

# Strategic Plan

agora. a gathering place for shared conversation, debate, and action ... The Stavros Niarchos Foundation Agora Institute seeks to realize the promise of the ancient agora in modern times, by strengthening opportunities for people of all backgrounds to dialogue across difference, vigorously contest values and ideas that form the foundation of pluralistic democracy, and act together to have voice in developing solutions that lead to a better world.

Our objective is to translate the best insights from academic scholarship into actionable knowledge in the real world. As we are a university-based institute, our students and faculty are our core constituencies. However, through our research, teaching, and practice, our objective is to impact people who are or will become leaders of the modern-day agora. This includes the community leaders, advocates, non-governmental organizations, party organizations, public thinkers, and arbiters of the public information sphere who are catalysts of civil society around the world, and the students at Johns Hopkins who will go on to fill those positions. These leaders of the modern agora act as intermediaries connecting people to the political process, to allow proper functioning of the norms, behaviors, and institutions that make liberal democracy possible. We organize our work around three core functions:

- **Discovery:** At the core of the SNF Agora Institute is a group of Johns Hopkins University– based scholars who will catalyze transformative, multi-disciplinary inquiry to understand democratic decline and resilience, and to identify possible interventions.
- **Design:** SNF Agora scholars will collaborate with practitioners to test practical interventions and translate academic research into usable knowledge for the world.
- **Dialogue:** Created as a forum for broad engagement, deliberation, and education, the SNF Agora Institute will share our work with the public through teaching, training, writing, and convening in order to strengthen citizens’ capacity for productive participation and leadership in democracy.

## Contents

Vision.....	3
Mission.....	3
Values .....	3
<b>1. DISCOVERY .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1.1. Faculty .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1.2. Scholarship .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1.3. Faculty Integration.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1.4. Fellows .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1.5. Culture .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1.6. Partnerships &amp; Impact .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2. DESIGN .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2.1. Action Tanks .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2.2. Case Studies.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2.3. Data .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2.4. Culture .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2.4.1. Work Environment .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2.4.2. Stakeholders .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>2.4.3. Perspectives.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>3. DIALOGUE .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>3.1. Education.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>3.2. Training .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>3.3. Forums &amp; Formats .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>3.4. Culture .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>3.5. Platforms .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>3.6. Network.....</b>	<b>9</b>
Administrative Information.....	10

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## Stavros Niarchos Foundation Agora Institute (SNFAI)

### Description:

We are an academic and public forum that integrates research, teaching, and practice to improve and expand powerful civic engagement and informed, inclusive dialogue as the cornerstone of robust global democracy. We work by generating scholarly insights and transforming them into usable knowledge for civic and political actors who can enable real-world change.

### Stakeholder(s):

#### Hahrie Han :

*Inaugural Director, SNF Agora Institute, Professor of Political Science*

*nian agora, a gathering place for shared conversation, debate, and action that became the heart of democratic governance in Athens.*

#### Stavros Niarchos Foundation :

*Founded in 2017 with a visionary \$150 million gift to Johns Hopkins University from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, the SNF Agora Institute draws inspiration from the ancient Athe-*

#### Johns Hopkins University

## Vision

The promise of the ancient agora is realized in modern times

## Mission

To integrate research, teaching, and practice to improve and expand powerful civic engagement and informed, inclusive dialogue as the cornerstone of robust global democracy.

## Values

**Beliefs:** WHAT WE BELIEVE -- To understand and define how we might realize the promise of the ancient agora in modern times, we engaged in an (always ongoing) process of research, discussion, and consensus-building with our core audiences and partners throughout the year. Our goals in this process were:

**Challenges:** Audience Discovery: We sought to understand the core needs of leaders of agora-like spaces around the world, and what challenges they face in partnering with university-based institutions to strengthen their work.

**Differentiation:** Differentiation: The SNF Agora Institute joins a wide range of organizations working to improve global democracy. While we look forward to collaborating with these organizations, we also wanted to identify the unique contributions we can make to this broader conversation.

**Consensus:** Consensus-Building: As we undertook this investigation, we also sought to develop insight from and build consensus with core partners at Johns Hopkins and elsewhere on the work we could do to fulfill these needs. From our research, a set of core principles emerged to guide our strategic vision. We also built some consensus around a few early areas of focus.

**Principles:** Our core principles:

**Democracy:** Democracy depends on a robust agora that enables powerful civic engagement, the free and open exchange of ideas, and inclusive dialogue. SNF Agora's focus on the agora as the cornerstone of liberal democracy defines and differentiates our work, allowing us to probe questions of civic deliberation and engagement, and focus on civil society leaders as our core audience. Focusing on the agora allows the SNF Agora Institute to explore the vulnerabilities in civic discourse and engagement in the United States and around the world, and the intermediary, interstitial spaces in democracy that connect citizens to the political process and exist to overcome people's natural tendencies towards parochialism. As Alexis de Tocqueville proposed in the early 19th century, "In democratic countries, the science of association is the fundamental science. Progress in all the others depends on progress in this one." If citizens in a democracy are "to remain civilized, or become so, they must develop and perfect the art of associating to the same degree that equality of conditions increases among them." De Tocqueville, like so many others, sees the agora as foundational to making liberal democracy work. Unlike organizations that focus on policy outcomes, the SNF Agora Institute seeks to become a space for discovery to understand the behavioral and institutional dynamics of the agora, and a public forum through which to normalize the inclusive dialogue, contestation, and debate that are central to making democracy work.

**Inquiry:** A spirit of collaborative, translational inquiry animates our work. Our scholarship simultaneously meets the highest standards of academic rigor and provides actionable insights for real-world actors. As a university-based institute, SNF Agora will be able to bring an intellectual permanence to the questions and challenges that face global democracy. Our research, like the best research has always done, will explore in depth the nuances of a complex and uncertain world. Importantly, this research will be conducted in an environment that fosters team-oriented, multi-disciplinary inquiry that puts academic research into conversation with the practitioners who can effect real-world change. The strength of our impact will depend on the quality of our scholarship. Academic research and democratic processes are united by the fact that people must accept uncertainty over outcomes in exchange for certainty over process. In research, academics must be able to enter into inquiry without knowing the answers, focusing instead on a methodologically sound approach. Thus, we are committed to protecting the integrity of the research process to enable our scholars to do problem-driven, solutions-oriented work. We seek to promote and model an environment that normalizes the vigorous contestation of ideas that is central to making both scholarly inquiry and democracy work.

**Impact:** Our toughest societal challenges are not just informational, but also strategic and relational. These problems require us to break down silos—across disciplines, ideology, domains of practice, and so on—to enable new translational collaboration. The SNF Agora Institute will ultimately be judged by its impact on the public domain. In speaking with civil society leaders around the world, two key challenges came to the fore. The first challenge was about building the cross-sectoral, individual, and institutional relationships that allowed new solutions to emerge. The second challenge was about developing tools to help them navigate strategic uncertainty in dynamic political environments. Addressing these challenges will require more than simply communicating scholarly information in accessible ways; we will need to create spaces that foster the strategic relationships—among faculty, visiting scholars, collaborators, civic leaders, and other partners engaged in complementary work—that are needed to solve our knottiest problems. These spaces constitute a form of the agora, in which people develop the muscles they need to solve problems together

**Capacity:** Our greatest impact comes from strengthening people's capacity to act together through teaching, training, convening, and shared learning. Given the complexity of the problems we face, we recognize that there are no quick fixes or formulaic answers. Instead, we must develop and train students and leaders who will carry the imprint of the SNF Agora Institute into the world. This includes students who become academic researchers; students who go into civil society, politics, business, and other domains of work; and practitioners who adopt our work to help solve problems in their own fields. It also includes our work as a convener, and our ability to bring diverse individuals and organizations together to deliberate and solve problems. Even as we carve our own unique niche and areas of focus, we

also seek to exploit the distributed capabilities of scholars and practitioners in the field in the United States and abroad. The questions we are seeking to solve are too complex for any one actor to solve alone; we seek to become the center node of a network of like institutions, inviting and convening comparative perspectives as we address these questions. As Johns Hopkins has shown in its response to the global coronavirus pandemic of 2020, our university has the human, material, and technological capabilities needed to become an intellectual center of activity for tackling the world's most challenging problems. Thus, even as the SNF Agora Institute focuses on discovery designed to strengthen the modern-day agora, we also recognize the need to collaborate with a wide range of partners who can expand our expertise in needed areas.

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## 1. DISCOVERY

*Address the causes of the decline of democracy and identify actionable solutions*

The notion of discovery refers to the core academic mission that is at the heart of the SNF Agora Institute. The institute will bring together world-class researchers from across a range of disciplines who are thinking about the causes of the decline of democracy and identifying actionable solutions. Through shared academic discovery, our institute seeks to examine these issues broadly and over time, and to engage in truly transformative inquiry.

### 1.1. Faculty

*Identify, recruit, and retain the highest quality faculty*

### 1.2. Scholarship

*Develop institutional mechanisms to provide resources and support for scholarship that meets the highest standards of academic rigor and to promote cross-disciplinary collaboration*

### 1.3. Faculty Integration

*Integrate SNF Agora faculty with existing faculty at Johns Hopkins and the Krieger School of Arts and Sciences to expand scope and impact of work and to build on existing institutional strengths*

#### **Stakeholder(s):**

**SNF Agora Faculty**

**Krieger School of Arts and Sciences Faculty**

**Johns Hopkins Faculty**

### 1.4. Fellows

*Expand SNF Agora's reach by providing access to a community of visiting fellows who participate in the institute through short-term engagements*

### 1.5. Culture

*Create an institutional culture that supports scholarship with a diverse range of perspectives and cultivates the open and free exchange of ideas*

### 1.6. Partnerships & Impact

*Become the center of a node of like scholars and institutions around the world doing related work, so that we multiply our impact not only through the people involved in the institute but also through the partnerships we create*

## 2. DESIGN

*Design opportunities for leaders to develop the strategic and relational capacities to solve public problems*

The translational goals of the SNF Agora Institute compel us to act not only as scholars but also as architects, designing opportunities for leaders of the modern day agora to develop the strategic and relational capacities they need to solve public problems. Through action tanks, case studies, and other projects and programs, the SNF Agora Institute will work with partners in civil society, government, and elsewhere to identify challenges and create opportunities to bring people together and equip them to move into a problem-solving mode.

### 2.1. Action Tanks

*Create “action tanks” or formalized mechanisms through which real-world practitioners and multi-disciplinary groups of scholars can work together in sustained fashion to solve discrete public problems that relate to SNF Agora’s mandate*

### 2.2. Case Studies

*Develop case studies that provide practitioners with readings and teaching tools they can use to inform and strengthen their own practice*

### 2.3. Data

*Support the development of “go-to” open-source data on the modern-day agora*

### 2.4. Culture

*Support an organizational culture that upholds the following values:*

#### 2.4.1. Work Environment

*Foster collaboration and applied problem-solving*

Cultural norms and a work environment that fosters collaboration and applied problem-solving

### 2.4.2. Stakeholders

*Welcome non-university civic and political stakeholders*

An environment that is equally welcoming to non-university civic and political stakeholders regardless of background

**Stakeholder(s):**

**Civic Stakeholders**

**Political Stakeholders**

### 2.4.3. Perspectives

*Respect and support a diverse range of perspectives*

Respect and support for a diverse range of perspectives

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### 3. DIALOGUE

*Provide a forum for open and productive engagement, deliberation, and education*

The SNF Agora Institute is committed to being a forum for open and productive engagement, deliberation, and education, and we welcome the free exchange of ideas from all viewpoints. Through our courses, trainings, symposia, conferences and workshops, publications, lectures, author talks, and other activities, we will share the best research-oriented social science with students, policy makers, and the broader public. In doing so, we aim both to model and develop the skills citizens require for participation and leadership in democracy. We are particularly interested in highlighting pockets of democratic resilience in this context, in order to identify and scale solutions for the challenges we face together.

#### 3.1. Education

*Develop and coordinate a variety of educational offerings and opportunities for students*

#### 3.2. Training

*Provide training for leaders from civil society*

#### 3.3. Forums & Formats

*Convene scholars and other thought leaders in a variety of forums and formats to teach, train, deliberate, and debate*

#### 3.4. Culture

*Develop a culture that seeks out and welcomes diverse perspectives in public conversations and convenings*

#### 3.5. Platforms

*Utilize a variety of traditional, digital, and social media platforms to disseminate insights, dialogue, and training widely, including the development of digital content*

#### 3.6. Network

*Create a network of partners to amplify the work of the institute*

### Administrative Information

**Start Date:** 2020-06-30

**End Date:**

**Publication Date:** 2020-11-12

**Source:** [https://snfagora.jhu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/SNF-Agora-Strategic-Plan\\_Public.pdf](https://snfagora.jhu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/SNF-Agora-Strategic-Plan_Public.pdf)

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