Texas A&M University-San Antonio’s (A&M-SA) academic excellence, status, and reputation have increased greatly as the university has implemented its 2016 strategic plan. As we now work toward the Strategic Vision for 2040, this document provides clarity about the academic progress needed to become an influential and productive public research university. This academic blueprint outlines shared principles that will position us as a thriving Hispanic Serving Institution with a demonstrated commitment to continually improving both the innovative education we provide our students and the world-class research that benefits the region, the nation, and the world.

Our focus on increasing academic excellence, on hiring the best and most creative faculty, and on encouraging path breaking research must continue to underpin all activities. Similarly, our core values must always guide our actions. At the same time, we acknowledge the fact that conditions in the world are changing ever more rapidly. Thus, strategies that are more flexible must be developed to enable A&M-SA to accelerate its progress under evolving external circumstances. Like all universities, A&M-SA actively shapes its own future—and, as well, is shaped by external conditions over which the university has little or no control.

The external environment for higher education is quickly changing in significant ways. We anticipate intensified competition among higher-education providers worldwide; increasing demands for greater regulation and accountability; and extensive realignments in federal support for the research enterprise. After some decades of relative stability, national science policies are shifting toward a greater emphasis on research that directly addresses practical issues in the country’s interest. No one can foresee how these trends will unfold in the coming years. Further, circumstances outside higher education, such as changing societal and global conditions and unexpected economic and technological developments—not to mention unforeseeable disruptions like that posed by the public health crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic—may undermine the long-term feasibility of specific strategies that make sense today.

We identify here capabilities that, as we continue to build our university, will give us the capacity, expertise, and flexibility to adapt to change while proactively setting and working to achieve our Strategic Vision for 2040. Ultimately, developing such capabilities will enable A&M-SA to better secure its place among the world’s great public universities.

A PATHWAY TO ACHIEVE ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

1. We will engage in innovative research, scholarship, and partnerships that influence health and welfare, educational equity, environmental sustainability, and economic development within the region, nation, and world.

2. We will create a significant national presence that will increase the international visibility, reach, and impact of our research, scholarship, art, education, and service.

3. We will develop nationally recognized academic programs by understanding and serving the needs of a diverse student body, preparing them for high achievement, from undergraduate education through continuing professional development. This commitment will guide our choices regarding pedagogy, instructional technology, curriculum, and academic support services.
GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Informing and underlying each of these areas of activity is a set of six guiding principles, outlined below.

1. PLACE MATTERS

A Geography to Create Opportunity

Increasingly, research suggests that where students live impacts their likelihood of attending a university or college. Today’s students are increasingly place-bound, working full time, and are balancing a number of other responsibilities while taking classes. A&M-SA is a steward of its neighborhood geography, demographics and community assets. Initially founded to serve an area described as a higher education “desert,” A&M-SA takes seriously its obligation to preserve access for underserved student populations by actively partnering in the community to enhance college readiness and create and enhance academic pathways.

Although we achieved the official designation in 2017, being situated in a large, vibrant and predominately Hispanic community made A&M-SA a Hispanic-serving institution from inception. As a young university with an identity and culture that is bound up with our Hispanic-serving nature, we’ve had—and continue to have—the opportunity to deliberately pursue social justice while building equity-minded best practices for supporting minority-student success into our very foundations—practices that we know benefit students of all backgrounds.

2. RESEARCH MATTERS

The Importance of the Public Research University and Translational Research

America’s research universities are essential public goods that strengthen our economy, our security, our democracy, and our quality of life. Their value can be measured in ideas that yield new products or cures for disease; jobs and new businesses in their communities; new approaches to difficult social problems; new expressions or interpretations of culture; new and invigorating creative output in the arts; and the development in students and communities of the capacity and moral commitment to help others. The value of a research university can be measured in graduates who contribute to the well-being and productivity of society and to the framework of freedom that we cherish.

We are committed to producing meaningful, applicable results that directly benefit our community through a focus on translational research, the goal of which is to move basic discoveries more quickly and efficiently into practice. As we move deeper into the twenty-first century, society will increasingly value universities that are actively engaged in addressing issues of practical societal importance. The research we pursue and the students we graduate will be judged on the basis of such contributions. We already see this happening with respect to trends in extramural funding, higher-education policy, and student achievement.

3. EQUITY MATTERS:

Ensuring Opportunity for All

Providing an equitable learning environment means creating opportunities for all students to have equal access to and participation in educational programs, and supporting them in the achievement of outcomes that are not disparate across race, ethnicity, gender, class, age, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, country of origin, or other characteristics.

An equity-minded approach ensures that each student has an opportunity to succeed. It creates an environment that empowers students to advocate for themselves. It gives students the opportunity to learn leadership skills to become transformative leaders in their families, professional environments, and the larger community. It strengthens ties between A&M-SA and the communities we serve and enhances our unique standing among state and national universities.
4. REPUTATION MATTERS:

Expanding Our Global Presence

Truly great universities have international visibility and reach. In our continued pursuit of excellence, A&M–SA will continue to grow its presence to create global visibility and brand recognition. The history of A&M–SA and the region we serve are closely linked, and both evolve together. San Antonio and South Texas increasingly form the economic, political, and cultural capital of the region. We recognize the deeply international character of our region in order to continue to meet the changing needs of our country.

5. STUDENTS MATTER:

Promoting Student-Centered Practices and Learner-Centered Education

As a public institution, oriented to service, it is critical that we give primacy to the needs of our students and contemporary forms of teaching such as hybrid, virtual, and on-line. This means thinking strategically about who our students are, their backgrounds, how their needs may change in the future, and how best to engage them in learning and research. Because students learn in different ways and bring different goals and aspirations to the university, this approach translates into greater flexibility and responsiveness in the way we structure and deliver education, academic support, and student services. We must inspire students to learn and aspire to advanced degrees that enrich their livelihood and economic mobility.

Technology has made information broadly accessible, and knowledge accumulates so quickly that information rapidly becomes outdated. Thus, universities need a new approach to teaching that moves beyond transmitting information and integrates flexibility. Faculty must continue to play a role in helping students overcome digital inequity and learn to locate, assess, apply, and create information. As learners’ educational goals and needs continue to change, we must continually evaluate our assumptions about whom we teach and where and how our educational programs are delivered.

6. VALUES MATTER:

Maintaining Our Identity, Adhering to Our Principles

It is important to ensure that the evolution of the university remains grounded in A&M–SA’s core values. Importantly, we create opportunities for a diverse student body by embracing the demographics of our region and the military-connected community. We are inclusive of all learners and welcome students where they are—socially, economically, and academically. We prepare traditional and nontraditional students with marketable skills and undergraduate research experiences that contribute to a meaningful life and a fulfilling career. And we value interdisciplinary approaches, partnerships, and research opportunities that respond to needs across public and private industries, the military community, school districts, other colleges and universities, and the Texas A&M University System.

DEVELOPING STRATEGIC CAPABILITIES FOR ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

Achieving the 2040 Strategic Vision will require sustained focus over the long term. To facilitate such evolution, A&M–SA will focus on developing four strategic capabilities described below. Although the process of fostering enduring change will extend well into the future, we can begin the process immediately by launching a number of initiatives to lay the groundwork for developing capacity in each of these areas. Our administrators and faculty leaders will serve as champions of particular initiatives and will work closely with faculty, students, and staff in design, implementation, and assessment.

1. Establishing Multidisciplinary Approaches to Problems of Societal Significance

A&M–SA realizes that societal problems rarely fall within the domain of a single discipline and that collaboration, which brings together different perspectives and skills, is one of the best means of addressing complex problems. Existing disciplinary boundaries can impede effective collaboration, so we must work to create mechanisms that remove such structural disincentives to collective efforts on problems of major significance to our region and our state. We’ve made significant strides in building this capability as a result of our original strategic plan, but we must continue to move forward more aggressively.
2. Linking Fundamental to Applied Research

In developing A&M-SA as the university with the greatest societal impact and presence, we recognize the longstanding divisions between fundamental versus practical/applied research and scholarship, and we will continue to build closer relationships between the core disciplines in the arts and sciences and those in our professional schools. Only in this way can we create and retain a critical role as a contributor of truly fundamental research in our society, while at the same time responding to society’s complex and evolving needs.

This does not mean that an individual must be engaged in both the fundamental and applied aspects of research. Rather, we must stimulate dialogue and understanding among researchers across the spectrum. As we build this capacity, we will face challenging questions about the domains and boundaries of disciplines, the relations among disciplines, the academic organization of the university, and the goals and structure of our educational and research programs. We face these challenges undaunted; the long-standing dichotomy between basic and applied research is less rigid at A&M-SA. We’ve learned that applications suggest directions for fundamental research and that the results of fundamental research lead to new applications.

3. Building Networks and Partnerships to Harness the Power of Collective Impact

Because we cannot encompass all the skills and knowledge required to address major societal needs and questions, many of which have global implications, we will develop new partnerships and joint ventures with various kinds of entities. These may include other universities; nonprofits such as libraries, museums, think tanks, and nongovernmental organizations; and businesses and corporations.

Whether these partnerships are with organizations across the street or across the globe, they should significantly enhance collective impact that benefits the university by (1) enhancing research and scholarship that provide skills, viewpoints, and resources not presently available at A&M-SA; (2) advancing the arts by providing new audiences, venues, collaborations, and inspiration; (3) enabling us to provide new educational opportunities without creating expensive infrastructure; and (4) supporting our local school districts. As with any effective partnership, these initiatives must also prove beneficial to our collaborators.

Given that societal problems do not stop at our nation’s borders, we will need to enter into international networks, engage in international projects, and assist our faculty in gaining access to foreign researchers, governments, and businesses. Our relationships with policymakers are also becoming increasingly important, and we need to expand our efforts to build capacity in this area. Our ability to impact society requires strong ties to multinational, national, state, and local policymakers. A&M-SA has a history of strong and fruitful relations with the city of San Antonio the county, and state legislators. As we move forward, it is critical that we work systematically across the academic community and seek to build alliances at all levels of government.

4. Increasing Responsiveness to Learners

To become learner-centered, A&M-SA must continue to develop three related capabilities: (1) revise educational structures and methods to better fulfill student needs and career readiness; (2) harness technology for more responsiveness and flexibility in education; and (3) offer learning opportunities beyond graduation.

Creating more student-oriented methods means aligning our efforts with what students most need to learn and how they can best access that learning, neither of which is static. Traditional lecture courses will be complemented by a variety of more flexible and interactive approaches to learning. We may need to develop alternatives to the fifteen-week semester, to various course requirements, and even to entirely classroom-based learning. Increasing responsiveness to learners will require creating a culture that values teaching as well as research.

Some educators today perceive a learning-centered approach to higher education as incompatible with a research emphasis. We disagree. It will be important to create the incentives, skills, support, and rewards for our faculty that will change these perceptions over time.

New technologies will continue to expand the learning opportunities available to students and enable more flexibility as they choose the modality, time, and place of their learning. Technology also allows support services to become more integrated and responsive. By prioritizing learner responsiveness in our approach
to academic technology, we have the potential to contribute meaningfully to the evolution of technology-assisted learning.

Finally, increased responsiveness to learners means providing more education to adults at various stages of their development, from early career through retirement. In this way, A&M-SA will serve a broader base of students, including working professionals seeking continuing education and professional development, retirees, and others interested in lifelong learning.

CONCLUSION

To achieve the Strategic Vision for 2040 requires integrated planning as well as institutional commitment and the concentrated, orchestrated effort of multiple individuals working in concert over time. This must be manifest at the institutional level. As an institution, A&M-SA relies on leadership that consciously builds the commitment, culture, and capability necessary for integrated planning. A&M-SA, like any organization, is only as strong as its weakest link. We must strive for the continuous development of the perspectives and skills of the campus professionals—who will work individually and together—to elevate the university to these heights.