



MEMORANDUM

To: Strategic Plan Extension Executive Steering Committee

From: “Our Hill” Subcommittee
(Susan Howarth, Leslie North, Gary Broady, Justin Cato, John-Mark Francis, Rachel Goodman, Danita Kelley, Alex Poole, Stephanie Pritchard, Mitchell Walker, Eric Wolfe)

Subject: Summary of Proposed Revisions and Rationale

Date: March 4, 2026

The *Our Hill* Subcommittee has completed its proposed 2026–2031 extension of the *Our Hill* section of the WKU Strategic Plan and offers the following summary to describe how we approached the revision, what changed from the original 2018 plan, and why the committee landed where it did. Our subcommittee’s proposed/draft revision for the *Our Hill* 2026-2031 extension is included with this memo.

Purpose and Approach

Our work began with a review of the original *Our Hill* section of Climbing to Greater Heights (2018–2028). The original version established an important foundation by emphasizing the Hill as both a physical place and a symbolic representation of WKU’s people, while addressing employee well-being, stewardship of place, innovation in teaching and learning, fiscal responsibility, and research and creative activity. For the extension period, the subcommittee’s goal was not to replace that foundation, but to refine and strengthen it for the current context. We sought to produce a framework that is institution-first, durable across the 2026–2031 timeframe, and aligned with how decisions about people, resources, space, innovation, research, and recruitment are made and experienced across the university.

Key Structural Changes

One of the most significant proposed changes is structural. Through our shared working document and committee discussions, we intentionally reorganized the section into six clearly defined areas of focus, each with a short framing statement and supporting bullets. This represents an expansion compared to the four areas of focused outlined in the original 2018-2028 strategic plan. We believe that the revised structure improves clarity, reduces overlap, and better positions the section to guide unit-level planning and prioritization.

The six focus areas now include:

- Commitment to Care and Excellence for Our Employees
- Stewardship of Place and Infrastructure
- Continuing to Strengthen Our Financial Foundation
- Fostering a Culture of Innovation
- Engaged Research and Discovery
- Recruitment as a Shared Responsibility

What We Added or Elevated

Several themes were either added or elevated based on committee discussion and the current institutional landscape:

- *Stewardship of Place and Infrastructure* was developed as a standalone focus area. While care for our physical plant appeared in the original plan, the committee agreed that our physical and virtual campus environment warrants more explicit strategic attention. This includes space utilization, design of spaces to facilitate institutional goals, and long-term capital alignment. Given the scale and significance of housing to student success, recruitment, and retention, the committee also intentionally called the work of *Project Elevate* directly within this section.
- *Recruitment as a Shared Responsibility* was added as a new focus area within *Our Hill*. While recruitment will likely continue to be addressed elsewhere in the broader strategic plan, the subcommittee concluded that recruitment is also deeply connected to campus culture, service, facilities, communications, and daily interactions across the institution. Including it here reinforces that recruitment outcomes are shaped well beyond any single office or unit.
- Responsible adoption of artificial intelligence was explicitly incorporated within the *Culture of Innovation* section. While the original plan emphasized emerging instructional technologies, the committee agreed that the strategic plan extension should acknowledge AI directly and frame its adoption as intentional, ethical, and aligned with institutional values.
- Research and discovery framing was updated to reflect WKU's continued evolution as a student-centered, applied research institution and its advancement toward Research-2 classification. The proposed revisions also call out, with clearer emphasis, research infrastructure, doctoral education alignment, and student engagement in discovery.

What We Intentionally Removed or Softened

The committee made deliberate decisions to not to carry forward all items from the original version. The 2018-2028 *Our Hill* section included several specific

implementation commitments (for example, year-one actions, named structural changes, or narrowly defined mechanisms). For the extension period, we intentionally shifted away from that level of specificity.

Our proposed revisions, instead, focus on strategic direction rather than prescribed solutions, allowing flexibility in how goals are achieved while still providing clear guidance for priorities and decision-making. Broadly, language across the section was adjusted to emphasize stewardship, alignment, and shared responsibility rather than fixed tactics.

Overall Rationale

Taken together, the revisions aim to:

- maintain continuity with the current 2018-2028 vision of *Our Hill*,
- reflect current realities and emerging needs facing the institution,
- clarify how people, place, resources, innovation, research, and recruitment collectively enable student success, and
- provide a clear, adaptable framework to guide the 2026–2031 extension of the strategic plan.

We appreciate the opportunity to share this update and welcome feedback as the extension process continues.

Respectfully,
The Our Hill Subcommittee

STRATEGIC PLANNING – OUR HILL

Committee Working Document | **Draft**

The Hill is both a physical place and a symbolic representation of the people who bring Western Kentucky University's mission to life. For nearly 125 years, WKU has been shaped by dedicated faculty and staff whose work in teaching, research, service, and stewardship has transformed students' lives and strengthened the communities we serve. As the institution continues its climb, the future vitality of Our Hill depends on intentional investment in people, thoughtful stewardship of place, and a shared commitment to institutional excellence.

This strategic plan extension affirms WKU's responsibility to cultivate a campus environment where employees are supported, innovation is encouraged, discovery is elevated, and resources are stewarded wisely. It is intended to refine and deepen institutional priorities related to *Our Hill*, strengthening alignment among existing commitments, current realities, and emerging opportunities.

Building on the foundation established in the 2018 version of *Climbing to Greater Heights*, this refreshed vision for *Our Hill* reflects lessons learned, new possibilities, and evolving aspirations. It is informed by a rapidly evolving higher education environment shaped by demographic change, heightened expectations for accountability, fiscal pressures, technological advancement, and increasing competition for both students and personnel.

This 2026 - 2031 extension of *Our Hill* is structured to emphasize care and excellence for employees, purposeful investment in infrastructure and financial sustainability, a culture of innovation and discovery aligned with WKU's research-grounded, applied-learning mission, and a shared responsibility for recruitment that reflects the unmatched quality of the WKU Experience at every touchpoint. Advancing Our Hill requires collective ownership across faculty, staff, administrators, and partners, recognizing that institutional quality is shaped not only by strategy and investment, but by everyday actions, decisions, and interactions across *Our Hill*.

Commitment to Care and Excellence for Our Employees

Establish and sustain a culture that actively supports employee well-being, promotes excellence and accountability, and enables professional growth:

- Maintain an ongoing analysis of market conditions for employee salaries and benefits as a part of WKU's compensation framework to support competitiveness,

internal equity, defined responsibilities, career longevity, and strategic performance.

- Strengthen systems for performance evaluation, recognition, and advancement by aligning annual review processes, tenure and promotion expectations, merit-based compensation adjustments, and workload decisions with institutional priorities.
- Enhance employee wellness by providing services and resources that promote financial planning, professional development, and overall quality of life for all members of the WKU community while enhancing awareness of the total WKU compensation package.
- Develop and implement a structured transition and professional integration program that equips new faculty and staff for success by ensuring that new employees receive adequate training on university systems and processes while fostering early engagement, connection, and long-term success at WKU.
- Foster a collegial and welcoming workplace culture grounded in respect, shared purpose, and appreciation for WKU's history, traditions, and people.
- Improve systems and processes that promote collaboration across academic, administrative, and support units, enabling shared expertise and collective progress toward institutional goals.

Stewardship of Place, Facilities, and Infrastructure

Steward WKU's physical and virtual environments across all campus locations and university-owned and managed properties to foster community, promote academic excellence, advance sustainability, and ensure long-term institutional success:

- Prioritize the creation, preservation, and modernization of spaces that facilitate learning, research, community-building, and meaningful engagement among students, faculty, and staff.
- Advance a comprehensive, phased redesign of campus housing that modernizes residential facilities, bolsters the on-campus experience, constructs facilities aligned with expectations of today's students, and supports WKU's recruitment, retention, and engagement goals.
- Optimize academic program scheduling and space utilization to promote student success, balanced faculty workloads, and responsible use of institutional resources.
- Advance stewardship of place by adopting and expanding sustainable practices that promote efficient use of campus resources across facilities and operations.
- Invest in physical and virtual infrastructure that supports evolving modes of teaching, learning, research, and engagement while preserving the character and assets that define the Hill.

- Enhance WKU’s digital infrastructure and virtual environments to support teaching, learning, collaboration, and student services, ensuring secure, reliable, accessible, and innovative platforms that enhance the WKU experience.
- Align campus planning and long-term capital investments with institutional priorities and anticipated academic and student needs.

Continuing to Strengthen Our Financial Foundation

Ensure long-term financial sustainability through responsible stewardship, alignment with strategic priorities, data-informed decision-making, and continuous improvement:

- Continue implementing performance-based financial approach including the principles established through RAMP.
- Identify and implement opportunities to improve operational efficiency by reducing manual processes, leveraging technology, streamlining workflows, and increasing coordinated planning across the institution.
- Strengthen financial decision-making through shared data, transparency, and regular assessment to promote institutional resilience and adaptability.
- Prioritize investments that directly foster student success, support employee performance, and the long-term financial and operational stability of the institution.

Fostering a Culture of Innovation

Encourage innovation in teaching, learning, research, and creative activity to meet the needs of a changing higher education landscape:

- Facilitate faculty and staff development through the promotion of effective and emerging pedagogical practices, providing evidence-based training in instructional design, and supporting the thoughtful adoption of new learning technologies that enhance student engagement and learning outcomes.
- Expand the adoption of high-impact practices such as experiential learning, collaborative instruction, immersive academic experiences, and process-based learning across disciplines.
- Bolster mechanisms for sharing best practices and innovations across campus to elevate effectiveness and efficiency institution-wide.
- Support responsible and intentional integration of artificial intelligence across teaching, learning, research, and operations while upholding academic integrity, ethical standards, and institutional values.

Engaged Research and Discovery

Strengthen WKU's identity as a student-centered, applied research institution and continue our advancement toward Carnegie designation as a Research-2 (Doctoral University: High Research Activity) institution:

- Expand and modernize research infrastructure to strengthen faculty scholarship, student discovery, and interdisciplinary collaboration.
- Develop new doctoral programs in a phased and strategic manner, aligning them with institutional priorities, workforce demand, regional needs, and long-term financial sustainability.
- Integrate students more fully into research, scholarship, and creative activity, reinforcing discovery both at the undergraduate and graduate level as a hallmark of the WKU Experience.
- Strengthen and expand the reach of the Office of Research and Creative Activity to expand scholarly impact, external engagement, and continually elevate the perception of WKU as a high-quality, research-focused institution.
- Align hiring, evaluation, and recognition practices to value scholarship and creative activity coupled with meaningful student mentorship and engagement.

Recruitment as a Shared Responsibility

Embed recruitment and enrollment initiatives as a shared institutional priority that reflects WKU's distinctive quality, highly engaged faculty, and commitment to student success.

- Further cultivate a culture of hospitality and service that ensures prospective students and families experience WKU as welcoming, responsive, and engaged at every point of interaction across the institution.
- Ensure recruitment and yield considerations are integrated into academic program development, student services, facilities planning, communications, and campus events.
- Equip faculty and staff with the tools, information, and confidence needed to serve as informed and effective ambassadors for the university.
- Promote practices and behaviors that help prospective students and families feel welcomed, supported, and confident in choosing WKU.
- Use shared data, regular reporting, and coordinated planning to inform recruitment strategies and reinforce shared responsibility for enrollments outcomes.
- Present a consistent and compelling institutional narrative that affirms WKU's academic quality, student engagement, and the growth opportunities available to Hilltoppers both inside and outside the classroom.