

Self-Study

Administrative Review of Provost Melody Tankersley

(as mandated by University Policy 3342-6-05.3 Administrative Review of Academic Administrative Officers)

15 March 2024

It has been my immense honor to serve as the Senior Vice President and Provost of Kent State University over the past four years. Kent State is where I built my academic career 31 years ago as a beginning assistant professor and has been my home ever since. To say that the university means the world to me is an understatement; so, to serve our faculty, staff, and students in this role is, indeed, my greatest honor.

As the Provost of Kent State, I oversee the academic mission of the university. This means that I must not only consider the curriculum that we offer, but how that curriculum is relevant and meets the needs of our students and our world, for the present day as well as into the future. To accomplish this, I work closely with our academic units to create new degrees and programs, refresh those that need updating, and sunset those that no longer have a demand.

Although the curriculum is important, it is the world-class faculty who bring it to life. I ensure that our faculty are exceptional teachers, researchers, creators, and translators of knowledge. In order to do so, I foster a culture of innovation, inquiry, and integrity while supporting a productive, respectful, and engaging environment for them to do their important work.

Taken together, my job is to ensure that the faculty and the curriculum provide our students the best educational experiences possible so that they leave with their degrees and make meaningful contributions to their families and communities. Indeed, student completion is my north star and guides the decisions I make and the initiatives I support.

I oversee the Kent State eight-campus system in Northeast Ohio, including the eleven academic colleges as well as the Honors College, University College, and Graduate College, which, collectively, offer more than 300 degrees and academic programs. In addition, I oversee our programs located outside of Ohio (e.g., New York City Studio) and abroad. In fact, we have over 200 education abroad programs, including our Florence, Italy location and our American Academy in Paraná, Brazil. The vast locations and deep relationships we have formed allow us to bring Kent State to so many people around our state and our world. The leaders of these academic units are among the brightest, most engaged, forward-looking, and caring individuals I have met, and I am honored to serve them as I help guide their strategic plans and decision-making.

In addition to the academic units, I oversee other academic-related units that support our educational mission. These units include the Regional Systems, Faculty Affairs, the Center for Teaching and Learning, Curriculum Services, Design Innovation, the Office of Global Education, Kent State Online, University Outreach and Engagement, Lifelong Learning, the Office of Strategy Management, and Institutional Effectiveness, which includes the Office of

Accreditation, Assessment, and Learning and the Office of Institutional Research. These important units provide the backbone to the academic mission, ensuring that, among other responsibilities, our faculty have support for their instruction and student learning, the curriculum and degrees are accredited and meets state standards, and our faculty and students are seamlessly engaged in our communities. Again, the professionals who provide leadership in these units are knowledgeable, involved, and eager to provide support. I guide them through developing strategic priorities and approaches to their work. We are fortunate to have such bright, dedicated leaders in these critical positions.

This self-study has provided me an opportunity to take stock of what we have accomplished together and to see paths forward for the future. At the outset, it is important to me to say clearly that none of the accomplishments I list in the sections that follow have been achieved by me alone. It is only through the collaborative efforts of so many of our students, staff members, and faculty that any of the important work is undertaken and realized. My leadership role places me foremost as serving as a change agent by setting the goals and inspiring and guiding our daily practices and transformative work to achieve them. To do this, I must understand the nature of higher education at large, as well as the multiple social, political, financial, and local issues that come to bear upon our daily and future work. I translate these influences and determine both their opportunities and barriers to our progress.

With collaboration from our community, I identify areas for improvement and investment, set strategic goals, and mobilize teams to create, adapt, and change approaches and opportunities for the long-term advancement of the university. My objective is to always engage in meaningful consultation, create and support a culture of shared responsibility and excellence, consistently communicate a compelling shared vision, and empower and motivate our community members to take action.

I am so very grateful for the collaborative energies of our Kent State community, whose dedication to the betterment of the university and determined support of our mission, have been instrumental to our successful outcomes. Indeed, our community is the reason we are successful.

In addition to recognizing the staff, faculty, and students who make our institution successful, I also want to acknowledge the difficulties that our community has experienced during the time of my tenure as Provost. I began the position in the interim role just eight months before COVID-19 hit northeast Ohio. It was through the awe-inspiring guidance of our faculty leaders (the Executive Board of the Faculty Senate and the Presidents of the AAUP-KSU TT and AAUP-KSU FT NTT Unions), the faculty, our community health experts, and Academic Affairs leaders that we were able to swiftly and effectively navigate our new methods of teaching, interacting with, and supporting our students and colleagues. During this time, it was critical for me to stay connected with decisions from our local and state health agencies regarding safe practices and to adopt those to our educational environments. I helped create and/or approved temporary policies and practices that would support our students and faculty in navigating the challenges of delivering quality educational experiences while limited in our approaches.

It was a difficult time for everyone given the severity of the global crisis, its impact on our families and friends (and ourselves), the disruptions to our work routines, and the daily unknowns of how our lives would be affected. I am immensely proud of how, together, we demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and solidarity in delivering upon our mission with empathy and compassion for our students and our colleagues. It is the kind and caring acts of our community during those uncertain times that define the best of Kent State.

And I believe it is with that same fortitude to make the hard, but necessary changes, and do so with understanding and kindness that we face our current challenges related to significant decreases in funding over the past years and continued declines in revenue projected for the near future. I, along with our academic leaders and faculty governing bodies, have begun significant consultation with campuses, colleges, and units to identify ways to consolidate our expenditures and streamline our work. We are discussing difficult changes for all of our academic divisions. I have been proud of our commitment to faculty engagement and consultation—which began in earnest with regional faculty representatives in January 2023 through biweekly meetings for the entire semester. As we continue consultation throughout the regional system and embark upon these same conversations and decisions on the Kent campus, I am committed to faculty and staff engagement in the processes and decisions that will lead us through this difficult time.

I think the context of my first four years as Provost is important as a backdrop to my self-study; however, I do not believe the challenges of the pandemic, the social/political climates of the day, or the declining budget define this time. Instead, I believe what defines these four years, and our future, is our shared dedication to Kent State and our mission, our resiliency to adapt to the storms that come our way, and our care for one another. These are the qualities that I am most proud of and that I believe distinguish Kent State from any other university. And these are the qualities that I invest in promoting as I know they will allow us to grasp new prospects and explore creative solutions that preserve and enhance the quality of our educational programs and services. My aim is to continue to foster unity and shared responsibility through our collective efforts as we work together toward our bright and sustainable future.

In the following sections, organized by our six priorities identified in the *Strategic Roadmap to a Distinctive Kent State*, I have highlighted several accomplishments across our Division of Academic Affairs that demonstrate our achievements related to the priorities. I only highlight a few, recent examples to illustrate the work that has been accomplished in Academic Affairs to make this report more readable, but each Annual Report for Academic Affairs is presented in full for the past four years on the [Provost website](#). The details of our accomplishments highlighted there are immensely impressive and worth the view.

Again, each of the achievements represents many people who led, contributed, assessed, implemented, and/or disseminated the work. In some cases, I may have conceived of and initiated the initiatives, and in other cases, I may have supported and guided the initiatives brought forth by others. And in other cases still, I may have simply cleared the path so that our talented faculty, staff, and students could lead and achieve our goals and aspirations. However, in all cases it is my privilege to work with our people to make Kent State an excellent institution of higher education.

Students First

To be a Students First University, we prioritize the comprehensive development and success of students above all else. It means creating the educational environments, opportunities, practices, and support systems that empower students to grow in knowledge, skills, and confidence. It means ensuring that we are strategically and continuously improving our degree offerings, methods of instruction, policies and procedures, approaches to inclusivity, academic support services, and co-curricular opportunities.

We are currently engaged in some of the most important work I believe a university can do to make certain that their students are well-rounded, have the tools and experiences they need to be successful, and are academically prepared for their first jobs and their lifetime of careers. This work includes creating the guiding map of where our division is headed (strategic planning), developing the most thorough and engaging liberal arts program (Kent Core), orienting our freshmen from day one to be on the path for success (Flashes 101), and providing excellent academic and holistic support.

Student success is the intention behind the actions of academic affairs and it is the star of our *Academic Affairs Strategic Plan: The Golden Road to Student Success*. During its development, we engaged over 155 faculty, staff, and students to define our *living* strategic plan that has student success at the heart of our vision, goals, and tactics that guide Academic Affairs forward. As we began implementation, we targeted 35 tactics across our eight priorities upon which to focus—tactics that include high-impact, evidence-based practices that will lead to higher retention and completion rates across our colleges and campuses.

Dedication to student success is prominently on display in our work updating university-required curriculum. For example, we have reimagined the freshmen orientation course (*Flashes 101*) to focus on student behaviors that are connected to retention and graduation, and faculty instruction that involves high-impact practices. Over the past years, we studied the outcomes of our previous orientation course, FYE, and found that students were not satisfied with the course and that many sections served more as an introduction to the major instead of an introduction to university life that contributes to the intellectual, personal, and social growth of students. We studied research that demonstrated best practices aligned with strong, positive outcomes and created the new orientation course. To date, over 300 instructors have participated in the required two-day training for Flashes 101 and implementation of the new course began Fall 2023.

Moreover, we are continuing our work to revise the *Kent Core* so that it is distinguishing and meaningful for students of the 21st century. During the past academic year, 82 members of the committee have met with faculty, staff, and students from across our Kent State system to hear how they believe our general education core curriculum should function in the future. The feedback focused on how to (a) make our general education program distinctive and consistent with the university's mission, vision, and values, (b) organize and structure the general education program, and (c) create a budgetary model that considers the implications of core courses to the financial health of colleges and programs. This work will guide the committee leaders as we continue our work toward revising the Kent Core.

Along with upgrading and enhancing the Kent Core and freshman orientation, we are continually updating our curriculum. Over the past four years we added 31 new degrees and created, refreshed, or deleted hundreds of courses. Making sure that we are providing the most current, relevant, and future-focused degrees, certificates, and courses is critical to our university.

In addition to high-impact practices that can be implemented in the classroom and the development of a distinctive core curriculum, we have approached student success from points of care and service programming. During the most recent academic year, over 100 advisors participated in workshops to examine approaches to advising that would best meet the needs of today's students. Kent State is consistently recognized nationally for our outstanding advising and support of high-need students, a claim that very few universities can make.

Our students-first philosophy that guides our approach to student success focuses on the whole student, and as such has led us to such actions as (a) instituting a minimum GA stipend level for all graduate students serving in that role, (b) implementing the [Purple Umbrella Network](#) to provide resources for Kent State students who have been impacted by foster care, and (c) expanding our advising hours to accommodate the needs of our busy students. In addition, we worked with Student Life to implement the [FlashBooks](#) fee model for textbooks and course materials that saved students more than \$4 million in its first two years of implementation. Initiatives such as these address the holistic needs of our students.

A Diverse Kent State

For a learning environment to thrive, we must make sure that all students, faculty, and staff have opportunity to succeed. Creating an equitable environment means that we intentionally and comprehensively strive to engage, empower, and honor all people and provide a space for perspectives to be shared and enlightened freely. It was a privilege for me to serve as a co-facilitator for university-wide [Anti-Racism Task Force](#) and I continue to work with our community to identify and implement recommendations to address racism at Kent State University.

From the recommendations of the Task Force, Academic Affairs has spearheaded many initiatives including advocating for the inclusion of a statement on syllabi faculty could adopt to indicate their commitment to honoring diverse voices. Additionally, we formalized a [mentoring](#) program for faculty who are traditionally underrepresented in their fields and each college now has identified specific approaches for supporting their faculty. Moreover, I championed the establishment of the Anti-Racism and Equity Institute which is now operating in its third year.

Perhaps one of the most impactful actions toward leading a diverse Kent State has been our effort to intentionally increase the diversity of our tenure track faculty. Excellent faculty members were identified and recruited because of their incredible academic scholarship and their ability to influence their disciplines. I am so grateful that they chose to bring their talent to Kent State.

A Nationally Distinctive Kent State

Our Kent State faculty have earned the recognition and accolades of their peers as well as their students. Currently, we have more than 20 faculty members who have been named to the top 2% of researchers in the world and/or named as having extraordinarily high productivity in a given year. The fact that Kent State faculty can make such an impact in their disciplines speaks highly of our colleagues, for sure. And, being able to achieve such prestige speaks highly of the opportunities and support they receive from their academic units and the university.

Moreover, *U.S. News and World Report*®, *Fortune*®, and the *Princeton Review*® consistently rank many of our academic degree programs among the best offered in the United States. These recognitions validate the dedication of our faculty and staff in creating world-class curriculum and educational experiences. Over the past four years of my tenure as Provost, more than 30 of our departments, schools, and colleges have been nationally recognized for their excellence. You can see details of such accolades in our [Academic Affairs annual reports](#).

For me, such recognition of our faculty and our academic programs is the highest honor a university can achieve.

Community Impact

Our impact in the community has grown considerably in the past four years. In 2020 I created the [Office of University Outreach and Engagement](#) to further strengthen Kent State's commitment to our access mission and to provide a dedicated and intentional effort to our responsibility to transform the lives of the communities around us. We noticed that there was often confusion around who was engaging with whom within and outside the university, and that both our faculty and staff as well as our community members were not sure how to make contact with one another. Creating this structure provided an intentional front door to our community efforts and now offers both internal and external partners opportunities to engage easier. This office has grown each year in its reach and impact. We have supported our employees and our communities by implementing the Blue, Gold, and Grateful appreciation program, increasing our connections to local and regional K-12 schools, working with foundations and the state to secure funding for students, and creating pipeline on-campus programs for first generation and high need youth.

In fact, just last year we served over 1,100 first-generation and/or limited income students through our formal outreach programs. This number is made up of individuals ages 13 – adult (including veterans) in eight different counties, ten different school districts, each regional campus and various community-based agencies and partnerships (such as Access Shelter, GED agencies, Aspire, Akron-Canton Regional Foodbank).

In particular, our work with Akron Public Schools has been tremendous. Through our named partnership with Firestone Career and College Academies, each year our faculty, staff, and students provide more than 3,000 hours of time and talent to engagements throughout the in-class and extra-curricular spaces. And our work with the LeBron James Family Foundation not only brings our skills and commitment to high-need students and their families, but also provides

a pathway for graduates to enter Kent State. In fact, this year we will graduate our first I Promise scholars.

In addition to such pipeline programs, we created the [*Office of Lifelong Learning*](#) to corral our efforts for industry certification, professional development, micro credentials, and other credit- and noncredit-bearing educational initiatives. Many individual efforts were occurring around Kent State to offer initial and continuing educational programming, but, as with our Community Outreach and Engagement, there was not one consistent place for our internal and external partners to go to find support or offer resources. The Office of Lifelong Learning brings together existing programs (e.g., Continuing Education, Center for Corporate and Professional Development, Ohio TechCred) and not only allows us to be more visible to industry and business partners, but also allows synergies to occur more easily among our faculty and staff.

Organizational Sustainability

As I mentioned in my introductory paragraphs, we are facing financial headwinds that most U.S. institutes of higher education are also confronting. However, I believe we have begun our work earlier and with more engaged consultation that will allow us to not only address the issues but do so in a way that allows us to create new approaches to do our important work that makes us more efficient, sustainable, and, perhaps, even more effective.

Although our accomplishments are great, and we have had successes and growths in many areas, we face the need to plan for a significant decrease in funding over the next few years. We first recognized the devastating shortfall that has and will continue to occur for our regional system and began serious work to identify ways to restructure in our regional system to be more efficient moving forward. Throughout the spring semester of 2023, our leadership team met biweekly with representative faculty from the regional system to organize a centralized approach to delivering our academic programs across all campuses. We also met biweekly with the deans, assistant deans, and budget managers of each campus to create a centralized approach to delivering student services, financial management, and course scheduling.

The same conversations and consultations are now also occurring on the Kent Campus. The same devastating financial shortfalls must be addressed in our Colleges and units of Academic Affairs. Consolidating, combining, and eliminating programs, services, and resources are important actions while we also consider how we need to invest in our future and look for new streams of revenue generation.

We continue to work to consult, identify, and finalize our approaches, and then the difficult work of implementing systemic changes will begin. It has been hard. And it will continue to be hard. I am committed, however, to continuing to work together to find approaches that allow us to persist in providing excellent educational opportunities to our communities in our region.

Global Presence

Kent State is a recognized leader in international education, as most recently demonstrated by being the only U.S. university awarded the prestigious [2022 Senator Paul Simon award for Comprehensive Internationalization](#) from *NAFSA: Association of International Educators*. International education has long been a value of Kent State and has been a major presence in our strategic plans and named in our core values over the last few decades. And each year we lean into this value as we become home to international students from around 100 countries and send hundreds of students abroad for life-changing experiences.

Over the past four years, our work in global education has created new pathways for international students and universities to enroll in and engage with Kent State University. Coming off the back-to-back setbacks of several years of a negative political climate and a global pandemic that resulted in a significant decrease in international applications, we have successfully increased the number of international students enrolled at Kent State through a combination of diversifying the countries targeted for engagement, the addition of merit-based scholarships, new recruitment approaches that focus on high school principals and counselors, and establishing offices (e.g., Rwanda) and partnerships (e.g., Jordan) that require deep, long-term engagement (e.g., American Academy).

In particular, our establishment of the [American Academy](#) in partnership with the Pontifical Catholic University in Paraná in Curitiba, Brazil (PUCPR) has provided an unique model of a 2+2 program that allows students to learn in their home country for their first two years of a bachelors degree and then complete the degree at the Kent Campus. With each cohort, our enrollment grows (we have 75 new students this year) and we now have more than 20 graduates from the program. We are currently replicating the American Academy model in three other countries (Italy, Jordan, and Rwanda) and hope to have opportunity to do more in the near future.

Our [Florence, Italy](#) location remains a vibrant location for Kent State students and faculty and serves as a host to domestic and international universities, as well. We are the largest American study abroad program in Florence and each year hundreds of students pass through our international home. Additionally, our reach continues to grow as we recently signed an agreement for the acquisition of the [Paris American Academy](#) which will become an official Kent State location in 2025.

Summary

Over the past four years, we have accomplished a lot together. Together we have faced crises that had no playbook for how to approach them, much less how to get through them. Yet, we did it and we became stronger because of our work together. We created new programs and new opportunities for students and, together, we made Kent State better. As we now face new challenges, I am confident that again, we will get through them and find ways to be stronger because of our reliance on, trust in, and commitment to one another and our mission. We will move forward together.

It has been the honor of my lifetime to serve as your Provost these past four years. But as I have hopefully made clear throughout this document, the accomplishments made are shared. The faculty and staff, the faculty leaders, and the leadership of Academic Affairs are not only the guides and advisors that prioritize and implement our work, but are also the hardest working and most caring people I know. I value and appreciate each of you.