



ABILENE  
CHRISTIAN  
UNIVERSITY

The background of the cover features a photograph of the 'The Gate' monument at Abilene Christian University. The monument is a large, multi-tiered structure made of stacked stone blocks, with a bronze sculpture of four winged figures (cherubs) perched on top. The figures are holding a cross. The monument is set against a clear blue sky. In the background, the ACU campus buildings are visible, including a tall, thin tower and a building with two large, arched windows. A person is sitting on the steps of the monument. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue rectangle that contains the title text.

# STRATEGIC PLAN 2016-21

*In Christ and in Unity: Our Vision in Action*

**F**or 110 years, Abilene Christian University has educated students for Christian service and leadership throughout the world, and we will continue to do so in a way that glorifies God, honors our heritage and attracts the next generation of students who want to make a real difference in the world. Our bold *21st-Century Vision* continues to drive us toward becoming one of the top universities, excelling at both intellectual and spiritual development.

To remain relevant, we will innovate the delivery of an ACU education. We will hold fast to our core values and examine everything else to keep ACU strong in a culture of rapid change. We will foster innovation and equip men and women for the world's most difficult challenges. We

will build on a century-plus foundation of excellence while adapting to the changing landscape in American higher education. We will adjust to marketplace trends, create new models of delivery and remain fiscally accountable.

Students are attracted to ACU because we engage them in authentic learning experiences and call them to examine their place in the Kingdom of God. We are committed to being distinctive in an environment of academic excellence and to educating the whole person. To extend and expand this commitment, this five-year plan focuses on three outcomes:

- Innovative, relevant programs and delivery
- Deep engagement in our mission through relationship building and spiritual formation
- Growth in many facets of the university

## OUR FOUNDATION

### *Our Mission and Promise*

ACU's mission – to educate students for Christian service and leadership throughout the world – produces graduates poised to fill the desperate needs of today's culture. Our promise is to be a “vibrant, innovative, Christ-centered community that engages students in authentic spiritual and intellectual growth, equipping them to make a real difference in the world.” Our mission and promise permeate discussions about every aspect of the university.

### *Our Vision*

A serious focus on our mission and promise led us to craft a bold vision: *By 2020, ACU will be a premier university for the education of Christ-centered, global leaders.* This vision affirms that what makes ACU truly unique is not counts and statistics, but an intentional focus on how academic disciplines are shaped and formed by an understanding of Scripture, a deep concern about ways to continually engage our faith community, and ongoing reflection on the value of serving others.

### *Our Values*

**Academic Innovation.** We are committed to a rigorous, exciting undergraduate educational experience and a deep and broad offering of dynamic, respected

graduate programs. We value innovation, critical thinking and academic exploration. We will continue to focus on our calling and responsibility to teach, research, mentor and serve.

**Spiritual Depth.** ACU is Christ-centered. We value missional living. We affirm and strengthen a culture fostering spiritual formation for the entire university community.

**Relational Focus.** We cherish deep relationships. We will fortify and nurture the relationships between our students, faculty, staff, alumni and friends.

**Intentional Diversity.** We welcome each individual as created in God's image and beloved by Him. We are dedicated to ethnic, racial and gender diversity among our faculty, staff and students; we promote global cultural awareness; and we value diversity of thought.

**Sustainable Excellence.** We are committed to economic sustainability. We will use quantitative, qualitative and experience-based decision making to reduce the cost of delivering an ACU degree while maintaining high-quality academic programs with excellent faculty and staff.

## WHERE WE ARE TODAY

**We are Strong.** ACU is building on a beloved mission; its hallmark of teaching excellence; its outstanding facilities;

its strong student demand; its passionate alumni network; a distinctive, Christ-centered spirit of camaraderie; and its relationships around the world. ACU faculty engage in relevant research and involve students as well. The university also boasts a long, successful record of placing students in great jobs and the best graduate schools.

**We Must Grow Stronger.** We will innovate at a more rapid pace, remain open to change and make progress in the face of challenges. We will encourage an environment of accountability and open communication. We will seek to improve retention and graduation rates, remain affordable and maintain a financially healthy university.

**We Must Stay Alert.** Demographically, our students are increasingly diverse. We must ensure our broad array of students receives the appropriate support to be successful and the financial aid to keep ACU affordable and accessible.

ACU welcomes and celebrates all students as created in God's image. Navigating the changing social norms and laws while remaining true to our Christian values will be challenging. We also are well aware that public perception of the value of a higher education degree has deteriorated, and this trend is likely to continue.

**We Have Opportunity.** The successful launch of new graduate and undergraduate programs highlights ACU's strong brand recognition and the potential to increase enrollment in high-demand fields. As a recognized innovative university, we are well positioned to emerge as an industry catalyst as the call to reimagine "traditional" education models intensifies.

Our transition to NCAA Division I athletics continues to increase our visibility and reputation. Our commitment to creating a strong faith community distinguishes us from universities focused only on intellectual endeavors. We also will support and mentor students as they seek to secure prestigious national scholarships such as the Truman, Marshall and Fulbright awards.

## **BUILDING ON ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

**Process.** The ACU community has been engaged in an inclusive strategic planning process for the past several years. We have completed this rigorous process that involved more than 200 members of the faculty and staff. Throughout this planning period, ACU has utilized the findings and insights gained to guide operations – and the progress has been remarkable.

**Achievements.** In the past five years, ACU has grown its endowment from \$266 million to \$383 million and increased the university's net worth from \$339 million to \$513 million.

We have launched new undergraduate, residential graduate and online graduate (via ACU Dallas) academic programs; started several dual-degree programs; implemented new General Education requirements; and expanded academic programs for ACU at CitySquare in Dallas. New accreditations have been secured or are being pursued, and we have won prestigious awards – including being designated an Apple Distinguished School and achieving a Top 40 ranking for Study Abroad participation among master's-granting institutions.

ACU has created a faculty mentoring program, expanded the technology infrastructure to support teaching and learning, advanced or launched key centers and institutes, and enrolled four consecutive freshman classes of 950 or more students for the first time in 25 years. The university has launched a peer-to-peer mentoring program, improved first-year to second-year retention to 79 percent, increased reported student community service by 30 percent, and achieved a record-high 59 percent of undergraduates completing an internship.

In the past five years, ACU has secured \$164 million-plus in total gifts and commitments – more than double the 2006-10 period – for capital projects, scholarship and operational endowments, and the Exceptional Fund. The university has attracted more than \$50 million for scholarships through the Partnering in the Journey campaign to make the cost of education more affordable.

ACU raised more than \$45 million to transform historic Bennett Gymnasium into the Physics and Engineering Laboratories, to transform the Foster Science Building into the Robert R. and Kay Onstead Science Center, and to construct the new Halbert-Walling Research Center. In addition, ACU raised roughly \$37 million for athletics facilities.

We transformed an existing building into Dillard Hall, which increased available student housing, and built new academic space for engineering, nursing, occupational therapy and the sciences. Our new energy management system resulted in significant reductions in energy consumption.

The move to NCAA Division I athletics has been significant and successful. We have improved our average student-athlete grade-point average, secured a number of conference championships, completed a new Elmer Gray Stadium for track and field and soccer, and begun construction of Wildcat Stadium for football.

This impressive list highlights the ACU community's commitment to excellence and continuous improvement. The progress over the past several years has elevated the university to new levels of achievement and positions ACU to capitalize on the opportunities outlined in this Strategic Plan.

# Strategic Goals 2016-21

## *In Christ and in Unity: Our Vision*

*in Action* responds specifically to ACU's values and to the changing higher education environment. The goals build on recent successes, historical strengths and excellent faculty and staff, while breaking new ground and creating new models to achieve the *21st-Century Vision*. The plan focuses on three bold strategic initiatives:

### 1 Innovation and Relevance

### 2 Spiritual Formation

### 3 Relational University

## 1 INNOVATION AND RELEVANCE

ACU is a recognized leader in educational innovation. From our mobile-learning initiative and AT&T Learning Studio to our recent Maker Lab, we excel at bringing students and technology together. This spirit of innovation prompted us to re-think how students pay for their education (annual block tuition) and how they receive their education (ACU at CitySquare and ACU Dallas).

*ACU's 21st-Century Vision: Educating Christian Leaders for the World* identified innovative practices that could facilitate growth and ensure the development of excellent, relevant academic programs – and this plan continues to build on those. The strategies to achieve Innovation and Relevance will focus on Academic Programs, Educational Delivery and Experiential Learning.

**Academic Programs.** To attract more Christian scholars among the student body and faculty, we will significantly strengthen our most distinctive undergraduate and graduate programs and develop new, innovative programs in the coming decade. We will ensure academic programs address 21st-century challenges, meet the demands of graduate programs and employers, attract top students and produce confident, Christian leaders. We will meet the learning needs of today's students and reduce the cost of educational delivery, becoming a model for others to follow.

- Develop distinctive new programs or initiatives that build on areas of current academic strength to meet emerging market demand. In a few key areas, create programs so distinctive and of such high quality that students will be drawn to ACU from around the world.
- Complete a full cycle of comprehensive academic program review including national demand and program viability analyses, followed by changes in offerings.
- Create undergraduate/graduate-degree partnership programs that enable students to complete both bachelor's and master's degrees in a shorter period of time.
- Advance unified marketing strategies to expand ACU's reputation and promote new programs.

**Educational Delivery.** In the next five years, we will stimulate and reward innovation in educational delivery that integrates technology, addresses student learning, incorporates competency-based credit, leverages relationships and provides alternative paths to degree completion. ACU will increase its reach to additional student populations, enhance learning and reduce costs through new delivery methods.

- Create an "ACU model" of undergraduate education based on experience and relationships. Establish an Innovation Task Force to develop new options for undergraduate degree delivery that can be piloted at ACU at CitySquare and on the main campus in Abilene.
- Establish an Innovation Fund to inspire faculty proposals proposing alternative methods of educational process/delivery that enhance learning outcomes, expand reach and reduce cost of delivery.
- Implement a restructured General Education requirement for undergraduate transfer students to create new pathways for them to attend ACU.
- Maintain and enhance academic quality while significantly lowering costs of educational delivery. Leverage proven methods and innovative approaches driven by technology-enhanced and pedagogically advanced delivery methods.
- Increase student engagement to enhance learning outcomes and improve their success.

**Experiential Learning.** ACU faculty and staff are eager to engage in the lives of our students, extending the educational experience within and well beyond a typical classroom. Experiential learning enhances students' understanding of curricular topics through practical application, self-reflection and exposure to varying and opposing perspectives. We will become nationally known





for our commitment to superior, holistic learning achieved through a powerful blend of curricular and co-curricular experiences.

- Ensure the majority of undergraduates have at least one professional internship experience or job that applies what they have learned in the classroom.
- Increase the number of students who expand their worldview through experiences including Study Abroad, WorldWide Witness or living/learning in urban contexts or other diverse economic and cultural settings.
- Ensure at least half of undergraduates participate in faculty-mentored research and/or projects that take at least one or more semesters to complete.
- Enhance student career skills development by increasing the proportion of students actively engaged in co-curricular activities and campus organizations.

### **Success Metrics**

- Establish a Teaching Innovation Grant Fund and award nine grants through FY20.
- Charge an Innovation Task Force with developing new options for undergraduate degree delivery.
- Continue reducing the annual cost of delivering an undergraduate education, and expand graduate revenue to achieve balanced budgets.
- Grow graduate enrollment to 3,000 students by 2021.
- Increase graduate-school revenue to 20 percent of ACU's total tuition and fees revenue.
- Increase the number of transfer students from 119 to 150 annually by 2021.
- Measure academic delivery and engagement by having at least 70 percent of graduates report "I had at least one professor at ACU who made me excited about learning" and "My professors at ACU cared about me as a person."
- At least 50 percent of undergraduate students will participate in each of these areas prior to graduation: internships/jobs, cross-cultural/Study Abroad experiences, research/long-term projects and co-curricular activities/organizations.
- Increase freshman-to-sophomore retention to 80 percent and improve the five-year graduation rate from 60 percent to 65 percent by 2021.
- 90-plus percent of students are employed or in graduate school within six months of graduating, as indicated by data collected by academic departments.
- Continue regular academic program reviews; document outcomes and resulting changes.
- Remain cutting edge in innovative undergraduate education delivery, indicated by a Top-5 rank in *U.S.*

*News & World Report's* Most Innovative Universities in the West.

## **2 SPIRITUAL FORMATION**

Because ACU's mission is to educate students for Christian service and leadership throughout the world, spiritual formation is of paramount importance. We are conformed to the image of Christ so we can love and serve God and others. We are formed spiritually through Scripture, the experience of community and the lifelong pursuit of a Christ-centered, missional life.

ACU has a longstanding culture of shared faculty/staff responsibility for student spiritual formation. However, we lack institutional coordination of holistic and integrated spiritual formation that could transform our community and the lives of our students.

To fully develop this aspect of our community, a task force of faculty and staff members will develop an intentional, sequentially designed spiritual formation journey that is culturally, developmentally, philosophically and theologically based. The program will be coordinated, facilitated and evaluated and will include curricular and co-curricular programs, with an emphasis on Scripture, community and vocation.

The plan will help every member of the ACU community connect their God-given strengths to all aspects of their lives, share a sense of common purpose and belonging, and live more fully into God's calling. In this way, our Christ-centered community will be united with one spirit and purpose.

- Conduct inaugural cross-disciplinary research in the area of spiritual formation of college students that helps inform the model and identifies metrics to measure effectiveness. The research will draw upon the leading technology and research in the field.
- Reimagine and integrate all currently required spiritual formation curriculum and co-curriculum to create a seamless learning environment to help students pursue godly wisdom in all aspects of life and address core issues and questions.
  - Utilize assessment tools or instruments to help students understand their God-given strengths and put them into practice.
  - Emphasize the story of Scripture and provide opportunities for students to develop and connect their personal narrative to God's story and the Spirit's leading, both entering and leaving ACU.
  - Integrate teachings in Christian theology and tradition, philosophy, Christian living and community, spiritual practices and vocation.

- Expand opportunities for deeply formative spiritual experiences for students and enhance the meaningful requirements for activities such as WorldWideWitness, Study Abroad and retreats.
- Develop programs to orient, equip and support faculty and staff in their vocational development in response to God’s call and in their commitment to serve as faith mentors to students.
  - Explore spiritual assessment instruments to help faculty and staff better understand their God-given strengths and put them into practice.
  - Emphasize the story of Scripture and provide opportunities for faculty and staff to develop and connect their personal narrative to God’s story and the Spirit’s leading as evidenced through their work at ACU, and share the same with each other and students.
  - Increase opportunities for deeply formative spiritual experiences/training on mentoring, integration of faith and learning, and spiritual practices such as the StillPoint ministry (in an expanded, annual format) and for serving alongside students.
  - Reinforce the importance of faith mentoring and integration through a variety of classroom/departmental practices and activities, and as part of performance evaluation, contract renewal, and tenure and promotion.
- Consistently integrate faith and learning across academic programs. Provide avenues and resources to incorporate Christian perspectives and enhance spiritual formation in each discipline.
- Re-conceptualize the organizational structure and alignment of current spiritual formation efforts to create an integrated, unified approach for implementing the Spiritual Formation Plan.

### **Success Metrics**

- Develop a Spiritual Formation Plan draft by Spring 2017, finalize it by Fall 2017 and implement it beginning in Fall 2018.
- Identify and utilize specific metrics for success in Spiritual Formation based on research. Use normative comparisons to help establish the goals.
- Ensure 85 percent of ACU students, faculty and staff have completed the assessment and developed their personal faith narrative.
- Increase the number of students who report having a mentor at ACU from 64 percent to 80 percent by 2021.

## **3 RELATIONAL UNIVERSITY**

To fulfill ACU’s promise, students, faculty, staff, alumni and friends must relate to one another, and a shared commitment to Christ is the foundation for these relationships. We are all created uniquely in God’s image, and we will celebrate our differences while growing stronger because of them. We will cherish the best of who we are and also challenge each other to be all God has called us to be. In so doing, we will better serve one another, ACU, our communities, and ultimately, the Kingdom of God.

We celebrate our growing diversity, and we will work diligently to help all individuals see themselves as an integral part of what God is doing through the ACU community. We will create deep, authentic relationships that form the bedrock of our vision and promise, and we will offer new opportunities for spiritual, academic and social growth. We will create significant opportunities for students, faculty and staff to interact with and learn about people different from ourselves. Most importantly, students will be prepared to live and serve more effectively in a changing world and church. ACU will focus on the campus community and on our alumni and friends.

### **The ACU Community**

- Promote the tradition of positive, Christ-centered relationships among employees, among students and between students and faculty/staff.
- Appoint a Diversity Task Force to create a diversity plan that considers organizational structure and best practices; that presents an integrated, unified approach; and that demonstrates ACU’s focus and support.
- Provide education and training for students, faculty and staff so the understanding of racial, ethnic, gender and cultural diversity grows on campus and ACU continues to ensure a welcoming environment for all.
- Improve the retention rate of racially and ethnically diverse students to correlate with the overall student population.
- Expand diversity by increasing the proportion of racially and ethnically diverse faculty and staff at all levels.
- Create a leadership development program providing workshops, activities and speakers for faculty and staff on the topics of leadership, spiritual formation and professional development.

### **ACU Alumni and Friends**

- Engage alumni and students in an Alumni Mentoring Program to increase the culture of engagement and support among ACU alumni and to prepare students for life after college.







- Build on the relationships formed at ACU and enhance alumni engagement with one another, with students and with departments on campus. Utilize ACU facilities to enhance relationships and create a rallying place for our neighbors to engage with students, alumni, faculty and staff.

### Success Metrics

- Appoint a Diversity Task Force. Draft and approve a Diversity Plan.
- Improve the retention and graduation rates of racially diverse students commensurate with the overall student retention and graduation rates.
- Double the under-represented ethnic diversity of ACU faculty to a range of 10-15 percent.

- Identify metrics related to alumni and student mentoring, using research with peer institutions, surveys and focus groups to set baseline measurements. Complete benchmarking and pilot in FY17; begin implementation in FY18.
- Stabilize *U.S. News* alumni giving participation rate at 10 percent by May 31, 2018, and push toward a goal of 13 percent participation by 2021.
- Complete three-year alumni engagement benchmarking, which tracks volunteerism, event attendance and giving, by May 2016. By December 2016, analyze the data to identify potential strategy changes needed to improve engagement.

## INTEGRATE AND IMPLEMENT THE STRATEGIC PLAN

To achieve success, we will integrate this Strategic Plan with the plans of Academics, Athletics, Enrollment, Finance, Advancement, Student Life and the Campus Master Plan. Implementation details will include the analysis of resource needs, specific timelines and responsibility for action steps.

**Flexible, living document.** ACU leaders will generate specific operating plans to accomplish these strategic goals. We will create success measures and clearly articulate the objectives and tactics to meet our goals. We will be focused and disciplined because these goals are not easily nor quickly accomplished, and we cannot predict the challenges and opportunities between now and 2021. Campus leaders will evaluate all decisions through the lens this plan provides. Periodic environmental scans and ongoing analyses of progress versus stated goals will assist ACU in updating the plan.

**Assessing the Strategic Plan.** The progress toward goals will be assessed annually. The assessment will include an analysis of resource allocation to support strategic goals, student learning outcomes and overall institutional effectiveness advanced by the plan.

## CONCLUSION

The 2016-21 Strategic Plan will empower ACU to complete progress begun in 2010 on the four objectives of its *21st-Century Vision*:

- Produce leaders who think critically, globally and missionally.
- Build distinctive and innovative programs.
- Deliver a unique, Christ-centered experience that draws students into community.
- Expand ACU's Christian influence and educational reach nationally and internationally.

This bold endeavor requires even more strategic teamwork in the years ahead. Many aspects of our vision have been accomplished because shared purpose is a hallmark at ACU, where our mission to educate students for Christian service and leadership throughout the world engages the entire campus community. Ultimately, we will be successful if we continue to work together in a spirit of unity with a focus on Christ.



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