

Community-Driven Strategic Planning

How Northern Kentucky University Leveraged Student-Centered Design to Build an Inclusive Strategic Planning Process



LOCATED IN THE SUBURBS of northern Kentucky, just minutes away from Cincinnati, Northern Kentucky University (NKU) serves over 15,000 students from across the state and beyond. In 2018, while celebrating its 50-year anniversary and closing out its current 6-year strategic plan, the college welcomed a new president with a bold vision. Feeling a sense of urgency to improve the student experience and increase outcomes, President Ashish Vaidya challenged the college to reframe its thinking about who the institution serves and how they design programs, services, and learning experiences to meet their students where they are.



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“INCREASINGLY, OUR STUDENTS ARE not just leaving high school and coming straight to college; they’re adults with families who are looking to move up in their careers” says Bonita Brown, NKU’s Vice President and Chief Strategy Officer (CSO). “President Vaidya challenged us to reframe our mindsets about who we serve and how we design our services, policies, and practices. When we broaden our focus beyond 18-year-olds and meet students where they are, understanding the complexity of their identities and experiences, we fulfill our promise to both our students and our regional employers and partners.”



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— **BONITA BROWN**
NKU VICE PRESIDENT AND CHIEF STRATEGY OFFICER

President Vaidya’s urgency also shook up the institution’s approach to strategic planning, typically a years-long process in higher education. During a listening tour across the campus and community President Vaidya conducted in his first few months at the helm of NKU, he heard an eagerness for this round of strategic planning to be shorter, more creative, and clearly focused. So, he set about exploring how other institutions and industries approach their strategic planning process.

After some research, President Vaidya settled on Vijay Govindarajan’s Three-Box Solution, contextualized to the culture and environment of NKU and combined with a set of design thinking tools. The three-box solution encourages the users to consider the present, the past, and the future all at once. This approach was shared with the campus community at NKU’s fall 2018 convocation, where he challenged the campus to use these tools to develop a 3-year strategic framework for the institution. The three boxes NKU defined based on the original model were:

BOX 1: THE PRESENT

We must improve on the things we are currently doing in ways that will yield better results for access, completion and career & community engagement.

BOX 2: THE PAST

We must learn from and selectively forget the past processes that hinder access, completion and career & community engagement.

BOX 3: THE FUTURE

We must design new, innovative ways to serve current and future students, ensuring their success with regards to access, completion and career & community engagement.

DEVELOPING THE FRAMEWORK

PRESIDENT VAIDYA DELEGATED THE development of the framework to a team of 12 administrators, faculty, staff, undergraduate and graduate students, and community members. The team was tasked with creating a framework with clear goals for deliverables that would:

- ▶ Create a highly collaborative, transparent process that engages and empowers faculty, staff, students, and the community to action.
- ▶ Foster an environment based on prudent risk-taking and acceptance of failure.
- ▶ Communicate frequently and celebrate successes.
- ▶ Align resources, structures and incentives for strategy execution.

Tools from design thinking were also brought into the development process for the framework. President Vaidya and the team held over 2,000 face-to-face engagements,

Goals for the Deliverables of the Framework

1. Engage with the campus and external community.
2. Gather qualitative and quantitative data for guidance.
3. Identify what NKU will do to support Access, Completion, and Career and Community Engagement based on gathered data.
4. Design and deliver a simple, well-defined university framework with student success goals and objectives focused on Access, Completion, and Career and Community Engagement.

including forums, ‘talkshops’ (large forums where participants are facilitated through table conversations on critical topics designed to center real-world experiences and inclusive participation), and pop-up events in heavy-traffic areas of the campus, and a regular event called Whiteboard Wednesdays open to all. To gather input from students less likely to attend such events, the Core Team walked around the campus plaza with pizzas, took their questions into classrooms, leveraged social media, and put up whiteboards in high traffic location for students to provide feedback. The team also talked to alumni associations, local P-12 schools, community college partners, regional businesses, and local non-profits. The goal was to ensure everyone had a voice in the process.

In the face-to-face engagements, participants would discuss barriers, opportunities, and outcomes associated with a college education for different student populations. Faculty and staff were shown

student input to ground their understanding of the reality of their students’ lives. They would then brainstorm the kinds of services and policies that could empower that student to be successful. The team used a range of design tools to help facilitate these activities and keep their students front and center, including:

- ▶ persona building activities,
- ▶ frame storming events (a systemic approach to brainstorming that encourages participants to reinterpret challenges and challenge their own mindsets), and
- ▶ ideas generation activities, such as ‘how might we...’ ... and ‘what is missing...’ question-framing techniques.

According to Doug Hume, department chair for sociology, anthropology, and philosophy and member of the core team, the personas “allowed faculty to get away from thinking about themselves and what they want. It also got students to think about what other students at the university needed. If they haven’t experienced the barriers personally, they all had a friend or student who had encountered these things.”

These data were added to the multiple efforts taking place across campus to collect and analyze open-ended qualitative data from across the campus community. These efforts included multiple campus surveys, open questions posted to the president’s web page, and notes from the talks. Hume also led his applied anthropology class in developing and implementing a research plan to gather student input on the barriers they face in completing their studies. Together, they designed an online survey and received more than 600 responses in less than a





month. Their findings showed the severity and frequency of different barriers and became one of the key sources of community input for the strategic plan.

All this qualitative data was coded, analyzed, and examined through the three pillars. This effort took place over a surprisingly short timeline given the amount of data collected. Within two months the teams had collected and analyzed the data that provided a foundation for identifying the needs that Success By Design would need to address.

The Strategic Framework Core Team were assisted in this effort by the development of six resource teams comprised of 70 additional NKU faculty, staff, students, and community leaders. The six teams each focused on one aspect of the work:

1. Best Practices
2. Consulting and Strategic Planning Expertise
3. Data and Metrics
4. Institutional Alignment
5. Market Forces
6. Scholarly Work

These teams conducted environmental scans by gathering data and research on their area and presented analyses of their findings in reports presented to the Core Team. These reports and provided context for the development of the framework, ensuring it was both data-informed and student-centered throughout.

“I’m reminded of the axiom, if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together. But what if we wanted to do both? The old process of 12 people sitting in a room, slowly crafting a plan for everyone else, was not going to serve all our students”, says CSO Brown.

NKU'S SUCCESS BY DESIGN FRAMEWORK

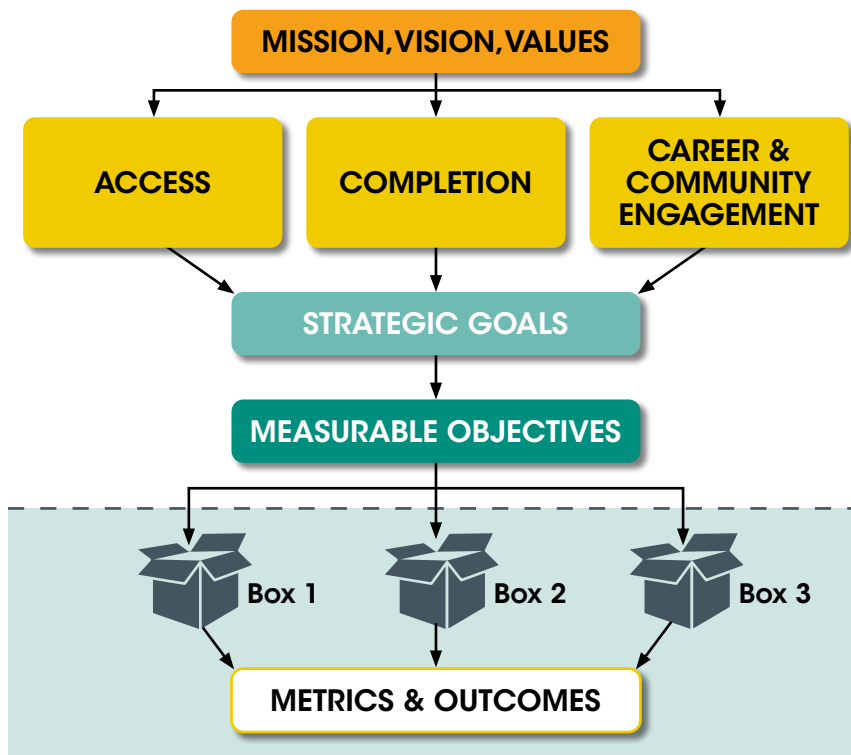
AFTER 8 MONTHS OF work and focusing on becoming a “student ready” institution, the team’s 3-year strategic framework, known as the “Success by Design” Framework, was approved by NKU’s board of regents. Grounded in NKU’s mission, vision, and values, the strategic framework identifies three pillars: Access; Completion; and Career and community engagement. Each of the pillars are defined by goals and objectives (outlined in Appendix B) which informed

the development of the institution’s strategic goals and objectives which, in turn, guided the projects that ended up in each of the three boxes (present, past, and future).

Managing the present (box #1) was the core of NKU’s framework, representing the majority of focus for resources, to ensure student success was advanced daily across the institution. Box #2 (managing the past) was framed as way for NKU to ensure the alignment of past/existing practices and services with what would be needed to serve future students. This demanded the institution democratize data on who their students are and how they experience the institutions policies and practices so those

that impeded the success of students could be identified and redesigned. Box #3 (managing the future) heavily leaned on tenets of design thinking in addition to these student data. It required a culture and leadership that facilitated calculated risk-taking, treated failure as a learning opportunity, and an openness to change in every corner of the institution. Initiatives that worked would eventually become the present, or the current situation, and be moved into Box 1.

This is where CSO Brown was brought in. President Vaidya knew that for this to work, he needed to hire someone who could facilitate this campus-wide focus on implementation, which is where most higher education institutions struggle in their strategic planning process. The position of Vice President and Chief Strategy Officer, an unusual position for higher education, was created with the authority the person would need to lead the implementation process and hold the institution accountable for what it promised in its strategic framework.



FROM FRAMEWORK TO ACTION

THE AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT generated through the strategic framework development process can all be bucketed in at least one of these pillars. The success of this initial input campaign resulted in approximately 50 ideas for improving student success and equity. Knowing this was too many for the institution to tackle

in one three-year strategic plan, Dr. Brown and her team went on a roadshow across campus to get the community to rank their top areas for improvement. In all, 15 groups of faculty, staff, and students were brought in and identified 12 areas they wanted the institution to prioritize in the next three years.

Still, getting started with implementation successfully required the team to narrow down the number of ideas so focus was not split across too many efforts. CSO Brown pulled together a small, representative think tank, which identified the five priority ideas that have come to be known as the ‘First Five Initiatives’. CSO Brown emphasizes the word “first” as critical. Given all the time, passion, and expertise invested in the development of the initial ideas, it’s critical to maintaining support for the work that everyone knows this is just phase one and that more ideas will be addressed in future rounds of the work.

Five large, cross-functional implementation teams were created and tasked with identifying 6 projects, two for each of the 3 boxes, that would move the institution closer to the goal for their assigned initiative. This list of 30 projects was then organized into waves of projects, to ensure the work was manageable and didn’t split focus or resources in too many directions at one time. President Vaidya set aside \$2 million in non-recurring funds to support Success By Design. The first wave of projects was selected based on the potential impact they could have on the student experience and were to be funded with \$1.5 million of the \$2 million pot.

THE FIRST FIVE INITIATIVES

ACCESS

- ▶ NKU will examine and re-envision its use of institutional aid dollars, non-tuition fees, and expenses, to support our enrollment and persistence goals and improve affordability.
- ▶ NKU will strengthen and expand critical PK-14 (high school and transfer) pipelines to NKU with special emphasis on regional schools.

COMPLETION

- ▶ NKU will provide coordinated and intentional support for all students through collaborations between key student service areas, enhancing current programming and services, and maximizing the use of EAB Navigate and other technology tools. (Phase 1 – first year freshmen and transfer students)
- ▶ NKU will ensure that the curriculum and degree pathways are aligned with national best practices and regional workforce needs, inclusive of co-curricular and experiential experiences and other High Impact Practices.

CAREER AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- ▶ NKU will catalyze a prosperous, equitable, and inclusive regional ecosystem through economic development and entrepreneurship, with an emphasis on talent development, research and innovation in technology, health and logistics.

UNLEASHING INNOVATION ACROSS CAMPUS: 2020 NKU INNOVATION CHALLENGE

President Vaidya, CSO Brown, and the team knew from their engagement efforts to-date that there was a lot of energy and bold ideas coming from all across their institution. The next phase of their approach was designed to root out the most promising ideas by empowering everyone in their campus community to generate and share their ideas for reaching their strategic objectives. So, in Fall 2019 the 2020 NKU Innovations Challenge was launched. NKU leadership had set aside \$500,000, again funded from past year budget savings, to fund innovative grassroots ideas. The successful ideas would be tied to the strategic framework and be launched by those proposing the successful ideas. Projects not selected for funding were shared with the relevant implementation team as a potential future project.

All NKU faculty and staff, often in collaboration with students and community partners, were invited to submit a 2-3 page application for funding for a project that aligns to at least one of the Success by Design pillars (access, completion, or career and community engagement). Applicants could apply for a one-time funding in any increment from \$5,000 to \$100,000 to launch their project, with the potential for future funding if the project proved successful. Faculty and staff were encouraged to include students in the development and delivery of their pitches, which many did.

Submissions were due in December 2019. The leadership team were pleasantly surprised when they received over 130 applications totaling 4.5 million dollars in new requests from across the campus community. From this pool of applications, finalists were invited to present their project to the campus community in January 2020 during NKU's inaugural Student success Summit. To judge the finalists, NKU called on their Summit speakers, experts in higher education and student success, and two senior students. There was also a "fan favorite project" to be selected through voting by the campus community.

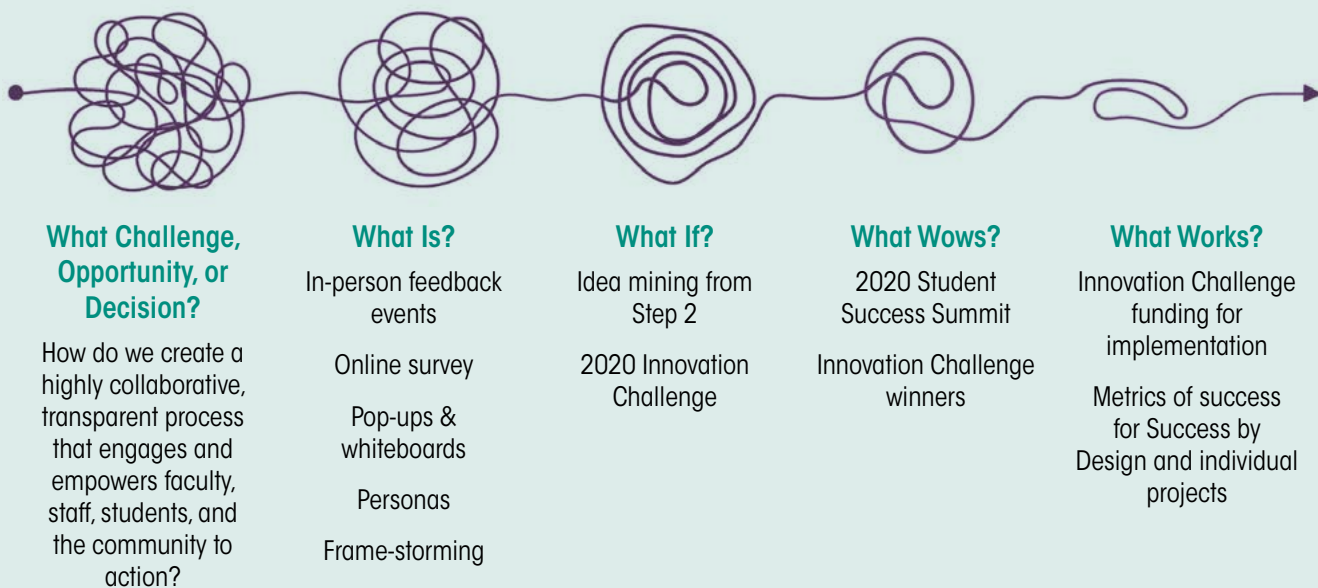
"The energy at the Summit was phenomenal", says Dr. Brown. "Teams had made t-shirts and invited colleagues in their department to come and cheer them on." The approach was so novel that local media showed up to report on the event.

Ultimately, the Student Government Association announced the winners by live video. The top 10 projects, which included the fan favorite winner, were fully funded, with funding ranging from \$5,000 to \$90,000 per project. An additional 5 projects were partially funded. Winning projects address a range of barriers to student success and equity across the student experience, including¹:

¹ Source: <https://www.nku.edu/successbydesign/events/innovation-challenge.html>

- ▶ A partnership with local high schools to train and credential high school faculty to teach dual-credit courses in high demand courses.
- ▶ Increasing support for students over the summer to help them prepare for college and develop a sense of belonging before they set foot on campus.
- ▶ A second-year retention program for Black students that offers career workshops and networking opportunities.
- ▶ Building a high-tech Student Innovation Lab designed to foster creativity, build community, and provide a space for cross-college collaboration on projects.
- ▶ Increase access to a market-relevant postsecondary certificate to currently incarcerated individuals in a local female prison.
- ▶ Building students’ financial literacy.
- ▶ Developing spaces (or “plots”) to recognize, celebrate, and educate on the historic and current contributions of African American Fraternities and Sororities.
- ▶ Establish a travelling planetarium program, complete with equipment, to serve schools across the region that are unable to offer high-quality learning experiences for students.
- ▶ Assessing the mental health needs and service usage of NKU students.
- ▶ Building belongingness through peer mentors in STEM.

NKU’s Success by Design Approach Mapped to the Student-Centered Design Process



NEXT STEPS IN IMPLEMENTATION AMID A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

NKU leadership credits its Success by Design Framework with encouraging innovations focused on meeting students where they are and becoming a more “student-ready” institution. The inclusion of students as experts in the problem identification and idea generation phases (a critical component of good design according to The Creative Reaction Lab) shared power with those individuals most likely to be impacted by the decisions being made, something not common to the traditional higher education strategic planning process. Additionally, the use of design tools and shared data throughout ensured everyone involved was

grounded in the reality of students’ lives and their obstacles to success.

Dr. Brown acknowledges that culture and leadership style are critical to the success of a strategic planning approach like this. “Our nimbleness allows us to fail fast and iterate quickly. We had to be open to taking risks on projects that hold promise but might fail and ensure that our culture gives people the confidence to take those risks.”

This nimbleness and calculated risk-taking style has served them well as the implementation phase began in earnest. Like every other institution of higher education in 2020, NKU has been grappling with how to move their strategic objectives forward while simultaneously dealing with the daily work and challenges posed by an ever-evolving pandemic and growing racial tensions. “Everything stopped when the COVID-19 outbreak began”, says Dr. Brown. “We spent most of the Spring semester trying to stay on top of the rapid shift to virtual learning and virtual service delivery. We’re now trying to resurface and figure out how to move the many projects forward within the reality of Fall 2020.”

However, Dr. Brown also notes that the inclusive approach to developing the strategic plan has served them well as they faced the urgency and uncertainty of 2020. “Everyone knows the three pillars and has

seen how open our leadership is to take calculated risks for our students,” Dr. Brown reflects. “Even faculty who were skeptical of this approach in the beginning





have seen our dedication to empowering them to do what's best for our students. Because of this, the shifts we all had to make individually and as an institution were made easier.”

While the path forward remains somewhat uncertain, the dedication to moving forward with implementation of the strategic framework and its composite projects is unwavering. The Core Team, now named the Strategic Advisory Group, is moving ahead in collaboration with the institutional research office, which reports to Dr. Brown, in developing a set of metrics to track the implementation and impact of the work. Once developed, these metrics will again be shared proactively with the campus community to gather feedback from those working to implement the work on the ground. Guiding their thinking is the need for two levels of metrics to track performance on Success by Design:

- 1. Broad Institutional Metrics:** Shows advancement of institutional performance (e.g., retention, degrees conferred, enrollment populations, etc.).
- 2. Individual Project Metrics:** Shows performance of each initiative launched during the implementation phase.

The institutional research department, along with the Strategic Advisory Group, will monitor institutional performance and if the metrics aren't moving, then they will look to the individual projects to see if they are advancing the metrics based on their performance, keeping the scale and scope of each project in mind.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the first phase of Success by Design, NKU leadership found that their approach had shown the campus community that they could collaborate and innovate across departments, roles, and with student and community partners as equals. It also spurred an evolution of campus culture to not only welcome but normalize and incentivize calculated risk-taking that centers the reality and complexity of the lives of their students. Dr. Brown is confident this will serve the institution well as the pandemic evolves, student needs change in the short- and long-term, and other regional and national crises occur.

NKU Lessons on an Inclusive, Student-Centered Strategic Planning Process

- ▶ Managing an inclusive approach like NKU's is time-consuming and involves multiple moving parts. This was a lesson learned as the process played out, which led to the development of the CSO position. Since then, NKU has found that having one senior leader responsible for moving it forward and providing that leader with adequate space, time, and resources to implement the process with fidelity and in a timely manner.
- ▶ Share power with the stakeholders being brought into the problem identification and idea generation.
- ▶ Ensure all stakeholders have easy access to as much data on the students you serve as possible.
- ▶ Communicate often with all stakeholders to ensure that momentum is maintained and to celebrate successes and identify next steps.
- ▶ Senior leadership should hold their community accountable for sharing their ideas and moving those selected forwards while constantly listening and adapting based on their feedback. However, they should be careful not to talk down to or micro-manage those they are hoping to empower.
- ▶ Include some of those skeptical of the process in the leadership team to continue to challenge the team to avoid groupthink.

APPENDIX A: NKU KEY STATS

Institutional Overview	<p>Four-year public university</p> <p>Founded in 1968</p> <p>Faculty & Staff: ~2,000</p> <p>Enrollment: 15,687</p>
Student Demographics- Gender	<p>Female: 62%</p> <p>Male: 38%</p>
Student Demographics- Race/Ethnicity	<p>White: 81%</p> <p>African American: 7%</p> <p>Hispanic or Latino: 3%</p> <p>Two or More Races: 3%</p> <p>Asian: 2%</p> <p>Nonresident Alien: 2%</p> <p>American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander: 0.2%</p>
Student Enrollment Status	<p>Full-Time: 60%</p> <p>In-State: 69%</p>
Student Outcomes	<p>Fall-to-Fall Retention: 72%</p> <p>150% Graduation Rate: 48%</p>

Sources:

<https://www.nku.edu/about/at-a-glance.html>

<https://inside.nku.edu/ir/StudentData.html>

APPENDIX B: GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE THREE PILLARS

Access

Goal

NKU will expand programs, services, and delivery options to increase access and become a preferred destination for learners across the Commonwealth of Kentucky, the nation, and the world.

Broad Objectives

- ▶ Reduce barriers and simplify processes so diverse learners can successfully apply, be admitted, and enrolled for NKU educational opportunities.
- ▶ Implement innovations to improve affordability of an NKU education.
- ▶ Expand outreach and partnerships with P-12 schools, community colleges, non-profits, and business and industry to increase educational opportunities that serve the needs of both students and the community.
- ▶ Increase the number of first-generation, post-traditional, international, and underrepresented students at NKU, particularly in fields where their underrepresentation is most significant.
- ▶ Design a welcoming and desirable NKU experience to create a sense of belonging for all students.

Completion

Goal

NKU will align the institution so more learners—particularly first-generation, post-traditional, low-income, and underrepresented individuals—earn highly-valued degrees, certificates and credentials.

Broad Objectives

- ▶ Enhance the culture of service-orientation that respects the realities of our students' lives and provides consistent, responsive care and support across all areas with special emphasis on wellness, advising, financial aid, and career preparation.
- ▶ Increase flexible, experiential and modular learning pathways that allow students to earn credentials along the way to their degree, and implement components of competency-based education in majors where possible.

- ▶ Implement innovative instructional and curricular approaches to reduce time-to-degree.
- ▶ Significantly improve retention, persistence and graduation rates with special emphasis on closing the achievement gap through meaningful use of predictive analytics and technology-based student success tools.
- ▶ Align the institution's policies, procedures, resources, rewards and incentives to encourage scholarship, creativity, collaboration, and innovations that advance student success

Career & Community Engagement

Goal

NKU will increase its contributions to the economic, social, and civic prosperity of the region through talent development, research and innovation, and the stewardship of place.

Broad Objectives

- ▶ Build experiential and co-curricular learning into all majors at NKU to enhance our students' career readiness and lifelong learning.
- ▶ Ensure that creativity, global awareness, cultural competence, and literacy in technology and data are hallmarks of NKU's undergraduate education.
- ▶ Expand public-private partnerships to accelerate innovation and entrepreneurship across the university.
- ▶ Strengthen engagement among alumni, business, and other external organizations with NKU students, faculty, and staff.
- ▶ Improve post-graduation outcomes to enhance graduates' economic and social mobility.

Source:

https://www.nku.edu/content/dam/nkuhome/docs/SbD-Prso-4_8_19-BOR.pdf



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- Envision the ideal student experience
- Plan how to engage stakeholders in making the case for change
- Prioritize the barriers to student success
- Provide insights and transformational strategies to improve equity
- Share evidence-based strategies for change
- Track implementation progress and impact of change initiatives

