SoE Future committee and inclusive planning process

A collaborative actionable foundation

This paper was published in June 2015. The ideas and recommendations within it are among dozens of suggestions that arose from the Stanford Engineering Future process. Share your thoughts with us at SoEFutureFeedback@stanford.edu.
After a preplanning process with a small group of faculty in fall 2014, the SoE Future Committee was appointed in January 2015. The committee co-chairs were Arun Majumdar, a professor of mechanical engineering, and Jennifer Widom, senior associate dean for faculty and academic affairs in SoE. Majumdar recently came to Stanford after serving as vice president for energy at Google and founding director of the Advanced Research Projects Agency-Energy (ARPA-E) at the U.S. Department of Energy, where he also was acting undersecretary for energy. He also spent a large fraction of his professional career on the faculty of the University of California-Berkeley. Widom is a professor and former chair of Stanford’s Department of Computer Science.

The committee was composed of one faculty representative from each of SoE’s nine departments and the Institute for Computational & Mathematical Engineering; two faculty members from outside engineering; three students (one undergraduate, one joint engineering/MBA, one PhD); a staff member; and the executive director of the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design. The departmental representatives were all midcareer faculty — associate or young full professors — enabling particularly forward- and outward-looking discussions and recommendations. [See full committee list, attached.]

The phases of committee work, were:

1. Gather knowledge and information from all our stakeholders and also beyond the Stanford diaspora.
2. Aggregate and summarize the gathered information into preliminary themes and recommendations in the form of draft whitepapers.
3. Circulate whitepaper drafts and iterate with stakeholders.
4. Produce the final findings and recommendations.

An aggressive timeline was set: Complete all work by mid-June 2015 (i.e., within five months), in a process consistent with SoE’s bottom-up and entrepreneurial culture. Naturally, a foundational goal was to produce compelling themes and actionable recommendations.

The input during the information-gathering phase was diverse, starting with each SoE department presenting its vision and ideas for the future in an open forum, and a simple survey sent to all faculty and staff to get a quick initial sense of the overall sentiment of the school. Members of the committee reached out to talk with all of the school’s stakeholders: faculty inside and outside of SoE, staff, students, alumni, academic leaders in peer institutions and other thought leaders. A formal Call for New Ideas, emphasizing but not requiring interdisciplinary or far-reaching ideas, yielded an unprecedented 88 proposals from faculty and others in SoE.
The committee was particularly intent on making the process as open and inclusive as possible. Numerous avenues were available for SoE faculty, staff and students to become involved. The 88 proposals submitted in response to the Call for New Ideas provided a wealth of material, generating excitement within the committee, across the school and beyond. Once the committee distilled topics framed in a set of whitepapers — operational recommendations, educational recommendations and research themes — a second round of discussions with stakeholders invited more focused feedback. In addition to in-person feedback, interim whitepaper drafts were posted on an online discussion forum, resulting in many useful suggestions and discussions from across SoE. The online forum was particularly effective in ensuring that the process remained transparent and inclusive through to its conclusion.

Naturally, not all of the 88 submitted New Ideas found their way into the committee’s whitepapers, but a large fraction of the proposals had some direct influence.

The final 20 whitepapers encompassing research, education and operations were presented formally to the dean and senior associate deans in May 2015. A small group headed by the dean then sorted the recommendations into four categories:

1. **Immediate straightforward action (“just do it!”).**
2. **Actions that may entail some cultural changes and will take collaborative review to move forward.**
3. **Projects and programs that require fundraising and/or resources.**
4. **Suggestions that would not be pursued.**

A final review of action items with the school’s senior associate deans, department chairs and other stakeholders will inform the next steps.

Because of the quality and excitement surrounding the proposals, and the school- and university-wide connections they fostered, 15 of the proposals will be made public to the Stanford community, with a hope that they will inspire additional discussion and collaboration.