Team 1: Assessing progress on the StFX Strategic plan

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An Academic Plan micro-committee reviewed the current StFX Strategic Plan: *University as it is Meant to Be 2017-2022* and prepared the following assessment of StFX's progress toward achieving the objectives set out in the plan. This assessment will help clarify a starting point for the academic planning exercise.

The StFX Strategic Plan is organized under 5 pillars: Academic Excellence, Student Experience & Opportunity; Social Responsibility & Innovation; Equity & Inclusion; Stewardship & Sustainability. Within those pillars are 16 broad goals and 60 specific objectives that were to be achieved during the term of the strategic plan.   For this exercise, the committee focused on the objectives that relate most directly to academic mission (excluding those that fall under the purview of the Research and Creative Works Strategic Plan). Many of the objectives are interconnected or overlap; the committee grouped them under relevant themes for the purpose of this report.

Assessing progress

The following is a brief status report on the academic-related objectives presented in the strategic plan.   While there has been movement on most items, the strategic plan did not include clear benchmarks against which to monitor achievement. Furthermore, simply indicating that a task has been completed does not demonstrate whether there has been any benefit from the initiative. It is up to the community, as part of this academic planning exercise, to use the following information as a starting point to determine if progress has been sufficient, and to help inform what the next steps should be.

1. Programs	Related Strategic Plan Objectives • Develop new programs • Improve collaboration on academic programs across the institution

Status: StFX has created a number of new programs in the past three years: BASc in Health, BASc in Climate and Environment, BA in Public Policy and Governance, Post-baccalaureate diplomas (a credential new to StFX) in Artificial Intelligence and Enterprise IT Management, Masters of Applied Computer Science. In addition to the new programs, there are now expanded and refined offerings in Actuarial Science and Forensics, new concentrations in the MEd, and a number of combined degree offerings (e.g. HNU and Business, BSc and Engineering). A number of these new programs are interdisciplinary and were built through collaboration across departments. More new degree options are in development.

To ensure new programs were developed in a consistent way, Senate formalized a procedure for developing new programs. In addition, the Deans of Arts and Science put out a call for program ideas, and a staff person was added in the Deans' office to assist departments as they developed new programs.

Assessment: Currently, the university is monitoring enrolment in the new programs while also refining administrative processes in Recruitment, Admissions, Registrar's Office, International Office, Graduate

Studies that support these programs. The Master of Applied Computer Science was a significant boost to enrolment, in particular, international enrolment. The program has been a highly attractive credential for international students and a model for the way course-based, full-time graduate programs can attract international students. The program has built awareness about StFX in international markets, and the hope is that this awareness will lead to increased undergraduate enrolment. The PBDs do not require significant investment of new resources and are designed to boost enrolment in existing upper-year (300-400 level) classes, so even when overall program numbers are not particularly high, the impact to the undergraduate programs can be positive.

Enrolment in the new undergraduate programs has been uneven – some high and some low. In some cases, refinement of the recruitment strategies is needed. Review of the academic resource needs and quality of all new programs is ongoing. Faculty are continually assessing and refining the programs. In addition, the MPHEC requires new programs to undergo a review after the first cohort has completed.

2. Build connections between the academic programs and the Coady Institute.	*Related Strategic Plan Objectives* • *Offer select Coady courses for credit* • *Integrate concept of social justice and social responsibility into academic programs* • *Create an interdisciplinary program on entrepreneurship, social innovation, and community resilience*

Status: To date, there has been limited progress on these objectives. While there have been numerous discussions over the past years, there have also been significant changes at the Coady. Recently, two faculty members have been hired as cross-appointments between the Coady and the academic departments; these positions will support continued efforts to build stronger connections.

Assessment: The objectives have not been realized.

3. Program review	*Related Strategic Plan Objective* • *Ensure ongoing review of existing programs through CAR*

Status: At the time the strategic plan was written, StFX was significantly behind in the cycle of regular departmental reviews.   Between 2017 and 2020 CAR was able to clear the backlog of reviews and establish a regular schedule for the coming years; however, some departmental reviews were put on hold during 2020 because of the pandemic and will have to be rescheduled.

Assessment: While department reviews are now being completed more consistently, in order to fully realize the potential of the review process, more consistent reporting back to Senate is necessary.

4. Teaching development	*Related Strategic Plan Objectives* • *Create a Center for Teaching and Learning* • *Increase professional development opportunities* • *Develop a peer mentorship program*

Status: StFX successfully launched a peer-led Teaching and Learning Centre in a state-of-the-art facility in the Mulroney Centre. As a result of this effort, there has been a significant increase in faculty development opportunities since 2017. The TLC also collaborates with the Maple League universities, giving faculty access to additional teaching development opportunities.

In preparation for 2020-21, instructors from across the university invested significant time preparing to transition their courses to be delivered remotely or in socially-distanced face-to-face classes. The Online Preparedness Task Force, the TLC, the Faculty Development Committee, Continuing & Distance Education, and IT Services collaborated on a wide range of resources and PD opportunities to help faculty. Most of this instruction and mentoring was faculty-led, taking advantage of the tremendous existing expertise on campus.

Assessment: StFX was in a much better position to respond to the challenges of 2020-21 because of the resources that were in place through the TLC and the teaching opportunities and connections that it cultivated. Given all the discussion related to teaching that took place in preparation for 2020-21, StFX is well-positioned to move forward with more robust conversations about teaching and learning.

5. Teaching practice/ delivery	*Related Strategic Plan Objectives* • *Embed experiential learning, including service learning, across a wider range of departments* • *Increase number and selection of online or blended courses*

Status:
• Between 2017 and 2020, the number of opportunities for students to participate in service learning remained consistent.
• Before the pandemic, the number and range of online and blended delivery of courses offered at StFX increased. The pandemic may serve as a watershed moment with respect to capacity to offer courses online.

Assessment:
• There has been no significant increase in the number of courses or disciplines offering service learning since 2017. This objective, as it was set out in the strategic plan, has not been fully realized yet.
• While StFX remains committed to offering in-person programs, the pandemic clearly increased our capacity to offer more online or blended courses. The discussion now must move to clarifying the appropriate situations in which online learning can supplement or enhance StFX program offerings.

6. Student academic support	*Related Strategic Plan Objectives* • *Create a Centre for Student Success* • *Enhance the Accessible Learning Centre* • *Expand services for International Students, including English language programming* • *Forge connections between academics and campus life* • *Encourage faculty connections outside the classroom* • *Implement a 1st year experience program to support transition from high school*

Status: The Student Success Centre (formerly the Writing Centre) was moved to a more high-profile location in the Library. The Centre for Accessible Learning moved to the same location, creating a hub for academic support. The Office of Internationalization was reorganized, relocated to Nicholson Tower, and staff added, offering more support for international students. This includes immigration consulting services. English language programming has not expanded.

A number of initiatives designed to build connections between academics and campus life were implemented since 2017: the President's Colloquia, First-year learning communities, Faculty Mentorship program are among them.

X Starts Here was introduced. This program comprises is a series of online modules on academic and transition issues that incoming students can complete prior to arrival. This program has been extended as *X Continues Here* to provide relevant information through the first year. These programs continue to be adapted and improved.

Assessment: While some progress has been made on the items in this category, more can be done. While many academic support initiatives have been implemented, we have not yet fully realized the potential of all of them. For example, programs such as *X-starts Here* and *X-continues Here* have undergone significant improvement every year and continue to be refined. The Student Success Centre has potential to increase and refine services to address needs of new and diverse groups of students. StFX students generally report (through NSSE and other surveys) that they feel supported during their time at StFX; however, not all experience StFX as a supportive place. While StFX retention rates are generally strong relative to comparator institutions, the first-year retention rate is not nearly as strong as the rates for second to fourth year. There is potential to coordinate and focus efforts in this area.

7. Equity, diversity, and inclusion	*Related Strategic Plan Objectives* • *Provide specific supports for faculty to support diverse needs of students* • *Increase supports that will enable the success of underrepresented students* • *Create ongoing support for equitable pedagogical practice across all disciplines*

Status: From 2017-20, StFX put in place a number of initiatives meant to address the equity, diversity, and inclusion items in the strategic plan; however, there is much more work to be done.

Among the initiatives to support students and build a more welcoming environment: ceremonial changes, including a land acknowledgement and permanent instillation of Mi'kmaq flag; updates to the Deveau Educational Equity Endowment; creation of StFX Knowledge Keeper; Mi'kmaq language courses; full-time diversity support staff in updated space; refinements to the recruitment and admissions processes. In addition to this, we began mandatory EDI training for chairs and coordinators and added EDI content to new faculty orientation.

Assessment: Enrolment and retention of equity deserving students, while improving, remains low. Numbers of Faculty and staff from racialized communities remain low. Our campus is still not as welcoming as it needs to be. A number of significant initiatives have launched recently: President's Action Committee on Anti-Racism; creation of four Chairs in Culturally-Responsive Pedagogy; the Spring Teaching retreat will focus on decolonization. In addition, StFX has recently received a federal equity, diversity, and inclusion grant to create a senior administration position that will lead EDI initiatives in the academic environment.

While there is renewed commitment to moving EDI forward, StFX still has far to go.

8. Enrolment management	• *Develop a Strategic Enrolment Plan* • *Develop a Retention Plan*

	• *Develop recruitment strategies for underrepresented communities* • *Assess entrance criteria to reflect equity and inclusion*

Status: StFX's first Strategic Enrolment Plan was approved by Senate in 2018. As part of that exercise, StFX was also to create operational Retention and Recruitment Plans that would sit under the strategic enrolment plan. Both were in progress, but put on hold during the 2020-21 as attention focused on responding to the pandemic and because there were leadership changes in both offices.

Assessment: StFX Retention and Recruitment plans were not complete prior to the pandemic. Both plans can now be approached with a post-pandemic lens.

Additional Observations

The Pandemic: Disruption and Opportunity

Responding to the Covid-19 pandemic became much of the focus of campus activities in 2020-21. As result, progress on some strategic plan items stalled during the past year. However, the pandemic and StFX's response to it has also focused energy on a number of important areas, such as teaching and learning, where considerable, collaborative work highlighted the community's resourcefulness and potential. The pandemic also demonstrated our community's capacity to be flexible and adaptable, and to do so quickly and with compassion. At the same time as the pandemic demonstrated our strengths, 2020 has also exposed issues that are particularly in need of attention at StFX: among them equity, accessibility, anti-racism.

StFX's new Academic Plan should consider what we have learned as a community from the past year, and use that learning to inform the goals we set out in the plan. For example, the community has the opportunity to draw on what we have learned about online and hybrid teaching; pedagogy, assessment and engaged-learning, broadly and from a culturally-relevant perspective.

Reporting mechanism

The committee strongly recommends that the StFX Academic Plan include an annual reporting mechanism that updates the whole campus community about the progress that is made toward achieving the plan's goals. Simply reporting to Senate is not sufficient to keep the community updated on the outcomes of this effort nor to keep the community working together to move the plan forward.

A Flexible Plan

This review of the strategic plan illustrated the extent to which StFX's priorities continued to evolve through the life of the plan. Some issues that are particularly relevant today are not explicitly addressed in the Strategic Plan. For example, equity, diversity and inclusion in the academic area, in particular, decolonization of the curriculum, was not fully developed. While it is unrealistic to assume that we can anticipate emerging issues, we can create a plan that leaves

room for the community to be responsive and adaptable.   Once an objective has been completed, the community must work to revise the goal and continue to push the bar.