

**ACADEMIC SUCCESS**  
**West Liberty University**  
**Strategic Planning Task Force Concept Paper (2018-19)**  
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**INTRODUCTION**

As an institution of higher education, West Liberty University is, naturally, centered around an educational mission: “To provide our students the opportunity for a high quality undergraduate, graduate, and professional education through appropriate formats and venues.” Given this focus on high quality education, the success of our academic programs is central to everything we do here at WLU. As a result of survey data amassed from a variety of stakeholder groups (faculty, staff, alumni, community members, etc.), we have determined that there are four areas of emphasis impacting our current and future academic success that will be worth examining in this strategic planning process: Academic Identity, Graduate Studies, Faculty Hiring/Development, and Collaboration. The narrative that follows is dedicated to contextualizing the present state and recent past of these elements of our academic success in an effort to provide a framework for our ongoing strategic planning.

<https://westliberty.edu/university-effectiveness/common-data-set/>

**Academic Identity:**

As the oldest institution of higher education in the state of West Virginia, West Liberty has been striving toward academic success for over 175 years. Naturally, throughout those years, the University’s educational identity has shifted in response to both the on-campus demographics and the needs of the surrounding community. Originally founded as a state normal school focused on teacher education, West Liberty shifted toward a more Liberal Arts-style model of education in the early-to-mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. Then, as a result of the post-war degree-seeking population boom as well as current trends toward more professionally focused educational programs, WLU has since grown in a number of different directions. Some of the most recent growth areas have included the introduction of graduate programs (see below), new programs in the health sciences (Physician Assistant Studies, Athletic Training, etc.), and a signature program in Zoo Science. All of this growth has been as a direct result of perceived needs in the community and, perhaps even more important, a need to creatively attract new student populations in the face of declining local high school populations, declining state appropriations, and a resultant increased reliance on tuition dollars for financial sustainability.

Overall, this growth has had a decidedly positive impact on the entire University community. That said, the enrollment-based growth—based as it is on the need to tap new student populations in order to remain financially viable—rather than mission-based growth has had possible unintended consequences. Individually, each of these areas of growth has been successful and is functioning well, but it has become increasingly more difficult to see how the University functions collectively. Adding on to University offerings without regard to the impacts rippling throughout the campus could result in a fractured sense of mission and identity, which would make it difficult to successfully attract and serve our student population. And despite the overwhelming positivity of these recent academic additions, our growth has

not come without growing pains. As a University moving forward, we need a recalibration of mission and identity. The question is often raised as to whether we see ourselves still following a Liberal Arts-style tradition (as was likely true for large portions of the previous century) or whether we have fully transitioned to a more career-oriented “professional education” model. This disconnect is perhaps best evidenced by the presence of five different General Studies programs that currently appear in our undergraduate catalog. Aside from the seeming impossibility of calling anything *General Studies* when there are five such programs on a campus of this size, the existence of five General Studies programs is likely a consequence of our enrollment-driven—and often isolated, “silo-ed”—growth. No other regional campus in the state of West Virginia has more than one general studies program in their curriculum. We have grown our offerings and added programs out of financial necessity or perceived community need, but those additions have not always been viewed in light of the larger impact on the academic identity of the entire institution. The University would do well to engage in a university-wide mission/identity recalibration that would allow the entire University community to know and embrace an explicitly defined identity. Furthermore, this would lead the University into future growth in more *intentional* ways. We could plan for growth that would expressly support the identified educational model rather than simply adding on in individualized ways when a perceived need or opportunity arises (the result of which might be described as a “Franken-university”). We cannot continue to add on without understanding that every addition impacts the current composition of the whole. And perhaps such an identity recalibration might also guide us toward a more uniform and sensible General Studies program.

All of these issues related to the University’s academic identity—renewed sense of mission, intentional reflection on our educational model, streamlined General Studies Program, and mission-based future growth—have a direct impact on our current and future academic success. In short, any entity that attempts to be all things to all people will inevitably encounter difficulties. Therefore, our continued academic success is dependent upon a University-wide self-analysis of our academic identity.

### **Graduate Studies:**

One of the recent growth movements at West Liberty University has been the addition of graduate programs. When West Liberty attained University status in 2008, we became eligible to begin offering graduate programs. In the ten years since, we have already developed 8 new graduate programs, and several more are in the development stages at this time. Some of these graduate programs are in-seat programs offered on our campus (MPAS), in-seat programs offered at our remote Highlands Center location (MAEd), and some are entirely online (MBA, MSDH). Several other graduate programs are currently being developed within their respective colleges including Athletic Training, Creative Art Therapy, and Speech Pathology and Audiology.

Unquestionably, the addition of these graduate programs has been a positive development for our academic offerings. And as aforementioned, in addition to serving local needs, these programs have also allowed us to tap into new student populations and increase enrollment numbers. However, with the newness of our graduate programs on campus some additional needs have arisen. There is a need for greater support of these new graduate programs. We have begun the process of that support with the creation of an official Office of Graduate Studies (complete with newly hired director and program coordinator), the establishment of a Graduate Studies Council as decision-making body regarding

curricular matters, and other such support mechanisms. However, additional graduate infrastructure is likely needed. For example, there is likely a need for graduate housing options for on-campus programs, possible technological needs for online programs, graduate-appropriate library offerings (see below), and other such logistical needs. Some additional resources and additional thinking will need to be directed toward further purposeful growth and support of the growing graduate programs.

That said, perhaps the largest need in the area of graduate programming is the establishment of a “graduate culture” on campus. For 170 years, West Liberty was home only to undergraduate programming and, therefore, undergraduate students. If the graduate programs at West Liberty University are to become one of our academic successes (and perhaps even a hallmark of our offerings), we will need to find ways to establish and nurture a supportive graduate culture on our campus.

Fall Semester	MAEd	MSPAS	MPS	MBA	MSC	MS/MA Bio	Special	Total	Total University Enrollment	%
2009	43						4	47	2644	1.78%
2010	45						5	50	2738	1.83%
2011	54						5	59	2788	2.12%
2012	59	19					4	82	2794	2.93%
2013	82	36					15	133	2776	4.79%
2014	91	35	25				10	161	2711	5.94%
2015	85	37	43				14	179	2346	7.63%
2016	104	34	26	37	10		11	222	2329	9.53%
2017	93	31	39	81	16	8	4	272	2449	11.11%
2018	69	34	31	97	17	35	16	299	2529	11.82%

**Faculty Hiring/Development:**

Essential to any growth and success West Liberty has experienced in the recent past has been the hiring, retaining, and developing of dedicated, highly qualified faculty members. One generation ago, it was common to hear West Liberty referred to as the “High School on the Hill” in the local community. The obvious implication of that moniker was that West Liberty was perceived as providing sub-par post-secondary academic offerings. While that was never fully true, the perception existed nonetheless.

Both the quality of our academic programs and the consequent reputation of WLU in the local community have undoubtedly been on the rise in the last 10+ years. In addition to the publicity boost offered by our transition to University status, it seems that the hiring of first-rate faculty has been the biggest driver of that shift in quality and reputation. In the previous generation, it was commonplace at West Liberty to conduct local-only searches when hiring faculty. In recent years, we have committed to national searches for the highest quality faculty members, and that difference in hiring practice has paid big dividends in terms of the quality and reputation of our programs.

As we head into our next phase of growth, it will be essential to continue to attract nationally viable faculty of the highest quality. This will be especially important in light of the growth of graduate studies cited above. Graduate-level offerings require graduate-level faculty, and graduate-level faculty, arguably, need to be even more highly trained and fully supported in their research and scholarly efforts than even our fine undergraduate faculty. Therefore, in addition to a commitment to hiring the best faculty we can with wide-reaching national searches (at both the graduate and undergraduate levels), it will also be imperative to find ways to support and retain those faculty members. In the recent years of shrinking state budgets, one of the areas that has been trimmed has been faculty support and development (including support of research in the form of materials, support of research in the form of travel, support of conference/seminar attendance, etc.). The budget cuts that resulted in the cutting of that faculty support are unlikely to be reversed in their entirety; however, it will be imperative to the continued and future success of our academic programs to find creative ways to support the professional efforts of our fine faculty.

One issue that cannot be ignored in the support of faculty—and also related to the development of a graduate culture—is the improvement of our library resources. Our library offerings—both in-building and online—were reasonably sufficient for the Liberal Arts-style mission that characterized the university when the library was built in the middle of the previous century. However, our growth of programming (including specialized career-oriented programming such as Physician Assistant Studies and Zoo Science), growth of graduate programs (with advanced needs regarding research capability), and the attracting/retention of high quality faculty (with active programs of scholarship) all seem to suggest a need to rethink the library, its space configuration, its in-building resources, and its online resources. Our continued growth in the directions cited previously, and our continued support of the highly qualified faculty are dependent upon some rethinking of our library offerings (in terms of resources, materials, and spaces).

#### Collaboration:

As is likely the case with any university, much of the day-to-day work within the academic divisions of the school happens in a silo. Decisions regarding curriculum, course offerings, faculty assignments, faculty research, etc. happen within individual divisions on campus. In this way, West Liberty is no different from the majority of universities nationwide. However, faculty have reported a desire for more cross-curricular, cross-campus collaboration. In this way, we could foreseeably use our relatively small size as an advantage. Larger universities have a difficult time fostering such collaboration; however, with some planning and deliberation in the direction of cross-curricular collaboration, it seems a school our size could establish productive and even trailblazing partnerships across the university. Doing so could

also lead to unique (read: attractive to new populations of students) program opportunities that ultimately foster additional growth.

In addition to thinking about ways to foster inter-divisional collaborations on campus, the faculty have also expressed interest in finding new partnerships in the surrounding community as well. Our isolated location atop a hill roughly 20 minutes away from the nearest population centers in any direction is both troubling and unchangeable. However, despite our isolated setting, it does seem as though we have not done all we can to foster rich, academic partnerships in the community. We do have two other 4-year universities within roughly 12 miles of our campus, so inter-scholastic collaboration opportunities certainly exist. Furthermore, our academic programs could also benefit from stronger partnerships with local businesses and other community organizations. These sorts of collaborations—both on campus and off—would seem to be rich-yet-untapped sources for additional academic growth and success.

### West Virginia Six County Feeder Schools--Enrolled Students (Graduating Class)

	<u>2011</u>	<u>2012</u>	<u>2013</u>	<u>2014</u>	<u>2015</u>	<u>2016</u>	<u>2017</u>	<u>2018</u>
BISHOP DONAHUE	8(43)	9 (32)	10 (29)	5 (29)	3 (27)	2 (18)	12 (30)	(0)
BROOKE	50(251)	37(216)	53 (245)	35 (219)	32 (214)	33 (211)	33 (212)	32(229)
CAMERON	6(44)	10(51)	1(51)	7 (44)	3 (70)	8 (51)	4 (63)	7(59)
HUNDRED	0(33)	0(29)	0(24)	0 (25)	0 (28)	1 (17)	0 (31)	2(20)
JOHN MARSHALL	41(307)	53(295)	43 (286)	45 (271)	45 (270)	50 (268)	35 (244)	42(282)
LINSLEY	6(61)	1(75)	4(65)	3 (77)	1 (76)	1 (65)	3 (86)	0(66)
MAGNOLIA	10(102)	10(113)	14 (107)	5 (111)	5 (104)	17 (119)	14 (116)	6(85)
OAK GLEN	16(118)	16(121)	13 (120)	10 (131)	9 (103)	7 (121)	13 (127)	11(120)
PADEN CITY	1(19)	1(24)	5 (23)	4 (22)	2 (35)	8 (31)	6 (28)	7(34)
TYLER CONSOLIDATED	12(110)	9(99)	8 (103)	4 (99)	2 (87)	10 (100)	9 (103)	9(96)
VALLEY	3(56)	1(39)	6 (54)	1 (42)	0 (48)	0 (56)	0 (34)	2(46)
WEIR	21(129)	25(137)	25 (138)	12 (134)	4 (133)	7 (146)	17 (136)	15(149)
WEIRTON MADONNA	7(35)	2(45)	7 (35)	5 (49)	7 (45)	7 (36)	3 (40)	8(46)
WHEELING CENTRAL	12(80)	15(72)	7 (53)	13 (73)	9 (53)	10 (60)	9 (58)	19(90)
WHEELING PARK	88(376)	76(398)	64 (375)	64 (419)	48 (364)	65 (369)	85 (362)	61(305)
TOTAL	281(1764)	265(1746)	260(1708)	213(1745)	170(1657)	226(1668)	243(1670)	221(1627)
% GRADS ENROLLED	15.92%	15.17%	15.22%	12.20%	10.25%	13.54%	14.55%	13.58%

### Conclusion:

Overall, West Liberty University has much to be proud of in its current academic offerings. But we are also at a crucial crossroads in relation to our mission/identity, program growth at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, continued hiring and support of highly qualified faculty, etc. In short, we have done a lot of things right in the recent past, but we are also facing potentially trying times ahead. All of these crucial issues will need to be thought about in the context of shrinking state appropriations. The time is right to be deliberate in our planning and strategizing for our movement into the future as one of the premier academic institutions in the state of West Virginia.

## Questions for Consideration

### Academic Identity

- What is the University's current academic identity?
- Do we see ourselves as continuing the Liberal Arts model that seemed to characterize the university in the previous century?
- Do we see ourselves as a newly created professional education model?
- How might we design a General Studies program that is actually general, that serves the needs of the programs we offer, and that supports our articulated identity?
- What kinds of future growth/programming would make sense in light of these identity decisions?

### Graduate Studies

- How can we better support our growing Graduate School offerings?
- What sorts of Graduate School infrastructure might be necessary to provide for the needs of these growing programs?
- What areas make the most sense for future Graduate programming?
- How can we begin to foster a vibrant graduate culture on our campus?

### Faculty Development

- How can we continue to sustain a program of hiring highly qualified, national faculty candidates?
- How might we support the research and professional development needs of our faculty in light of increasing budget cuts?
- How might we rethink the library's spaces to better serve our current faculty and programmatic offerings?
- How might we rethink the library's in-building and online resource offerings to account for current, new, and specialized academic programs?
- In particular, what are the needs of the Graduate School in relation to library services and resources?

### Collaboration

- What are some possible ways to foster inter-division collaboration on campus?
- What might be some unique collaborative programming opportunities that exist within our current university structure?
- How might we better tap into the expertise and offerings at other local universities? Are there possibilities for partnerships?
- What sorts of community collaborations are possible for the support of our academic programs and their students (as well as increasing the visibility of the University)?