

2022  
*Listening  
and Learning  
Report*



Chancellor Maria Gallo, Ph.D.



## *Dear Falcons,*

I told the campus at the Fall Opening Meeting on August 23, 2021, that I would conduct a listening and learning tour to hear from both internal and external stakeholders about what makes UW-River Falls great and how to make it even better. Our community has been welcoming.

You shared your experiences, ideas, insights, concerns and opinions with me through individual meetings, group meetings and online forms. I received honest and relevant feedback. My appreciation to all who took the time to help me achieve a deeper understanding of the institution, broaden my perspective, and open my eyes to possibilities. The listening and learning tour also allowed us to begin the process of getting to know one another and to build a relationship. I will strive to be open, authentic, sincere and to earn your trust as we work together toward a shared vision. This tour was the start of our partnership to provide the best education for all our learners and to strengthen our university community.

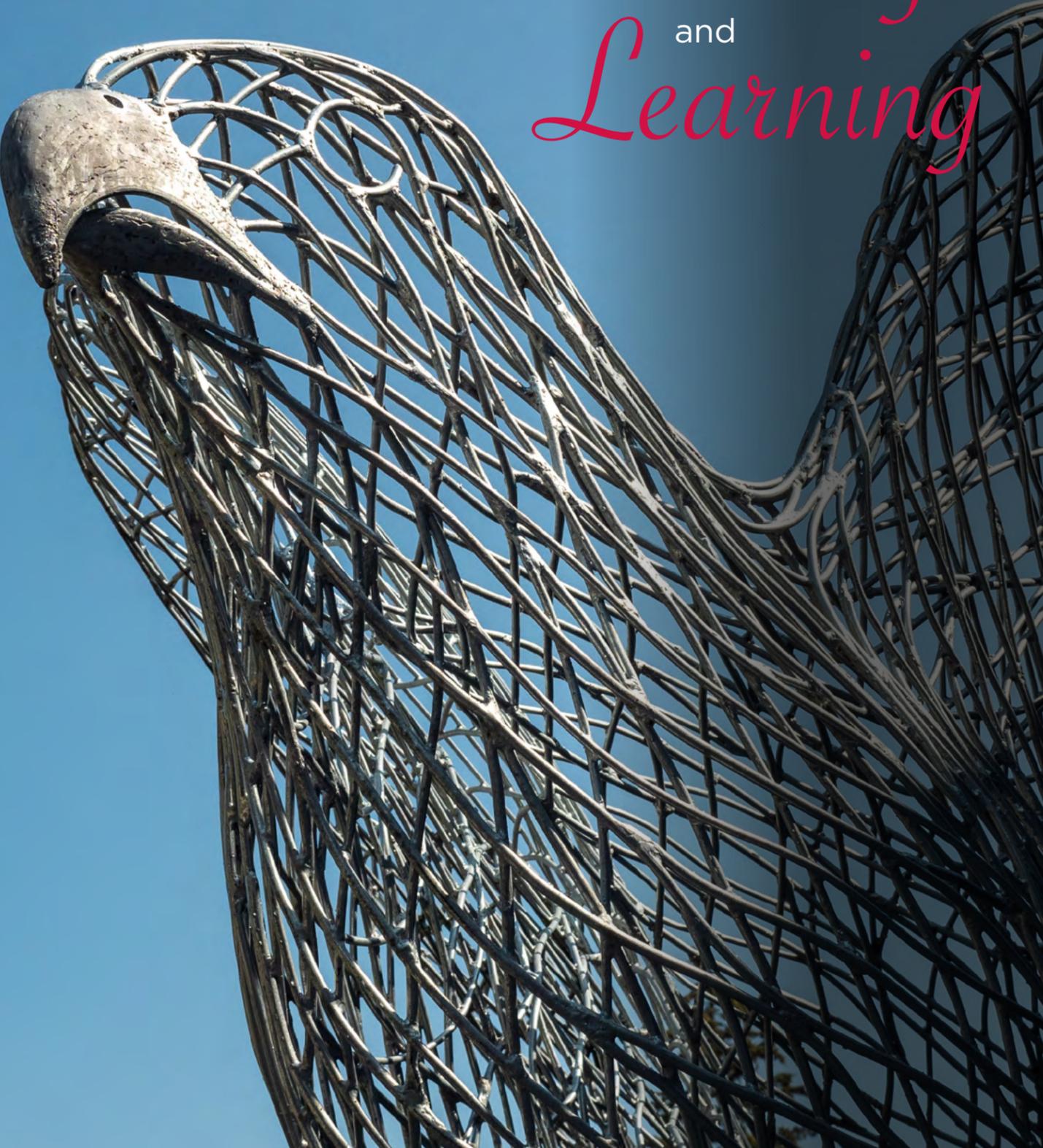
There is no doubt that the pandemic has challenged us in many ways and shaped the way we view the future. It has been scary at times and exhausting, both mentally and physically. But do you know what I learned about the UW-River Falls community? We are resilient. We are dedicated to our mission. We are passionate about helping students and each other. We are unstoppable when we use our collective talents. With these strengths, we will work together to shape the future of UW-River Falls.

The summary that follows provides an overview of the major themes that I heard during the listening and learning tour, and my current thoughts on each of them. These themes will provide us a basis for making meaningful change happen.

With much gratitude,

*Maria Gallo*

Maria Gallo, Ph.D.



# *Listening and Learning*

## *Themes*

- One* Telling the Story of Who We Are
- Two* Making the Most of Our Proximity to the Twin Cities
- Three* Focusing on Student Success
- Four* Fostering a Diverse, Welcoming and Cohesive Campus Community
- Five* Creating a Cross-Collaborative Culture
- Six* Embracing a Holistic Approach to Sustainability
- Seven* Strengthening Data-Driven Decision Making

# Theme One

## Telling the Story of Who We Are

From every corner of the Falcon nation, I heard that we are the best educational value in the state. In fact, our performance goes well beyond the borders of Wisconsin. We are one of the most affordable four-year institutions in the Midwest! Nationally, in 2017-18, we were recognized by MONEY magazine as one of the country's "Best Colleges for Your Money." And in U.S. News & World Report's 2022 edition, we were named a Best Regional University, a Top Public University, and a Top Performer on Social Mobility. As I heard from several alumni, at UWRF a student gets a small, private school experience at a public school price.

Another common refrain that I heard is that our campus is beautiful. Natural beauty certainly abounds on our 226-acre main campus with the picturesque Kinnickinnic River running through it where you can kayak and trout fish, as well as walk the trails alongside it. I also heard from our students that UWRF is a safe place to live and learn.

That claim was bolstered in 2021 when Safewise's rankings of the 50 Safest College Towns in America included River Falls in 34th place! Additionally, I was told that we have the distinct advantage of a small-town setting with world-class opportunities. We are located in the fastest growing economic region in Wisconsin, close to a major international airport and only a 30-minute drive from the Twin Cities, a rich cultural and thriving business metropolis of over 3.5 million.

Many appreciated that we offer small classes taught by professors, not teaching assistants. A student commented, "It is nice to have smaller class sizes that allow for more personalized learning, especially in upper level courses." Professors know their students and they are vested in each student's success. Students commented, "I feel like this is my home away from home" and "Being a student at UWRF feels like you are part of a friendly and involved community that promotes the personal growth of one's education and social life."

I also heard how we excel in many disciplines including teacher education, business, agriculture, physics and other STEM fields. Students benefit from the numerous hands-on experiences offered at our living/learning laboratories, such as our campus and Mann Valley agricultural facilities, and our glass blowing studio, university preschool and campus makerspace. Students characterized UWRF as their "dream school." There was excitement around the Science and Technology Innovation Center (SciTech), not only about the state-of-the-art facility but about new educational program offerings and growth of business and industry partnerships with our students and faculty that will be ignited at SciTech.

What I also heard is that we aren't known to brag, that we are too humble at UW-River Falls. In my conversations, it was said that we are a "hidden gem." Many emphasized that people don't know as much about us as they should or recognize how excellent we are in a myriad of ways. They went as far as to say that this lack of awareness included our local communities and high schools. I heard that there was an urgent need to better understand who we are now, what makes us distinctive, and who we aspire to be in the future. I clearly heard that we must market ourselves better as an institution, with a substantial focus on individual departments and specific programs, playing to our strengths. There was a call to provide more student testimonials and tell more compelling alumni stories. Our ability to tell our unique story of excellence is clearly a critical factor in our recruitment of new students.

"We have a fantastic story to tell, and we want to tell it!"

### MY THOUGHTS

We have a fantastic story to tell, and we want to tell it! The time is now to renew our institution-wide communication tools and strategies. We must be able to articulate new and bold value propositions.

The last UW-River Falls brand study was in 2008. That is over 13 years ago and, as we all know, so much has changed over that time. I am committed to investing in a new brand study that will better promote our strengths as highlighted earlier and provide us with insights that will be developed into a compelling UW-River Falls story that we will present to the world via a multi-channel approach.

One of those channels is our website which has been undergoing a major update. We will invest in its completion so that it looks current and appealing, presents information clearly and accurately, and tells an inspiring story of who we are and what we have to offer making our prospective and current students, our employees and community partners feel like they have found THEIR university. We will strengthen our social media presence to draw attention to current happenings and make telling our story a priority. We will increase awareness of UW-River Falls locally, regionally, nationally and globally, strengthen our reputation, and grow the enrollment of all learners, which ultimately will allow us to deliver more broadly and intentionally on our mission.

# Theme Two

## Making the Most of Our Proximity to the Twin Cities

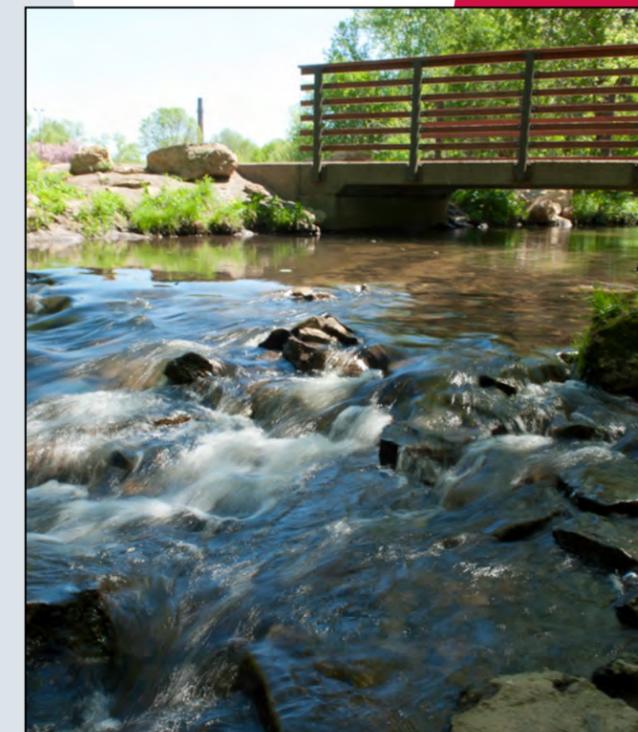
Almost every listening and learning session stressed the unique position we are in as the western most UW school in a town of 15,000 surrounded by scenic rivers and picturesque farmland, while also being part of the greater Minneapolis/St. Paul metro area. Regarding our ability to recruit UW-River Falls employees from anywhere in the country, I heard that the Twin Cities was a draw because employees could either choose to live there if they prefer urban life, or live in our more affordable, rural/suburban surroundings while still having access to top notch restaurants, shops, professional sports and entertainment. The Twin Cities themselves represent a large pool of talent from which to recruit new employees, yet I also heard from many that we face a challenge of salary competitiveness when recruiting from this rich source.

For student recruitment, the overall sentiment was that we are not taking as much advantage of our location as we could. Due to tuition reciprocity, UW-River Falls does benefit by enrolling almost 50% of our undergraduates from Minnesota. I heard from many that we need to have more focused recruitment efforts there for undergraduate, graduate and continuing education students. People expressed that with our affordability and academic offerings, there was an opportunity to serve more first-generation, BIPOC and nontraditional adult learners which would aid us in achieving our goals to diversify our student body and increase enrollment. Those I spoke with also made me aware of the number of alumni who live and work in the Twin Cities area. It is important to engage more of these alumni in UW-River Falls initiatives and that we celebrate their accomplishments. Additionally, there are businesses there that not only employ alumni but have an interest in the success of our current students. We need to continue to leverage these partnerships and identify opportunities to bring in more resources for scholarship funding, internships, academic program support and other philanthropic endeavors, as well as investments in the economic development of River Falls and the St. Croix Valley. A consistent sentiment that dovetails with Theme One above is that UW-River Falls needs greater visibility in the Twin Cities. I heard that many people there do not realize that UW-River Falls is just across the St. Croix River about 30 minutes away, closer than some universities that they know about in Minnesota. I was told that when they hear River Falls, many think it is Black River Falls which is more than two hours from the Twin Cities.

### MY THOUGHTS

UW-River Falls offers the best of both worlds. It is in a small, friendly and safe university town surrounded by gorgeous countryside making it quiet with easy access to outdoor adventures, while still being very near a major urban center with all of its entertainment and cultural possibilities. The location of UW-River Falls near the Twin Cities is a major advantage. We need to maximize this potential to strengthen the university and provide opportunities for students and employees. To do that, we will focus on more outreach, networking and marketing specifically in the Twin Cities area and initiate discussions around programs and educational offerings that appeal to a more urban stakeholder while maintaining our traditional strengths and building upon them.

“UW-River Falls offers the best of both worlds.”



# Theme Three

## Focusing on Student Success

When university employees were asked what was important to them when they came to work each day, the overwhelming response was interacting with students and helping them be successful. There was a wonderful sense of pride and joy that filled people when speaking about our students. I heard from every corner of the university that they were here because of our students and having an opportunity to make a difference in their lives. Many of our employees are alumni and they spoke of their motivation to give back to the institution that nurtured them by keeping it the welcoming place that they experienced. Time and again it was said that the needs of the students were at the forefront of everything they did each day.

I heard about how wonderful it was to have students back on campus and to have in-person classes. The energy level was palpable and both students and employees were happy to be back together again as a Falcon community. I also heard about the increased mental health and wellness needs exacerbated by the strain of the pandemic and how critical it is to have the support, tools and resources available for their success. There was a desire on the part of students to have regular touch points and to be asked not just how they were doing, but how they were feeling.

Many of our conversations centered around innovations in teaching, about the need to invest in high impact practices and effective advising models, the desire to offer more experiential learning opportunities especially through research, internships, leadership opportunities and study abroad trips, and to rigorously evaluate learning outcomes.

There were robust discussions about a focus on retention, the importance of living on campus, along with rich engagement through co-curricular programming. Many expressed the need to seamlessly and more holistically support our students from admission through their first destination after graduation and beyond with better marketing of our alumni career support services and additional re-skilling obtained through stackable credentials and certificate programs.

I clearly heard that all learners, not only our traditional, residential undergraduate student population, should be adequately supported and communicated with on a regular basis. I heard that it was essential to keep a UW-River Falls education affordable and accessible.

### MY THOUGHTS

I am extremely impressed and inspired by the dedication to our students. I am committed to facilitating the work that needs to be done and building the human, financial and intellectual capital necessary for our students to receive the highest quality education that is affordable, accessible and empowers them to reach their greatest potential. As the saying goes, it takes a village. Every single one of us at UW-River Falls plays a vital role in our excellence and in helping every UWRF student find success. I look forward to our continued conversations on this theme because there are many excellent ideas that need to be prioritized, implemented and evaluated.

“Every single one of us at UW-River Falls plays a vital role in our excellence and in helping every UWRF student find success.”



# Theme Four

## Fostering a Diverse, Welcoming and Cohesive Campus Community

We know that diversity is an asset to any organization resulting in greater innovation. There is an overwhelming desire to have more student and employee diversity at our university, and this diversity was mentioned in a broad sense encompassing gender, race, sexual orientation, age, abilities and cross-cultural competence. The overall sentiment was that we can talk about wanting greater diversity, but we need to develop concrete goals, metrics of success, and sustained support for those efforts to make UW-River Falls a truly inclusive community where all feel welcomed.

A strong refrain I heard was that our employees are proud to work at UWRF and enjoy working with each other. Employees felt welcomed by their unit and immediate colleagues, but they felt less connected to the institution. There was a clear call for a robust onboarding process. There was a desire to create an effective orientation program for new employees where we thoughtfully teach how to navigate through the complexities of our state system and university processes, as well as communicate key parts of our history along with sharing our mission, vision and values, and clearly articulate what it means to be a Falcon.

For established employees, I heard about the importance of true inclusion in creating a welcoming environment where people felt valued, appreciated for who they were and what they had to offer, and that there was a real sense of belonging. It also was about clear communication, consultation on decisions that impacted their work, and celebrating successes together.

I heard about the many talented people we have at UWRF who could reach greater heights through professional development, leadership and training opportunities. Many spoke of wanting career progression pathways that aligned with compensation. It is well-known that employees feel more engaged when they can grow and reach their career goals within an organization.

During this hopefully once-in-a-lifetime pandemic, most mentioned craving more face-to-face social interaction. We are inherently social beings and as such we are happier, more creative and better thinkers when we share our personal experiences and discuss and debate ideas with each other.

### MY THOUGHTS

There is no doubt that at UW-River Falls we are student-centered, as we should be. However, as an organization, we must put a premium on valuing all our people and continue building a healthy university community. We have work to do to make UWRF an inclusive and welcoming community for all. I will be committed to supporting diversity, creating a robust onboarding process, building relationships, providing authentic feedback, looking for accountability, coalescing around a shared vision, celebrating accomplishments and milestones, and investing in the growth of our employees.

“We have work to do to make UWRF an inclusive and welcoming community for all.”



# Theme Five

## Creating a Cross-Collaborative Culture

“I work on a great team.” That sentence sums up the many comments I heard from across the university.

Many found interdisciplinary work exciting, energizing and motivating. I heard numerous times of the efficiencies to be gained and the novel partnerships that could be formed if we offered more opportunities to learn what others are doing, eliminated the silos that exist, and provided more incentives for collaboration. There was a call for more cross-college and joint department academic program offerings. Students wanted to learn more about all the colleges on campus not only the one that housed their major. Additionally, they wanted to have more intentional co-curricular activities with students from outside of their home college.

University Communications and Marketing (UCM) and Admissions were mentioned often as the units that others wanted to collaborate with more in the future. I heard that departments would benefit from dedicated UCM support for marketing specific programs. People wanted to be able to meet prospective students earlier and participate in giving tours. They suggested having an outreach coordinator identified for each college. I heard that there was a desire to more tightly connect Student Success and Academic Affairs so that they could work synergistically.

There were conversations around connecting the four shared governance groups through a common council model. In this way, decision making and policy development affecting the institution could be made collaboratively by representatives of students, academic staff, faculty, and university staff to advance shared goals.

There was recognition of the tremendous opportunity to build a strong business and innovation ecosystem within the region. Connecting to start-ups, entrepreneurs and local businesses through the St. Croix Valley Business Innovation Center and the recently funded Science and Technology Innovation Center, with its University-Business Collaboration Center, will allow faculty, students, and staff to create impactful partnerships.

### MY THOUGHTS

We can do more together. The collective power of cross-team collaboration is immense. Research shows that collaboration results in more creative ideas and better aligned outcomes. Academics working together across disciplines will develop more impactful learning experiences for our students. I know many are on cross-unit teams already, and these teams can serve as mentors for others and examples of success. UW-River Falls needs to form cross-functional groups more intentionally, purposefully and systemically. I will work to create an environment that promotes collaboration in all areas of the university.

“I will work to create an environment that promotes collaboration in all areas of the university.”



Science and Technology Innovation Center



Theme  
*Six*

## Embracing a Holistic Approach to Sustainability

A theme I heard from many students was their passion for sustainability. They clearly articulated the four pillars of sustainability in their responses: human, social, economic and environmental. I heard about the great work being done by the Sustainability Office along with Sustainability Faculty Fellows and other faculty across the campus in a wide variety of disciplines.

Clearly, we are doing great work in sustainability. Our sustainability initiatives have been recognized over the years, with many occurring over the last six months! In July 2021, we became an affiliate of Bee Campus USA. In August, we received a STARS Silver rating from the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education. This past September, we were named to the 2021 Sierra Club's Cool Schools List, and most recently, we were featured in The Princeton Review Guide to Green Colleges 2022 Edition.



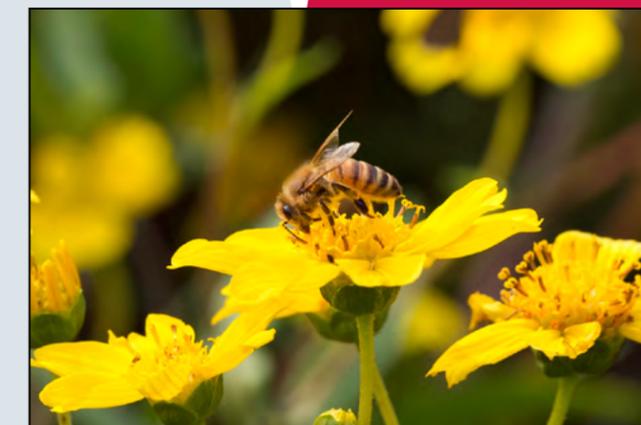
Students expressed their excitement over expanding the university's commitment to reaching sustainability goals and for UWRF to continue being a national leader among higher education institutions. I also heard their desire for the university to do and be more.

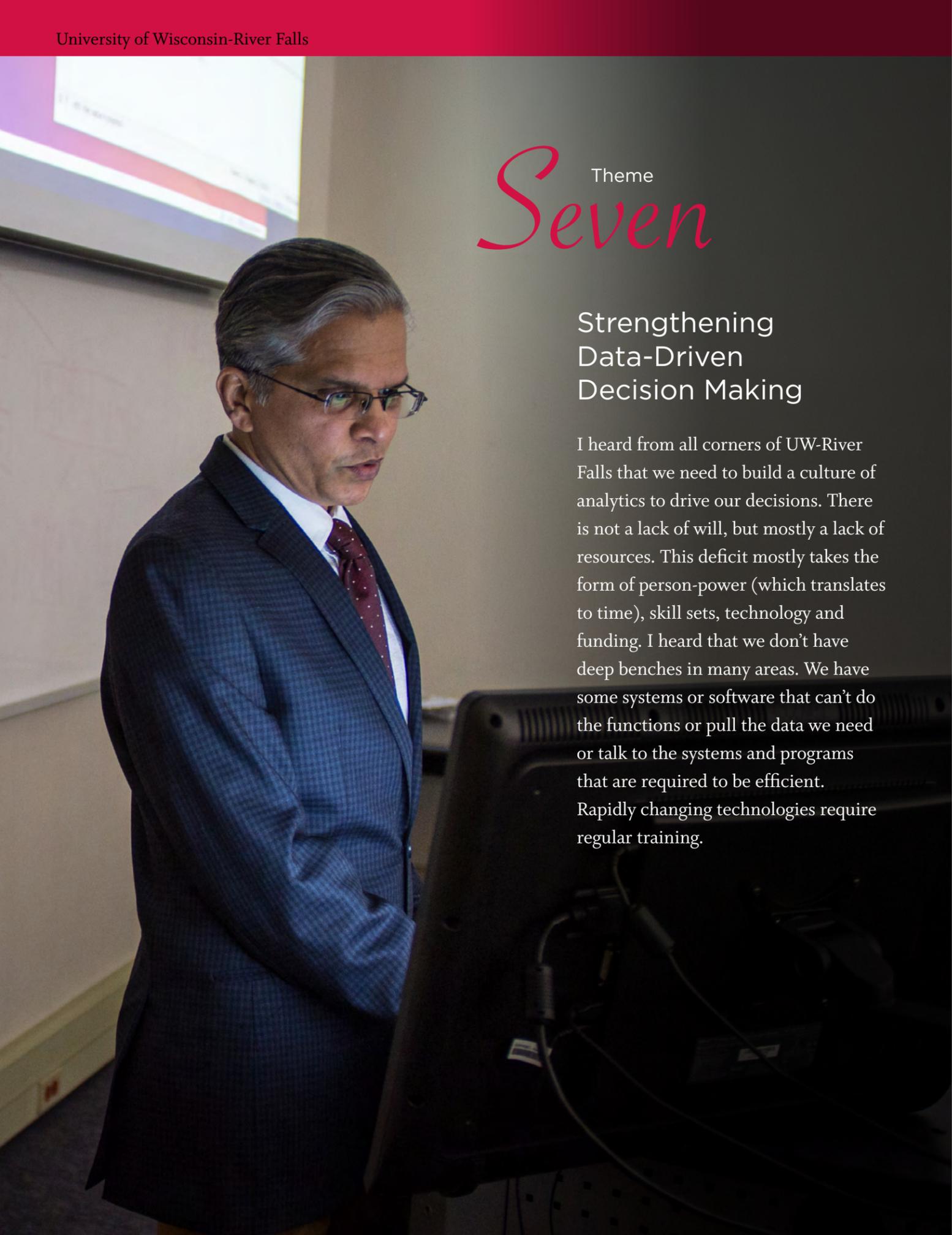
### MY THOUGHTS

It should not be surprising that our students care a great deal about sustainability. UNESCO has reported that 91% of college students "agree their place of study should actively incorporate and promote sustainable development." If we want to fulfill our mission of preparing "students to be productive, creative, ethical, engaged citizens and leaders with an informed global perspective," then a holistic approach to sustainability must be a priority for us.



“A holistic approach to sustainability must be a priority for us.”





Theme  
*Seven*

## Strengthening Data-Driven Decision Making

I heard from all corners of UW-River Falls that we need to build a culture of analytics to drive our decisions. There is not a lack of will, but mostly a lack of resources. This deficit mostly takes the form of person-power (which translates to time), skill sets, technology and funding. I heard that we don't have deep benches in many areas. We have some systems or software that can't do the functions or pull the data we need or talk to the systems and programs that are required to be efficient. Rapidly changing technologies require regular training.

*M*any people at UW-River Falls recognize the issues and are immensely hard-working and resourceful enough to get much of the job done. Yet, more is required for us to thrive. We need to be accountable, have the ability to identify and anticipate trends, and use these data to impact student success and our success as a university.

### MY THOUGHTS

I am impressed by the great work that we do and the commitment that employees have to making a lot happen in an environment of scarce resources. However, to gain an advantage in this competitive higher education landscape, I agree with our need for more relevant and more thoroughly analyzed data at our fingertips. We can and will do a better job of accessing and analyzing all the information we need to make sound, effective decisions and to hold ourselves accountable.

### *Final* Thoughts

I am grateful to have had this wonderful opportunity to listen to, and learn from, all of you. It was clear from our conversations that we all want to see UW-River Falls grow to meet the needs of today's and tomorrow's learners. It is exciting to be able to shape the future of UW-River Falls with you.

The work you are doing, the work we are doing together, is vitally important. We are changing people's lives by providing an education that gives them more choices and possibilities. They are participants in the creation of new knowledge, works of art and innovative products and processes that flow out of UW-River Falls and into communities both near and far. Our students are the embodiment of the Wisconsin Idea, which says that the boundaries of the university are the boundaries of the state – and I would even say, our students go beyond that. A UW-River Falls education can positively impact lives across our entire region, the county and the globe. A quote that is displayed on my desk along with a delightful picture of the author is: "Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world." These are the words of Nelson Mandela. He believed them and so do I. I know you do too.

I am proud to serve UW-River Falls and I look forward to what we can build together. Thank you for your contributions to this great university. Go Falcons!

"We can and will do a better job of accessing and analyzing all the information we need to make sound, effective decisions and to hold ourselves accountable."

*M*y appreciation goes to Jenna Lindseth and Beth Schommer for their assistance with the Listening and Learning Tour and report, and a special thank you to University Communications and Marketing for their work on this publication.

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