Academic Task Force Report: ETSU 125 Chapter II

EAST TENNESSEE UNIVERSITY

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Task Force Membership

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Overview

The Academic Task Force for the Committee for 125 Chapter II received the following charge:

Consider and recommend new and innovative ways of fulfilling our academic mission. Explore emerging issues impacting the future of the higher education landscape, embracing any ideas or opportunities regarding course delivery, short-term academic experiences, the academic calendar, and consider linkages to workforce training and development.

The Task Force was further given six questions to guide its thinking:
1. What if…? Imagine a future for the university related to your topic that is not just a revision of the current reality but attempts to alter reality and create something new.
2. What key objectives will best ensure that we fulfill our mission?
    a. 1-3 Years?
    b. 5 Years?
    c. 10 Years?
3. What are our key audiences and how are their needs and aspirations changing?
4. How is the environment evolving and what does that mean for our competitive advantage?
5. Who are our competitors – both traditional and non-traditional – and in what ways are they competing differently? How might we respond?
6. What do we not do or consider not doing? What are the boundaries of our efforts? What criteria Is used to demarcate what is inside and outside those boundaries?

Through weekly Zoom meetings during the late Spring and early Summer of 2021, the Task Force undertook its work with seriousness and excitement to imagine the academic enterprise of East Tennessee State University over the next decade.

Evolving Landscape

It is not lost on anyone who follows *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, or other publications that higher education is changing dramatically. This change was notable prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but the pandemic seems to have accelerated change. Arguably the most pressing change is the looming "demographic cliff" (Higher Education Magazine, 2019). The 2008 recession resulted in a sharp decline in birth rates in the US and around the world; children born (or not) in 2008 would be the incoming college class of 2025-2026. Even as the economy improved, the birth rate did not, which means that college enrollment will feel the impact of this declining birth rate through 2035. Predictive modeling suggests that college enrollment will decline by 15% beginning in 2025, continue through 2029, and then level to a continued decline of 1-2% annually (Barshay, 2018). This modeling also suggests that the loss will not be evenly distributed across institutions: Elite institutions will likely continue to be in

demand, but regional 4-year institutions are the ones to likely "to lose more than 11 percent of their students, from 1.43 million in 2012 to 1.27 million in 2029" (Barshay, 2018).

The demographic cliff had to factor into the Task Force's thinking about the future of ETSU. With fewer students of traditional high school age matriculating into college, the marketplace of higher education will become competitive in what will be a basic supply and demand problem: There will be too much supply and not enough demand of traditionally aged college students.

Competition

Who is ETSU's competition? Our competition will continue to be other in-state and regional (within 200 miles) public institutions such as Middle Tennessee State University, University of Tennessee Knoxville, University of Tennessee Chattanooga, Radford University, Appalachian State University, University of North Carolina Asheville, Western Carolina University along with smaller private institutions. All of these institutions offer a traditional undergraduate residential and commuter experience and a varying number of online options for students. At the graduate level, these institutions have been expanding their portfolio of offerings, increasing competition in the graduate education market.

Beyond those institutions we have traditionally viewed as our competitors, ETSU's competition has expanded during the last decade. While MOOCs and for-profit institutions appeared to be a concern during the prior work of the 125 Academic Task Force, those threats have dissipated, having been replaced by public and private institutions like Liberty University, Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), and Purdue Global, institutions with physical, residential campuses as well as strong online presences. For example, Southern New Hampshire University grew its enrollment from 10,000 in 2010 to over 100,000 in 2019 (Douglas, 2020). Liberty University saw similar growth adding 40,000 students since 2010 (Chumney, 2020). In 2020, Liberty University's enrollment grew by 10,000 students while public institutions in Virginia saw a decline of 6,658 students (Chumney, 2020). This large enrollment growth is driven by online and on-ground options that provide quality, accredited programs in a flexible formats for both traditional and non-traditional students at a compelling price point. It is also the case that these institutions have leveraged incredible marketing assets to cast a wide net for potential students. In 2018, SNHU invested $139 million dollars in marketing efforts (McKenzie, 2019).

However, the competitive landscape is also changing for non-traditional students who may need some additional education or training but do not need to return for a full degree or certificate. Rather they need "bite-sized," "just-in-time" coursework to meet their professional needs. LinkedIn Learning and Google Career Certificates provide short-format courses at a subscription-based pricing structure (e.g., $49 per month in the case of Google), addressing a long-held criticism of higher education that "universities don't properly equip students with real-world skills they need in the workplace, and leave them in debt for years as they struggle to pay back student loans" (Bariso, 2020). This criticism has also been leveled by various state governors and legislators.

Technical and trade training programs are another evolving competitor. Free community college options, trade school, and technical credentialing (some even while in high school) provide local students an opportunity to move into a reasonably well-paid position in the region. Northeast Tennessee has struggled with economic growth, and the recruitment of industry that might address growth (more jobs, higher paid jobs, etc.) is linked with a bigger demand for a technically trained workforce. A local emphasis on preparing a workforce for these types of trade careers (i.e., as a regional growth solution) has de-emphasized a 4-year degree and created a value proposition problem.

More people than ever are questioning the value of higher education both from philosophic and monetary perspectives. These questions are particularly pointed in east Tennessee where wages tend to be comparatively low. In 2020, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics indicated that the hourly wage in Knoxville metropolitan area averaged $22.95 compared to the national average of $27.07. "[A]fter adjusting for statistical significance, wages in the local area were lower than their respective national averages in 19 of the 22 major occupational groups, including computer and mathematical, healthcare practitioners and technical, and management" (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). In a region where education is undervalued and wages remain low means that another competitor is public perception. Some students may choose to go to a different university; others may choose not to go at all.

We do not intend for this perspective to be read as a tale of "doom and gloom." Rather, we hope that this narrative provides an unvarnished look at the issues facing our institution in the next decade.

Traditional and Emerging Student Audiences

Since its founding in 1911, ETSU has been and will continue to be a primarily undergraduate institution. With a strong portfolio of graduate and professional programs, ETSU is also a significant player in the region beyond undergraduate education. Over the past decade and as a result of the original Committee on 125, ETSU has invested in improving its residential campus experience with improvements to the Culp Center, Bishop Hall, University Commons, and Greene Football Stadium and investment in Student Life Enrollment. Our key audience is and will remain traditional undergraduate, graduate, and professional students who desire a residential campus experience, face-to-face courses taught by caring, highly qualified faculty. We do this well, and we should continue.

Our audience, however, must broaden to include transfer students from community college, as well as non-traditional students who are attending college for the first time or after a period in the workforce. Moreover, we believe our academic mission extends into the community, and we are the leaders in creating a broad and encompassing academic enterprise that exposes children, working adults, retirees, and others to opportunities to learn and grow (academics goes beyond lectures). While it is true that ETSU has always had transfer and returning adult students and other community members, we have not considered these groups key to our mission and focus. That must change.

As part of their growth strategy, SNHU, Liberty University, and Purdue Global have adapted to meet the needs of diverse learners. They have not required students to mold to their structure; they have been flexible and addressed their audience's needs all while remaining accredited quality institutions. This flexibility includes offering on-ground and online courses, scheduling short-format courses (e.g., 7-week formats), providing multiple admission points (e.g., two undergraduate fall semester starts in August and October), removing barriers for transfer students, and having student services support available outside the 8 am-5 pm timeframe.

How are the traditional and non-traditional students of 2021 different from the students of a decade ago? Our audience's needs and aspirations are changing to reflect the desire for more options and flexibility in the university experience. They want programming to be delivered in diverse/flexible formats (online, in-person, in the field), options in semester structure, engagement in their majors quickly once decided. They want to see purpose and connection in what and how they are learning.

Imagining ETSU Students in the Next Decade

Students of the future would be diverse individuals (race, ethnicity, age, experience, abilities, etc. as reflected in the 2020 US Census) who come to ETSU directly from high school (many with undergraduate hours gained while in high school), or after time in the workplace. They perceive ETSU as an academic and personal fit because of the dynamic and flexible offerings and formats (interdisciplinary combinations, length of training, on and offline, etc.). These students would expect to participate in well-designed curricula, with real-world experiences and strong connection to future careers. Networking, professional connections and opportunities are infused into academics with many students opting to stay in the region. Relevant/applicable general education programming, exposure to the "world outside," and an appreciation for civic engagement would be creatively infused into their coursework. Students would have access to state-of-the-art classrooms and well-designed online learning materials. They would receive high quality instruction/high impact practices from well-supported ETSU faculty as well as site liaisons in the community. Students' strengths, experiences, and skills would be fully appreciated and leveraged to maximize not only their university experiences but also the enhancement of the university overall (students are co-creators of/in this place). Graduation, certificate completion, and credentialing are respected as possible off-ramps on the complex and varied pathway of life-long learning.

It will be important for ETSU to consider touchpoints with all of the region's residents as opportunities to engage "students" in the next decade. Experiences such as attending a concert, play, or lecture at the Martin Center, dual enrollment in high school, a free class after age 65, or a swimming lessons are all "academics" that can grow a learner's capacity to engage in their community and live a fuller life. We must begin to see that ETSU's academic mission is about in-class learning, but that it also includes vibrant, enriching offerings beyond the classroom with and for our students and the larger community.

Academic Vision and Goals for the Next Decade

For ETSU to meet the needs of a changing student body and regional workforce, to remain financially viable, and to become a leader in the Appalachian Highlands for high quality, student-focused higher education, the Task Force on Academics developed a vision statement and goals for academics.

Academic Vision Statement

To become an academic destination university of the 21st Century and further its focus on regional stewardship, ETSU will

- Develop undergraduate, graduate, and professional students through a robust education that features high-impact practices, real-world experiences, and interdisciplinary/interprofessional opportunities, enabling graduates to be life-long learners with vital careers as well as engaged citizens in an increasingly diverse, interconnected global world.
- Enhance its role as an academic leader in the region, expanding access and appeal for transfer, adult, and non-traditional students; providing specialized, just-in-time training for local career opportunities; partnering with local school districts to set high standards for coordinated curricula across the life span; and inspiring the citizens of the Appalachian Highlands to seek career vitality and personal growth through life-long learning.
- Feature state-of-the art academic facilities to support innovative teaching and learning.
- Develop and continually refine an academic infrastructure[1] for nimble responsiveness to emerging disciplines and changing workforce needs, and flexible access for students.
- Cultivate a sustainable academic culture where faculty, staff, and students respect a variety of human experiences

Strategic Goals

The Task Force proposes goals for each tenet of the vision statement as outlined.

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[1] "Infrastructure" is used capaciously to mean financial aid, student services, academic programs, academic calendar, etc. In this sense, "infrastructure" means all of the inner workings that impact student's academic success and ease through the institution, as well as faculty's ability to create and deploy new programming and research.

Develop undergraduate, graduate, and professional students through a robust education that features high-impact practices, real-world experiences, and interdisciplinary/interprofessional opportunities, enabling graduates to be life-long learners with vital careers as well as engaged citizens in an increasingly diverse, interconnected global world.

1-3 years	Develop internship experiences or courses that put students in close connection with real life application for all undergraduate majors. Every ETSU student should have the opportunity to have a professional experience related to their career goals/major before graduation.
5 years	Unveil an overhauled general education curriculum that • includes dynamic, interdisciplinary pathways and courses • bakes-in opportunities to gain core general education competencies in community-based settings • weaves inclusion, equity, and global awareness throughout the general education experiences so that students have touchpoints in 50% of the general education courses • spreads general education throughout the four-years, getting students involved in their majors earlier • emphasizes high impact practices • has students develop multi-modal speaking and writing skills • focuses on competencies & outcomes rather than courses (including prior learning assessments and alternative ways to demonstrate mastery) • includes a robust assessment of general education competencies (as defined by the faculty) that utilizes direct and indirect assessment methods, provides feedback on student learning to individual students and more broadly to the institution, and are disseminated to the university community for continuous improvement. Have 90% of students participating in internship or real-world experiences with their majors or area of interest and reflecting upon the internship/experience in terms of community and place
10 years	Create 5 new interdisciplinary programs Develop co-curriculum for "soft skills" (e.g. teamwork, diversity & inclusion, global awareness, communication, leadership, etc.) that can be documented on an experiential or co-curricular transcript and via badges.

Note: Of the goals listed for above, the faculty and students on the Task Force unanimously and enthusiastically agreed that an overhaul of general education should be ETSU's tantamount academic priority for the next five years.

Enhance its role as an academic leader in the region, expanding access and appeal for transfer, adult, and non-traditional students; providing specialized, just-in-time training for local career opportunities; partnering with local school districts to set high standards for coordinated curricula across the life span; and inspiring the citizens of the Appalachian Highlands to seek career vitality and personal growth through life-long learning.

1-3 years	Grow existing summer short-term programming to provide robust enrichment opportunities for children, retirees, and others
	Create diverse summer bridge programs for underserved, at-risk, or first-generation college students to increase their success.
	Build a process for coordinated programming with local school districts, community colleges, technical education centers, etc. address workforce gaps across sectors.
	Revise the academic calendar, format of academic offerings, and policies to facilitate on and off ramps for students to start, stop, and restart academic progress.
	Remove academic, financial aid, and structural barriers for all students to make ETSU easy to navigate and access.
	Expand opportunities at branch campuses like Allendale, piloting a program to deliver all general education requirements in flexible, accessible formats.
	Expand opportunities to complete undergraduate and degree requirements at off-site campuses such as Allandale and Sevierville.
	Address graduate tuition to create fixed-price models to increase price competitiveness.
	Create a "big ideas" lecture/performance with a well-respected speaker series that would be open and accessible to the Appalachian Highlands region to expand the academic enterprise beyond the classroom and into the region.
5 years	Expand and revitalize Continuing Education with robust, dynamic programming for non-credit learning in the region, offering opportunities in Johnson City and at Allandale/downtown Kingsport sites.
	Expand Access ETSU and programming for other neuro- and physically-diverse students who have been traditionally underserved in higher education but who are capable of success with additional levels of academic support.

	Build academic program/faculty partnerships with area middle and high schools that will bring ETSU faculty expertise into the school settings and inspire students. Develop 5-10 pre-college academies for middle-high school students and create a seamless pipeline for matriculation to ETSU (modeled after Music Pre-College Academy at ETSU). These pre-college academies should engage students with faculty-led research projects or other experiences.
10 years	Partner with a local high school with a high-risk populations to develop the first cooperative innovative high school[2] opportunity in our region to provide a seamless transition from high school to college. Increase research access to Little Bucs and University School to serve as learning and research sites for faculty and students across the university.

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[2] Cooperative innovative high schools are partnerships between local education agencies (LEA) and a partnering higher education institution. These schools target students who are at risk of dropping out of high school and/or have primarily first generation college students; by partnering with a local higher education entity, the curriculum is designed to provide students with academic preparation and access to dual enrollment courses to seamlessly facilitate their transition from high school to college, increase the likelihood of enrolling in and completing college..

Feature state-of-the art academic facilities to support innovative teaching and learning.

1-3 years	Create one adaptive learning classroom[3] in each academic building on campus, and at Allandale and Sevierville. Identify a core set of pilot courses that can be taught in real-world community settings, and develop "classroom space" in those settings (e.g. criminal justice course meets in the courthouse; history courses meet in the County archives, etc.). with paid, community-based facilitators
5 years	Open a new classroom building in which all classroom spaces are designed for adaptive learning and high impact practices (e.g., flexible spaces with movable furniture, accessible white boards, etc.). Double the number of adaptive learning classroom spaces in each building. Establish innovative, flexible, community classrooms in key locations.
10 years	Enhance Sherrod Library to become the key academic space for ETSU with makerspace, studios, data visualization labs, etc. much like the James Hunt Library at North Carolina State University. Renovate all laboratories, art studios, and similar spaces to bring them to a 21st Century level of functioning and safety. Update Alexander Hall (University School) to make it a state-of-the art, accessible learning laboratory for ETSU students' and faculty's learning and research

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[3] Adaptive learning classrooms (or flexible learning spaces) use modular furniture, wifi, smart technology, walls painted with white board paint, and the like to provide maximum flexibility in academic spaces. These spaces are necessary for high impact practices like active learning and small-group learning.

Develop and continually refine an academic infrastructure[4] for nimble responsiveness to emerging disciplines and changing workforce needs, flexible access to students.

1-3 years	Create undergraduate certificates (or other alternative credentialing) in data analytics, public health, hospitality and tourism, and 3 other programs that support workforce needs for students who may not need a (or another) full degree and ensure that pricing is competitive. Develop stackable credit and stackable non-credit credentials[5]. Implement flexible, alternative schedules and course offerings including multi-semester enrollment Establish an office of workforce development and advisory board of community and university partners to examine emerging academic trends and determine how ETSU can respond in coordination with other educators in the region. Create faculty development opportunities around creative engagement of local workforce in their field of interest.
5 years	Establish a faculty "culture of contribution" in which research and teaching programs are closely interrelated and responsive to industry needs (i.e., a growing sense of faculty responsibility for this, not the work of a single center or person).
10 years	Be the first higher education institution in TN to have identified a discipline/workforce need that does not exist yet and develop a major/minor/certificate/or graduate program to meet that need.

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[4] Infrastructure is used capaciously to mean financial aid, student services, academic programs, etc. In this sense, "infrastructure" means all of the inner workings that impact student's academic success and ease through the institution, as well as faculty's ability to create and deploy new programming and research.

[5] The U.S. Department of Labor defines a stackable credential as "part of a sequence of credentials that can be accumulated over time to build up an individual's qualifications and help them to move along a career pathway or up a career ladder to different and potentially higher-paying jobs" (Heckstall, n.d.)

Cultivate a sustainable academic culture where faculty, staff, and students respect a variety of human experiences.

1-3 years	Have 60% of ETSU faculty and staff trained in resilience/trauma-informed, diversity and equity, and neurodiversity best practices. Revise tenure/promotion policies to recognize pedagogical changes that support these efforts. Offer undergraduate and graduate level writing courses for non-native English speakers.
5 years	Train 100% of ETSU faculty and staff in resiliency, diversity and equity, and neurodiversity best practices to empower them to revise curriculum and teaching practices and improve daily interactions. Increase hiring and retention of diverse faculty by 20%. Enhance academic support structures for neuro-diverse and non-traditional students.
10 years	Increase hiring and retention of diverse faculty by 40%

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