

Strategic Thinking Document

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Introduction

The following is a Strategic Thinking Document, not a Strategic Planning Document. Any quality strategic plan comes from the congruence of thought, data, discussion, participation and collaboration of an entire organization to set a course for the future. A strategic thinking document is just that, one person's view of the landscape facing higher education and thoughts on potential goals, strategies and tactics that can be used to deal with advancing an organization in the future.

On October 9, 2019, President Armstrong released his first Strategic Thinking Document¹ to the St. Thomas University community. Those thoughts were greatly influenced by three articles and a book written about the future of higher education. The articles describe the major challenges and disruptions ahead for education and they offer tactics to successfully navigate the future of higher education in these extremely volatile times. These publications are still relevant today:

- J. Selingo's April 2013 article, "Colleges Struggling to Stay Afloat"², speaks of the coming "disruption" of higher education and that only 400 to 500 of the 4,000 colleges and universities in the country have the fiscal strength to weather the oncoming storm. Selingo added that the schools most vulnerable in the changing landscape of higher education are small (personal), tuition driven, faith-based, underfunded, underendowed colleges. At STU, we are a personal university with limitless reach!

¹ [STU Strategic Thinking Document \(2019\)](#)

² [Colleges Struggle to Stay Afloat – The New York Times \(2013\)](#)

- An article written by Kent Barnds, “Private Colleges Need a New Agenda”³, featured in InsideHigherEd challenged the old formula for private colleges that ambition + tradition = progress. He writes that the new formula for success is achieved by mastering five steps that are outside the norm of past behavior for smaller (more personal), private institutions: (1) operate like a start-up, (2) fully embrace the teacher-mentor model, (3) be bold when identifying what student’s can’t do at Flagships, (4) emphasis place-based teaching and scholarship, and (5) double down on your hometown.
- The third article written by Scott Kelley from DePaul University is an existential conversation with his brother, a marketing executive with NIKE, on the question “Do Catholic Universities Still Have a Value Proposition?”⁴ The question is a simple one, is there a place for Catholic Universities in a growing secular society that abhors tradition and rules. Kelley surmises that a Catholic University’s Value Proposition is the following:

“This leads us to the most important value proposition of Catholic universities: to educate students to shape the future we want. Catholic universities belong in today’s higher educational matrix because they imagine the development of the whole person and of all people. They do much more than educate for jobs or careers. It should follow that those students who feel it is their duty to save our world will become the most loyal customers of all.”

- Fourth, a book by the President of Northeastern University, Dr. Joseph Aoun, “Robot Proof”⁵ provides the blueprint for higher education institutions that wish to prepare their students to thrive in an artificial intelligence global economy. Dr. Aoun strongly asserts that if colleges and universities want to serve their constituencies and society, then institutions need to move from centuries of stale pedagogy to teaching what he calls the “Humanics” to equip students to compete with artificial intelligence. Humanics is based on three literacies that higher education should embrace to prepare students for the future, Technological, Big

³ [Private Colleges Need a New Agenda - InsideHigherEd \(2019\)](#)

⁴ [Do Catholic Universities Still Have a Value Proposition? - InsideHigherEd \(2019\)](#)

⁵ [Robot-Proof - Joseph Aoun \(2018\)](#)

Data and Human. Dr. Aoun theorizes the best way to teach Humanics is through experiential learning.

The articles/book mentioned above laid the foundation for the development of **STU's LIMITLESS Strategic Plan⁶** that focuses on LIMITLESS Devotion, LIMITLESS Opportunity, and LIMITLESS Results. The plan includes 3 goals, 9 objectives, 27 tactics, and 96 metrics. We have achieved and surpassed most of the ideas from the current plan and have completed 82% of the metrics. STU is a model of success in an atmosphere of declining college enrollment and confidence in higher education. It is obvious based on what we have achieved that we don't have a data point, we have a trend of success at STU, which is demonstrated by our **Top 10 list of achievements**:

1. Five straight years of record enrollment growth.
2. Grew from an \$85 million to \$204 million organization.
3. 400,000 square feet of new buildings and athletics spaces.
4. Institutional accreditation reaffirmed until 2033.
5. Three straight years of record fundraising.
6. Tripled on-campus housing.
7. Operating revenue increased by 54%.
8. Record number of team sports qualifying for the NAIA National Playoffs, and first team National Championship.
9. 72% passing rate on the February 2024 Florida Bar Exam. Second in the state.
10. Mock trial team wins the prestigious Florida Bar Chester Bedell Mock Trial Competition for the second year in a row.

Challenges in Higher Education Today

Four specific challenges are impacting St. Thomas University today:

⁶ [LIMITLESS Strategic Plan \(2020\)](#)

- First, **attacks on personal, faith-based institutions by the current federal administration have been pervasive and consistent, continuing to strain the financial resources of these tuition-dependent entities.** Examples include increased Title IX regulations, the FAFSA roll-out failure, direct attacks on religious freedom, increased funding for land-grant universities, and the lingering impacts of the nation’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. An article from the Hechinger Report entitled “Experts predicted dozens of colleges would close in 2023 – and they were right⁷” in January 2024, notes:

“This time last year, experts predicted we’d see another wave of college closures, mostly institutions that were struggling before the pandemic and were kept afloat by Covid-era funding. Since then, keeping their doors open has become unrealistic for these colleges, many of which are regional private colleges.”

The drop in enrollment is further compounded by the FAFSA roll-out issues this spring, which could reduce the number of low-income and minority students attending college⁸.

- Second, **American higher education has become the battleground for weaponizing political discourse.** A recent Gallup/Lumina Foundation poll found that political agendas are the number one reason Americans have lost confidence in higher education⁹. Examples of this include the recent pro-Palestinian protests on college campuses and the unwillingness of elite university presidents to condemn the genocide of the Jewish people. In his recent op-ed in the Baltimore Sun, “Student protests need not have thrown college campuses into chaos¹⁰”, President Armstrong writes that “*Colleges must do a better job of proactively enforcing their policies and procedures, condemning hate and defining free speech versus illicit action, while promoting intellectual diversity.*” Van Jones from CNN remarks that colleges should keep students physically safe, while challenging students intellectually¹¹. Together, these thoughts are summed up well in a recent STU commercial

⁷ [Experts predicted dozens of colleges would close in 2023 - Hechinger Report \(2024\)](#)

⁸ [Low-Income And Minority Students Aren’t Filling Out FAFSA—Which Could Mean Fewer Go To College - Forbes \(2024\)](#)

⁹ [U.S. Confidence in Higher Education Now Closely Divided - Gallup \(2024\)](#)

¹⁰ [Student protests need not have thrown college campuses into chaos - Armstrong \(2024\)](#)

¹¹ [Opinion: Why university presidents are under fire - CNN \(2023\)](#)

where President Armstrong says, “*Based on the Catholic intellectual tradition, at St. Thomas University, we don’t tell you what to think, we teach you how to think*”¹².

- Third, **a values based collegiate education is needed now more than ever**. The Catholic intellectual tradition teaches us to seek out all answers no matter where it takes us, knowing that in the end God and Truth is at the center. And, that we hold ourselves to a standard of truths that are self-evident. Scott Kelley’s article on the value proposition of Catholic Universities is still true today. Reverend Ronald J. Nuzzi, Ph.D., formerly with the University of Notre Dame’s Alliance for Catholic Education, identifies ten reasons why a catholic education still matters¹³: (1) An Incarnational View of the World, (2) Immersion in the Paschal Mystery, (3) The Value of Relationships as a Reflection of the Divine, (4) A Nuanced View of Scripture, (5) Civic Engagement, (6) Service for the Common Good, (7) Discipline as a Faith Expectation, (8) The Centrality of Arts, Ritual, Drama, and Music to the Life of Faith, (9) The Fullness of the Catholic Identity at the Heart of the Church, and (10) Personal Excellence as a Spiritual Goal.
- Finally, **our post-Covid world has lost the idea of seeking out excellence**. Deadlines have become optional, customer service has been forgotten, and the need for students to learn the right school values and essential skills has been forgotten. In addition, institutions have become more lenient in their exam policies for admissions. However, institutions are now reversing their optional college entrance exam test policies,¹⁴ including St. Thomas University. Excellence is an ideal for us to strive for.

STU’s Next Strategic Plan: Pursue Excellence

The next strategic plan focuses on the key elements needed for **STU to become the Great Catholic University of the South**, including a full 360-degree review of the institution to refocus our efforts on the ideal of pursuing excellence. However, STU is breaking the trend of traditional 3-5 year strategic plans common among higher education institutions and instead looking at a 9 year

¹² ["Think Critically" - STU Commercial \(2024\)](#)

¹³ [Ten Reasons Why Catholic Education Still Matters – University of Notre Dame \(2020\)](#)

¹⁴ [Why Highly Selective Colleges Are Reinstating The SAT - Forbes \(2024\)](#)

strategic plan constructed by three consecutive mini plans to achieve our ultimate goal to Pursue Excellence.

In December 2023, St. Thomas University received its 10-year accreditation reaffirmation with no concerns from SACSCOC and President Armstrong received a 10-year contract extension. These two events laid the foundation and stability for STU's future and provide an opportunity to re-think the concept of strategic planning within this context. The three phases of the next strategic plan are:

1. **Building to Excellence** (Years 1-3): This first stage focuses on cultivating a student's ability to learn (Excellence in Intellectual Discovery), ensuring that all students have a well-rounded and balanced education (Excellence in Student Experiences), developing the brand of STU to build strong partnerships (Excellence in Strategic Partnerships), and ensuring our offices/departments are utilizing best practices in their fields (Excellence in Operational Management).
2. **Focusing on Excellence** (Years 4-6): Once the foundation for excellence is established, the second stage focuses on the continued development and refinement of key institutional priorities that give STU a competitive advantage among other institutions. This second stage focuses on the uniqueness of STU and the value it offers to students, employees, and the community.
3. **Sustaining Excellence** (Years 7-9): The final stage includes a reflection of the first two stages, with a focus on STU's 10-year accreditation reaffirmation in 2033. It includes an evaluation of the current state of higher education, lessons learned from the first two stages of the strategic plan, and prioritizing the final elements required for STU to be recognized as a Top 20 Catholic University in the country and to become the Great Catholic University of the South.

Each of the 3 stages in the strategic plan will include goals, objectives, and tactics. These will be determined through either a full strategic planning process (the first phase), or a mini strategic planning process to signify the transition to a new stage of the plan (the second and third phases).

An underlying theme reflected in this strategic plan is that **confidence in American higher education has declined**.¹⁵ STU should continue to promote the benefits of education in all aspects of our work. A Gallup & Lumina Foundation study, “Education for What?”¹⁶, evaluated existing research on the relationship between education and positive outcomes, while also conducting a nationally representative survey to inform gaps in the current data. Their key findings are:

- Out of 52 economic and noneconomic outcomes tested in the study — such as higher income, greater job satisfaction, higher voting rates and greater volunteerism — educational attainment has a meaningful statistical relationship with 50 of them.
- Education is positively related to higher income, better health status, better wellbeing, increased likelihood to do work that fits with their natural talents and interests, voting participation, volunteerism and charitable giving.
- The relationships between education and positive life outcomes are generally similar for people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, but the link between education and labor force participation is slightly higher for Black adults.
- Most adults agree that higher education boosts innovation, incomes and entrepreneurship. However, the public is more skeptical that higher education improves physical health, mental health, cooperation or democratic representation.

Excellence in Intellectual Discovery

The defining element of any institution is its academics. Recently, Douglas Belkin, writing for the Wall Street Journal, commented that “*The misalignment between universities and the labor market is compounded by the failure of many schools to teach students to think critically....The combination of more college graduates and weaker learning outcomes has diluted the signal*

¹⁵ [Americans' Confidence in Higher Education Down Sharply – GALLUP \(2023\)](#)

¹⁶ [Education for What? – GALLUP \(2023\)](#)

*provided by a degree from less prestigious colleges.”*¹⁷ As a personal, private, liberal-arts institution, the ability of our students and graduates to demonstrate critical thinking, analytic reasoning, and communication skills is a reflection of the quality of our educational process. Our reputation for producing exceptional individuals increases our standing among employers seeking to hire our graduates and potential students looking for an institution of value and prestige.

How does STU stand out among the thousands of higher education institutions in the United States? We do this by focusing on the promise of developing the entire individual, to allow them the safety to think critically without judgement and explore the depths of human thought. The spring 2024 edition of the Harvard Youth Poll¹⁸ from the Institute of Politics at Harvard Kennedy School found that “1/3 of college students are uncomfortable sharing their political views on campus.” Rather than jumping on the ephemeral topic of today, STU is a beacon of stability providing the appropriate education for our future leaders. This approach begins with our General Education Requirements, which allow students to select from a broad range of courses to facilitate “lifelong and value-oriented education.” And, it continues in our graduate programs which are designed to build on the strong foundations of a liberal arts education.

Authors of the recently released “St. Thomas University Catholic Identity: Past, Present, and Future” document, write “*Ethical leaders model the way for a high standard of leadership and the practice of Catholic values that can be applied to personal and professional lives. The foundational instruction provided to students at STU applies a moral framework for decision making and produces leaders for life rooted in authentic Catholic teachings.*”¹⁹ The Catholic Identity document also highlights the importance of intellectual and vocational exploration and supports the idea of the development of free-thinking students.

A final theme impacting instruction (as well as institutional operations) is artificial intelligence (AI). AI raises questions throughout academia as the benefits and concerns of AI are still being tested.

¹⁷ [Why Americans Have Lost Faith in the Value of College - Wall Street Journal \(2024\)](#)

¹⁸ [Harvard Youth Poll \(47th Edition, Spring 2024\)](#)

¹⁹ Catholic Identity: Past, Present, and Future (St. Thomas University, 2024 p. 73)

Nevertheless, those in the field “say AI will certainly lead to the technology being used as a vast accessory to higher education instruction, research, and operations”.²⁰ STU must incorporate the concepts of AI into this strategic plan to be a leader in this new technology.

The pillar of Excellence in Intellectual Discovery focuses on cultivating a student’s ability to learn. Objectives for this pillar are:

- **Catholic Intellectual Tradition** – Reviewing the Catholic Intellectual Tradition and ensuring that its concepts are present in all academic programs.
- **Academic Offerings** – Understanding the needs of the economy and ensuring STU’s academic programs are appropriate.
- **Challenging/Supporting Curriculum** – Providing the rigor required for students to be successful after leaving STU (e.g., passing licensure exams), while also ensuring appropriate support to help students succeed (e.g., student success, tutoring).

Excellence in Student Experiences

Earning a college credential is not enough in today’s employment market to guarantee a job offer. Graduates must be prepared to clearly articulate and demonstrate their knowledge within an employment setting, which is the foundation of STU’s Experiential Learning requirement and our Quality Enhancement Plan with SACSCOC. The experiential learning requirement provides students with the opportunity to learn through the integration of academic and practical knowledge to ensure our graduates develop essential career skills that they can apply as they become ethical leaders in our global community. This is just one example of experiences available to our students that set them up for success later in life. Other experiences include athletics, clubs, and organizations.

Student engagement and interaction is a key component needed to increase student retention. Students choose to transfer-out or withdraw for several reasons and although the

²⁰ [Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Higher Education, Part 1 – AGB \(2024\)](#)

administration is actively working on multiple efforts to increase retention (new residence hall, increased on-campus amenities, more effective advising), student retention is a critical component for the continued financial stability of the institution. Decades of study have shown that the key components of retention are affordability and quality of advising.

We should review our opportunities for students in terms of how engaged they are with STU. A number of High-Impact Practices (HIPs)²¹ have been identified in the literature and include: (1) first-year seminars and experiences, (2) common intellectual experiences, (3) learning communities, (4) writing-intensive courses, (5) collaborate assignments and projects, (6) undergraduate research, (7) global learning, (8) service learning, community-based learning, (9) internships, and (10) capstone courses and projects. Although the concept of High-Impact Practices focuses primarily on academics, the underlying conceptual framework can be expanded to co-curricular activities.

The pillar of Excellence in Student Experiences focuses on ensuring that all students have a well-rounded and balanced education. Objectives for this pillar are:

- **Classroom/Co-curricular activities** – Ensuring faculty-student interaction and support is the foundation to our academic programs.
- **Campus Ministry** - Ensuring students have opportunities to grow in their faith through campus ministry programs that include prayer, worship, formation and service opportunities
- **Athletic/Student Activities** – Ensuring students have opportunities outside the classroom to grow, practice leadership, and develop their complete person.
- **Career Planning/Experiential Learning** – Ensuring all graduates are prepared to enter the workforce (Excellence in the Workforce), articulate their value and “Essential Skills,” and embrace life-long learning.

²¹ [High-Impact Educational Practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter – AAC&U \(2008\)](#)

Excellence in Strategic Partnerships

STU's name and brand are key components for the success of the institution and our graduates. Strategic partnerships must incorporate promoting both the value of an STU education and the value of higher education in general. According to Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, which has been the source of state-wide data for Lumina Foundation's estimates of educational attainment for their A Stronger Nation reports²², *"By 2031, 72 percent of jobs in the US will require postsecondary education and/or training"*²³. The need for higher education is not going away, but the value must continue to be defended.

Excellence cannot be achieved in a vacuum. It must be nurtured, developed, and supported. And, we cannot achieve our ambitious goals alone. We need to develop new partnerships and build on existing ones to be successful.

The pillar of Excellence in Strategic Partnerships focuses on developing the brand of STU to build strong partnerships within the local, state, national, and international communities. Objectives for this pillar are:

- **STU Global** – The leading institution for online Catholic higher education.
- **"Value" of Higher Education** – Promoting the value and the ROI (Return on Investment) of education and STU's ability to increase awareness and brand identity.
- **Regional/State/National Alliances** – Increasing alliances for more opportunities for both the university and our students.
- **Philanthropy** – Securing funding for the development of new facilities at STU is a key component of the university reaching its full potential.

²² [A Stronger Nation - Lumina Foundation \(2024\)](#)

²³ [After Everything Projections of Jobs, Education, and Training Requirements through 2031 - Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce \(2023\)](#)

Excellence in Operational Management

Over the past five years, record enrollment and strategic fiscal management have placed STU in a position of financial stability. As we move into the concept of pursuing excellence, it is time for the offices/departments within STU to refocus their activities within a framework of best practices within their respective fields. This includes the following activities: (1) development of office/department strategic goals to compliment the STU strategic plan, (2) review and evaluation of best practices in the field for each office/department (for example, in Career Services following National Association of Colleges and Employers – NACE standards and in Philanthropy following the Council for Advancement and Support of Education – CASE standards), and (3) peer review of office/department goals.

Rather than continuing to do what has always been done at STU, we need to shift our attention to how things should be done to increase efficiency. STU should be evaluated with the WAYMISH²⁴ (Why Are You Making It So Hard...for Me to give You my Money?) mentality, by reducing friction to success. In addition, this pillar of operational management extends to the use and value of our contracting partners. Are we leveraging partnerships to the best of our abilities? What untapped opportunities exist? These conversations provide an opportunity for STU to decide what we do well internally, and what should be outsourced.

Similar to other higher education institutions, STU has struggled to attract and retain highly qualified employees in key offices. A revolving door of contractor/temporary staff has led to oversight issues and an inability to move the institution towards excellence. This issue is not unique to STU, but rather a common problem in higher education today. The National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO) identified supporting and maintaining the workforce as one of the Top 5 higher education business issues of 2023²⁵.

²⁴ [WAYMISH: Why are you making it so hard for me to give you my money? \(2012\)](#)

²⁵ [Higher Education's Top 5 Business Issues of 2023 – NACUBO \(2023\)](#)

The pillar of Excellence in Operational Management focuses on ensuring our day-to-day activities are focused on the correct objectives and that we are not wasting efforts, as well as eliminating barriers to success for potential and current students (e.g., processes, software, and access).

Objectives for this pillar are:

- **Best Practices/Office Goals** – Identifying best practices for each department and measuring progress towards this objective.
- **Standard Operating Procedures** – Articulating and recording standard operating procedures for each department to standardize activities and clearly detail processes.
- **Professional Development/Retention** – Focus on the development/retention of our staff, as they are the most important resource at STU.

Conclusion

Over the next few months, a committee of Board members, faculty, staff, administrators, students, and alumni will meet to develop the next STU Strategic Plan. As we embark on this journey, remember:

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit”

~ Will Durant, American historian and philosopher

God Bless and Go Bobcats!