



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
TENNESSEE  
KNOXVILLE

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# Envisioning the Future of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Analysis of Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results

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February 5, 2020

*Prepared by Members of the Strategic Visioning Ad Hoc Committee*

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This month the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, embarks on a visioning process to refresh its vision, mission, values, and priorities to place the university at the forefront of educational innovation, impactful research, and service to society.

In preparation for the visioning process, Chancellor Donde Plowman convened an ad hoc committee of faculty and university leaders in December and January to examine the changing landscape of higher education and analyze the university's prospects for the future. This report conveys their analysis of the university's strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results (referred to as a SOAR analysis).

## *Ad Hoc Committee Members*

David Manderscheid, Provost and Senior Vice Chancellor (chair)

Suzie Allard, Chancellor's Professor of Information Sciences

Kari Alldredge, Vice Provost for Enrollment Management

Joel Anderson, Associate Professor of Nursing

Suresh Babu, Governor's Chair; Director, Bredesen Center

Brad Collett, Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture

Claire Donelan, Undergraduate Student

Gale Fulton, Director, School of Landscape Architecture; Associate Professor of Architecture

Denita Hadziabdic-Guerry, Assistant Professor of Entomology and Plant Pathology

Wes Hines, Department Head and Chancellor's Professor of Nuclear Engineering

Shea Kidd-Houze, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Student Life and Dean of Students

Jioni Lewis, Associate Professor of Psychology

Rachel Patton McCord, Assistant Professor of Biochemistry and Cellular & Molecular Biology

Dorian McCoy, Associate Professor of Education Leadership and Policy Studies

Lori Messinger, Dean, College of Social Work

Althea Murphy-Price, Associate Professor of Art

Jacob Rudolph, Associate Vice Chancellor for Communications and Marketing

Johnelle Simpson, Graduate Student

Anne Smith, Department Head and Professor of Management

Shawn Spurgeon, Associate Professor of Educational Psychology; Faculty Senate President-Elect

Elizabeth Strand, Program Director and Associate Professor of Veterinary Social Work

Matthew Scoggins, Chief of Staff (ex-officio)

## Executive Summary

This document analyzes the University of Tennessee, Knoxville's current circumstances and future opportunities for the purpose of preparing the university community for a new strategic visioning process in spring 2020. The strengths identified are aspects of the university on which we can build, and the opportunities identified below seek to leverage these assets. The bold aspirations, in turn, build on our opportunities in pursuit of results that improve the university for the benefit of students and society.

UT Knoxville's strengths include our status as Tennessee's flagship land-grant university. Our access and affordability are vital strengths, as is our presence in all 95 counties across Tennessee through our extension offices. The university's intellectual legacy of thinking big is also foundational to our culture. Other key strengths include the Volunteer spirit of our alumni, our location, and our new leadership.

Our opportunities include heightening our impact on Tennessee through our research and enhancing learning by adapting our curricula to meet students' emerging needs. Extending our thought leadership and harnessing our capacity for discovery and creativity in the service of societal problem solving are also opportunities. Transforming our campus culture is also a crucial opportunity we must leverage to make our university more welcoming, inclusive, transparent, and supportive of wellness.

Our aspirations for UT Knoxville form the heart of our analysis. This report envisions a bold future for the university which we put forward for consideration by the entire UT community. We aspire to a university where

- Every Tennessean is part of UT Knoxville. We could be the first university to launch 100 percent admission from the moment one is born in Tennessee.
- Every Tennessean clearly understands the value UT brings to their lives. If people widely viewed us as the institution of opportunity and inspiration for Tennessee, our role would be transformed.
- We deliver degrees, certifications, and marketable skill sets to learners whenever and wherever the need arises. We envision a broad range of options including full degree programs, microcredentials, boot camps, and other targeted learning opportunities delivered throughout the state.
- We innovate a subscription-based model of enrollment to transform access and create a more fluid academic environment with fewer boundaries between the university and other aspects of learners' lives.
- Our campus culture is optimistic, inspirational, transparent, diverse, inclusive, and outward looking.
- Our research, scholarship, and creativity are renowned for offering solutions to society's intractable problems.
- Our university is a gateway to the world for all of our students. Whether through experience overseas, on campus, or online, global engagement should be a vital part of the Volunteer experience.

If we build on our strengths, leverage our opportunities, and fulfill our aspirations, we envision a bright future for UT Knoxville where

- We achieve new levels of societal leadership through our innovative research and teaching
- Boundless learning is a hallmark of UT Knoxville
- Our vibrant culture attracts, welcomes, values, and nurtures everyone in our community

These and other strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results (referred to herein as a SOAR analysis) are discussed in detail within.

# SOAR Analysis

## Strengths

### *Flagship Campus*

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, is the flagship campus for the state with all of the benefits and responsibilities that come with that status. We serve as a knowledge engine for Tennessee, and as a land-grant university we deliver these benefits throughout the state. Whether through the skills of our students, the discoveries of our faculty, or the leadership and creativity of our alumni, UT's deep commitment to the state drives us to succeed.

The land-grant mission also brings close connections throughout the state through our robust Volunteer network and UT Extension presence in all 95 counties. This physical presence is a strength that connects activities in Knoxville to communities across the state and provides us with a powerful foundation on which to build and deepen our ties to every community we serve. Moreover, our deepest linkages throughout Tennessee are our students and alumni, who are ambassadors between their communities and the rest of the Volunteer community.

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| <p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Extension presence across Tennessee</li><li>• Accessibility</li><li>• Affordability</li></ul> |
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Access is also a hallmark of UT Knoxville and a competitive advantage that strengthens the university. The state's HOPE Scholarship and UT's Tri-star Scholarship programs foster extensive access to the university through low-cost tuition for families throughout the state. These and other funding mechanisms yield a university that provides opportunity. UT's student body includes many students who enrich the culture of the campus and serve as role models to friends and family members in communities across the state who dream of the opportunities the university provides to Tennesseans.

### *Thinking Big*

Our intellectual strengths abound, and a common theme among them is thinking big. Beginning with the crucial role UT Knoxville played in innovating university-based government-funded national defense research during World War Two, our legacy is inextricably linked to big ideas. UT Knoxville's world-class faculty are leaders in a wide array of disciplines, and their research enjoys robust support from funding agencies.

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| <p>Strengths include partnerships with</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Oak Ridge National Laboratory</li><li>• Y-12 National Security Complex</li></ul> |
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Our vibrant partnerships with Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Y-12 National Security Complex, and the newly established Oak Ridge Institute provide unparalleled opportunities for intellectual leadership, as do our deep expertise in community-based field research and our reputation for engaged scholarship. In these ways, our scholarly and scientific strengths continue Tennessee's rich legacy of big ideas like the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the Tennessee Valley Authority. Moreover, this focus on big ideas spans the broad array of disciplines at the university and extends into the research conducted by our graduate and undergraduate students.

## *Volunteer Spirit*

To be a Volunteer means to step forward in leadership and service. The Volunteer spirit is the bedrock of our culture and the ethos that guides us as individuals and as a community. This shared identity binds us to our loyal supporters who constitute one of our greatest strengths. Our achievements—in classrooms and labs, in clinics and studios, through our research and practice, on the gridiron and court, and in the communities with which we engage—are the truest manifestations of this spirit.

Being a Volunteer should be about caring about our community and our success, and caring for each other. It is our commitment and obligation at UT Knoxville to be a hospitable community where every person is welcome and valued. This supports one of our most vital strengths: a nurturing learning environment where faculty are passionate about making a difference in students' lives. Rigorous standards, attentiveness, and a culture of mentorship deliver the Volunteer spirit to students—and strengthen the university community.

## *Vibrant Location*

Our location is a tremendous strength. Knoxville is a dynamic community situated at a crossroads that connects the Southern, Midwestern, and mid-Atlantic regions. Knoxville also benefits from its proximity to the great biodiversity of wilderness and agricultural lands. In these ways, Knoxville is both an intellectual hub and a recreational center.

### Strengths

- Volunteer spirit
- Knoxville
- New leadership

## *New Leadership*

Timing is on our side, and one of our strengths stems from vibrant new leadership. The appointment of Chancellor Donde Plowman and her bold vision for the future represent a new lever for the university. Her challenge for the university to have the courage to take risks, the courage to care, and the courage to lead points to the coming years as a period of strength in which opportunities should be seized and aspirations fulfilled.

## **Opportunities**

### *Societal Impact*

Our greatest opportunities draw upon the core purpose of the university: to improve the lives of Tennesseans. Students and alumni are at the heart of this effort, as they fulfill their dreams and improve their communities through their industry. Strengthening Tennessee's workforce is crucial; creating and attracting good jobs to Tennessee is also crucial and in doing so UT can help transform our state by helping students, industry, and the professions in our state achieve more. We can also facilitate job opportunity and job creation and foster economic development in Tennessee through the entrepreneurship of our Volunteers and the research-based discoveries made here.

These opportunities challenge us to reimagine what it means to be a flagship land-grant university. First and foremost, we must seize the opportunity to help solve problems facing Tennesseans and the world. UT Knoxville's research, teaching, and service should invigorate

communities across Tennessee. As such, we need meaningful, more synergistic relationships with community organizations, governments, and companies. Our close collaboration with Oak Ridge National Labs, Y-12, and the newly formed Oak Ridge Institute are good exemplars and provide many opportunities in this regard. Together with our partners we can solve problems of local, regional, national, and global significance.

Second, as we re-envision the purpose of a flagship land-grant university, it must involve being present and accountable in communities we serve. If we can nurture a culture where we ask and listen to what our stakeholders want, we can better understand our communities and let their needs inform and help drive our teaching and research. The extension offices offer myriad opportunities in this regard. For example, they can be listening stations, helping us to hear what communities need and to respond accordingly. Accomplishing this will require building widespread understanding of our land-grant mission throughout the state so UT is seen as a source of solutions that address Tennessee's needs. Through these connections our university can enhance Tennessee's ability to

#### Opportunities

- Strengthen Tennessee's workforce
- Fully utilize extension offices
- Help the state prepare for technological change

- Attract and retain an educated population
- Enhance innovation across the state
- Attract investors to Tennessee

Moreover, through our research and service, faculty and students can transform minds and influence public policy. This influence can and should span the full range of our disciplines and expertise. We should lead our communities to an understanding of integrating technology, particularly artificial intelligence, into society and help Tennessee prepare for the likely automation of many existing jobs.

#### *Enhanced Learning*

In her investiture address Chancellor Plowman challenged the campus community to have the courage to take risks. Some of our greatest opportunities to enhance learning would involve risk-taking of this nature, with the potential for great rewards for Tennessee and the university alike. Our new Volunteer Core curriculum provides many opportunities in these directions. In addition, we can

- Reimagine learning outcomes to focus on community benefits and thereby more closely align on-campus learning with societal problem solving
- Adapt curricula to better meet student and employer needs, particularly with regard to in-demand 21st-century skill sets and knowledge areas
- Nurture a spirit of innovation across the student body to ensure that graduates know how to harness their creativity
- Establish UT Knoxville as a hub of learning by delivering education to Tennesseans wherever they are (such as online and via extension)

These efforts should focus on enhancing learning across the university. Innovations of this nature would establish us as a new kind of research university with a deep, proactive relationship with its communities. We can leverage our identity as a place that grows and trains leaders. We can do this while providing cost-effective education that prepares learners of all ages for fulfilling lives. These efforts would also enhance access for underserved populations across Tennessee, including minoritized populations, first-generation students, veterans, and people in rural communities.

As we reconsider what a UT education can and should deliver, we must also seize the opportunity to continue to redesign instruction to meet the emerging needs and interests of the next generation of students. How will the next generation approach learning? How should we prepare these future graduates to be critical thinkers? What international experiences and understanding will they need to thrive in the 21st century? We must tackle these questions as a university because the needs, interests, and learning styles of our future students will differ from those of past generations.

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| <p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excel at convergent and transdisciplinary research</li> <li>• Reimagine learning</li> <li>• Adapt our curricula</li> <li>• Enhance leadership across the university</li> <li>• Become a hub of distributed learning</li> <li>• Meet emerging student needs and interests</li> <li>• Think differently about lifelong learning</li> </ul> |
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Lastly, as we seek to enhance learning we should also think broadly about who can and should learn here, and when that learning should occur during their lives. We have an opportunity to meet the changing needs of our state by re-envisioning the way we think about lifelong learning. Our university can be a vital resource and partner for individuals, organizations, and communities across Tennessee seeking new skills for a changing job market and those just curious to learn more. Just as UT Knoxville can better serve adult learners, we have the opportunity to extend the Volunteer spirit into secondary schools by expanding dual enrollment programs with Tennessee high schools. Moreover, we can explore increasing international student enrollments and find effective ways to leverage the presence of international students on campus to enhance the learning of all students within the university.

*Innovative Research*

UT enjoys tremendous strengths across a wide range of disciplines, and thus the opportunity to discover solutions to myriad problems, invent new technologies, and deepen our understanding of the human condition. Fulfilling our opportunities will require further enhancing our

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| <p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Heighten faculty thought leadership</li> <li>• Cultivate an environment open to intellectual risk taking</li> </ul> |
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disciplinary strengths and cultivating connections across disciplines to address grand challenges. We must leverage our vibrant scholarly and creative activity across the disciplines to advance knowledge and practice and to extend the impact of our discoveries. We must cultivate an environment where our scholars, scientists, artists, and practitioners can take intellectual risks and innovate. We must develop convergent research topics and transdisciplinary work across the university and with partners

across Tennessee and beyond. Through these efforts we can extend our role as thought leaders and contribute to positive change in communities near and far.

These innovations can lead to new distinctions and concomitant opportunities, such as establishing our university as an incubator of entrepreneurial activity. In addition, our work with government partners, including the National Science Foundation, the US Department of

Energy, the National Institutes of Health, and the US Department of Defense, as well as other long-standing partners such as philanthropic foundations, can bolster our research. Lastly, our success in undergraduate research offers us the opportunity to more deeply integrate research into undergraduate education and thereby make it an integral component of the Volunteer experience.

### *Campus Culture*

What characteristics will the university need to leverage the opportunities discussed above? What structures and incentives would foster the bold research accomplishments we seek? What pedagogical innovations will be necessary to enhance learning on our campus and across Tennessee? What changes must we make to our organizational culture and structures to truly re-envision and launch the flagship land-grant university of the future?

Seizing our opportunities will require a culture of trust and transparency both within the university and between the university and its partners. Ensuring that our leadership is effective and transparent in decision making will be crucial. Moreover, developing leaders across the faculty, throughout the student body, and among the staff will be vital to our success. Many of our opportunities also involve collaboration with partners, and we must develop transparent mechanisms for establishing and maintaining partnerships.

#### Opportunities

- Put people first
- Create a culture of trust and transparency on campus
- Robustly support the well-being of students, faculty, and staff

We have the opportunity and duty to build on the strength of our Volunteer spirit—to deepen and extend it going forward. We should focus on ways of making a big place feel small and nurturing for everyone in the campus community, and ways of extending that community to students who study at UT from outside Knoxville (such as through extension or online learning). Ultimately the opportunity is to find ways of putting people first and creating a robust service culture. This also extends to physical and mental health and wellness. We can lead the way among flagship public universities by building world-class infrastructure to support the well-being of students, faculty, and staff.

### **Aspirations**

Our analysis of UT Knoxville’s strengths and opportunities inspired our group. The aspirations below convey the possible futures we envision. We recognize that our discussions occurred at the very beginning of a university-wide process that will challenge all of us to consider the brightest possible future for UT Knoxville. To stimulate those discussions, we offer the aspirations below.

#### *Societal Impact*

Our aspirations for the university envision possible futures that could transform our impact. We aspire to become a university where

- Every Tennessean is part of UT Knoxville. We could be the first university to launch 100 percent admission from the moment one is born in Tennessee. Presumably an offer like this would be contingent on meeting certain academic benchmarks, but what would a lifelong association with the university look like? An idea of this nature could reframe the



way people think about the university, providing a lifetime of learning opportunities and community experiences for all.

- Every Tennessean clearly understands the value UT brings to their lives. If people widely viewed us as the institution of opportunity and inspiration for Tennessee, our role would be transformed. People would need to see UT Knoxville as adding value regardless of whether they enroll, because we underpin the state economy through our education, research, and entrepreneurship. This role would also rely on our ability to meet Tennessee’s adult education needs, to attract talented people to Tennessee, and to keep educated people in state. Affordability and access to our undergraduate and graduate programs alike would also be vital.
- Studying at UT is a lifelong subscription rather than a singular multiyear event. Could we re-envision the way people pay for higher education and the way they relate with their university throughout their lives in this way? An inventive subscription-based model of enrollment could transform access and create a more fluid academic environment with fewer boundaries between the university and other aspects or times in learners’ lives.

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| Aspirations   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Welcome every Tennessean</li><li>• Enhance the lives of every Tennessean</li><li>• Revolutionize how people pay for education</li></ul> |

Whether or not these particular ideas come to fruition, they must be a topic of discussion in the coming months. Our main goal in proffering them here is to convey the scope of our ambition. We have the opportunity to transform the role and meaning of a flagship public university if we have the courage to embrace change.

### *Academic Achievement*

Our aspiration for the university is to be recognized for teaching and research excellence nationally and internationally. Here too we urge our university community to consider bold futures for our teaching and research.

Given the challenges of the 21st century, we believe new structures and priorities may be necessary within the university. Leading in research, particularly research that offers solutions to society’s intractable problems, will require visible thought leadership by our faculty. For many of us this will occur within our disciplines, but together we must also master transdisciplinary work. What could the university accomplish if we found ways to transcend (or discard) our silos and other barriers to crossdisciplinary collaboration?

We also aspire to teaching that meets the evolving needs of Tennesseans, from the most ambitious secondary school students to those in later stages of their lives. Whether full degree programs, microcredentials, boot camps, or other targeted learning opportunities, our ambition for UT Knoxville is to deliver certifications and marketable skill sets to learners whenever and wherever the need arises. We envision offering a range of à la carte degree options to meet learners’ needs. To do so we must fully utilize our campus, our extension sites, and online learning to reach learners when and where they want to learn.

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| Aspirations   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lead transdisciplinary research</li><li>• Create flexible learning opportunities for students of all ages</li><li>• Be Tennessee’s gateway to the world</li></ul> |

Our home is Tennessee, but we also aspire for our university to be a gateway to the world for all of our students. Whether through experience overseas, on campus, or online, we should make

global engagement a vital part of the Volunteer experience. To what extent can we make international study achievable for all students? How can we maximize global engagement for faculty? We will likely need to bring the world to campus and bring our students to the world to accomplish this ambition—but given the deep and growing interconnectedness of economies and societies around the globe, this is a vital goal.

### *Campus Culture*

We aspire to have a campus culture focused on achieving a bold, evolving future—a culture that is optimistic and inspirational for all. To accomplish this, we need to make UT inclusive of everyone, so everyone can fully live the Volunteer spirit. We must identify and remove barriers to access and inclusion. How can we create true equity of opportunity at UT? What would it take to create true equity of educational experience at our university? These questions must be explored to the fullest and addressed robustly, because we aspire for our university to be nationally recognized for our culture of inclusion. We must become a place where all students, faculty, and staff matter and belong. Our university should also be a destination employer, regionally and nationally, to attract and nurture talent. And we must ensure the physical safety of our community.

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| Create a campus culture that is |
| • Optimistic                    |
| • Inspirational                 |
| • Transparent                   |
| • Diverse                       |
| • Inclusive                     |
| • Outward looking               |

UT Knoxville’s future success will also rely on innovating and sustaining new types of community partnerships. As noted above, we believe that fully utilizing our presence in all 95 counties across Tennessee is a tremendous opportunity. We also believe that deep, enduring partnerships with businesses, organizations, and governments will be vital going forward. To fully implement this new level of community engagement, we will need a campus culture that is outward looking, transparent, responsive, and inclusive.

## **Results**

What would success look like if our aspirations are achieved? If we build on our strengths, leverage our opportunities, and fulfill our aspirations, **UT Knoxville will achieve new levels of societal leadership** visible in the

- Trust of the Tennessee public, who understand and appreciate our shared mission and how that mission positively impacts the state
- Actions of people throughout Tennessee who see UT Knoxville as the vital source of learning throughout their adult lives
- Access and affordability made possible by UT Knoxville’s innovative approaches to paying for education
- Visibility of Volunteer alumni as innovative leaders in communities throughout Tennessee
- Solutions we offer to societal problems and the insights we provide
- Value that people and institutions ascribe to our scholarship, research, professional service, and artistic creations
- Robust multidirectional flow of communication, ideas, and knowledge between our university and our partners

**Boundless learning will be a hallmark of UT Knoxville**, demonstrated by our

- Transformed classrooms, labs, and studios that reach learners throughout Tennessee when and where they seek education
- Lifelong commitment to students whose needs for knowledge and skills are met by our university throughout their adult lives
- Robust experiential learning opportunities that are fundamental to a UT Knoxville education
- Equity of experience among our students whereby they flourish in their learning regardless of their varied backgrounds and circumstances
- Highly competent alumni whose creativity and know-how make them sought after in Tennessee and beyond

**UT Knoxville's vibrant culture will attract, welcome, value, and nurture each member of our community** as seen in our

- Shared commitment to the mission of the university and the trust we have in the university and one another
- Campus environment that deeply values diversity and inclusion
- Student body, staff, and faculty who are representative of the state of Tennessee
- Civil and meaningful discourse, where critical thinking and difficult dialogues are encouraged
- Engaged faculty and staff whose high career satisfaction positively impacts their lives
- Reputation as a home for innovators and thought leaders
- Culture of care and commitment to wellness for all members of our community
- Stewardship of the university's finances and infrastructure such that we enjoy the resources necessary to thrive

## **Conclusion**

As we embark on a process of considering our future anew, the analysis above seeks to provide insight and inspiration for the university community. We will, each of us, need to examine the strengths we see in this university, the opportunities inherent in those capacities, our aspirations for the future, and the bold results we can imagine for our efforts.

This is a time of great change in society and in academe, with demographic shifts changing society, soaring student debt, and technological innovations reshaping the world of work. Perhaps most importantly, today's primary and secondary students will be tomorrow's undergraduate and graduate students—and their needs will likely differ greatly from the students of today and yesterday. How will they learn most effectively? What subjects will captivate their attention and ignite their imaginations? What preparation will they need to succeed in their careers and lead our society in the latter half of the 21st century? We cannot assume that the formulas that worked so well in the late 20th century, or that work well for us now, will remain salient for this new generation of students. So we offer the analysis above as a starting point in a conversation that begins this semester. What can and should this great university accomplish in the coming years?