

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations podcast. I'm John Boccacino, Senior Internal Communications Specialist at Syracuse University.

Jamie Winders:

Academic strategic planning that it's a roadmap to the future that we all collectively create. And so I think of it as answering three basic questions. And so the first question is where are we right now? And in particular, what are we already really good at? What are we almost really good at? And we think of that as the distinctive excellence we already see on campus. So that's the first question. The second question we ask is, where do we want to go? What do we want to be? What's that aspirational future state we'd love to see here at Syracuse University? And then the third question is, how do we get there?

And so we think of the Academic Strategic Plan as laying out those three questions so that it's that roadmap to where we want to go. And then it also becomes the set of principles and ideas that help shape our decisions, that help us think about, of all the things that we could do as a university, what should we be doing to reach that future state that we want?

John Boccacino:

Our guests today on the 'Cuse Conversations podcast, we are thrilled and honored to have on two esteemed guests from the academic side here at Syracuse University, talking about the Academic Strategic Plan and the process that is going into this essential roadmap that really will dictate where we as a university and academic community want to go over the next five years. It's been a comprehensive process. It's involved the community members at every step of the way. I think it really makes it special that we are getting the feedback from our faculty, our staff, and our students here on campus as far as the makeup of this strategic plan. And our guests today joining us to talk about the Academic Strategic Plan, it's Gretchen Ritter who is our Vice Chancellor, Provost and Chief Academic Officer. And Jamie Winders an Associate Provost for Faculty Affairs. I thank you so much for making the time to join us today.

Provost Gretchen Ritter:

Thank you.

Jamie Winders:

Yeah.

Provost Gretchen Ritter:

We're really pleased to have the opportunity to talk about this.

Jamie Winders:

Yeah, we're super excited to be here.

John Boccacino:

In academia, we love our phrases and we love our terminology and academic strategic plan can sound a little bit intimidating. Can we break down, just for those of us who have never been involved in a

process like this, what exactly is an academic strategic plan and what are the goals we hope to accomplish with this Academic Strategic Plan moving Syracuse University forward?

Jamie Winders:

So John, as a geographer, I love that you described it as a roadmap because that's exactly how I think of academic strategic planning, that it's a roadmap to the future that we all collectively create. And so I think of it as answering three basic questions. And so the first question is where are we right now? And in particular, what are we already really good at? What are we almost really good at? And we think of that as the distinctive excellence we already see on campus. So that's the first question. The second question we ask is where do we want to go? What do we want to be? What's that sort of aspirational future state we'd love to see here at Syracuse University? And then the third question is how do we get there?

And so we think of the Academic Strategic Plan as laying out those three questions so that it's that roadmap to where we want to go. And then it also becomes the set of principles and ideas that help shape our decisions, that help us think about, of all the things that we could do as a university, what should we be doing to reach that future state that we want?

John Boccacino:

Provost Ritter, I want to piggyback off of that question. In your esteemed opinion, how can an academic strategic plan set Syracuse University up for sustained long term success?

Provost Gretchen Ritter:

Yeah, thanks John. I think the benefit of a plan like this is that it's a coming together around what we're seeking to achieve as a community. And so as Jamie has talked about, part of that starts with the why question. I've encouraged everybody to start conversations about academic strategic planning by asking themselves why do we do what we do? And I think great way to think about this is to say, imagine you are talking to someone you're trying to recruit, say a faculty candidate or perspective student, undergraduate or graduate student, what do you tell them? What do you tell them about why this is the place that they want to come to?

And when you get people to start talking about that, you surface all the things that they're proud of, you surface all the things that we're really great at, you surface all the ways that as an institution we already make a difference. And then I think our job is to think together about given the moment we're in, given what we see on the horizon five years from now, what should we be thinking about in doing collectively to [inaudible 00:05:41] a difference in a way that is distinctive to the areas of excellence that you see here at Syracuse?

Jamie Winders:

I think one of the beauties of academia is that when we think about Gretchen used that phrase coming together is that we collectively chart our own path and that we is faculty, it's students, it's staff, it's often alum, and that process can sometimes be a little chaotic, but it's also the things that make universities work at their best. And I think that's what our goal with this process is that coming together to think about where do we collectively want to go and how do we get there?

John Boccacino:

I love the use of coming together because all of us that work or attend school or employed by the university, we have a passion for Syracuse University, it's a unique passion. But I feel like there's members of our community still... They might need a little bit of a sell job on the Academic Strategic Plan. Why should you care about this Academic Strategic Plan and what are the best ways you can get involved in voicing your feedback on this?

Provost Gretchen Ritter:

I think people should get involved with it for both principled and practical reasons. I think they should get involved in it because if they believe that what they're doing makes a positive difference in the world, this is a way to accelerate and enhance that difference. So at a principled level, if you think educating students and helping them to develop their skills, their talents and ambitions makes a positive difference in our community, our country, in our world, then thinking about how do we do that at an even higher level is something that I think people should want to be involved with. I think at a practical level, this is, we're developing a social contract for this community. We're saying these are the commitments that we have identified and that we are going to bind ourselves to. So I would hope that everyone would want to be part of the effort to create what that social contract is since it's going to govern our work over the next few years.

John Boccacino:

Jamie, same question for you.

Jamie Winders:

I think it would be a similar thing. And again, I go back to the thing that drew me to academia and that has kept me in it is this sense of being part of this collective project that at root is about the greater good and the public good. And it gives us as members of the campus community an opportunity to be invested in and to shape our collective future in a way we might not see in other kinds of places. And so it's both a privilege, but I think it's also a responsibility as a member of this campus community to be part of that process. And what has been the most exciting thing for me in our planning process thus far is the level of engagement. Campus has really come together and taken the time to do the what's labor intensive work of really thinking about where we want to go.

John Boccacino:

I'm glad you mentioned the labor of love because this is not an easy process to pull off and it's evident if you visit the website academicaffairs.syracuse.edu you can read up more in depth on this conversation of the Academic Strategic Plan, but it's evident that you and the planning group went to great lengths to establish the goal marks along the way. And I want to start off with what you so cleverly called the guideposts. There are three core pillars of the Academic Strategic Plan, researching creative excellence, educational excellence in student success, and the public impact. What made those the three core pillars that we wanted to start focusing on when it comes to this strategic plan?

Provost Gretchen Ritter:

So John, I would tell you that we have benefited over a number of months from lots and lots of conversations. From conversations with faculty, from conversations with deans, with students, with members of the board of trustee, with alumni. And these are among the areas that have emerged as central to what we do. And I would also suggest to you that when I see those pillar areas for me, they really are a way of talking about our mission as a university. This is what we're about, this is why we

exist. It's to help create new knowledge and to foster human understanding. It's to educate and equip students to be our leaders for the future. It's to have through those things we just talked about and in other ways, a positive impact on our communities and in partnership with our communities at the local level, the national level and the global level. So I think that all felt very organic to this, but I don't know if Jamie wants to add anything to that.

Jamie Winders:

Let me explain my version of how we ended up where we are. So about 6:00 AM one morning over the summer, a couple of us who had been working on academic strategic planning get this text from the Provost that says, "Here's how I'm thinking about our Academic Strategic Plan." And then we got these two pictures of drawings that she had made and they had these pillars and then these lines. And then we spent about the rest of the day trying to figure out what are we looking at, what is this model?

But it was clear to us that we were going to chart a very different path in terms of how we think about the act of planning. And so the more we talked to her, we started to get a sense of the pillars and then those four crosscutting sets of core values around diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility around global impact, thinking about budget, thinking about enrollment. And so we then built the whole planning process around those areas. And what's been really amazing to watch is how much people have embraced it as really resonating with how they also think about campus. But it did begin with a 6:00 AM text and a picture.

John Boccacino:

Some of the best ideas seem to come from those early morning, either you're woken up out of a sound sleep or your brain is mossy first thing in the morning. And I can just envision based on again, these cross pillars of what we're trying to achieve here with this strategic plan, it goes to show the passion that both of you have for this project. And it's not just the two of you who are putting out this strategic plan. There are work groups that are involved and there's community involvement that has been involved as well going through the month of October into November, there are opportunities to have your feedback heard from the campus community on this strategic plan. What are your goals when it comes to these forums with the campus community? What are your goals of having so many voices involved in this process?

Provost Gretchen Ritter:

So let me just say first John, that I am so grateful, I am so grateful to all the folks who have shown up, who have shared reactions, ideas, who have asked great questions. It has already given me a sense of this as something that has a broader collective ownership, which is the goal here. So why are we so focused on getting as many voices involved as possible? So I a scholar who works among other things on deliberative democracy, I believe strongly that getting the participation of all the different stakeholder groups into this process means just because of that the outcomes will be better because we will have the benefit of all that creative thinking of different perspectives and experiences contributing to a larger process and helping us to generate the right core ideas to focus on out of this.

I also very much believe that the plan is only step one. The real work begins after we have a plan that we've all endorsed and bought into. And for people to feel like this is something that they want to participate in that guides our collective work here, they need to be part of the process. So part of the aim is to really create a vision that is collectively owned so that it will guide the work at all levels of the university.

John Boccacino:

Not to put you on the spot, Jamie, but can you think of any type of feedback that you've heard so far through these forums that really has made you stop and think and maybe want to interpret this and incorporate it into the plan moving forward?

Jamie Winders:

So I think the most telling moment for me coming out of the... So we have three pillars, we have four crosscut areas. Each one of those areas has held at least two of these campus conversations or these public forums. And earlier this week I was at this second forum for the research and creative excellence pillar and they were bringing back what they had learned from feedback in lots of different venues and were presenting some preliminary ideas to the people on the call to get a double check of this is what we've learned, is this resonating with you?

And toward the end, this was on Zoom, someone put in the chat, "Could we get into smaller groups and keep talking about these ideas?" And to me that was such a telling moment because it's the second reason that we do this. It's not only to get the feedback to create this robust plan, but it's also to model and encourage the cross campus conversations about research, about creative endeavors, about our work as scholars. And that was such an important moment for me when that happened organically of people saying, "I'm really getting value out of talking with folks in other parts of campus about what we collectively do in the area of research. I want these conversations to continue." And that to me is what the process of academic strategic planning is doing is it's helping us identify and shape that vision that we then all want to be part of moving forward.

John Boccacino:

I know there was the watershed moment when Provost Ritter had the text messages that at 6:00 in the morning to get us on this path. But part that I didn't get to dive into a little bit, and you've hit on it, you both have hit on this, are the working groups that have been formed to shape the process of these shared and cross-cutting values. And Jamie, you mentioned them in passing, diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility, global engagement, enrollment strategy and resource sustainability and budgeting. Provost Ritter, what was the thought process when you had that brilliant moment in the morning of sending this diagram along to your colleague? What was your thought process behind those four shared and cross-cutting values?

Provost Gretchen Ritter:

I think a chunk of the credit for this goes to the folks in the School of Education. So for the last couple of years, the School of Education has been working on a re-visioning effort for the school. And along the way in this past year I've heard from and been in conversation with many of the people working on that and I have been deeply impressed by their effort. And one of the key parts of that effort, and this is something I talked extensively to Kelly Chandler-Olcott, who's the Interim Dean there about, has been an iterative crosscutting process. In which to create a plan that is coherent at the larger level you have your different working groups talking to each other. And very specifically the commitment that they made at the get go that you should not be treating diversity, equity, inclusion and access as something separate, that it needs to be woven into our core work in everything we do.

And it's something I believe in fully as being a key part of how do we do research and creative work at a level of excellence that we benefit from doing it in a way that is inclusive of different communities, people with different social backgrounds. Similarly, I think in our educational work and in other work,

we have to be preparing people for global citizenship. And it has been part of who we've been as a university throughout so making sure that we do that in a way that is attuned to both the moment we're in and where we're headed that is, for instance, mindful of things like the challenges that climate change will bring to our global community strikes me as quite important. And in terms of thinking about enrollment and resource sustainability, I think of those as two of our core operational levers that if you don't match it up with what you're trying to achieve in terms of the pillar areas and our values, you're not going to be able to achieve them as well.

John Boccacino:

This is really a living document, it's something that adjusts and adapts over time. And I find that so impressive with the fact that we're not just be focused on today's needs and challenges. This is something being done to set Syracuse University up for long term success. If you had to look into your crystal ball, and this can be for either of our guests here on the podcast, what do you think about this plan is really going to help set us apart from our peers and set up our students and faculty and campus community for long term success?

Jamie Winders:

I think we had our running joke in Academic Affairs that no matter what question we ask about academic strategic planning, the answer was always distinctive excellence, no matter what the question, that was always the answer. But I actually think that is in fact the thing that our starting focus on what is it that we're exceptionally good at now and what do we want to be exceptionally good at moving forward? I think that focus is the thing that will help set us apart. Because every university wants to be good at research teaching and we all want to have an impact.

So the core concepts are going to be very similar, but what we've tried to do is really frame the conversation about, to go back to what Gretchen mentioned at the middle, when we brag about Syracuse, what are those stories we tell? What are the things that we point to? Both the things that we're doing now, both the legacy of what Syracuse University has meant and has done over time and also where do we want to be moving forward. And I think that focus on distinctive excellence in the context of all of these different aspects that these core values that we've identified. I think that's the thing that is going to set us apart and really help us chart a path forward for the university.

Provost Gretchen Ritter:

And one of the things I would add to that, I'll add two things to that John, and one of them is that, that also means realizing where the work that we're doing isn't as impactful and being willing to not spend as much time or as much effort in the areas where we don't make a significant difference in order to contribute more and focus more on the areas where we do make a significant difference. So that part of the work is not necessarily easy, but I think thinking about it from the perspective of we have an obligation given all the challenges in the world in the moment we're in to make our highest and best difference.

And the other thing I would say about looking forward, how do we make sure that this is a living document that guides us as a community is if we turn that into a check box exercise, that is a sign of failure as far as I'm concerned. What we need to be adhering to as we go forward is the principles that we're trying to be governed by as we create the document. Which is coming together periodically as a community and saying, what have we achieved? What hasn't worked out the way we had hoped? What have we learned? What's new here that we hadn't anticipated that we have to adjust for? I think that

commitment to engagement as a campus around this will be the key to making this a true living document.

John Boccacino:

I want to give our audience some insights too. This is not something where we're sitting back and waiting, there isn't an ambitious timeline that Academic Affairs has set forth just a few months from now in January. The goal is to have a draft plan ready for review and feedback coming up in the new year. What was the driving force behind this ambitious timeline?

Jamie Winders:

So I think the keyword there is draft. So when we sat down and thought about what's our timeline for producing a refreshed Academic Strategic Plan, we were cognizant of a few things. We did not want the planning process to stretch until the next time we need to revisit the Academic Strategic Plan. And so we wanted to contain that process on purpose so that it would be an intense period of engagement as opposed to this low intensity thing that we're just doing seemingly in perpetuity. The other is that we wanted to really focus on, we want a draft so that we then have a separate semester to engage it, to finesse it, to talk about it, to workshop it, to get feedback on it. And so we were intentional in terms of putting an ambitious timeline around drafting it out so that we had the bandwidth then to really massage it and to work through it and to reflect on does this document which we've drafted accurately reflect where we are and where we want to go.

Provost Gretchen Ritter:

When I talk to students who are working on a dissertation, I say write your first chapter because it will help you figure out what the project's about. It creates the idea, the framework for what the project's about. And then expect once you've finished all the other chapters, that you'll essentially go back and completely rewrite that first chapter because by then you figured out what the project's about. So this is we're writing the first chapter in order to give our community a chance to help us figure out in greater detail what is this really about. And then we'll go back and refine it in a way that represents our collective wisdom as to where we should be headed.

John Boccacino:

My last question for the both of you, before we wrap up this very insightful conversation on the 'Cuse Conversations podcast, you both have very busy schedules, this is something that has taken a lot of your time, but it obviously is a very important project. Why is this something that both of you were so passionate about getting involved with?

Provost Gretchen Ritter:

Honestly, I think it's a huge opportunity for us. I think as a university, we're in a fortunate position. A lot of universities in recent years have not unwell, given the challenges of COVID, changes in enrollment trends, et cetera, and have been set back a bit. Syracuse University is vibrant, it's thriving, it's incredibly well positioned to move ahead. And the world needs us to be making the highest level of contributions that we can. So I feel incredibly fortunate to have the kind of talented partners I have all over the university who are willing to join into this work to say, "How do we collectively think about making the highest possible level of difference as we go ahead."

Jamie Winders:

So I'm passionate about this because Gretchen told me I had to be. Just kidding.

Provost Gretchen Ritter:

You're not supposed to say that Jamie.

Jamie Winders:

Just kidding. So I believe in academic strategic planning because I have seen what it can do in an academic unit. So I was department chair for several years and I also built out and directed a new interdisciplinary institute. And in both cases I saw firsthand the value of taking that time to create a collective vision for what your department or what your institute wants to do and how very important that work is in shaping things like faculty hires, new academic programs. And so I've seen what a good academic strategic plan can do in practice, and so that's why I'm excited about being part of drafting the new plan for the university.

John Boccacino:

In case you're listening, you have not missed your opportunity to get involved with the engagement sessions. They run through the end of October and into November. Again, it's academicaffairs.syracuse.edu. This has been a fantastic conversation. I want to thank our two guests today, Vice Chancellor and Provost and Chief Academic Officer Gretchen Ritter and Jamie Winders, an Associate Provost for Faculty Affairs. Thank you so much you two, keep up the great work and we appreciate your insights.

Provost Gretchen Ritter:

Thanks John.

Jamie Winders:

Thank you John.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the 'Cuse Conversations podcast. My name is John Boccacino, signing off for the 'Cuse Conversations podcast.