

WSU SYSTEM STRATEGIC PLAN  
*Envisioned Future*  
2020-2025

Final  
June 26, 2020

## ENVISIONED FUTURE

The **envisioned future** conveys a concrete, but as yet unrealized, vision for the organization. It consists of **an aspirational goal**—a clear and compelling catalyst that serves as a focal point for effort—and **vivid descriptions**—vibrant and engaging descriptions of what it will be like to achieve the aspirational goal.

### Vision (aspirational goal)

- Washington State University will be recognized as one of the nation’s top 25 public research universities—**creating positive outcomes for all.**

### Vivid Descriptions

- **WSU will be a leading land-grant institution, as measured by accessibility, graduation rates, and public service.** Land-grant universities were created to change the world, and WSU will model the core principles upon which these institutions were founded. In the process the University will become a national leader in all three areas of its mission, setting an example for others to emulate.
- **WSU will be the university of choice for student success.** The University will provide an educational experience through which students transform their view of themselves and the difference they can make in the world. The University will have robust resources system-wide to provide an accessible, affordable, life-changing education to a diverse student body—highlighted by experiences, internships, and opportunities that will prepare students to be contributors and leaders in their communities, the state, the nation, and the world. Additional resources will better support first-time and under-served populations, both urban and rural. Innovative teaching will foster a community in which students expect to be challenged to learn, and to succeed. More students will graduate, ready to make a difference in the world. They will experience reduced time to degree completion, achieve higher graduation and placement rates, and earn greater numbers of advanced degrees. As a result, interest in WSU from prospective students will increase substantially.
- **The University will be a magnet for students seeking to overcome equity gaps in their journey to complete a degree because WSU will be well known for the upward social mobility its graduates experience after they begin their post-University life.** The WSU system will offer a well-developed suite of resources to assist students who have no history of college attendance within their family, have significant financial need, or have gaps in their preparation for higher education.
- **The people of the state of Washington will benefit to an even greater degree from the benefits the WSU system delivers through scientific innovation, research-based program delivery, and University-led practical problem solving.** WSU will increase the resources and improve the internal infrastructure required to enrich its ability to serve as a key player in solving the problems of the state, the nation, and the world. By advancing the Drive to 25, the University will boost its ability to contribute to accessibility, social mobility, and community well-being.
- **WSU truly will become the state’s university, enhancing opportunities for the state’s residents to gain access to its expertise.** The caliber of the University’s faculty will continue to grow, and students will receive a superlative education. WSU’s endowment will increase. Local economies will improve due to the high value human capital the University provides. Industry will look with greater frequency to WSU as a partner in creating programming that supports workforce development. The University will strengthen its capabilities in workforce development, innovative research, health care (throughout the state), and development opportunities for residents.
- **WSU’s stature as a university will be dramatically elevated.** The University will be viewed as one of the top places in the United States to learn, teach, and study as it grows its reputation for transforming lives and bettering society. The institution will receive new opportunities for external research funding, including enhanced public and private partnerships, and most importantly—create richer educational experiences for students.

**WSU’s research will continue to change the state, nation, and world.** System-wide, University researchers will be highly visible in their communities. World-changing innovations developed throughout the WSU system will address the challenges of the state, the nation, and the world. The impact of WSU’s efforts will lead to more community engagement as industry and other external stakeholders seek to partner with the University. The WSU system will have an enhanced ability to assess state economic needs and to adapt and provide research and education to address those needs. Research won’t be only the purview of researchers. Every student—undergraduate, graduate, or professional, not just those in fields labeled “scientific”—will receive the opportunity to be involved in research to

some degree. As WSU proactively addresses and demonstrates the benefits of its research in service to society, the University's contributions will play an important role in enhancing the reputation of higher education from a national perspective. An improved reputation for impactful research also will assist the recruitment of faculty, staff, and students, and research dollars will flow to the University at unprecedented levels. In becoming a top 25 university, doors will be opened to greater collaboration with higher educational institutions across the United States and beyond. WSU students will benefit from international partnerships and exchanges that allow them to learn from people worldwide, enriching their education and providing insights that can be applied in their future careers. Both partnerships with corporations and endowments will increase, and the WSU system's structure will create greater links between campuses for research partnerships.

- **The WSU system will be a vibrant, diverse, and thriving community of scholars, students, and staff, known for its integrated and informed campus communities.** WSU's collaborative, integrated multi-campus system will leverage its strengths to enable each component to respond more fully to those they serve and to the evolving environment. The WSU system will recognize and celebrate the uniqueness of each campus, college, and unit, as well as the role each plays in the success of the system. Campuses, colleges, and units may become known for specific areas of excellence, yet all disciplines will play a part in creating a transformative student experience. The sum of WSU will be stronger because of the way each of the parts will complement the system. All components of the system will benefit from the institution's enhanced and sustainable fiscal health, which will provide increased resources to meet needs and support growth. WSU will fully embrace and pursue a culture of philanthropy, further reducing its dependence on state funds. A dramatic increase in the endowment will occur. Improved and new facilities, labs, personnel, and equipment will create an infrastructure that will allow WSU to enhance the benefits of research that serves the public good.
- **WSU system-wide will achieve a deeper sense of responsiveness to communities statewide, built in part on increased dialogue between communities and the University focused on identifying top local concerns. As a result,** the campuses will become more integrated into their communities. Increased funding of outreach, education, and service activities will benefit local communities and broaden the institution's impact statewide. These connections will become an institutional strength.
- **Faculty and staff at all locations across the WSU system will feel inspired, engaged, and supported by the institution as a whole and by each other.** New faculty and staff looking for employment will seek to join the University, and the satisfaction level of existing faculty and staff will reach unprecedented levels due to improved salaries and additional opportunities for professional development and training. An emphasis on shared governance throughout the system will more fully incorporate the input of faculty and staff in decisions affecting the strategic direction of the institution.
- **The pride that faculty, staff, students, alumni, and communities feel about the University will grow to unprecedented levels as they become even more engaged in helping WSU grow.** One of the University's biggest strengths is the sense of Cougar Pride. "Cougness" exists system-wide—at every college, campus, and unit. It lifts the WSU community when challenges arise. It drives fierce loyalty among members of the Cougar family—to each other and to serving the greater good. Cougar Pride inspires the WSU community to fearlessly pursue human advancement. It manifests itself when students and alumni rally to raise money for hurricane victims or volunteer to do home repairs for the elderly. It's evident when nursing students care for the homeless. WSU Athletics magnifies Cougar Pride, serving as the front door to WSU and introducing thousands of stakeholders to the rest of the University and its academic mission. WSU Athletics thus is an integral part of the University—nurturing a community mindset that is a unique blend of family, pride, and work ethic. Cougness provides the fertile soil that allows the WSU community to believe that it can make positive change in the world. It is at the heart of WSU's institutional ethos. Cougar Pride will drive the WSU community to achieve even more in the future.
- **All members of the WSU community will feel connected to the Drive to 25 and clearly understand their ability to contribute to the collective vision.** Community members will understand that each individual can play a significant goal in the University's vision, regardless of rank or position at WSU. The goals and metrics of the Drive to 25 are focused equally on raising WSU's accomplishments in all three phases of the University's land-grant mission: teaching, research, and service. The Drive to 25 will create the culture for operational excellence system-wide. It will be an outcome of living institutional values, not just a slogan, and the initiative will not focus solely on competition with other institutions. Each college, campus, and unit will be empowered to find ways to achieve excellence toward the collective vision.

- **The Drive to 25 will be not just a static goal.** Every year, the WSU community system-wide will engage in conversations focused on institutional actions, progress, and the path forward in fulfilling the strategic plan. “We have always done it that way” will not be a philosophy that guides future actions. Checkpoints for accountability will be established. Students, staff, and faculty from each campus, college, and unit will be encouraged to provide input on a regular basis. Individual units will be able to point to WSU’s mission and vision as a guide for strategic decision making and resource allocation. The institutional commitment to continuous improvement will allow for flexibility and change as the needs of the University and students evolve, and as the environment in which the system operates changes. Throughout, the bottom line focus will remain unwavering: to serve the public good.

## ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE RELEVANT FUTURE

**Assumption** statements will help the WSU system purposefully update the strategic plan on an annual basis. When conditions change, strategy needs to be adjusted. An annual review of these assumptions will help the system ensure the ongoing relevance of its strategy. The assumptions that follow are based on a pre-COVID-19 environment. Due to the impact of the virus and the future implications of COVID-19 for society and economies globally, reviewing, reassessing, and updating our assumptions on a regular basis will be even more critical.

### Demographics

- The population of college-aged people nationally will continue to decline. Unless college-going patterns change, many institutions will experience large enrollment declines in the mid-2020s in line with predictions for the number of high school graduates. Washington likely will be an outlier in this regard, at least in the short-term future.
- The number of traditional college-aged students will continue to decline nationally, and students over 25 who are working fulltime (non-traditional students) may eventually become the majority of the student population in higher education.
- The diversity of the population will increase, and students will continue to come from more diverse economic, cultural, and educational backgrounds. Nearly half of Generation Zers (48 percent) are racial or ethnic minorities representing African American, Latinx, Native American, Pacific Islander, and Asian American students, among other groups. Institutions of all types can expect a student body consisting of more students of color, but the specifics will differ by institution type and geographic location.
- Students increasingly will enter four-year institutions with at least some of their lower-level requirements met through dual enrollment or possession of an AA degree, which will require the four-year school to concentrate resources on upper-division education.
- Funding challenges will continue to affect the student population. Millennials have more income but less wealth than older Americans had at the same age, due in part to student loan debt, and this will be a challenge in terms of funding their education.

### Social, Cultural, and Consumer Trends

- The current political climate which has emerged not only on university and college campuses but also in communities across the country will continue to put university administrators in a difficult place. One major challenge? They will need to strike a balance between allowing free speech and maintaining a secure and safe environment for students, faculty, and staff.
- The public will continue to scrutinize higher education policy and public skepticism about the value of higher education may place more emphasis on ROI (Return on Investment), micro-credentials, “mini-masters” academic programs, and non-academic careers.
- If proposed cuts in federal funding for the arts and humanities are enacted, societal relief in terms of access to arts and culture will diminish, thus increasing stress and increasing disparity in access.
- Students increasingly will view themselves as customers and consumers, expecting high-quality facilities and services.
- Society will expect students to be able to immediately apply their knowledge, which will place a burden on institutions to broaden and diversify their experiential learning opportunities.

### Economic Climate

- Economic inequality will continue to grow during the next ten years, with a larger segment of the population living on lower incomes and with less access to wealth.
- Business models of universities highly dependent upon tuition dollars and adjunct faculty will be tested more seriously than ever before.
- While the state of Washington has been an exception, federal and state funding of higher education and research will be an issue nationally, particularly in a post-coronavirus environment.

- The reliance on philanthropy to provide funding support for student scholarships, research, and education initiatives will continue to increase.
- Society will expect more of universities in any economic climate.

## Legislative and Regulatory

- Population loss and economic shifts will continue to lead to the restructuring of major university systems. Structural changes in university systems, such as campus mergers, will be the subject of legislative activity in many states.
- The national focus on college affordability will continue, and state officials—from the capital to the campus—will likely feel more pressure to hold down the price of higher education.
- An increased focus on sustainability in all its forms will continue to reshape policies and procedures at all levels of universities across the nation. Responding adequately to many of the issues will require additional funding.
- Increased policy and political pressure from the federal government may negatively impact an institution’s ability to recruit and retain qualified international students.
- The continuing uncertainty about the future of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) immigration policy will continue. If DACA expires without a resolution, the impact on public higher education institutions, particularly in states with substantial populations of DACA students, will be consequential.

## Higher Education

- Institutions must adapt to the challenges and “new normal” confronting society as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.
- Higher education institutions will continue to diversify in form and access. More “elite” public institutions will become less accessible to lower-income students because of changes in educational funding programs such as federal grants and loans. Private higher education institutions may continue to make up for some of this differential access through endowments and private giving.
- As higher education is increasingly commodified, the role and purpose of the liberal arts and humanities will continue to be questioned. Current national-level discussions indicate the liberal arts are again likely to be more highly valued in the short-term future.
- Reformation of core financial and educational practices, and greater business complexity, will require colleges and universities to provide greater transparency and implement new accountability structures to sustain public trust.
- Occupations that require highly specific skillsets will more frequently emerge and disappear, requiring institutions to be able to quickly establish—and eliminate—degrees as dictated by the marketplace.
- A greater number of university administrative and service functions (e.g., financial management, housing, student services) will be privatized.
- In an era in which the value of higher education is being questioned at unprecedented levels, land-grant universities must recommit themselves to serving their local communities as part of the effort to demonstrate their value.

## Scientific and Technological Advances

- Data privacy issues will impact higher education institutions. Among the top issues: the need to secure student and research data, guard against data breaches, and demonstrate responsible enforcement.
- Distance learning will be an increasingly common option in higher education. It will co-exist with but not threaten the traditional bricks-and-mortar model.
- Tech-savvy students will expect fast-paced, interactive technology, as well as new methods to be infused in their educational program and learning experience.
- Many students will have less developed communication skills due to their reliance on technology to communicate. As a result, many will enter college with diminished verbal and written skills.
- Students will continue to be challenged by their instructors to engage in more personal interactions, as more of them will have been raised with social media being their primary form of communication and connection.