NORTHERN

STATE UNIVERSITY



NORTHERN FORWARD

Strategic Plan 2026-2031

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Northern Forward gives us a shared direction. It reflects the university we are today and the Northern we continue to build together: a place where students are known, challenged, supported, and connected to opportunities that prepare them for lives of purpose and impact. Guided by our mission, vision, and values, we will continue to strengthen the Northern Experience and extend Northern's impact across our region and beyond.

We are building from a position of strength. Northern is experiencing strong enrollment growth, improving student retention, strengthening academic programs, expanding partnerships, and creating new opportunities for students. Sustaining our forward progress requires us to continue examining how we teach, how we mentor and support students, how we operate, and where we invest our time and resources.

I wish to thank everyone who contributed to the development of Northern Forward, from our initial listening sessions and design team discussions to campus forums and implementation planning.

Together, we have identified four strategic directions that will guide Northern State University over the next five years: Increasing Enrollment and Student Success, Strengthening Organizational Framework, Advancing Academic Innovation, and Championing a Unified Identity.

These priorities reflect our shared commitment to strengthening the Northern Experience and creating opportunities for our students, employees and communities. I invite you to explore the goals outlined in this plan and join us in moving Northern forward.

Alan D. LaFave

Dr. Alan D. LaFave, *President*

NORTHERN FORWARD • 2026-2031

STRATEGIC PLAN AT A GLANCE

OUR MISSION

Rooted in community and academic excellence, Northern State University prepares students for leadership and lifelong success. Northern delivers student-centered education and hands-on experiences that cultivate health and human connection, civic and cultural vitality, and economic growth.

Northern's mission is grounded in its statutory mission under South Dakota law (SDCL § 13-59-1) and the Board of Regents' mission policy for Northern State University (Policy 1.2.3).

OUR VISION

Northern is where students are known, challenged, supported, and prepared for lives of purpose and impact.

OUR VALUES

Northern State University's students, faculty, and staff are committed to the following values:

- **Community:** Building a culture of inclusion, belonging, and collegiality that respects diversity in knowledge, culture, and worldview.
- **Discovery:** Pursuing rigor and excellence in education, inquiry, and engagement for the benefit of our students, state, and region.
- **Integrity:** Adhering to the highest standards of honesty, fairness, and transparency, with a commitment to responsible stewardship of resources.

OUR FOUR STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

#1 Increasing Enrollment and Student Success

#2 Strengthening Organizational Framework

#3 Advancing Academic Innovation

#4 Championing a Unified Identity

One shared purpose: An exceptional Northern Experience.



INTRODUCTION

Northern State University helps each student become the person they want to be. We support students' growth through strong academic programs, exceptional teaching, trusted mentorship, experiential learning, and a community where students are known and supported. Our mission reflects both who Northern has long been and what we strive to be: a student-centered university that prepares graduates for leadership and lifelong success while contributing to the health and vitality of our communities, our region, and our state.

Our mission, vision, and values provide the foundation for this strategic plan. Community, discovery, and integrity are evident in the experience of our students and in how we work together.

- **Community** means creating a place where people know and support one another, promoting a sense of belonging.
- **Discovery** happens through rigorous academic programs, research, creative activity, experiential learning, and opportunities for students to discover what they are capable of and where they want to go next.
- **Integrity** guides how we make decisions, use our resources, serve our students, and fulfill our responsibilities to one another and to the communities we serve.

Northern Forward is structured around four strategic directions: increasing enrollment and student success, strengthening our organizational framework, advancing academic innovation, and championing a unified identity. Each direction was developed through extensive work by faculty, staff, students, university leaders, alumni, and community members.

The four directions are intentionally interconnected. Enrollment is bringing students to Northern and helping them persist to graduation. A strong organizational framework gives our faculty and staff the systems, processes, participation, and support they need to help students succeed. Academic innovation ensures that our programs, teaching, and learning experiences continue to prepare students for a changing world. Our unified identity enables us to clearly communicate who we are, what students can expect from their Northern experience, and the role Northern plays in Aberdeen, South Dakota, and beyond.

At the center of all four directions is the Northern Experience. Over the past several years, we have worked together to better define what that experience should be for every student, whether they learn on campus in Aberdeen, at the Huron Community Campus, or through online or HyFlex E-Learning: an education grounded in strong academic programs and student supports and strengthened by relationships, experiences, opportunities, and a sense of belonging. Our strategic plan gives us a framework for continuing to build the Northern Experience.

Artificial intelligence, data, and technology will serve as enabling capabilities across all four strategic directions. Northern will use these resources responsibly to strengthen student learning and support, improve institutional effectiveness, expand access to information, and prepare students and employees for a changing world. Northern upholds the belief that AI should augment—never replace—the human capacity for judgment, curiosity, connection, creativity, and ethical reflection. Northern is committed to ethical research practices, safeguarding sensitive data and intellectual property, and cultivating responsible innovation. AI will be used with integrity and responsibility in alignment with our mission, vision, and values.

Northern Forward gives our campus community a shared framework for the work ahead. Its Objectives, Targets, and Milestones will guide how we teach, support students, operate, and invest our resources, and we will report on our progress openly through town halls, annual reports, and dashboards. Together, we will move Northern forward by building on our strengths, embracing new opportunities, and ensuring that every student has an exceptional Northern Experience.

DEVELOPMENT OF NORTHERN FORWARD

Northern State University's former plan, Strategic Pathways, was sunset in 2026. To prepare for the next five years, the University launched a planning process in summer 2025. Campus leadership, faculty, staff, students, alumni, and Aberdeen community members worked in stages and with broad participation to create a strategic plan that provides clear direction for the institution's future. The planning process included the following actions:

- Interim President Laurie Nichols retained consultants Kristi Wagner and John Beranek to lead the strategic planning process.
- In September 2025, the consultants conducted empathy interviews with seven Executive Leadership Team members.
- In October 2025, the consultants held eight Listening Sessions conducted on campus with constituent groups including students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community members. A total of 248 individuals participated.
- At an October 2025 Faculty Senate meeting, Interim President Nichols invited faculty to volunteer for a small working group (three to four members members) to draft a revised mission statement for review by the broader campus community.
- In an October 2025 town hall, Interim President Nichols introduced consultants Kristi Wagner and John Beranek who outlined the strategic planning process to campus.
- A 46-member Design Team was formed to work across two days to review listening session results, engage in strategic dialogues, and identify emerging themes. These themes were refined into four strategic directions.
- The mission statement workgroup met to discuss and develop an initial draft.
- The Design Team split into four teams to further develop each Strategic Direction and a series of Objectives.
- A two-hour town hall meeting on Dec. 3, 2025, brought together more than 200 campus and community members, including incoming President Alan LaFave, to review emerging priorities of the strategic plan and a draft mission statement and provide feedback. A campuswide public input survey was also opened to gather anonymous feedback.
- In January 2026, an Implementation Team formed, comprised of 51 members. The team split into four groups to further develop each Strategic Direction and the Objectives, as well as develop Targets and Milestones. Throughout spring 2026, Implementation Teams met multiple times to further develop the Objectives, as well as develop Targets and Milestones for their specific Strategic Direction.
- In February 2026, the mission working group reviewed feedback received and expanded into a taskforce to continue the development of the mission statement. The taskforce included faculty representatives from each college and school, athletics, and students.
- In March 2026, the mission taskforce met to refine the draft mission statement. Over the spring, the taskforce solicited review and feedback by Faculty Senate, Staff Council, Executive Leadership Team, and the Student Government Association.
- The Implementation Teams met on April 16, 2026, to update the other Implementation Teams on the work that had been done to date. Special focus was on metrics to determine how we measure success.
- A Strategic Planning Implementation town hall meeting was held on April 28, 2026, in the Kessler's Champion Room to share the Strategic Directions, Objectives, Targets, and Milestones and the revised mission statement. Feedback was solicited from the more than 200 people who took part in the town hall, including students, faculty, staff, alumni, donors, and community members.
- The Strategic Plan was shared with Implementation Team co-chairs in July 2026, and co-chairs were asked to provide revisions.
- In August 2026, President LaFave brought together the Implementation Team co-chairs to review the Objectives, Targets, and Milestones in the plan.
- During Welcome Week 2026, President LaFave shared the Strategic Plan and Mission with campus.
- ELT held a summer retreat in August 2026 to walk through the Strategic Plan and dedicated time in each weekly ELT meeting in fall 2026 to name the plan, create a vision statement, and finalize the Objectives, Targets, and Milestones.
- In November 2026, President LaFave shared Northern Forward.

STRATEGIC DIRECTION 1:

INCREASING ENROLLMENT AND STUDENT SUCCESS

Value Statement: Northern will grow enrollment and student success by strengthening recruitment, enhancing the student experience from first contact through graduation, and expanding student financial resources.

Objectives:

1. Strengthen recruitment strategies.
2. Enhance the experience of each student throughout their academic journey to improve engagement, retention, and graduation.
3. Review and expand sustainable student financial resources.

Victories for Each Objective

Objective 1: Strengthen recruitment strategies.

5-Year Targets

1. Achieve and sustain the number of first-time, full-time degree-seeking students at equal to or greater than 355 students annually each fall. Fall 2026 baseline: 351.
2. Increase degree-seeking graduate student enrollments by 2% annually. Fall 2026 baseline: 222.
3. Increase total international student enrollment by 2% annually. Fall 2026 baseline: 86.
4. Increase transfer student enrollment by 2% annually. Fall 2026 baseline: 100.
5. Increase academic year (AY) credit hour production to 60,000. 2025-2026 baseline: 57,241.
6. Increase fall headcount to 4,000. Fall 2026 baseline: 3,890.
7. Increase enrollment of undergraduate, degree-seeking students who take courses fully online by 2% annually. Fall 2026 baseline: 165.

2-3 Year Milestones

1. Sustain a 32% or higher yield of admitted new students who enroll. Fall 2026 baseline: 34.16%
2. Increase the matriculation rate of high school dual enrollment (HSDE) students to 12%. Fall 2026 baseline: 10.63%
3. Achieve and sustain 1,500 fall start undergraduate admissions applications. Fall 2026 baseline: 1,119.
4. Achieve and sustain 1,200 fall start undergraduate admitted students. Fall 2026 baseline: 1,083
5. Grow the number of enrolled post-traditional students (ages 24 and older) served, including online and at the Huron Community Campus, by 2% annually. Fall 2026 baseline: 136.
6. Intentionally outreach to 50 or more students who stopped out each year, with the goal of awarding earned certificates or associate degrees and re-enrolling students to complete credentials. Baseline: 2024-2025, 268 students left without a credential, averaging 44 credits.

Objective 2: Enhance the experience of each student throughout their academic journey to improve engagement, retention, and graduation.

5-Year Targets

1. Achieve and sustain a ≥78% fall to fall retention rate for first-time, full-time, bachelor's degree seeking students. Fall 2025 cohort baseline 83%.
2. Sustain a fall to fall retention gap of 5% or less between first-generation and continuing-generation students. 2020–2024 five-year average: 9.5%. Fall 2026 baseline: 3.0%.
3. Achieve and sustain a ≥38% four-year graduation rate. Fall 2022 cohort baseline: 35.5%.
4. Set a six-year graduation rate, achieve, and sustain it. Fall 2020 cohort baseline: 45.2%
5. Increase first-to-second-year retention among students who apply to Northern between June 1 and July 31 to 65%. 2020-2024 five-year average: 58.5%

2-3 Year Milestones

1. Reduce the average no-show rate for Summer HOWL (New Student Orientation) events to less than 10%. Summer 2026 baseline: 16%
2. Increase the percentage of first-year students who report participating in a learning community, as measured by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to 15%. Baseline: 5% (2023) and 10% (2026).
3. Achieve and maintain at least 70% of first-year students reporting participation in at least one high-impact practice as measured by NSSE. Baseline: 51% (2023) and 68% (2026).
4. Increase and sustain a first-time, full-time bachelor's degree seeking student fall to spring retention rate of 95%. Fall 2025 to Spring 2026 baseline: 94%
5. Increase on campus housing occupancy to 90% in the fall and 85% in the spring. Fall 2026 baseline: 85.55%.

Objective 3: Review and expand sustainable student financial resources.

5-Year Targets

1. Decrease average student loan borrowing. Establish baseline and set goal in 2026-2027.
2. Maintain the percentage of students who receive some sort of financial aid at or above 85%. Fall 2026 baseline: 89.81%
3. All students have access to financial aid resources.

2-3 Year Milestones

1. Decrease the number of students who indicate leaving NSU due to financial constraints on the exit/withdrawal form. Establish baseline and set goal in 2026-2027.
2. Reduce the number of students removed from future-term registration for non-payment to 10 or fewer. Fall 2026 baseline: 15
3. Fully expend all available GAP scholarship dollars annually.
4. Using 2025-2026 as a baseline, grow scholarship endowments by 5% per year for the next five years

STRATEGIC DIRECTION 2:
STRENGTHENING ORGANIZATIONAL FRAMEWORK

Value Statement: Northern will strengthen how the university works by engaging students, faculty, and staff in improving our policies, processes, and workplace, to build a thriving, connected campus community.

Objectives:

1. Ensure and support regular policy and procedure reviews by involved stakeholders.
2. Encourage ideas and feedback about policies, processes, and workflows.
3. Invest in employees to promote retention and professional development.
4. Modernize campus workflows through strategic investment in human capital and process improvement.

Victories for Each Objective

Objective 1: Ensure and support regular policy and procedure reviews by involved stakeholders.

5-Year Targets

1. Increased clarity and accessibility of institutional policies and procedures with every policy housed in central repositories and assigned an owner and review date.
2. Documented, routine review cycles in every division.
3. Stronger, documented alignment with SDBOR policy and external governing bodies.
4. Increase faculty and staff satisfaction with how well Northern keeps them informed on important matters.

2-3 Year Milestones

1. A policy committee established by 2026.
2. Centralized repositories for all campus policies, both public facing and internal, that are easily accessible and navigable by the campus community.
3. A clearly defined system for regularly reviewing policies and procedures, including who is responsible, when reviews happen, and how updates are communicated across major areas.
4. Early evidence of regular routine review activity, with multiple units completing documented reviews.

Objective 2: Encourage ideas and feedback about policies, processes, and workflows.

5-Year Targets

1. Consistent campuswide use of a centralized system for submitting and routing feedback on institutional policies, processes, and procedures.
2. Multi-year increases in submissions and engagement, tracked against a baseline established in 2027.
3. Reliable patterns of review, response, and visible follow-through.
4. Improved perceptions of transparency, individual voice, and institutional responsiveness.
5. Beginning in 2028, ELT will annually identify and outline priorities for process improvement, drawing from campus submissions and strategic directions, with an emphasis on enhancing institutional effectiveness and operational efficiency.

2-3 Year Milestones

1. A campuswide feedback system launched by 2027 with access for students, faculty, and staff.
2. Clear workflows for review and response, with responsibility visible across divisions.
3. Early evidence of closed feedback loops, including regular examples of input shaping decisions.
4. Growing participation trends and early perception data showing increased trust in the process.

Objective 3: Invest in employees to promote retention and professional development.

5-Year Targets

1. Positive multi-year trends in employee satisfaction, engagement, and retention.
2. Consistent, high-quality onboarding experiences across employee groups.
3. Widespread participation in professional growth opportunities.
4. Improved institutional continuity and internal capacity to ensure knowledge and effective processes are maintained through employee transitions.

2-3 Year Milestones

1. A coordinated onboarding and training framework and experiences adopted across major employee groups.
2. Consistent onboarding experiences that employees can clearly describe and recognize.
3. Early improvements in employee feedback related to welcome, role clarity, and institutional connection.
4. Visible professional development pathways aligned to institutional needs and succession planning.

Objective 4: Modernize campus workflows by building internal process improvement capacity and redesigning priority processes.

5-Year Targets

1. Increased consistency of workflows across units.
2. Reduced redundancies and process barriers.
3. Improved satisfaction with institutional processes.
4. Documented efficiency gains in key administrative and academic support functions.

2-3 Year Milestones

1. A clear institutional picture of major workflows and systems, with campus awareness of available tools.
2. Priority processes identified and modernized, with early evidence of improved turnaround, clarity, or reliability.
3. Cross-unit alignment emerging around shared platforms and practices.
4. Initial data and feedback demonstrating operational improvements.

STRATEGIC DIRECTION 3:
ADVANCING ACADEMIC INNOVATION

Value Statement: Northern will create a culture where all students own their education through academic excellence, innovation, and experiential learning to build rewarding lives and careers.

Objectives:

1. Empower and inspire all students to define and pursue success for themselves in their lives and careers.
2. Support faculty and staff in creating a culture of exceptional teaching and an engaging and evidence-based learning environment that fosters student transformation.
3. Build a collaborative ecosystem among faculty, staff, alumni, and employers that connects students early to career pathways, integrates liberal arts competencies, and aligns education with workforce opportunities.

Victories for Each Objective

Objective 1: Empower and inspire all students to define and pursue success for themselves in their lives and careers.

5-Year Targets

1. Implement a life design model in which students move through ideation, incubation, acceleration, and scale-up (explore, prototype, test, refine) of their own career and life goals with 50% of students completing an individualized academic and career plan by graduation by 2030.
2. Grow the percentage of graduating students who complete a Tier 3 experiential learning activity, such as apprenticeships, internships, and student research to 75% by 2030. Baseline: 2024-2026 average: 55%
3. Implement common, nationally certified, peer mentor training. Provide 100% of first-year and transfer students with a trained peer mentor by fall 2030.

2-3 Year Milestones

1. Establish a baseline and set goals by 2027 for career fair participation and completion of a preparation step, such as a resume review, mock interview, or job fair prep session. Fall 2026 data point: 100 attendees with 20 completing a preparation step for Fall Career and Internship Fair.
2. Faculty, staff, and students have and use a shared vocabulary for goal setting, experiential learning, career opportunities (pre-apprenticeships, internships, apprenticeships, and industry-based projects), liberal arts competencies, and success. By 2028, establish and make accessible a plain-language guide for alumni, families, and community partners.
3. At least 90 faculty and staff complete career and life design training by 2027, forming the base for a train-the-trainer model by 2030.
4. The Center for College Experience and Life Design (CELD) is staffed and open in its renovated space by 2028-2029.
5. Online and Huron students can access Center for College Experience and Life Design programming, peer mentoring, and experiential learning tracking virtually by 2028-2029.
6. Establish a baseline and set a goal for the percent of first and second year students who take part in a Northern Innovation and Startup Center workshop, competition, or project by 2029. Fall 2026 data point: 95 unduplicated students registered for and attended a NISC workshop in 2025-2026.

Objective 2: Support faculty and staff in creating a culture of exceptional teaching and an engaging and evidence-based learning environment that fosters student transformation.

5-Year Targets

1. Increase first-year students' NSSE Higher-Order Learning score by 10 percentage points by 2029. Baseline 34 (2023) and 39.6 (2026).
2. Establish a regular survey of faculty and develop a baseline and goal for the share of faculty who report regularly using formative assessment by 2028.
3. Establish a baseline and set a goal for the percent of full-time faculty, E-Learning master teachers, and adjunct faculty who participate in CETL programming, including training in evidence-based curriculum and instruction, annually by 2028, and identify and reduce the barriers across campus that limit participation. Fall 2026 data point: Number participating in at least one CETL event 2025-2026: 37 faculty, 6 E-Learning master teachers, and 2 adjunct faculty.
4. Establish a regular survey of staff and develop a baseline and goal for the share of staff who report understanding how their role contributes to student success by 2028.

2-3 Year Milestones

1. Grading response times are built into the faculty syllabus template by fall 2027, and 100% of course syllabi use the template by fall 2028.
2. Exceptional teaching is articulated in faculty advancement and evaluation processes, including Promotion and Tenure and Annual Performance Evaluations by fall 2028.
3. Establish a structured new faculty onboarding and mentoring program, with defined mentor expectations and the active support of department chairs, by fall 2027. 100% of new faculty are intentionally onboarded to understand, appreciate, and be supported in becoming exceptional teachers, including training in experiential learning design and career and life design by fall 2030.
4. Create and celebrate an annual recognition of faculty excellence in teaching, research, and service by spring 2027.
5. Through CETL, establish a Teaching Fellow designation with defined responsibilities (including peer observation, mentoring, and faculty learning communities) and selection criteria, to provide support for professors and promote exceptional teaching by fall 2028.

Objective 3: Build a collaborative ecosystem among faculty, staff, alumni, and employers that connects students early to career pathways, integrates liberal arts competencies, and aligns education with workforce opportunities.

5-Year Targets

1. Establish and advertise 50 employer-paid sponsorships and scholarships with a 2-year commitment to work at the employer in South Dakota by fall 2030.
2. Deans, faculty, the NSU Foundation and Alumni Association, and the Center for College Experience and Life Design (CELD) collaborate to ensure every academic degree program has active connections with its alumni through the alumni mentor network by 2030.
3. By 2029, deans and faculty in every program annually consult with area employers to ensure liberal arts competencies, career pathways, and experiential learning opportunities are aligned with current business needs.
4. Every undergraduate program has a published major map that shows course sequence, experiential learning opportunities, and career pathways by 2030.

2-3 Year Milestones

1. Establish and implement a non-manual way to track experiential learning by fall 2029.
2. Produce experiential learning report cards in 50% of capstone courses by fall 2029 and 100% by fall 2030. Capstone instructors use the report cards to guide student reflection and help students turn their experiences into resumes and interview preparation.

STRATEGIC DIRECTION 4:
CHAMPIONING A UNIFIED IDENTITY

Value Statement: Northern will build connections with students, alumni, partners, and the region by communicating a clear, consistent identity to our region, state, and stakeholders.

Objectives:

1. Define Northern's identity in a core identity statement that reflects and affirms the Northern Experience.
2. Deepen mutually beneficial partnerships between Northern and the greater northeastern South Dakota community.
3. Northern's identity will be recognizable and resonate both regionally and nationally, positioning the University as a leader in academic excellence and community engagement.

Victories for Each Objective

Objective 1: Define Northern's identity in a core identity statement that reflects and affirms the Northern Experience.

5-Year Targets

1. Establish a baseline audit of percentage of audited materials containing inaccurate or unnecessarily narrow identity references in 2027 and set a goal to reduce the percent of narrow materials by 2029.
2. Set and achieve a goal for the percent of graduates who are employed or continue their education in South Dakota one year after graduation. Baseline 2024-2025: 70.2%

2-3 Year Milestones

1. Identity toolkit completed and core identity statement drafting underway by spring 2027.
2. Core identity statement adopted by spring 2027.
3. Core identity statement is shared with internal and external stakeholders and easy to find for future reference by fall 2028.

Objective 2: Deepen mutually beneficial partnerships between Northern and the greater northeastern South Dakota community.

5-Year Targets

1. Grow and sustain partner-hosted for-credit internships across all disciplines to 100 annually. Baseline 2025-2026: 45.
2. Grow the number of regional partners providing experiential learning opportunities, tracked through the experiential learning platform and the number of employer participants at annual Career Fairs.
3. The NSU Alumni Association will partner with Student Success, the Center for College Experience and Life Design (CELD), Williams Library, and the Northern Innovation and Startup Center to grow the number of joint initiatives with community partners.

2-3 Year Milestones

1. Partnership pathways are established and functioning for all colleges (pre-apprenticeships, internships, apprenticeships, and industry-based projects), and examples are integrated on the webpage of each academic degree program.
2. A partnership guide, posted online, that shows campus and community members how to start an internship, project, or other partnership with Northern.

Objective 3: Northern's identity will be recognizable and resonate both regionally and nationally, positioning the University as a leader in academic excellence and community engagement.

5-Year Targets

1. Using 2025-2026 as a baseline, grow gifts, sponsorships, and partnership funding from regional partners and alumni, beyond current fundraising and state appropriations by 3% per year for 5 years.
2. Using 2025-2026 as a baseline (about 13.9 million paid digital impressions, 234,382 digital ad clicks, and 1.23 million engagements), set a goal for growth in paid digital reach and engagement, with advertising spending tracked by market and tied to inquiries, applications, and enrollment.
3. Establish a baseline and goal for Northern's regional visibility, as measured by earned media mentions plus web and social reach.
4. Set a baseline and goal for growth in applications of first-time students from outside Northern's traditional recruitment region.

2-3 Year Milestones

1. Set a goal and achieve growth in Northern's name familiarity among the regional public from the 2024 baseline (38.6% regionally; 43.6% among South Dakota respondents) as measured by repeat comparable regional brand research.
2. Communications plan established for strategic communications of campus-related information both internally and externally by fall 2028.
3. Student and alumni connections grow through social platforms, career pathways, and mentoring programming, including the alumni mentor network.
4. Consistent core identity branding (e.g., messaging content, university marks, and visual elements) with flexible expression across all campus channels, including Athletics, NSU Foundation and Alumni Association, whose brands may look different while reflecting Northern's core identity.
5. A formal process for monitoring and reinforcing Northern's identity is established by fall 2028.



CONCLUSION

Northern Forward is a shared direction for Northern State University over the next five years. Its four strategic directions—increasing enrollment and student success, strengthening our organizational framework, advancing academic innovation, and championing a unified identity—are connected by our mission, vision, and values and by a common purpose: creating an exceptional Northern Experience for every student who chooses our university.

Our strategic plan will guide the work and priorities of the entire Northern community. It will be reflected in the programs we offer, the experiences we create for students, the partnerships we build, the ways we support faculty and staff, and the decisions we make about our resources. It will also require us to measure our progress, learn from what is working, and make changes when we need to. An implementation crosswalk will identify the offices, programs, and initiatives that will carry each objective forward.

Northern's greatest strength has been and always will be its people. Faculty and staff know our students, challenge them, support them, and connect them to opportunities that help them discover what they are capable of and where they want to go next. Students bring their own goals, talents, experiences, and ambitions to that community. Together, we create the Northern Experience.

Northern Forward gives us a shared direction for continuing to strengthen Northern, expand opportunities for our students, and serve Aberdeen, South Dakota, and the communities and industries that depend on our graduates.

GOVERNANCE AND BUDGETING

Governance

Chaired by President LaFave, the Implementation Team will meet once per semester to review progress, assess outcomes, identify areas requiring additional attention, and coordinate campus updates through town halls, annual reports, and dashboards. The Implementation Team is comprised of the president, the co-chairs of each Strategic Direction and the director of Institutional Research. The Implementation Team will help ensure progress remains transparent and that implementation efforts stay aligned with institutional priorities.

Budgeting

The institution's mission and strategic plan guide budget decisions and resource allocation. Finance and Administration will integrate strategic priorities into Northern's annual budget process, evaluating proposed investments in the context of enrollment projections, financial capacity, operational needs, and long-term commitments. Beginning with the budget cycle launching in December 2026, this process will provide a consistent connection between strategic planning and resource allocation while supporting the university's long-term financial sustainability.

DESIGN TEAM AND IMPLEMENTATION TEAM

Thank you to the Northern Forward Design Team and Implementation Team for their thoughtful work in developing this strategic plan. Their collaboration, ideas, and commitment to Northern's future shaped the priorities and goals that will guide us forward.

Design Team

Laurie Nichols, *Interim President*

Veronica Paulson, *Former Vice President of Finance and Administration*

Erin Fouberg, *Provost and Vice President of Academics*

Mike Wanous, *Former Provost and Vice President of Academics*

Chad Hatzenbuhler, *Director of Communications and Marketing*

Sean Blackburn, *Dean of Students*

Nate Davis, *Athletic Director*

Zach Flakus, *President, NSU Foundation*

Debbi Bumpous, *Vice President of Technology and Chief Information Officer*

Eric Kline, *Chief Enrollment Officer*

Anna Schwan, *Dean Millicent Atkins School of Education*

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Dan Shannahan, *Assistant Professor of Business*

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Jon Mitchell, *Professor of Biology*

Hannah Walters, *Associate Professor of Marketing*

Britt Lorenz, *Executive Director Student Success*

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Bea Smith, *Director of Northern Innovation and Startup Center*

Kelly Weismantel, *Director of Counseling Services*

Layton Cooper, *Director of Admissions*

Jodi Casanova, *Deputy Chief Information Officer*

Jason Henslee, *Director of Instructional Technology*

Stacy Bauer, *Executive Assistant to President*

Elizabeth Varin, *Communications and Marketing*

Jessica Beilke, *Finance*

Sean Meyers, *Purchasing Manager*

Russell Entzel, *Carpenter*

Ashley Gauer, *Associate Athletic Director, Internal Operations*

Dean Berry, *Associate Athletic Director, External Relations*

Laci Hettick, *Senior Director of Development, NSU Foundation*

Rocky Burkett, *Director of Development, NSU Foundation*

Gavin Wollman, *Student, School of Fine Arts*

Lexi Cutler, *Student, School of Business*

Jorja Whempner, *Student, College of Arts and Sciences*

Carter Schmidt, *Student, School of Education*

Jaeden Shaving, *Graduate Student, School of Education*

Abiah George, *Student, College of Arts and Sciences, President, Student Government Association*

Tanner Jondahl, *Chief of Police, Aberdeen Police Department*

Kristie Martin, *Market President, Dacotah Bank*

Mike Quast, *Chief Executive Officer, YMCA*

Amber Schwab, *Economic Development Manager and Public Information Officer, City of Aberdeen*

Heath Johnson, *Principal, Dakota Plains*

Katie Washnok, *Owner, Blackout Industries*

Eric Payne, *Sales Associate, Insurance Plus and NSU Foundation Board Member*

Kami Spieker, *Outreach and Social Media, Chamber of Commerce and NSU Foundation Alumni Committee*

Implementation Team

Alan LaFave, *President*

Erin Fouberg, *Provost and Vice President of Academics*

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Dean Berry, *Associate Athletic Director, External Relations*

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Morgan Stadler, *Assistant Director of Financial Aid*

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Josh VanLaecken, *Assistant Professor of Accounting*

Vicki Evans, *Student Success Director of Tutoring*

Carl Perry, *State Senator, State of South Dakota*

Al Novstrup, *State Representative, State Of South Dakota*

Julie Dvorak, *Circuit Judge, South Dakota Unified Judicial System*

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Amanda Fair, *Associate Athletic Director for Business Operations*

Amy Beaner, *Registrar*

Amber Henderson, *Associate Professor of Management*

Amy Johnson, *Simulation Lab and Clinical Coordinator*

Kristi Bockorny, *Dacotah Bank Dean of School of Business*

Darci Bultema, *Professor of Music, Voice and Opera*

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