**Draft Report *Student Success through Academic Excellence***

**Executive Summary**

Various sources of data, two UND (University of North Dakota) taskforce reports, and our professional experiences of teaching and supporting UND students informed our group’s discussions and writing of this report. Several themes emerged from these discussions and our group work, which in turn led us to establish Three Strategic Goals of *Student Success through Academic Excellence* and related recommendations for actions.

**Aspirational Statement and Key Themes**

Before we dive deeper into the themes, we want to share the following concepts and organizing framework that guided our understanding of student success in universities. Student success is a set of desired student behaviors/outcomes (O) which result from the interaction between student characteristics (I) and the academic as well as social environments of their university (E). Put differently, the strength and positive direction of the desired success outcomes depend on the university environment and the degree to which it functions in support of every student’s learning needs and its capacity to optimize inclusive academic excellence for student achievement of these outcomes.

**(E) Academic Excellence in Learning Environment/s**

**(O) Student Success**

**(I) Diverse Student Characteristics**

Based on this understanding, we propose our vision of *Student Success through Academic Excellence*, in which UND administrators, faculty, and staff take individual and collective responsibilities to cultivate and sustain an empowering university environment that embodies DEI, promotes inclusive academic excellence, optimizes learning for student progress and success, builds on collaborative and innovative intra-institutional approaches, and is responsive to the diverse characteristics of every learner.Below, each theme of the framework provides more meanings, definitions, and interpretations that are related to our university.

**Theme 1. Who (Input): Supporting and Educating Current and Future Students**

Who do we aspire to educate?What challenges are present? What are our strengths and opportunities to attract new students?

The UND enrollment (University Planning & Analytics, Power BI enrollment dashboard) trends show that the student profile has been changing over the last decade, shifting some balance to post-traditional students, creating a new generation at UND. This new generation may include older students who must balance their care for dependents, work, and education; more racially/ethnically diverse populations (we see increases among Asian and Hispanic groups); students from historically and economically underserved backgrounds; and/or students connected to the military (ACE). UND has observed increases in the number of part-time students and decreases in full-time students, where many students now participate in solely online education or a combination of online and traditional models of instruction. While welcoming this new generation on our campus, UND will face challenges to ensure equitable student success outcomes. To turn this challenge into an opportunity, UND should re-visit institutional definitions of student success outcomes, aspire to support every individual learner towards success, and invest into strategic actions.

**Theme 2. What (Outcomes): [Re]Defining Student Success**

What do we aspire to be? What challenges are present? What are our strengths and opportunities? These questions helped us review and discuss the ways we (faculty, staff, students, alumni, and the state) at UND think and define student success. We arrived in the five sub-themes, as follows.

**Theme 2.1. Retention, Persistence, & Graduation** are the most commonly measured goals of student success on college campuses. Universally and traditionally in higher education, retention and graduation provide a quantitative measure of students’ successful academic progression through degree completion and graduation. These goals of success may differ in interpretations by students themselves; for example, persistence, a student-level measure of postsecondary success, can be observed in student behavior of navigating and choosing a nonlinear path towards a postsecondary certificate or degree attainment. Thus, persistence may mean a variety of progression paths for students that are innovative in content, flexible in structure, and responsive to each student’s goals and aspirations. Ensuring learning along the way is the only consistent measure across all paths.

**Theme 2.2. Career Readiness** is a student success outcome most referenced by students, parents, alumni, employers, and state agencies who expect a college graduate’s successful transition into the workforce. National Association of Colleges and Employers (2021) discusses career readiness as “a foundation from which to demonstrate requisite core competencies that broadly prepare the college-educated for success in the workplace and lifelong career management.” NACE has eight core career-ready competencies: career and self-development, communication, critical thinking, equity and inclusion, leadership, professionalism, teamwork, and technology. These competencies are transferable across all disciplines as well as different programs and levels of study. UND can provide a solid foundation for its students to achieve these competencies.

**Theme 2.3. Civic Engagement & Leadership** is a value of postsecondary education with the belief that education is more than a private gain (e.g., income, employment). Education is also a public good, meaning that postsecondary education is a privilege and opportunity for students to strive for a greater good and to make a positive impact on their communities, society, and the world. Leadership, however, is a complex and context- and culture- specific concept, allowing UND students to explore diverse ways of leading and leadership.

**Theme 2.4. Holistic Development** is at the core of the Liberal Arts education and professional/graduate education that builds on similar ideals, meaning that education at all levels at UND is more than a path to employment. Students have opportunities for cognitive and intellectual, social-emotional, spiritual, and cultural growth and development. Learning in core curriculum and across disciplines builds student character and encourages students to live a meaningful life in which they apply their knowledge in multiple domains. This foundational learning and character-building strengthen student resilience, allowing the student to deal with challenges of the current and future world. Given today’s fast-changing world and a wide range of global and local challenges, separate attention needs to be given to lifelong learning and creative discovery as an additional success outcome related to student holistic development.

**Theme 2.5. Lifelong Learning & Creative Discovery** is a key quality in a future-proof education and for the problem-solving capacity of citizens in today’s rapidly changing world. In other words, individual learning does not stop with an earned credential. Instead, this quality refers to an adaptive and lifelong curious mind that integrates concrete experiences (e.g., community-based, industry-specific, and/or globally oriented), reflective observation of these experiences, diverse perspectives and interdisciplinary points of view, abstract conceptualization of novel ideas, and active experimentation. This lifelong curious mind and sense of wonder provides a foundation for creative discoveries and novel problem-solving.

**Theme 3. How (Environments): Fostering Learning Environments of Academic Excellence**

How will we foster student growth towards these student success outcomes? What challenges are present? What are our strengths and opportunities?

**Theme 3.1. Preboarding & Onboarding** is a process of supporting prospective applicants and newly matriculated students to be able to navigate the university in its physical/virtual spaces and successfully transition to their first-year experiences at UND. Successful transition also includes a guided socialization to UND’s mission and core values, such as engaging new students in conversations about the purposes of essential studies or the value of a Liberal Arts education. The metaphor of a “front door” through which to enter the university and find a welcoming transition point has also been a recurring one in many other strategic working groups’ conversations. This metaphor reflects our group’s thinking that student success starts with that first welcoming contact with faculty, staff, and peers for students to start feeling “home” and begin to build supportive relationships. Finding their way to that front door also requires well-designed pre-boarding coordination and support that starts the day a prospective applicant shows even a tiny bit of interest in attending UND. Moreover, the awareness of the diverse student characteristics and cultural backgrounds during the pre- and on-boarding processes is essential to ensure inclusivity. Thus, comprehensive, and well-coordinated preboarding and onboarding programs (e.g., orientations for non-traditional students, for veteran students, and the like) as well as cohort-specific transition programs should be key features of an environment that nurtures and empowers equitable student success.

**Theme 3.2. Relevance** refers to curricular, co-curricular, and learning experiences vis-a-vis the real world. Students tend to feel lost or unmotivated when they do not know how to make connections between their learning and its utility in some practical sense and in their career trajectories. Similar thoughts are evident among parents and employers since postsecondary education has been increasingly seen as a return of investment in economic terms and workforce needs. As a liberal arts university, we find these views of relevance exciting (not limiting) and encourage UND faculty and staff to further explore the nexus between holistic development outcomes and career readiness outcomes. More intentional conversations about the value and purpose of core curricular, essential studies, and the Liberal Arts will be helpful for students to understand their learning gains and explorations across disciplines.

**Theme 3.3. Equity & Inclusion** means that UND should provide a learning environment in which our students from all walks of life and diverse backgrounds can learn, thrive, and succeed at equitable rates. Student success or failure is influenced by both the student and the institution; however, the institution can create a nurturing and empowering learning environment to support students’ efforts and aspirations. Such an environment means proactive support, unambiguous communication (i.e., define, explain, invite), and intentional outreach to coordinate students’ engagement with success programs and HIPs are crucial. The role of faculty and staff in understanding DEIA principles and implementing them in their immediate settings and practices is crucial.

**Theme 3.4. Accessibility & Neurodiversity** is a very specific, less visible, aspect of Equity & Inclusion work on campus, that requires a comprehensive effort and intentionality from all corners of the university infostructure, including attention to inclusive designs in physical spaces, more training for faculty and staff on how to make reasonable adjustments to their learning and support spaces, peer-to-peer engagement and awareness, use of language and labeling, as well as access to assistive digital tools and technology.

**Theme 3.5. Teaching Expectations & Faculty Development** were mentioned several times during open sessions and conversations with faculty, students, and administrators, particularly as they relate to the themes of Relevance and DEIA educational practices. Teaching excellence should be an expectation and professional value. Faculty development opportunities are an important component of fostering teaching excellence, but institutional support should go beyond providing additional training opportunities to foster an environment that values and supports teaching excellence across all programs and degree types.

**Theme 3.6. Student Success Data & Analytics (SSDA)** are necessary building blocks of institutional capacity to monitor student success, know how to support best- and high- impact educational practices, and recognize how to intervene in areas that need more development and investment. Learning analytics as an institutional strategic practice is most frequently defined as, "the measurement, collection, analysis and reporting of data about learners and their contexts, for purposes of understanding and optimizing learning and the environments in which it occurs" (SOLAR, 2011). Without SSDA capacity, UND will continue to face the challenge of not knowing its vitals (e.g., environmental factors that promote or inhibit student success) and falling into outdated reporting practices of enrollment, retention, and graduation trends that are not informative for collective efforts to build an institution that strives to support success in every learner. With SSDA capacity, UND may create exciting opportunities for ongoing self-study and improvements, accounting for a host of environmental factors as well as frequency, duration, and quality of interactions between a student and their environment.

**Recommendations**

We offer three Goals, each with a corresponding set of outcomes and proposed actions. These Goals stem from the themes of (O) Outcomes of Student Success. All recommended actions draw from the themes of (E) How to Foster Learning Environments of Academic Excellence Towards Each Goal.

**Goal 1. Excellence in Postsecondary Educational Attainment**

UND will recognize and guide flexible pathways to a certificate or degree attainment for diverse student populations who have personal and professional reasons for seeking postsecondary education, as well as opportunities to discover new knowledge, learn new skills, and grow personally and professionally. UND students will:

* Short-Term Outcomes: Understand the value and purpose/s of ES, HIPs, Honors Program, and career planning programs; participate in UND onboarding activities and campus-based HIPs; demonstrate higher rates of semester-to-semester and year-to-year retention; and demonstrate progression through earned credits towards a credential and/or a degree plan of study that is congruent with student goals and aspirations as well as with the academic expectations of their programs.
* Mid-Term Outcomes: Demonstrate progression through earned credits and attainment of an earned academic credential; be guided through flexible entry and exit points to an academic program (e.g., through the credit transfer agreements); and be guided to create individualized plans of study that can be built up with a series of micro-credentials.
* Long-Term Outcomes: Demonstrate higher rates of completion of bachelors’ degrees (undergraduate) and graduate/professional degrees (graduate and professional students); and demonstrate higher rates of completion of competency-based certificates.

Proposed Actions for UND:

* Establish an institutional Pathway of Success program, led by an interdivisional office of a robust First-Year Experience and Transition to University, Student Affairs & Student Success, Enrollment Management & Financial Aid. Provide additional resources and professional staffing to support the program in their efforts of embodying DEI in student success practices and ensuring one-on-one guidance, advising, and mentorship for every student.
* Demystify Essential Studies curriculum, HIPs, and the Honors Program. Proactively communicate via peer and alumni storytelling and real-life examples of how ES or other educational experiences enriched their lives during and after their years at UND.
* Establish a Graduate Student Hub of Success program. Provide additional resources and professional staffing to support the program in their efforts of embodying DEI in graduate student success and ensuring inclusive onboarding and mentorship experiences for graduate students.
* Build a one-stop tech-friendly platform for students to access services and resources, such as Pathway of Success, academic advising, career planning, wellness.
* Support formal coordination and collaboration between colleges and academic programs for Curricular Innovation (in structure and content), Adaptive and Inclusive Pedagogies, and Micro-Credentialing for/within Pathway of Success program.
* Establish an Institutional Research Office/Unit on Student Success & Learning to design and implement a comprehensive, rigorous, and equity-conscious assessment models for Pathway of Success in partnership with the University Analytics and Planning office, Assessment Office, Curriculum and ES Committees, academic departments, Division of Student Success, Division of Student Affairs, Division of Enrollment Management, research faculty fellows, postdocs. These assessment models will identify opportunities and barriers for student success and create an institutional feedback loop for equity-based improvements.

**Goal 2. Excellence in Holistic Development & Life-Learning**

UND’s achievement of Goal 1 will depend on the unwavering commitment to excellence in student learning as well as holistic development in educational activities both in and outside of the classroom. UND will recognize that faculty and staff in student success programs and academic programs consult discipline-specific academic standards, innovate in content and delivery, incorporate inclusive pedagogical strategies, utilize student-centered teaching designs to support student learning efforts and needs, foster student motivation & curiosity, model practices of wellbeing and care, and advance postsecondary success. UND students will:

* Short-Term Outcomes: Learn about self and others, as well as from one another; earn credits through the required FYE and Transition credit-based courses that will be included in their programs of study; make quality connections with faculty and staff; and participate in campus-based HIPs.
* Mid-Term Outcomes: Demonstrate growth in subject-matter competencies; participate in research and/or community-based HIPs; demonstrate engagement with diverse expertise to aim for novel solutions and the application of new knowledge; and begin development of an expert identity in topics of interest and professional areas.
* Long-Term Outcomes: Demonstrate proficiency in subject-matter competencies through capstone courses and/or tests required by accreditation agencies; and demonstrate growth in holistic development through reflection assignments and [E]portfolio projects.

Proposed Actions for UND:

* Monitor and remove barriers that students may experience in accessing campus-based and community-based HIPs and barriers that may impact participation and learning in courses, including those who attend virtually.
* Conduct a full review of the core required curriculum (including ES) to propose and include competency-based, project-aimed, tech literacy, and DEI-infused educational goals and activities to be designed as HIPs and potentially create paths towards earning an academic micro-credential (e.g., ES interdisciplinary certificate programs).
* Facilitate and encourage an infusion of arts into sciences and sciences into arts for innovative, future-proof curriculum.
* Communicate the value of the Liberal Arts through students and alumni storytelling and narratives to optimize the power of peer-to-peer learning and alumni role modeling.
* Promote student active learning through formative feedback strategies in every curricular and co-curricular experience.
* Identify faculty development needs, invest in educators’ development and success tools, and reward campus-based educational practices that are reviewed and assessed through the equity-based assessment models.

**Goal 3. Excellence in Career Readiness & Engaged Global Citizenship**

UND will recognize that support and achievement of Goal 1 and Goal 2 translate into the long-term investment and success in students’ career readiness and their roles as engaged citizens of a global world. We envision a future at UND where students are more readily able to make connections between what they learn in the classroom and how that learning relates to skills employers look for as well as the needs of their communities. UND students will:

* Short-Term Outcomes: Participate in career planning activities from the first semester of their studies at UND; make positive connections with alumni networks; and take courses that integrate co-curricular activities and student interest groups.
* Mid-Term Outcomes: Participate in hands-on experiences, such as internships, practical experiences, study abroad, fieldwork, research, micro internships, and the like in their curriculum, which will help guide them to learn more about the diverse types of career opportunities that await them post-graduation.
* Long-Term Outcomes: Participate in a community-based HIP as part of their degree; participate in industry-based educational experiences; demonstrate well-defined postgraduation plans; and report career satisfaction postgraduation.

Proposed Actions for UND:

* Monitor and remove barriers that students may experience in accessing community-based projects, HIPs, and a diverse range of curricular and co-curricular opportunities.
* Identify, enable, and reward intentional collaborations between academic departments/programs and the staff from student success programs and career services, especially related to early experiences of students at UND, and make these collaborations visible during the onboarding experiences of students.
* Enable and reward institutional partnerships with industry and other potential employers.

Overall, Student Success in all three Goals can be measured in several ways via different methods, including institutional measures and student self-reported (e.g., surveys, focus-groups) data. Examples include: (1) university-based assessment models testing associations between student participation and engagement (a combination of institutional data and student self-reported data) and success outcomes (institutional measures), (2) retention, persistence, and graduation rates (institutional measures), (3) NSSE’s data on quality interactions and engaging environments (self-reported student measures), (4) students’ impact portfolios (self-reported data) and customized academic plans that are competency-oriented and based on diverse learning experiences; (5) career satisfaction survey, (6) job placement reports. Other means of student success assessment shall be customized by colleges, departments, and programs to align with their accreditation requirements.