

## **SWOT Analysis: Building Communities, Expanding Opportunities**

### **Strengths**

The grand challenge of “Building Communities, Expanding Opportunities” demands the engagement of the humanities, social and behavioral sciences, arts, and professional schools. KU is poised to address this challenge by drawing on existing faculty excellence and the support of its research centers and Institutes. This theme encompasses multiple areas of research and creative expression—for example, disparities and social justice, human and civil rights, law and public policy, educational opportunities, healthy families and communities, civic engagement and participation. The theme requires us to respond ethically to pressing social problems in our local and global communities. KU can build on its history of engaged scholarship, and leverage its strengths, to become a national leader by forming partnerships committed to developing human potential by building communities and expanding opportunities.

- Theme lends itself well to potential exchanges among humanities, social and behavioral sciences, arts, and professional schools. It draws from existing faculty research energy and excellence in numerous disciplines, schools, and centers.
- Emerging research clusters in: Addressing Disparities and Promoting Social Justice; Expanding Opportunities through Education; Building Healthy Communities; Migration and Changing Communities; and others.
- Themes that cut across research clusters —inequalities, identities, civic engagement, collaborative action, changing nature of urban and rural communities—provide additional opportunities for conceptualizing problems in collaborative ways.
- Record of community-engaged scholarship and participatory research around issues listed above.
- Campus leadership and synergies in existing organizations, including the Hall Center for the Humanities, the Institute for Policy & Social Research, the Center for Research on Learning, the Life Span Institute, and others.

### **Weaknesses**

Limitations of infrastructure, incentives, and funding across campus dampen KU’s leadership role in the theme. This theme invites multidisciplinary collaboration from the humanities and social sciences, disciplines without a strong tradition of collaborative research. There are institutional disincentives to launching collaborative projects: department and promotion and tenure committees typically value “single-authored” works, community-engaged learning and scholarship is typically undervalued, excessive non-scholarship demands on faculty time preclude collaborative team-building, and cross school faculty appointments are uncommon. KU has invested few resources to launch collaborative research or to hire more

senior faculty in key areas and retain them to sustain “critical mass.” KU has not established a history of support from foundations, such as Ford and Carnegie, that fund multidisciplinary research on community, social problems, and social justice

- Institutional disincentives (including annual merit, promotion and tenure processes) to engage in collaborative research across disciplines and schools in this area, reinforcing the “silo” effect.
- KU Endowment has not historically played a role in relationship-building with foundations to support research.
- Lack of valuing non-traditional research products (e.g., practice guidance such as manuals, technology-based tools) that might have high impact for building communities and expanding opportunities.
- Key areas within the theme have gaps or shortages in faculty areas of expertise (e.g., humanistic social problems research, advanced statistics and computing); there is an institutional reluctance to hire established scholars in tenured ranks.
- Graduate recruitment issues (lack of competitive funding) affects our ability to create a high profile in this area; graduate recruitment and profile/reputation have a mutually reinforcing effect on each other.

### **Opportunities**

Our theme speaks broadly to issues that are important to Kansas, the region, and the world and provides opportunities for research that addresses social and policy problems. Traditional funding agencies (e.g., NSF, NIH, Department of Education) support research in this area, but there are untapped sources of support, especially among foundations (e.g., Ford, Carnegie, Spencer). Hiring scholar-leaders in more senior roles could enliven research and create synergies across units, as could building stronger intellectual bridges between CLAS and the professional schools. Supplementing these efforts with greater investment in existing faculty, with a track record of multidisciplinary research activity related to our theme, will enable KU to partner with government and private agencies to shape public policy and influence debates about disparities and social justice.

- Opportunities to hire emerging scholar-leaders at more senior levels.
- Development of existing faculty into scholar-leaders that can work collaboratively across disciplines.
- Strong interest in having public policy be informed by scholarly work on these issues.
- Significant external opportunities for funding work in these areas (NSF, NIH, Department of Education, as well as major foundations such as Ford, Carnegie, Spencer).
- Growing recognition of disparities as a social problem worthy of systematic study and collaborative public action.

## Threats

Within our theme, there are several well established research programs, especially in the areas of education, children and families, and community health promotion. In other areas, such as law and society and migration, we have several prominent and important research initiatives, but little that is institutionalized. Whether established or nascent, these research programs depend on one or two researchers, making KU especially vulnerable to the loss of lead faculty scholars. These areas of research call out for engaged scholarship, focusing more public attention on our work. Good research on social problems often challenges conventional wisdom and long-held assumptions and can engender social and political controversy.

- Other universities are aggressively recruiting our high-profile faculty, especially those successful in external funding, as well as trans-disciplinary, problem-solving faculty-scholars.
- Because less external funding is available and competition is increasing, faculty may choose to focus their energy and time on their research rather than on grant applications with a lower probability of success.
- External grants provide insufficient institutional support structure, including course release and project management.
- Several of the research areas within our theme—e.g., immigration, inequality, injustice—are controversial and could attract heated political and ideological attention.
- Other universities are more strategic in identifying and pursuing future research areas. KU is often a late entrant into emerging areas of research.