

**Building Northwest's Future:
Development of the 2026-2031 Academic Affairs Strategic Plan**

Executive Summary

Over the past several months, Academic Affairs has engaged in a strategic planning process designed to identify the opportunities and challenges that will most significantly influence Northwest Missouri State University's future. The work was grounded in the university's mission, vision, values, and core competencies while incorporating insights from faculty discussions, discussions at faculty senate, discussions among deans and chairs, SWOT analysis activities, enrollment data, workforce trends, and emerging institutional priorities.

The planning process confirmed two important realities. First, Northwest's greatest strength continues to be its personalized, community-centered educational experience. Second, the institution faces a defining challenge: achieving long-term enrollment sustainability in a rapidly changing higher education landscape.

Throughout the planning discussions, participants repeatedly emphasized the need to attract, retain, and graduate undergraduate and graduate students while simultaneously responding to workforce demands, supporting faculty excellence, strengthening regional partnerships, leveraging data-informed decision making, and enhancing the overall student experience. These conversations ultimately resulted in six proposed Academic Affairs strategic goals designed to guide institutional priorities through 2031.

Foundation of the Planning Process

The strategic planning process began with a review of the university's foundational commitments. Northwest's mission emphasizes student success for *every student, every day*, while the institutional vision calls for becoming the university of choice for a comprehensive and exceptional student experience. Supporting these statements are institutional values focused on student success, scholarship, lifelong learning, collaboration, integrity, strategic thinking, and excellence. Participants were also asked to consider Northwest's STIR competencies: Safe; Trusted; Invested; and Resourceful. These competencies served as guiding principles for evaluating future priorities and opportunities.

Identifying Strategic Priorities

As planning discussions began, Academic Affairs reviewed several ongoing strategic initiatives that were already shaping the institution's future, including:

- Student retention, enrollment, and persistence initiatives
- Development of 90-credit degree pathways
- Expansion of the Rural Health Center
- Artificial intelligence initiatives and curriculum integration
- Workforce development efforts
- Emerging partnerships and grant opportunities

These initiatives helped frame conversations around the areas where Northwest could create the greatest long-term impact. The planning process organized discussions around four institutional pillars established by the President's Office:

1. Enrollment Growth & Sustainability
2. Collegiate Experience
3. People
4. Operations

What We Learned from SWOT Analysis (February 2026)

Chief of Staff Jacob Wood lead the community through SWOT sessions. Nineteen sessions were conducted with groups (faculty, staff, students, alumni, community members). He examined the results and developed themes from each session. Provost Ward presented these themes at the drop-in session in April 2026 along with the mission and value statements as a foundation for the strategic planning sessions. Greatest strength and challenge were developed in the April drop-in session.

Our Greatest Strength

Participants consistently identified Northwest's greatest strength as its personalized, community-centered experience. This finding reinforced the importance of maintaining student-centered approaches while pursuing growth and innovation.

Our Defining Challenge

The most significant challenge identified during the planning process was enrollment sustainability. Participants recognized the need to stabilize enrollment while expanding opportunities for future growth.

Faculty and Staff Perspectives (April through September 2026)

Faculty conversations (open sessions, faculty senate, deans and chairs discussions, SWOT; spring 2026) emphasized several recurring themes:

- Attracting students to Northwest
- Retaining students through graduation
- Creating actionable recruitment and retention strategies
- Remaining adaptable in a changing environment
- Becoming a destination institution for students, faculty, and staff by 2031

These themes became central drivers of the strategic goals that followed.

From Challenges to Opportunities

Through the conversations, we identified several weaknesses:

- Declining traditional student pipelines
- Limited high-demand academic program offerings
- Dependence on a small number of enrollment streams
- Limited adult, transfer, and online growth
- Increasing financial aid competition

At the same time, the discussions highlighted significant opportunities:

- 90-credit degree programs
- Dual-credit expansion
- Growth in health professions

- Online and hybrid delivery
- Workforce certificates
- Regional partnerships
- Graduate, international, and out-of-region recruitment initiatives

These conversations directly informed the first strategic objective area and influenced many of the goals that followed.

Proposed Strategic Goals for Academic Affairs (See more information in Table 1)

Goal 1: Advance Student Success and Career Readiness

The first goal emerged from discussions focused on student persistence, graduation, and workforce preparation. Participants recognized that enrollment growth alone is insufficient. Sustainable success requires helping students complete their degrees, engage in experiential learning, and successfully enter careers or graduate education. As a result, this goal emphasizes retention, graduation, advising, career readiness, internships, undergraduate research, and other high-impact educational practices.

Goal 2: Lead Rural Workforce and Health Care Innovation

A second major theme involved Northwest's unique opportunity to address regional workforce shortages through leadership in rural health care and workforce development.

The Rural Health Center initiative, ongoing workforce shortages across Missouri, and growing partnerships with health systems helped shape this goal. The resulting objective positions Northwest as a premier rural-serving institution focused on preparing health professionals and improving regional health outcomes.

Goal 3: Innovate Academic Programs for a Changing World

Discussions consistently emphasized the need for a dynamic academic portfolio that responds to workforce and learner demands.

This goal reflects discussions surrounding:

- Flexible degree pathways
- Certificates and microcredentials
- Online and hybrid education
- Accelerated pathways (BAMA)
- Artificial intelligence, Advanced technology
- Digital literacy
- Program review modernization

The goal is designed to ensure that Northwest remains responsive while maintaining academic excellence.

Goal 4: Cultivate Faculty and Academic Staff Excellence and Scholarly Impact

The success of every strategic Academic Affairs initiative ultimately depends upon faculty and the academic staff. Discussions emphasized a need to strengthen teaching excellence, scholarship, leadership development, grant activity, mentoring, and interdisciplinary collaboration. The resulting goal highlights the institution's commitment to investing in faculty as the primary drivers of student success and institutional distinction.

Goal 5: Strengthen Community and Regional Partnerships

Stakeholders repeatedly highlighted Northwest's responsibility as a regional anchor institution. Participants stressed the importance of partnerships with:

- K-12 schools
- Community colleges
- Industry
- Employers
- Community organizations

This goal supports economic development, educational attainment, transfer pathways, workforce preparation, and community engagement throughout Northwest Missouri and surrounding regions.

Goal 6: Enhance Institutional Effectiveness Through Data and Continuous Improvement

The final strategic goal emerged from conversations about accountability, assessment, transparency, and evidence-based decision making. Discussions identified opportunities to improve the use of dashboards, predictive analytics, assessment processes, resource alignment, and institutional performance metrics. This goal ensures that implementation of the strategic plan remains measurable and data informed.

Additional Themes Emerging from the Process

Several themes surfaced repeatedly across SWOT discussions, faculty conversations, and Provost strategic initiatives. Collectively, these ideas formed the "BEARCATS" framework:

- Be known for rural health leadership
- Enhance the learner experience
- Amplify scholarship and creative activity
- Refresh curricula and co-curricular opportunities
- Continue investment in students, alumni, faculty, and staff
- Amplify alumni engagement
- Transform learning and working environments
- Strengthen rural communities

These themes serve as cross-cutting concepts that support all six strategic goals.

Looking Ahead

The strategic planning process reaffirmed Northwest's commitment to student success while identifying pathways for growth and innovation. Although enrollment sustainability emerged as the defining institutional challenge, participants also identified substantial opportunities in health professions, workforce development, academic innovation, faculty and academic staff excellence, community engagement, and data-informed decision making.

The proposed goals provide a framework for moving Northwest toward a future that builds on its greatest strength, the personalized Northwest experience, while responding effectively to changing student expectations, workforce demands, and regional needs. Success will depend on continued campus engagement, measurable outcomes, and a shared commitment to advancing the university's mission through 2031.

Academic Affairs Goals

Goal	Potential Objectives	Potential KPIs	High Level Indicators
Goal 1: Advance Student Success and Career Readiness Ensure every Northwest student has access to transformative learning experiences that promote persistence, timely degree completion, career readiness, and lifelong success.	- Increase first-to-second-year retention and graduation rates. - Expand experiential learning opportunities including internships, clinical placements, undergraduate research, and service learning. - Strengthen academic advising through data-informed student success interventions. - Improve career placement and graduate school outcomes. - Increase participation in high-impact educational practices across all academic programs.	Student Success KPIs - First-year retention rate - Second-year retention rate - Six-year graduation rate - Four-year graduation rate - Course completion rate - DFW (D/F/Withdrawal) rates in gateway courses - Student satisfaction with advising - Time-to-degree Career Readiness KPIs - Percentage of graduates employed or enrolled in graduate school within 6 months - Internship and registered apprenticeship participation rate - Undergraduate research participation rate - Student participation in high-impact practices - Employer satisfaction ratings - Career readiness competency assessment scores	Suggested 2031 Targets - First-year retention $\geq 82\%$ - Six-year graduation $\geq 65\%$ 95% of graduates employed or continuing education within 6 months 75% of graduates complete at least one experiential learning activity
Goal 2: Lead Rural Workforce Development and Health Care Innovation Position Northwest as the premier rural-serving university in the region for	Explore and potentially expand health sciences and health care degree offerings in response to regional workforce shortages.	Workforce Development and Health Care Workforce KPIs - Enrollment in health-related programs - Number of health care graduates annually	Suggested 2031 Targets - Increased enrollment in targeted health professions programs 10+ active clinical partners

preparing health care professionals and addressing rural workforce needs.	• Develop strategic partnerships with health systems, community providers, and state agencies. • Increase clinical education, simulation, and rural practicum opportunities. • Support the development of the Rural Health Center as a hub for education, research, service, and workforce development. • Increase the number of graduates entering rural health professions and underserved communities. • Explore the development of a rural workforce development center.	• Rural clinical placement sites • Health care program graduation rates • Licensure or certification pass rates (NCLEX, board exams, etc.) • Number of students completing rural clinical experiences Community Impact KPIs • Partnerships with health systems and clinics • Number of counties served through Rural Health Center initiatives • Continuing education participants in health professions • Grant funding secured for rural health initiatives • Community health projects completed annually	• 80% of health graduates placed in Missouri or surrounding rural communities • \$150,000+ annually in rural-health-related grants and contracts • Establish a rural workforce development center, if suggested during exploration process.
Goal 3: Innovate Academic Programs for a Changing World • Create a dynamic academic portfolio that responds to emerging workforce needs while maintaining Northwest's commitment to academic excellence.	• Explore expanding flexible degree pathways, certificates, microcredentials, and accelerated programs (BAMA). • Explore implementing innovative delivery models including hybrid, online, and competency-informed learning. • Review the program review process and develop methods to regularly evaluate academic programs using workforce	Academic Portfolio KPIs • Number of new programs launched • Number of microcredentials/certificates offered • Enrollment in online and hybrid programs • Program review completion rates • Academic program demand index • Academic portfolio contribution margin	Suggested 2031 Targets • Annual portfolio review covering 100% of programs every 5 years • AI literacy embedded in 100% of undergraduate programs • 25% increase in online/hybrid enrollment • Launch at least 4 new industry-aligned credentials

	demand, student outcomes, and financial sustainability metrics. • Explore integrating artificial intelligence, digital literacy, and emerging technologies throughout the curriculum. • Develop interdisciplinary programs aligned with regional and national workforce priorities.	Innovation KPIs • Programs incorporating AI literacy outcomes • Interdisciplinary programs developed • New industry partnerships • Student enrollment in emerging workforce fields • Percentage of academic programs reviewed using workforce data	
Goal 4: Cultivate Faculty and Academic Staff Excellence and Scholarly Impact • Invest in faculty and academic staff development, innovation, scholarship, and leadership to promote excellence in teaching, research, and service.	• Increase [ensure] participation in evidence-based teaching and learning initiatives. • Expand opportunities for faculty scholarship, creative activity, and grant development. • Strengthen faculty and staff leadership development pathways. • Support interdisciplinary collaboration across colleges and schools. • Promote faculty engagement in community-focused and applied research initiatives.	Faculty and Staff Development KPIs • Faculty and staff participation in professional development • Participation in teaching innovation programs • Faculty and staff leadership development participation • Faculty and staff mentoring participation Scholarship KPIs • Peer-reviewed publications • Creative works and presentations • Grant submissions • External grant dollars awarded • Undergraduate researchers mentored • Interdisciplinary research projects Teaching Excellence KPIs • Student evaluation measures	Suggested 2031 Targets • 80% faculty and academic staff participation in annual professional development • 50% increase in external grant funding • Every faculty and academic staff member participates in at least one development activity annually

		• Peer review results • Teaching award recipients • Course quality review participation	
Goal 5: Strengthen Community and Regional Partnerships • Leverage Northwest's role as a regional anchor institution to enhance economic development, educational attainment, and community well-being.	• Expand partnerships with K-12 schools, community colleges, employers, and community organizations. • Increase dual-credit, transfer, and workforce-aligned educational pathways. • Strengthen engagement with rural communities across Northwest Missouri. • Develop collaborative initiatives that address regional challenges and opportunities. • Increase community-engaged research and learning activities. • Expand dual credit offerings • Codify credit for prior learning for all students.	Partnership KPIs • Number of active strategic partnerships • Partnerships with K-12 schools • Community college articulation agreements • Industry advisory board participation • Employer engagement activities Regional Impact KPIs • Dual-credit enrollment • Transfer student enrollment • Workforce-training participants • Community engagement hours • Economic-development initiatives supported • Regional employer satisfaction	Suggested 2031 Targets • 25% increase in dual-credit enrollment • Partnerships in every county within the Northwest service region • Annual increase in transfer student enrollment
Goal 6: Enhance Institutional Effectiveness Through Data and Continuous Improvement • Use evidence-based decision making to improve academic quality, resource stewardship, and student outcomes.	• Implement academic dashboards to support continuous improvement. • Strengthen assessment and accreditation processes. • Use predictive analytics to improve enrollment, retention, and completion outcomes.	Data-Driven Decision Making KPIs • Dashboard utilization rates • Program assessment completion rates • Strategic plan metric attainment	Suggested 2031 Targets • 100% strategic initiatives tracked through dashboards • All academic programs completing annual assessment reporting • Annual improvement on key student success indicators

	- Align resource allocation with strategic priorities and measurable outcomes. - Increase transparency and accountability for academic performance indicators.	- Accreditation findings and recommendations addressed Operational KPIs - Budget alignment with strategic priorities - Administrative process cycle times - Percentage of strategic initiatives on track - Performance measure reporting completion Outcomes KPIs - Student success dashboard improvements - Academic quality indicators - Resource efficiency measures - Overall institutional health scorecard	
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Overall Guiding Metrics

- Total enrollment
- First-year retention
- Six-year graduation rate
- Degrees awarded
- Graduate placement rate
- Health care program enrollment
- Rural health workforce placements
- External grant funding
- Faculty scholarly productivity
- Student satisfaction score
- Academic program demand index

- Operating margin of the academic portfolio

Draft