MTSU’s *Quest for Student Success, 2013-2016*, set ambitious goals to improve student retention and graduation rates. The University transformed advising through the hiring of 47 additional academic advisors and the application of data analytics, which allowed faculty greater flexibility to focus on career advising with students. Our faculty led innovations in curricula to promote student engagement through the redesign of 27 gateway courses, including 12 of MTSU’s most predictive and most enrolled courses. Learning support was championed across campus through a more robust system of tutoring, which has been used by an average of 9,000 students per semester; the introduction of supplemental instruction to about 120 course sections, assisting 5,000 students per semester; and the launch of a student-faculty MakerSpace in the James E. Walker Library. Specialized programs and activities, such as the Scholars Academy and the Presidential Student Success Award Program, were implemented. Faculty, administrators, and staff, working together, identified and shared performance metrics to inform changes in policies, procedures, and practices. Most importantly, faculty, administrators, and staff came together to embrace our pledge to students: we are here to help you succeed.

These investments have significantly improved our students’ success. Since the launch of the Quest, MTSU’s retention rate for first-time, full-time freshmen has increased 4.3% to 80.6%; the 2017-2018 six-year graduation rate, a long term success indicator, has increased 1.5% over the previous year; and, the University has graduated more than 25,000 students. Not only are more students being retained, success rates in other areas have improved as well. More students are completing at least 15 hours a semester, thereby earning their degrees sooner and minimizing their debt. The number of students on probation or suspension has dropped and more students have earned the Dean’s List designation.

These achievements have set the stage for us to reimagine our Quest and to commit more fully to the cornerstone of student success—student learning. Now the question is: **How does the University better define student success as its core commitment—creating a culture that fosters students’ ability to be active learning partners as students, alumni, and engaged citizens now and in the future?**

**Next Steps**

The *Quest for Student Success 2025* focuses on student success marked by a deeper and broader academic and student life experience that extends learning beyond graduation. Students who learn how to learn, how to ask the right questions, and how to take risks and learn from their mistakes, succeed personally and professionally. They own their own education and become life-long learners. Thus, we seek to develop life-long learners who have the continuing capacity to discover, create, recreate, innovate, and break new ground as they address their own professional development and the challenges of the world around them.
The University now refines its focus to **shape a distinctive MTSU student experience that supports engaged learning, builds self-confidence in learning, inspires life-long learning and civic engagement, and rewards learning successes.** Shaping such an experience requires a shared, concerted, and intentional focus by every member of the MTSU family—whether student, faculty, administrator, staff, alumni, University friend, or supporter. **Engaged learning, when expected and practiced by all of us in the University community, becomes the catalyst for creating a distinctive and successful student college experience—and becomes the bedrock for a student’s future learning and successes in their careers and civic lives.** The *Quest* and its call for creating a distinctive and successful student college experience is central to the goal of MTSU’s academic master plan, *A Reach to Distinction.*

**Goal:** Middle Tennessee State University will graduate students who are prepared to thrive professionally, committed to life-long learning, and actively engaged as citizens of their communities and the world.

To achieve this goal, the University will seek to provide each student with a distinctive learning experience that lays the foundation for her or his own student success, life-long learning, and civic engagement. The University will use a three-pronged approach to advance its commitment to creating such an environment: an enhanced academic experience; an enhanced student life experience; and an enhanced academic and student support network.

**Strategic Path: Enhance the quality of the academic experience.**

The core of a quality academic experience is the mutual engagement of students and faculty in learning, scholarship, and service. Such an enterprise acknowledges the pivotal role of faculty in leading, guiding, and engaging students in intellectual pursuits and recognizes that a commitment to an enriched faculty experience lies at the core of an enriched student experience. It is the faculty who create academic and professional pathways and actively engage with students. Therefore a key to enhancing the quality of the academic experience lies in helping the faculty engage in innovative joint pursuits with students.

Consequently, the University will:

- Invest in faculty to develop and use high impact learning practices to heighten active, jointly-pursued learning;
- Invest in faculty to creatively develop and implement curriculum that explicitly connects students’ learning in the general education core to major fields of study and to professional and civic engagement; and
- Support a student-centered continuum of learning that aligns a student’s interests and aptitudes, beginning with onboarding experiences, to a program of study and an anticipated future of professional and civic engagement.
Strategic Path: Enhance the quality of the student life experience.

Strong, integrated links between a student’s academic and student life experiences are essential to student success. Active co-curricular and student life learning deepens engagement inside and outside the classroom, grounds a student in an inclusive University community, and sets the stage for a student-learning practice that carries forward to and beyond graduation. The co-curricular linked to the curriculum, built spaces linked to learning, students linked to each other through mutual interests and pursuits, students linked to alumni, alumni linked to students—these become key ingredients of an environment that supports learning and, importantly, also allows students to uniquely shape their own experiences and celebrate their own successes.

Consequently, the University will:

- Invest in effective, coordinated student success programs and services targeted to meet holistic student-learning needs.
- Invest in a campus-wide constructed environment, including a virtual environment, to foster informal living-learning opportunities for on-campus and online students; and
- Address, with vigor, the wellness, financial health, and safety needs of students.

Strategic Path: Build an academic and student support network that facilitates learning.

An academic and student support network that facilitates learning underscores the University’s core responsibility. MTSU students, faculty, staff, administration, alumni and friends will continue to build a University support community that encourages students to learn inside and outside the classroom, to engage in research and creative expression, and to connect with their broader communities through service. Central to doing this is our recommitment to student-centered decision-making in the crafting and delivery of University programs and services that anticipate and acknowledge students’ learning needs across their academic career and through their transition into the professional world.

Consequently, the University will:

- Cultivate student-based and faculty-student groups based on common interests;
- Continue to develop MTSU as an educational, cultural, and economic hub, in strong partnership with the University’s neighboring communities, to provide students enhanced community opportunities for learning;
- Optimize the development and use of learning and predictive analytics to support increased student success; and
- Reduce structural barriers to student success.

Conclusion

The *Quest for Student Success 2025* underscores the University's core mission: to produce graduates who are prepared to thrive professionally, committed to critical inquiry and life-long learning, and engaged as civically, globally responsible citizens. In placing student-centered learning at the forefront of the academic and student life experience, the University seeks to create and sustain a learning environment where **students themselves, in joint intellectual pursuit with faculty, become responsible decision-makers and active participants in their own learning.** The students’ reward is a truly distinctive educational experience that they help shape and that sets a pattern of active, reflected learning propelling them to graduation and carrying them forward as they embrace new challenges and new successes. Their knowledge and skills, combined with their capacity for continuous learning, will serve them well and will immeasurably affect the communities in which they will live and work. The mark of their successes also will affirm the University’s success in honoring its commitment to meet the higher educational needs of its students, and thus, of the state of Tennessee and its citizens.