August 31, 2021

Highlights:

- We are positioning NAU as a national leader in supporting equity in and delivering value from higher education.

- NAU will develop a three-year strategic roadmap to shape and organize our work, maximizing our ability to deliver on the promise of equitable postsecondary value.

- The process will be driven by a universitywide conversation that will refine and localize the definition of equitable postsecondary value.

- To meet the urgency of this challenge, we will draw from existing initiatives to help us complete a robust draft of our 2022-2025 Strategic Roadmap by the end of Fall 2021.

- Share your feedback: StrategicRoadmap@nau.edu.

Dear Lumberjacks,

Today, as we enter the second week of the Fall 2021 semester, I am confident in our capacity to anticipate and respond to the COVID-19 challenges that will surely come our way. In addition, I am optimistic about our ability to gain traction in resolving the many long-standing issues identified through our presidential transition process.

With this context and foundation, I believe it is time to expand upon the vision I have been sharing within our community about how we will collectively work toward the bold and boundless future that awaits us.

The strategic challenge

The greatest challenge facing institutions of higher education today is delivering value to prospective students and the communities they represent. Per the Postsecondary Value Commission, “the value of education after high school [must] recognize the economic and non-economic benefits of that education for students and society and emphasize the importance of equity, evidence, and policy and practice.

While the question regarding whether college is worth the cost pre-dates the pandemic—driven largely by gaps in opportunity, achievement, wages, and completion, as well as challenges of access and affordability—the social, educational, and economic disruptions caused by the pandemic have brought these questions into sharper focus.

From the work of the national Postsecondary Value Commission, on which I served, we know that higher education does have tremendous value—for individuals, communities, and the economy. Unfortunately, that value is not equitably accessible to
all those who seek to meet their full potential in life, thus limiting the ability of vast swaths of our population from contributing to and reaping the benefits of the social advancement, economic development, public health, and civic engagement spurred by societies with high levels of educational attainment.

And I know, from reflecting on the hundreds of conversations I’ve had with the internal and external NAU community in the past several months, that there is an expressed need and desire to differentiate NAU’s role within the state and national higher ed landscape and to leverage our distinctive excellence to contribute to a more prosperous Arizona and beyond. This desire is fueled by a deep understanding that equitable policies and practices can sustain the type of inclusive environment we need to optimally leverage the diversity of our internal and external communities in pursuit of a more just society.

Through this context, it is clear that NAU is well-positioned to seize the moment and tackle the grand challenge facing institutions of higher education across the nation—the challenge of equitable postsecondary value—head on.

To this end, as we advance our mission in the years ahead, we will do the hard yet important work that will establish NAU as a national leader in supporting and delivering equitable postsecondary value to students and the communities they represent.

The value-driven strategic roadmap: Framework

To provide structure to the important work ahead, we will develop a three-year strategic roadmap that will help us sharpen our focus, organize our work, and pace our efforts, maximizing our ability to deliver on the promise of equitable postsecondary value.

The strategic roadmap will include actions to advance goals and objectives associated with each of the following six broad areas of institutional focus:

1. Inclusive academic excellence
2. Equitable student access, momentum, graduation, and post-graduation success
3. Impactful research, scholarly, and creative activities
4. Enhanced practices for recruiting, retaining, and developing quality, mission-driven, diverse faculty and staff
5. Strong stewardship of place and demonstrated engagement with our communities
6. Effective stewardship of financial, physical, and virtual resources

The above areas interlock, inform, and complement one another. In doing so, they provide a strong foundation and cohesive framework for organizing the work ahead.

The value-driven strategic roadmap: Process

The process of developing the strategic roadmap will be underpinned by a universitywide conversation that will help us refine and localize the definition of “equitable postsecondary value.” From this starting point, we will formulate aspirational goals for each of the six areas of institutional focus, articulate concrete objectives to be met for each goal, and identify specific strategies that will help us achieve these goals within the next three years.

We will not be starting this process from scratch. We will draw from the One NAU Side by Side, 2018-2025 Strategic Plan—including the goal and objectives in support of becoming a national leader in serving Native American students—and from existing efforts driven by our university community in recent years, such as the
Diversity Strategic Plan, the Climate Action Plan, and the Teaching Stream proposal, among others. We also will incorporate into our strategic roadmap emerging opportunities, such as those represented by our recent designation as a Hispanic Serving Institution and the increasing importance of our statewide and online programs as vehicles to ensure all Arizonans have access to the educational opportunities they need to actively participate in the state’s booming economy.

We have already started the process of laying the groundwork and thinking about what we need to do to become a better, bolder, and more impactful university. We are driven by the imperative of providing equitable postsecondary value at a time of great need for our students and their communities. Now is the time to roll up our sleeves and get the job done.

Next steps

To meet the urgency of the moment, we will endeavor to complete a robust draft of our 2022-2025 Strategic Roadmap by the end of the Fall 2021 semester. This will afford us the opportunity to collectively review and finalize the document in early Spring 2022. More information about how we will structure our universitywide conversation, how our community can engage, and how these efforts will be reflected in our ABOR-related metrics is forthcoming. For now, if you have questions or comments, I encourage you to share them at StrategicRoadmap@nau.edu.

I look forward to the bold work before us that will lead to a boundless future for NAU, the State of Arizona, and the communities impacted by the sum total of our efforts.

In partnership,

José Luis Cruz Rivera
President