

**SMU**

Office of  
the Provost

# TRANSFORMATIVE

2021 ANNUAL REPORT



# FROM THE PROVOST



**H**aving now completed my first year at SMU, a year that will always be remembered for our need to respond to a global pandemic, I reflect with tremendous pride and gratitude on SMU's ability to not just persevere but to thrive. Our successful response to COVID-19 required more, new and different from faculty, staff and students — more vigilance, new tools and technology, and different ways of working. In the midst of COVID, I have consistently challenged our academic community to reflect upon SMU's academic priorities for the next 3–5 years and to develop and implement plans that will allow SMU to reach its full potential as a premier research and teaching university with global impact.

During the interview process, and confirmed time and again upon my arrival to campus in July 2020, I came to understand that SMU was on the verge of breaking through into the uppermost pinnacle of higher education institutions. Through the hard work of our faculty and staff, along with the work of those who came before them — and thanks to the sustained and visionary leadership of President Turner, the generosity of our donors and the students who choose to study with us — SMU is well positioned to reach the next level in terms of academic and research excellence.

SMU has made tremendous strides, particularly over the past two decades, in terms of its academic quality. We are *U.S. News & World Report's* highest ranked university in North Texas (66th in 2021). Also, many of our graduate professional programs are ranked within or near the top 50 (Cox, 44th; Dedman Law, 52nd; Simmons, 59th). And the research productivity and Ph.D. output from our most research-intensive schools (Dedman College of Humanities and Sciences, Lyle School of Engineering and Simmons School of Education and Human Development) earned SMU a “Research Two” position in the most recent Carnegie Classification system reporting cycle. Additionally, Meadows School of the Arts is renowned for its instruction across a broad range of visual, performing and communication arts degrees, and its

faculty continue to excel in traditional as well as creative and innovative contributions to scholarly excellence across its array of disciplines. Perkins School of Theology, home to the internationally renowned Bridwell Library, has experienced renewed student demand and boasts a roster of acclaimed scholars. Achievable through a landmark \$100 million gift, the Moody School of Graduate and Advanced Studies opened during the 2020-2021 academic year and will help bolster graduate education and our research ecosystem. We are poised to continue our great momentum in the years to come.

To guide us in reaching our goals, my primary areas of focus for the next three to five years include:

- Academic Excellence, most directly measurable through ranking systems such as *U.S. News & World Report*, where our goal remains to achieve and sustain top 50 status.
- Achieving and sustaining Research One status as measured by the Carnegie Classification system.
- Meeting the remaining goals for academics in the **2016–2025 Strategic Plan**.
- Implementing and supporting **inclusive excellence initiatives** — most immediately in response to the Black Unity Forum action plan.

This report is organized around these four priorities. The content that follows is a representative illustration of the ways that, working together, our goals for greater academic quality will continue to take shape over the next three to five years.



Sincerely,

Elizabeth G. Loba, Ph.D.  
Provost and Vice President  
for Academic Affairs



**“ A recurring group of priorities have come into shape that we believe will inform our office’s priorities for academic affairs over the next three to five years. ”**

Elizabeth G. Lobo, Ph.D.  
Provost and Vice President  
for Academic Affairs



## ACADEMIC *EXCELLENCE*

**S**MU has achieved incredible enrollment and academic success over the last few years, most notably in terms of our ability to recruit high-achieving students. For the past two years, SMU's incoming classes have been record-setting in terms of size, achievement and diversity. Continued focus on data-driven decision making will be critical in our efforts to sustain these recent advances in academic excellence. Being mindful of how we rank relative to our peers, through established systems such as *U.S. News & World Report*, is one effective way to measure our progress and it remains our goal to achieve and remain within the top 50 colleges and universities.

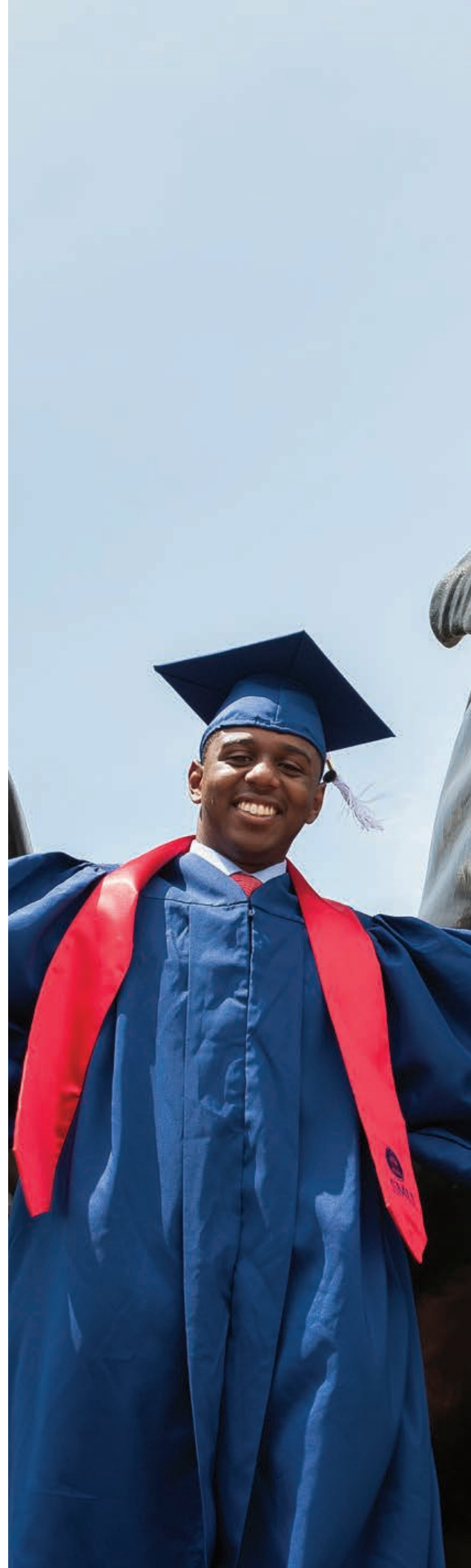
While rankings alone do not determine our strategy, they are an important — and influential — indicator of how we are viewed by our peers and by the students and parents who make school selections. SMU aims to make improvements that, first and foremost, benefit all our students but that will also favorably impact our rankings. For 2021, SMU was ranked 66 and has set a goal to be within *U.S. News & World Report's* top 50 universities.

Over the last decade, our focus has been on improving student quality as measured by standardized test scores. In this way, we have been very successful, raising average ACT scores from 26 in 2007 to 32 in 2021.

Over the past few years, *U.S. News & World Report* has made several changes to their ranking system, with increasing focus on outcome-based measures such as: student debt ratios, the number of Pell-grant recipients, and graduation rates (particularly for Pell-grant recipients).

For the incoming class of fall 2021, we will see an increase in Pell-grant recipients. This is possible thanks to generous support from SMU's donors and to the outstanding work of our Division of Enrollment Services to meet need of high-achieving, Pell-eligible students.

Our focus this year and for the immediate future will be a heightened concentration on Student Outcomes, most specifically as measured by graduation and retention rates. SMU in Four — the University's comprehensive approach to improving student success (described in detail in the next layout) — will be instrumental in achieving our goals.





**Our focus this year and for the immediate future will be a heightened concentration on Student Outcomes, most specifically as measured by graduation and retention rates.**

**Achieving and sustaining top-50 status as measured by *U.S. News & World Report*.**

# Change Starts Here



**W**ell into our second century of achievement, SMU looks to the future and is more committed than ever to the pursuit of even greater academic quality. We are building upon and reaffirming our founding principles and values as we rally behind our commitment to the continued improvement of our programs and the creation of unparalleled opportunities for our students — tomorrow’s innovators, leaders and informed citizens — to successfully achieve their educational objectives. It is in support of these goals that we have developed “SMU in Four” — SMU’s Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP).

SMU in Four, developed over the past year by a broad and representative group of over 100 stakeholders, is the University’s comprehensive approach to improving SMU’s retention and four-year graduation rates. To this end, our QEP

advances student academic success through its most essential form: progress toward degree. The strategies in this QEP build upon existing University practices to integrate three important levers, which will be activated across academic majors and student-support resources to address the needs of all SMU students and ultimately lead them to greater levels of success.

SMU in Four implements three essential pillars that will direct changes to help students in their early years: Early Alert, Academic Advising, and First-year and Gateway Courses.

#### **EARLY ALERT PILLAR**

- Improved collection of early and midterm progress report data to support student interventions to promote student success.

- Faculty will understand the importance of providing students with early and midterm feedback to increase the chances of student success in the course.
- Students and faculty will have an increased understanding of what resources are available to students who are earning a deficient grade.

### ACADEMIC ADVISING PILLAR

- Implement improvements to academic advising through the integration of technology solutions and changes to academic policies, and by empowering advisors to require at-risk students to meet with advising staff.
- Execute changes to the advising experience so that students view their assigned advisors as important resources on campus who care about their situation.

### FIRST-YEAR AND GATEWAY COURSE PILLAR

- Improve the design and instruction in first-year and gateway courses to promote student engagement and success and reduce any unintended equity gaps that might exist.
- Expand faculty information on best practice research of strategies to engage students.

SMU's QEP will adopt new business processes and technological solutions underlying these pillars to improve the student experience with our campus student information system and to increase staff and faculty awareness of student experiences and outcomes. In addition, we will improve information sharing and record-keeping among staff and faculty advisors to enhance the effectiveness of our early alert system and to understand differences in first-year and gateway courses. We will increase faculty understanding in our first-year and gateway courses as to how the early alert system operates and how to engage effectively with University advisors. In other words, these three pillars are intentionally designed to build synergies across the pillars to collectively improve our first-year retention and four-year graduation metrics.

The planned improvements to progress reports, academic advising and first-year and gateway courses present a comprehensive approach to improving SMU's retention and four-year graduation rates. These strategies cut across academic majors and student-support offices to address the needs of all SMU students. The strategies in this QEP build upon existing University practices that have led to significant

successes in retention and graduation. Ultimately, these strategies have the potential to lead to greater levels of student success.

Our goal is to improve the first-year retention rate from 91% to 94% within three years and the four-year graduation rate from 73% to 80% by 2025. We will also address gaps in these outcomes by race and ethnicity, first-generation students and Pell-eligible students. Besides the significant and positive impact to students, this work has the additional benefit of impacting our goals on rankings in *U.S. News & World Report*.

## SMU in Four: The University's comprehensive approach to improving retention and four-year graduation rates.





## OUR JOURNEY *TO R1*

**S**imilar to the *U.S. News & World Report* national rankings of colleges and universities, the Carnegie Classification system attempts to classify and distinguish universities in terms of their research productivity, with “Research One” being the pinnacle of distinction.

To reach our lofty, but achievable, research goals will require progress in each of the seven measures monitored by Carnegie. We have made tremendous progress in recent years, moving from the third tier or Research Three designation to Research Two, and with concentrated effort and investment can reach the next level.

My focus will be on helping SMU advance in our ambitions toward Research One (R1) while maintaining our commitment to outstanding undergraduate education, scholarly, artistic and creative contributions and world-class professional degrees. R1 and teaching excellence should never be viewed as either/or endeavors but rather both/and initiatives.



***SMU  
advanced  
past 55  
universities  
from 2005 to 2018***

Research universities prepare future professionals to tackle problems and create solutions to some of the world’s most pressing challenges. SMU’s faculty members are doing incredible work contributing to both SMU’s teaching mission as well as to our research aspirations. SMU is a place where scholars love to teach. Students with exposure to research have invaluable opportunities to develop their creativity and critical thinking skills, often hallmarks of the effective researcher. These universal skills transfer across a range of careers.

During the 2021–2022 academic year, SMU will launch three external searches to fill strategic leadership positions that will





We will build on existing research strengths and expand into new areas of study. When we unlock the full potential of SMU's outstanding faculty, the results will be truly world-changing.

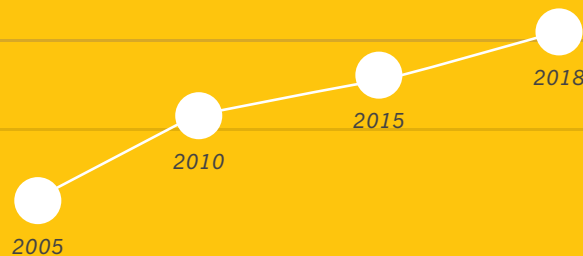
## Achieving and sustaining Research One status as measured by the Carnegie Classification system.

### OUR CONTINUED R1 PROGRESS OVER THE YEARS

Very High Research Activity

High Research Activity

Moderate Research Activity



support our research and graduate studies ambitions: 1) Vice Provost for Research and Chief Innovation Officer 2) Dean of the Moody School of Graduate and Advanced Studies and Associate Provost for Graduate Education and 3) the Director of SMU's Data Science Institute.

Taking the recommendation of faculty-led task forces and working in consultation with the deans, SMU will also advertise cluster hires in fall 2021 across two areas of strategic research excellence: 1) 21st Century Technology and Education and 2) Earth Hazards and National Security. These clusters will enhance areas of established research strength at SMU and will

serve as a model for future cluster hires to support our research and scholarly/creative ambitions.

We do not see our journey to R1 as leading to a choice between mutually exclusive goals, but rather as offering an orientation toward innovation and aspirations that we all share, as they are manifested in the unique contributions of every single discipline on campus. Pursuit of the R1 path will not preclude this kind of continued excellence and striving across all areas of our academic mission and determination to shape world changers.



2016–2025

# STRATEGIC PLAN

**L**ike the preceding two five-year plans (1996–2000 and 2001–2005) and the 10-year plan (2006–2015), our *2016–2025 Strategic Plan: Launching SMU’s Second Century*, is grounded in the vision and values embodied in SMU’s Master Plan of 1963.

To enhance the fundamental strengths of the University – faculty, staff, students and the resources for instruction, research and service – SMU has implemented many major advances during the past 20 years, led by its strategic plans. These plans have guided two major gift campaigns, *The Campaign for SMU: A Time to Lead* (1997–2002) and *SMU Unbridled: The Second Century Campaign* (2008–2015) and will serve to guide *SMU Ignited: Boldly Shaping Tomorrow* which launched on September 17, 2021.

These campaigns provided crucial enhancements to the entire campus, including new buildings and endowments for scholarships, academic programs, faculty positions and the campus experience. These fundraising successes also have generated great momentum for SMU’s distinction as a national institution growing in quality and impact.

Many of the remaining goals are addressed in greater detail in the sections below. However, one focus area not otherwise addressed is developing and strengthening interdisciplinary programs, particularly in the areas of data science and high-performance computing.

The Gerald J. Ford Hall for Research and Innovation, which was dedicated in December 2020, is unlike any other building on campus, and will serve as the hub for many of our most strategic growth areas. It is home to SMU’s AT&T Center for Virtualization, the Dedman College Interdisciplinary Institute, the Data Science Institute, a cutting-edge visualization lab, and SMU Guildhall, the Hart eCenter’s highly ranked digital game design program. The work this building supports will be the driving force in SMU’s computational and creative computing strategy, which will serve as the foundation of much of our future growth opportunities in terms of academic quality.

Another key focus area is strengthening programming and research collaborations with business, non-profit and civic organizations focused on community impact. The Toyota USA Foundation, the Simmons School of Education and Human Development, and the Dallas Independent School District have formed a partnership to develop a PreK– 8th grade STEM-focused school in West Dallas. After three years of design and planning, the school opened in August 2021 and is currently offering an evidence-based, industry-informed STEM curriculum to 7th and 8th grade students, with plans to expand to additional grades in future years. In addition to instruction, this school will offer embedded wraparound services such as summer and after school programming, social and emotional support for students, and parenting support for families. Partnerships such as these are at the heart of our call to be World Changers.



**Gerald J. Ford Hall for Research and Innovation, which was dedicated in December 2020, will serve as the hub for many of our most strategic growth areas.**



**Meeting the remaining  
goals of the 2016–2025  
Strategic Plan.**



## INCLUSIVE *EXCELLENCE*

**D**uring the summer of 2020, in the height of a global pandemic, we as a nation struggled with a series of terrible events that underscored our nation's painful legacy of racial and social injustice. The Black Unity Forum, a consortium of SMU students, faculty, staff and alumni groups, came together to develop an action plan aimed at helping our campus become a more welcoming and inclusive environment for our Black students, faculty and staff.

SMU's response to the Black Unity Forum action plan was released on September 30, 2020, and is helping to define our work in the days and years ahead to make tangible, systemic and sustainable change to be true to our collective belief that "Every Mustang is Valued."

During the fall of 2020, each of the academic units appointed chief diversity officers. Also, we launched the Provost Faculty Fellows program in October 2020 to offer SMU faculty opportunities for leadership development and to expand collaborations with the Office of the Provost in our areas of strategic focus. Our faculty fellow for equity and inclusion works most closely with SMU's associate provost for faculty success to support our inclusive excellence initiatives.

In summer 2021, working in close consultation with the Office of Institutional Access and Equity and the Chief Diversity Officer, the provost office announced changes to the faculty search and recruitment process. These changes align with the university response to the Black Unity Forum Action plan and our commitment to increase diverse representation in hiring processes on campus.

# 100%

Diversity officers appointed in every academic unit.

# 80%

Increase the six-year graduation rate of Black first-year students enrolled in SMU to 80% by 2025.

Tangible, systemic and sustainable change will be required to be true to our collective belief that "Every Mustang is valued."

**The Black Unity Forum came together to help our campus become a more welcoming and inclusive environment.**



# EXPAND AND *IMPROVE*

**A**mong the many things that appealed to me so strongly during my interviews was SMU's impressive trajectory under President Turner's leadership. This sentiment has been reinforced time and again through my first year as provost.

Particularly within the past decade, our University has seen a remarkable rise in undergraduate quality, an incredibly successful fundraising campaign (totaling >\$1B), and the development and implementation of an ambitious 2016-2025 Strategic Plan – in which many of the goals and objectives link directly to the steps required for SMU to reach our full potential. And this September, with the launch of the \$1.5B SMU Ignited Campaign, we will have a unique opportunity to see the remaining goals of our 2016-2025 Strategic Plan to fruition.

Many other higher education institutions made the decision to begin the 2020-2021 academic year with remote-only instruction. To meet the educational needs and desires of our students, and working in consultation with our own health and safety experts, local/state/federal authorities and CDC guidelines, SMU chose to offer a combination of virtual, hybrid and in-person learning.

In response to this decision, SMU transformed both the campus and our ways of engaging with it. More than 340 faculty members completed 25+ hours of required training modules to join the 160 faculty who had previously received this training across the last four years.

SMU invested over \$1.5 million to upgrade classroom technology and more than \$5 million in signage, air quality upgrades, classroom/office infrastructure, COVID 19 testing and vaccinations and many other items necessary to operate safely in the COVID 19 environment.

We see validation in these sacrifices and investments in terms of the students who are choosing to come to SMU. The fall 2020 and 2021 incoming classes were the largest and most diverse in SMU's history.

It has been a hard year, full of new and difficult challenges. But it has been a very productive year as well. Despite the considerable headwinds we have faced and overcome together this year, SMU is well-positioned to reach its goals for even greater academic quality. I look forward to the years ahead as we continue to refine and implement the plans that will propel SMU even higher.







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[smu.edu/provost](http://smu.edu/provost)