

Design for Our Future

The Academic Plan for The University of Akron

Introduction

Design for Our Future is the Academic Plan for The University of Akron and serves as the compass to navigate *Charting the Course*, our University's strategic plan. *Design for Our Future* also serves as a bridge document to link the strategic plan and the Academic Scorecard, a foundation document that establishes institutional and unit goals and metrics to allow assessment for the purposes of improvement and accountability. The design principles of our Academic Plan and the metrics of the Academic Scorecard are the operational tools by which we continue to realize the vision and strategic intent that we first envisioned in *Charting the Course*.

Taken together, these three documents and the actions that flow from them illustrate how our collective work over the past year, as we sought to define operational excellence and academic primacy, has come together and continues to build momentum for our success as a university. The University of Akron's *Mission Statement* unifies all three strategic documents. Collectively, these documents demonstrate The University of Akron's unique commitment to the threefold mission of higher education in society: teaching, research and service.

In our quest for a prosperous, 21st Century future, The University of Akron seeks to define a new genre of a great American university – a new results-based model defined by new performance standards.

In contrast to yesterday's model of higher education, where institutional "excellence" was defined largely by selectivity and expense – by how many students were excluded and by how much money was spent per student, regardless of outcomes, we seek to be measured by our effectiveness – by outcomes and achievements and the efficiency of our investments. In short, we seek to be known by the actual results that we achieve and by the success of the communities that we serve.

- Unlike others, we shall not be measured by how many students we exclude, but rather by how much value we add in enabling the success of our students.
- Unlike others, we shall not be measured by the barriers we erect between ourselves and our communities, but by the collaborative impact that we create for each other and for our common future.
- Unlike others, we shall not be measured by the isolation of our disciplines, but by their integration as applied in solving the problems of today.

We seek to provide access to excellence for all students - not exclusion. We seek collaboration with community partners to create new knowledge, to expand human and business capital, and to increase our role in the new global economy. We seek collaboration among our faculty members and with our students and with our staff and contract professionals to enable a brighter tomorrow for all. In so doing, we remain committed to discovery and innovation for the betterment of our students and the community through our teaching and research excellence—we seek to advance our common good.

A History of Access and Excellence

While pursuing our path for the rest of this century, we are grateful to our founders, mindful of our traditions and enthusiastic about our future. A guiding legacy has nurtured and preserved this institution for more than 130 years: to provide students with access to high-quality, postsecondary education, while at the same time partnering in research needed to fuel the industrial and economic growth of the region.

Founded on May 3, 1870, our predecessor, Buchtel College, was a sectarian liberal arts college associated with the Ohio Universalist Convention and named for its benefactor, Akron industrialist John R. Buchtel. During 1913 in the midst of the rubber boom, the assets of Buchtel College were transferred to the City of Akron, and the institution became the non-sectarian, Municipal University of Akron. Subsequently in 1967, the University transitioned to a state-supported institution.

Throughout its history, the University has achieved distinction and recognition for knowledge creation and teaching excellence in collaboration with our community. Today, as a mature, comprehensive metropolitan institution, The University of Akron includes 13 academic units that serve over 24,000 students. It operates on a budget of over \$325 million and offers more than 350 degree programs from the associate to the doctoral level.

To meet the demands of a global 21st Century knowledge economy, *Design for Our Future* articulates the design principles that will be used to establish academic priorities within the clusters of excellence outlined in *Charting the Course*. We see The University of Akron as consisting of this set of four related clusters of excellence that interweave to comprise the tapestry of who we are: (1) discovery and innovation; (2) cultural enrichment, (3) community well being, and (4) economic development.

The Five Design Principles

Drawing on the resources of our community through a series of retreats, forums and other feedback opportunities, we now advance the five principles by which we will design the new University of Akron – an exceptional place for students to learn, grow and succeed in today’s knowledge economy. The five design principles are:

- Leadership
- Engagement
- Innovation
- Inclusive Excellence
- Assessment

These visionary principles express our collective university culture. As an interrelated, interdependent set of principles, they function synergistically to create a dynamic and flexible framework for the University to build its future.

The University of Akron aspires to leadership characterized by engagement, innovation, and inclusiveness. The architecture by which we will assure the leadership of the institution rests on a foundation of assessment—the benchmarking by which we document the impact of our leadership and the degree to which all that we do is marked by the principles of engagement, innovation, and inclusiveness. It is through the transformative power of engaging, innovating, and including—in the content of our curriculum, creation of comprehensive learning environments, expectations for our graduates, structure of our buildings, collaboration with local and global communities, and pursuit of programs of research—that we will define a new performance standard, while also honoring our legacies of access and excellence.

Design Principle 1 – Leadership

To build a better university requires that we establish leadership in the areas in which we have chosen to excel. Institutional leadership requires leading among peer institutions. We are globally or nationally ranked in a number of fields, many of which continue to function as the foundation for economic growth and development and civic and cultural transformation in Northeast Ohio. By systematically investing in selected academic fields, we will maintain a position of national leadership. As we asserted in *Charting the Course*, we seek to lead in all that we do to create and to protect new knowledge and technologies. We seek to lead in all that we do to define the cultural well being of the greater Akron region. We seek to lead as we enhance the general well being of our community, and we seek to lead in the enhancement of the economy of Akron, the state of Ohio, the nation, and the world.

Achieving institutional leadership requires that we create a culture of leadership at all levels in the institution. Through this plan, the University recommits itself to identifying and rewarding operational excellence and leadership that benefits the entire University community. Individual leaders may be students, staff, contract professionals, or faculty members who have demonstrated special distinction in service to the University. We must seek innovative ways to maximize the participatory environment, identify and foster leadership potential, and provide leadership opportunities. As Harvey S. Firestone said, “The growth and development of people is the highest calling of leadership.” The leadership capacity of The University of Akron springs from the leadership of its people and its programs; enabling leadership of employees and students through the expansion of community building, leadership development programs, mentoring support, and innovative partnerships that create teamwork and accomplishment ensures the success of the individual and of the community.

To do this requires a climate of shared leadership that flourishes in a creative climate where people are self-motivated to master long-term goals. As expressed by President Proenza, shared leadership is a process that derives its strength from a community working together toward a common vision, not from vested authority. With shared leadership, we learn from mistakes and welcome change as the challenge of opportunity. Communication is crucial. Shared leadership is inclusive of all; it values diversity, and it recognizes that complex organizations require resources of expertise and creativity. Shared leadership is a process wherein values are integral to the vision and where commitment is embraced because shared dreams challenge and inspire. (May 10, 1999, *Looking Forward*, comments to the University Community)

Design Principle 2 – Engagement

Engagement unites intellectual, cultural, economic, social, political and physical resources and capacities for a common purpose while transforming people and institutions for the betterment of all. At The University of Akron, our engagement must be designed to function for the public good—for our students, the institution and the communities that we serve.

Engagement contributes to student success. We will design our work with students to incorporate appropriate levels of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning opportunities, dynamic student-faculty interactions, enriching educational experiences and a supportive campus environment. We will enrich our students’ education through their participation in a variety of experiential learning opportunities, including service learning and community service, cooperative education, internships and externships, study abroad and international exchange and partnerships, as well as varied opportunities for campus and civic leadership.

Engagement among units and disciplines is fundamental to this design principle. As we focus on engagement, we must foster innovative collaborations across disciplines and between administrative units and academic disciplines that bring to bear the multiple perspectives and varied expertise within this University to provide solutions for complex problems.

Engagement finds expression in community service and collaborations between university and community that are designed to enable the civic and cultural transformation of our local communities, region and state. The increasingly global economy broadens our definition of community to the world, and The University of Akron must extend our own and our students' engagement as citizens of our school, local, state and world communities. Engagement that helps us recognize our place as citizens of the globe with responsibility for the international impact of our actions will transcend the artificial barriers that separate and isolate within and across these communities.

Design Principle 3 – Innovation

A university dedicated to the education and success of its students must depend on a culture of innovation. Optimizing our students' opportunities for success requires an innovative perspective in all services and instructional experiences that touch our students. Developing new and creative ways to meet the ever-changing needs of students challenges our creativity, imaginations and diligence. For our students' benefit, we must, in the words of the Council on Competitiveness "create the conditions that will stimulate individuals and enterprises to innovate and take the lead in the next generation."

The individuals who make up The University of Akron community are the focal point for our innovation. We challenge ourselves to discover, develop and employ emerging technologies in support of teaching, research and excellence in operations. Moreover, through collaborations across disciplines and units, we will innovate with thoughts, discovery, discourse and service to assure success for ourselves and for our world. Indeed, as innovators, we will develop and apply new knowledge to create new products and yield enterprising collaborations of campus and community partners for cultural enrichment, community well-being and economic development.

Innovation yields value in teaching, research and service. Innovation leads to new program offerings and creative instructional delivery mechanisms. Repositioning ourselves in an increasingly competitive postsecondary environment requires new approaches to recruitment and retention. Challenging fiscal times and demographic changes, coupled with an increasing need to provide quality education, provoke paradigm shifts in lifelong learning opportunities and the means by which they are funded. Traditional processes

and practices require review and renewal for the most strategic actions and investments in a time of increased accountability.

In our global economy, the University's commitment to the design principle of innovation must increase. Knowledge communities of faculty, students and community partners must generate new perspectives that bridge disciplines and institutions. An entrepreneurial spirit should infuse all that we do academically and operationally. Innovation as an underlying principle challenges us to approach our work with the freedom to create new ideas and new solutions, seeking ways to effect the changes that transform and differentiate.

Design Principle 4 – Inclusive Excellence

Inclusive excellence at The University of Akron is defined as valuing differences with the intention of promoting learning, critical thinking, and personal enrichment of students that enables them to contribute to an increasingly diverse society and world as graduates of the University. Inclusive excellence builds a welcoming campus community that promotes learning for all students, administrators, faculty, contract professionals and staff. As we design a university that embraces inclusive excellence, our policies and protocols will reflect equity and educational quality for all. With respect to a diverse student body, equitable outcomes are about access, retention and graduation rates; for our employees ... access and promotion of a diverse, culturally and professionally competent employee population.

As articulated by American Association of Colleges and Universities' Alma R. Clayton-Pederson, Inclusive Excellence in education is characterized by:

- Focusing on student intellectual and social development.
- Developing and utilizing organizational resources to enhance student learning and knowledge development—organizationally by challenging each student to high academic achievement and each organization member to contribute to learning and knowledge development.
- Being attentive to and drawing on the cultural diversity that learners bring to the educational experience to enhance teaching and learning.
- Building a welcoming community that engages all of its diversity in the service of student and organizational learning.

Designing living, learning and working environments for inclusive excellence will enable us to engage in civil conversation and reasoned debate with those who hold views that differ from our own and to interact with persons who have had different life experiences. The environments we design should provide ample opportunities to learn about diverse cultures locally and globally. They will support scholarship, professional development and pedagogy that is

culturally responsive, facilitating inter-cultural interaction and a systematic approach to linking co-curricular experiences with academic programs.

The University of Akron realizes that, to be a great American university, to achieve and maintain academic and research excellence, we must expand and learn from the diverse talents of all members of the University community. Indeed, rather than defining ourselves by the numbers and types of individuals we exclude, we shall measure our efforts by the value we add in enabling the success of the diverse community of students we include.

Design Principle 5 – Assessment

The design principle of assessment identifies and creates shared values for the use and implementation of data in support of every design principle and its application to our programs, services and operations. Absent assessment, we will not know if we have reached our goal of institutional leadership characterized by engagement, innovation and inclusiveness. Rigorous and meaningful assessment across all areas of the University depends upon broad and active campus engagement and shared leadership. Assessment is a principle The University of Akron will employ to distinguish and leverage itself as an optimum learning environment ensuring student success.

Assessment promotes sound decision-making by providing a structured system by which data are collected, analyzed and translated into a comprehensive action plan. It provides for continuous improvement through the establishment of benchmarks and incremental targets. Finally, it provides transparency for those calling for greater accountability from higher education.

An increasingly robust assessment culture at The University of Akron will require the collective appraisal of our internal stakeholders, including students, faculty, administration, academic units and staff and support-service professionals. It increasingly includes internal mechanisms such as program reviews, personnel performance appraisals and assessments of student learning. Accreditation studies, audits and benchmarking studies will respond to external assessment demands. Through the collection and analysis of data, the assessment process will assure compliance with recognized/prescribed standards while addressing best practices in programs, service and operations in higher education institutions. Assessment allows us to quantify our excellence, contributing to improved recruitment and retention, service quality and scholarly productivity. It also provides data to ensure the wise allocation of resources for the consolidation of our successes in engagement, innovation and inclusive excellence.

Charting Our Course to the Future

As we move into the 21st Century, we are cognizant of two historical legacies important to The University of Akron: First, providing students with access to a high-quality university education and, second, creating the new knowledge that has, in partnership with our community, sparked economic growth and enhanced the civic and cultural well being of the region.

We honor those legacies today, as we now seek to chart a course to a prosperous future and our rightful destiny. We are a university dedicated to student success and to the production, integration, and dissemination of knowledge for the public good. To fulfill these legacies, we must advance with a powerful vision and with strategic intent. This academic plan, *Design for Our Future*, delineates the five design principles we will honor as we navigate the course we have charted for ourselves. These are: (1) Leadership, (2) Engagement, (3) Innovation, (4) Inclusive Excellence and (5) Assessment.

These five design principles will illuminate our course to the future. We will strengthen our ties on campus and in the community; we will innovate to improve the effectiveness of everything we do; we will be inclusive to create excellence for all; we will demonstrate leadership as we educate future generations and make discoveries that improve life around the world; and we will continuously and relentlessly assess our efforts so we can sustain improvement and demonstrate accountability in all that we do.

With the vision, principles and goals set forth in the University's defining documents – the *Mission Statement*, *Charting the Course*, the *Academic Scorecard* and this Academic Plan, *Design for Our Future* - we are poised to capture our destiny and become a great new American University – The New University of Akron.