

STRATEGIC PLAAIA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After a decade of growth and innovation, Ottawa University is riding a wave of unprecedented momentum. The historic campus in Kansas can boast its largest enrollment in half a century; OUAZ is on the brink of 1000 students after only five years of existence; our adult, professional, and online units continue to innovate and exceed expectations. Ottawa University has much cause for optimism looking forward.

At this moment of great promise, Ottawa University faces specific unique opportunities and distinctive challenges, which include:

- Moving beyond an athletics-focused recruiting strategy to ensure future growth.
- Navigating a limited capacity to use institutional debt to finance further expansion.
- Achieving substantial cost savings, additional revenues, and endowment growth in order to improve affordability for our students.
- Addressing the critical functions that have not kept pace with our overall growth, while digesting the rapid changes of the past decade.
- Optimizing the efficiency of the University as a whole while providing our distinctive operating units the flexibility they need to flourish.
- Focusing on recruiting and retaining top talent at a time of economic instability and seismic change in labor markets.

In 2021-2022, the Ottawa University community came together through an inclusive, grassroots process to reflect on how far our institution has come, where we stand now, and what the future holds. The plan that emerged grew from our collective aspirations and from a keen sense of the strategic focus required to flourish in these turbulent times.

Guided by our mission, this document provides an ambitious and flexible roadmap for the University over the coming five years. To set our path forward as a focused, cohesive, and energized community, this strategic plan presents four key goals, each with associated objectives:

- Advance the Academic Mission
- Elevate the Student Experience and Outcomes
- Ensure Belonging
- Achieve One University

In five years, Ottawa University will be just as dynamic and growth-oriented as it is today, but strengthened with a more participatory and collaborative culture, enhanced services and opportunities for students, a renewed focus on our academic mission, a record of translating our commitment to inclusion and equity into meaningful change, and a stronger balance sheet with stable financial operating results.

To attain our goals, we must use existing resources even more carefully, better realize the efficiencies of our scale, and develop new streams of revenue. Fundraising and grant-writing will be become even more critical. Everyone in the Ottawa University family—students and alumni, faculty and staff, trustees and other supporters—will be called upon to work together with commitment and creativity, focus and flexibility, stamina and passion. And we need to continue to draw upon our historic strengths—our skill at building transformative partnerships, our boldness in innovation, and the tenacity and heart that distinguishes our Ottawa Spirit—as the foundation for the University's ongoing growth and success.

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MISSION

Building on its foundation as a Christ-inspired community of grace and open inquiry, Ottawa University prepares professional and liberal arts graduates for lifetimes of personal significance, vocational fulfillment, and service to God and humanity.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, Ottawa University has quietly emerged as one of the most striking success stories of twenty-first-century American higher education. At a time of retrenchment and lowered expectations at many private colleges and universities, Ottawa has traced an enviable path of growth: University-wide enrollment has increased by 40 percent and total revenue has doubled since 2016. Today, OU is riding a wave of unprecedented momentum: even as most commentators are writing obituaries for small, rural liberal arts colleges, the historic campus in Kansas is bustling with its largest enrollment in half a century; OUAZ, one of the rare entirely new residential university campuses built in recent decades, is on the brink of 1000 students after only five years; our adult, professional, and online units continue to innovate and exceed expectations; our athletic programs are the largest in the NAIA, our teams are pioneering in new sports, and we are winning national championships; and we regularly earn high accolades for the social mobility of our students and graduates. Ottawa University has much to be proud of and much cause for optimism looking forward.



The distinctive heritage, character, and spirit that define Ottawa University have brought the institution to the position of dynamism and strength that it enjoys today. A key aspect of OU's history and culture is its longstanding commitment to partnerships, to forging and sustaining deep and meaningful relationships with other organizations. From its roots as a frontier mission school on the banks of the Marais des Cygnes River, Ottawa University has been thoroughly intertwined with the Ottawa Tribe and the American Baptist Churches USA; so too the history of the Kansas campus and the growth of the City of Ottawa are inseparable; and more recently, the University's connection with the City of Surprise has emerged as one of the most remarkable public-private partnerships in contemporary American higher education. These foundational, enduring relationships, based on a bedrock of mutual respect and shared values, have profoundly shaped OU, suffused its institutional DNA, and positioned it well for a future in which partnerships (with government agencies, corporations, non-profits, and other educational organizations) are critical to the growth of American colleges and universities.

Ottawa University's history is also filled with numerous examples of innovation and leadership, of genuine boldness and creativity in furthering our institutional mission. The New Plan for Education of 1970 was a visionary attempt to rethink the liberal arts in a time of sweeping change; the founding of the College Without Campus in 1974, which carried the University's mission beyond traditional-aged students and beyond northeast Kansas to empower adult learners in Kansas City, Phoenix, Wisconsin, Indiana, and Asia, put OU at the forefront of American higher education; our achievements in online learning were similarly pioneering; and, most dramatically and most recently, the decision to build a new residential campus in Arizona was an act of vision, audacity, and courage. Ottawa University's heritage is not one of complacency or timidity or resistance to change, but of experimentation and initiative, adaptability and ambition.

Less tangible, but perhaps most important to the achievements of the University, is the Ottawa Spirit, the distinctive character of the place, the people, and the community that sets OU apart from all other institutions of higher education. Defining the Ottawa Spirit is a difficult task, but it is rooted in the



commitment to enlightened faith and engaged service that animated the University's founders and continues to infuse our mission and our collective endeavors today. It grows from our tradition of serving the underserved and from our dedication to inclusion and equity, as evidenced by the long and consequential history of the Black Student Union on the Ottawa campus, the provision of full scholarships for Ottawa Tribe members, the University's brave and principled decision to provide benefits to the same-sex partners of faculty and staff in 2011, and OUAZ's emergence as a Hispanic-Serving Institution. The Ottawa Spirit encompasses the heartfelt warmth of kindness, empathy, and teamwork, but also the unyielding steeliness of determination, resilience, and grit. Above all, it is a bond that links us—students, alumni, faculty, staff, students, Board members and supporters—as members of an extended family, a community that has repeatedly proven itself to be formidable in the face of challenges and agile in responding to opportunities.

For all the advantages Ottawa University now enjoys—from a rich historical legacy to a diversified business model, from a wide-ranging mix of academic programs and modalities to a major presence in America's fastest growing metropolitan area—we are not immune to the winds of change currently

buffeting all colleges and universities. Worrisome demographic trends, intense competitive pressures, rapidly changing student expectations, concerns over college costs and student debt, and a decline in public faith in the value of higher education all weigh heavily on OU and its prospects for the future. So too does all the uncertainty and anxiety in the larger world, as we all struggle to navigate an ongoing pandemic, economic volatility, tight labor markets, global instability, rising environmental hazards, and a polarized political climate.

At a historical moment where there seem to be no right answers, Ottawa University should not just follow the latest trends and fads, kidding ourselves that there is security in doing what every other college is doing. We cannot be complacent or be satisfied with playing it safe, content with merely getting by or making do. Perhaps above all, we must avoid limiting our potential with low expectations and easy excuses, or falling into the trap of thinking that a tight budget and a small endowment mean we cannot aspire or excel or dream. Part of the genius of Ottawa University across the decades has been our uncanny ability to recognize and act on opportunity shrewdly, creatively, and decisively. Now is the time for us to face forward with confidence: confidence

in the strength and relevance of our mission, in the vitality of our diversified business model, and (most importantly) confidence in ourselves, in the capacity of this community to come together (as it has many times in the past) to master trying circumstances, to innovate, to find solutions, and to achieve what seem like bold, even audacious goals.

In 2021-2022, the Ottawa University community came together through an inclusive, grassroots, participatory process to reflect on how far our institution has come, where we stand now, and what the future holds. Our assessments of OU's strengths and weaknesses were clear-eyed and analytical, and our hopes and dreams for the University's path forward were diverse, heartfelt, and compelling. The plan that has emerged from this process grew from our collective aspirations and from a keen sense of the strategic focus essential to navigating (and flourishing in) the turbulent waters of twenty-first-century American higher education. Guided by our mission and by the Ottawa Spirit, this document details the key priorities and initiatives that we will tackle together over the coming five years.

The strategies outlined here are premised on a series of hard truths regarding Ottawa University and its challenges, identified during the planning process. These facts shaped our thoughts on the future and stimulated discussion, not just of our limitations, but also of the opportunities ahead. While we recognize that Ottawa is not alone among American colleges and universities in facing such constraints, we feel confident that by acknowledging them and seeking to address them directly through our plan, we can chart an ambitious and responsible course forward that furthers our mission, propels our ongoing growth, and supports the long-term sustainability of the University.

- Although an athletics-focused recruiting strategy has fueled the growth of the Ottawa and OUAZ campuses, future enrollment gains on the residential campuses will depend on our ability to attract more non-athletes.
- Ottawa University has used debt wisely to support growth, but our capacity to assume additional institutional debt is very limited.
- As we aspire to keep Ottawa University within the reach of all students, we need to recognize that we cannot achieve improvements in affordability without cost savings, additional



revenues, and significant growth in our endowment that will allow for higher scholarships.

- After a period of rapid institutional growth, including the opening of a new residential campus, the University, its systems, and its people need time to digest the rapid change and address critical functions that have not kept pace with our overall expansion.
- Without sacrificing our agility to respond quickly to change and opportunity, we need to take longer term perspectives as a community and a University. While we must remain acutely sensitive to financial realities, we need to move beyond a mindset of institutional precarity toward a more measured, confident, and sustainable outlook.
- Ottawa University's diversified business model works only if we fully realize the institution's economies of scale and the efficiencies provided by centralized services. While our units serve different markets and different student populations, and have distinctive organizational cultures and characters, we are linked by a common mission and a shared financial and operational structure. In the extraordinarily competitive landscape of American higher education, our campuses and programs do not have the luxury of complete autonomy: our challenge is finding ways of balancing independence and coordination to optimize the efficiency of the University as a whole while still providing our units the flexibility they need to flourish.
- Even as we enthusiastically strive to create new programs that serve our students, further our mission, and strengthen the institution, we need to remain acutely aware of our institutional capacity and should commit to major new initiatives only if we can invest sufficient resources to give them the chance to succeed.
- In the end, what sets Ottawa University apart
 is its people. So in a time of seismic change in
 U.S. labor markets, we need to be focused and
 intentional about how we recruit and retain top
 talent on our staff and faculty.

To set our path as a focused, cohesive, and energized community, this strategic plan presents four key



goals, each with a number of associated objectives, for Ottawa University over the coming five years. Working together, we will advance the academic mission: strengthening and investing in the academic core and the faculty; developing innovative programs, curricula, and structures; and expanding intentionally and strategically, based on our existing strengths, evolving student preferences, and pressing workforce needs. We will elevate the student experience and outcomes: growing opportunities for students and the support services that we offer; improving retention and graduation rates; creating exemplary career services programming; and sharpening our value proposition. We will ensure belonging across the University: listening to, hearing, respecting, and supporting our community; making real our commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion; living and sharing the enlightened faith we profess; and nurturing a more engaged, participatory culture. And we will achieve the promise of one university: embracing unity but not uniformity; defining and telling our collective story more effectively; improving the critical technology, systems, data, and advancement infrastructures upon which we all depend; and seeking new ways to learn from each other, more active means to collaborate together,

and additional opportunities to celebrate our shared successes.

Our goals are intentionally ambitious and will stretch us individually and collectively. The plan identifies metrics for each goal so that progress can be quantified and the University's administration, faculty, and staff can be held accountable. Annual reports on progress toward the goals of this plan, based on these metrics as well as other appropriate quantitative and qualitative data, will be prepared by the Chancellor's Cabinet and presented to the Board of Trustees and our campus communities. Although this plan is explicit in its priorities and strategic focus, it is intended as a flexible roadmap, allowing Ottawa University latitude in responding to ever-changing conditions, challenges, and opportunities in American society and higher education.

Attaining our goals will not, of course, be easy. Existing resources will need to be used even more carefully and new streams of revenue will need to be developed. Fundraising and grant-writing will be become even more critical. Everyone in the Ottawa University family—students and alumni, faculty and staff, trustees and other supporters—will be called upon to work together more intensively than ever

before. We will need commitment and creativity, focus and flexibility, stamina and passion. And we will have to draw upon our historic strengths: our skill at building transformative partnerships, our boldness in innovation, and the tenacity and heart that distinguishes our Ottawa Spirit.

The core values that run through this plan are the very qualities we will need as a community to make its goals and objectives real over the coming years: participation and collaboration; respect and transparency; service, compassion, and enlightened faith; innovation, creativity, and nimbleness; with an unwavering focus on students and their needs. Happily, these are values that run deep in the Ottawa character, so our success will depend not on sweeping cultural change, but simply on being our best selves, on staying true to our beliefs, and on coming together anew to advance Ottawa University and its mission.





ADVANCE THE ACADEMIC MISSION

Ottawa University is understandably proud of its accomplishments in teaching and learning, as well as the breadth of its undergraduate and graduate programs, spanning disciplines and modalities. In a highly competitive environment, we ensure that our academic enterprise is adequately resourced, that our curricula and offerings meet student needs and foster student success, that our faculty is energized and supported, that our academic structures are efficient and transparent, that programmatic growth is intentional and strategic, and that we remain flexible and adaptable in meeting market demands and addressing workforce development imperatives.

STRENGTHEN THE ACADEMIC CORE

- Reform the academic structure and review academic offerings across the institution.
- Review and update the general education curriculum, reflecting our strong roots in the liberal arts and the evolving needs of educated citizens.

INVEST IN ACADEMICS

- Increase investment in instruction and academic support.
- Affirm support for professional development of faculty and staff in teaching, advising, scholarship, and service, including through the establishment of a new faculty-driven Center for Teaching and Learning.

GROW SMART

- Prioritize intensive rather than extensive growth: rather than expanding into new academic areas, invest in the growth of existing programs with strong future demand and demonstrated workforce needs in the regions we serve. Demand areas include nursing and allied health, engineering, psychological sciences and counseling, education, technology and computing, interdisciplinary and cross-campus programs.
- Focus on expanding non-athletic recruitment, exploring programmatic initiatives (including the development of a University Honors Program) and new strategies to leverage financial aid.
- Consider alternative credentials (such as stackable and stand-alone micro-credentialing) and dual degree programs (BA-MA/MS) as a means of serving students and addressing workforce development needs.
- Expand existing partnerships and develop new ones (with corporations, non-profits, government organizations, and other educational institutions) to create opportunities for our students, faculty, and staff and to address workforce development needs.

METRICS

- Proportion of institutional budget dedicated to instruction and academic support.
- Proportion of non-athletes in the undergraduate student bodies at the residential campuses.
- Student enrollment in demand areas.
- Professional development participation among faculty and staff.







ELEVATE THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE AND OUTCOMES

Serving our students is at the very core of Ottawa University's mission and we can never relent in seeking new ways of improving the student experience and better preparing our graduates for life after commencement. To ensure that we remain a university of choice among the many populations we serve, we must sharpen Ottawa University's value proposition by building exemplary career services programming, providing enhanced support services, nurturing more vibrant campuses, boosting our retention and graduation rates, and growing global and engaged learning opportunities.

SUPPORT STUDENT SUCCESS

- Increase retention and graduation rates, conducting data-informed analysis and implementing targeted, cost-effective strategies
- Enhance students' efficient and equitable access to services such as medical, mental, and behavioral health care; wellbeing programs; tutoring, library, and writing support; advising, disability accommodations, and financial aid guidance; and developmental education and academic support programs.
- Address the specific needs of provisionally admitted and at-risk students.
- Pursue major grants to support student learning and success, such as US Department of Education Strengthening Institutions Program (SIP), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI), and TRIO opportunities.















ENHANCE STUDENT OPPORTUNITIES

- Enrich student life (from athletics to the arts and other co-curricular activities), creating more participatory opportunities on campus and beyond. Continue working to realize the full potential of Spirit Life and Personal Growth Days on the residential campuses.
- Increase opportunities for study abroad, build international connections, and seek means of internationalizing the curriculum and student experience.
- Invest in facilities that directly support the student experience (residences, academic and athletic facilities).

FOCUS ON STUDENT OUTCOMES

- Establish best-in-class career services programming, including internships, experiential and service learning, curricular integration, alumni mentoring, partnerships with employers and other community entities.
- Ensure adherence to industry best practices in tracking student outcomes in learning, student success (persistence, retention, completion), exposure to high-impact practices (such as learning communities, capstones, undergraduate research, and communitybased experiences), and career preparation/ placement.
- Better articulate the value proposition for students and demonstrate the return on investment of an Ottawa University education.

METRICS

- Retention and graduation rates.
- Student learning outcomes.
- Student satisfaction.
- Student engagement and exposure to high-impact practices.
- Curricular and cocurricular student learning outcomes relevant to career preparedness.
- Percentage of students with experiences abroad or other substantive international exposure.
- Student outcomes: internships, job and graduate school placement.



ENSURE BELONGING

As America struggles in the early twenty-first century to be a more inclusive and equitable society, Ottawa University—with its historic commitment to serving the underserved—should be a model among educational institutions. We must ensure that all members of our community feel a genuine sense of belonging by respecting, rewarding, and empowering our students, faculty, and staff; enacting our inclusive values in our priorities and practices; and revitalizing our commitment to enlightened faith.

BUILD AN ENGAGED, PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

- Define and improve internal communications and transparency for students, faculty, and staff.
- Empower the University community by sharing information and embracing transparency about the institution, finances, advancement, and the landscape of higher education.
- Provide opportunities for listening to community concerns and seek participatory means of addressing institutional challenges.
- Affirm and clarify the philosophy and practice of shared governance, including student voices.
- Review compensation and performance review systems for effectiveness, equity, and competitiveness, with broad input from stakeholders.



MAKE REAL OUR INCLUSIVE VALUES

- Prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives across the University and work to reduce social and economic barriers to student success. Better highlight and celebrate our successes in diversity and inclusion.
- Review and update our institutional diversity and non-discrimination statements and act upon them more intentionally and effectively.
- Explore and implement means of increasing belonging of our online, adult, and international student populations.
- Take steps to make our residential campuses more attractive choices for female students.
- Pilot innovative means of better serving and including parents/guardians/families of students.

RE-AFFIRM OUR FAITH COMMITMENT

• Actively seek new ways of living our principles of enlightened faith and making real our commitment to being "Steadfastly Christian. Proudly American Baptist. Positively open and inclusive."

METRICS

- Results of regular climate surveys of students, faculty, and staff.
- Student and employee satisfaction.
- Diversity of faculty, staff, and student bodies.
- Longitudinal tracking of DEI initiatives and their outcomes.

ACHIEVE ONE UNIVERSITY

Ottawa University's campuses and programs serve diverse student populations and geographical regions, and have distinctive and strong cultures and characters. But OU will only flourish and realize its full potential if we are greater than the sum of our parts. Toward a common mission and shared goals, we must strive not for an artificial uniformity, but for the benefits that flow from collaboration, coordination, and unity. We must take full advantage of the shared services and economies of scale at the heart of Ottawa's diversified business model. And, building on our heritage, we must focus on partnerships, across the institution and with key organizations beyond it.

COMMIT TO UNITY, NOT UNIFORMITY

- Unify brand, message, and voice across the institution.
- Upgrade the website as the front door of the University and the portal as a key component of internal communications.
- Review and update our institutional statements
 of Guiding Principles, Hallmarks of Distinction,
 Educational Purposes, and Code of Conduct. Develop concise rubrics of institutional values or guiding questions to help guide decision making.
- Build a university-wide problem-solving culture,
 seeking means of celebrating, incentivizing, and rewarding innovation and collaboration. Embrace practices spanning our units, including the creation of "sandbox spaces" (open venues for brainstorming) and the use of "blank-sheet thinking" to spark conversations across campuses and encourage creativity and collaboration in institutional problem solving.





GOALS

AND





REALIZE THE EFFICIENCIES OF UNITY

- Better balance local needs with centralized efficiencies.
- Conduct a comprehensive review of ERP (enterprise resource planning) software and other systems in 2022-2023. Begin necessary migrations in 2023-2024 with the overall goal of simplifying systems, realizing improved functionality, enhancing technology governance, and realizing cost savings.
- Achieve a more data-informed institution by improving the practices of collecting, analyzing, and sharing data.
- Strengthen our advancement infrastructure and build a stronger culture of fundraising and philanthropy spanning our campuses, the Board of Trustees, our alumni, and our respective communities.

BE BETTER TOGETHER

- Leverage the opportunities of a multi-campus, multi-modality, comprehensive university, including the development of intra-university exchanges of students and faculty.
- Implement partnership best practices across the institution

METRICS

- Employee satisfaction.
- Student, faculty, and staff participation in cross-campus and University-wide programs.
- Website and portal usage and user satisfaction.
- Reduction in the number of individual software solutions utilized.
- Advancement effectiveness: new donors, donor retention, alumni giving, average gift size..

CONCLUSION

Today, Ottawa University has much to be proud of, from a thriving historic campus in Kansas with more than a century and a half of history, to vibrant adult, professional, online, and international degree programs, to a rapidly growing new residential campus in a city and a region of unparalleled dynamism, to a mission that is both timely and timeless. Our ambitions are high and so is our potential. At a time of instability in American higher education, we face substantial challenges to be sure, but they are far outweighed by the opportunities ahead.

Realizing the goals of this strategic plan—advancing the academic mission, elevating the student experience and outcomes, ensuring belonging, achieving one university—will require patience and persistence from faculty and staff, consistency and transparency from University leadership, and support and good counsel from students, alumni, and our larger communities. It will also demand meticulous and creative stewardship of the University's existing resources as well as the development of new sources of

revenue to invest in our ongoing growth. Energizing and mobilizing our Board of Trustees, our generous supporters, and all who care about this institution and embrace our mission will be essential to our success. And, not least, striving for such high objectives will take the kind of bold, optimistic audacity that inspired Ottawa University's founders on the Kansas frontier and, more recently, fueled the institution's daring innovations and farsighted ventures.

Perhaps above all, our success depends on our ability to work together to realize our goals collaboratively and collectively, just as we did in the drafting of this plan. Together, and with a shared sense of direction, we can control our destiny in times of great uncertainty, we can sustain the University's enviable upward trajectory, we can build a more resilient, sustainable, empowered institution and community, and we can further our time honored mission of transforming lives and educating students for "personal significance, vocational fulfillment, and service to God and humanity."



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