



Strategic Compass for the University of Illinois Springfield

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UIS Strategic Compass

Introduction and Purpose

In 2017, the University of Illinois at Springfield's (UIS) Chancellor Susan Koch and Provost Dennis Papini sought the development of a Strategic Compass to clarify UIS' identity and guide the strategic direction of the university. The Center for Organizational and Human Resource Effectiveness (COHRE) at Middle Tennessee State University was commissioned to design and conduct the process for engaging UIS stakeholders' input, ultimately producing a collectively developed vision for UIS. COHRE served as a neutral third party in guiding this process, with full independence for all aspects of the project. The COHRE Senior Consultants who led this endeavor were Dr. Michael Hein, Dr. Patrick McCarthy and Dr. Richard Moffett.

The Strategic Compass approach is anchored in identifying the strengths, distinctive qualities, underlying values and future ambitions of an organization. These provide an essential foundation for addressing strategic development priorities. The resulting Strategic Compass provides the general framework of the organization's identity and aspirations. It is particularly useful in dynamic environments, because this framework provides strategic direction with flexibility for how the organization can adapt to evolving circumstances.

The UIS Strategic Compass was collaboratively developed, utilizing extensive input across UIS stakeholders. In contrast to the top-down mandate of most strategic planning approaches, the Strategic Compass is an inductive integration of the shared vision for UIS.

NOTE: This version of the UIS Strategic Compass report was edited and updated in January 2019 to reflect the collective work that resulted from a university-wide effort to develop and affirm the new UIS mission, vision and values statements.

Methodology

The process involved two primary phases. The first phase featured the use of individual and focus group interviews ("focus groups") from a wide range of UIS stakeholders to identify issues and perspectives that they deemed to be significant. The focus groups also provided qualitative descriptions of these perspectives. The focus groups were conducted from October 2017 through February 2018 with stakeholders that included UIS faculty, staff, administrators, students, alumni and community collaborators.

The second phase included the development and administration of surveys for further input. Participation, in April 2018, was fully anonymous with high security protections. One survey was sent to all full-time faculty, staff and administrators. Another survey was sent to all students. These surveys provided further qualitative and quantitative descriptions of some issues initially raised by the focus group participants.

At least 85 focus groups with 268 participants were conducted. Most of the focus groups contained 10 or fewer individuals, which helped facilitate the engagement of each participant.

The survey to faculty, staff and administrators was completed by 246 people and yielded 1,673 comments in addition to their ratings of the quantitative items. Furthermore, 266 students completed their survey, adding 1,351 comments along with their ratings of the quantitative items. More detailed information about the focus groups and surveys is available in the supplementary Strategic Compass Technical Report provided by COHRE to UIS, including further description of participants' views regarding many of the issues highlighted in this Strategic Compass.

COHRE also reviewed an array of documents of potential relevance. Some examples include: the previous UIS Strategic Plan (January 2006), the microaggressions report authored by McChesney and Moranski (March 2016) and the UI System Strategic Framework (May 2016).

The extensive participation of so many UIS stakeholders across multiple methods provided a solid foundation for generating conclusions, particularly since consistent findings emerged across the varied sources. The resulting UIS Strategic Compass is an aspirational vision of UIS' identity and strategic direction.

Overview of UIS Strategic Compass

UIS strives to provide a **Premier Educational Experience**. That overarching strategic goal aligns with the UI System's emphasis and reputation for exceptional quality yet enables UIS to tailor that ambition to its own distinctive priorities, including its mission "to provide a uniquely student-centered educational experience both in and out of the classroom through active learning, meaningful research and impactful civic engagement that prepares graduates to contribute fully to society." What that looks like and how it's achieved is expressed via four directional pillars and seven essential values and guided by UIS' vision "to be a pathway for opportunity, a catalyst for change and a space of possibility where learners become ethical and passionate scholars, leaders and citizens capable of transforming their local and global communities."

The UIS directional pillars features **World-Class Teaching**, where students get **Personal Attention** and are both **Experience Engaged** and **Liberal Arts Skilled**. These pillars are guided by an environment of seven essential values: **Student-focused Teaching and Learning, Integrity, Inquiry, Civic Engagement, Diversity, Strategic Thinking and Accountability**.

The UIS Strategic Compass is described in more detail below. This new path forward honors the university's history and leverages its strengths, yet evolves for the future with a core identity.

The ideals of the UIS Strategic Compass have substance and impact as they are translated into actionable priorities. Accordingly, the descriptions below integrate several issues of particular significance for UIS to manifest the ideals into actions.

UIS Strategic Compass: Four Directional Pillars

World-Class Teaching

UIS has strong roots in a teaching-oriented mission, and UIS stakeholders universally emphasize the importance of top-tier teaching quality for the university's future. UIS has a proud history of innovative approaches for stimulating student learning and engagement in the classroom and online. Moreover, the vast majority of UIS classes are taught by professors and full-time instructors, while students at some other universities are often taught by part-time temporary instructors or graduate students. There is a core of talented and dedicated faculty, and supporting them is essential. UIS continues to affirm its commitment to world-class teaching quality and recognizes key priorities for enhancing its future success.

Key Priorities:

- *Reinforce emphasis on hiring faculty with strong teaching skills.*
- *Improve teaching assessment and feedback systems.*
- *Recognize and reward high-quality teaching.*
- *Invest in ongoing development of faculty teaching skills.*

It is essential for UIS to hire faculty with strong teaching skills and to provide ongoing development and support for those faculty.¹ UIS should reinforce an emphasis on hiring criteria for faculty positions that heavily weight the candidates' teaching potential, including their skills, abilities, motivation, creativity and innovation. This includes both facilitating student learning and energizing student engagement.

Development of teaching quality begins with effectively assessing the strengths and areas for improvement of each faculty member. That feedback should drive individualized strategies for how to further develop each one's teaching capabilities. This, in turn, would help the university to more effectively allocate resources to support these developmental efforts.

Faculty and administrators indicate that the current assessment tool is insufficient for providing effective developmental feedback. Better assessment systems can improve developmental feedback, provide individualized performance goal-setting, facilitate incentives for improvement and strengthen accountability for teaching quality.

Recognition and rewards are also important for reinforcing high-quality teaching, and better assessment systems offer a valuable foundation for doing so more effectively. One current practice that is strongly endorsed by UIS stakeholders is placing a particular emphasis on teaching performance when making promotion and tenure decisions.² Additional options include ongoing constructive feedback, prestigious teaching awards, high-profile recognition at major

¹ Professional development of staff and administrators is also important.

² The processes for promotion and tenure decisions are widely cited by faculty and administrators as priorities for improvement, and better assessment systems are a key step.

ceremonies and in the media, as well as informal attention throughout the year from leaders throughout the university. A positive side-effect to doing these well is improved morale.

Exceptional teaching quality is integral to UIS' identity and mission, which makes faculty development a pinnacle priority for the university. For these Stars to shine, UIS must significantly and strategically invest in the ongoing development of its faculty.

UIS should “[e]stablish a unit, perhaps a ‘Faculty Development Center’ in order to create, organize and sustain programs and initiatives related to teaching innovation and engaged learning.” That call from the 2006 UIS Strategic Plan (prominently listed as Goal No. 1’s Action Step No. 1) has yet to be fulfilled and is a major omission limiting developmental progress.³ In recent years, waning UIS resources for externally based professional development have further stifled progress.

There have been some positive developmental advances at UIS, most notably the Center for Online Learning, Research and Service (COLRS) to support online teaching.⁴ However, UIS could significantly benefit from providing more comprehensive teaching innovation support services at an exemplary level, including for classroom-based teaching and for fostering the Experience Engaged and Liberal Arts Skilled pillars of the UIS Strategic Compass.

³ Although the UIS website contains a section with a similar-sounding name (Faculty Development Office - www.uis.edu/fdo), that does not operate as a comprehensive faculty development center. UIS administrators acknowledge that the Faculty Development Center recommendation of the 2006 UIS Strategic Plan has not been implemented.

⁴ Regarding online generally: Many stakeholders cite the quality of UIS online courses as a competitive advantage. While the university was a proactive innovator during the early rise of online education, UIS should heed cautions against potentially over-assuming its status in this arena. The online market has grown exponentially, bringing far more competitors with nationally prominent reputations. Online students can easily shop among any of them. Moreover, what it takes to initially create online success is not the same as what it takes to stay out front in this rapidly evolving arena. Even some early online pioneers with major competitive and resource advantages have encountered unanticipated declines for these reasons. UIS needs to be accordingly diligent in order to sustain its online success.

Personalized Attention

Personalized attention to the students has been a defining feature of UIS throughout its history. Stakeholders are particularly proud of this distinction and reiterate its essential role for UIS' future. All corners of the university impact this ideal, including students' interactions with faculty, staff and administrators regarding their full spectrum of experiences at the university.

Key Priorities:

- *Reinforce emphasis on individualized student interactions with faculty and staff.*
- *Assure classes available in format students want/need (classroom vs. online).*
- *Improve practices for meeting specialized needs of diverse student body.*
- *Develop critical student life factors.*

On the academic side, stakeholders frequently cite positive examples at UIS such as small class sizes; individualized communication, feedback and mentoring from faculty; and opportunities for student involvement with research and other experiential activities. UIS affirms its commitment to such standards for students getting an education with a personal touch. Individualized student-faculty interactions are a central element.

Of course, staff interactions also directly and significantly impact students' perceptions of how personal (or impersonal) their experience at UIS is and merit further diligence by UIS. Additionally, administrators' support of faculty and staff in these regards can be a facilitator (or barrier) for reinforcing the personal connection of each student with the university.

An additional academic aspect of personal attention is the ability for students to get classes in the format they want/need, particularly regarding classroom-based versus online courses. Online courses are valuable for many students, and stakeholders rate these courses positively overall. The convenience and quality of these courses led half of the surveyed students to want more online offerings. In contrast, another half of the surveyed students indicate they prefer and benefit more from classroom-based courses, and some noted a detrimental impact on their campus life experience if their only choice for some courses is online (e.g., if they live on campus but are required to take classes online). Opportunities for adding sections of courses in either modality may be facilitated financially as UIS achieves its intended enrollment growth in the years ahead. The recommendation is to assure an appropriate balance of classroom-based versus online sections, especially for required courses and popular electives.

Personalized attention also encompasses an inclusive culture, reinforced by practices that meet the specialized needs (academic and otherwise) of a diverse student body. Student life is another key factor, including residence life and other campus life considerations. Stakeholders recognize the ascending ambitions of UIS in these areas and some corresponding achievements. They also point out significant needs for improvement as UIS continues its evolution in these areas.

A commitment to diversity and inclusion is explicitly a focus for the UI System overall, and for UIS specifically. Meeting the specialized needs of diverse students, while fostering an inclusive culture, is key for success. UIS stakeholders acknowledge efforts and programs to help meet such needs, yet advocate for further progress in the future.

A valuable starting point is to identify the varying student segments, evaluate how effectively each is served and develop an integrated strategy for the future. UIS draws a wide array of students⁵ and offers a variety of support services, with stakeholders reporting considerable differences in the quality and effectiveness of such services. This has a major impact on student success and retention and merits high priority attention.

Assessing the strengths and shortcomings of each student support program, and developing strategic goals with action plans, is an important foundation. An integrated approach can also leverage the strengths of some programs to improve others. For instance, beneficial aspects of programs serving Capital Scholars and/or student athletes may be expanded to positively impact additional segments of students. Such cross-fertilization advances a more inclusive approach to personally assisting students and expands the positive impact accordingly.

The amount of resources, including staffing levels, also need to be strategically addressed as UIS plans for how to best serve each segment of a diverse student body. Limited resources means that increased attention to one segment often results in decreased attention to another segment. For instance, stakeholders note that transfer students were historically the cornerstone of the university, yet the more recent focus on adding traditional freshman has significantly challenged the ability to serve transfer students. Administrators' planning and support will be vital to empower coordinated gains across all segments.

Student life also has a major role in the personalized care that a student experiences with the university. The impact is heightened by the physical distance of the campus from downtown Springfield and business areas. UIS has an ascending focus on enhancing campus life and integrating with the Springfield community, although many of these efforts are in the early stages.

Each student's personal experience of campus life is driven by social interaction opportunities. These are created directly via student life events and indirectly by having common areas that attract students to gather and interact. The Student Union is one recent achievement for the latter. Expanding the accessibility of the Student Union and creating more common areas (inside and outside) throughout the rest of the campus are recommended, in addition to further growth of student life events.

Residence life offers significant potential for improvement, and the new leadership in this area may facilitate progress and reduce the excessive number of housing vacancies on campus. Stakeholders note that high cost (relative to the local housing market) is a barrier. Student feedback also emphasizes social restrictions specifically, and culture issues more generally, as major targets for improvement. Many add that the hours for access to food services are too limited, especially since there are no off-campus alternatives nearby and transportation is not always available. Stakeholders at all levels of the university advocate high-priority attention to each of these issues.

⁵ e.g., undergraduate, graduate, residential, commuter, transfer, traditional freshmen, non-traditional adults, urban, rural, international, first-generation, honors, student athletes; with a diversity of academic abilities and socioeconomic status, as well as race, ethnicity, religion, age, disability, gender, LGBTQ+ status, and more.

UIS is also actively seeking to collaborate with the Springfield business community for development of a “campus town” region adjacent to UIS, which could include shops, restaurants and entertainment options for students. This would be a major benefit for student life, as well as for strengthening the university’s connection with the community, and thus is a key priority for UIS’ future.

Experience Engaged

UIS is committed to education infused with experiential learning opportunities and is positioned to build upon its strengths in this area. This expands skill development, stimulates interest, enhances career preparation and facilitates community connections. The UIS aspiration is for every student to benefit from a range of such experiences.

Stakeholders praise UIS’ history in this regard and endorse an even greater focus for the future. It is a point of distinction for the university that provides a competitive market advantage for both the university and its students.

Key Priorities:

- *Reinforce and expand current experiential learning opportunities beyond the classroom.*
- *Increase capability and practice of integrating experiential activities within courses.*

UIS strengths include a variety of existing initiatives that have strong reputations and/or rising potential. The size of the university also enables every student to benefit from several opportunities, which typically is not practical at larger universities and often is not as well developed at similar-sized or smaller universities. Additionally, being located in the state capital is a significant advantage for developing opportunities, especially regarding public policy and service. State government, nonprofit and not-for-profit organizations, and private businesses all provide regional collaboration foundations.

Civic engagement has been prominent at UIS since the birth of the university. Examples range from civil activism and volunteer efforts to formal initiatives such as the acclaimed Illinois Innocence Project and the Center for State Policy and Leadership.

Internships are another major form of experiential learning. Two of the highly regarded assets at UIS include the Graduate Public Service Internship (GPSI) Program and the Illinois Legislative Staff Internship Program (ILSIP).

Student involvement in faculty research also provides valuable experience, including individualized professional mentoring of students and development of analytical skills. As part of delivering on its “Leadership Lived” brand promise, internships are available throughout campus to help students develop applied leadership experiences. International opportunities are available as well through Study Abroad.

These are some of the ways in which UIS provides experiential opportunities beyond the classroom (or online platform). Experiential learning can also be fostered within the courses in a wide variety of ways, including applied projects, civic engagement activities, interviews and/or

shadowing at organizations, simulation activities, etc. Stakeholders endorse increased integration of experiential learning into courses and note the importance of a corresponding investment in faculty development of ideas, skills, strategies and resource support.⁶

Liberal Arts Skilled

UIS has an esteemed liberal arts history that lays an important foundation for its future. Liberal arts provides students with versatile skills that are valuable across careers, and in life more generally. It takes more than applied technical skills to be prepared for career success, with prominent employers increasingly emphasizing the importance of liberal arts skills.⁷ These skills range from interpersonal to analytical, and much more.⁸

Key Priority:

- *Strategically assess how to best leverage UIS' liberal arts strengths for the future, including how to integrate those strengths across majors.*

This priority frames the value of general education courses as more than their respective knowledge domains, particularly when the liberal arts skills gained from those courses are explicitly recognized. Additionally, the Engaged Citizen Common Experience (ECCE) program is lauded by many, particularly for its role in exposing students to alternate perspectives and for the quality of ECCE guest speakers. However, stakeholders have mixed reactions overall to ECCE, partly due to cumbersome processes and effects (e.g., impact on transfer students). A UIS review of ECCE should clarify ECCE's purpose, assess how well it meets that purpose and examine potential obstacles that may result from this program. That review will provide UIS with a more complete basis for developing ECCE recommendations.

There are more potential avenues for developing liberal arts skills at UIS. Teaching innovation initiatives can include liberal arts-based pedagogy developments for non-liberal arts classes. Cross-course collaborations are another creative option, with proper planning and logistical support. A future UIS faculty development center could have a valuable role for facilitating these and other liberal arts skills integration innovations.

⁶ See the World-Class Teaching section for further description of faculty development recommendations (including the importance of incentives and rewards, and the value that a "Faculty Development Center" could provide for facilitating teaching innovations across campus).

⁷ e.g., Google found that "soft" liberal arts skills are more critical to job success than "hard" technical skills, even for highly technical jobs (December 2017 - https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/12/20/the-surprising-thing-google-learned-about-its-employees-and-what-it-means-for-todays-students/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.57471b8e2631)

⁸ Specific Liberal Arts skills often cited by employers and alumni as beneficial include those featured on the UIS Sociology Anthropology website (<https://www.uis.edu/sociologyanthropology/about/thebenefitsofoliberalartsdegree>). Additional current examples can be researched from external sources regarding employer-preferred liberal arts skills and related career readiness skills.

UIS Strategic Compass: Seven Essential Values

The four pillars described above are driven by an environment of seven essential values. Each of these values is strongly endorsed by UIS stakeholders and has cross-cutting impact. These UIS ideals should serve as essential reference points for decisions and actions throughout the university.

Student-Focused Teaching and Learning

We place student development – fostered through meaningful interactions among students, faculty, staff and the community — at the core of all University activities.

Integrity

We conduct ourselves with honesty, professionalism and respect for others, accepting responsibility for the ethical consequences of our ideas and actions.

Inquiry

We seek to understand the world around us through the mastery of core skills of perception, analysis and expression, through the acquisition of knowledge and through the pursuit of scholarship that is challenging and significant.

Civic Engagement

We build meaningful relationships that enable us to both learn from and contribute to our local and global communities.

Diversity

We embrace diversity in all its forms as both an intellectual commitment and a social responsibility, and we foster an inclusive culture that recognizes the needs and contributions of every individual.

Strategic Thinking

We are a proactive learning organization committed to continuous improvement, evidence-based decision-making and innovation.

Accountability

We translate intentions into actions via shared governance and fiscal stewardship, holding decision-makers responsible to our students, colleagues and other stakeholders.

Closing

This Strategic Compass provides a summary description of the identity and aspirations of UIS, as well as the core values that drive the environment for achieving this strategic vision. It was collaboratively developed with extensive input from a wide range of UIS stakeholders. The resulting Strategic Compass honors the university's history and leverages its strengths, yet evolves for the future.

COHRE delivered this Strategic Compass and the supplementary technical report to the Strategic Compass Steering Committee, the Chancellor and the Provost. These stakeholders confirmed and further developed the final UIS Strategic Compass to guide the University through the opportunities and challenges of the coming decade. Those developments are reflected in this version of the Strategic Compass document.