2023-2028
STRATEGIC PLAN
Our Framework for the Future

THOMAS UNIVERSITY

Strategic Planning Context

Higher education is considered an asset of the public good that produces a ripple effect throughout society by promoting personal development, economic growth, technological innovation, exchange of knowledge and positive social change. Higher education institutions are essential actors in the promotion of lifelong learning and cultural awareness that results in a lower chance for violence and incarceration, improved health outcomes, civic engagement, feelings of empowerment, and advanced career opportunities. For individuals considered at-risk and vulnerable, higher education can be a key that unlocks economic security and a stable future.

In the midst of the fast-moving dynamics of social, economic and technological change, higher education faces opportunities and challenges unlike any other industry. In view of this reality, planning for Thomas University (TU) has and must continue to include consideration of several factors that impact postsecondary education today. First, with diversity of provision in higher education and student mobility enhanced by technology, contemporary learners and their expectations differ from those of previous generations, so we must adapt to the nuances of the new learner. Second, in light of the rapid changes in the global economy and industry, we must adapt to engaging and working together with various industries to bring corporations and the University together for productive collaborations and enrichment that is mutually beneficial. Third, as a result of greater financial burden on federal and state level agencies, it is unrealistic to expect compounded increase of financial aid support for students (e.g., PELL Grant, Georgia HOPE Scholarship and GTE Grant) to promote affordability. Consequently, we must adapt to the change in aid funding models for higher education, while ensuring operational efficiency, programmatic quality and sustainability.

In today's capricious higher education environment, private non-profit universities must do more than focus on high quality academic programming through the traditional lens of liberal arts education. Institutions must adapt, be inspiring, be innovative and create a community of shared interests. The city, state and region in which Thomas University calls home, along with the global settings in which we operate, all require TU to be forward-thinking in pursuit of new opportunities and pioneering in our response to societal needs. In response to this demand, Thomas University presents the framework of its plan.

The Process

Thomas University's previous strategic plan covered the 5-year period from 2017 to 2022. To sustain existing institutional priorities and develop new initiatives, a Strategic Planning Team was assembled in 2022 with the end goal of launching a new strategic plan in Fall of 2023. The team immediately began the evaluation of the University's status relative to the conclusion of the 2017 Strategic Plan. The findings were presented in the 2017-2022 Strategic Plan Report. The University's identified level of success relative to the plan served as an informational baseline for the development of the current plan. When coupled by an assessment of the Mission, Vision, Core Values, Challenges and Opportunities, the identified achievements served to substantially inform the work and led to a successful draft of a plan by February 2023. The team solicited additional input for the draft plan from internal and external stakeholders including the University's Board of Trustees, students, faculty, staff, and affiliates which served as an essential step of the overall strategic planning process. The feedback from our stakeholders was incorporated into the draft planning tool and led to the formulation of the final draft document presented for Board review at their April 2023 meeting.

Participants

The Strategic Planning Team was led by Co-Chairs, Mr. Randy Livingston, CPA and Vice President of Finance and Administration, along with Dr. Dañáe Johnson, Vice President of Institutional Effectiveness and Research. The team also included executive leadership members: Mrs. Susan Backofen, Vice President of Enrollment Management, Dr. Robert Bohman, Vice President of Student Life, Mr. Stephen Ferguson, Vice President of Military and Corporate Relations, Dr. John Meis, Vice President of Academic Affairs, and Mr. Kurt Stringfellow, Vice President of Advancement and Athletic Director, who served as liaisons for each departmental sector of the institution. A combined 40 students, faculty, staff, and affiliated stakeholders who possessed a strong interest or expertise in the proposed goal areas of the plan were surveyed to provide individual feedback. The group was asked to give input on all aspects of the plan and to consider its alignment with the current institutional Mission. The group also provided their perspectives of unique challenges and opportunities they identified from the strategic initiatives presented in the plan.

Identification of Goals and Strategies

Development of the institutional goals and objectives took several stages including: data collection, analysis, selection and common consent. The team examined data from a variety of internal and external sources which included information that benchmarked TU against peer institutions both in and out of the state of Georgia. The team analyzed relevant snapshot and trend data included in customized reports from the Institute of Educational Statistics (National Center for Educational Statistics— Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System Reports), Council of Independent Colleges Key Indicators Tool and Financial Indicators Tool Reports, enrollment and retention trends,

revenue trends, and several other key performance metrics. Standard planning activities, such as SWOT analysis, gap analysis, environmental scan, and market factors (via analysis of benchmarked composite reports) were conducted to identify the University's current activities, institutional position, and factors impacting a newly proposed strategic directive for TU.

As a result of the data analysis and the proposed strategic charge, new goals and objectives were selected to address the Milestone themes designed to expand institutional strengths, while driving increased enrollment, establishment of new markets and increased institutional sustainability. To ensure consistency in the process and to promote impartial review of proposed goals and objectives, a single planning tool was implemented. The tool included outlined goals, the associated objectives per goal, and the accountability measures of key performance indicators and select targets. The tool was presented in document format to the review team and the Board of Trustees.

The critiques from the Board of Trustees and the review team indicated which goals, objectives or key performance indicators should be rejected, accepted without revision, or accepted with revisions and clarification. The summary of responses suggested the need for clarification of select key performance indicators and clarification regarding select language associated with goals. Based on the reviewers' collective assessment, the final draft of the strategic plan for 2023-2028 was formulated and presented to the Board of Trustees for final review and approval.

Our History

Located in the beautiful historic city of Thomasville, Georgia, Thomas University is a regionally accredited, non-profit university with a rich history. TU provides an educational experience that explores and develops each student's full potential. Situated on 75 acres just 30 miles north of Tallahassee, Florida, TU offers associate, bachelor's, master's and education specialist degrees at our main campus, online and at satellite locations in Tallahassee and across Georgia.

Our student body includes traditional students, professionals returning to college, members of the military and citizens from around the globe. TU students participate in a wide variety of activities, including 12 varsity and junior varsity athletic teams.

Thomas University's origins date back to 1950 when the Primitive Baptist Church chartered the institution as Birdwood Junior College at the winter home of the Honorable W. Cameron Forbes, former Governor General of the Philippines, Ambassador to Japan and grandson of Ralph Waldo Emerson. The Forbes Building, built in 1932, is one of the original structures on campus and is still in use today. The architecture of the building inspired the graphic elements of the TU logo and the design of Smith-Bonvillian Hall, which was built much later.

In 1976, the Primitive Baptist Church relinquished control of the college and the name was changed to Thomas County Community College. In 1979, the college became nonsectarian and independent. The name was changed to Thomas College in 1986, and the first four-year degrees were offered in 1988.

In December 1998, Thomas College was approved by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) to offer graduate degrees. In January 2000, the name was changed to Thomas University.

Thomas University has not only become the school of choice for this region but has also taken its dynamic educational programs worldwide. Hundreds of international students have earned their degrees at our campus in Thomasville, Georgia.

In 2017, Thomas University opened the Center for Professional Learning offering customized training and certification preparation classes in a variety of areas including contracting, cyber security and project management.

The Center for Military Life was established in 2018 to support military personnel and their families' service throughout the military from pre-enlistment to veteran status. TU is a proud partner with the Community College of the Air Force offering seamless transfer of CCAF associate degrees to TU bachelor's degree programs. TU is also an approved General Education Mobile (GEM) provider for Air Force personnel. Thomas University is an active participant in the voluntary education programs for all branches, providing access to quality education. The Veterans Services and Career Transition Center is available to all veterans and active duty personnel on campus and in the surrounding area.

Vision

Thomas University will be a national leader in innovative teaching and interactive technology that engages students in creative problem-solving for the Information Age.

Mission

Thomas University is a private, comprehensive, university offering undergraduate and graduate degree programs as well as training for non-credit industry certifications to prepare students to serve the common good through industry, government, and community.

Values

...dynamic learning environments that engage students in their intellectual and personal development;
...rigorous intellectual studies that require creativity, discipline and personal responsibility;
...diversity and its use as a learning tool to teach that the world is a better place when respect for the individual is central to our relationship with others;
...community involvement, including cultural and artistic experiences, that enriches the lives of our students, as well as their fellow citizens;
...individual attention to all students;
...a lifetime connection with our students.

Strategic Challenges and Opportunities

Introduction

Colleges and universities face unprecedented challenges and threats in the current higher education environment. Such factors include enrollment declines, rising operational costs, college alternatives and political interference. Rapid changes and influences on the educational environment demand institutions reinvent themselves or risk alienating contemporary learners with different expectations and seeking various educational options. Though the pressures of external change can be challenging, institutional realignment is essential for producing opportunities.

To successfully align an organization to change that is influenced by market environment, factors such as adaptability, innovation and branding are arguably among the most important. Not surprising, the organizational identity of Thomas University has evolved as a natural consequence of its rapid historical growth and shifts in institutional categorization. Though Thomas University has an impactful mission, effective academic programming and a unique history, we lacked a concrete organizational identity to incorporate in our calculus for determining market position, establishing a competitive advantage, and conveying our story well. This being the case, the impact of decades of progress and change relative to the inception of Thomas University was examined to reconcile its numerous external public classifications and perceptions of identity. This investigation was conducted by analysis of TU's categorization status within the Carnegie Classification system, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) peer categorization, and comparative analysis of liberal arts colleges and comprehensive university characteristics. Consequently, it was determined that Thomas University has developed into a Comprehensive University with an open campus.

As experienced at Thomas University, traditional residential (domestic) students who typically attend comprehensive universities live within the local city or region and primarily seek educational programs aligned with careers in the local or regional area. The faculty of comprehensive universities take on heavier teaching loads and engage in some research, although not with the emphasis or the extramural funding found at research "level-one" universities. In view of these attributes, comprehensive universities—like Thomas University—have proven to be the "people's universities" that are driven to not only educate but support regional economies and civic life.

Framing the Positioning Strategy

Thomas University is not confined to Thomas County and has not been for several decades as a result of distance education programming offered by the university. Statistically, traditional residential student populations that select a comprehensive university or liberal college for postsecondary education choose to attend institutions within 120 miles of their home or on average a maximum of a three- hour drive from their home. Moreover, low income students who have the opportunity to attend college will choose to enroll in a college within the local city if available. Based on these factors, Thomas University has elected to define its regional market to include area military installations which serve to delimit the physical boundary for recruitment of both traditional residential students and online learners.

This new regional approach has allowed for greater opportunities to establish community relationships and local area branding for the University. The strategy has also enabled the expansion of our military friendly campaign and our ability to redouble our efforts toward increasing educational opportunities for veterans, their dependents and local residents. As a result, the newly defined regional market strategy has proven to positively impact TU's targeted enrollment goals.

Beyond the benefit to our enrollment goals, the approach has also enabled TU to strengthen our support of job development and growth within the region by expanding the academic portfolio to include market-driven programming. To facilitate program development, we considered the effect and consequential benefit of military installations for local community areas—specifically, their impact as a substantive economic anchor and job creator for communities throughout region. Accordingly, we examined the surrounding regional industry and job growth with emphasis on the state of Georgia. A review of a 2022 report by Georgia Power Community and Economic Development indicated the specific target industry areas with the highest demand or sector growth included: Aerospace, Automotive, Chemical Manufacturing, Cybersecurity, Data Centers, Digital Media & Entertainment, Fabricated Metal, FinTech, Food Processing, Life Sciences, Plastic and Rubber Manufacturing and Warehouse Distribution. To date, Thomas University offers some form of programming for all areas except four—Chemical Manufacturing, FinTech, Food Processing and Warehouse Distribution. However, to have a meaningful impact on preparing students for these career areas with high regional and global market demand, we must: (1) continue to be innovative in our method to provide the delivery of academic programs for the contemporary learner, (2) align with opportunities for continuing education based on substantiated market- demand, (3) increase our stakeholder engagement, and (4) expand efforts for venture capital for sustainability, increased educational opportunities, and revenue generation. The method by which these fundamental activities will be actualized is through the new strategic direction.

The New Direction

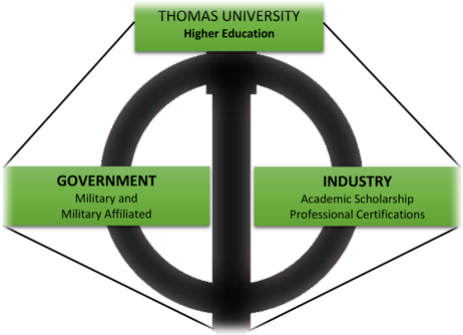
The landscape of higher education demands constant examination, institutional versatility, and the ability to pivot. Making the right decisions about where to direct university resources, finding niche markets to invest in, and creating innovative pathways and programs will not only sustain TU as a "school of choice for students", but support our efforts to help the community continue to thrive and prosper. As a Comprehensive University, TU is uniquely positioned to respond to the identified educational needs of our region. The challenges and opportunities for Thomas University fall into five overarching themes: educational opportunities, industry-university engagement, sponsored research and philanthropy, workforce development, and affordability and quality.

This strategic framework builds on Thomas University's areas of strength, such as innovative teaching and learning, expanded community engagement, athletics, and philanthropy. The framework has been structured to allow TU to focus on the most immediate issues we are positioned to address. The framework focuses on a multi-faceted approach that connects Thomas University with government and industry in a way not previously implemented by the institution. TU's new strategic direction is crystalized within the President's Vision for the next five years.

PRESIDENTIAL VISION & STRATEGIC MILESTONES

Presidential Vision

Thomas University will continue to be the lynchpin that ties industry, higher education, and the government.



Strategic Milestones

- TU will increase the number of military affiliated learners.
- TU will increase the number of Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) that provide for training, tuition assistance, and employment opportunities for students and graduates.
- TU will increase the amount of external dollars secured through educational grants, contracts, and philanthropy.
- TU will introduce innovative credit and non-credit programming that meet the needs of industry.
- TU will seek to stabilize educational costs related to academic programming.

STRATEGY

Educational Opportunities

Military service members learn the values of teamwork, discipline and perseverance—three fundamental skills that drive success in life, academic pursuits and the veteran who transitions into the role of a student-athlete. The skills and talents they employ, regardless of whether they are serving to defend our country, excelling in a class, or dominating in and out of a game, is a source of pride for Thomas University and the community we serve. To honor those talents, Thomas University will continue to build our military transition programming and associated athletics, along with our relationships with military and affiliated entities, to render an extended pathway to educational opportunities for our military affiliated learners.

MILESTONE #1 - TU will increase the number of military affiliated learners

Goal 1

Thomas University will support enrollment growth through establishing relationships with military and military affiliated entities.

Objective A
Establish partnerships with organizations serving Active Duty and Veterans Service Organizations

KPI/METRIC 1:
Identify qualifying orgs

KPI/METRIC 2:
Increase partnerships by 3 annually

KPI/METRIC 3:
Increase MOUs by 3 annually

Objective B
Secure a pathway to academic program offerings by formalizing agreements with the Department of Defense Medical Training Command (DOD MTC)

KPI/METRIC 1:
Execute agreement with DOD MTC

KPI/METRIC 2:
Establish degree pathways aligned with specified functional areas

Objective C
Submit applications for approval to Air University Associate to Bachelors Cooperative to offer online degree programs that align with Community College of the Air Force (CCAF)

KPI/METRIC 1:
Identify what programs align with CCAF

KPI/METRIC 2:
Submit 3 applications for AUABC approval

Goal 2

Thomas University will develop a new marketing strategy for each of the various constituencies that make up "military affiliated learners."

Objective A
Identify and engage social media groups aimed at active duty and veterans

KPI/METRIC 1:
Create a list of what social media groups will be engaged.

KPI/METRIC 2:
Increase the number of shared posts annually.

Objective B
Engage and establish partnerships with Education Service Officers from surrounding military installations.

KPI/METRIC 1:
Create a list of Education Service Officers from surrounding military installations to engage.

KPI/METRIC 2:
Establish communication medium to provide outreach to ESOs a minimum of 3 times annually.

Industry-University Engagement

TU recognizes the need to expand our notion and redefine our concept of industry-university engagement and collaboration. This form of commitment promotes the development of cooperative relationships that provide mutually beneficial opportunities. Though Thomas University has successfully amassed a number of MOUs for academic program initiatives historically, we have to reexamine and cultivate new methods for partnering with industry, corporations, and other organizations to render sustainable growth opportunities.

TU must also focus on establishing its profile as a resource for intellectual exchange with industry leaders. This exchange would open opportunities for direct contribution to resolving industry challenges, allow direct access to evolving innovations that enhance academic offerings, and provide practical exchange to help better prepare students for industry locally and abroad. Greater industry-university engagement can lead to high-impact research and internship opportunities for students, funding opportunities, and employment for students immediately after graduation. To ensure success, TU will extend internally to our community and actively support organized cooperative efforts across the university as we work to expand opportunities for collaboration and mentoring among faculty, students, alumni, and other stakeholders.

MILESTONE #2 - TU will increase the number of MOUs that provide for training, tuition assistance, and employment opportunities for students and graduates.

Goal 1

Thomas University will support enrollment growth by increasing the number of MOUs that provide educational and training opportunities.

Objective A
Grow enrollment through increasing the number of MOUs

KPI/METRIC 1:
Achieve an average annual enrollment increase of 3% of students enrolled through MOUs

Objective B
Thomas University will assess the effectiveness of MOUs

KPI/METRIC 1:
Thomas University will create a means of assessing and reporting the effectiveness with MOU partners

KPI/METRIC 2:
Secure consensus of what constitutes an effective MOU for each MOU outstanding

KPI/METRIC 3:
Assess existing MOUs to determine the need to be restructured to enhance educational and training opportunities.

Goal 2

Thomas University will establish internship and career services partnerships with organizations.

Objective A
Identify and engage organizations to formulate partnerships to provide career pathways for our students

KPI/METRIC 1:
Increase the number of MOUs that offer internship or employment opportunities

KPI/METRIC 2:
Create a system to establish effective communication between Career Services, external entities, and academic programs

Objective B
Increase the number of students that make use of internships

KPI/METRIC 1:
Increase the number of internship recipients by 2% annually

Sponsored Research and Philanthropy

Funding provides opportunities for the advancement of institutional aims to prepare students for successful careers, responsible leadership, and scholarship that benefits society. This ambition can be realized through continued alignment of donor passion and generosity with the ideals of Thomas University, coupled by, the sustained application of "intellectual elbow grease" to secure grant funding.

Thomas University has a successful grants history. However, we lack the infrastructure necessary to support our faculty and students that would allow TU to accelerate our research projects to new competitive heights. To build on our success, TU will invest in research efforts by establishing an organizational arm for grants and contracts management, bolster efforts of providing professional development opportunities, and galvanize research activity and collaboration through the promotion of ambitious funded research projects.

TU has made a great deal of progress with forming relationships with generous donors and stakeholders who believe in the mission of the University. We value every dollar invested in TU by our benefactors and by our students who invest in themselves through tuition. The investment in Thomas University not only supports the fundamentals of our vision to serve as a "national leader in innovative teaching" but also helps provide the critical resources TU needs to meet its mission's underlying principle to prepare students to be successful in their careers. An expansion of our diversified endowment portfolio, increased donor gifts and alumni engagement will help Thomas University achieve our mission.

MILESTONE #3 - TU will increase the amount of external dollars secured through educational grants, contracts, and philanthropy.

Goal 1

Professional Growth and Development - Thomas University will provide training, support and incentives for faculty members who elect to pursue grants.

Objective A
Thomas University will create a plan for providing resources and training for faculty on selection, writing, and management of grants.

KPI/METRIC 1:
Thomas University will train interested faculty on selection, writing, and management of grants.

KPI/METRIC 2:
TU will create a training module for faculty that promotes uniformity of grant preparation

Objective B
Identify uniform financial incentives that can be awarded with any type of successful grant endeavor.

KPI/METRIC 1:
Ensure the annual budget accommodates awarding financial incentives to successful grant writers.

Goal 2

Research and Academic Grants - Thomas University will create an institutional system to facilitate grant selection, writing, management and reporting.

Objective A
Enhance developmental opportunities for stakeholders to advance research and training skills to improve grantsmanship

KPI/METRIC 1:
Number of professional research trainings and continuing education opportunities: Professional Development - Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

KPI/METRIC 2:
Number of professional research training and development opportunities: Grant writing workshops—Pre and Post Award Certifications level workshops

Objective B
To create an institutional grants management process

KPI/METRIC 1:
Establish a grants management position

Goal 3

Thomas University will enhance the mission of the organization through an active effort to encourage philanthropy.

Objective A
Alumni Development

KPI/METRIC 1:
Establish alumni chapters and network

KPI/METRIC 2:
Alumni Board of Governors is representative of the alumni base

Objective B
Expand into new regional markets

KPI/METRIC 1:
Increase the number of new marketing benefactors serving on the Board of Trustees and committees of the university

KPI/METRIC 2:
Increase in giving indices – i.e., Annual, Capital and Endowment Campaigns

Goal 4

Thomas University Center for Military Life will explore contract and grant opportunities.

Objective A
Identify federal grants and contracts aligned with the objectives of Center for Military Life (CMIL)

KPI/METRIC 1:
Review contract solicitation opportunities

KPI/METRIC 2:
Identify potential partnership opportunities for collaboration on grants and contracts

Objective B
Identify potential corporate partners that support CMIL initiatives

KPI/METRIC 1:
Engage key stakeholders from the defense industry

Workforce Development

Expectations of the contemporary learner has caused higher education to undergo an inescapable transformation. Universities must adapt in order to navigate the distinctive needs and demands of the new generation of learners. Higher education no longer serves as simply the means by which an individual becomes knowledgeable about sciences and prestigious fields. Today, higher education must be creative and adjust its traditional academic portfolio designed for scholarship, personal development, economic benefit and social change by shifting its offering to include industry-driven professional certifications that allow the working professional to gain skills for immediate advancement of career opportunities.

Thomas University recognizes the need to serve not only the traditional undergraduate student but the working professional. As a result, TU offers more than 70 relevant industry-driven professional certification (non-degree) programs. Though our programs have been successfully implemented, we must further develop infrastructure to engage potential students and demonstrate how our program will uniquely prepare them for advancement in their chosen career field or connect them to their desired career field where they live. Thomas University will invest in a team of dedicated corporate business development and recruitment specialists to deploy within our newly defined regional market to establish industrywide relationships that connect to the University and promote the offerings that would enhance the expertise and skill sets of their employees.

MILESTONE #4 - TU will introduce innovative credit and non-credit programming that meet the needs of industry.

Goal 1

Thomas University will create new programs that prepare students to pursue careers in high-demand fields as identified by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Objective A
Establish relevant non-credit training or certification programming to meet current industry demands

KPI/METRIC 1:
Identify and hire subject matter experts to develop non-credit certification programs in high demand career fields

KPI/METRIC 2:
Create a working list of "high demand career fields"

Objective B
Establish relevant academic programming

KPI/METRIC 1:
Create a working list of "high demand career fields"

KPI/METRIC 2:
Launch programming based on financial feasibility

Affordability and Quality

Student success is the foundational driver of our central mission to prepare students for successful careers and responsible leadership. Two known factors of student success rest on institutional affordability and quality. We recognize that cost too often serves as a hindrance to low income students and underserved populations. For the working student paying for college, maintaining educational costs at an affordable level can eliminate a primary barrier to academic program completion. TU is positioned to find innovative methods to make college more financially accessible though our efforts to control educational costs while safeguarding the learning experiences and educational expectations of our students. To that end, Thomas University will continue to consistently examine educational costs and engage committed external stakeholders with the expertise and skills to provide guidance as program advisors. Though TU has Advisory Councils, we will raise the profile of our councils to national visibility in parallel with further enhancing our academic programming quality, and ultimately, TU's profile to national standing.

MILESTONE #5 - TU will seek to stabilize educational costs related to academic programming.

Goal 1

Thomas University will expand the use of open source or other cost alternatives for traditional textbooks and other learning materials.

Objective A
Determine the availability of comparable low-cost alternatives to current resources

KPI/METRIC 1:
Replace a portion of high cost materials with low cost alternatives annually based on analysis

Goal 2

Thomas University will implement a student laptop program based on the evaluation of cost effectiveness.

Objective A
Evaluate the need for and cost effectiveness of a laptop program and TU's capacity to manage such.

KPI/METRIC 1:
Determine what percentage of students enter college without their own laptop.

KPI/METRIC 2:
Determine financial feasibility

Goal 3

Thomas University will improve the efficiency of program delivery through the utilization of actionable data and standardization of internal metrics defining satisfactory student-to-faculty ratio and governing the deployment of faculty resources for all programs.

Objective A
Develop a system for objective evaluation of program sustainability.

KPI/METRIC 1:
Identify appropriate student-faculty ratio and other program efficiency metrics.