

Destination 2021 Strategic Plan Update
December 15, 2020

The following document presents short summaries for objectives in Goals 1-4 of the WSU Vancouver Strategic Plan, *Destination 2021*. It should be used as a companion to the “WSU Vancouver Strategic Plan Tracking” document which presents updated benchmark Information.

Goal 1: Advance excellence in research and creative activity consistent with the University’s strategic missions and grand challenges.

Objective 1: Increase scholarly productivity at the campus, department and individual levels consistent with WSU aspiration to advance into the ranks of the top 25 public research universities by 2030.

Scholarly activity is measured through analysis of faculty self-reported publishing data entered into *annual review* databases. These databases are useful for understanding general patterns of scholarship. (For instance, comparing behavior between Assistant, Associate, and Full professors.) However, specific conclusions concerning the average productivity of faculty members over time have proven vulnerable to technical and structural obstacles.

In 2017, WSU transitioned from using the WORQS system to Digital Measures software. Data across these systems is somewhat inconsistent. Additionally, metrics of productivity vary between domains, with some focusing on journal articles, books, or exhibitions. While in depth analyses can account for these variations, the small size of WSU Vancouver means fluctuations produced by individual faculty failing to report data or leaving the university produce an outsized impact. Future strategic plans may continue to make use of this data source but should carefully consider emphasis on specific summary data.

Scholarly output is one of the central missions of any research-intensive university. It is therefore natural that the campus will continue to seek to develop publishing objectives. How should such objectives be oriented? Further adding to the challenge is the context of current operations in the pandemic. Research for many faculty has been disrupted by associated conditions including stay-at-home orders, human subjects obstacles, or travel restrictions. Even those whose research operations have remained unaffected have been impacted by increased responsibilities connected to transitioning to online instruction or to increased personal obligations. While these specific conditions will change in the next few years, their impact will likely linger well into the next strategic plan. Future research objectives should acknowledge and incorporate this reality.

Objective 2: Increase campus research capacity through consistent year-over-year growth in research funding awards per capita and through diversification of funding sources.

Research expenditures totaled \$5.2 million in Fiscal Year 2020. This represents an increase from years prior to the strategic plan, averaging 3.5 million a year (2011-2015). Furthermore, this increase outpaced growth in the number of faculty.

Increases in funding may be attributable to a 48% increase in the number of grant submissions in 2020 as compared to the average from 2011-2015, while maintaining a high acceptance rate campus wide (between 44% and 58% throughout *Destination 2021*).

A further aim for this objective was to seek more diverse funding sources. Over the last four years, 27% of funding has come from the State of Washington. 7% has come from private funding or non-profits. Neither was a significant source of funding for the campus in 2015.

Objective 3: Incubate new flagship research initiatives focused on areas of cross-disciplinary research leading to the creation of at least one center.

Intensive conversations in 2016 resulted in the selection of three research clusters as foci for flagship initiatives, *Sustainable Water, Sensors and Devices*, and *Brain Health*. These clusters comprise many of the campuses most prolific researchers in terms of grant-funding as revealed by benchmark data. It is difficult to quantify whether efforts to spur cross-disciplinary research have proved catalyzing. It is unlikely that a formal research center will be created in the remaining year of the Strategic Plan.

Meaningful research infrastructure support remains a popular focus for faculty. Objective three represented a unique attempt at a specific target for such focus. To better gauge the success of that focus, qualitative review with faculty is necessary.

Objective 4: Increase graduate students' (1) productivity and (2) professional development.

During academic years 2016 and 2017, an effort was made to better record graduate student productivity and professional development activities through an end of year reporting process. However, participation did not exceed 10% of the graduate student population. While the reporting process was useful to campus leadership as a means of uncovering the activities of prolific graduate students, it was not useful for summarizing or evaluating the student population as a whole.

The last few years have seen several challenges to growing graduate education at WSU Vancouver. These include restrictions to international students, a variable landscape dictating demand for advanced credentials in the field of education, and limited funding for research and teaching assistantships. Lingering economic fallout from the pandemic will likely impact funding and employment prospects for new graduate students for the foreseeable future.

Graduate education within research domains is an important facet of the research enterprise. However, the size of the Vancouver campus has presented many challenges in building robust programs. Focus on navigating these challenges is likely to remain a focus for future planning.

Goal #2: Champion student learning and success.

Objective 1: Transform student learning and involvement to support the signature first-year experience.

In the first four years of the strategic plan, a newly expanded University 104 course has been piloted and grown to serve a sizeable portion of the incoming class. In Academic Year 20-21, ten sections of the course enrolled 53% of the freshman class.

Initial analysis of course outcomes suggests the course is benefitting first-year students. Over the past three years, students who participated in University 104 received an average Fall GPA of 2.8. Freshman peers with little or no college experience who did not enroll in University 104 averaged a Fall GPA of 2.5. The University 104 students were also more likely to persist with an average of 83% returning for Spring Term, compared to just 76% of their matched peer-group. Finally, University 104 students were able to do this while taking an average of one more credit in the term and putting them that much closer to graduation.

Objective 2: Increase student engagement in co-curricular activity to enhance student life and campus culture.

Engagement in co-curricular activity remains difficult to measure. In the The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), students are asked to estimate how much time they spend “Participating in co-curricular activities (organizations, campus publications, student government, fraternity or sorority, intercollegiate or intramural sports, etc.)”. WSU Vancouver’s students consistently devote less time to such activities than those at other universities (2.7 hours a week as compared to 6.8 hours for AAU university students or 3.3 for students at other comparable commuter schools). This is not surprising since in the same survey, WSUV students report spending more time working for pay than their peers at other schools. Time spent on activities isn’t necessarily equal to engagement, however. Future revisions to the Strategic Plan may consider if co-curricular activity is meant as a means to boost involvement with the institution and therefore aid persistence and academics or if rather it is seen as goal in its own right. If the latter is identified, what concrete objectives are sought? What do we hope students will gain from co-curricular activity?

Objective 3: Build experiential learning into the curriculum for all majors.

In 2016, 12 of the total 21 majors required an experiential learning component representing about 43% of students graduating. In 2019, 13 of 23 available majors required such a component, representing 49% of the graduating class. However, many more students participate in experiential learning outside of major requirements, incorporating other course registration it is estimated that at least 65% of recent graduates participated in experiential learning for credit with more participating in activities that do not earn credit.

One obstacle to accomplishing this objective is lack of campus autonomy in determining major requirements. WSU major requirements are consistent across campuses and must therefore be agreed upon at the system level. While in some cases local courses can be altered to further incorporate experiential learning, a concerted effort to accomplish universality of this component was never undertaken.

In April 2019, the Strategic Plan Review Committee proposed eliminating this objective. That proposal was shared with the campus community with no objections raised.

Objective 4: Foster a curriculum and learning environment that prepares our students to be creators, researchers, collaborators, and problem-solvers.

While many in the campus community agree with the vision of this objective, no method was ever adopted to operationalize it. It can be argued that several ongoing efforts align with the strategies proposed for this objective. However, if substantial change is to be accomplished in curricular alignment, a more formal method is needed.

Goal #3: Expand and enhance efforts to grow, educate, and graduate a diverse student body.

Objective 1: Fulfill the mission of a vibrant, versatile, and world-renowned center for higher education in Southwest Washington as well as increase regional degree attainment by growing undergraduate and graduate enrollment towards our long-term goal of 5000 students.

The WSU Vancouver campus student headcount has grown from 3305 in Fall 2015 to 3504 in Fall 2020 for a total of 6%. This growth coincided with a 13% increase in annual average student FTE (From 2484 in 14-15 to 2856 in 19-20).

Efforts to grow the size of Freshman classes have been very successful, with the Fall 2020 freshman class representing a 54% increase compared to Fall 2015 (440 and 285 respectively). However, these gains have been attenuated by shrinking incoming transfer and graduate classes. In the case of transfer students decreasing enrollment at surrounding community colleges has significantly shrunk the pool of potential students.

As discussed above, graduate student numbers have similarly been influenced by external factors. Further declines in graduate enrollment are associated with the discontinuation of the masters in business administration and in public affairs. While both programs were small, they were mostly comprised of tuition-paying students, as opposed to research-focused programs where many students do not pay tuition. This loss furthers their financial impact.

Objective 2: Expand educational opportunities in response to national trends, existing campus strengths and synergies, and regional workforce demands.

As of Fall 2020, undergraduates at the WSU Vancouver campus have an additional five majors (Entrepreneurship, Math, Strategic Communication, Data Analytics, and Human Biology) and one certificate (Prof Science and Tech Writing) available for study as compared to the start of the strategic plan. At the master's level, the Electrical Engineering M.S. program has successfully launched as well. Enrollment in these programs has grown steadily as well, currently involving 121 students.

Objective 3: Support student persistence to improve retention and graduation rates.

Beginning in 2015, campus leadership undertook an intensive effort to understand predictors of retention/attrition within the student population and use this information to guide infrastructure improvements. At this time, this analysis was used to identify seven groups of students who were less likely to graduate as compared to their peers:

- Students with a history of lower than average academic success as identified by a low high school or transfer grade point average.
- Students beginning their WSU Vancouver career as freshmen.
- Students transferring to WSU Vancouver with less than 60 transfer credits.
- Part-time students.
- Students identifying as belonging to an underrepresented race/ethnicity group.
- Male students beginning as freshmen.
- Students with a high amount of unmet financial need.

Coinciding with this effort has been a pronounced transformation in the student population with these very groups (and their overlap) representing the bulk of new students over the course of the strategic plan. Persistence and graduation rates have not changed substantively over the course of the strategic plan. While this may suggest that the formal objective has gone unmet, maintaining campus graduation rates in the face of growing challenges may be seen as success. It is noted that persistence rates were maintained even during the first 6-months of the pandemic and transition to online learning. The coming years may see increasing obstacles to on-time graduation including students struggling to connect online and financial precarity affecting a large portion of the student population. Future planning must acknowledge this reality.

As the campus continues to transition from a population dominated by accomplished transfer students with associate's degrees toward less-experienced students beginning as freshmen, many different structural demands will be called for to accommodate students academically and build community. These demands are likely to require emphasis in the next strategic plan.

Goal #4: Promote an ethical and socially just society through an intentional commitment to inclusion, equity, and diversity.

Objective 1: Ensure equitable opportunities and outcomes for all student populations, including equal retention and graduation rates across demographic groups.

Two central measures were used as benchmarks for this objective, graduation rate comparisons across race/ethnicity and gender as well as recruitment/admission rate comparisons across race and gender. For both measures, great improvements were seen over the course of the strategic plan. Transfer graduation rates have been equivalent between the combined group of students from underrepresented racial or ethnic backgrounds (Latinx, African American, Native American, and Hawaiian/Pacific Islander) and white students for four out the last five years. Freshman-admitted student graduation rates reached equivalence for the first time in 2020. While it is too soon to conclude that race/ethnicity is no longer associated with graduation rate on the campus, it is clear that improvements are substantial.

Furthermore, Disparities in the graduation rate tied to gender have narrowed to a 3-year average of 1% for freshman admits and 6% for transfer admits.

At the start of the strategic plan, the greatest demographic disparity existed within the recruitment and admissions process. In Fall 2015, only 15% of prospective freshmen applications from underrepresented race/ethnicities resulted in student enrollment as compared to 38% of those from white applicants. These unequal outcomes were tied to smaller disparities at several different stages in the recruitment progression. As of Fall 2020, several changes to processing and recruitment within the student affairs and enrollment division resulted in enrolling 33% of prospective freshman applicants from underrepresented backgrounds (compared to 37% of white applicants). Furthermore, this more equitable recruitment process was the greatest driver of enrollment growth over the past five years.

As the campus looks to the next planning phase, it is recognized that many of the gains in recruitment resulted from an emphasis on building relationships at local high schools. These methods have suffered during the transition to distanced communication. Maintaining gains during the pandemic and ensuing financial shocks will require thoughtful focus.

Objective 2: Infuse equity-mindedness throughout the fabric of the campus structure and create capacity to work toward equity in all aspects of campus endeavors.

A number of methods have been used to assess equity mindedness and campus environment over the past four years. These include biennial Campus Climate Surveys of students and employees and the Student Voice Project qualitative focus groups as well as many other efforts both formal and informal. Each method paints a complex portrait of equity on campus. Contrary to more quantitative assessments such as graduation rate comparisons, understanding whether a campus is truly equity-minded or welcoming to all is a task that resists simple conclusions.

There is general acknowledgement from students and employees alike that WSU Vancouver has put emphasis on equity efforts. For instance, in the 2017 and 2018 campus climate surveys 73% of student respondents and 88% of employee respondents agreed or strongly agreed that “WSU Vancouver is committed to promoting diversity and equity on our campus.”

Destination 2021 formally emphasized a benchmark of “Percentage of employees meeting a requirement for cultural competency”. This later evolved to highlight involvement in the Building a Culture of Equity (BaCE) professional development program. The BaCE program was piloted with 70 employees in 2017 and fully launched in 2018. As of the 2019-2020 academic year, approximately 58% of all campus employees had participated, with an increasing number working toward completion of the BaCE certificate.

How should planning teams look at this objective for the next cycle? There would seem to be two likely paths. The first of these would be formalize this objective as process-oriented rather than outcome-oriented. Such a strategy would accept that the *practice* of equity must be robust

and visible. Associated benchmarks might continue to emphasize training of campus personnel or emphasize the use of new decision-making tools such as a formal “equity lens” document. The second likely path might incorporate a more formal structure for qualitative analysis of equity on campus. This may make more visible the perceptions of underserved groups and provide a platform for advocating for equity-driven improvements.

Objective 3: Build and maintain a safe and welcoming environment for all students and employees.

There is considerable overlap between objectives two and three of this goal so many of the same issues are relevant. Campus discussions suggest that faculty of color perceive improvement to the campus environment due to the creation of the office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion. Further effort is needed to understand specifically where improvements lie and what areas should remain the focus for further effort.

The formal benchmark adopted for this objective was “Percentage of faculty from underrepresented groups.” For the first time, in Spring 2018, WSU Vancouver was given access to demographic records for employees, extend from 2011 forward. At present, efforts to summarize demographic trends are limited by the fact that records are incomplete for roughly a third of all employees throughout most years for which there are records. This is particularly true for faculty on adjunct appointments.

As of Fall 2019 (the latest year for which official records are available), 19% of employees for whom information is present have identified as People of Color. This represents an increase up from 16% in 2011. Diversity is not evenly spread throughout campus roles. At present the greatest percentage of Employees of Color comes from the tenure-track faculty roles, where the percentage equals 25%. 19% of the larger group of all faculty types identified as People of Color in 2019. This percentage has remained roughly the same since 2011 when it was 18%.

In Fall 2020, 47% of the 15 new faculty hires identified as people of color. This mirrors changes at the leadership level as well where both academic and administrative leadership groups have seen increases in racial diversity of the course of the strategic plan.

Recent efforts within the office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion have focused on the creation of Employee Resource Groups, beginning with the Support and Empowerment for Employees of Color Association (SEEC Association). Such efforts aim to boost belonging and community amongst Employees of Color. Future discussions of this objective may focus directly on employee recruitment and retention metrics. The campus transition to Workday may present new opportunities for better quantifying employee demographics.