United States University
2019-2022 Strategic Plan

Pillars of Progress

The 2018-19 Strategic Planning Process: Participation and Commitment

In January 2018, President Stargardter requested that the Board initiate a new strategic planning cycle, driven primarily by two considerations. First, the extant Strategic Plan was due to run its course sometime in 2019. Secondly, the December 1, 2017 change in ownership to Aspen Group, Inc. (AGI) made 2018 a logical calendar year in which to engage in a process focused on providing strategic recommendations by late in 2018. The monograph by Dr. Karen E. Hinton, "A Practical Guide to Strategic Planning in Higher Education," (Society for College and University Planning, 2012) as well as leadership roles in strategic planning processes at other institutions informed and guided the President's overall implementation of the planning process.

An "All Hands" USU community meeting was held on March 14, 2018 during which the new strategic planning cycle was discussed. The recent history of strategic planning at USU was reviewed and the importance of the role of all community members in strategic planning for the University's future was emphasized. Finally, the adoption of four essential characteristics was announced:

- A commitment to an inclusive, collaborative, and transparent process
- A commitment to systemic communication resulting in the receipt of input from all constituencies
- A commitment to accountability focusing on functional areas as opposed to individuals
- A commitment to the alignment of the strategic planning process with the University's budgeting process

The initial meeting of the Strategic Planning Steering Committee occurred on March 26, 2018. President Stargardter chaired the meeting and committee members agreed to meet every 14 days in order to meet the goal of presenting the Board of Trustees with strategic recommendations by late November. Committee members consisted of the Provost, Associate Provost, Chief Financial Officer, Deans from the College of Nursing and Health Sciences and College of Business and Management, Director of the MSN – FNP Program, Director of Financial Aid, Registrar, Director of Enrollment and the Network and Systems Administrator. AGI representation included the Chief Academic Officer and the Director of Student Services; AGI's CEO addressed the committee on April 11. A University-wide email confirming the empaneling of the committee was sent on April 18, 2018.

The Steering Committee reconnected with the University community in a memo dated June 8, 2018. By that time, the committee had taken four actions: it resolved to (1) recommend retention of the institution's mission:

United States University provides professional and personal educational opportunities, with a special outreach to underserved groups. Through campus and online courses, the University offers affordable, relevant and accessible undergraduate and graduate degree programs and certificate programs in a supportive student-centered learning environment.

(2) The maintenance of extant core values likewise was unanimously recommended for retention:

- *Affordability*
- *Quality*
- *Integrity*
- *Diversity*

- *Inclusiveness*
- *Life-Long Learning*

Additionally, the community was informed that the steering committee had adopted an (3) institutional aspiration, "to make college affordable," while creating a vision to, "provide quality, relevant degree and certificate programs with exceptional student service while being the leader in affordable education, [enabling] our students to achieve their fullest potential to live, work and lead within the global community." Finally, (4) the Steering Committee saw fit to announce four preliminary strategic pillars:

- *Growth and Sustainability*
- *Relevance*
- *Culture of Innovation*
- *Quality*

An extended participatory phase of the strategic planning process was announced to the University community in late June. Steering Committee members were each assigned constituency groups with which to meet in order to discuss the status of the planning process in addition to receiving input as to the suggested pillars. Recommendations as to metrics (enrollment goals, graduation rates, levels of student support, etc.) that could be used to measure progress were also to be solicited by committee members. Input was received in varying degrees from the following groups: Core Faculty; Adjunct Faculty; Business Office Staff; Financial Aid Staff; Registrar and Student Services Staff; Admissions Staff; Alumni; and Students. Meetings and discussions continued throughout the Summer and early Fall months. These discussions informed the creation of a series of "support beams," meant to reinforce the pillars referenced above:

- *Growth and Sustainability*: making college affordable again; programmatic growth; addressing the national nursing shortage; undergraduate degree completion opportunities for non-completers; lower student acquisition costs; enrollment growth; revenue growth; technology enhancements (a "smart CRM," etc.); zero-based budgeting process

- *Relevance*: programmatic advisory boards; career services; alumni services; employer satisfaction survey creation and data; maintenance of appropriate marketing strategies; "right product, right time, right away"

- *Culture of Innovation*: multi-tiered advising levels: financial aid advisors; enrollment advisors; new-student advisers, academic advisers; Monthly Payment Plan; improvement of technology access; virtual professional training (current focus on telehealth); Office of Field Experience placement rates; experiential learning at undergraduate level; "linked" undergraduate and graduate programs designed to accelerate time to degree

- *Quality:* accreditation and approvals; federal state, regional and specialized institutional and/or programmatic approvals; compliance with all reporting requirements and agencies; student success: persistence, retention, graduation, board pass rates, certification pass rates, etc.; ongoing assessment of outcomes: course, program, institutional; ongoing assessment of student engagement; creation of and adherence to an Institutional Effectiveness Plan; ongoing assessment of faculty engagement; end of course survey; student satisfaction survey; recruiting process for faculty and staff; professional development opportunities for faculty and staff; faculty and staff retention; succession plan for leadership positions and development of career ladders

The Steering Committee continued its meetings into October and in the process recommended one modification in addition to defining the four pillars. Given USU's growing student trajectory, the committee changed the initial pillar from "Growth and Sustainability," to "Growth and Scalability." Definitions follow below:

- *Growth and Scalability*. Grow in a scalable fashion, enabling USU to provide quality education to its students while remaining financially stable

- *Relevance*. Deliver the right opportunities at the right time in the right way by understanding market needs and conditions

- *Culture of Innovation*. Challenge the status quo in all USU does and support changes across the University that lead to improved USU student and institutional outcomes

- *Quality*. Enhance operational effectiveness across USU to exceed external and internal expectations

In late 2018, the Executive Council (President, CFO and Interim Provost) met weekly to expand the Strategic Plan's contents as described by the Steering Committee, define a plan reporting matrix that would form the basis of this living document, include the recommendations from the WSCUC Special Visit held in November 2018, assign an Executive Council member as a steward for each Strategy to lead pertinent efforts, and refine timelines and measures. The plan includes many of the support beams in its strategies and initiatives and each goal is one of the initial pillars. In January 2019, the Steering Committee met to review the full reporting

document and agreed that the Executive Council members assigned as stewards would work individually with any University staff or faculty members to refine metrics as needed.

USU's Board Chair asked four Board members to form a committee to review the Strategic Plan draft and provide input and recommendations that memorialize the strategic direction of United States University throughout FY 2020, 2021, and 2022. Following receipt of this input, the Strategic Plan was finalized and presented by Dr. Stargardter to the Board at its March 5, 2019 meeting. Following discussion and approval, the Plan was presented to the University community in April, with the agreement that activities making up this plan would begin July 1, 2019. A series of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) will be included in quarterly Board Packets for review and discussion as part of the "President's Report," at all future Board Meetings.

Answering the Challenges to Higher Education and Recommendations from WSCUC

United States University recognizes that, "the landscape of higher education – the growing variety of…institutions, the cultural environment, the complete ecosystem – is changing rapidly and disruptively." (Staley and Trinkle, Educause Review) It further acknowledges that more than 70% of the emerging student population may work while attending school, and study partially or fully online while supporting a family. (Sharma, Palvia, and Kumar, Journal of Information Technology Case and Application Research). Further, the expectations of this emerging student body are higher than ever before. As a result, fully engaging students on a 24/7 on-demand basis will be accomplished primarily through the provision of innovative online pedagogies, courses and programs.

The University intends to respond to these and other disruptive challenges by remaining steadfast in its commitment to implement the variety of emerging online communication, visualization, and simulation technologies that will make it possible to provide the affordable, relevant, and accessible undergraduate and graduate degree programs and certificates cited within the institution's mission. The parameters established by the institutional learning outcomes will guide the University as it grows and expands the student population within its core academic pillars: business, management, technology, nursing, health sciences, and education:

1. Effectively use information from academic and popular sources
2. Demonstrate cultural and global awareness as responsible citizens and professionals
3. Exhibit mastery of knowledge, skills, and abilities within a discipline
4. Write effectively according to disciplines and/or audiences
5. Effectively express ideas and information verbally
6. Collaborate effectively as members and leaders of diverse teams
7. Apply quantitative analysis and techniques to address complex challenges
8. Integrate ethical principles and civic life
9. Objectively analyze and evaluate issues in order to formulate judgments

Further, the strategic plan specifically addresses the six recommendations made by the WSCUC Visiting Committee in their report to the Commission

1. Evaluate and set realistic enrollment targets based on market analysis and resource allocations necessary to sustain program quality - Goal 1, Strategy 3, Initiative 3.3
2. Closely monitor financial performance relative to plan to ensure that realistic budgets based on accurate estimates of enrollment are developed - Goal 1, Strategy 3, Initiative 3.3
3. Optimize the implementation of the Service Level Agreement through regular assessment, including all stakeholders, of the efficacy and quality of services provided – Goal 1, Strategy 2, all initiatives
4. Complete the strategic plan and establish protocols for monitoring its progress and outcomes - Goal 4, Strategy 4, all initiatives
5. Utilize the existing assessment infrastructure of student learning outcomes to ensure the quality and rigor of academic programs. Goal 4, Strategy 1, Initiative 1.1
6. Clarify the decision-making process for the selection and development of the academic program portfolio including degree levels and content areas - Goal 1, Strategy 3, Initiative 3.1

The Role of the Steward

In discussing how the University can move forward in an efficient way towards meeting the challenging goals posed by this strategic plan, the Executive Council determined that it is their responsibility and duty as the leadership team to ensure ongoing progress and accountability. The Council, i.e., the President, Provost and CFO, all know that the pressing business of the University can often leave little to no time for working on special projects particularly given the small staff size at USU. To that end, each Council member has been assigned Strategies and Initiatives to steward, according to the plan's timelines and against the plan's metrics. As a Steward, they have agreed to bring all the right people, regardless of departmental unit, together to address the plan's initiatives and to personally engage and lead the teams. As well, they have agreed to ensure that staff and faculty members' individual goals fit within the parameters of the strategic plan goals, strategies and initiatives and vice versa. They have pledged to include all members of the USU community in the work needed to accomplish this challenging plan.

Goals and Strategies

Introduction

A review of USU's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats undertaken during the course of the strategic planning process did not reveal any material factors entirely unknown to the University community. It was, for example, very clear that prior to December 2017, when USU's ownership changed to AGI, that the University was challenged seriously by consistently low enrollments leading to ongoing revenue shortfalls. While removed from WSCUC probation in 2015, its seven-year term of accreditation carried with it a notice of concern. On the other hand, the dedicated faculty and staff assembled by USU continued its overall focus on student success. End of courses surveys, graduate surveys, and student satisfaction surveys uniformly confirmed the institutional commitment to a student-centric learning experience.

The change in USU following acquisition by AGI has been positive and strong, recognized during the November 2018 Special Visit conducted by WSCUC. As the Visiting Team observed, the University is poised to migrate from a focus on sustainability to one of managed growth and scalability. Community members collectively agree that there exists a clear opportunity to grow the academic portfolio at all degree levels. New undergraduate degrees designed using a degree completion model will greatly assist in providing the stepping stones to new and existing graduate degree programs. This will need to be done carefully and creatively, however, due to competition in many disciplines across the United States. With the ability of students in the newly approved BSIT program being able to obtain IT certifications through their program and use the unique monthly payment plan to pay for college, USU has shown that its degree design process is a creative one that is poised to become successful in the market place.

This Strategic Plan, built on four "pillars of progress," is meant to add fuel to USU's initial efforts at changing its culture and improving its programs and services. It is meant to support the University as all its faculty and staff truly transform the institution through growth, innovation, and efficiency.

Goal 1: Growth and Scalability

The premise of Goal 1 recognizes that the University is well on its way to attaining financial stability. Since the change in ownership to Aspen Group Inc. (AGI), USU has experienced phenomenal enrollment growth, based largely on the expansion of its MSN-FNP program and the dramatic marketing enhancements brought in by the new owner. The University understands that to continue its trajectory financially it must scale its processes and procedures in a way that is smart and controlled. The concept of Goal 1, therefore, is that USU will "grow in a scalable fashion so as to enable it to provide quality education to its students, while remaining financially stable." The University aspires to grow into an institution that provides multiple programmatic offerings supported by well controlled, organized, efficient and effective operations.

Strategy 1 of this goal is to ensure that the University sets clear and achievable financial expectations to establish and build on a solid financial footing. Initiatives in this strategy will be stewarded by the CFO and include developing financial planning processes and monitoring their progress; lowering student acquisition costs; and monitoring the cost of instruction to ensure quality and sustainability.

Strategy 2 of this goal is to optimize the Service Level Agreement with AGI and this goal will be stewarded by the President. The strategy includes both regular assessment of the SLA twice yearly and development of a process for improvement. In addition, the University wishes to participate in a process that allows leveraging of the resources of AGI, Aspen University, and USU to lower costs and improve efficiency.

Strategy 3 of this goal is to develop a plan for achievable portfolio expansion within WSCUC guidelines and will be stewarded by the Provost. The initiatives under the strategy include but are not limited to developing an Academic Master Plan for the University, clarifying the

decision-making process for selecting and developing new academic programs to achieve a balanced portfolio, prioritizing viable opportunities, developing two new programs per year with appropriate WSCUC and discipline specific accreditation, and monitoring enrollment for all new and existing programs.

Strategy 4 of this goal, also stewarded by the Provost, involves the continuous improvement of the USU advising methodology to support higher student acquisition, persistence, retention and cohort graduation rates, as well as ensuring that graduates are highly employable in the field of their choice by virtue of graduating from USU.

Goal 2: Relevance

The premise of Goal 2, delivering "the right opportunities at the right time in the right way by understanding market needs and conditions," lies with the assumption that if all members of the University community have a good understanding of our marketplace, USU would be better able to increase enrollments and ensure ongoing financial stability. This includes truly knowing what our students want and need, not only in terms of degree programs but also in terms of services to ensure their success. It includes investment in staff and faculty as well as in community partnerships. The University aspires to have established a deep understanding of the marketplace and to deliver the right products in the right way to those seeking educational opportunities.

Strategy 1 of this goal is to have the right people in place to support the University infrastructure and is stewarded by the President. It includes working with Human Resources to research and determine the appropriate experience for all positions, then hiring individuals with that experience as well as assisting current staff in attaining that experience if they do not already possess it. Also included is the development of additional training for all staff following a review and revision of the staff and faculty orientations.

Strategy 2 of this goal, also stewarded by the President, is firmly rooted in alignment of the strategic visions of AGI and USU, based on supportable market data as well as information obtained from members of the greater USU community. Following analysis of the data, faculty and staff must be given the opportunity to learn and clearly understand the information in order to meet the assumption underlying this goal.

Strategy 3 of this goal brings community partnerships into the academic planning and implementation process. Stewarded by the Provost, this goal includes solidifying existing partner relationships through outreach, adding new partnerships, and establishing a USU Alumni Association and selected program advisory boards. Because we know the importance of referrals to USU, whether they be from graduates and their families, faculty or staff, it is important to ongoing growth to invest the time required to nurture University relationships with those individuals who already know USU.

Goal 3: Culture of Innovation

Goal 3 looks to both immediate needs as well as the future of USU. Stewarded by the CFO, the strategies in this goal look to "challenge the status quo in all USU does and support changes that lead to improved USU student and institutional outcomes." The University aspires to "provide socially conscious, professionally relevant and universally affordable educational opportunities addressing a variety of 21st century societal needs." This goal capitalizes on AGI founder Mike Matthews' vision of making college affordable. It furthers the work of all faculty and staff to ensure that the University uses technology to its fullest, linking the work in this goal with that of both Goal 1 and 2.

Strategy 1 of this goal, "make college affordable," calls for implementing affordable tuition rates for all degree programs. As the institution scales its processes and engages in the potential of leveraging both Aspen University and USU talent and capacity, it is likely that USU can lower tuition rates over time for all programs. As the University continues to offer the Monthly Payment Plan, currently utilized by almost two-thirds of our students, it will insure that the cash flow model for the University is solid.

Strategy 2 of this goal involves the use of technology by the University to support learning and our students' experience. It involves providing students with mobile access to all systems they need. This strategy also calls on Finance and Academics to work together to ensure faculty understand how to participate in academic technology decision-making, ensuring that technology is part of program review and assessment, and working on the long-term technology road map with AGI to improve technology used by faculty, staff and students to align with the University's strategic needs.

Goal 4: Quality

For USU, the fourth goal, Quality, is meant to carry forward Goal 3, so that operational effectiveness is enhanced across the University thereby exceeding external and internal expectations. The underlying aspiration supporting this goal is that both students and their employers highly value the education provided by USU and recommend it without hesitation. External organizations, such as regional and discipline specific accreditors have provided full and clean accreditation and the University is in compliance with all federal and state regulators.

Strategy 1 of this goal is stewarded by the Provost and engages the University in the use of continuous improvement processes to establish quality measures matching external constituent expectations. Specifically, the strategy calls on the University to use the existing assessment infrastructure to ensure quality and rigor of academic programs as well as to implement this assessment process for all student-facing services units.

Initiatives within **Strategy 2** of this goal will be stewarded by each member of the Executive Council. The University, for example, needs to solidify its process for submitting sub-change requests to WSCUC as well as proposals to discipline-specific accreditors and that activity will be stewarded by the Provost. The regular review of accreditations and approvals will be stewarded by the President, and the CFO will steward activities involved in ensuring 100% compliance with federal and state regulations.

Strategy 3 of this goal involves the design and implementation of a succession plan for University leadership as well as professional development for staff. The establishment of continuous learning and professional development exists for faculty but does not currently exist for staff at all levels. The stewards for these activities will be the Executive Council, working with colleagues at AGI and the Board of Trustees.

Strategy 4 of this goal will be stewarded by the President and is meant to ensure that not only will this Strategic Plan be accomplished, but a funding and reporting strategy will be developed and utilized as the University grows and flourishes.

Strategic Plan Implementation and Reporting Process

Once approved by all, the activities within this Strategic Plan will commence (on or about July 1, 2019). As noted in the plan, it is intended that by year's end, each major unit of the University will have developed its own strategic or master plan to ensure that each unit is working to support and further the University Strategic Plan. The timing of these activities is important so that each unit will have the information necessary to determine funding requirements for its work for the next fiscal year.

The Strategic Planning Steering Committee will review progress on each initiative prior to each Board meeting; stewards or their designees will provide status updates and note successes as well as opportunities for improvement, requests for assistance, and the like. A Dashboard with pertinent performance indicators for each goal, strategy and initiative will be developed for the Board of Trustees to keep them apprised "at a glance" of the progress on the plan. Strategies and initiatives may be updated as accomplished and funding will be reviewed annually.