



Strategic Planning Document 2025-2026



NORTHERN
STATE UNIVERSITY

Northern State University initiated its strategic planning process by listening to the voices of those we serve. Through comprehensive engagement with students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community partners, NSU sought to understand the opportunities and challenges that will shape our future.

Focus Question

How might NSU create a collaborative and authentic future that strengthens enrollment and aligns programs to ensure sustainability and student success?

The Listening Process

Listening sessions provide an organization the opportunity to hear from diverse stakeholder groups, gather their insights, and synthesize feedback in meaningful ways. This information serves as the foundation for strategic planning efforts that reflect our community's collective wisdom.

NSU's listening sessions utilized the World Café conversation method. World Café Conversations are an intentional approach to creating dynamic dialogue around questions that matter. This creative process facilitates collaborative discussion, knowledge sharing, and the development of actionable possibilities across groups of all sizes.

World Café Questions

- Round 1: What question(s), if answered, could have the greatest impact for NSU?
- Round 2: What are you hearing beneath the variety of opinions? What is the larger story emerging here?
- Round 3: What actions might we take together to advance these ideas?

Listening Session #1

BOLD AND UNIQUE IDENTITY

- How does NSU define its identity and make it sustainable?
- How do we tell the rest of the world how great NSU is?
- We're having an identity crisis.
- How much flexibility do we have with our mission/vision, or will the state/BOR decide for us?
- Who are we?
- Our perception is our reality.
- What is NSU's authentic 'thing'?
- What are we?
- Identity crisis.
- Perception vs. reality.
- Lack of identity.
- We need a grassroots approach.

TRUSTWORTHY, BALANCED AND FLEXIBLE UPPER LEADERSHIP

- Administrative accountability.
- ELT accountable to this plan.
- Do more with less.
- Consistency.
- Strategic efforts need to be a campus-wide effort.
- Focus on strategic action.
- Need change agents on ELT.
- ELT doesn't appoint the strategic team. The departments need to do it so voices are varied.
- Administrative transparency and follow-through.

SUPPORTIVE AND ATTENTIVE TO CAMPUS COMMUNITY

- Be more purposeful with academic offerings and experiences.
- How can we improve morale on campus?
- What are we doing well and how can we maximize those strengths?
- How do we retain high quality staff and faculty?
- What community partners do we need?
- Campus involvement as job duty for faculty and staff.
- How do we decrease department conflict?
- Who do we honor? Students? Northern? Or academics?
- Who is learning, working, and teaching at NSU?
- Be more purposeful with staff time.

CREATIVE AND PURPOSEFUL COLLABORATION

- Where do we want to be in 5-10 years and how are we going to get there?
- How do we collaborate and build long-term planning?
- Create a sense of belonging. More interdepartmental team building and collaboration.
- Is the administration willing to get out of the way, so that things can get done?
- How do departments collaborate on skeleton staffing?
- How can we be more collaborative?
- Lack of cohesiveness among departments.
- Celebrate new hires and achievements often.
- Understand each department's role.

EFFECTIVE AND ACTIVE COMMUNICATION

- Continued weekly emails from leaders (department leader updates too).
- Communication is so weak!
- We are translucent, not transparent.
- Transparency lacking.
- Voices limited to executive voices.
- Build a platform to share ideas and find compromise across campus.
- Establish a department communication plan.
- Open, honest, and clear assessment of communication.
- Intentional and accessible communication.
- Frustration due to lack of communication.
- Develop a mechanism for safe communication.

DYNAMIC AND SUCCESSFUL GROWTH

- How do we diversify programs?
- How do we grow enrollment?
- How can we attract and keep the best? (students, faculty, and staff)
- How do we stay relevant?
- Are we going to be mediocre at a lot of things or masters of a few?
- Do we offer more than shiny new things?
- Is Northern really committed to changing?
- Why are we afraid of change?
- Commitment to change in thinking, budgets, and communication.

STUDENT-CENTERED FOCUS

- How can we engage current and future students more effectively?
- Different housing options.
- We need to focus on students.
- Be more purposeful with student experiences.
- Welcoming, not inviting.
- Improved student-centered customer service.
- What is best for students?
- Why is 'student success' not the first part of our focus question?



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING TEAM

- Stakeholder awareness for each project.
- Employee appreciation with more awareness, broken down by department with layers of awards.
- Better explanation of what the events are and who or why everyone should go.
- Reward the behavior you want to see and build better habits and behaviors.
- Create and build our identity.
- Department heads are responsible for their own budgets.
- Increase financial transparency. Is it okay for other departments to see other department budgets?
- Develop communication plan with employees that are effective. Too many emails are not read due to busy schedules.
- Clear, defined goals for each department.
- Communication plan.
- Listening sessions.
- Membership with boots-on-the-ground staff.
- Democratic process.
- Who is on the strategic planning team and how were they chosen?
- All units must be represented.
- Shape recruitment based on enrollment and retention research.
- Focus all efforts on students first (student-centric).
- One size doesn't fit all BOR universities. We need someone to fight for us and our students.
- Actionable, campus-wide solutions to the lack of communication.
- Run everything through a student-centered lens.
- Think beyond a set dollar sign. It's worth investing more now to make our future brighter (sow now, reap later).
- Stop trying to be something we're not while adapting to what the future of the workforce will look like.
- It's just as worthwhile to consider what needs to be stopped as what needs to be started.
- Attainable and measurable goals.
- Quality, not quantity.
- Transparent communication and explanation.
- Consider budget implications for strategic goals.
- Have an open mind. Keep what's best for everyone in mind.
- Establish goals that are realistic and attainable.
- Define the assessment process for measuring success with a process for review, key performance indicators, and listening to staff and students who have shared the same concerns for the past 10 years.
- Meet the needs of the students, not legislators.
- Look beyond what has always been done (clean slate).
- Be open to change and opportunities.
- Quarterly forums from administration with opportunity to share and be heard, and do something from that information.
- Opportunities for input.
- Don't ask the same people who are always asked to serve with this.
- Be open-minded.
- Participation from all departments and levels.
- Think long-term. Where do we want to be in X years?
- Focus on both employee and student retention.
- Be open to change, seek out the quiet voices, and make the plan actionable, intentional, and measurable.
- Clear and concise communication.
- Student-first mentality over budget mentality.



Listening Session #2

IMPROVING CAMPUS CLIMATE

- Poor campus morale.
- How can we improve relationships between administration and faculty?
- Course scheduling across campus.
- Poor campus climate and morale.
- Workload, morale, and faculty retention.
- Enrollment anxiety.
- How do we fix campus morale?

INCREASE EMPLOYEE SUPPORT

- Low support.
- How do we manage faculty burnout?
- Put resources toward experiential learning.
- How do we better support faculty and staff from traditionally marginalized groups?
- Deans, chairs, and faculty control programs and curriculum.

REPRESENTATION ON ELT

- Add faculty to ELT.
- Faculty and students on ELT.
- Involve people in solving problems.
- Explanation of policy changes, especially budgetary.
- Faculty senate and student representative on executive leadership team.

UNDERSTANDING AND BEING HEARD BY BOR

- Knee-jerk BOR policies.
- BOR rethinking “one size fits all.”
- Conversation with BOR.
- Include faculty in decisions.
- What is our place in the BOR system and how does the BOR view our purpose in the system?
- More direct interaction with BOR.

STUDENT-CENTERED FOCUS

- Commitment to students’ best interests.
- How are we best serving students and faculty retention?
- How do we boost enrollment?
- What can NSU do to encourage and foster student engagement and resiliency?
- Centering students in everything.
- Student-centered focus.
- Why do students come to NSU, leave NSU, pass on NSU, and stay at NSU?
- What majors do future students want?

DEFINING NORTHERN’S IDENTITY

- Reach out to similar-size universities.
- Solidify our identity.
- Defining Northern’s identity.
- Who are we and what is our identity?
- Align policy to identity.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING TEAM

- Identify similar-sized universities and start conversations about how they address similar issues.
- Define Northern's identity and compare and align to policies.
- Dig into enrollment data and compare applications to commitments.
- Assess and reflect on interactions with first-generation students and avoid one size fits all.
- Don't dismiss common themes and concerns as 'just complaining.'
- Our most important stakeholders are our students.
- Should have bottom-up approach, not top-down.
- Any major decisions that affect the entire university should include representation from those affected (faculty, student, staff).
- Involve all stakeholders: students, faculty, staff, administration, representatives of each BOR institution, and BOR.
- Others include community members, politicians, regional entities (school districts), and employers (Avera, banks, etc.).
- Students need to be involved.
- Plan needs to be actionable and implemented.
- Goals need to align to a shared set of beliefs and values that are authentic.
- Goals need to include budgetary, revenue, and financial transparency.
- Plan needs to stay true to Northern. We are not SDSU or USD. No one size fits all.



Listening Session #3

PURPOSEFUL STUDENT-DRIVEN CONVERSATION

- Initiate student voices.
- How do we make more transparency between the administration and the student body?

AVAILABILITY OF RESOURCES

- Do we have the resources to achieve our goals?

SUPPORTIVE AND ACTIVE COMMUNITY

- How can Northern energize our students to the community?
- Put students first.
- Increase involvement on campus.
- Build community.
- Community driven.
- Building a supportive community – “GO WOLVES.”
- How do we get students involved on campus?
- How will NSU support the health and wellness of students?
- Students commit to create a shared space to cultivate a shared Northern culture.

UNDERSTANDING A SHARED VISION

- What is Northern’s vision for student success look like for the next decade?
- Is the mission of NSU number-centered or student-centered?
- NSU identity is uncertain.
- What investments are most beneficial for NSU?
- Students advocate for necessary changes.
- A lack of clarity to the future.
- Lack of a clear, strong vision.
- Does expanding NSU lose the true identity of it?
- Northern as we know it is fading.
- An era of rapid changes.
- Overcome NSU’s mental limitations.

CHECK-IN

- Collaboration with a lot of changes. Students are the customers.
- Implementation of a plan is necessary.
- Sustainability is the focus rather than student success.
- How can NSU support students? How can students help and support NSU?
- Align programs by creating programs that provide job growth and other production. Workplan development that is well-rounded.
- Student success and retention. How do we help in the future?
- Decisions are made by BOR and administration, not students.
- Opportunities to get involved. Push students to get involved.
- What is NSU known for? Nursing facility, students, faculty, alumni, and professors.
- Sense of community. Community supports NSU. Every student that comes to NSU feels supported by community.

Listening Session #4

ACTIVE AND GROUNDED BELONGING

- How do we focus on the hometown family feel NSU provides?
- Connect prior students, community to campus, and campus to community. Focus on the family feel and belonging.
- Programming for students on campus (community and campus culture).
- How do we recruit and support non-traditional students?

DYNAMIC AND SUPPORTIVE COLLABORATION

- Connection and collaboration between NSU to community and community to NSU.
- Build relationships with community to provide opportunities for students, including internships and jobs.
- Community and NSU leadership quarterly meetings (communication and relationships).
- Focus on communication internally at NSU, from NSU to community, and from community to NSU.
- Community supports NSU as they were and are NSU.

UNIQUE AND INSPIRING IDENTITY

- How is the experience at NSU built and rooted in NSU – 'GO WOLVES'?
- Focus on the heart of NSU (programs). What are we good at?
- What is the identity of NSU?
- Create lasting memories.
- Provide exciting marketing materials.

CAPABLE AND INSPIRING LEADERSHIP

- Hire a president who is dedicated to NSU and Aberdeen – students, staff, and faculty.
- Empower decision making, especially the NSU brand. Let the community use it and just say 'yes.'
- How can we grow the education programs to dynamic growth levels?
- How do you measure the impact and evaluate positive impact?



Listening Session #5

POSITIVE AND INSPIRING STUDENT EXPERIENCE

- Look at campus through a student's eyes.
- How do we make students want to stay at NSU?
- How do we improve student experience?
- How can we make NSU more exciting to incoming freshmen and transfer students?
- Improve student experience.
- More personalized attention to students.
- Include students in the conversation.
- Invest in retention, not just recruitment.
- What do the students want?
- Brag up your program.
- Evolving student experience.

STRONG GROUNDED IDENTITY

- What is NSU's identity? (besides SD BOR)
- What is NSU known for?
- NSU brand is missing.
- Establish a clear identity.
- Lack of focus.
- It's okay to be diverse.
- Focus on picking an identity.
- What do we hope to accomplish and how do we get there?
- Stronger identity.
- Define NSU's identity.
- And how do you know?
- What makes NSU stand out?
- Lack of support.
- Seek an answer vs. complaining.
- Identify NSU's priorities.

FORWARD THINKING LEADERSHIP

- Leadership transparency with decisions.
- Willingness to try.
- Spread out commitment and who is involved.
- Are we, as a university, open and willing to adapt and evolve?
- Open to growth.
- Require annual trainings.
- Being open to everyone.
- Adapt to change.
- Appetite for change.
- Do you honestly enjoy working at NSU and the work you do, or is it just a paycheck to pay the bills?
- Who decides?

STUDENT-CENTERED ACADEMICS

- What if we had sustainable funding?
- Do online classes extinguish the Northern experience?
- How can we keep enrollment numbers up or the same?
- Commitment to better communication.
- How do we grow and serve students when classes are being cancelled?
- Quality of education.
- Collaboration across departments.
- Brainstorming sessions.
- What do we need to do to actually engage together and collaborate effectively?

DYNAMIC AND PURPOSEFUL COLLABORATION

- Number calendar and events.
- Less meetings, more idea sharing.
- Interdepartmental meetings.
- Work together between departments.
- How can we collaborate as a university?
- University-wide idea sessions.
- How can departments collaborate better to serve our students?
- Be more present with staff and students.
- Communication with admissions.
- Disconnect and lack of understanding.
- Meaningful collaboration and identify common goals.
- How do we communicate NSU's specialties to surrounding areas of the country?
- More communication and collaboration needed.
- How do we improve customer service campus-wide?
- Lack of collaboration.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING

- Balance out online and in-person courses.
- Align programs to all types of students (dual credit, non-traditional, etc.).
- Make training sessions, webinars, etc. required for all staff.
- What do we want to be known for? Pick identity and stick to it and brand it.
- Move collaboration with departments and programs.
- Include e-learning. What is the role of e-learning in the NSU strategic plan?
- Develop a campus-wide Teams channel for ideas or help sharing.
- Treat graduate assistants as full employees.
- Collaboration, collaboration, collaboration. For example, e-learning science has nothing to do with on-campus science faculty. For example, all department secretaries don't know each other and all do things their own way.
- Administration needs to listen to the workers in the trenches, ask them, and implement.
- Need to look at retaining our current students vs. just recruiting. Offering scholarships to dual credit students who stay and graduate develops current employees.
- Be open to new ideas and change.
- Involve all departments and levels with the process.
- Be realistic and ensure goals are attainable but challenging.
- Define NSU brand and ensure it is understood across campus and community.
- Define what we want the student experience to encompass and make sure it is applied to on-campus and off-campus students (online, high school, etc.).
- Try to unite all faculty and staff to be on the same team and work together seamlessly.
- Make sure strategic plan is transparent for everyone and that it is followed through.
- Focus on 'fixing ourselves' internally before looking to make external changes.
- Make it a plan that we can follow through on.
- Make sure the strategic plan matches existing initiatives (SEM, Epicenity, etc.).
- Consistent updates on the plan so it stays fresh in everyone's mind and new staff can be educated on what the plan is.
- Foster collaboration between departments.
- Consider all walks of employee input.
- Transparency from administration on positive changes or why a change can't be implemented.
- Support fresh ideas.
- Self-awareness and courage to change.
- Educate faculty, staff, and employees on what the departments are and what their purpose is.
- Educate students on what the departments are and how each can help their Northern experience.
- Process communication (trickle down) from ELT (decision makers).
- First impressions really count. How is NSU 'wowing' incoming students?
- Educate faculty, staff, and students that they play a part, and we can all contribute.



Listening Session #6

PATHWAYS TO GROWTH

- What is the next Super 8 for Aberdeen?
- Local and regional growth.
- Increase population and enrollment.
- How could we grow the population of Aberdeen to 40,000?

PURPOSEFUL ENERGETIC INTEGRATION

- Regular NSU and community collaboration sessions.
- Fully integrating NSU into Aberdeen.
- How can we connect NSU students to employers for career pathways?
- Internship for all students.
- Students need help to commit to our community.
- Encourage faculty and staff to serve on community boards and join community organizations.
- Community partnerships for career paths, internships, etc.
- How can we create a better workforce initiative with NSU students after graduation to work and live in Aberdeen?
- Workforce development partnerships.
- Increase community collaborations for jobs

BOLD AND DYNAMIC IDENTITY

- How can we fully fund our students?
- What is the guiding mission, vision, or principle that focuses on everything?
- Teachers and what?!?!?

INCREASE THE APPEAL

- Market “NSU the Region” with things to do within an hour of Aberdeen.
- Reputation and perception (back-up option? 2nd choice?).
- A scholarship for every student.
- In an area of the state with flat to decreasing population, how can we increase our market share of students choosing NSU?
- Create full tuition scholarships for a suite of programs.
- How can we incorporate our local sports associations and NSU student athletes to work together to increase attendance and help our programs locally?
- The cost and benefit ratio.
- Grow appeal and help people ‘fall in love with this area of SD.’

AGGRESSIVE RECRUITMENT RETENTION

- Everyone is a recruiter.
- How do we get more regional and local students to attend NSU?
- How do we make people fall in love with NSU?
- Change how we do admissions to be different and where the students are.
- How do we break down silos of responsibility, so everyone feels the process and success is everyone’s responsibility?
- Surveys to accepted but unenrolled students.
- Where will our future students come from?
- What is fun for students?
- Enrollment concerns and recruitment strategy.

Listening Session #7

WHAT QUESTION(S), IF ANSWERED, COULD HAVE THE GREATEST POSITIVE IMPACT ON NSU'S FUTURE?

- What specialized two-year and four-year degrees can we add or improve?
- What do students want out of a college?
- What do we want NSU to be known for?
- What makes the community support NSU, and how can we improve that?

WHAT ARE YOU HEARING UNDERNEATH THE VARIETY OF OPINIONS BEING EXPRESSED? (WHAT IS THE BIGGER STORY ABOUT WHO NSU IS TODAY AND WHAT IT COULD BECOME TOMORROW?)

- Collaborating and creating a personal and connected atmosphere in community.
- Being excited about new academic improvements and sports atmosphere.
- Being known for NSU initiatives on specialized micro-credentials and tech innovation.

WHAT NEXT STEPS MIGHT WE TAKE TOGETHER? (COULD BE AN ACTION, COMMITMENT, COLLABORATION, OR PARTNERSHIP)

- Increasing the visibility of opportunities for community involvement.
- Increase visibility and communication of options and routes you can take in and out of college.
- Prepare students for post-college through life skills and practical classes.



Listening Session #8

CONNECTING CAMPUS AND COMMUNITY

- How do we ensure community workforce is being met in an ever-changing world?
- How do we strengthen community connections? (both ways)
- Removing silos and collaborations.
- Better connection between community and students.
- Community and connections.
- Point of contact on campus for community engagement.
- How do we get NSU out to the public (facilities and programs)?
- Do we periodically check on the programs we offer and the workforce needs of the community, region, and state?
- What can NSU do for the community?
- Conversations between NSU and workforce.
- Connection between community, campus staff and faculty, communication, department heads and faculty with business community.
- Building meaningful connections.

RECRUITING AND RETAINING TALENT

- How do we best support students?
- How do we compete for students in a demographically challenged area?
- Events on campus.
- How can we increase and sustain enrollment?
- More strategic recruitment.
- Marketing, recruiting, and communication.
- Provide resources for recruitment and retention.
- How can we retain faculty, staff, administration, and students?
- Internal retention (i.e., faculty and president).

PURPOSEFUL PERSPECTIVE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

- What excites a 15-year-old to move from outside the area to NSU?
- Defining the 'Northern Story.'
- What will you make in the first year to five years with this degree?
- What is the value of an education?
- What is job placement with a degree?
- Partnership of high schools to get kids on campus.

EFFECTIVELY MARKETING OUR EXCEPTIONAL STORY

- Leaning on alumni (testimonials).
- Need to tell our story.
- Better marketing to accurately share NSU story.
- Share our story and collect stories to share.
- How do you communicate the value of Northern?
- Stronger marketing and communication.
- Selling and marketing to entire family, not just the student.
- Committing to an identity.
- Selling Aberdeen as a full package with NSU.
- Finding our niche and marketing it (funding).

ADAPTABLE, SUSTAINABLE AND ACCOUNTABLE PLAN

- Accountability of goals.
- Who is the next NSU president?
- Adaptability for the future.
- Be the action you want to see!
- What measurables are we going to achieve with the plan?
- Value proposition.
- Sustainability of long-term leadership.

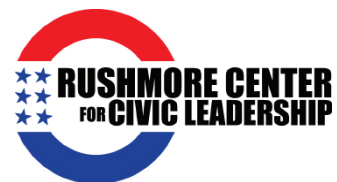
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE STRATEGIC PLANNING TEAM

- Better define Northern's identity to better tell our story and unify our message (students, community, staff).
- Community liaison.
- Expectation of community engagement from faculty and staff.
- Strengthening on-campus relationships and communication upheld with mutual accountability.
- Realistic goals.
- Flexibility in the plan to adapt to changing times.
- Actionable and measurable.
- Community liaison (designated person on campus).
- Good consensus and representation.
- Marketing the university.
- Partnerships with community and collaboration of community with NSU.
- More direct information from students as to what would bring them here. How do we make Northern your home?
- Eliminate barriers and have an inclusive campus.
- To become the university that takes the student to the adult.
- Northern's identity cannot be tied to one individual (changing leadership or faculty).
- Balancing academic scholarships with athletic scholarships.
- Enhancing and expanding marketing focus to tell NSU's story (and Aberdeen).
- More alumni participation and engagement.
- Competing with tech schools is better by strengthening job pipelines and collaborating with technical programs.





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