New Mexico Highlands University

Focused Visit Report

In Preparation for the HLC Focused Visit in March 2020

Draft document dated 5/3/19

Document preparation coordinated by Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Research
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Introduction

This document, prepared by New Mexico Highlands University, is presented to the Higher Learning Commission in preparation for our Focused Visit scheduled for March 30-31, 2020.

Institutional Background

New Mexico Highlands University is one of six four-year public universities in New Mexico, and the only one in the northern half of the state. The main campus is located in Las Vegas, NM in San Miguel County. NMHU has centers in Santa Fe, Rio Rancho, Farmington and Albuquerque, as well as distance learning and off-campus learning programs. The University has 28 bachelor’s degree programs and 14 master’s programs, spread across the College of Arts and Sciences degrees, as well as three professional schools in Social Work, Education, and Business. It is classified as a Carnegie Master’s/large institution, reflecting the high number of master’s degrees granted.

The University enrolls approximately 3,200 students per year, with an undergraduate enrollment of slightly over 2,000. The main campus at Las Vegas services some 2,200 of our students, with the rest attending one of our Centers, attending online, or engaging in more than one location/delivery method.

More than half of our first-time freshmen each year are classified as first generation, low income, or both. With a student body that is over 50% Hispanic, and an additional 15% from other ethnic minority groups. In addition to our large Hispanic student population, the Highlands student body has remained at about 7% Native American for the past decade.

Historically, about 20% of our first-time freshmen students come from families with incomes below federal poverty thresholds. Data from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) suggest that approximately 50% of our first-time freshmen are first-generation college students. Highlands prides itself on affordability and accessibility. We are an open-enrollment institution with an extensive scholarship program which, in conjunction with state scholarship programs, ensures that any first-time freshman is eligible to receive a tuition scholarship. NMHU offers the lowest tuition of any of the six public universities in New Mexico. Highlands has a long history of serving first-generation, low-income college students.

Background of Focused Visit

NMHU is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). In an action letter dated September 8, 2016, the Commission notified New Mexico Highlands University that it was being placed on probation. The university was given until November 1, 2017 to submit an Assurance Argument demonstrating that it had ameliorated all areas of concern as specified in the September 8, 2016 letter.

The university submitted an assurance argument to the Commission on November 11, 2017, with intent to demonstrate that the university had met all areas of concern specified in the September 8, 2016 letter. In an action letter dated July 9, 2018, the Commission informed the university that it was being removed from probation, but that the university would be required to host a Focused Visit to address remaining areas of concern:

“The Board determined that the institution is no longer out of compliance with the Criteria for Accreditation and removed the institution from Probation. The institution meets Core
Components 4.C, 5.A, and 5.D with concerns. The institution is required to host a Focused Visit, as outlined below, no later than June 30, 2020.”

In subsequent communications with the Commission, a date of March 30-31, 2020 was set for the Focused Visit.

The action letter of July 9, 2018 specified the remaining areas of concern as quoted below:

“Focused Visit: The Board required that the institution host a Focused Visit regarding Core Components 4.C, 5.A, and 5.D no later than June 30, 2020. The Focused Visit will specifically address the following:

Core Component 4.C

- Completion and implementation of a comprehensive Enrollment Management Plan. This plan should, at a minimum, identify target enrollments with supporting rationale for student population types (e.g., first-time, first-year students, transfer students, graduate students); mechanisms for recruiting students; and targets for retention, persistence, and completion rates for each student type.
- Documentation of improvement in the collection and analysis of data on student retention, persistence, and completion, with consistency in data reporting. These data should include a comprehensive review of the 2017 retention, persistence, and completion goals.
- Increased use of information to make improvements as warranted by the data on student retention, persistence, and completion. Evidence should be provided that demonstrates the use of the evaluation of the 2016 and 2017 retention, persistence, and completion goals for continuous improvement.

Core Component 5.A

- Evidence of a reduction in the reliance on state funding to balance the institution’s budget.
- Stabilization or growth in student enrollment through the identification of a clear strategy linked to metric-driven recruitment and student persistence goals.
- Independent audits of the institution, the Foundation, and Isotopes that do not yield any findings or, at minimum, do not yield any repeat findings.
- Continued year-end actual change in net assets at break-even levels or that yield surplus.

Core Component 5.D

- Evidence of the creation and implementation of policies related to new processes for the institutionalization of stakeholder agreements in all areas, including strategic planning and budgeting, student complaint management, the Office of Advancement, and Student Financial Aid administration.
- An executive Strategic Plan Indicators update that includes outcomes that provide evidence that the institution is improving its institutional effectiveness, capabilities, and sustainability, both as a whole and in its component parts.
A unit and/or department strategic plan update that includes outcomes that provide evidence that the institution is improving its institutional effectiveness, capabilities, and sustainability, both as a whole and in its component parts.”

This document will address each of these concerns to demonstrate the manner in which NMHU has made progress towards ameliorating the concerns. The document also acknowledges areas in which there are continuing challenges and possibilities for further improvement.

Institutional Process for Addressing HLC Concerns

In order to address the concerns of the HLC, we formed an HLC Focused Visit Steering Committee to oversee the process of preparing a response to the HLC concerns. We also formed three sub-committees to address each of the three areas of concern specified by the HLC. These sub-committees each consist of several faculty and staff members reflecting a broad range of experience and expertise. The sub-committees have met periodically to engage in planning and oversight activities relevant to each of the three HLC areas of concern. Committee membership, meeting dates, agenda, and minutes are available on the NMHU website.

The university has also worked diligently to keep the campus community informed and engaged throughout the preparation process for the Focused Visit. First, we have held a series of campus-wide HLC forums. These forums are basically hour-long sessions, open to all institutional stakeholders, in which key aspects of the accreditation process and Focused Visit preparation are discussed. These HLC forums have been well-received and well-attended. More information about the forums can be found on the NMHU website.

Second, we have included regular HLC updates at key meetings of university stakeholders, including Board of Regent meetings, Executive Management Team meetings, Provost Council meetings, and Budget Listening sessions. These meetings provide an opportunity to inform a range of campus stakeholders about key developments or activities in the accreditation process.

Third, we have several web pages (linked to dozens of supporting documents) devoted to the institutional accreditation process. This extensive web presence, which is publicized through multiple channels, allows campus stakeholders to review accreditation documents and activities at any time. Additionally, we have been publishing an “HLC Update” newsletter on a regular basis, which is designed to serve a similar informational purpose and is sent via email to all campus employees.

Fourth, we have sent a relatively large and diverse contingent of campus stakeholders to the annual HLC Conference. In the past two years, attendees have included two regents, our president, three vice presidents, three faculty members, and other administrative personnel. This experience has allowed conference participants to increase their knowledge and understanding of the accreditation process, and has also allowed attendees to share their experiences with a larger group of stakeholders.

This document is organized in six main sections, as follows.

- Introduction
- Executive Summary
- Response to Core Component 4C
• Response to Core Component 5A
• Response to Core Component 5D
• Summary and Conclusions

The campus community of New Mexico Highlands University hopes that this document will address the concerns of the Higher Learning Commission. We will be happy to provide any additional documentation or supporting materials as requested.

Finally, we would like to take this opportunity to thank the Commission for working with us through this admittedly challenging but essentially positive process. We are confident that we are a better and stronger institution as a result of addressing the legitimate concerns expressed by the Commission, and we remain committed to a process of continual improvement for the benefit of our students and all other stakeholders we serve. We are also grateful to the Focused Visit team for their time and commitment and look forward to working with them.
Executive Summary
[This section will be completed later]
Core Component 4C
The first major section of this document outlines how the university has addressed Core Component 4C.

Background: Core Component 4C
HLC Core Component 4C specifies:

“The institution demonstrates a commitment to educational improvement through ongoing attention to retention, persistence, and completion rates in its degree and certificate programs.”

In their letter of July 9, 2018, removing NMHU from probation, the Higher Learning Commission Board of Trustees identified Core Component 5A as an area of continuing concern. Specifically, the HLC letter made four broad recommendations in this area in preparation for the Spring 2020 Focused Visit.

“The Focused Visit will specifically address the following:

- Completion and implementation of a comprehensive Enrollment Management Plan. This plan should, at a minimum, identify target enrollments with supporting rationale for student population types (e.g., first-time, first-year students, transfer students, graduate students); mechanisms for recruiting students; and targets for retention, persistence, and completion rates for each student type.
- Documentation of improvement in the collection and analysis of data on student retention, persistence, and completion, with consistency in data reporting. These data should include a comprehensive review of the 2017 retention, persistence, and completion goals.
- Increased use of information to make improvements as warranted by the data on student retention, persistence, and completion. Evidence should be provided that demonstrates the use of the evaluation of the 2016 and 2017 retention, persistence, and completion goals for continuous improvement.”

Each of these three recommendations will be addressed in the major sections below.

In order to address the concerns of the HLC, we formed an HLC Focused Visit Steering Committee to oversee the process of preparing a response to the HLC concerns. We also formed three sub-committees to address each of the three areas of concern specified by the HLC. These sub-committees each consist of several faculty and staff members reflecting a broad range of experience and expertise. The sub-committees have met periodically to engage in planning and oversight activities relevant to each of the three HLC areas of concern. Committee membership, meeting dates, agenda, and minutes are available on the website.

Enrollment History
NMHU has experienced steady enrollment declines for the past several years. Figure 1 shows the total enrollment for NMHU for the past 10 years as reported to IPEDS.
After reaching a high point of 3781 in fall 2011, total enrollment has declined steadily since then. Historically, NMHU does not have a record of aggressive or intentional enrollment management. As an open-access institution, NMHU has basically accepted all undergraduate applicants without formulating a comprehensive strategic enrollment management plan. However, it is clear, in the face of changing demographics and increased institutional competition, that such a passive strategy cannot sustain institutional enrollments in the long term.

**Completion Rates**
Fall-to-fall retention rates at NMHU for first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students have remained relatively stable across time, as shown in Figure 2. However, these retention rates, while stable, are rather low compared to peer institutions. While these low retention rates in part reflect the demographic populations we serve (low-income, rural, diverse), it is clear that improvement is needed. Furthermore, improvements in retention rates will of course translate to improved enrollment numbers even without recruiting new students.
Similarly, graduation rates have remained relatively stable across time, but these rates are again quite low compared to peer institutions. Figure 3 shows four-year and six-year graduation rates for first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students for the past 10 reporting cycles per IPEDS.

![NMHU Graduation Rates (per IPEDS)](image)

It should be noted that retention and graduation outcomes are significantly better for other cohorts of NMHU students, notably incoming transfer students and incoming graduate students. Nevertheless, the above data clearly point to a number of enrollment management challenges at NMHU. The HLC wisely challenged NMHU to develop a strategic enrollment management (SEM) plan to prepare for a changing future and to ensure sustainable institutional growth and student success.

While NMHU remains committed to our open-access policy, which is essential to providing educational opportunities for the lower-income, diverse, and rural populations that we serve, we recognize and acknowledge that a properly formulated SEM plan will allow us to continue serving this vulnerable population while also promoting growth among other demographic populations.

With this historical background, and challenged by the HLC, NMHU has initiated a series of ambitious but carefully planned recruitment and retention initiatives, to help stabilize enrollment and improve student retention and graduation outcomes. These initiatives are outlined in this chapter, with specific reference to areas of concern cited by the HLC.

**Enrollment Management Plan**

With respect to Core Component 4C, the Higher Learning Commission challenged Highlands University to develop a comprehensive strategic enrollment management plan, as evidenced in the quotation below from the Commission recommendations in preparation for the Focused Visit:

“The Focused Visit will specifically address the following... Completion and implementation of a comprehensive Enrollment Management Plan. This plan should, at a minimum, identify target enrollments with supporting rationale for student population types (e.g., first-time, first-year students, transfer students, graduate students); mechanisms for recruiting students; and targets for retention, persistence, and completion rates for each student type.”

This section of the evidence document will focus on the steps taken by Highlands University to address this concern.
Administrative Reorganization

As a first step toward developing a more systematic approach to enrollment management, a significant administrative reorganization was implemented. A new division of Strategic Enrollment Management, under the direction of a vice-president, was created in January of 2016. Dr. Edward Martinez, a professor of Natural Resources Management at NMHU, was appointed interim Vice-President of Strategic Enrollment Management. Dr. Martinez is a native of northern New Mexico and a graduate of NMHU who has been a faculty member since 2005. He has also served as Director of the ARMAS Center (Achieving in Research, Math and Science). ARMAS provides comprehensive support services to science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) students and faculty at NMHU. Dr. Martinez’ extensive experience at NMHU in multiple roles and his familiarity with our service region made him uniquely qualified to lead the enrollment management efforts at NMHU.

The creation of the Strategic Enrollment Management Division consolidated the offices that serve students and is now comprised of the Office of Financial Aid, Office of Academic Support, Customer Relations Office, International Education Center, Native American Center, and the Office of Undergraduate Recruitment and Admissions.

Additional administrative restructuring has taken place in the Office of Recruitment. In 2016 the admissions staff, who reported to the Registrar, were relocated to the recruitment office which led to the creation of the Office of Undergraduate Recruitment and Admissions. A Campus tour office was also created along with the onboarding of a YouVisit virtual campus tour showcasing the Las Vegas campus and residence halls for more global recruitment efforts of students, faculty, staff and administrators.

The Native American Center has been re-structured to better meet the needs of our native and indigenous students, who comprise approximately 10% of our population. Historically, these students have had poorer outcomes than the student population as a whole. By committing resources to addressing the needs of our native population, it is hoped that we can work collaboratively to improve outcomes for these students. Additionally, the university is exploring the possibility of attaining federal designation as a Native American-Serving Non-Tribal Institution. Achieving this designation would help with our recruitment of native students and would also provide access to grant funds which could be directed to improving outcomes for this population.

The administrative changes outlined above provided NMHU with an opportunity to re-evaluate and re-formulate our enrollment management process and procedures. Additionally, the recommendations for Core Component 4C made by the HLC in preparation for the Focused Visit provided additional guidelines and parameters for developing a more effective enrollment management strategy. The changes and developments in our enrollment management strategy are outlined below, with specific reference to HLC recommendations.

Strategic Enrollment Management Plan

One of the first and most important actions undertaken by the new division of Enrollment Management was the development of a Strategic Enrollment Management Plan. This type of plan was essential to ensuring that the enrollment management efforts of the university took place in a carefully planned and organized manner, with buy-in and participation from stakeholders across campus, including students,
faculty, staff, administration, and the Board of Regents. As noted above, the development of this plan also addressed a key concern of the Commission.

In order to prepare the SEM Plan, a large committee was formed consisting of approximately 25 members of the NMHU community, including students, faculty, staff, and administration. This committee, led by Dr. Edward Martinez, Interim Vice-President for Enrollment Management, spent several months developing the SEM Plan. The final version of the plan was approved by the Student Senate, Staff Senate, and Executive Management Team during fall 2018, and by the Faculty Senate in spring 2019. The Board of Regents approved the plan during the spring of 2019. The SEM Plan can be accessed on our website.

The SEM Plan includes the following key elements.

Demographic trends
The SEM Plan contains extensive background information on demographic trends that may inform our enrollment management activities. Analysis of these demographic trends can help the university to formulate realistic enrollment goals, and to determine emerging markets where enrollment growth might be leveraged.

Institutional data
The SEM Plan includes institutional data showing enrollment, retention, and graduation rates across time. An evaluation of these data will help to identify areas of vulnerability as well as strengths within our enrollment management stream, allowing us to set realistic goals and to aggressively address areas of concern.

Recruitment goals
The SEM Plan identifies clearly defined undergraduate recruitment goals. These goals are very ambitious, but provide a vision of a future for NMHU in which we might be able to shift attention away from struggling to maintain enrollment to ensuring optimal success for all of students. The SEM plan provides concrete goals for each stage in the enrollment funnel, from inquiry to application to admission to enrollment. The plan specifies both the action steps and responsible parties necessary to achieve each of these recruitment goals. This section of the SEM Plan is driven by the annual Undergraduate Recruitment Plan.

Retention and completion goals
The SEM Plan includes clearly defined undergraduate retention and completion goals. These goals are moderately ambitious, reflecting the realities and challenges of our student population, which is predominantly lower-income, rural, and highly diverse. The overall freshman student retention and graduation target goals were set based on the national average for similar institutions as defined by ACT (ACT 2016). Once again, the SEM plan specifies both the action steps and responsible parties necessary to achieve each of these retention and completion goals.

Graduate recruitment and persistence goals
The SEM Plan includes recruitment and persistence goals for graduate students. Historically, NMHU has not had a university-wide, graduate-level recruitment office. Instead, students enter our graduate programs through the individual recruiting efforts of the various graduate programs across campus. We are working to develop more centralized enrollment strategies for graduate students, who comprise
almost 40% of our student population. The SEM plan formulates specific strategies to increase enrollment and improve retention of graduate students.

**Academic initiatives**

Finally, the SEM Plan outlines academic initiatives designed to strengthen enrollment management. A basic principle of our overall enrollment management strategy is that all university stakeholders need to be invested and involved in our enrollment management efforts and initiatives. Faculty and academic affairs can play a key role in these efforts. The SEM Plan, with input from faculty representatives, includes a broad range of academic initiatives that could help increase enrollment and promote student retention and completion. Once again the SEM Plan specifies both the action steps and responsible parties necessary to realize each of these initiatives.

**Application and use of the SEM Plan**

The SEM Plan is a foundational document for our enrollment and retention efforts. The Strategic Enrollment Management Committee meets regularly to evaluate progress towards achieving the goals outlined in the SEM Plan. The Key Enrollment Indicators (see below) are tied to the goals specified in the SEM Plan. The SEM Plan also guides the publication of various annual reports (outlined below). Through these reports and other channels the SEM Committee helps to keep the university community informed about key enrollment and retention data points.

**Other Key Documents**

While the Strategic Enrollment Management Plan remains the key document in our enrollment management efforts, there are several other important documents that have been developed to help address our recruitment and retention concerns. All these documents are data-based and provide concrete recommendations for increasing enrollment and/or improving retention. These documents are summarized below.

**Retention Plan 2018-19**

This is the latest version of an annual document that is produced by the SEM office. This Retention Plan documents a disciplined approach to goal-setting and development of a blueprint that identifies priority improvement targets, strategies, and action plans. It was developed through a collaborative process and serves as a communication tool that describes what Highlands University expects to achieve and how it will accomplish it. This document summarizes our current retention goals and provides detailed data support for the development of these goals and implementation of strategies to achieve these goals. The [2018-19 Retention Plan](#) is posted on our website.

**Retention Accomplishments Report 2017-18**

This is the most recent version of another annual document produced by the SEM office. The Retention Advisory Council (described in more detail below) distributes a yearly list of accomplishments to the faculty, staff, students, administration, and the Board of Regents to document the progress towards the Retention Plan (see above). The accomplishments for academic year 2017-18 are documented in the [2017-18 Retention Accomplishments Report](#). This document summarizes some key accomplishments in the area of retention at NMHU, as well as identifying some continuing challenges.
2018-2019 Undergraduate Recruitment Plan
The Undergraduate Recruitment Plan will drive the various marketing, recruiting, and statistical predictive modeling strategies that will be implemented by the office of student recruitment and undergraduate admissions. The recruitment team will develop student raw leads into inquiries that will be engaged throughout the rest of the student lifecycle using specialized communication flows and on campus events based on student classification and lifecycle stage. This plan will be revised yearly based on the previous year’s accomplishments and new strategy development and implementation.

2018-2019 Marketing Plan
The 2018-19 NMHU Institutional Marketing Plan is designed to increase New Mexico Highlands University’s visibility, strengthen the university’s reputation, build interest of our academic programs among prospective students, assist with fundraising efforts, and align communication efforts across the institution’s Las Vegas campus and centers in Albuquerque, Rio Rancho, Santa Fe, and Farmington. To support a consistent, unified brand centered on the Highlands Family while supporting academic and non-academic units, this plan outlines tactics and strategies to achieve that end.

Student Retention and Persistence Data
Another area of concern noted by the Commission was our relative lack of readily available data on student retention and completion rates, as evidenced in the quotation below from the Commission recommendations in preparation for the Focused Visit.

“The Focused Visit will specifically address the following... Documentation of improvement in the collection and analysis of data on student retention, persistence, and completion, with consistency in data reporting. These data should include a comprehensive review of the 2017 retention, persistence, and completion goals.”

This section of the evidence document will focus on the steps taken by Highlands University to address this concern.

Key Enrollment Indicators
In response to the legitimate concerns expressed by the Commission, the SEM Office has developed a comprehensive set of “Key Enrollment Indicators” or KEIs. These KEIs include retention and completion goals and outcomes for several student cohorts, including the following:

- First-time, full-time, degree-seeking students
- Freshmen student athletes
- Freshmen Native American students
- At risk freshmen students
- Freshmen STEM majors
- Transfer students with and without an associate’s degree
- Graduate students

The KEIs are closely and intentionally aligned to the cohorts addressed in the SEM plan (see above), and provide a concise system for tracking our achievement of retention and completion goals. Most of the data elements included in the KEIs are extracted from our Banner ERP system by the Office of
Institutional Effectiveness and Research (OIER). The OIER office has developed a set of turnkey queries to quickly and efficiently extract these data, so as to provide timely tracking of the KEIs. A snapshot of the KEI Report for 2018-2019 can be found online.

After the KEIs are produced for each term, the data are evaluated by the SEM Office to determine areas in which we have met our goals and areas where we are still lagging behind. The KEIs are shared with multiple campus stakeholders and are also posted on the university website. By determining areas of continued need, the university can channel the necessary resources to address ongoing enrollment and retention concerns. In some cases, the retention and completion goals for future terms may be increased if it is apparent then there is an upward trend. In other cases, the goals may need to be lowered if it appears that they were set at an unrealistically high level.

The sections below provides a brief summary of some key retention and completion trends we have detected upon evaluation of the 2018-19 KEIs.

*Retention rates*

Fall-to-fall retention rates for the fall 2016 cohort of new students dropped to 45.2%, the lowest figure in several years. This appears to have been an academically weak cohort. However, the retention rate for the fall 2017 cohort rebounded to 51.6%, close to our recent historical average. This appears to have been an academically stronger cohort compared to 2016. We also believe that some of our recent retention initiatives may have helped improve recent retention rates.

Fall-to-spring retention rates for new students have increased for the past three years, from 72.1% for the fall 2016 cohort, to 75.6% for the fall 2017 cohort, to 76.9% for the fall 2017 cohort. Once again, we believe that recent retention initiatives may have helped improve retention rates.

For transfer students with an associate’s degree, which constitute the majority of our incoming transfer students, we also saw an increase in fall-to-fall retention rates from 76.4% for the fall 2016 cohort to 79.2% for the fall 2017 cohort. For transfer students without an associate’s degree, there was a marked increase in fall-to-all retention rates from 40.4% for the fall 2016 cohort to 51.8% for the fall 2017 cohort.

Similarly, for incoming graduate students we also saw a significant increase in fall-to-fall retention rates from 81.5% for the fall 2016 cohort to 85.3% for the fall 2017 cohort.

*Graduation rates*

4-year graduation rates have also improved for all of the above cohorts. For new students, the 4-year graduation rate improved significantly from 10.9% for the fall 2013 cohort to 20.4% for the fall 2014 cohort.

For transfer students with an associate’s degree, the 4-year graduation rate improved slightly from 69.6% for the fall 2013 cohort to 69.8% for the fall 2014 cohort.

For transfer students without an associate’s degree, the 4-year graduation rate improved significantly from 17.6% for the fall 2013 cohort to 21.4% for the fall 2014 cohort.

For incoming graduate students, the 4-year graduation rate improved significantly from 67.8% for the fall 2013 cohort to 73.5% for the fall 2014 cohort.
Enrollment
While we have seen significant improvements in retention and graduation rates across multiple cohorts, we continue to experience overall enrollment declines. For fall 2018, our total enrollment was 3181, down from 3284 in fall 2017. However, we did see a significant increase in the number of new students (from 254 to 280), and a slight increase in the number of incoming transfer students from 355 to 362. However, we saw declines in the number of incoming graduate students, continuing students, and re-admit students.

KEI-based initiatives
Several initiatives and activities have been developed in response to the data provided in the 2018-19 KEIs. Clearly, the two of the key trends that emerge from the KEI report are the decline in enrollment and the relatively stagnant retention rates. Two recent initiatives have been developed to help address these enrollment and retention concerns. First, based on the Georgia State University model, we have formulate a plan to develop an “academic coaching” model, in which professional academic counselors would help guide students through the key academic decisions they need to make in order to be successful and persist to completion. This proposal has been endorsed by the university president, but at the time of this writing the proposal was still contingent on available funding.

A second initiative has been our student call-out process. During the pre-registration period (i.e. the time before the start of a new term when students are allowed to register for classes) we have attempted to contact previously enrolled students who have not yet registered. This effort has been led by the Academic Support Office and by the campus center directors. This process is described in more detail below.

Other Data Reports
In addition to the Key Enrollment Indicators, we have a number of other data sources that we use to track enrollment and persistence trends, and disseminate those data to a larger audience.

Department enrollment and retention reports
The Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Research (OIER) annually prepares an enrollment and retention report for each academic unit. These reports show enrollment and retention disaggregated by various academic and demographic variables, presented in both a tabular and graphical format. The data include multi-year trends on key data points. These reports are a relatively new initiative, begun in summer of 2018. Some academic departments have found the reports useful, other departments have not. The OIER office continues to work with academic departments to help identify data metrics or report formats that may be more helpful.

Highlands Factbook
The OIER office produces an annual Factbook which includes enrollment and completion data. This Factbook is available to all campus stakeholders on our website, as well as in hardcopy form with limited distribution. Although the Factbook contains much useful information in a familiar format, we continue to work with our stakeholders to try to determine if there are additional metrics or formatting options that might be helpful.
Performance Effectiveness Report

The Performance Effectiveness Report is a project of the New Mexico Council of University Presidents, designed in part to respond to state legislative mandates for performance accountability among colleges and universities in the state of New Mexico. This is an annual report that includes a broad range of enrollment, affordability, and student success measures. Each of the seven universities in the state of New Mexico provides institutional data for this report, which thereby provides a useful channel for benchmarking our performance on these metrics against other state institutions. The report, which is posted on our website and is also available in a hardcopy version, is available for all campus stakeholders.

OIER data reports

The Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Research posts a wide range of data reports on the OIER website. These reports, which are available to all campus stakeholders, include annual enrollment data, degrees conferred, retention and graduation rates, IPEDS survey data, and the Common Data Set.

Weekly Enrollment and Admissions Reports

Concerns about declining enrollment prompted us to develop a better tracking system for examining live enrollment trends. Basically, during the pre-registration process we freeze enrollment data on a weekly or daily basis. This allows us to compare enrollment data for the current term with enrollment data from the previous year at exactly the same time point. Data are disaggregated by major academic and demographic categories. These comparisons can alert us to any enrollment concerns in particular areas, and thereby allow us to take pro-active measures to address the areas of concern.

Similarly, the office of admissions has been freezing admissions data on a weekly basis to detect positive or negative trends in the enrollment funnel. These reports track the number of recruits and applicants and provide a comparison to similar data from previous years. Once again, analysis of these data allows us to take pro-active measures to address areas of concern.

These reports are broadly distributed to a range of institutional stakeholders, including senior administration, academic deans, faculty and staff representatives, and key office directors. By publishing these reports broadly we help to keep the university community informed of key enrollment and recruitment indicators. These data may be used by various offices or departments to take action to address enrollment concerns.

Evaluation of 2016 and 2017 Persistence Goals

With respect to Core Component 4C, the Higher Learning Commission challenged Highlands University to use data, specifically 2016 and 2017 retention and completion goals, to inform strategic enrollment management decisions for institutional improvement. As stated in the HLC letter of July 9, 2018:

“The Focused Visit will specifically address the following... Increased use of information to make improvements as warranted by the data on student retention, persistence, and completion. Evidence should be provided that demonstrates the use of the evaluation of the 2016 and 2017 retention, persistence, and completion goals for continuous improvement.”

This section of the evidence document will focus on the ways in which NMHU has conducted a systematic evaluation of 2016 and 2017 retention and completion goals. These goals as well as detailed
trend data for multiple cohorts are included in the Key Enrollment Indicators document. These data will be discussed in more detail below, with an emphasis on how we have used the data to inform institutional improvement in the area of enrollment management.

In general terms, our overall strategy has been to develop retention and completion goals that are realistic and attainable, given our student population, but at the same time are ambitious enough to challenge the university community to work more effectively to promote student progress toward completion. We have carefully evaluated past data trends in developing the goals, and will continue to monitor our progress towards attaining these goals and modify them as needed based on our ongoing data collection procedures.

Retention Targets for Primary Cohorts
As noted above, the Key Enrollment Indicators report specifies clearly defined retention and completion targets for several key cohorts of students at NMHU. Each of these key cohorts will be discussed below.

Full-time, first-time, degree-seeking students
The standard cohort for retention and graduation tracking (reported to IPEDS, the New Mexico Higher Education Division, and other agencies) is first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students. It should be noted that at NMHU, this group of students accounts for a relatively small percentage of incoming students in a given year, since we attract a relatively large number of transfer students and graduate students, and also have a significant number of returning or readmit students.

The table below shows our target fall-to-spring retention rates and our actual retention rates for the fall 2016 and fall 2017 cohorts of first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>New freshmen: Fall-to-spring retention rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall Cohort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall Cohort Size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target Fall-to-Spring Percent Retention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual Percent Fall-to-Spring Retention</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These data show that we have failed to reach our target fall-to-spring retention rates for 2016 and 2017 cohorts. However, we have made steady improvements and with the fall 2018 cohort were approaching the target.

The table below shows our target fall-to-fall retention rates and our actual retention rates for the fall 2016 and fall 2017 cohorts of first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>New freshmen: Fall-to-fall retention rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall Cohort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall Cohort Size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target Fall-to-Fall Percent Retention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual Percent Fall-to-Fall Retention</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These data show that we have failed to reach our target fall-to-fall retention rates for the 2016 and 2017 cohorts. However, we did see a marked jump in retention rates for the fall 2017 cohort.
The table below shows our target 4-year and 6-year graduation rates and our actual graduation rates for the most recent cohorts of first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students for whom graduation rates could be calculated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>New freshmen: 4-year and 6-year graduation rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fall Cohort</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall Cohort Size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-year Completion target</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual 4-Year Completion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-year Completion target</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual 6-Year Completion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These data indicate that we easily exceeded our target 4-year graduation rate for the fall 2014 cohort. The magnitude of the increase, compared to previous cohorts, was surprising, and likely reflects a combination of factors including some of the persistence initiatives that we have put into place. The 6-year graduation rates have remained relatively stable and have been slightly above our target of 20%. We will continue to monitor our graduation rates and may increase our targets for future cohorts if the data continue to show positive results.

**Transfer students**

Another important cohort we track for retention and completion is incoming transfer students. At NMHU, this cohort is actually larger than the new student cohort.

The table below shows our target fall-to-spring retention rates and our actual retention rates for the fall 2016 and fall 2017 cohorts of incoming transfer students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incoming transfer students: Fall-to-spring retention rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fall Cohort</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall Cohort Size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target Fall-to-Spring Percent Retention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual Percent Fall-to-Spring Retention</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These data indicate that retention rates for this cohort seem to vacillate somewhat from year to year. We failed to reach our goal of 80% retention for the fall 2016 cohort, but exceeded the goal for the fall 2017 cohort. However, we fell back slightly below the goal for the fall 2018 cohort. These results suggest that we need to work toward stabilizing retention rates for this cohort. Clearly the goal of 80% is attainable, but we have not consistently reached it.

The table below shows our target fall-to-fall retention rates and our actual retention rates for the fall 2016 and fall 2017 cohorts of incoming transfer students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incoming transfer students: Fall-to-fall retention rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fall Cohort</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall Cohort Size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target Fall-to-Fall Percent Retention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual Percent Fall-to-Fall Retention</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These data indicate that we failed to reach our target of 71% for the fall 2016 cohort, but almost attained the target for the fall 2017 cohort. The target of 71% seems reasonable and attainable with continued diligence in our enrollment efforts.

The table below shows our target 4-year and 6-year graduation rates and our actual graduation rates for the most recent cohorts of incoming transfer students for whom graduation rates could be calculated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fall Cohort</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall Cohort Size</td>
<td>318</td>
<td>339</td>
<td>369</td>
<td>394</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-year Completion target</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>51.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual 4-Year Completion</td>
<td>39.6%</td>
<td>48.1%</td>
<td>48.0%</td>
<td>47.2%</td>
<td>51.8%</td>
<td>54.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-year Completion target</td>
<td>51.0%</td>
<td>51.0%</td>
<td>51.0%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual 6-Year Completion</td>
<td>47.8%</td>
<td>55.5%</td>
<td>52.0%</td>
<td>51.8%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These data show that our 4-year graduation rates have basically been increasing for the past several cohorts, exceeding the target value for the past two years. We will continue to monitor these trends and will evaluate the appropriateness of the targets if the actual graduation rates continue to increase.

**Graduate students**

A third cohort of students that we regularly track for retention and graduation rates is graduate students. Currently we only offer master’s degrees, not doctoral degrees, which impacts the projected time to completion.

The table below shows our fall-to-fall retention rates for incoming graduate students for the past five years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fall Cohort</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall Cohort Size</td>
<td>382</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>370</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual Percent Fall-to-Fall Retention</td>
<td>81.7%</td>
<td>84.7%</td>
<td>82.2%</td>
<td>81.5%</td>
<td>85.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These data indicate that retention rates for graduate students have been quite high and relatively stable, with a peak value attained for the fall 2017 cohort.

The table below shows 4-year graduation rates for incoming graduate students for the past five years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fall Cohort</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall Cohort Size</td>
<td>369</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>382</td>
<td>404</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual 4-Year Completion</td>
<td>68.0%</td>
<td>63.9%</td>
<td>66.8%</td>
<td>67.8%</td>
<td>73.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once again these data show fairly strong completion trends, with a steady increase from the fall 2011 cohort to the fall 2014 cohort.

As of this writing, we have not yet defined target retention and completion rates for our graduate student cohorts. The office of graduate studies is currently in a state of transition and our enrollment management efforts for graduate students have primarily been managed at the departmental level. We are exploring ways to develop a more systematic and centralized process for managing enrollment for this population.
Retention Targets for At-Risk Populations

In fall 2016, the Retention Advisory Council (RAC) was officially formed and endorsed by the senate governing bodies to address institutional retention concerns, particularly with reference to first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students, who historically have relatively low retention rates at NMHU. One of the first initiatives undertaken by the RAC was to identify specific sub-populations of students who have especially low retention rates, to help determine the most effective methods for increasing retention in these vulnerable sub-populations.

This initiative took a data-informed approach to determining the appropriate sub-populations to target. We worked closely with a consultant (Ruffalo Noel-Levitz) in this process, providing the consultant with a large amount of raw institutional data. The consultant then used their own algorithms and statistical procedures to help identify several sub-populations of concern, including the following:

- Native American students
- Late applicants
- Students with a permanent address more than 93 miles away
- Academically at-risk students
- Students with an undeclared major

For each of these sub-populations, a committee was formed to further delve into the specific challenges that these sub-populations may be facing, and to recommend possible initiatives that could help to address the academic and personal needs of these sub-populations so as to improve their retention outcomes. Each committee produced a report summarizing relevant data pertaining to their sub-population and providing a list of key recommendations. These sub-population retention reports are available on our website.

While the Retention Advisory Council and its various subcommittees were not charged with implementing or authorizing changes in institutional policies or procedures, these reports and subsequent committee discussions were instrumental in informing subsequent decisions on how to develop meaningful and effective retention initiatives. The reports also informed the development of the Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) Plan. Some of the key findings of the Retention Advisory Council reports, as well as retention activities derived from those reports, are outlined below.

Enrollment Success Program

During the summer of 2017, the RAC further analyzed the data from the five subpopulations identified above. At that point, it was determined that students common to each of the subpopulations included those that fell within the following criteria:

- Admitted within 35 days of the first day of class
- Probationary Admission (GPA less than 1.75)
- An ACT score of less than 13 or SAT score less than 740

For the Fall 2018 cohort, the criteria were modified to include more students. Therefore, students that were admitted on probationary status or had an ACT score of 14 or less were included in the program.
Based on this analysis, the RAC developed the Enrollment Success Program. This program is for first-time freshmen and it provides students meeting the above criteria opportunities to attain academic success by fostering orientation, advisement, and support services.

As part of the program, participating students were encouraged to abide by the Enrollment Success Contract for a period of one academic year. The contract asks students to attend weekly meetings with their academic adviser, participate in 30 hours of academic enrichment activities (e.g. ARMAS, writing center, net tutor, etc.), maintain 15 credit hours per semester, earn at least a 1.75 GPA, attend all class sessions, and fulfill all course responsibilities as outlined in the course syllabi. Based on retention and GPA data for these students, the increased contact between advisers and at-risk students appears to be having a positive impact on retention. As a student-centered strategy designed to foster measurable improvements in persistence rate, time to graduation, and completion rate, the Enrollment Success Program will continue to be evaluated every semester to determine its effectiveness.

Because this initiative is relatively new, we have not yet developed targets for retention and completion rates for these students. However, the available data suggests that we are having some success with this very high-risk population. The fall-to-fall retention rate for the fall 2017 cohort was 47% (compared to 52% for all first-time freshmen), while the fall-to-spring retention rate for the fall 2018 cohort was 80% (compared to 77% for all first-time freshmen). It must be acknowledged, however, that these students have a relatively low GPA (2.17 average for the 2017 cohort and 2.15 average for the 2015 cohort).

Native American students
We have has developed a number of initiatives designed to increase engagement, retention and academic success among Native American students. The RAC report for this group identified a number of possible ways to more deeply engage Native American students, with the goal of increasing retention and success. Some of the proposed ideas include the following:

- Require all first time freshmen to live in the Community Center for Indigeneity at Melody Hall (one of our residence halls)
- Provide academic support by encouraging study groups
- Introduce students to available support services by providing in-house presentations
- Introduce students to peer mentors and Native American Center (NAC) staff
- Require peer mentors to live and establish office hours in Melody Hall
- Provide Meal Away from Home and other culturally relevant social opportunities
- Call and contact students at least twice a semester
- Encourage students to participate in NAC events and workshops
- Host events that highlight different New Mexico tribes
- Work with faculty and staff to educate student population about different tribes

Not all of this recommendations have been implemented as of this writing, although several of them have been. We are monitoring the success of these initiatives using retention and GPA data, and are exploring opportunities for expanding academic success programming for Native American students.

The target fall-to-fall retention rate for the fall 2016 cohort of Native American first-time freshmen was 28%, while the target for the fall 2017 cohort was 30%. We exceeded the targets for both cohorts (the actual retention rate for the fall 2016 cohort was 39%, while the actual retention rate for the fall 2017
cohort was 32%). The target retention rates were admittedly very modest, but were higher than the actual retention rates for the fall 2014 cohort and the fall 2015 cohort. While we are pleased that we met our targets for both cohorts, it is clear that we need to aspire to higher targets for these students. It must also be acknowledged that we were disappointed by the significant drop in retention rate from fall 2016 to fall 2017.

**African American students**

Our African American students have also had historically low retention and completion rates. Because this is a relatively small cohort at Highlands University we have struggled to provide adequate resources to address the academic needs of this population. We have, however, made some recent progress. As noted below, we have a working group of faculty and administrators who have developed a number of low-cost initiatives to provide better social support to our African American students. However, it is still too early to assess the effects of these efforts.

A significant proportion of our African American students are athletes, especially football players (by far the largest sport numerically at NMHU). Historically our football players have had very poor retention and success rates, which translated to low retention rates for our African American population as a whole. However, our Athletic Office, working with the SEM Office, has recently developed more effective recruiting strategies to ensure that student athletes who come to NMHU have the appropriate academic background to succeed. To better support student athletes once they matriculate, the athletic department implemented a study hall initiative for all athletes in which they are provided necessary academic support to be successful in college. We have seen significant improvements in retention rates for our student athletes as a result of these efforts.

The fall 2015 cohort of African American first-time freshmen had a fall-to-fall retention rate of 20%. Based on this admittedly disappointing value, we set a target retention rate of 23% for the fall 2016 cohort and a target of 25% for the fall 2017 cohort.

**Improvement Process for Enrollment Management**

With respect to Core Component 4C, the Higher Learning Commission challenged Highlands University to develop a process for systematic improvement in all areas of strategic enrollment management, as evidenced in the quotation below from the Commission recommendations in preparation for the Focused Visit:

“The Focused Visit will specifically address the following... Increased use of information to make improvements as warranted by the data on student retention, persistence, and completion. Evidence should be provided that demonstrates the use of the evaluation of the 2016 and 2017 retention, persistence, and completion goals for continuous improvement.”

The previous section specifically addressed our use of 2016 and 2017 retention and completion goals. This section focuses more broadly on some of the initiatives that we have developed at NMHU to address our enrollment management challenges. These initiatives were developed through the evaluation of institutional enrollment and persistence trends, survey results, and faculty and staff input based on prior experience.
Persistence and Completion Academy

In June 2017 Highlands University committed to participate in the HLC sponsored Persistence and Completion Academy. In this multi-year initiative, NMHU has focused on improving our advising model for undergraduate students, in the hope that improved advising would lead to better persistence. At the time of joining the PCA, Highlands University was relying on a somewhat traditional model of faculty-based advising with additional support for first-year students provided by the Academic Support office. The current advising process is outlined in the NMHU Undergraduate Advising Manual.

While this traditional model offers many benefits, anecdotal and survey-based evidence (from the advising questions on the NSSE and FSSE surveys) have suggested that students were not always receiving optimum advising to help them move toward graduation in a timely manner. Careful analysis of institutional data indicated that a relatively high percentage of students who graduate from NMHU have a significant excess of credit hours beyond what is needed to graduate. In some cases these excess hours may be a result of student “swirl” at multiple prior institutions, in other cases the hours appeared to result from students taking unnecessary courses at NMHU. A working hypothesis for the PCA team was that improving student advising would help to reduce the likelihood that students would graduate in a timely manner.

There were some modest but positive outcomes from the work of the PCA team. Many faculty members were engaged in the process of evaluating our current advising model. The Academic Support Office initiated a number of processes and procedures to ensure that first-year students were receiving more effective and timely advising.

However, the university has continued to struggle with making major changes to the current advising model. Faculty have expressed legitimate concerns about losing vital connections with students if faculty advising is replaced by another model. We have continued to explore various options for improving the student advising experience while still maintaining an appropriate level of faculty involvement. As noted below, we have been exploring an “academic coaching” model to provide more extensive and in some cases more intrusive advising to help students make good academic decisions and persist to completion.

Georgia State University Model

The enrollment management team at Highlands as well as the entire campus community have been working diligently to improve student retention. However, we recognize our limitations and lack of experience in this area. Therefore, we have explored best practices at other institutions. In particular, we have worked with Georgia State University (GSU), which has become a national model for improving retention and student success in at-risk populations. Although GSU is much larger than Highlands, there are many similarities in our respective undergraduate student bodies: in both institutions, a high percentage of incoming students are minority students from academically and/or financially challenged backgrounds. We therefore felt that we could learn some effective retention strategies from our colleagues at GSU.

In fall 2018 a team of six representatives from Highlands University travelled to GSU to learn more about their retention practices. This team included the VP for Enrollment Management, the Provost, the Dean of Students, the Director of Human Resources, and two faculty members. The team brought back a
number of recommendations for practices, outlined below, that could be easily implemented at Highlands.

**Early alert system**
One recommendation was to develop a more effective early alert system to determine if a student is struggling or disengaged as soon as possible, so as to provide support to that student. Currently Highlands University does not have a class attendance policy, but we do have a system in place whereby faculty can alert the Academic Support staff if a student is not showing up for class or is struggling academically. We continue to explore ways to improve this early alert system, which is a cornerstone of the GSU approach.

**Data analytics**
A second recommendation was to delve into our student databases (Banner and BrightSpace in particular) more carefully to track student engagement and participation in both academic and co-curricular activities. GSU tracks hundreds of data points on each students, and applies data analytic algorithms to identify students who may be struggling in a particular area. While we do not have the resources to duplicate the data analytics approach at GSU, we are exploring ways of scaling down the approach to apply at Highlands.

**Freshman first-year experience**
A third recommendation was to re-evaluate our first-year experience for incoming freshmen, to develop a more engaging and supportive academic and co-curricular experience. We have made numerous changes to our first year experience and continue to explore various options, although we have not yet, as of this writing, settled on an approach that will feel to be optimally effective.

**Academic coaching**
A fourth recommendation was to shift our advising model by developing a team of academic coaches, who would be full-time employees dedicated to working with students to maximize their success. These academic coaches would not replace faculty advisors, but would rather supplement the work that faculty are already doing in this domain. This approach, which has been used very successfully at GSU, has strong support from our President and our Strategic Enrollment Management Office, but is resource intensive. Depending on available funding, we may implement a scaled down version of this academic coaching model.

**Recruitment Strategies**
NMHU is taking a multi-pronged approach to increasing enrollment. Some of the strategies we have already implemented or are exploring are summarized below.

**Matriculation Task Force**
The Matriculation Task Force was instituted in October 2016 and remained active until May 2018. The task force was responsible for reviewing the university's processes that affect prospective students from the inquiry phase through the enrollment phase. More specifically, the role of the task force was to develop more efficient and effective interdepartmental communication processes to support students from inquiry to matriculation.
The Matriculation Task Force provided an opportunity for all functional areas of the college to collaborate in order to improve recruitment and enrollment experiences for prospective and current students. Task Force members included representatives from both Student Services and Academic Affairs who collaborated closely to identify and reduce barriers to student enrollment in addition to monitoring, supporting, and encouraging communication among stakeholders to increase enrollment, retention and graduation of NMHU students.

The task force was de-commissioned after the May 2018 meeting, on the basis that the task force had succeeded in achieving its goals. Our current recruitment and admissions policies and procedures reflect the productive work performed by the task force. Meeting minutes for the Matriculation Task Force are available online.

Transfer coordinator

The university recently hired a new employee in the position of “Transfer Coordinator,” whose role is to help recruit community college students in the state of New Mexico to attend NMHU. This employee is actually housed at Central New Mexico Community College in Albuquerque, which is by far the largest community college in New Mexico. Given that a high percentage of our incoming students are transfers from community colleges, we felt that this position would be a good investment in our enrollment management efforts. The early returns have been positive, as we have seen an increase in enrollment of transfer students in both the fall 2018 term and in the spring 2019 term, relative to the previous year.

Streamlined application process

The university has made a number of key changes to the application process, designed primarily to make the process more streamlined and more user-friendly. In the competitive environment of higher education recruitment, we wanted to ensure that our process would allow interested students to complete the application process quickly and efficiently, with optimal communication between the university and the prospective student. We have implemented new applications software (Slate), revised our application forms, and significantly decreased response time to communicate with applicants.

Additionally, our financial aid office has made numerous improvements to their operations and processes, which have helped us respond more quickly and more effectively to student financial aid applications and questions. These changes are outlined in another section of this document.

Intentional recruitment

The university has recently adapted its recruitment strategies for new freshmen. Specifically, we have taken a more intentional and focused approach, targeting potential students who are more likely to be interested in attending Highlands University. This has resulted in higher yield rates for admitted students and also allows us to provide more attention to a smaller but more select number of applicants. We remain committed to our open-access policy for incoming undergraduate students, but we feel that a more intentional recruiting strategy will allow us to recruit students who are more likely to be successful at NMHU and therefore more likely to be retained.

New program development

Until recently, Highlands had not initiated any new programs in over a decade, although we have made some changes to existing programs and added new concentrations to some existing majors. We felt that an essential strategy toward increasing enrollment is to add high profile programs that will attract new
students. We recently received approval from the HLC for a Master of Fine Arts program, which will build on our successful Media Arts program. The MFA is our first terminal degree and fills an obvious need within a large geographic region in which there are not other MFA programs offered. Our first cohort of students was admitted to the MFA program in fall 2019.

In late fall 2018 we also received approval from the HLC for an alternative teacher certification program. This program is directed toward residents of New Mexico who currently have a bachelor’s degree but are interested in entering the teaching profession. The program will not only boost enrollment at Highlands but will also help to address the critical teacher shortage in the state of New Mexico. There has already been considerable interest in the program, with xxx students enrolling in the program in fall 2019.

Website changes
The university has recently made dramatic improvements to our institutional website. Previously the website was difficult to navigate and unappealing to prospective students. We hired a web content manager in early 2019, and contracted with a web designer to provide a complete facelift of our website. We are confident that the improved website will serve as an effective tool for recruitment of new students.

Resources for Academic Support
Highlands University provides multiple channels of academic support for our students. Given the higher percentage of students from academically challenged backgrounds, these academic resources are a critically important part of our overall retention efforts. These offices engage in data-informed improvement processes to help ensure that they are providing the best services possible to our students, thereby helping to improve student retention and success. Some of our key academic support offices and initiatives are summarized below.

Office of Academic Support
Our primary support channel for helping students be academically successful is the Office of Academic Support. This office offers a broad range of services to help students be successful. These services include:

- Undergraduate Advisement
- Orientation
- Learning Center Computer Lab: Computers are available year-round for student use; conference tables and Smartboard available for student use.
- Adaptive Needs Computer Lab: A universally accessible computer lab is located in Donnelly Library.
- Online Tutoring: Tutoring and writing help is available for all students enrolled at NMHU.
- Accessibility services: Academic Support coordinates accessibility services starting with the high school-to-college transition for incoming freshmen and continuing throughout the college experience.
- Peer Advising: Peer advisers are here to help students address academic challenges. Peer advisers work with students to develop an individualized study plan
- Placement testing
More information about these academic support services is available online at the Learning Center website.

As an additional measure to improve retention results and collect usable retention data, the Office of Academic Support has begun contacting eligible students who have not registered for the current term in a timely fashion. This effort has focused on students in good academic standing who do not have a large balance owed to the university. These calls have two purposes: 1) to encourage students to enroll and offer any appropriate help or support, and 2) to determine what factors may be contributing to students’ decision not to return. A significant number of contacted students have subsequently re-enrolled. We have also been able to gather a body of evidence to help us understand why students are not returning. Student reasons for leaving HU are organized into several broad categories, including transfer to another institution, financial difficulties, family responsibilities, academic concerns, and dissatisfaction with campus life. We have begun discussing ways to address these concerns so as to increase retention of students who may be non-committed to returning to NMHU.

The Office of Academic Support participates in the co-curricular outcomes assessment (CCOA) process. In a report from their most recent CCOA cycle, outcomes data are summarized and strategies for improvement based on those data are identified. In this report, the Office of Academic Support focused on the effectiveness of advising services for first-time freshmen, a key aspect of our retention efforts.

**ARMAS Center**

The ARMAS (Achieving in Research, Mathematics And Science) Center provides math tutoring, peer-facilitated study groups in gateway science courses, local science-focused internships and research opportunities, a computer lab with printing, and comfortable study spaces for individuals or groups. Supplemental Instruction sessions are led by trained students who have successfully completed the course and are selected by their professors to hold group study sessions and office hours to support students currently taking the course. All students (not just STEM students) are welcome to participate in the services and programs offered by the center. More information is online at the ARMAS website.

The ARMAS Center has conducted detailed analyses of student usage data to determine how the various services offered by ARMAS may impact academic success among various groups of students. These data are available for review.

**Writing Center**

The Writing Center provides support to undergraduate students in all disciplines, by helping them to develop their writing skills both for classroom success and for real-world applications. The Writing Center provides tutoring in a supportive environment centered in which students plan, write, or revise papers under the guidance of a trained tutor. The tutors are experienced writers, often with professional publication experience. More information is online at the Writing Center website.

The Writing Center participates in the co-curricular outcomes assessment (CCOA) process. In a report from their most recent CCOA cycle, the Writing Center surveyed students about their writing habits and the development of their writing skills. The Center also evaluated course grades in composition courses to determine whether students who visit the Writing Center have better grades in these courses. These data have helped to validate the effectiveness of Writing Center services and have also helped the Center to improve its services.
Financial Aid leveraging / loan default rate / affordability

In fall 2018, the Strategic Enrollment Management Office, Financial Aid Office, and Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Research assembled a team to evaluate our Financial Aid distribution policies and practices. The purpose of this project was to determine if student financial aid and scholarships can be used to leverage increased enrollment and retention of undergraduate students at Highlands. The following action steps were taken to address this key question:

- Determine the type of scholarships that are offered to new undergraduate students at Highlands
- Determine the historical type and amount of student aid provided to Highlands students
- Determine the retention of scholarships by student recipients
- Determine the retention and graduation rates of undergraduate scholarship recipients
- Determine the amount of debt non-retained students leave the institution with
- Determine the relationship between financial aid and scholarship awards and student retention
- Determine the retention and graduation rates of Highlands students based on unmet financial need
- Develop recommendations for restructuring of scholarships based on findings

The research team’s overall recommendation was that Highlands review the current scholarship structure and consider restructuring to leverage student financial aid and scholarships to increase enrollment, retention and graduation of students. Given the limited amount of institutional aid the university can disburse, it is essential that we use those funds in a way that will help to improve our recruitment efforts and also help to ensure that students have appropriate levels of financial support to make progress toward graduation.

The work of this team is outlined in detail in a final report which is posted on the university website.

Student Activities and Student Services

Another broad area in which we have directed our retention efforts is in Student Life. We recognize that a vibrant campus and opportunities for meaningful engagement can be powerful tools for promoting retention as well as a life-long commitment to the university. In the last few years we have implemented numerous strategies for expanding campus life activities and engaging students more effectively. While most of these activities and services are open to all students, they may be especially beneficial from both a personal and retention standpoint for traditional students who are struggling to get connected on campus.

Outdoor Recreation Office

One of the chief attractions of our main Las Vegas Campus is our proximity to a range of recreational opportunities. The Outdoor Recreation Office, which was opened in fall 2016, coordinates a wide variety of outdoor activities that are open to all students. As a few examples, almost 300 students have gone on hikes, approximately 800 students have gone on ski trips, and over 1800 daily equipment rentals (e.g. tents, backpacks) have been processed.
These activities help to strengthen students’ connections to the university and also help students to form new friendships, which in turn can help improve retention. We have also leveraged the attraction of these outdoor opportunities as a recruitment tool.

**Campus Activities Program**

Highlands University charges all students a $75 fee for student activities. This modest fee helps to support a broad range of activities that are open to all students. These activities include outdoor activities sponsored by the Outdoor Recreation Office (see above), as well as a variety of performing arts events. In AY2018-19 we offered 7 major events in the performing arts. The Student Activity fee has also been used to fund movie passes, museum visits (especially for our NMHU-Santa Fe students), gym memberships (for our NMHU-Farmington students), as well as a variety of social events.

**Native American Center**

Almost 10% of our student body and NMHU are of Native American ancestry. Historically, Native American students have had relatively poor retention rates. One of our recent initiatives to address this concern was to open the [Native American Center](#), which provides support services to all NMHU Native American students. The center offers academic support, assistance with financial aid applications, and social opportunities through various clubs and organizations. Our hope is that providing these various opportunities for campus engagement will help to increase retention rates among Native American students. The presence of the Native American Center may also serve as a recruitment tool among the Native American population.

We also work with several Tribal-Affiliated institutions to encourage Native American students to consider transferring to Highlands University. As an example, in spring 2019 Highlands University hosted a contingent of students from [Southwest Indian Polytechnic Institute](#) (SIPI), a two-year college located in Albuquerque.

**African American Outreach**

Another group of students who have had historically poor retention rates at NMHU are African American students. We have recently implemented a number of student activity initiatives to address the needs of our African American students to help ensure that they have improved levels of engagement and student success. Dean Kimberly Blea (Dean of Students), Dr. Gloria Gadsden (faculty), Dr. Ruthy Watson (HU Cares) and Yvette Wilkes (Director of Housing), with the support of President Minner, have created an informal work group to address the needs of African American students on campus. Thus far, the work group has brought speakers and cultural events to campus during Black History Month and is working with students to create an African American student club (the Black Student Union). The work group is also focused on advocacy. President Minner is committed to locating resources to address the needs of this population in order to improve their rates of success.

**Student Union**

Our new and state-of-the-art Student Union building provides a large, comfortable, inviting space for a range of student activities. The Union has study space, a game room, and numerous areas for socializing and for hosting larger events. The Union also houses various offices directly connected to student activities. Part of the design strategy in constructing the Student Union was to improve student connections to the university and to create a space for building friendships and relationships among students. These strategies should translate to increased engagement and retention.
**HU Cares**

Many students at NMHU come to us from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds. In order to ensure that these students can continue their education and be successful, the university recognizes the importance of providing emotional and social support services to our students. The Center Advocacy Resources Education & Support (HU-CARES) program provides services and support to students who may be struggling in their personal or social lives. Services provided by the center include counseling, advocacy, and referrals to community service providers. HU-CARES also provides educational outreach and prevention programs.

**Customer Relations Office**

Student surveys as well as anecdotal evidence have suggested that many students at NMHU, especially first-generation students, struggle to navigate through the various steps involved in registration, seeking financial aid, and working with the business office. There was concern that these difficulties could be contributing to our retention challenges.

Partly in response to these concerns, the Customer Relations (CR) Office was established in October 2017 as an additional resource for Highland’s students. The two main roles of the CR Office are to serve as a student ombudsman, helping to resolve student issues and concerns, and to serve as a one-stop-shop call center for students with several questions looking for answers with one phone call, email, or visit. This position has been instrumental in improving our student services. Since its establishment, the CR Office has assisted over 970 students. The Customer Relations Coordinator assists students by appointment or walk-in, via telephone, email, live chat, or Zoom appointment and travels to HU’s Centers monthly to be available for in-person student assistance.

**Communication**

We have also worked to ensure better dissemination of information about student activities. We have an events calendar posted online and send out regular email blasts announcing all student events and activities.

**Campus-wide involvement**

As noted above, NMHU recently created an Office of Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) to oversee the recruitment and retention efforts of the institution. However, it is clear that promoting enrollment growth and improving retention have to be campus-wide initiatives. We have therefore worked to inform the campus community about our enrollment and retention efforts, and also to develop opportunities for various stakeholders to contribute to our enrollment and retention efforts.

**Campus-wide forums**

The university has held a number of campus wide events focusing on enrollment management. In spring 2019, we held an HLC Campus Forum in which we presented the HLC concerns with reference to Criterion 5D, and outlined some of the steps we are taking to address those concerns. This forum also provided an opportunity for audience members to make suggestions and recommendations for ways that all members of the campus community can contribute to the enrollment and retention efforts. A recording of this forum and a summary of the audience-generated ideas can be found on the university website.
As noted above, a team of university representatives travelled to Georgia State University in fall 2018 to learn more about the successful retention efforts implemented by GSU. In spring 2019, we held a campus-wide forum to inform the campus community about some of the initiatives underway at GSU, and about how NMHU can scale down some of those initiatives to be implemented here on a local level. This forum was well attended and well received, and prompted some productive discussion about some of the strategies we could be taking here at NMHU to boost retention. A summary of this presentation is available on the website.

**Professional development session**
In August of 2018, during our annual Professional Development Week for faculty and staff, the Vice-President for Strategic Enrollment Management presented a session on ways that academic departments and individual faculty can contribute to enrollment and retention efforts. The session was data-based, with each academic unit being provided with a summary of their enrollment and departmental retention trends for the past several years, broken down by key demographics. Audience members were invited to reflect on and discuss ways that they could participate in the enrollment management efforts of the university.

**SEM newsletters**
In fall 2018 and spring 2019, the Office of Strategic Enrollment Management released a series of enrollment management newsletters to the entire campus community. These newsletters provided a summary of key data points and trends related to our enrollment management efforts, as well as a narrative explanation of what the data mean and how these data may impact our enrollment efforts. Copies of these newsletters are available on our website.

**Summary: Core Component 5A**
We believe that we have effectively addressed most of the concerns of the Higher Learning Commission with respect to Core Component 5A, but we acknowledge that there are areas where continued improvement is needed.

Ongoing challenges

- Recruitment of graduate students
- Enrollment declines

[this section will be expanded later]
Core Component 5A
The second major section of this document outlines how the university has addressed Core Component 5A.

Background: Core Component 5A
HLC Core Component 5A specifies:

“The institution’s resource base supports its current educational programs and its plans for maintaining and strengthening their quality in the future.”

In their letter of July 9, 2018, removing NMHU from probation, the Higher Learning Commission Board of Trustees identified Core Component 5A as an area of continuing concern. Specifically, the HLC letter made four broad recommendations in this area in preparation for the Spring 2020 Focused Visit.

“The Focused Visit will specifically address the following:

- Evidence of a reduction in the reliance on state funding to balance the institution’s budget.
- Stabilization or growth in student enrollment through the identification of a clear strategy linked to metric-driven recruitment and student persistence goals.
- Independent audits of the institution, the Foundation, and Isotopes that do not yield any findings or, at minimum, do not yield any repeat findings.
- Continued year-end actual change in net assets at break-even levels or that yield surplus.”

Each of these four recommendations will be addressed in the major sections below.

In order to address the concerns of the HLC, we formed an HLC Focused Visit Steering Committee to oversee the process of preparing a response to the HLC concerns. We also formed three sub-committees to address each of the three areas of concern specified by the HLC. These sub-committees each consist of several faculty and staff members reflecting a broad range of experience and expertise. The sub-committees have met periodically to engage in planning and oversight activities relevant to each of the three HLC areas of concern. Committee membership, meeting dates, agenda, and minutes are available on the website.

Reduction in Reliance on State Funding
A key area of concern for the Higher Learning Commission, and one of the areas that contributed to our probationary status with the Commission, was our over-reliance on state funding to balance our budget. In the letter of July 9, 2018, recommending that NMHU be removed from probation but subject to a Focused Visit, one of the key areas of concern in Criterion 5A focused on demonstrating a more stable budget management process:

“The Focused Visit will specifically address the following... Evidence of a reduction in the reliance on state funding to balance the institution’s budget.”
The economy of the state of New Mexico is based heavily on resource extraction, which provides a volatile and unpredictable revenue stream for the state as a whole and public colleges and universities in particular. Historically, an over-reliance on state budgeting has led to various operational challenges for Highlands University, often requiring the university to make unplanned and unexpected budget cuts in many areas of institutional funding. Furthermore, given the uncertainty of future state funding levels, it has been difficult to plan effectively and to make appropriate investments in initiatives that could help the university grow and fulfill our mission more effectively.

Therefore, the university fully concurs with the recommendation of the Commission to reduce our dependence on state funding. To that end, we have implemented a number of policies and procedures to help stabilize our revenue stream and allow for more intentional and effective planning. These policies and procedures are summarized below.

Monitoring fiscal landscape
As a basic strategy towards achieving a greater degree of financial independence from state appropriations, we have been carefully monitoring the fiscal landscape within the state and region. Our Vice President for Finance and Administration closely monitors the state budgetary proceedings, travelling to the state capital extensively during the legislative budget hearing sessions. Given the extraction-based economy in New Mexico, we also carefully monitor global oil prices and resource extraction activity within the state, trying to anticipate significant fluctuations.

Annual reserves
The university is committed to setting aside an amount of $750,000 annually to be placed in a reserve account. These reserve deposits will be continued until the reserve balance reaches a minimum of $12,000,000. Once this minimum reserve balance is reached, the university will be able to withdraw from the reserves as needed, subject to maintaining the minimum balance of $12,000,000. This will allow the university to maintain essential functions even in the face of state budget cuts.

The commitment to annually allocate $750,000 into the reserve fund was approved by the Board of Trustees on March 5, 2018. The university’s annual budgets also reflect the allocation of the reserve amount under unrestricted net assets.

Tuition and fee increases
Historically, Highlands has been one of the most affordable universities in the southwestern United States. The table below shows in-state tuition and fees (from IPEDS) for Highlands University compared to other state universities in New Mexico, as well as comparisons with comprehensive universities in adjacent states.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution Name</th>
<th>2013-14</th>
<th>2014-15</th>
<th>2015-16</th>
<th>2016-17</th>
<th>2017-18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adams State University</td>
<td>$7,449</td>
<td>$8,014</td>
<td>$8,574</td>
<td>$9,153</td>
<td>$9,440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado State University-Pueblo</td>
<td>$7,327</td>
<td>$7,834</td>
<td>$8,282</td>
<td>$9,519</td>
<td>$10,090</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As these data show, Highlands has been a remarkable bargain for many years, and continues to be so. Our low tuition rates reflect our commitment to serving a low-income, rural student population. It is important to all HU stakeholders to continue this commitment, however, we also recognize that we will not be able to continue providing quality academic programs and student services without improving our revenue stream. We have therefore implemented a series of tuition and fee increases, consciously striving to balance fiscal responsibility with affordability. As the tables above indicates, we have made fairly significant increases in tuition while remaining very affordable compared to peer institutions.

The Highlands University Board of Regents has approved these tuition increases. The table below shows our revenue from tuition and fees for the last five years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Revenue from tuition and fees (from IPEDS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$10,914,886</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As these data indicate, we have significantly increased our revenues from tuition and fees despite declining enrollments over this same time period.

However, while all campus stakeholders agree that we need to increase revenues, the tuition increases have led to some concerns among various constituents. One of the primary concerns is that the tuition increases may have an adverse effect on enrollment. A primary attraction of Highlands has always been
our low tuition rates, and, as noted above, many of our students are from financially disadvantaged backgrounds and simply cannot afford high college tuition. In the past, our out-of-state tuition rates have actually been lower than the in-state tuition in some adjacent states, which has helped us in recruiting out-of-state students. It is difficult to determine the exact relationship between tuition rates and enrollment behavior, but it must be acknowledged that our enrollment has been declining during this period of tuition hikes. This decline is especially marked for out-of-state students, who have seen the largest tuition increases.

It is therefore imperative for the university to continue to carefully monitor the relationship between tuition and enrollment. Ideally, we need to find a tuition structure that helps maintain our financial solvency while at the same time allowing access to financially challenged students and also serving as an incentive to attend Highlands.

Expense Reductions
As noted above, Highlands University is committed to increasing our reserves, which will help us to stabilize our budgeting process and avoid negative reactive responses to either a reduction in state funding or a drop in enrollment. Currently, however, our reserves have not reached a sufficient level to provide this type of fiscal stability. In the wake of recent enrollment decreases, the university has therefore implemented a series of strategic budget reductions to help balance our budget without having to resort to sudden or traumatic cost-cutting measures.

In fall 2018, Highlands experienced an overall drop in enrollment of approximately 3%. This drop was not unexpected and was significantly less than the statewide drop in higher education enrollment at the same time. However, in spring 2019 Highlands experienced an unexpectedly large decline in overall enrollment of approximately 9%, which resulted in a significant loss of tuition-related revenue. As a response to this revenue loss, the university immediately implemented various austerity measures to help maintain a balanced budget. These austerity measures included a freeze on travel, a freeze on new hiring, and departmental budget sweeps of non-essential projected expenditures. As a result of implementing these austerity measures, the university was able to stabilize its budget without resorting to more extreme cost-saving measures like staff layoffs or furloughs.

The campus community was notified of these expense reductions through several channels. The Vice President for Finance and Administration distributed an email on February 15, 2019, outlining the mandated austerity measures. The budget reductions were reinforced at a campus-wide HLC Forum on March 25, 2019. Finally, the reductions were discussed at special budget meeting of the Board of Regents on April 5, 2019.

Stabilization of Enrollment
In the letter of July 9, 2018, recommending that NMHU be removed from probation but subject to a Focused Visit, one of the key areas of concern in Core Component 5A focused on enrollment issues:
“The Focused Visit will specifically address the following... Stabilization or growth in student enrollment through the identification of a clear strategy linked to metric-driven recruitment and student persistence goals.”

Because Highlands University is heavily tuition dependent, it is clear that managing our enrollment growth is a critically important factor in maintaining a healthy and balanced budget.

In another chapter of this document (Core Component 4C), we have explained in detail some recent developments in our enrollment management strategy. Here we will simply highlight some key elements of our enrollment management strategy that speak more directly to budgetary concerns.

In addressing our enrollment management concerns, Highlands University has focused on two broad areas: recruitment of new students, and improved retention of existing students. It is clear that growth and improvement in either of these areas will lead to increased enrollment and a stronger tuition-based revenue stream.

Recruitment Strategies
Historically, Highlands University has taken a somewhat haphazard approach to recruiting students. As an open-access public institution, the assumption was that an appropriate number of students would matriculate without extensive recruiting efforts on our part. For years this strategy was reasonably effective and our enrollment numbers were fairly consistent, and even increasing in some years. More recently, however, Highlands University has had to confront the emerging reality of higher education enrollment challenges. In response to these challenges, we have taken a much more intentional approach to recruiting new students. We have worked with a consultant (Ruffalo Noel-Levitz), we have purchased lists of high school students from standard sources (e.g. ACT), we have hired new admission counselors, and we have even hired a transfer coordinator who works with our community college partners. We have also updated our admissions and financial aid policies and procedures to ensure that we can more effectively recruit prospective students and provide them with the financial support they need.

New degree and certificate programs
In the past, Highlands University has been slow to start new programs or to implement new modalities for program delivery. More recently, while we were on probation, we were not allowed to initiate new programs, but we did begin substantive discussions on various ways that we could expand our program portfolio. Now that we are off probation, we have begun to take significant practical steps in that direction. We recently received approval from the Commission to offer an MFA program, which will begin accepting students in fall 2019. This is an exciting opportunity for Highlands University, as this will be our first terminal degree. The MFA program builds on our successful Media Arts program but will attract a broader range of students.

Highlands University also received recent approval from the Commission for a new Alternative Teacher Certification program. This is essentially a “fast-track” program is geared toward adults who currently hold a bachelor’s degree in a field other than education, but who are interested in pursuing a career in K-12 education. We have worked closely with partners in the state government to ensure that the program curriculum meets state expectations for teacher licensure. There has been considerable interest in this program both from prospective students as well as from our education partners in the
state of New Mexico. It is expected that, in addition to providing an enrollment boost for Highlands University, the program will help to address the chronic teacher shortage in New Mexico.

New programs under consideration
Our School of Business is currently investigating the possibility of developing an entrepreneurship concentration. This concentration would address a specific area of interest as expressed by current and former students, and would also address a pressing need within our region and the state of New Mexico to promote business development.

For many years Highlands University has had a very successful RN-to-BSN program, which has trained hundreds of nurses for advanced positions in health care both within the state of New Mexico and beyond. Hoping to build on this solid foundation, Highlands University has been in conversation with a partner institution about the possibility of developing a Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) program. This program, which would of course require state and HLC approval, would give Highlands University another terminal degree (along with the MFA) and would potentially attract a significant number of new students. Furthermore, this program would train nurses for high level administrative positions within the health care field, helping to alleviate a shortage of such professionals within the state of New Mexico.

Expanded online programming
For a number of years Highlands University has had several online programs available at the graduate level, as well as an online RN-to-BSN program. All of these online programs have been successful and have attracted significant numbers of students. But we have not significantly expanded our online offerings in recent years, and have thereby compromised a potential growth opportunity. Now, however, we are making an organized and strategic effort to expand our portfolio of online program offerings. Notably, our large and renowned social work program has been increasing its online offerings. At an administrative level, in spring 2019, the university hired an executive-level director of online and distance education, who reports directly to the provost. This employee will assume primary responsibility for working with faculty to develop new online programs and to expand existing programs into the online domain.

Leveraging financial aid
In fall 2018, the Strategic Enrollment Management Office, Financial Aid Office, and Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Research assembled a team to evaluate our Financial Aid distribution policies and practices. The purpose of this project was to determine if student financial aid and scholarships can be used to leverage increased enrollment and retention of undergraduate students at Highlands. This process is outlined in more detail in another section of this document and is also described in detail in a document prepared by the Strategic Enrollment Management Office.

Given that the university has a very modest amount of money allocated to financial aid, it is essential that we distribute those limited funds in a way that will benefit the maximum number of students, consistent with our mission as an open access institution. More careful leveraging of financial aid resources can help to recruit students who are more likely to be successful, and can help retain current students who have demonstrated that they can be successful.

These financial aid leveraging initiatives went into effect in fall 2019. It is therefore too early to determine whether these strategies have had a positive effect on enrollment. However, we will continue
to monitor the effectiveness of our financial aid strategies to ensure that we are using limited institutional funds in the most efficient and effective manner possible.

Retention Strategies
Historically, fall-to-fall retention rates for first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students have been modest at Highlands University, typically averaging around 50% for a given cohort. These modest retention rates reflect in part the demographics of our incoming students, the majority of whom are minority students from a rural, financially challenged, and academically challenged background. Nevertheless, it is clear that there is significant room for improvement in these retention rates, and obviously improved retention will translate to stronger enrollment numbers. We have therefore been working to develop multiple initiatives to help increase retention rates among new students. Some of these initiatives are presented in detail in the 4C chapter of this document, but are outlined briefly here.

Retention Advisory Council
The Retention Advisory Council (RAC) was formed in to address institutional retention concerns, particularly with reference to first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students, who historically have relatively low retention rates at NMHU. One of the first initiatives undertaken by the RAC was to identify specific sub-populations of students who have especially low retention rates, to help determine the most effective methods for increasing retention in these vulnerable sub-populations. The RAC continues to meet on a regular basis to monitor retention data and to track effectiveness of various retention initiatives. Minutes of RAC meetings are available on our website.

Persistence and Completion Academy
In fall 2016 Highlands University was accepted for participation in the HLC sponsored Persistence and Completion Academy (PCA). In this multi-year initiative, NMHU has focused on improving our advising model for undergraduate students, in the expectation that improved advising would lead to better persistence. With input from faculty and other campus stakeholders, we have explored a number of options for improving our model of student advising. The PCA Committee continues to meet on a regular basis to promote the work of improving students advising and, by extension, student retention and success. Minutes of PCA meetings are available on our website.

Georgia State University model
Georgia State University (GSU) has emerged as a national leader in developing innovative and effective retention strategies for students from an at-risk background. Given the many similarities between the GSU student body and the Highlands University student body (both predominantly minority students from low-income and academically challenged backgrounds), a decision was made to explore more carefully the types of retention initiatives that have been effective at GSU. To that end, we sent a team of faculty and administrators to visit GSU in fall 2018. Two key areas of activity at GSU immediately caught our attention: 1) the academic coaching model, and 2) the extensive use of predictive analytics. We are currently exploring ways to scale down these initiatives for application at Highlands University.

Academic Success initiatives
Given the high percentage of incoming students from financially and academically challenged backgrounds at NMHU, a key retention strategy is developing academic support systems to help ensure that these students can be successful and persist towards graduation. We have a well-staffed Academic
Support Office that provides a range of services to our students, focusing especially but not exclusively on incoming freshmen, who tend to have the greater challenges in becoming academically successful. The Academic Support Office has been an integral part in all significant retention and completion activities, and has recently introduced a number of new or revised initiatives to improve their services to students. One example is our Enrollment Success Program, which targets academically at-risk freshmen by providing a comprehensive range of support services.

Student Outreach
In an effort to improve retention and better understand non-retention behaviors, the Academic Support Office and our campus centers have begun contacting eligible students who have not yet registered for the upcoming term. This effort has focused on students in good academic standing who do not have a large balance owed to the university. These calls have two purposes: 1) to encourage students to enroll and offer any appropriate help or support, and 2) to determine what factors may be contributing to students’ decision not to return. These call-out efforts do appear to be beneficial in helping to bring back at least a small number of students who might otherwise have left, as well as providing useful insight into student retention behavior.

Customer Relations Coordinator
The university recently created a new position of “Customer Relations Coordinator” (CRC) to provide a one-stop location for students with serious or complex issues. The role of the CRC is to basically take charge of the issue and help the student work through all necessary channels to achieve an appropriate resolution. This position plays a key role in our retention efforts by assisting students to resolve issues that might otherwise become obstacles to persistence.

Campus-wide involvement
Although the Office of Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) has primary responsibility for leading the recruitment and retention efforts of the institution, it is clear that promoting enrollment growth and improving retention have to be campus-wide initiatives. We have therefore worked to inform the campus community about our enrollment and retention efforts, and also to develop opportunities for various stakeholders to contribute to our enrollment and retention efforts. Some key activities include holding campus wide forums on enrollment management issues, publishing periodic SEM newsletters, engaging faculty in enrollment and retention discussions during our Faculty Professional Development Week, and encouraging academic departments and administrative units to consider ways to incorporate enrollment and retention concerns in their unit level strategic plans.

Key Enrollment Indicators
The Commission has emphasized the importance of taking a data-informed approach towards enrollment management. At Highlands University we have taken this recommendation seriously and have developed a broad set of key enrollment indicators and other data metrics to inform our strategies for expanding enrollment and improving retention. These data measures are discussed in more detail in the 4C chapter of this document. In brief, we have worked diligently to incorporate data into all discussions related to strategic enrollment management, to make sure that all decisions are appropriately informed by accurate and complete data.
Enrollment and Retention Outcomes

As noted briefly above, and as discussed in more detail in the 4C chapter of this document, we have implemented a broad range of initiatives and activities to increase enrollment and improve retention. While we have seen positive signs in some persistence measures, and modest growth in the number of incoming new freshmen and transfer students, our overall enrollment has continued to decline. The table below provides a brief summary of enrollment and persistence measures for the last five reporting years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enrollment and retention measures - most recent reporting cycle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall enrollment:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New freshmen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New graduate students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total enrollment (per IPEDS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall-to-fall retention:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New freshmen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New graduate students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-year graduation rate:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New freshmen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New graduate students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These data show positive recent trends in the number of new and transfer students, and in fall-to-fall retention rates and 4-year graduation rates for all cohorts. However, the continued decline in overall enrollment remains a concern. Institutionally, we need to continue to evaluate our enrollment and retention strategies to ensure that they are having a positive impact, and to discontinue ineffective strategies and explore new strategies and necessary, informed by a broad range of data metrics. In the 4C chapter of this document we outline our process and procedures for strategic enrollment management in more detail.

Audit Findings

A key area of concern for the Higher Learning Commission, and one of the areas that contributed to our probationary status with the Commission, was the presence of repeat findings in our annual audit statements. In the letter of July 9, 2018, recommending that NMHU be removed from probation but subject to a Focused Visit, one of the key areas of concern in Criterion 5A focused on demonstrating clean audit findings:

“The Focused visit will specifically address the following... Independent audits of the institution, the Foundation, and Isotopes that do not yield any findings or, at minimum, do not yield any repeat findings.”

NMHU Audit

The annual audit for fiscal year 2017-18 for New Mexico Highlands University has been finalized and publicly posted on our website. A summary of findings is provided below.

There were no repeat findings in the 2017-18 audit. The summary statement from the audit report (p. 73) shows that all previous findings have been cleared, as noted below:
SCHEDULE OF PRIOR YEAR FINDINGS

- Financial Statement Audit
  - 2015-002 University Policies Not Approved (Significant Deficiency) Cleared
  - 2015-004 Capital Asset Accounting (Material Weakness) Cleared
  - 2015-009 Component Unit (Highlands Stable Isotopes Corporation) (Material Noncompliance) Cleared
  - 2016-003 Budget Overspending (Other Noncompliance) Cleared
  - 2017-001 Segregation of duties over Cash Receipts (Significant Deficiency) Cleared

- Findings in Accordance with 2.2.2 NMAC (State Audit Rule)
  - 2015-002 Insufficient Collateral (Other Noncompliance) Cleared
  - 2017-001 State Auditor Referral letter (Other Noncompliance) Cleared
  - 2017-002 Restricted Accounts (Other Noncompliance) Cleared
  - 2017-003 Internal Controls (Other Noncompliance) Cleared
  - 2015-009 Tax Status (Material Noncompliance) Cleared

However, there were five new findings in the 2017-18 audit, as summarized below (p. 73 in the report).

CURRENT YEAR FINDINGS

- Financial Statement Audit
  - 2018-004 Financial report and closing (Significant Deficiency)
  - 2018-002 Controls over Campus Life accounting (Material Weakness)
  - 2018-005 Controls over Capital Assets (Material Weakness)
  - 2018-001 Compliance with Fuel Card activity (Other Noncompliance)
  - 2018-003 Lack of policies over budget adjustment requests (Other Noncompliance)

The university has taken the appropriate steps to correct the 2017-18 audit findings, as outlined in the Corrective Action Plan.

Foundation Audit

As noted above, the Commission has also requested that the university demonstrate clean audit findings for the Foundation. The annual Foundation Audit for fiscal year 2017-18 has been finalized and publicly posted on our website.

The Foundation Audit was clean. There were no findings for findings for 2017-18, and all prior findings have been cleared, as noted below:

PRIOR YEAR FINDINGS

- 2015-002 Foundation Budget (Other Noncompliance) - Resolved
- 2017-001 Restricted accounts (Other Noncompliance) - Resolved
- 2017-002 Internal Controls (Other Noncompliance) - Resolved

The Foundation has taken several steps to insure that it continues to operate in a transparent, ethical, and fiscally responsible manner. These measures are outlined in more detail in the 5D chapter of this document, but are briefly summarized below:
The Foundation recently developed a Strategic Plan to guide ongoing and future Foundation and Advancement activities.

The Foundation recently published an Investment Policy Statement that outlines the goals and investment objectives of The New Mexico Highlands University Foundation.

The Foundation recently published a Use of Funds Policy that defines and clarifies the process for use of all NMHU Foundation Funds.

The Foundation recently developed an Advancement Policy that set forth guidelines for advancement, fundraising, and alumni activities at New Mexico Highlands University.

The Foundation recently published a Conflict of Interest Policy to help ensure integrity and transparency of operations.

**Highlands Stable Isotopes Audit**

As noted above, the Commission has also requested that the university demonstrate clean audit findings for Highlands Stable Isotopes. The annual Isotopes Audit for fiscal year 2017-18 has been finalized and publicly posted on our [website](#).

The Isotopes Audit was clean. There were no findings for findings for 2017-18, and the only prior finding has been cleared, as noted below:

**PRIOR YEAR FINDINGS**

- Financial Statement Findings Required by Government Auditing Standards
  - 2015-001 Tax Status (Material Noncompliance) - Resolved

**Maintaining a Balanced Budget**

In the letter of July 9, 2018, recommending that NMHU be removed from probation but subject to a Focused Visit, the last area of concern in Criterion 5A focused on maintaining a balanced budget:

"The Focused Visit will specifically address the following... Stabilization or growth in student enrollment through the identification of a clear strategy linked to metric-driven recruitment and student persistence goals."

Highlands University has taken a number of concrete steps to help ensure that we maintain a balanced budget both now and in the future. These steps are discussed below.

**More efficient budget processes / allocation**

In recent years the university has revised its processes for developing the budget and allocating resources. Our annual operating budget process is posted on our [website](#).

Key elements of our annual budget process include the following:
Budget priorities are developed in a manner that facilitates planning; informed discussion; faculty, staff and student participation; and a proactive response to critical external and internal issues.

The process encourages openness, trust and transparency by providing feedback to identified groups at various designated points in the budget process.

Efficiency and effectiveness of the budget process is increased by implementing procedures to achieve an online, paperless budget process at the college and major unit level.

Institutional divisions, colleges, and major units are assisted in their development of summary information on budget decisions, reallocation decisions, and budget actions to support budget objectives.

The annual budget process flow is outlined below, moving from spring of the current budget year to early spring of the next budget year.

- Spring: Strategic Planning Group (SPG) meets with President and VPFA to establish preliminary budget priorities for the year, tying those priorities to the strategic plan.
- Early Fall: VPFA distributes priorities to campus via e-mail; holds meetings with the campus to receive feedback on budget priorities (Listening Sessions). Based on feedback, the SPG, President, and VPFA revise budget priorities and distributes them to the campus community.
- Fall: Departments and Units prepare budget requests based on the budget priorities, tying them to the strategic plan, their Program reviews, and their Outcomes Assessments. Departments will have individual Budget Hearings with the Budget Office and Deans to present their requests.
- Late Fall: The VPFA, working with the President, the Provost, the Deans, the SPG, and the Campus Budget and Planning Committee, prioritizes the budget requests from the budget hearings. The VPFA’s office provides written feedback to departments on their budget requests. If departments have new information or new arguments, they may submit a written appeal to the Dean, VPFA, and Provost regarding their budget requests. The response to the appeal will be yes or no.
- Winter: The VPFA’s office, working with the President, produces the final budget.
- Early Spring: The President presents the final budget to the Campus Community, including a list of prioritized requests.

This budgeting process is designed to ensure a balance between centralized control of the budgeting process and unit-level participation. The Vice President for Finance and Administration maintains control of the overall budgeting process, but individual units clearly have substantial input and feedback. This interactive process ensures that there is an appropriate level of oversight in all budget activities, while maintaining an appropriate level of responsiveness to the needs of individual units. These improved processes have helped to ensure that we maintain a balanced budget while still being responsible to the financial needs of individual departments and the university as a whole.

Auxiliary and component operations
The university has taken a number of measures to reduce expenses associated with auxiliary and component operations, especially those relating to Stable Isotopes and the NMHU Golf Course, which are not directly tied to our primary mission as an educational institution.
Stable Isotopes
For several years NMHU has been funding the Stable Isotopes project. This project was essentially a technology transfer operation which received substantial funding allocations from the institution with the expectation of long-term financial gains which would offset the initial investment. The expected financial gains have not materialized, leaving the university to support a rather costly venture for a number of years. However, the university has finally paid off all debts incurred by the Stable Isotopes project with no future expenditures expected. This will help to stabilize our annual budget by removing a substantial ongoing expense that was not contributing significantly to our educational mission.

We should also note that the Stable Isotopes Board has been re-constituted. It is necessary for the board to be operational in order to process additional revenues that may be realized in the future.

Golf Course
For many years Highlands University has owned a golf course, which was originally a donation to the university, within the city of Las Vegas. In 2008 the university re-opened the golf course after significant renovations and updates, in the hope that the new course would generate increased revenue. However, that has not happened, and the golf course continues to operate at a significant annual deficit, which must be absorbed by the university. Annual budget reports for the golf course are posted on the university website. These budget reports show that the university is golf course has been operating at an annual deficit of over $200,000.

An obvious solution would be to sell the golf course. However, the golf course provides a critically important recreational outlet for the city of Las Vegas, which offers relatively few recreational activities for its residents. As part of our commitment to the local community, Highlands University is very reluctant to sell the golf course without some clear assurance that another entity would operate and maintain the facility. We have had various discussions with the City of Las Vegas about some type of joint operation or ownership of the golf course, but so far the city has not been receptive to these discussions. We have also explored options for leasing the golf course to a private operator, which could potentially generate revenue for the university, but to date we have been unable to secure a partner for this type of enterprise.

In summer and fall of 2018, the university formed a task force to address the financial challenges posed by our ownership of the golf course, and to propose possible solutions to reduce the annual deficit. The university also held a community forum to elicit feedback from various stakeholders within the local community. The task force offered various recommendations for basic operating improvements, including a modified fee scale, staff reductions, and enhanced amenities such as dining. More substantively, the task force also explored options for selling currently unused portions of the golf course property for real estate development. These conversations are still ongoing. The university remains committed to resolving the budget deficits associated with the golf course while at the same time ensuring access to the local community. While we do not exclude the possibility of shutting down operations at the golf course and selling the land, this option would only be pursued as a last resort.

Other auxiliary operations
In the face of declining enrollment, we have shut down two of our residential halls, with a total capacity of approximately 120 beds. This has allowed significant savings on maintenance and utility costs. We have been able to accommodate all interested students in our remaining residence halls. If necessary,
for example if we see an increase in enrollment, one of the off-line residence halls could be brought back online quickly and efficiently.

We have realized additional though modest cost savings by consolidating two coffee shops on the Las Vegas campus. Given the small size of the campus, it did not make financial sense to operate two similar establishments within a few hundred feet of each other.

Communication with campus community
Another area in which Highlands University has worked to improve the budget process is communication and transparency. A primary goal of the revised budget process is to ensure participation among stakeholders as well as a greater awareness of how the budgeting process takes place. Better stakeholder involvement at all levels of the budgeting process can help to ensure that the outcomes of the process are fair and equitable, but also fiscally responsible, ethical, and sustainable. These are all important elements in ensuring that the university can continue to maintain balanced budgets despite the uncertainty of external circumstances over which we may have little control.

Some of the steps we have taken to ensure effective communication and transparency in the budget process include the following.

*Budget Listening Sessions*
The Office of Finance and Administration has held periodic public forums open to all university stakeholders to discuss all aspects of the budget process. These forums provide an opportunity for stakeholders to ask questions or make recommendations about the budget process. These sessions are recorded via Zoom, and the recordings have been posted to our website.

*Website postings*
The Budget and Finance Office maintains an extensive and up-to-date website which contains links to a wide range of documents and other artifacts relevant to the budget process. This website is available to all university stakeholders and to the general public. By providing this wealth of information, the Budget and Finance Office helps to ensure that stakeholders have relevant budget information easily and readily available, which in turn allows those stakeholders to be more informed and more intentional participants in all stages of the budget process.

*Budget and Planning Committee*
The university maintains a Budget and Planning Committee which meets regularly. This committee is chaired by the Vice President for Finance and Administration and has broad representation from across the university, including students, faculty, staff, administration, and a representative from the campus centers.

The role of this committee, as specified in the Annual Operating Budget Process document (p. 8), is as follows:

* To serve as the primary contributors on updates to the budget, capital planning, and campus master plan
* To serve on various qualification-based Request for Proposals (RFPs) for any professional services contract on any capital projects or major initiatives
• To serve on standing administrative, faculty, staff or student financial committees
• To review, recommend, and provide revised policies as necessary related to budget and capital planning

The activities of this committee, as outlined above, once again help to ensure broad participation and transparency in the budget process, thereby helping to ensure the development of responsible and responsive annual budget.

Annual Budget Hearings
On an annual basis, the Budget Office schedules budget hearings with each academic department and administrative unit to discuss budgets for the upcoming academic year. For academic departments, the meetings include the Department Chair, Budget Director, the appropriate Dean, and, if necessary, the Provost. For administrative units, the meetings include the Budget Director and Unit Director.

Prior to the meetings, the Department Chair will submit their Budget Requests (a standard form with linkages to the institutional Strategic Plan), their Department Strategic Plan, their Department’s most recent Program Review and Response, and their last two years of Outcomes Assessment Reports. Failure to submit these documents may result in denial of Budget Requests.

Within four weeks of the Budget Hearing, the Budget Office will provide written feedback to the department or unit on their budget requests, indicating whether the requests have been approved (pending funding) or denied. If departments have new information or new arguments, they may submit a written appeal to the Dean, VPFA, and Provost regarding their budget requests.

Working with the appropriate stakeholders, the Budget Office will develop a list of budget priorities for submittal to the President and Campus Budget and Planning Committee based on the budget hearings.

The President, working with the Budget Office and the advice of the Campus Budget and Planning Committee, will establish budget-planning allocations at the institutional division level.

The process outlined above helps to ensure that academic departments and administrative units have significant input into the budget process, and also helps to ensure regular and effective communication at all stages of the process. Additionally, by requiring multiple sources of support, the budget hearings helps to integrate various key aspects of institutional functioning, including budgeting, planning, and assessment.

Coffee and Conversation
Our president holds regular campus-wide meetings (typically two or three times per semester) to inform the campus community about any significant events or activities that may impact employees or office operations. These “Coffee and Conversation” meetings are open to the entire campus community and are broadcast via Zoom technology to allow participation from stakeholders at the campus centers and other remote sites. These meetings, which are well attended, typically include an update on any important budgetary items.

Annual Budgets
As we have outlined above, Highlands University has taken significant measures, including improved policies and procedures, to ensure that we can formulate a balanced budget now and in the future.
Obviously, however, the most important evidence is in the annual budgets themselves. All annual budget reports for Highlands University are clearly posted on our website and accessible to the university community and the outside community.

As the data below shows (extracted from the IPEDS Finance Report, part D), Highlands University has been managing a modest surplus in change in net assets for the past several years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fiscal Year</th>
<th>Revenues</th>
<th>Expenses</th>
<th>Net change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FY2013-14</td>
<td>64,159,170</td>
<td>64,917,788</td>
<td>-758,618</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY2014-15</td>
<td>65,902,956</td>
<td>65,585,164</td>
<td>317,792</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY2015-16</td>
<td>75,047,656</td>
<td>66,537,885</td>
<td>8,509,771</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY2016-17</td>
<td>69,620,674</td>
<td>68,674,917</td>
<td>945,757</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY2017-18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The unusually large surplus in FY2015-16 resulted from the fact that we included substantial capital revenues related to major building projects. Overall these financial data testify to the success of our revised budget planning processes in helping to ensure that the university can maintain a balanced budget.

Summary: Core Component 5A
We believe that we have effectively addressed most of the concerns of the Higher Learning Commission with respect to Core Component 5A, but we acknowledge that there are areas where continued improvement is needed.

Some of our key accomplishments with reference to Core Component 5A include the following:

- We have developed a clear budget strategy, with board approval, to develop a reserve fund to provide a financial buffer in the event of reduced state funding.
- We have implemented tuition increases to help reduce our reliance on state funding, while still allowing us to remain one of the most affordable institutions in the southwest.
- We have developed a comprehensive and coherent strategy for enrollment management.
- There were no repeat findings in the FY18 institutional audit.
- We have developed an action plan to address each of the new findings in the FY18 institutional audit.
- FY18 audits for the Foundation and Stable Isotopes were clean.
- We have improved the budgeting process to insure transparency, participation, and effective communication to all stakeholders.
- The revised budgeting process has allowed us to adjust the budget in real time, so as to ensure a balanced budget or surplus despite enrollment changes or other unforeseen circumstances that may reduce revenue or increase expenses.

Some remaining challenges include the following:

- Despite a broad range of strategic enrollment management initiatives, the university continues to see continued enrollment declines.
- Although we did not have any repeat audit findings in the FY18 institutional audit, there were several new findings.
- Although the university has expended considerable effort in exploring innovative and responsible solutions to the fiscal challenges posed by the NMHU Golf Course, this asset continues to be a significant financial liability.
Core Component 5D

The third major section of this document outlines how the university has addressed Core Component 5D.

Background: Core Component 5D

In their letter of July 9, 2018, removing NMHU from probation, the Higher Learning Commission Board of Trustees identified Core Component 5D as an area of continuing concern.

“The Institutional has demonstrated that it meets Criterion Five, Core Component 5D, ‘the institution works systematically to improve its performance,’ but with concerns for the following reasons:

- The institution has demonstrated that it has the processes in place to develop and document evidence of performance in its operations.
- However, the institution currently lacks specific outcomes of its work that it can demonstrate through data and other tracking measures; and
- Such measures are needed to help the institution provide clear evidence of its efforts, learning, and subsequent improvements toward institutional effectiveness, capabilities, and sustainability.”

Specifically, the HLC letter made three broad recommendations in this area in preparation for the Spring 2020 Focused Visit. We have addressed these three recommendations in this chapter of the Focused Visit Report.

The university acknowledges that we need to improve our processes for promoting and measuring institutional improvement. We welcome the recommendations of the Higher Learning Commission and have taken significant measures to achieve compliance with HLC expectations through a comprehensive process of institutional improvement. These measures are outlined in the present chapter.

In order to address the concerns of the HLC, we formed an HLC Focused Visit Steering Committee to oversee the process of preparing a response to the HLC concerns. We also formed three sub-committees to address each of the three areas of concern specified by the HLC. These sub-committees each consist of several faculty and staff members reflecting a broad range of experience and expertise. The sub-committees have met periodically to engage in planning and oversight activities relevant to each of the three HLC areas of concern. Committee membership, meeting dates, agenda, and minutes are available on the website.

At an administrative level, both the president of the university and the provost have made systematic institutional improvement a priority, as will be documented below. The university has worked to communicate the importance of these institutional improvement efforts to a broad range of campus stakeholders, as explained in a later section of this chapter. We continue to strive to build a campus culture of continuous improvement.
Creation and Implementation of Policies for Stakeholder Agreement
With reference to Core Component 5D, the first broad area of concern identified by the Commission was stated as follows:

“The Focused Visit will specifically address the following... Evidence of the creation and implantation of policies related to new processes for the institutionalization of stakeholder agreements in all areas, including strategic planning and budgeting, student complaint management, the Office of Advancement, and Student Financial Aid administration.”

The sections below will address the various ways in which Highlands University has addressed these concerns.

Institutional Strategic Planning
While NMHU has always had strategic planning efforts and activities underway, in recent years we have not taken a systematic approach to institution-wide strategic planning. Our current strategic plan, “HU Vision 2020,” provides a vision, mission statement, and set of broad institutional goals, but does not provide specific objectives or action steps, nor any mechanism for tracking progress toward achieving the institutional goals.

We are currently preparing a new strategic plan which will address some of the shortcomings of the current plan. The strategic planning effort is being led by our president, Dr. Sam Minner, with broad faculty and staff participation. The outline of the new plan ensures that we will have a carefully articulated set of goals and objectives, with action steps, measurable outcomes, responsible parties and an appropriate assessment process to ensure progress toward our goals.

The new strategic plan, which is expected to be complete by will be a foundational document for NMHU. The new plan will guide the university into the future, and will help us to assess our successes and achievements as well as areas of possible improvement. The new plan will also help NMHU move towards a more mature and fully developed culture of continuous improvement. Finally, the new institutional strategic plan also will drive unit level planning as noted below.

Budget Process
Our budgeting process has undergone significant revisions and improvements in recent years, with a goal toward increasing stakeholder involvement in the process and also improving the transparency of the process. The budget process has been carefully documented in the Annual Operating Budget Process document, which is available on our website. Key elements of the budgeting process are outlined below, and are also discussed in more detail in the 5A (Finance) chapter of this document.

Following are the primary goals of the budgeting process:

- Budget priorities are developed in a manner that facilitates planning; informed discussion; faculty, staff and student participation; and a proactive response to critical external and internal issues.
- The process encourages openness, trust and transparency by providing feedback to identified groups at various designated points in the budget process.
• Efficiency and effectiveness of the budget process is increased by implementing procedures to achieve an online, paperless budget process at the college and major unit level.
• Institutional divisions, colleges, and major units are assisted in their development of summary information on budget decisions, reallocation decisions, and budget actions to support budget objectives.

The Budget Process document (p. 6) provides a detailed annual timetable for the budget cycle. For every step of this process, the Vice President for Finance and Administration will be responsible for making all relevant documents, including Budget Priorities, Budget Requests, and the Final Budget, available online for the NMHU community to review.

On an annual basis, the Budget Office schedules budget hearings with each academic department and administrative unit to discuss budgets for the upcoming academic year. These hearings help to ensure that academic departments and administrative units have significant input into the budget process, and also help to ensure regular and effective communication at all stages of the process. Additionally, by requiring multiple sources of support, the budget hearings helps to integrate various key aspects of institutional functioning, including budgeting, planning, and assessment.

The university maintains a Budget and Planning Committee that meets regularly. This committee is chaired by the Vice President for Finance and Administration and has broad representation from across the university, including students, faculty, staff, administration, and a representative from the campus centers. The activities of this committee help to ensure broad participation and transparency in the budget process, thereby helping to ensure the development of responsible and responsive annual budget.

The Office of Finance and Administration has held periodic public forums open to all university stakeholders to discuss all aspects of the budget process. These forums provide an opportunity for stakeholders to ask questions or make recommendations about the budget process. These sessions are recorded via Zoom, and the recordings have been posted to our website.

Financial Aid Office
In their action letter of July 9, 2018, the Commission specifically challenged the Financial Aid Office to improve operations and stakeholder satisfaction: “The Focused Visit will specifically address the following... Evidence of the creation and implementation of policies related to new processes for the institutionalization of stakeholder agreements in all areas, including... Student Financial Aid administration.” This section outlines some of the measures taken by the Financial Aid Office to meet these expectations.

The Financial Aid Office has made widespread and significant changes to all aspects of their operations. These changes have been designed first and foremost to improve financial aid services to our students. Secondarily, the changes outlines below have helped to improve efficiency, communication, and reporting effectiveness.

Operational Process Improvements in the Financial Aid Office
The Financial Aid Office has created processes utilizing the Financial Aid Banner Module to load, select, review, and package all student ISIR (FAFSA) files, eliminating processing time for all staff members.
Tasks that in the past took hours, have now been moved to minutes to complete. For example, the loading files process has moved from a four-hour process to 30 minutes, depending on the number of files loaded for the day. This change has allowed the FA Office to package awards earlier for the upcoming year. This effort will assist students in knowing what financial aid they have been awarded at an earlier point in time, which translates to stronger recruitment and retention outcomes.

The Financial Aid Office has also eliminated the manual processes for verification of student financial aid files. We now request income taxes, W2 forms, and paperwork from students by email. We also have created a process utilizing the Financial Aid Banner Module to complete verification and load corrections through the automated system. This process has reduced manual work and improved staff morale as well as allowed for other overdue projects to be accomplished within the office. Most importantly, these improvements allow Financial Aid staff to focus more time and energy in providing assistance to our students.

The university has revised the Satisfactory Academic Progress policy to allow for a more equitable and consistent set of criteria for all students, regardless of class level. The outcomes of these changes will be reflected by continued Pell Grant eligibility and by increased retention rates. These changes were informed by a careful analysis of financial aid and outcomes data conducted by the Office of Financial Aid and the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Research. The Satisfactory Academic Progress policy is posted on our website.

Recently the office created a “Financial Aid Office Structure and Position Responsibilities” document defining duties and expectations for all staff members. The staff have all documented their job procedures and currently continue to cross train to ensure processes continue in the event of their absence. This has allowed us to maintain a high level of service to our students even under conditions when we may not be fully staffed.

In an effort to positively impact sustainability for the university, the Financial Aid and Scholarships Office has moved to create a paperless environment. The changes include the elimination of printing of all ISIR (FAFSA) files downloaded from the Department of Education. Today, the ISIR (FAFSA) files are downloaded into the Banner system and reviewed electronically by a paperless process. This progressive change has eliminated the need for more than 25,000 printed copies per year. The cost savings achieved by moving to a paperless environment allow us to dedicate more resources toward directly helping our students.

The Financial Aid office has eliminated the practice of creating a student hard copy file for every ISIR (FAFSA) received in our office. Currently, student files are only created when the student is actually attending NMHU and are stored in our vault. Those students who will not attend NMHU, have electronic files in the Banner system in the event they decided to attend at a future semester within the academic year.

**Scholarship Process Improvements**

The Financial Aid Office has worked to revise the allocation of institutional scholarships to support our recruitment and retention efforts. Recommendations were submitted to the Board of Regents and approved on December 14, 2018. These changes allow us to more effectively leverage institutional scholarships to reach potential students by incentivizing them to attend, retain, and graduate from NMHU.
We have restructured the Foundation Scholarship application on the submission portal called Award/Spring. We now leave the application open for almost a full year, beginning March 1 and closing the next year on February 15. In the past the application would open and close on an inconsistent basis and resulted in significant student frustration.

We have changed the process whereby we offer scholarships to freshman and transfer students. These scholarships are now offered by the date of their admission to NMHU. We review GPA and ACT/SAT scores and begin offering institutional scholarships on the first day of November for the upcoming academic year. There is no application for the scholarships, only a fully admitted date. The students are notified by letter and email and given the ability to accept by use of their cellphones. This change provides for a less complicated application and an earlier notification process, which can help with our recruitment efforts.

For incoming transfer students, scholarships are offered to applicants in March of every year as students are admitted. Students can now accept scholarships on SLATE, a new software product. With this software we have the ability to send bulk emails and collect data. These changes have allowed us to provide better service to our students as well as to track outcomes more effectively.

**Communication Plan for Financial Aid**

The Financial Aid Office recently created a “Communication Plan” for prospective and continuing students. In collaboration with other offices, such as the Admissions Office, we regularly send email communication which includes relevant messages from multiple offices. This helps alleviate over-saturation of messages to students from different offices, thereby reducing confusion and student frustration.

We have changed the communication process for Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) notification by email instead of sending hard copy letters to students who are suspended. This allows them the ability to submit an appeal earlier, reduce paper, and returned letters. It also helps to ensure that only the student receives the notification.

We have established a more regular schedule for monitoring and updating the Financial Aid website to ensure all information is relevant and current. We have restructured the landing page to provide important links on top of page which point to relevant student information, especially the Net Price Calculator.

We have initiated a process of emailing all students who have a FAFSA but have not yet been admitted (typically indicating that they have not yet submitted all required materials). The email provides a link for the students to go directly to the Admission application. This assists with recruitment efforts by reaching out to potential students who may still be deciding whether to complete their application to Highlands University.

Finally, the Financial Aid Office has implemented a Financial Literacy Initiative to improve potential students’ understanding and awareness of the FAFSA process, and also to emphasize the importance of budgeting for college. We have engaged in continuous outreach to area high schools to provide FAFSA workshops. Additionally, we have provided financial aid training for staff members at our various centers, and have made arrangement to meet with students at the centers.
Office of Advancement / Foundation
In their action letter of July 9, 2018, the Commission also challenged the Office of Advancement (Foundation) to improve operations and stakeholder satisfaction: “The Focused Visit will specifically address the following... Evidence of the creation and implementation of policies related to new processes for the institutionalization of stakeholder agreements in all areas, including... the Office of Advancement.” This section outlines some of the measures taken by the Office of Advancement (also referred to as the Foundation) to meet these expectations.

The NMHU Foundation and Office of Advancement has recently implemented comprehensive changes to ensure better efficiency, integrity, and transparency. These changes are articulated in several policy and planning documents, as detailed below.

**Strategic Plan**
The Foundation recently developed a [Strategic Plan](#) to guide ongoing and future Foundation and Advancement activities. This Strategic Plan, approved in July 2018, included the following goals:

- Raise funds for the university
- Provide administration and governance for the Foundation
- Develop a Board that provides resources, diversity and capacity
- Develop Marketing and Public Relations

Each goal includes specific objectives and action steps to guide the Foundation towards completion and fulfillment. The plan also identifies a number of standing committees that will play a key role in implementation.

**Investment Policy**
Another key document recently published (July 15, 2017) by the Foundation is the [Investment Policy Statement](#). This document outlines the goals and investment objectives of The New Mexico Highlands University Foundation. This Policy Statement outlines certain specific investment policies that will govern how to achieve those goals and objectives. This Policy Statement, upon the review and approval of the Foundation Board:

- Defines certain responsibilities of the Board, Committee, the Consultant, the investment managers, and other specified parties
- Describes a risk posture for the investment of the Foundation’s assets
- Specifies the target asset allocation policy for those assets
- Establishes investment guidelines regarding the selection of investment managers, permissible securities and diversification of assets
- Specifies the criteria for evaluating the performance of the Foundation’s investment managers and of the Foundation investment portfolio as a whole

These policies will be reviewed by the Foundation Board periodically and revised as necessary to ensure that they continue to reflect the current financial situation of the Foundation and the capital markets.
Use of Funds Policy
The Foundation published the Use of Funds Policy on July 11, 2018. The purpose of the NMHU Foundation Use of Funds Policy is to define and clarify the process and guidelines for use of all NMHU Foundation Funds. This policy is intended to work in coordination with the NMHU and NMHU Foundation Advancement Policy (see below), as well as other NMHU and NMHU Foundation policies, in addition to all applicable laws, regulations, advisory or letter rulings, or other precedent or guidance. This policy is also intended to reflect best practices, and the NMHU Foundation’s fiduciary responsibilities related to donor funds.

Advancement Policy
The Foundation has developed and published an Advancement Policy. The purpose of this policy is to set forth guidelines for advancement, fundraising, and alumni activities at New Mexico Highlands University. The policy is not meant as an exclusive, or comprehensive guide to all situations that may arise, but rather sets forth basic procedures, criteria, and priorities. The Advancement Policy includes the following major sections:

- Coordination of solicitation
- Gift acceptance
- Gift acknowledgement
- Gift recognition

Conflict of Interest Policy
The Foundation has also published a clear Conflict of Interest Policy to help ensure integrity and transparency of operations. This conflict of interest policy is designed to help directors, officers, employees and volunteers of the Foundation identify situations that present potential conflicts of interest and to provide the Foundation with a procedure to appropriately manage conflicts in accordance with legal requirements and the goals of accountability and transparency in Foundation operations. This policy statement includes the following major sections:

- Definition of conflict of interest
- Procedures for handling potential conflicts of interest
- Confidentiality policies and procedures
- Requirements for stakeholder compliance

Finally, an amended version of the Foundation Bylaws was published on July 15, 2016. These bylaws specify in detail the operational principles and practices of the Foundation.

Collectively, the planning, policy, and procedural documents summarized above provide clear guidelines and parameters for all aspects of the NMHU Foundation’s operations, while providing flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances and promote continual improvement.

It should also be noted here that the Foundation audit for fiscal year 2018 was clean, and all prior audit findings have been cleared. The Foundation audit is discussed in more detail in the 5A chapter of this document.
**Student Complaint Process**

Another key area of concern in the HLC action letter of July 9, 2018 was the student complaint process. We have always taken student complaints and concerns seriously at NMHU. However, in the past student complaints were handled in a very de-centralized manner, which issues be directed to specific offices and, too often, being re-directed to another office. In many cases this led to students getting the “runaround” when they had a complaint, which typically and understandably led to frustration and anger on the part of our students. Additionally, the de-centralized nature of complaint management did not allow for tracking of types of complaints or the manner in which they were resolved.

NMHU has taken steps to improve the complaint management process, but it must be acknowledged that we still have considerable room for improvement. We continue to prioritize this area, as we understand that it is a critically important aspect of student satisfaction and of institutional effectiveness. The paragraphs below outline some of the measures we have taken to date to improve complaint management.

**Student Handbook**

We have updated our Student Handbook to collect complaint handling concerns in a single section. This helps students to determine more effectively where they should direct complaints and reduces the likelihood of being transferred from one office to another. We are also exploring better ways to present the complaint procedure on our website, so as to allow students easy and usable access to this information. Another possibility we are exploring is developing a web-based form for submitting student complaints. This form would automatically be sent to the appropriate office based on the type of complaint specified. In addition, such a form would allow easier and more efficient tracking of the types of complaints submitted by students. With work-flow programming, such a form could also allow tracking of the resolution of the complaint along the entire complaint pathway.

**Process improvements**

Based on prior complaint history, several campus offices have tried to improve their operations so as to ensure better student services. This will of course help to reduce the incidence of future complaints in those areas. It is also another example of trying to “close the loop” by identifying a problem, taking measures to address the problem, and then verifying that the solution was effective. In addition to numerous initiatives discussed elsewhere in this document, here are some examples of some recent initiatives designed to improve our services to students:

- The Business Office worked collaboratively with Financial Aid and Registrar to improve the disenrollment process so as to better support student retention and success
- The Business Office created a Student Help Center to address customer service issues
- The Farmington Center developed program-specific transfer and advisement sheets to help students develop a clearer path toward completion; the Farmington Center also hired a Student Support Specialist to provide more direct and immediate advising and support to students
- The Director of Housing and Custodial Supervisor have planned meetings with residence hall students to listen to ideas and address concerns in a proactive manner
Customer Service Coordinator

A key measure in addressing student complaints and concerns was the creation of the Customer Relations (CR) Office in October 2017 as an additional resource for all Highland's students, especially those attending courses online and at the Centers. The two main roles of the CR Office are 1) to serve as a student ombudsman, helping to resolve student issues and concerns; and 2) to serve as a one-stop-shop call center for students with several questions looking for answers with one phone call, email, or visit. This position has been instrumental in improving our student services. Since its establishment, the CR Office has assisted over 970 students. The Customer Relations Coordinator assists students by appointment or walk-in, via telephone, email, live chat, or Zoom appointment and travels to HU’s Centers monthly to be available for in-person student assistance.

The CR Office implemented a Live Chat feature available on NMHU’s website. Live Chat was introduced in April, 2018. Many students have taken advantage of the Live Chat option to receive immediate answers to their questions and concerns. Recent contact data indicates that about 43% of incoming communication with the CR Office is received via Live Chat. The Customer Relations Coordinator keeps record of the reason(s) for contact and the assistance provided. The table below indicates the top five department inquiries/concerns that were received via Live Chat from 4/2018 to 10/2018.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Office</th>
<th>Reason/Concern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Registrar</td>
<td>Transcript inquiry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Aid</td>
<td>FAFSA file inquiry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITS/EOS</td>
<td>Unable/unaware of how to login to Self Service Banner/Brightspace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Office</td>
<td>Student account payment inquiry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty/Faculty Advisors</td>
<td>Requested assistance contacting faculty/faculty advisor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As this table shows, the Live Chat feature has been effective in addressing a range of common student concerns and complaints.

The CR Office also has a “Student Concern Request” form available on their website. This simple form allows students to express concerns or complaints and submit the form directly to the CR Office. The Customer Relations Coordinator will then process the form and contact the student to determine an appropriate course of action.

Library Improvement Initiatives

The Donnelly Library at Highlands University is a major asset for academic support and academic research, benefiting our students, faculty, and the larger community. Our library has been and continues to be a high-functioning unit within the university, and is fully committed to engaging in a process of data-informed continuous improvement. Some key initiatives and activities undertaken by the library are outlines below.

Information Gathering

The library gathers customer service input throughout the year using a variety of methods. In the fall, we send out a Centers, Distance Education, and Online Library Assessment Survey. In the spring, we conduct a Main Campus Library Assessment Survey. These surveys are sent out globally, and we
encourage both students and faculty/staff to participate. Additionally, the library solicits student input concerning instruction after every session that is given during the year. There is also a student satisfaction survey that is given at the end of the 5-week Library Research course. Each semester, the survey data is reviewed and evaluated and a report is produced, which is shared in online docs.

Finally, the library still maintains a suggestion box as well as an online suggestion form, which are checked monthly. These suggestions are reported to the Faculty Library Committee, along with a response from the library addressing the specific suggestion or concern.

Data-Informed Decisions

Based on survey findings and other suggestions, the most frequently requested improvements or changes include increased access to online resources (particularly professional journals) and updated computers. For several years, the library’s budget has remained static; however, we do allocate our existing resources based partially on input from library users. Reviews and changes in many areas are made on an annual basis.

Some of the areas of operation in which decisions are made at least partially on user feedback include:

Online resources: Each year, library staff evaluate usage of online resources to determine the usability and value of our database subscriptions to students and faculty. Usage data (along with input from faculty and the library’s subject specialists) is utilized to determine how to allocate online funds for the coming year. This evaluation of fund allocations is a continuous process.

Computer improvements: Although current budgetary restraints do not allow for the replacement of the library’s computers, library staff have allocated funds and staffing to update existing computers where possible. Computer upgrades constitute one of the most common requests from surveys and user input.

Hours of operation: Current hours are based on evaluation of past library usage. In 2017, library staff examined gate counts and user statistics to determine that the library could be closed on Saturdays with little impact on the student body. A trial run was conducted in the summer of 2017 with full implementation thereafter. This reduction in weekend hours allowed the library to re-channel resources to areas of greater need.

Instruction: When and how our library research courses are offered is based on data kept on past offerings (e.g. traditionally morning classes are not as successful as afternoon ones). The decision to offer online courses is based partially on trends within the university and the changing nature of the student body and partially on requests made by students and faculty from the centers (i.e. survey results).

Awareness: Both campus surveys include questions pertaining to the awareness of and use of various library services. This information allows the librarians to determine which services and/or which collections require further attention, publicity, and training.

ITS Improvement Initiatives

Another key division in providing support to students, faculty, and staff at Highlands University is Information Technology Services (ITS). The ITS office has been committed to the process of continual improvement. Notably, in spring 2018, the ITS office sent out a detailed survey regarding ITS services to
all campus stakeholders. Based on feedback from this survey, ITS implemented a broad range of improvements to its services. A summary of some key improvement initiatives are summarized below; the complete report can be found on our website.

- Established an agreement with D2L for providing 7x24 Help Desk Service for NMHU community. The service augments service provided by ITS Help Desk
- Repurposed a vacant position creating an ITS Support Tech for the Albuquerque and Rio Rancho Centers
- Performed a complete inventory of all classroom technology and computer lab technology; the inventory included both hardware and software. The inventory revealed deficiencies in software levels for a limited number of computers and one revision level back for Smartboards. The deficiencies on the computers have been addressed. The Smartboards will require an updated service agreement to address. ITS is in the process of addressing the Smartboard software updates.
- Developed a number of training opportunities for Banner and other campus technologies
- Performed a complete inventory of all classroom technology and computer lab technology; the inventory included both hardware and software. The inventory also included room utilization data. From this inventory the following steps have been identified to address these concerns:
  - Developed a Technology Renewal and Replacement Administrative Directive focused on a six to seven year replacement strategy, as well as process for renewal and replacement.
  - Developed a plan to specifically address classroom and lab technology, working and coordinating with Provost and Deans
  - Identified portal software to navigate NMHU Technology environment. The intent of the portal is to provide better navigation of NMHU’s technology environment, provide users links that will take students and staff directly to the services and/or information, and include improved single sign-on, improved password reset software and enhanced security including geo-fencing. The technology request will be included as a FY20 Budget Request.
  - ITS has identified the following measures to improve processes, communications and transparency with the NMHU technology community.
    - Work-Order process targeted at improving communications throughout the work order life-cycle as well as consistency in the manner in which problems are resolved.
    - Digital Technology Plan and associated process for NMHU technology targeted at improving communications related to technology projects, approval status, funding and progress.
    - Technology Renewal and Replacement Directive targeted to provide replacement standards, improved communications (which equipment is being replaced and when) and transparency in the process.
    - SharePoint site as a central and one-stop-shop for the NMHU Technology community to go for support and information related to technology.

These improvement initiatives have helped ITS improve campus services while operating within tight budget and resource constraints.
**Website Improvements**

For years an area of continuing concern for the NMHU community was the ineffectiveness of the university website. Faculty, staff, current students, and prospective students have all expressed frustration with navigating the website. Ongoing budget challenges have made it difficult to address these concerns; however, senior administration, supported by the Board of Regents, recently made a decision to prioritize improvement of the website. There is widespread agreement that a better website will contribute to improvements in institutional function at multiple levels, and that these improvements, based on feedback from multiple stakeholders, will justify the expense.

In early 2019, the university hired a web content manager, and secured the contractual services of an experienced web design company. The web design team held numerous open forums held with varied and diverse groups of campus stakeholders, to ensure that stakeholder needs and concerns were addressed.

The new NMHU website is a cornerstone of institutional improvement efforts because it impacts so many areas of university operations and activities. Following is a short list of some of the institutional benefits that can result from our improved web presence.

- **External relations:** A more attractive, informative, and navigable website can help to attract and interest potential students, job applicants, and potential donors and business partners.
- **Internal communication:** The improved website will facilitate improved communications and information exchange within the NMHU community. This improved communication can in turn lead to improvements in efficiency and customer service.
- **Campus life:** The improved website will provide better information delivery to current students about upcoming activities and events, safety and health issues, and academic events and schedules. The new website may also help to facilitate a more user-friendly complaint process, which as noted above is a priority for the university and also a specific area of concern for the HLC.

**Student and Institution-Wide Surveys**

Like most colleges and universities, NMHU has traditionally surveyed students using a suite of survey products, some proprietary (e.g. NSSE, Noel-Levitz, Skyfactor) and some developed internally. In recent years, however, we have tried to be more intentional in our use of survey results, although there is still room for improvement in this area. By intentionally and strategically using our survey data, we can more effectively determine areas of student concerns and student needs. This knowledge allows us to respond proactively and take measures to address those needs and concerns, thereby improving the quality of student life and reducing the number of student complaints. Such initiatives can also help to improve retention, another key area of HLC concern which is addressed in another area of this document.

The primary nationally normed survey that we use at NMHU is the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which provides information about a range of academic and co-curricular student behaviors linked to student engagement. The most recent deployment of this survey took place in spring 2019. Several key areas of concern emerged from this survey.
The previous NSSE survey was deployed in spring 2016. Results of that survey were used to drive ongoing discussions about our approach to student advising. While no immediate changes were made at that time, this discussion has continued into the present and has led to more recent revisions to our advising model, as discussed in the 4C (Enrollment Management) chapter of this document.

The Career Services office periodically deploys various survey tools to solicit feedback from alumni about their experiences at Highlands University as well as their post-graduation experiences. These data are used by multiple stakeholders across campus, including the Career Services staff but also including faculty who are interested in learning more about the experiences of graduates from their departments. This information has been instrumental in helping faculty to improve their academic programs. Results of the most recent cycle of Career Services surveys can be found in their annual co-curricular assessment report.

The Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Research (OIER) annually conducts a survey of graduating seniors. This survey is typically distributed manually to students at the graduation rehearsal, which promotes a high response rate. Results of this survey are summarized and are available to the campus community in a summary report. Results can be disaggregated by academic department and can therefore help individual departments to gain further insight on their student experiences.

The OIER office also conducts an annual survey of alumni who graduated three years previously. The response rate for this survey is understandably low, but results nevertheless provide valuable insights about the experiences of our students and their post-graduate activities. A copy of the most recent summary of this survey is available online.

**Campus Communication**
NMHU has made significant efforts to inform the campus community about changes that we are making to improve our institutional effectiveness and strategic planning capabilities. We have hosted regular “HLC Campus Forums” to keep our faculty and staff up-to-date about the steps we are taking to ensure that we meet HLC expectations and recommendations. These campus forums also provide an opportunity to elicit feedback from stakeholders and, in some cases, to solicit greater involvement in our institutional improvement efforts. These campus forums have been well-received and well attended. The meeting times for these forums, as well as video recordings, are available on our website.

The university has also hosted other informational events to keep the campus informed about all of our campus initiatives. Our president publishes a weekly newsletter touching on a range of topics relevant to institutional functioning. He also hosts monthly meetings open to the entire campus community in which he updates employees and other stakeholders about key events and news items. These meetings provide an opportunity for questions and feedback. Our Vice-President for Finance hosts regular budget hearing sessions, in which he provides an overview of key budgetary and finance issues impacting the university. These sessions also allow for audience questions and comments. Recordings of these sessions are available online.
Executive Key Performance Indicators

With reference to Core Component 5D, the second broad area of concern identified by the Commission was stated as follows:

“The Focused Visit will specifically address the following... An executive Strategic Plan Indicators update that includes outcomes that provide evidence that the institution is improving its institutional effectiveness, capabilities, and sustainability, both as a whole and in its component parts.”

This section will address the ways in which Highlands University has addressed these concerns.

The Executive Management Team of the university developed a set of key performance indicators (KPI) to track institutional performance in a wide variety of areas, including enrollment and retention, key financial indicators, faculty/staff salaries and diversity, marketing and website activity, advancement activity, and student athlete participation and success. This KPI report is updated semi-annually to ensure that the measures reported are accurate and up-to-date. The Executive Management Team periodically reviews the KPIs to determine areas of strength and areas of potential concern in institutional functioning. A copy of the KPI report is available on the university website. Details of the KPI report are provided below.

Enrollment and Retention Data

The first major section of the KPI report focuses on enrollment and retention data, submitted by the Strategic Enrollment Management Office and the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Research. These data include the following:

Term enrollment: Fall, spring, and summer enrollment are disaggregated by student level (i.e. undergraduate or graduate). Five years of data are provided to allow for analysis of recent trends in overall enrollment.

Demographics: Fall enrollment is disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, and age, including five years of data. These data allow an evaluation of demographic trends that may be relevant to our recruitment activities.

Retention rates: Fall-to-spring and fall-to-fall retention rates disaggregated by cohort, i.e. new freshmen, transfer students, and new graduate students. Five years of data are presented to determine recent trends. These data are critically important to helping track the success of our various retention activities and initiatives. These initiatives are discussed in more detail in the 4C (Enrollment Management) chapter of this document.

Retention rates by residence hall: A later section of the KPI report also lists retention rates by residence halls. These data help us to determine possible sources of student dissatisfaction with campus life that may be contributing to student attrition.

Graduation rates: Graduation rates are disaggregated by cohort, i.e. new freshmen, transfer students, and new graduate students. Three years of data are reported. These data are used to help track the effectiveness of our long-term persistence and completion initiatives.
**Application funnel:** Finally, this section of the KPI report provides data on the number of applicants, admitted students, and registered students for the most recent five years. A yield rate is also calculated for each year. These data help to measure the effectiveness and efficiency of our recruitment efforts.

**Finance and Administration**
The second major section of the KPI report focuses on key financial indicators, extracted from the annual IPEDS Finance Survey which is prepared by our Budget Office. These financial indicators include the following:

**Core Revenues:** As reported to IPEDS, core revenues include tuition and fees, state appropriations, grant income, investment income, and other key revenue sources. Three years of data are provided. These data allow us to determine significant changes in our revenue stream and make appropriate adjustments as needed.

**Core Expenses:** As reported to IPEDS, core revenues include instruction, student services, academic support, public services, and other key expense categories. Three years of data are provided. These data allow us to determine significant changes in our expense patterns and make appropriate adjustments as needed.

**Advancement:** A later section of the KPI report shows advancement revenues, number of donors, and number of alumni events. These data help us track growth and change in our fund-raising efforts.

**Human Resources**
The third major section of the KPI report focuses on human resources data, extracted primarily from the annual IPEDS Human Resources Survey. These human resources indicators include the following:

**Employee salaries:** Faculty salaries, disaggregated by rank, and staff salaries, disaggregated by job category. Four years of data are provided. These data, along with comparative data from peer institutions, help us to determine whether our salary structure is equitable and competitive.

**Faculty and staff diversity:** Four years of data are provided. Highlands University takes pride in being a very diverse and welcoming institution, both for our employees as well as for our students. These data help us to determine whether we have achieved an appropriate level of faculty and staff diversity given our mission and service area.

**University Relations**
The fourth major section of the KPI report focuses primarily on institutional website data, specifically the number of pageviews, top geographical markets for website hits, and type of source traffic. These data help us to determine who is viewing the website, which in turn informs our marketing and recruitment efforts. It should be noted that with the current website upgrades, the format of these data may change. However, we will continue to track website traffic to optimize our outreach and communication.
Athletics
The fifth major section of the KPI report focuses on student athlete data, including the following:

*Number of athletes by sport:* Three years of data are provided. These data allow us to track growth or decline in particular sports, which helps to inform budget and personnel decisions.

*Academic success of student athletes:* Three years of data are provided. Success measures include academic year GPA and retention rates, disaggregated by sport. These data provide insight into areas in which additional academic support or different recruitment strategies may be indicated.

Unit Level Planning
With reference to Core Component 5D, the third broad area of concern identified by the Commission was stated as follows:

The Focused Visit will specifically address the following... A unit and/or department strategic plan update that includes outcomes that provide evidence that the institution is improving its institutional effectiveness, capabilities, and sustainability, both as a whole and in its component parts.

The sections below will address the ways in which Highlands University has addressed these concerns.

Unit Level Strategic Planning
In the recent past NMHU has been working diligently to develop a coherent and effective process for strategic planning at the level of individual units, both academic and administrative. This process is still being fine-tuned but the system that is currently in place is now in its fourth cycle. Basically, all academic and administrative units with a departmental budget are expected to submit a unit level strategic plan on an annual basis. Furthermore, each unit is expected to provide a report on the extent to which the goals and objectives in the previous year’s plan have been achieved. This allows individual units to “close the loop”: units define their goals and objectives, measure attainment of those goals and objectives, and then if necessary adjust their goals and objectives for the next cycle of strategic planning. All unit level goals and objectives should be consistent with the institutional goals and objectives specified in the institutional strategic plan (see above).

The unit level strategic planning process operates under the general supervision of our Provost, with the Director of Institutional Effectiveness assuming responsibility for managing the collection and publication of the individual plans. We have formed a Unit Strategic Planning Committee to help oversee the process and provide recommendations for improvement and effective application. This committee has a charter and a Strategic Planning Guide posted on our website. Units are encouraged to consult this guide, which emphasizes the importance of proceeding in a cyclical fashion to promote continual improvement.

At this point in time, the unit level strategic planning process has been moderately effective, although there is room for improvement. While some departments clearly understand the process of developing goals and objectives at the unit level, other departments seem to struggle to develop appropriate goals.
and objectives. The university has offered some training in this area, including a session during our Professional Development Week 2018 and the above referenced Strategic Planning Guide, but not all departments have taken advantage of this training. A more formalized approach to training in this area may be needed.

Compliance with the unit level strategic planning process has been good but not 100%. Part of the problem is defining the appropriate level at which the unit plans should be produced. It may not make sense for very small departments to produce their own strategic plan, which may be redundant to the plans produced by a parent department. In any case, we have posted all unit level strategic plans and annual reports on the institutional website, so that stakeholders can view the materials than have been submitted.

One area in which further improvement is needed is better integrating the departmental strategic planning process with the budgeting process. In principle, departmental budgets are submitted in conjunction with the departmental strategic plans, but this does not always happen in practice. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, there is no clear and direct link between the strategic plans and the budgets. We are working to develop a system that allows for a stronger linkage between these two critical processes.

Overall, the unit level strategic planning process at NMHU has been an effective mechanism to help individual departments think more strategically. The shortcomings that exist in the process are being addressed. We are confident that continued improvement in this process will strengthen our whole system of institutional effectiveness.

Departmental dashboard.
As noted above, the university has developed a process for developing and evaluating strategic plans at the departmental level. Additionally, we are in the process of developing a department level dashboard for academic units. Such a dashboard would allow individual departments as well as senior administrators to evaluate the performance of academic units on a regular basis.

A retention-based version of the department level dashboard was created in summer of 2018 and distributed to all academic departments during our annual Professional Development Week. This dashboard contained enrollment and retention data by department, in both graphical and tabular formats. The primary purpose of this dashboard was to encourage academic units to reflect on ways in which they could support the recruitment and retention efforts of the university. However, subsequent discussion with faculty members and department chairs suggested that this type of data and format may not be very useful. In fall 2019 the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Research prepared and distributed a different version of the department dashboard. This version is still under review for its utility.

A second type of the department dashboard is currently under preparation. This version, which is intended primarily for administrative review but would be available to academic departments, would include data for each department on the number of majors and graduates, number and rank of faculty, credit hour generation, and basic fiscal measures. A beta version of this dashboard is available for review but has not yet been distributed.
Departmental Improvement Initiatives

In conjunction with the unit level strategic planning process (see above), all academic and administrative units were encouraged to submit a list of “improvement initiatives” that would reflect activities undertaken by the units in the 2017-18 academic year that led to positive and measurable changes in departmental and/or institutional functioning. These improvement initiatives provided another opportunity for individual units to engage in a cyclical process of improvement using the “closing the loop” pattern. The template provided to units for listing their improvement initiatives included columns for departmental goals (derived from the unit strategic plans, see above section), outcomes of goal-directed activities, and departmental or institutional improvements seen as a result of those outcomes.

Some of the improvement initiatives are listed below. This list, which is only a small sampling of all the initiatives identified, serves to give some idea of the range and scope of activities undertaken by many departments across campus and helps to demonstrate the university-wide commitment to institutional improvement. A more complete summary of key improvement initiatives by department is available on our website.

- **Financial Aid:** Revised Foundation scholarship application to allow for an open application throughout the academic year and continuous awarding. Began offering Institutional Scholarships to entering Freshman and Transfer students as they became admitted. Provided an online acceptance portal through SLATE to track data and reporting ability.
- **Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Research:** OIER has worked with ITS and the Outcomes Assessment Committee to explore software solutions for assessment, planning, and accreditation activities.
- **Business Office:** Created a collaboration with GA Office, HR, Financial Aid and the students; we improved the process by implementing earlier distribution of the GA reimbursements.
- **English Department:** Create a cutting-edge program that counters the false public narrative that an English degree does not provide many work opportunities. Created “Geek Week” in Spring 2017; will continue Spring 2018.
- **Media Arts Department:** Every faculty member attended at least one conference with students. Increased number of professional connections and job opportunities for students.
- **Forestry Department:** Forestry has now revised its scheduling practices and offers all required courses on a regular basis, improving scheduling predictability for students. This change will likely improve student success and reduce time to degree completion for students going forward.

Co-Curricular Assessment

In the past few years, NMHU has developed an assessment model for co-curricular outcomes (CCOA). While this area of activity primarily falls under HLC Criterion 4B, it is mentioned briefly here because the CCOA model has help drive institutional improvement. As part of the CCOA process, several administrative units which work directly with students in a non-academic capacity are required to submit assessment plans and reports on a regular schedule. Participating in this process has helped these units: 1) to define more clearly their role within the institution; 2) to articulate more clearly the
outcomes they are trying to achieve with their students, and 3) to measure the success of their efforts, and 4) to revise their goals or operations based on the result of their assessment activities. Again we have an example here of “closing the loop” in a way that leads to institutional improvement. CCOA reports from specific offices can be found on the website.

**Summary: Core Component 5D**

As outlined in the above sections, Highlands University is committed to creating an institutional culture of continuous improvement. We feel that we have made significant progress in meeting the expectations of the Commission with reference to Core Component 5D. At the same time we acknowledge that, in the spirit of continual improvement, we still have a considerable amount of work to do. In this concluding section we summarize some of our key accomplishments and challenges in this area.

**Accomplishments**

Some key highlights of our commitment in strategic planning and institutional improvement include the following:

- Institutional SP: new plan is under development
- Financial Aid: New policies and procedures, revised SAP process
- Foundation: New policies and procedures, comprehensive documentation, transparency, clean audit
- Student complaints: Hiring CRC position; web landing page
- Budgeting: have made improvements in communication, transparency, process
- Extensive student survey data is available
- KPIs: developed template, collecting data
- Unit level strategic planning: implemented process to create cyclical process at unit level

**Ongoing challenges**

Despite the progress that we have made in promoting institutional effectiveness and improvement, there are still a number of challenges that need to be addressed, including the following:

- Institutional Strategic Plan: still not fully developed as of this writing
- Student complaints: still decentralized
- Budgeting: still struggling to adjust budget when faced with revenue shortfalls
- Do not have a systematic approach to using student survey data
- KPIs: not linked to SP, still working to develop systematic approach to using KPIs
- Unit level SP: compliance and quality issues
Overall Summary and Conclusions
[This section will be completed later]