce and working group committee members will participate in the spring collaborative workshop activities.

## **Why: Tell us the objectives of the project, including some background on the problem the project addresses and what change you are trying to make. Please indicate clearly how this**

**project will develop students' identity, agency, or sense of purpose. Projects may focus on one or more of these elements of a life-transformative education.**

Imagine that, when asked the question, "Why are you working *here* at UConn?" every one of the over 1,400 faculty and 4,500 staff could answer that they are here to help transform the lives of UConn's undergraduate students. UConn, a comprehensive research university, identifies the centrality of strong and meaningful relationships as the catalyst to create the conditions for every undergraduate student to have life transformative experiences. At UConn we believe relationships are the vehicle through which agency, identity, and purpose are best developed. We also believe that we need to be more intentional and systemic in the ways we do this. Students need the opportunity to become inspired and informed in a range of contexts -- in their classes and in environments that are integral to their experience, such as independent research, internships, and experiential learning opportunities. UConn's goal is to emphasize and foster the growth of diverse opportunities for students to experience education outside the classroom, such as through innovative classes that incorporate real-world research elements or service-learning components, as well as potential expansion of first-year programming beyond the first year, strategically expanding novel learning community experiences, among many other possibilities.

As a public land grant university with many researchers working on projects with direct positive social outcomes in Connecticut and beyond, students develop their sense of purpose through the ability to engage with fields as wide ranging as educational psychology, gerontological nursing, civil engineering, corporate social responsibility, public humanities, and environmental sustainability. For example, building off of three years of a combination of research, teaching and civic engagement, a team of faculty members recently received a 5-year National Science Foundation Improving Undergraduate STEM Education grant for a project entitled: "Redefining Public Engagement at the University of Connecticut: Studying the Impact of an Innovative STEM Service Learning Model on the University Community." The project, "Environment Corps," combines familiar elements of classroom instruction, service learning, and UConn's Extension's work with communities across Connecticut in a unique way that allows students to develop STEM skills and get "real-world" experience as preparation for the workforce, while communities receive assistance in responding to environmental mandates that they often lack resources to address on their own. As part of the grant, UConn is working to better understand how innovative instructional models and partnerships like this can be institutionalized. The Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning is taking the lead in working with University administrators and faculty to promote further expansion of the model across the university (see: <https://today.uconn.edu/school-stories/uconn-receives-nsf-grant-environment-corps-project/>).

Our problem is not a lack of life-transformative educational experiences at UConn. We know that there are a number of areas of excellence across the university, such as the example above. Individual professors and programs are deeply committed to this type of educational experience. UConn's challenge is to effectively extend and scale life-transformative educational experiences so that every single one of its 24,000 undergraduate students at UConn graduates having had such an experience. To go from good to great, we have to catalyze our culture in gradual and not-so-gradual ways simultaneously. We have to expand the quantity and variety of our best existing programs. We have to develop new programs by "*listening louder*" to our students, our alumni, our communities, and converting what we hear into actionable reciprocal impacts for those involved.

We know that a top-down model will not be successful in this endeavor. Making life-transformative education yet another “thing” that is added on to current work will fail. Instead, we will use this funding to empower those who are already leading on life-transformative education at UConn to become a catalyst for the growth of a life-transformative educational culture that will touch and inspire everyone at UConn.

The core of this culture is two areas that faculty and staff feel are fundamentally valued and an intrinsic part of the *why* of UConn:

- Developing authentic and supportive relationships with students. This can take the form of mentoring and will exist in multiple locations, including:
  - Residential programs for students (*e.g.*, learning communities) that also foster a sense belonging within student groups.
  - Relationships with individual advisors who help support students through their educational experiences and anchor them securely within the institution.
  - Mentorship from faculty, staff, alumni, and peers.
- Extending the opportunity for all undergraduate students to participate in learning experiences that develop agency and purpose. This will include:
  - Small service-learning classes spanning the curriculum, with students able to connect their educational experiences to solving real-world social problems. This will be connected to our re-application for the Carnegie Foundation Community Engagement Classification.
  - Opportunities for undergraduate students to work directly on research projects of world-class faculty members.
  - Internship opportunities that directly and carefully connect educational content in the classroom to “real world” learning.

None of these elements in and of itself is necessarily experimental; we know that they are sound routes through which to practice life-transformative education. The problem that we seek to address is how to create a framework in which life-transformative education can truly take hold for *every* student on a large public university campus with no diminution of the research mission -- instead our aim is to find a way in which life-transformative education becomes synonymous with the research mission of the university and genuinely valued in the same way.

**What: Tell us what activities you will pursue and how faculty will be engaged. Clearly describe how your proposal addresses the expectations of:**

- **Boldness**
- **Viability**
- **Scalability**
- **Experimentation**
- **Assessment**
- **Contextual Awareness**
- **Sustainability**
- **Adaptability**

The **boldness** of our plan is the overall goal for engaging literally everyone who works at UConn in providing and supporting life-transformative education. We begin with two separate elements:

1) areas of excellence in which life-transformative education is already happening, and 2) the faculty and staff who are disengaged from this type of undergraduate-focused experience. There are serious barriers to our goal, particularly the hesitancy of those who are suspicious of administration-led initiatives and those who think that providing time for life-transformative experiences will diminish the research mission of the university or will pull time away from activities valued in the Promotion, Tenure and Reappointment (PTR) process. To prevent this initiative from becoming yet another element that university faculty and staff are supposed to add on to already robust workloads, it has to be developed as a peer-led iterative process supported by institutional resources for life-transformative education.

Our project is an **experimentation** in large-scale culture change. Although a large number of areas of excellence already exist within our institution, this project will be **sustainable** only if we can catalyze an authentic route for peer-led, grassroots development, supported by the leadership of the university. To achieve this, we propose to utilize two different models to create a framework for change that we can help support and nurture without micromanaging or being overly directive.

We will be using this grant as support to build our coalition of leaders who will create ripples of change through campus culture. They will catalyze the process of embedding life-transformative education throughout our institutional culture. Crucially, this will be through *their own* vision of change and through supporting their models of scaling up life-transformative education. This “bottom up” approach will already provide **contextual awareness** because we will be empowering a cadre of life-transformative educators to develop processes and models that are specific to our institution.

Because the logistics of setting this process in motion by the nature of initiatives and funding have come from a smaller group of leaders within UConn (including President Katsouleas) we are loosely using two models that we think can help bring about the type of change we want to see, while sidestepping the usual institutional hierarchy:

- Kotter's 8-step model for leading change. This framework allows us to separate management and leadership so that we can see ways in which the administration will support non-hierarchical, distributed leadership in this endeavor. We are particularly focused on the early steps of this process, but it is useful to think about all eight steps as a framework:
  - *Create a sense of urgency*: the pace of institutional change in higher education can be slow. We want to make our core of changemakers lead their peers in feeling that this is an exciting process and to jump into dynamic projects.
  - *Build a guiding coalition*: the core of the funding from this proposal will be used to have a major event in which our “guiding coalition” will be formed. These are the faculty and staff who have strengths and a belief in the process of life-transformative education.
  - *Form a strategic vision and initiatives*: our vision is change across UConn in the development of life-transformative education for all undergraduate students. Our guiding coalition will be given the freedom to develop further content with regard to a specific vision and initiatives as to how this will be achieved.
  - *Enlist a volunteer army*: our first wave of program participants is going to be the individuals who believe in the overall vision for the project and who are excited

about building this out across the institution. They are going to lead their peers in every corner of UConn in getting excited about this project and the opportunities it provides for ever-deeper engagement with our undergraduate students, while also having the ability to be deeply focused on research.

- *Enable action by removing barriers*: a major barrier will be the sense that this is another “add on” program to the university. We are going to use this first round of programming to more deeply identify barriers and to offer innovative routes to overcome them. This will include visibly rewarding those who lead on life-transformative education both through items that literally identify the leaders and through elements such as new annual awards for life-transformative educators. We will also work on identifying and removing internal barriers that will hinder life-transformative education, such as rewarding those who fully engage through the PTR process or consideration (e.g., course ‘buyout’) for those who are spending significant time working individually with students.
- *Generate short-term wins*: we will celebrate current life-transformative educational practices and make visible the iterative ways in which our first set of leaders is beginning to influence their peers. We will use university communication channels to make sure that our leaders are lifted up across UConn and celebrated for their achievements.
- *Sustain acceleration*: later phases of our work are going to have to provide continued support to build out and mentor our faculty and staff as we create an ever-widening pool of life-transformative educators. This will require allocation of resources to support the time that faculty and staff need to devote to this endeavor.
- *Institute change*: to fully realize our vision of life-transformative education at every level of our institutional culture, we will use our top-down leadership support to institutionalize the grassroots movement.
- *The positive-deviance approach to improvement*. This method is important because the issue we need to address is behavioral and requires social change within our institutional culture. The positive-deviance approach relies on individuals or groups who have uncommon but successful behaviors and strategies to particular problems - in this case the first round of our life-transformative educational leaders are our positive deviants. Through the fact that these leaders are already successful in this area, we know that they are our positive outliers who have the possibility - with support - to catalyze widespread change. Our loose program will allow for the framework of the positive deviance approach to be enacted:
  - *Defining* the problem with the community will be part of the deep discussions of our taskforce and work groups.
  - We have already *determined* the presence of positively deviant individuals and groups, and these will form our initial set of leaders to start this project.
  - Our 2020 collaborative workshop will give our leaders the opportunity to reflect and *discover* existing uncommon practices or behaviors.
  - Our taskforce and leaders will look for ways to *design* peer-to-peer initiatives to leverage solutions that help scale up life-transformative education at UConn.
  - We will *discern* the effectiveness of our process through continual monitoring and evaluation.

Utilizing these two frameworks will help to support the **viability** of the project -- this is a large undertaking and, because we do not want to overdetermine the nature of change, it would be easy for the undertaking to fizzle out after our initial event. Each of these models provides guidance commensurate with a non-hierarchical and iterative grassroots project that will allow our initial set of leaders to create change-like ripples across a pond.

These frameworks will also help provide the parameters for **adaptability**: the success of our project overall will be predicated on the ability to develop a series of relational solutions of how to engage more and more faculty and staff specifically at UConn. Our model for others, therefore, does not lie in just the end result when we have life-transformative educators in every corner of the institution; it is instead in the process of engaging faculty and staff in developing their own, “community-led” solutions to the scalability of life-transformative education.

Both frameworks to create culture change across our institution emphasize continual **assessment**. There can obviously be measures against our end goal, but because of the bottom-up frameworks of change we will use, continual assessment of the participation of increasing numbers of faculty and staff at UConn, celebrations of incremental change, and continual reevaluation of ways to further support and sustain accelerated change will ensure the ongoing evaluation of our work.

#### *Catalyzing Culture Change: An Initial Event*

To initiate our long-term vision and process, we will develop a professional development collaborative workshop. This will be a flagship event: life-transformative educators who are already active at UConn will be able to come together and be inspired by external and internal speakers. The event will include some intensive short work sessions with others from across our large and often disconnected institution (schools and colleges, regional campuses, departments, student affinity groups, learning communities, *etc.*) to define their own ideas of what we can do to foster an ever-greater availability of life-transformative educational experiences. It will be formed of two main elements:

- *Listening Louder*: we will work to make sure that the crucial knowledge for scaling-up life-transformative education across our institution is right there within the participants. Instead of just bombarding them with external ideas, we want to use the smaller sessions to focus on a theme of listening. The faculty and staff we will bring together are already life-transformative educators - our challenge to them is how to spread this further across the campus and, as administrative leaders, we will be listening to them.
- *Empowering Ideas*: We will bring a visionary external leader in life-transformative education to speak to our first team of leaders to help empower them in their own community. We want to provide a scaffold of ideas and networks that can help our UConn grassroots community realize their own vision.

When they leave this event, we want our initial cohort of life-transformative educators to feel excitement at the possibilities for expanding their work at UConn and spreading their approaches to their peers. We want them to feel an urgency for the mission and to have developed the beginnings of networks that will form a genuine guiding coalition.

Approximately a 150 participants will be included in the initial collaborative workshop. These will be a mixture of self-selected and nominated individuals. Our life-transformative education

taskforce and administrative leadership will take an active role in engaging department heads, deans, and managers across campus to identify participants for this first round. To be successful, this first cohort must be formed of those who are deeply passionate about life-transformative education and who are ready to be empowered to accelerate their work by building it out to peers.

### *Creating a Visible Community of Leaders*

After this initial event, the risk is that our potential army of changemakers dissipates into the larger UConn community. To truly catalyze change, this initial group must be charged with an urgent mission to grow their numbers. If we have 150 faculty and staff participate in our first major event, we will still only have involved 2.5% of the workforce at UConn. Involving 10% of faculty and staff requires that each of our first wave of leaders engages three of their peers. Each participant in this first event will be asked to mentor a colleague in life-transformative education across the next year and to bring at least two other colleagues along to small-group meetings.

To help facilitate this, we want to make them into a visible “brand” of leaders. There are various ways that this can be done - more prosaic, but often effective, are items like stickers for office doors and laptops that identify life-transformative educators. It is fundamental that these leaders are easy to identify by both faculty and students. Beyond this, we want to introduce new awards at convocation and other major university events to help lift up some of our strongest leaders in this field to help further develop the sense that this is something that is recognized and rewarded at our university. The life-transformative education taskforce will work on larger ideas for recognition and support (*e.g.*, examples may include buying out time so that visionary leaders can have the ability to focus on developing their work of transforming the lives of undergraduate students and helping teach their colleagues how to better engage with this mission). We will make sure that we announce some of these new forms of recognition and support at the workshop to further energize our participants, to reinforce that there are actual institutional resources supporting them, and to make them feel that they are being rewarded for being in the initial wave of leaders.

### *Ongoing Iterative Opportunities for Growth*

Beyond our initial collaborative workshop, faculty and staff will need to have further opportunities to return together to reflect on their ongoing experiences, to have contexts into which they can bring their peers in whom they spark interest, and to monitor and evaluate the ways in which they and their colleagues are scaling out life-transformative educational experiences. This ongoing reflection and evaluation is crucial to ensure that the program continues to offer a thoughtful and authentic set of experiences for students, experiences that are tailored to the specific unit in which they originate.

A series of small-group, reflective events will occur throughout the year and will be an opportunity for our life-transformative education leaders to invite and engage interested peers. The frequency of these small groups will be such as not to become a burden and to yet offer regular opportunities to maintain momentum and incrementally build community. An annual event will be a dynamic and exciting opportunity to share our successes and ideas and to draw in even more participants.

It should be noted, that this will be a dynamic process, as many of the taskforce and working group members will be active participants in the workshop activities (*i.e.*, organizing, planning,

participating, etc.). As such, synergistic progress will be facilitated by the natural feedback that will result from the groups informing each other as the overall project moves forward.

**Where: Tell us the context and location of the project**

Our project is located in the community of our institution. It is centered in individuals who will be leading on life-transformative education. To jump start and facilitate this process, our collaborative workshop will be located in the [Innovation Partnership Building](#). This will provide a “retreat space” that can pull most participants out of their day-to-day workspaces and is, at the same time, a location for the type of UConn/industry partnerships that students may experience as a cornerstone of life-transformative education.

Addressing geographical barriers and institutional size will be one of the challenges that we have to overcome. UConn is comprised of a main campus at Storrs, with four much smaller regional campuses - these are crucial to our mission of life-transformative education. We know that on these smaller campuses and communities, students are often having life-transformative educational experience facilitated by smaller class sizes, prompted by some specific and localized internship and research opportunities. Our headline event and follow-up community building must therefore manage to center expertise from regional campuses alongside that of practices and participants from Storrs.

To build our “volunteer army” effectively across UConn, we need to make sure that the 2.5% of faculty and staff who form our initial guiding coalition are well distributed physically across campus and relationally across different units of the university. It is only then that they will be able to build their transformative community effectively across the institution. Forming a network of life-transformative educators will entail physical follow-up meetings of smaller groups after the main event. We will make sure that these meet in varied institutional spaces across all campuses so that their physical locations reinforce the idea that the project of life-transformative education is everywhere on our campus.

**When: Provide a timeline for activities and assessment.**

January 2020:

- Identify and invite keynote speaker for workshop.
- Develop language for nominating first cadre of life-transformative educators.
- Launch a website and create an email address.
- First call for workshop attendees sent out: this includes the ability to nominate or self-nominate as a life-transformative education leader.
- Venue and details for workshop are planned.

February 2020:

- Reminders for nominations sent; senior leadership reaches out to deans, directors *etc.* to make sure that they are nominating participants.
- Break-out session topics identified; workshop facilitators/presenters identified and trained.
- Selection of first cohort of life-transformative educational leaders for workshop.
- Announcement of initial group of life-transformative educators with invitation to participate in workshop.

April/May 2020:

- Pre-conference evaluation surveys participants.
- Conference / workshop takes place.
- Announcement of new initiatives at an institutional level to further support life-transformative education (*e.g.*, course buyouts to provide time to work on projects, new awards to help make leaders more visible).
- Post-conference evaluation surveys participants.
- Begin to use UConn communications (*e.g.* UConn today) to run stories specifically about life-transformative educators and their work.

May 2020:

- University-wide task force on life-transformative education reports back to President Katsouleas.

May-December 2020:

- Small group meetings held for life-transformative educators.
- Each initial participant brings at least three colleagues to meetings across the eight-month period and builds community.
- Continual qualitative assessment provided by voluntary reporting back from small groups, including suggestions for institutionalizing change.
- Begin planning for 2021 events, further routes for building out community, and initiatives to reduce institutional barriers.

November 2020:

- Distribution of survey for initial cohort and wider participants in life-transformative education groups.

December 2020:

- Preparation of report for Coalition for Life-Transformative Education.

**How: Provide a project implementation plan, including a plan for assessment of how you will determine whether the project has been successful.**

Our project is divided into several key stages, comprising:

- Organization of our workshop:
  - Overseen by administrative leadership, supported by ideas from the life-transformative education task force (see timeline for implementation, above).
- Study of current best practices, institutional barriers, and resource requirements by the life-transformative education task force and related workgroups:
  - Initial group spans faculty and staff across the university, including regional campuses.
  - Invitations to workgroups and opportunities for engagement will allow this task force to be iterative and relational in and of itself.
  - Taskforce will produce a report for President Katsouleas by May 2020.
- Central collaborative workshop event:
  - Bring together up to 150 faculty and staff who are current leaders in life-transformative education at UConn and *listen louder* to their ideas.

- Further inspire this cadre of leaders with external speakers who will help them develop beyond their current capacity.
- Small-group iterative community building and culture change:
  - Following the workshop, smaller groups will form our “volunteer army” for change – and will set their own schedule of recurrent meetings.
  - Small groups will report back on continued initiatives and ideas for helping support ever-widening participation in life-transformative education.

Our monitoring and assessment will take the following forms:

- Pre-and post-survey of workshop participants in April/May 2020 to find out:
  - What initiatives they are currently leading and engaged in at UConn
  - What they hope to gain from the program
  - Barriers they see to widespread culture change
  - Assessing the value of the programming
- Ongoing qualitative reporting from small groups (May 2020 onward), allowing them to offer ideas and feedback to the life-transformative education taskforce and central administrative leadership team.
- Survey of initial participants, along with mentees and invitees of first cadre of life-transformative education leaders. This will assess:
  - Whether programming has succeeded in making leaders feel that they are listened to for their expertise.
  - Whether the programming has been useful in: a) providing further ideas, b) recognizing leadership and excellence, and c) helping build community.
  - The degree to which participants think culture change in expanding life-transformative education has begun to catalyze.
  - Barriers participants still see to further change and resources that participants identify as crucial to the overall project.

The different stages of feedback will allow us to engage in near-continuous reflection on what is working, what needs change, and what is yet to be implemented. In the spirit of *listen louder*, the success of the project will depend on participants feeling that they can report back to administrative leadership on what they need, which barriers exist for them, and to make sure the administrative leadership listens and knows what the participants are working on.

At the risk of over-surveying the population, by utilizing a pre/post-survey model for the main event and a later survey that will capture a wider population after the iterative stages have begun, we should assess change over time to analyze the degree to which the project is being successful and to identify weaknesses as we look to a second year of implementation. Although the first survey will be focused on gathering data to make sure we tailor our collaborative workshop to the participants’ needs, we will include benchmarking questions that we can return to later in the survey so that we can assess how the first cadre of leaders view cultural change across the institution and support for their work through time.