

Newspaper column
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Dr. John Jasinski, Northwest Missouri State University president

As we wind down the spring semester at Northwest Missouri State University, we are updating goals and actions focused on people excellence, our academic plan, digital excellence, well-being and our inclusive excellence work. Our strategic plan, "Adventure 2030," is set in three-year increments and tweaked annually. Strategy drives budget decisions, actions and all we do.

Our mission statement guides the strategic planning process and delineation of our four strategic themes: learners, enrollment and completion, people, and operations. One of the key steps in our ongoing planning process is continual environmental scanning, which allows Northwest to understand the rapidly-changing environment and share, consider and act.

Over the years, we have adopted an "Everyone's a Recruiter" (and retainer!) model and have realized headcount increases for four consecutive years while achieving six consecutive years of billable student-credit-hour increases. We have broken all-time enrollment records the last two fall semesters, recorded strong retention and persistence rates, are at the 90th percentile of graduation rates and are beginning to close equity gaps. We are the only public institution in the state with enrollment growth during the last five years. We remain proud to have been named by Zippia, a career website, as the best college in Missouri for getting a job.

Enrollment management is complex and fierce, but as fall 2022 approaches, Northwest's enrollment projections show another record number of students with housing and transfer commitments ahead of last year's pace as well. Northwest will continue seeking to grow in ways that are strategic, realistic and practical – through a balanced approach.

We saw demographic changes coming years ago as part of our strategic planning process. We know the traditional college-going population is shrinking, while the share of Hispanic students increases. Missouri is expecting up to a 9 percent decline in students attending regional four-year colleges and universities by 2029.

We were well ahead of our peers in focusing on retention and completion – and our recently-completed work with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation on student success and achievement gaps is part of overall improvements. We have dabbled in competency-based education and prior learning assessment efforts, offered new certificate programs and partnered with area and regional employers to help drive programming.

Further, we revved up our institutional focus in online programming. In fact, our strategic planning constructs in 2015 and 2016 led us to partnering with Academic Partnerships. This revenue-sharing partnership has yielded significant enrollment increases, and improving our high retention rates have aided our overall enrollment.

To solidify the enrollment picture, we can also look at student satisfaction. Results collected from the fall 2021 semester distribution of the Ruffalo Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction

Survey to Northwest freshmen and juniors shows their satisfaction with Northwest remains extraordinarily high – especially in comparison to regional and national peers. In fact, on all scales and all but two questions, Northwest achieved higher student satisfaction rates than national and regional peer comparison groups for both freshmen and juniors. Further, 80 percent of all Northwest students report they would repeat their Northwest experience, compared to 78 percent of students at regional peers and 76 percent of students surveyed nationally at their respective institutions.

Bottom line, friends, the college campus, enrollment patterns, programming and services of, say, the 1970s and 1980s, is nothing like the 2020s and what is coming in the 2030s. We must not dream of years gone by but rather continue addressing obstacles, opportunities and pathways ahead.

Over time, Northwest has consistently realized what I call “gap separation” from many of our peers. Our beloved institution should continue being strategic and not be afraid of strategic messiness and complexity. Doing so will continue to give us our best opportunity to protect the gap separation we have created.

I thank our communities throughout the region, which do so much behind the scenes every day to ensure Northwest students – whether they’re competing on the court or preparing for a professional field of an entirely different sort – are successful.

On May 6-7, we celebrate our graduates during spring commencement ceremonies and look forward to welcoming so many families to our campus and community and the economic impacts that special weekend provides. We have much to celebrate and reflect upon at Northwest and will continue to do so as we conclude the spring semester.

Dr. John Jasinski is the 10th president of Northwest Missouri State University. For news and events at Northwest, visit www.nwmissouri.edu.