**Student Success & Experience Strategic Planning Working Group**

**White Paper**

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**Executive Summary**

The Student Success & Experience (SS&E) Strategic Planning Working Group offers the following vision, mission, goals and strategies to make student success and a transformative student experience the center of what we do at WKU over the next decade.

Vision: Student success is who we are and how we thrive

Mission: Make students the center of an inclusive, supportive, and personalized learning environment that prepares them to lead successful, productive, and fulfilling lives

Goal 1: Make student retention and degree completion the center of our institutional culture and structure

*Strategy 1*: Reorganize student support services into 1 physical space with 1 organizational structure that reports directly to university president; this structure will accommodate the diversity of all learners (i.e. traditional, non-traditional, adult learners, online, etc)

*Strategy 2:* Articulate the impact on student success in every job description at WKU

Strategy 3: Make contributions to student success a metric in the promotion & tenure & continuance process for faculty and in the annual review process for staff

*Strategy 4:* Establish and clearly articulate the total cost of attendance for all degree seeking students; re-structure financial aid to reward and/or promote progress toward degree

*Strategy 5:* Require all students to complete a personal development plan (which shall include an academic plan, a financial plan, and a professional) before the completion of their second semester at WKU

Goal 2: Prepare all students for academic success, professional competency, and lifelong learning

*Strategy 5:* Require all students to complete a personal development plan (which shall include an academic plan, a financial plan, and a professional) before the completion of their second semester at WKU

*Strategy 6*: Require all students complete 1 High-Impact practice per year of enrollment; build and offer First-Year Experience (FYE) and (Living)-Learning Communities for First-Year Students

*Strategy 7*: Embed professional competencies (intercultural competence; personal and social responsibility; and inquiry & analysis) into course work, academic programs, student affairs programming, and student employment.

*Strategy 8*: Make parents/family, WKU alumni, current WKU students, and WKU employees equal partners in student success.

**SOAR Analysis**

The Student Success & Experience Strategic Planning Working Group met a total of eight times over a period of 18 hours to discuss WKU strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, shared aspirations, and measurable results. We have distilled these hours of discussion into the SOAR Analysis presented below.

Greatest **S**trengths

* At larger universities and Research-1 institutions, undergraduate students are primarily exposed to graduate teaching assistants in 100-level and 200-level courses, and research experiences are primarily available to third and fourth year undergraduate students or graduate students. WKU offers students an 18-1 student-faculty ratio, and 71% of WKU Colonnade Courses (i.e. general education) are taught by full-time faculty. WKU offers extensive opportunities for faculty-student interaction through course work and applied learning experiences like undergraduate research and creative activities.
* WKU has an established culture of applied learning. Areas of particular excellence include undergraduate research and creative activities, study abroad/internationalization, internships/co-op experiences, and service learning. Many of these experiences exist within a student’s major area of study.
* WKU has an excellent physical infrastructure (campus classroom buildings, residence halls) and an attractive curriculum (undergraduate majors/minors; Colonnade Program; graduate degrees; and certificate programs) in various modalities (i.e. face-to-face, online, blended/hybrid).

Best **O**pportunities

* WKU can do a better job of making applied learning pervasive & accessible for ALL students. Typically, high achieving students seek out applied learning experiences for their educational benefit. Moreover, many students do not have the time or financial resources to seek out applied learning experiences because of work and/or family commitments. We must ensure that ALL students benefit for these applied learning experiences by making them pervasive across our curriculum, within student activities, student employment, and student life.
* We must promote, value, and reward high quality instruction in our classrooms & online courses. Students will be more successful in applied learning experiences if they are exposed to active-learning in their course work and in the 150 hours of student life outside of the classroom.
* Students spend 150 hours per week outside of the classroom. We must create meaningful & transformational experiences for ALL students wherever they might be located.
* WKU can and should make parents and family members of our students and university alumni partners in student success.

**A**spirations (our preferred future)

* We must make student success center of the university.
* Student success is EVERYONE’s job at WKU.
* We must provide a supportive, personalized, non-bureaucratic learning environment for our students.
* We must make the following commitment to every student that we admit to WKU: “If we admit you, we believe in you and your success, and we will help you be successful.” There can be no more excuses at the university level when our students do not succeed.
* We must work to create and promote a shared “WKU Hilltopper Student Identity.” Too often students are defined as “honor’s students” or “forensics students” or “student athletes” or “SGA students.” This must end. We must develop a culture and identity centered on ALL WKU students.
* WKU must build a sense of belonging among students, faculty & staff.
* The vast majority of our students are attending WKU to get a degree that will lead to a better job or profession. We must recognize this fact and ingrain professional/transferable skills within students. This professional socialization must occur in our courses, within student life, through student participation in high-impact practices, and via student employment (on and off campus).

Measurable **R**esults

* Evidence of success will be manifest in increased retention and graduation rates for ALL students and placement in paid employment upon graduation for ALL students.

**Vision Statement**

*Student success is who we are and how we thrive*

The Student Success & Experience Working Group (SS&E) believes that Western Kentucky University (WKU) should strive to become a student-centered applied research university that recruits, retains, and promotes individuals committed to student success. The SS&E Working Group trusts that at WKU all employees, units, and departments will partner with students at every level to ensure student success by providing opportunities inside and outside of the classroom to promote a well-rounded, satisfying, and transformative college experience. All WKU job descriptions will include student success metrics that clearly articulate roles and responsibilities that lend to student success and the well-rounded, satisfying, and transformative college experience for our students.

**Mission Statement**

*Make students the center of an inclusive, supportive, and personalized learning environment that prepares them to lead successful, productive, and fulfilling lives*

The SS&E Working Group proposes that WKU establishes a student success & experience (SS&E) plan for all students. The plan will be introduced during all recruitment events and initially crafted by students and parents during the university’s student orientation session(s), and will continue until the student graduates, joins the workforces, and/or attends graduate school. Within the SS&E plan several components will be required and embedded each year. They include but are not limited to: one high impact practice each year of enrollment, academic pathways for graduate/career readiness, financial literacy, and professional competencies interwoven within each academic degree program including the WKU Colonnade General Education Program. In addition, the SS&E plan will provide opportunities for all students to engage with community, alumni, and employers to ensure student success and acquisition of core competencies.

**Goals, Strategies and Metrics/Targets**

The SS&E Working Group has developed two overarching goals that will guide the university toward our vision of being an institution where *student success is who we are and how we thrive*. We also offer a total of eight strategies for achieving these two goals. During the course of our discussions, working group members offered additional ideas and suggestion that could have been added to this list of strategies. We have intentionally focused on these eight strategies because we believe they offer the best opportunity for the university to meet our goals and the articulated vision for student success and the student experience at WKU. We have included some of the additional ideas and strategies in a “parking lot” at the end of the document should the strategic planning steering committee wish to evaluate these further.

**Goal # 1: Make student retention and degree completion the center of our institutional culture and structure**

Student success must be at the center of everything we do at WKU, and institutional and cultural change are necessary to make this goal a reality. Student success cannot be simply the job of faculty in the classroom or student affairs professionals in the residence halls. Student success must be part of everyone’s job at our university if we hope to create a student-centered institutional culture. Faculty and staff should be purposive and intentional about making student success a central part of their work and profession, and they should be rewarded and recognized for these contributions. This also requires incorporating contributions to student success in the promotion, tenure and continuance process for faculty. We must rethink our student support efforts and reorganize our student support offices into one organizational structure with a direct report to the WKU President. Students should be able to get the help and assistance they need with one phone call, one visit to an office, one text message or one email message. The “Bureaucratic Runaround” at WKU must end.

We must ensure that our students have the information and mentorship they need to be successful. Many universities have adopted a centralized and intrusive advising model to help students find their academic path and to provide mentorship and coaching. While WKU has a culture of solid academic advising, within academic departments and via the Academic Advising and Retention Center (AARC), we believe this is not enough. We believe that students must be guided through a formalized process where they must think and reflect upon their academic and professional goals and to work with their academic advisor, their faculty advisor/mentor, a career mentor/coach, a career center staff member, and/or their office of financial aid to create a plan for academic and professional success and lifelong learning. The idea of a student personal development plan (PDP) is widely used at other universities, and we believe WKU students will benefit academically and professionally if they are forced to develop an academic plan (“this is what I want to study and why”), a professional plan (“this is a field or area in which I would like to work for X/Y/Z reasons), and a financial plan (“this is how I am going to pay for my education when I am done”). A critical student success variable is college access and affordability, and the development of the financial plan is a important component to this effort. We also believe that students should know the total cost of attendance when they begin an associate’s, bachelor’s, or graduate degree. We believe the university should lock tuition when a student enrolls, and clearly articulate the total cost of attendance for a period of 2-years for an associate’s degree, 4-years for a bachelor’s degree, and 2-years for a graduate degree.

We offer the following five strategies to achieve this first goal.

* Strategy 1: Reorganize student support services into 1 physical space with 1 organizational structure that reports directly to the University President; this structure will accommodate the diversity of all learners (i.e. traditional, non-traditional, adult learners, online, etc)
	+ In an effort to ensure that the Student Success & Experience (SS&E) plan be executed properly, we propose to centralize all student support services into one organizational structure, and ideally, to centralize these offices to operate under this one organizational structure. Ideally, these offices would have a presence in one physical space as well. We believe this is necessary to eliminate the barriers of bureaucratic policies and procedures that impede student success and prohibit successful navigation of university requirements. We also believe students should be able to call or text message 1 phone number, email one address, or visit one office to get the answers/resources they need.
* Strategy 2: Articulate the impact on student success in every job description at WKU
	+ If student success, defined here as retention and degree completion, is going to be part of our university’s institutional culture and structure, every employee (faculty, staff and graduate assistants) must be committed to this goal. We propose that the impact on student success be articulated in every job description at WKU. All job applicants and employees will know specifically how their position directly impacts student success and what is expected of them in this regard. Moreover, the job description information should be used as an indicator in the annual review process (see Strategy 3).
* Strategy 3: Use contributions to student success as a metric in the promotion & tenure and continuance process for faculty and in the annual review process for faculty & staff
	+ Currently, faculty are evaluated for promotion and tenure based on their contributions to teaching, research/creative activities, and service. We propose adding contributions to student success to the promotion, tenure and continuance process for WKU faculty. Should this strategy be a part of the final university strategic plan, the Faculty Handbook Committee and the University Senate will be charged with deciding how to incorporate student success into the T&P and continuance process. Student success might represent a fourth measurable area in faculty T&P; or student success indicators/efforts could be clearly articulated within the teaching, research/creative activities, and service sections of the T&P process & portfolio. We also propose making student success part of the annual review process for faculty and staff. Each year, faculty and staff would set goals for promoting student success based on their current job descriptions; department heads/directors would evaluate progress toward meeting these goals during the annual review process. This strategy will require all employees to be intentional and purposive about making student success a part of the annual evaluation process and part of the rewards structure (should merit pay return).
* Strategy 4: Establish and clearly articulate the total cost of attendance for all degree seeking students; re-structure financial aid to reward and/or promote progress toward degree
	+ Access and affordability are important realities for our students and this institution. We must ensure that our students have access to a high quality education and a transformative student experience that is affordable. As we have noted elsewhere in this white-paper, when we admit a student to WKU, we are conveying the message that we believe in his/her success. In order to recruit and retain a student population that can persist to graduation, the university must provide undergraduate students with estimated cost and estimated award package information as early as the January preceding their fall enrollment (or upon receipt of the FAFSA and high school academic data). This must be done in joint cooperation between administration and other departments which assess required or common charges associated with cost of attendance. Students should be equipped with a specialized calculator that will allow them to estimate their potential costs, their estimated financial assistance and any potential funding shortfalls. This will help educate them in sufficient time to realize their financial situation before beginning their studies so that their focus is on education and success once the academic year begins. The cost of attendance must include both direct and indirect components and information pertaining to potential return on investment in one’ college education.
	+ We must also shift the focus of our scholarship model from solely a merit based mentality targeted to recruit high achieving freshmen to also include a need-based approach for new and returning students. We must introduce need-based scholarships and/or tuition discounting in order to address financial needs that remain unfulfilled by Federal Title IV Aid opportunities.
* Strategy 5: Require all students to complete a personal development plan – which includes an academic plan, a financial plan, and a professional plan - before the completion of their second semester at WKU
	+ To truly impact student success and a transformative student experience at WKU, we must stop helping a student get from semester to semester. Instead, we must create pathways for a student to go from admission to graduation to professional life.
	+ We propose that each WKU student create a personal development plan before the completion of their second semester at WKU. This personal development plan will include three components: (a) an academic plan, (b) a professional plan, and (c) a financial plan.
	+ WKU has historically created 4-year degree plans that are accessible to prospective and current students. These plans do not allow for student exploration nor do they include second majors, minors, or concentrations. For the aforementioned reasons, each should create an academic plan tailored to their personnel definition of student success.
	+ To ensure that each student is able to achieve their academic plan we must guarantee that they are able to pay for their entire higher education experience at WKU. One of the greatest challenges facing higher education nationally and at WKU specifically is affordability. We must work with students to provide realistic cost of attendance and help students find ways to afford the WKU experience. Currently, discussions are underway within the CPE and SACSCOC to require institutions to have programs about financial literacy and debt management. Individualized plans allow WKU to have directive and personal conversations with students to fulfill requirements from CPE and SACSCOC.
	+ A recent Gallup-Strada study states there is disconnect between how employers and how higher education views students’ preparedness for the work-force. To help our students prepare for the workforce or additional education we believe it is important for first year students to create a professional plan. The professional plan will guide a student’s time at WKU so he/she gains professional competencies that will be used throughout one’s career. Furthermore, this personal professional development plan should be used to guide student conversations pertaining to the financial and academic plans.

Metrics & Targets for Goal # 1

The Commonwealth of Kentucky has moved toward a performance based funding model for public institutions of higher education in the state. A common set of metrics have been developed to measure institutional performance over time, and these metrics will be used to allocate state funding in the future. WKU has worked with the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) to set specific targets for each metric.

Many of the performance-based funding indicators pertain to student success and persistence toward graduation. On December 20, 2017, the Strategic Planning Working Groups were provided with a copy of these performance-based metrics, and we were asked to align these metrics to any relevant goals and strategies we have developed. Given our working group’s focus on student success and the student experience, there are several indicators that easily align with the five strategies outlined above for Goal # 1. These metrics and targets are listed below.

* Target 1: Increase the percentage of undergraduate students earning 30 cumulative credit hours in a given academic year by 7% over 5 years (Performance-Based Funding)
* Target 2: Increase the number of bachelor’s degrees awarded during an academic year, from 2,817 (AY15-16) to 2,987 by AY20-21 and to 3,316 by AY25-26 (Performance-Based Funding)
* Target 3: Increase number of bachelor’s degrees conferred in STEM-H related fields from 888 (AY 15-16) to 1,021 by AY20-21 and to 1,135 by AY25-26 (Performance-Based Funding)
* Target 4: Increase 6 year graduation rate of first-time, full-time baccalaureate degree seeking students from 51.9% (AY15-16) to 53.7% by AY20-21 and to 60% by AY25-26 (CPE Strategic Agenda)
* Target 5: Increase the number of graduate and professional degrees awarded during an academic year, from 881 (AY15-16) to 950 by AY20-21 and to 1,030 by AY25-26 (CPE Strategic Agenda)

**Goal # 2: Prepare all students for academic success, professional competency, and lifelong learning**

As aforementioned, student success must be at the center of everything we do at WKU, and institutional and cultural change is necessary to make this goal a reality. In addition, creating a meaningful college experience for all students is equally important. The SS&E working group understands that for far too long WKU has attempted to be all things for all students; however, we believe that we should create and offer more specific, holistic identity of who we are as an institution, what we provide, and what every student should experience while at WKU. We understand that each student will have some unique and personalized experiences, but every student should graduate with a singular, overarching WKU experience and Hilltopper identity. This unifying Hilltopper experience must be embedded in everything we do at the university to help facilitate the creation of a WKU student identity that prospective students will embrace, current students will live and shape, and our graduates will reinforce and nurture in their role as alumni and mentors to our future students. We have developed several strategies to help create this unifying student experience and identity at WKU. We believe these strategies will: (a) set WKU apart as an institution that can offer a transformational and supportive experience for current and prospective students; (b) provide applied learning experiences that will engage our students in high-impact transformative experiences; (c) build a sense of community and shared identity among our students, faculty, and staff; (d) instill professional competencies that will help our students lead successful and productive professional and personal lives, and (e) create a culture where our extended WKU family becomes a key stakeholder in promoting the lifelong success and personal/professional development of our students.

We offer the following four strategies to achieve this second goal.

* Strategy 5: Require all students to complete a personal development plan – which includes an academic plan, a financial plan, and a professional plan - before the completion of their second semester at WKU
	+ This strategy was also listed under Goal # 1, and we have re-listed it here because requiring students to develop a personal development plan will ensure their academic success, the development of professional competencies, and establish them on a path of lifelong learning, professional growth and reflection.
* Strategy 6: Require all students complete 1 High-Impact practice per year of enrollment; build and offer First-Year Experience (FYE) and (Living)-Learning Communities for First-Year Students
	+ The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has identified 10 educational practices that empirical research has shown to be transformative in the lives of college students, especially among traditionally underserved student populations (e.g. racial and ethnic minority groups; first-generation college students; adult learners; etc). Empirical research has demonstrated the influence of these high-impact practices (HIPs) on increased student engagement, deep learning, the acquisition and development of professional and soft skills, and increased retention and graduation rates (<https://www.aacu.org/leap/hips>). To promote equity of access to HIPs, we propose embedding these practices throughout a student’s educational experience. By making these HIPs pervasive and embedded within the curriculum, student life and student employment, we will ensure that students cannot opt-out of these transformational experiences.
	+ Given the lack of a unifying student identity, we propose creating a new First Year Experience that would socialize new WKU students into the life and culture of the WKU community. We recommend linking this FYE with living-learning communities and/or meta-majors to help new students build a sense of belonging and community. These meta-majors could be used to help students develop the academic and professional components of their personal development plan cited in Strategy 4/5.
	+ We recommend incorporating more high-impact practices into course offerings within the WKU Colonnade program (e.g. project-based learning).
	+ We recommend each academic unit identify 1-2 high-impact practices that are appropriate for their students, and to embed these HIPs into course work and/or the program’s curriculum.
	+ High-impact practices can also be embedded within student affairs programming and within student employment (i.e. work study). This would provide students with the benefits of HIPs while participating in campus activities and/or working on campus to defray the costs of their education.
* Strategy 7: Embed professional competencies (intercultural competence; personal and social responsibility; and inquiry & analysis) into course work, academic programs, student affairs programming, and student employment.
	+ Regardless of a student’s major or extracurricular involvement, all courses, student employment opportunities, social programming, etc. will incorporate these competencies by July 1, 2020.
		- Assist students in developing an understanding of multicultural issues and how to act in ways that promote inclusivity.
		- Engage students in solving problems that require effective communication, thoughtful decision-making, coping with ambiguity, and managing conflict.
		- Require students to assess genuine professional issues by interpreting and applying quantitative and qualitative research techniques.
		- Assist students in developing a professional identity based on ethical principles, career goals, and careful reflection.
	+ A review of the implementation of each of these core competencies should take place each year during discussions of Promotion & Tenure and though faculty & staff annual appraisals.
* Strategy 8: Make parents/family, WKU alumni, current WKU students, and WKU employees equal partners in student success.
	+ All members of the WKU community need to remain engaged in and supportive of the success of current students.
	+ All WKU employees should possess a basic understanding of fundamental information outside of their own area of expertise but relevant to all students to eliminate campus “runaround.” Similarly, a one easily accessible database or dashboard should be constructed/purchased to serve as a reference point for all faculty and staff members as they work to help and support students.
	+ The WKU Alumni Association and the Center for Career and Professional Development will develop a network of alumni to serve as mentors to current students with similar career interests. Pairing alumni with current students will begin during the student’s second semester at WKU. This relationship will help each student in the development of his/her professional plan.
	+ Parents/family members (within the confines of the law) should have access to information regarding their student’s progress. Parents need to know when a WKU employee notices a change in the student’s behavior, demeanor, academic performance, etc. WKU should strive to provide regular opportunities for parents to come to campus other than the single parent/family weekend that takes place each fall.

Metrics & Targets for Goal # 2

In addition to the performance-based funding indicators, the CPE Strategic Agenda has outlined several metrics/targets that pertain to student success and the student experience. We have included some of these targets below (Target 1 & 2) as they relate to several of the recommended strategies for Goal # 2. Target # 3 requires the university to track student participation in high-impact practices, via their academic transcript or through a separate electronic portfolio (that might be coupled with the personal development plan outlined above). Moreover, professional development and readiness is an important component of our second goal, and we have crafted one target (Target 4) that will require the university to track the employment prospects of recent graduates. Given that students are paying more than $10,000 in tuition/fees per year a four-year bachelor’s degree at WKU (as of 2018), we believe the university should make a concerted effort to track the paid employment prospects of graduates from our undergraduate and graduate programs.

* Target 1: Increase the percentage of students graduating in a given year who have completed internship, co-op, clinical, practicum, apprenticeship or student teaching courses from 53.8% (AY15-16) to 56.2% by AY20-21 and to 60% by AY25-36 (CPE Strategic Agenda)
* Target 2: Increase the percentage of students graduating within a given year that have participated in an institutional-level research or creative experience that has culminated in the completion of a specific project from 41.3% (AY-15-16) to 50% by AY20-21 and to 60% by AY25-26 (CPE Strategic Agenda)
* Target 3: Establish a baseline for percentage of students participating in at least 4 applied learning experiences or high impact practices before graduation; increase by 10% by AY20-21 and by 25% by AY25-26 relative to baseline (SS/SE-WG)
* Target 4: Establish a baseline for percentage of students obtaining full-time paid employment within 6 months of graduation; increase by 5% by AY20-21 and by 10% by AY25-26 relative to baseline (SS/SE-WG)

**Items in the “Parking Lot”**

As one may imagine, several excellent and valuable ideas emerged through our discussions that are not contained within the strategies presented above. We attempted to synthesize all of our ideas into a concise number of strategies that we believed would have the greatest impact on student success and creating a transformational experience for our students over the next decade. However, we have provided a list of “parking lot” items below. These are ideas the Strategic Planning Steering Committee might wish to incorporate, in whole or in part, into the final university strategic plan. The university might also evaluate and/or implement these ideas outside of the strategic planning process.

* Be kind! We have spent a significant amount of time in our working group discussing the importance of being kind and professional to our students and to each other. Without students, WKU would not exist as an institution. It is incumbent on all WKU employees to support and engage all of our students. One negative interaction between a faculty member and a student, or a staff member and a student, can influence a student to withdraw from coursework and sever his/her relationship with WKU forever. WKU employees must always be mindful that each and every interaction with our students has implications for student success and the student experience.
* WKU must offer the appropriate courses at the right time in the appropriate format with ample numbers of seats to ensure that students can progress toward a degree or certificate in a timely manner. The university can engage in a healthy strategic planning process and develop new ideas to promote student success and a transformative student experience. But, if students cannot enroll in the courses that they need to graduate in a timely manner, then all of these strategies will fail and the goals articulated will not be met.
* Core business hours at the university are from 8:00-4:30pm. Many students, especially working professionals who have family commitments, need greater flexibility. We recommend keeping the university open later at least 1 night per week so that students can have access (via in person and phone/text) to advisors, admissions and financial aid staff, and representatives from academic units.
* The current academic calendar does not support students who need seasonal employment to pay for their education. Currently, the university closes for a period of 5 days for the Thanksgiving Holiday. During this time period, many students (who have the financial means to do so) return home because many campus offices and services are closed. These students then return for 1 week of classes and 1 week of final exams before returning home again for the 5-6 week winter break. We recommend shifting the entire academic calendar 3 weeks to the left/sooner. Fall semester could begin in early to mid-August and end just before Thanksgiving. The university could offer a winter-term for three weeks between the Thanksgiving Break and the winter holiday/New Year’s break. The university could reopen in early January for the start of the spring semester, which would conclude in late April. This structure would allow our students to work in paid employment during the holiday period (from Thanksgiving through New Year’s). Moreover, students would be able to begin working in summer positions well ahead of students who are attending other institutions. This change could also help students save some travel funds as they would have to return home once at Thanksgiving as opposed to the current system, where many students return home for Thanksgiving and then again two weeks later at the end of the Fall semester.
* Currently, the WKU summer semester/session has 9 unique start dates. Students and academic advisors experience difficulty under the current system building schedules across these 9 different start dates. We should consider returning to the 3-week May term, 5-week June term, 5-week July term, or an 8-week June/July term. The added flexibility of the current system causes unwarranted confusion for students seeking to build a consistent schedule of courses over the summer term.