Bold Ideas and New Frontiers

Introduction and background

Bold ideas and new frontiers are breakthrough innovations that solve a highly critical, unresolved problem in the lives of the people and entities that we serve--our students, our alumni, our donors, our faculty and staff, our partners, our communities, our state, and our planet. These are SDSU’s customers. Breakthrough innovations attract new students, inspire donor investment, and solve economic challenges across the state and nation. They are critical to a sustainable future.

Breakthrough innovations begin by focusing on:

1. Deeply understanding our customers’ struggle for progress, then
2. Creating the right solution and attendant set of experiences that will...
3. Solve our customers’ challenges well, every time.
4. Provide opportunity to underserved populations of South Dakota.*

Over the past six years, SDSU has pursued initiatives in areas such as bioinformatics, accreditation, and continuous improvement. This is only a sampling of the initiatives and activities that have impacted the progress of the university. They are commendable and impressive. However, how many of these initiatives were the result of following a trend in higher education, or necessary to remain operational? Moreover, how many of these initiatives arose in direct response to solving a highly critical, unresolved problem in our customers’ lives?

An innovative campus embraces difference, is comfortable exploring new ideas, and provides both a top down and bottom up approach to planning. SDSU’s culture is in many ways prepared to lead on numerous significant bold initiatives. The people and community have a strong desire to see everyone succeed. Although our culture has an eagerness to perform at a high level, we often struggle to integrate across divisions and functional areas. This results in obstacles that, at best, slow progress, stifle creativity, disempowers marginalized populations, and dampens motivation. At worst, it halts innovation entirely.

Our path forward will require a precise and deliberate appreciation of the positive cultural elements that foster the thoughts and ideas that will spring from our strategic planning process. Care and work should be done to retain the parts of all cultures that promote this development, and make the necessary changes to other areas so that we have the synergies in place to ensure progress.

The bold ideas and new frontiers that will lead us into the future will solve highly important problems and solve them well. But first, we will need to create a culture of innovation that provides individuals with the empowerment and tools to ask the right questions, and the resources to take the next step.
As we embark on this journey toward bold ideas, it is important to remember that change is inherently risky, and if you strive to be courageous and to push toward exciting and new frontiers, you must be willing to make an investment in the future. We feel strongly that our community of students, faculty, alumni, partners, and donors rely on us to make smart, educated investments with a sharp eye on the future for all.

**Lessons learned**

As the saying goes, those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. The start of every bold journey should begin with an analysis of the hard work performed by those who ventured before us. SDSU has a rich history of successes. Each year we build on our collective knowledge. A quick walk through the archives of Briggs Library demonstrates 136 years of progress and lessons learned that are expertly captured and available to us as road maps for guiding our actions, today and into the future.

Reflecting on the impact of our bold ideas and new frontiers over the past six years, it is clear that the speed of change in education is rapid. For example: Mounting pressure from state and federal reduced budgets has thrust the university system into re-evaluating its cost structure. As a result, we will be more reliant on private sector resources to carry out our mission. Ownership of the responsibility to be good stewards of our dollars through lean processes has allowed us to continue to invest in the event of declining traditional revenues. Developing in-house expertise in continuous improvement has further aided in this movement.

The university has also boldly changed its budgeting process to a responsibility-based budget. Through the efforts of our finance department and economics faculty, we have put the control of our revenue in the hands of our revenue generating centers. We view support centers through the lens of an affiliate to the process of education and have the ability to understand the true cost of instruction with finer detail. This has allowed us to make shifts in the way education is delivered based upon student demand for online options. We have learned through this process that we are capable of large changes and how to navigate those changes to align with the core mission of the university in a manner that best serves our students.

The university has also invested in research through advanced cluster computing and high-speed research connectivity. Leveraging innovative technology has put the proper tools in the hands of our talented researchers to produce amazing science at all levels. For example, the Web-Enabled Landsat Data project processed more than two petabytes (2000TB) of satellite data to develop a 10-year data product to meet the needs of our customers, including the USGS EROS Center and NASA.
National trends and external picture

Just as there are lessons to be learned from our past endeavors, there is also knowledge and inspiration gained from the present. We should look not only to the bold initiatives that are shaping higher education, but also to other industries whose shifts are directly affecting everyday lives. For example: The changes in customer preferences toward online and mobile services; and emerging transformative technologies (such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, and augmented reality) that will shape the future experiences of the individuals we serve.

In higher education, universities across the nation are facing cutbacks in state funding; stagnant enrollment growth; pressures to lower tuition and increase scholarships; increased competition for donors; and all in the face of tighter federal regulations that may or may not continue. However, the data points to a few elements of potential enrollment growth: the non-white student population, nontraditional students, transfer students, and online students. This data is largely available and has prompted universities, particularly those who have failed to invest in the predicted growth areas, to immediate and bold action.

Two examples come from Purdue University, a fellow land-grant university in Indiana. After concluding that they were not in a position to deliver online education at the scale they required, Purdue shocked the public higher education community with its bold decision to purchase the for-profit Kaplan University. This acquisition followed on the heels of Purdue’s implementation of Income Share Agreements—a new alternative to student loans. Under this option, Purdue will front a student’s tuition in exchange for a fixed percentage of a student’s future earnings.

Another land-grant university, University of Wisconsin, launched the UW Flex option in 2014, one of the only online competency-based programs in the nation where the tuition is based on a three-month “all-you-can-learn” subscription price. Implementation cost was close to $10 million and, in nearly three years, the program has graduated 26 students and netted $37,600.

It is evident by these examples alone that national trends will undoubtedly change the landscape for land-grant universities. It is wise to keep a close eye on fellow institutions, but to be wary in following them into uncharted territory that does not necessarily solve a specific challenge for our unique and distinct customers in a way that will also benefit the university.

Which poses the question: How do we spot the trends that will have an impact and that will shape the future of the university? These trends are the ones that are happening around you--in the local news, in the conversations with your friends and family:

- Addressing the educational needs of our native and underserved
populations, and helping build the knowledge and tools to aid economic
development in those communities;
• Finding solutions to the South Dakota labor shortage;
• Partnering with businesses to ensure employees have the knowledge and
skills to remain relevant and current in their field;
• Retraining opportunities for individuals facing job obsolescence;
• Strengthening our partnership with technical institutes to provide
opportunities to students who want to continue their education;
• Finding solutions for the challenges of commodity over-supply, climate
change, and environmental concerns.

This is just a sampling of challenges. By looking to the specific customers we
serve, and identifying and understanding their struggle for progress, we will have
distinguished the trends that will be the key to SDSU’s vitality and success into
the future.

Strategic themes and options

Our goal is to align our community of invested individuals in a thought process
toward the bold. To achieve that, we are proposing several strategic themes
designed to begin a process of how we as a group can start to “Think Big.”

1. Strengthen our recruiting and retention efforts for native and underserved
populations. Consider creating a Mobile Student Service Center to travel
to the rural South Dakota communities on a scheduled weekly rotation in
order to provide admission, advising, registration, and coaching for
distance students, and to build cohort-type relationships between students
in those communities.
2. Federal support for low-income students is even harder to come by every
year. Consider building a scholarship endowment that rewards the high
achieving, but also opens doors to the underserved population of South
Dakota.
3. Work to become the primary inclusive conduit in South Dakota between
raw talent and regional businesses. Tomorrows workforce is strengthened
by fair access to our resources by those who are underserved or living with
a disability. By ensuring equal access to higher education the University
serves its core land grant mission and helps empower historically
marginalized communities. Consider building curriculums that work to
reduce disparities and advance social justice through internship
experiences for the majority of undergraduate students.
4. Students often arrive on the campus with existing general education
requirements completed. Consider implementing degree models that
account for this prep work in order to shorten degree completion times
and transition those students directly into graduate level programs.
5. SDSU should be continuously expanding its reputation for quality
research. Consider seeking out new and expanded niche graduate
programs that reach out to talented domestic and international students.
6. Our students need to be internationally aware when they graduate. Consider opening a satellite campus in another country where SDSU students can continue their education while being immersed in another culture.

7. The undergraduate advising system does an excellent job of course selection and monitoring student progress. However, career placement is often a subject discussed later in the degree-seeking process. Consider retooling advisement to include an active career placement component from year one.

8. SDSU needs to continue to invest in research, and connectivity is vital to the collaboration of our researchers worldwide. Consider investing in 100gig connectivity between state and federal research labs.

Cost

Cost should not limit the scope of a concept. It is important to see the expense of an idea through many lenses. The dollars spent on any one initiative can be an investment in the future progress of an organization. Balancing the need to be bold with an investment is critical in forging new endeavors. The University budget model should encourage departments to consider bold initiatives in their long-term budget forecasting. Viewing cost as an investment allows an organization to continue to move forward.

We also recognize the need to spend our capital wisely. Investing in ideas or frontiers that are on the cutting edge of progress can be risky. Conversely, it is important to remember that there is a cost to stagnation. The lack of progress and change also carries with it a price. Do not stagnate a discussion of bold ideas and new frontiers by viewing cost as an insurmountable roadblock.

Short- and long-term plans

With any bold idea or new frontier, the time line is always a consideration. It will be important that the campus community separate thought processes into two paths:

1. What can be implemented and achieved in the coming months, and
2. What will require a consistent and persistent effort over an extended period?

Short-term goals should be manageable, achievable and prepare the university for long-term success. The most important process that can take place is active involvement in the strategic planning process. The more voices that participate in this process will have a direct impact on the speed of change and the quality of the ideas we bring forward.

Long-term goals should be transformational. We need to see beyond our current state and rally behind the hard work it takes to achieve something bold. We are poised to continue to lead the region in high-quality education for our people,
culture, and ideas. As you think about those frontiers, challenge yourself to have a voice in the process, to lead an initiative or play a role in the future of SDSU.

References


SDSU Archives and Special Collections

Knocking at the College Door (9th Edition)