Mission Statement

Aurora University is an inclusive community dedicated to the transformative power of learning. As a teaching-centered institution, we encourage undergraduate and graduate students to discover what it takes to build meaningful and examined lives. Our singular goal is to empower our students to achieve lasting personal and professional success.

Statement of Core Values

Aurora University draws upon the rich legacies of Aurora College and George Williams College to welcome learners to our campuses in Illinois and Wisconsin. Here all become members of an inclusive educational community dedicated to the development of mind, body and spirit. Today, as in the past, we prize the twin virtues of character and scholarship and affirm our commitment to the values of integrity, citizenship, continuous learning and excellence.

We adhere to the highest standards of integrity in every aspect of institutional practice and operation. Through this proven dedication to honesty, fairness and ethical conduct, we lead by example and inspire our students to do the same.

We exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in an inclusive educational community, founded upon the principles of mutual respect and open discourse. We live within our means and manage our resources wisely and responsibly, while sustaining an environment that fosters teamwork and promotes services to others. We serve the needs of the Fox River Valley, McHenry County (Illinois), Walworth County (Wisconsin), and online learners by offering myriad educational and cultural opportunities to our students and the community-at-large.

We work and live as a non-profit organization dedicated to continuous learning. We help students achieve their full potential.

We pursue excellence by embracing quality as a way of community life.

The university’s core values endure even as our mission evolves and our vision for the future emerges. As members of the Aurora University community, we enter into a voluntary compact with one another to live and work in ways consistent with these ideals.

Vision Statement

Aurora University will be known and experienced as an exemplary institution of higher learning. We will draw upon the values of integrity, citizenship, continuous learning and excellence to provide our students with life-changing educational experiences. As an inclusive and vibrant community, inspired by the traditions of the past, we will create a promising future for our university and our students.

Toward fulfillment of this vision, we will engage gifted faculty, staff and trustees in the work of the university and will recruit and graduate talented and dedicated students. Together, we will strengthen our educational programs and will improve the learning, living and working environments on our campuses. We will serve the needs of our students through strategic partnerships and will enhance the well-being of the communities around us. We will manage our resources effectively and will deepen the financial foundation upon which our aspirations rest.

Through these initiatives, we will invest in our university and will endow a new generation of Aurora University graduates with the knowledge, skills and values to transform themselves and their world.
Introduction

The work of Aurora University (AU) is guided by the strategic directions and goals derived from the institution’s mission, core values and vision statements. Institutional priorities are informed by an ongoing environmental scanning effort, student learning assessment findings and student success outcomes. Given the ever-changing landscape of higher education, operating flexibility and financial elasticity are prized. Careful consideration is given also to ensuring that the university meets appropriate external requirements and regulations.

Broad responsibility for the development, implementation, evaluation and revision of the Aurora University strategic plan rests in the president’s office. Members of the institutional community engage the AU planning effort through both informal and formal processes. This iteration of the plan, titled Rising Above, was drafted during the summer of 2020 and subjected to review and revision in governance bodies, including the Board of Trustees, during the 2020 fall semester.

The diagram below provides an overview of the strategic planning process that has guided the AU community over the past two decades.

Mission, Values and Vision

During the 2000-2001 academic year, as a new president began her tenure at Aurora University, members of the community gathered for a series of workshops dedicated to formulation of mission, values and vision statements. The essential message of the statements continues to resonate with members of the institutional commitment. In 2019, at the recommendation of a Higher Learning Commission evaluation team, the mission and values statements were expanded to reflect current accreditation expectations.

The mission statement is integral to the ongoing strategic planning process at Aurora University since it sets forth the purpose for which the institution exists. Indeed an effective planning process is predicated on the understanding that “purpose is the foundation of strategy.” Even in a period when external threats to institutional survival command heightened attention, purpose is the imperative that drives decision-making.
Three essential themes or priorities are woven through all Aurora University strategic plans:

- The first strategic priority of Aurora University always is to fulfill its educational promises to students.
- A second theme calls for the continuous enhancement of the learning environment, including the welfare of the institution’s faculty and staff, in service to students.
- Finally, each strategic planning document calls for expansion of the university’s resource base, prudent management of resources and maintenance of the institution’s distinctive business model.

This iteration of the AU plan, intended to guide institutional decision-making from 2020-2024, is no different. Institutional priorities are presented within the architecture of three broad strategic direction statements.

**Rising Above**

Aurora University traces its origins to the 1893 founding of Mendota Seminary in Illinois and the Western Secretarial Institute in Wisconsin, the two organizations that matured into Aurora College and George Williams College respectively. In 1992, the two colleges affiliated. A merger was completed eight years later. Today the institution operates campuses in Aurora, Illinois, and Williams Bay, Wisconsin, as well as an enrollment center in McHenry County (Woodstock Center) and along the I-88 corridor (Orchard Center). The Spartan Athletic Park, home to many of the university’s intercollegiate teams, is located less than a mile from the main campus in Aurora. In addition to providing undergraduate and graduate curricula in a wide range of fields, AU also has a growing online presence.

In many respects, today’s Aurora University manifests the best of the Aurora College and George Williams College traditions. Our curriculum blends offerings in the liberal arts and sciences with strong emphases on professional preparation in a variety of fields and disciplines. Many programs draw inspiration from a shared commitment to the greater good, the belief that learning has the power to change lives and societies for the better. This conviction finds expression also in our dedication to improving and enriching our hometown communities. The university opens its doors and welcomes friends and neighbors to its campuses for athletic contests, dramatic productions, music concerts, lectures and other presentations free of charge. It was this spirit of hospitality that motivated our founders and continues to inspire our actions in the 21st century.

Aurora University strives to be an exemplary institution of higher learning. Our distinctive business model blends a remarkably low private college tuition price with a generous aid philosophy, thoughtful stewardship and demonstrated excellence to provide a truly exceptional value. Like our longstanding commitments to scholarship and character or to educating body, mind and spirit, this value proposition sets us apart. With a demographic profile that is reflective of the nation as a whole, AU meets students at their point of readiness and empowers them to realize their full educational potential. We are proud also to be a “private university with a public purpose,” to work at the intersection of need and hope to pioneer sustainable solutions to complex social problems. This is what it means to be “an inclusive community dedicated to the transformative power of learning.”

In the years ahead, the university will continue to build upon these strengths as we welcome new populations of undergraduate and graduate students to our campuses, enrollment centers and growing online program. We will continue to affirm our belief in the invigorating interplay between excellent teachers and eager students, who seek together to understand their place in the world. This is the educational process we describe when we tell our students to “discover what matters and build your life around it.” It is this timeless and enduring purpose that compels members of the Aurora University community. Toward this end, we seek to rise above the exigencies and orthodoxies of a complicated world to fulfill our mission with confidence for decades to come.
Strategic Direction I – Optimal Mix

Direction

Provide Aurora University students with the optimal mix of programs and services vital to fulfillment of their aspirations and our mission.

Rationale

At Aurora University, we recognize that the welfare of our students and our institution are inextricably intertwined. The university succeeds, grows and prospers when members of the community focus their full attention on fulfilling our promises to students. This student-centric perspective is essential to our mission. AU provides learners of all ages and life circumstances, who meet our admission criteria, with the opportunity to learn in a way that is best for them. Regardless of the instructional format or modality, our essential purpose remains the same. An Aurora University education blends the best of the liberal arts tradition with emphases on skill development and focused preparation in a 21st century array of majors and fields of study.

Goals

A. Continue to strengthen the general education curriculum for undergraduates and explore the feasibility of establishing common required experiences for graduate students.

Engage select trustees, academic administrators and faculty in a discussion of the current distribution requirement component of the general education curriculum and implement improvements as needed.

Implement plans for 2023 QI project focused upon improving student writing throughout the university.

Recruit the first Joe Dunham Distinguished Professor of Ethics and explore options for building a stronger focus on ethics into the university’s undergraduate and graduate student experiences.

B. Develop new undergraduate majors and graduate programs, consistent with the university’s mission and emerging workplace needs.

Launch the Aurora campus autism initiative with the introduction of a new major, summer learning experiences for students on the spectrum and recruitment of the first cohort of students in the Pathways program.

Strengthen and broaden the array of offerings in emerging fields relating to information technology and analytics.

Establish a School of Health Sciences with initial emphases on programs in community/public health, speech and language, pre-professional curricula and development of pipeline agreements with area institutions.

Introduce new Plus One/advanced degree options in sport management and teacher education/certification.

Diversify online offerings to reduce dependence upon the MSW program.

C. Engage Aurora University undergraduates in affordable and accessible high impact learning experiences.

Ensure that all AU undergraduate majors provide students with high impact learning opportunities.

Embed travel study experiences within fall and spring semester undergraduate offerings.

Expand upon travel study and mission experience opportunities during break and holiday periods.
Revitalize May Term offerings with special emphasis upon experiential learning.

Build upon the momentum generated during the pandemic to strengthen the curriculum through the strategic use of digital and simulation resources.

D. Prepare Aurora University undergraduates for successful transitions to the worlds of work and continued study.

Evaluate the effectiveness of the current junior mentoring component in the general education curriculum and make changes as necessary.

Draw upon the resources available in the new Student Success Center, planned for completion in time for the 2021-2022 academic year, to expand and strengthen services.

Engage members of the campus and alumni communities in vocation/career exploration programming.

Experiment through a pilot study with the use of student portfolios to document growth and success.

E. Facilitate the persistence and growth of AU undergraduates through delivery of high quality support services and a strong co-curriculum.

Evaluate and expand, as appropriate, programs and services offered through the Wackerlin Center for Faith and Action.

Provide engaging campus activities and programs throughout the 2020-2021 academic year through fusion of community relations and student activities efforts.

Offer expanded wellness, intramural and recreational programs, as safe and appropriate, for students on both campuses throughout the 2020-2021 academic year.

Support the university-wide writing initiative and attainment of general education outcomes through the Center for Academic Support.
Strategic Direction II – Vibrant Learning Environment

Direction

Invest in the continuous development of a vibrant 21st century learning environment.

Rationale

Aurora University is dedicated to the welfare and professional development of its faculty and staff. We recognize that some aspects of our work are timeless and enduring, even as we acknowledge the ever-increasing rate of change in the world beyond the campus and the many demands placed upon universities such as our own. Accordingly, we endeavor to provide an educational environment that is safe, current and vital.

Goals

A. Continue to strengthen the university’s salary/wage, benefit and professional development programs.

Continue to publish an annual faculty salary report that places AU in context with its 19 peer institutions.

Publish the first in a bi-annual companion assessment of salaries and wages for non-faculty, relying upon a comparable methodology and peer group.

Review the effectiveness of the university’s faculty development program and restore full funding for this important purpose as soon as feasible, given the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 emergency.

Investigate options for providing AU employees with financial wellness programs beyond the level provided currently by TIAA.

Introduce a robust annual schedule of professional development and training opportunities with particular emphasis on preparing members of the AU community to hold crucial conversations as they work and learn in an inclusive learning environment.

B. Empower the university community with the information technology systems and resources necessary to sustain academic and administrative excellence.

Continue to make financial strategic investments in technology infrastructure and resources.

Enhance the academic environment through installation of integrated teaching solutions (completion of podium project, installation of cameras in classrooms, continued focus on sound quality in classrooms, athletic facilities and gathering places).

Evaluate continued reliance upon Ellucian products and prepare the institution for necessary transition or upgrade.

Develop a university-wide model for introducing and supporting simulation-based learning throughout the curriculum.

C. Ensure the safety and welfare of our campus communities.

Continue to hold regular emergency drills and tabletop exercises and to enhance campus awareness of critical procedures and resources.

Evaluate the effectiveness and sufficiency of existing Campus Public Safety resources and develop improvement plans as necessary.
Strengthen all aspects of Health Services operations on both campuses.

Guide the university community through a successful transition to the institution’s new food service provider (Chartwells).

**D. Continue to make strategic investments in the university’s facilities and campus environments.**

Complete the second phase of the lakefront revitalization project on the GWC campus.

Finalize plans for the redevelopment of Upper and Lower Lewis Dining Hall at George Williams.

Prepare the Ferro Pavilion for the 2021 season of *Music by the Lake*.

Reach closure with the City of Aurora on calculation of campus storm water detention requirements.

Evaluate current Aurora campus residence halls and develop prioritized recommendations for renovation or replacement.

Continue the process of mapping critical municipal and institutional utilities on both campuses.

Finalize plan to develop a new Learning Commons on the Aurora campus.
Strategic Direction III – Financial Vitality

Direction

Ensure continued institutional vitality through the entrepreneurial development of new sources of financial support and the prudent management of existing resources.

Rationale

Like many institutions of higher education, Aurora University is dependent upon enrollment revenue to fulfill its promises to students, to fund growing operating expenses and to sustain a culture of excellence. University leaders favor conservative management, often creating the annual surpluses that facilitate investment in new programs, priorities and facilities. The institution’s distinctive “value proposition” pairs a generous financial aid philosophy with carefully controlled tuition levels and annual increases. Significant numbers of AU undergraduates depend upon state and federal grants to help fund the cost of their attendance. AU has a modest record of alumni philanthropic support. In fact, our largest gifts and investments have come from friends of the university and government sources.

Goals

A. Secure external support to help fund important university capital projects and program initiatives.

Seek government and foundation support to fund COVID-19 related expenses and to provide additional support to AU students through the WeAreOneAU Fund.

Engage GWC alumni and Geneva Lake area friends of the college to support the lakefront revitalization project and improvements to the Ferro Pavilion.

Garner philanthropic support for the autism initiative.

B. Evaluate continuously the viability of the AU business model in a rapidly changing and volatile external environment and amend as appropriate.

Reduce dependence on the MSW at the graduate level and nursing at the undergraduate level through development of attractive new offerings, both on-ground and online.

Develop a plan to introduce undergraduate programming at the Woodstock Center.

Rationalize the AU pricing model across various modalities and reconsider the existing fee structure.

Evaluate the costs and benefits associated with expanding into the associate degree market in select disciplines, offering badges or certification programs and reintroducing adult degree completion curricular offerings.

Evaluate the ongoing effectiveness of the current endowment investment policy and managers.

Expand summer learning opportunities to AU and GWC students.

Explore the feasibility of offering three-year bachelor’s degrees in selected disciplines.