

Concept Paper: Academic Excellence

Introduction

The University of South Dakota is focused on academic excellence. We train professionals for future careers in both the public and private sectors in the state of South Dakota, in the region, and nationally. Faculty teach and conduct new research that supports undergraduate and graduate training, while contributing to the economy of South Dakota. This research and training supports workforce sectors that are key to the future of the state: healthcare, education, tech, and business. Undergraduate and graduate education further prepares our citizenry to engage with their communities as voters, volunteers, business owners, and employees. This focus on scholarship enhances our graduates' ability to succeed in the modern workforce and respond as active citizens in our state.

Strategic Theme

USD's academic excellence critically depends upon the ability to recruit and retain accomplished faculty and support research by faculty and students that advances industry, art, and education in our state. This helps us to retain the best and brightest undergraduate and graduate students. Recent lessons suggest that academic success for both undergraduate and graduate students involves providing hands-on or active-learning education opportunities, connecting education to workforce opportunities, and supporting student learning.

External Factors

External factors at the regional and national level that provide the context for Academic Excellence at USD are described below:

Demographics and Workforce Needs

Research indicates that a projected decline in the number of high school graduates between 2026 and 2029 will significantly affect the college recruitment pool and will have significant implications for the workforce. Furthermore, state data suggests young adults and individuals of prime working age have weak attachment to the state. To combat these factors, the state will need to work to encourage in-migration to South Dakota over the next decade. By current estimates, up to 30% of out-of-state students remain in state after graduation. USD has a key role to play in fostering educational opportunities that create strong attachments to the state and region and encourage in-migration and attachment to South Dakota.

USD can contribute to these goals through the development of a qualified workforce by providing a quality degree. Data from 2018 from the South Dakota Department of Labor and Regulation (SDLR) shows a 0.9% unemployment rate for those with a bachelor's degree or higher. This is extremely low compared with national numbers. The professional, scientific, and technical services industries have demonstrated "extraordinarily low unemployment" of 1.4% in

2012-2013 and are projected to experience job growth between 2016 and 2026 of 12.05%. The healthcare and social services industry “accounts for one out of five private sector jobs” in South Dakota with unemployment at 2.7 %. According to SDLR data from 2018, demand for workers in the education and health services sector is expected to increase as a result of a growth in population in the state. Likewise, when surveying the SDLR “South Dakota Hot Careers” list for the period of 2016-2026, the value of a bachelor’s degree and/or graduate education is apparent. Many of the careers listed overlap with programs at USD including social workers, clergy, coaches, teachers, insurance agents, loan officers, management analysts, registered nurses, sales representatives for wholesale and manufacturing. **State demographic data indicates the ongoing importance of educating citizens and future-workforce members for an increasingly diverse state.** For example, within the Sioux Falls public school system, the nonwhite population has grown from 5% to 39% since 1990. Similarly, the number of nonwhite high school graduates statewide is projected to increase by 1400 by 2032.

Workforce Education vs. Traditional Liberal Arts Education

USD distinguishes itself from other institutions via its focus on a liberal arts education that emphasizes generalized knowledge across disciplines, with an emphasis on the humanities, arts, and general sciences. While this can be misconstrued as an impractical focus for training a workforce, jobs research continues to demonstrate that employers value job candidates with the skills provided by a liberal arts education. Higher education institutions nationwide have experienced declining enrollments in traditional liberal arts degrees in favor of education that can be linked to specific career paths. However, as graduates average more than 12 careers during their prime working years, individuals who hold a liberal arts education are likely to be more successful in transitioning to the contemporary needs of their position. **As USD considers growth areas and priorities, it must support programs that respond to immediate workforce needs and foster lifelong learning. To be successful, USD must communicate the value of a college education *within the state* and farther afield.**

External Environment

USD designs curriculum to serve student needs and interests, which together serve state needs for an educated and culturally-responsive workforce. The university needs to more effectively articulate the value of diversity offices and their role in fostering a welcoming climate for ethnic and racial minorities, the LGBTQ+ community, and members of all religious communities. It also needs to better communicate the full complexity of USD’s curriculum to external stakeholders. **How might USD embed its core values in its programs and continue serving the needs of its increasingly diverse USD community and state? How can USD more effectively work communicate the values and approach of its curricula and programming?**

Learning Modalities and Technology

As USD considers growth areas, it must respond to a rapidly changing technology landscape with implications for recruitment and retention of students, educational equity, research opportunities for students and faculty, and cyber security. Scholars surveying the projected nationwide decline in high school graduates have raised questions about the relative importance of new learning modalities to the future of higher education. Scholars place differing levels of emphasis on the value of investment in new learning modalities. The frequency of cyberterrorism threats from foreign and domestic entities requires ongoing investment in robust and adaptable technology infrastructure. **What investments need to be made in technology to both protect**

**existing infrastructure and innovate for new opportunities in both education and research?
How can we maintain academic excellence while expanding online offerings?**

Faculty

Retention of high-quality faculty has been a growing concern. USD has lost faculty due to several issues: workload; lack of strong collective representation; difficulty attracting postdocs/students/staff/lab personnel; lack of spouse/partner opportunities; and low salary. Retention would likely be improved by improving any of these elements. Currently, of the faculty who are at least half-time, the composition is: 30.4% instructor, 26.8% assistant professor, 22.6% associate professor, and 20.1% professor. If all faculty, including limited-term contracts (less than annual) are included, tenured and tenure-track faculty make up only 38.94%.

In sum, USD faces a situation where the quantification of workload and the incentive structure are not commensurate with the actual duties expected of faculty. Faculty performance expectations are quantified and evaluated through the workload policy (defined in the COHE-SDBOR Agreement) and the expectations of the faculty document. For tenure/tenure-track faculty including librarians in the professoriate duties are assigned across teaching, scholarly/creative work, and service. For instructor/lecturer faculty including librarians who are not on tenure track, duties are assigned across teaching and service. One item of note is that service for instructor/lecturer faculty is limited to a maximum of 10% of workload. Teaching workload is clearly defined as a three-credit hour undergraduate course equates to three workload units (of 30 total) or 10% of workload, but research and service are poorly quantified.

Service workload is essential to student success but is not clearly outlined in faculty workload. For instance, academic advising, mentoring student research, providing career support, and writing letters of reference all affect the success of our students, are strongly identified as a strength of USD and contribute to academic excellence, yet there is no discernable way to credit this time. As the needs of the university, community and society shift, faculty are asked to continually add tasks to their expected duties. For example, with the reduction in student enrollment, faculty have been asked to devote time to marketing, student recruitment, and retention activities. This example reflects a national upward trend for increased faculty time on administrative tasks with no corresponding reduction in another area of workload (e.g. teaching or research). This is aggravated by reduction in the number of full-time faculty (tenure/tenure-track, instructor, and librarian), due to increased teaching by adjunct faculty (who perform no service duties). Thus, the number of individuals available for service duties is decreasing, but the service load is increasing.

In its consideration of faculty workload and tenure and promotion process, USD needs to better account for faculty mentorship and support for students outside the classroom as well as service commitments. USD must consider the equity of existing workload structures and their alignment with institutional priorities, and design meaningful incentives.

Monetary incentives are provided through salary policy, retirement plans, travel support, and faculty awards with stipend. **In its effort to recruit and retain high quality faculty, the University must explore means for ensuring competitive monetary compensation and also fulfilling the deeper need for purpose through non-monetary channels.** The feeling of a

shared purpose can be a primary motivator for productivity and engagement. Non-monetary incentives include flexible work hours, sabbaticals, health insurance and other benefits, reduced cost at the University Wellness Center, and activity tickets for University events. A policy that has been successful at other institutions is provision of full tuition remission for faculty and their immediate family.

Graduate Education

Graduate programs focused on academic career tracks have taken a significant hit in enrollments following nationwide trends in academia. Graduate students have expressed concerns about limited healthcare and funding options, low stipends, and lack of collective representation. Facilities remain a key concern for students in clinical and lab-based environments. New graduate education opportunities for distance learners have shown promise, but students in these programs look for improvements to the digital classroom experience.

Graduate students serve a critical role in maintaining academic excellence in many disciplines. Much scholarship at USD is supported by the efforts of graduate students. In addition, graduate students coordinate with undergraduates in research projects, are instructors of laboratory sections and discussion based recitations, and represent a value laden resource for academic excellence. **Efforts to improve graduate student recruitment and retention will ultimately pay dividends both to their faculty advisors and to the undergraduates they work with.**

Models of success in academic excellence in graduate programs currently exist within USD. Common threads of these successful programs include:

- Integrate life-long learning and societal workforce needs within the state and region
- Faculty who engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning, are dedicated to the individual success of students, and report ownership and common purpose to the success of the program.
- Match delivery medium to needs of prospective students, including incorporating new learning modalities.

Undergraduate Education

Academic excellence at the undergraduate level is defined by the academic success of all students. We must retain the best students and provide the resources they need to succeed while also supporting those without the same advantaged backgrounds. Students have diverse educational backgrounds and needs, and their success is affected by factors such as finance, health, culture, and race. Support services, research opportunities, and alumni mentoring all result in a greater connection to USD and improved academic performance.

USD has an extensive list of programs and services designed to support student success both in and out of the classroom. This is highlighted by the strong reputation of faculty and staff for

forging connections and engaging with students. **It is vital that these programs and services continue and that the culture of faculty and staff engagement is nurtured and strengthened.** Models of success in academic excellence in undergraduate programs currently exist within USD. Common threads of these successful programs include:

- Emphasize liberal arts education and professional skills, while connecting students to career opportunities within the state and region.
- Involving students in undergraduate research.
 - We note that research participation is heavily centered in the STEM fields. **A concerted effort to increase support for research in disciplines in the humanities, social sciences, business, fine arts, and education is warranted.** For example, even as undergraduate research participation had grown by 30% since 2011, with undergraduates accounting for 70% of the total presenters, IdeaFest proposals are heavily concentrated in the STEM fields (including psychology and sustainability) with 44% of abstracts submitted in these disciplines.
- **Many universities offer students opportunities to meet with alumni in their fields.** A university's graduates are at its heart as "brand ambassadors". Creating a strong alumni presence has benefits on its own, but moreover can help build a student's career pathway. They can play a significant role in supporting undergraduate research by providing funding (particularly in fields in humanities and social sciences where external funding is sparse) or by offering opportunities in laboratories. Recent data has established a link between student satisfaction and student retention, with mentorship programs emerging as an opportunity to lessen student feelings of isolation and foster alumni engagement.