



Backgrounder: developing our institutional values

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What are organizational values?

An organization's values are the principles and beliefs that guide its actions, decisions, and culture. Values reflect what an organization stands for and how it aspires to interact with its community, stakeholders, and the world.

Values are a cornerstone for building a sense of belonging and connection and provide a lens to guide the university in priority setting and decision-making over the long term.

What do organizational values look like?

Values are typically concise and direct – **a small number of keywords or phrases that are easily understood and embraced across the institution.**

Organizational values also tend to be:

- Authentic to the institution (reflecting its history, mission and aspirations)
- Relevant across the organization, over the long term
- Action-oriented (i.e. can be reflected in our actions)

Why now?

[*Forward Together: The University of Alberta People Strategy 2024-2034*](#) commits the U of A to develop a set of formal institutional values **that will sit alongside our mission and vision as long-term guiding lights for our whole organization.**

The university community has offered extensive input on its values through a number of consultation processes, and a number of our institutional plans include principles and values. We want to build on this work.

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Reflecting on the university's existing guiding statements, please consider the following questions:

- *Why is it important for the university to articulate a set of values?*
- *Thinking about what values should guide the university over the long term (10+ years), which statements/words/ideas resonate the most strongly for you? Why?*
- *Which statements/words/ideas resonate the least? Why?*
- *What important ideas might we be missing?*

Selected reference documents

- [Shape: A Strategic Plan of Impact](#)
- [Statement on Freedom of Expression](#)
- [Forward Together: The University of Alberta People Strategy](#)
- [Braiding Past, Present and Future: Indigenous Strategic Plan](#)
- [Changing the Story: An Integrated Action Plan for Transforming Our Vibrant and Interconnected University Community](#)
- [Forward with Purpose: Strategic Plan for Research and Innovation](#)
- [Igniting Purpose: Student Experience Action Plan](#)
- [A Culture of Care: Safety Action Plan](#)

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Selected existing institutional language

The following are excerpts from a selection of institutional strategies, plans and documents. They are grouped thematically to help navigate the document, but they are a **starting point** for discussion and not the themes for the values themselves.

Mission

Within a vibrant and supportive learning environment, the University of Alberta discovers, disseminates and applies new knowledge through teaching and learning, research and creative activity, community involvement and partnerships. The U of A gives a national and international voice to innovation in our province, taking a lead role in placing Canada at the global forefront.

Vision

To inspire the human spirit through outstanding achievements in learning, discovery and citizenship in a creative community, building one of the world's great universities for the public good.

THEME: Learning and discovery

Statement on Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression is one of the key elements of such an environment and has been central to the university since its founding. Learning requires exposure to a variety of views, including those with which one disagrees, and the ability to participate in intellectual debate – including having one's own views challenged. Research and discovery require the ability to challenge the conventional, to communicate findings and their implications, and to provide informed commentary in the public sphere. Across all areas of its mandate, the university is committed to intellectual integrity, rigorous inquiry, and the robust expression and discussion of ideas.

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Shape: A Strategic Plan of Impact (core commitments)

Creativity – We embrace opportunities to innovate to make things better. While coming together as one university to reach new heights, we break down barriers, transform systems and remain flexible to create the conditions that support our students, faculty and staff to flourish.

Collaboration – We succeed by working together, within and beyond the university and across traditional boundaries. We prize relationships, and we create opportunities for mutual benefit. We celebrate each other's achievements and help each other to thrive.

Igniting Purpose: Student Experience Action Plan (principles)

Connections are fostered – Students are supported by a community that values and respects all perspectives, histories and worldviews. Through connecting with community members on and off campus, students enjoy a rich, transformative experience that inspires personal, academic and professional success.

Exploration is essential – A vital benefit of belonging to the expansive and diverse U of A community is the opportunity for students to have dynamic experiences, engage with new and differing perspectives and explore the parts of themselves that will support them in pursuing self-defined success.

Challenge accepted – The U of A offers a space to learn, grow and develop, potentially beyond what a student thought possible. However, challenges in life are inevitable. While navigating academic and interpersonal difficulties throughout a student's experience provides invaluable life and problem-solving skills to take into the rest of their lives, challenges should exist in the right

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places. The U of A is committed to minimizing barriers throughout the institution, ensuring our students' energy is dedicated to the pursuits of fostering relationships, achieving academic and professional success and finding enjoyment in the journey.

Forward with Purpose: Strategic Plan for Research and Innovation (guiding principles)

The University of Alberta is committed to **academic freedom**, where individual researchers determine their own research area, focus and pursuits, which in turn are supported at the faculty, college and institutional level.

Research and creative activity are the core focus and foundation of our university. They are the drivers of new knowledge and understanding that fuel applications, innovation, knowledge mobilization, technology transfer and broad societal impacts.

We are committed to safe and Responsible Research, **creative work, knowledge mobilization, social and technological innovation, and commercialization** activities, regardless of disciplines and our partners' geographic locations.

We foster **collaboration** within and beyond the university and across traditional boundaries. We are committed to working with government, industry and communities to co-create and co-define research areas to meet our aspirational goals as an institution.

Changing the Story: An Integrated Action Plan for Transforming Our Vibrant and Interconnected University Community (values-based practices)

Embracing Our Interconnectedness – We are, as we always have been, already interconnected. No matter what unit, college, faculty or department we study or work within, our research, teaching, administration, service, supervision, mentorship and communication activities have been impacted by interconnected pieces of the past and will impact interdependent pieces of our future.

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Realizing the Possibilities of Uncomfortable Encounters – Encounters tend to be understood as new or unexpected meetings, within or across species, ideas or with the world around us. Every one of us carries a history of encounters that contribute to who we are. Encounters contain within them the possibility to catalyze something new, such as a new perspective or approach; when not held with care, they can also make us less willing to engage with new ideas or perspectives. When thinking about encounters, the question isn't, "How do we reduce or eliminate uncomfortable, unfamiliar, or disruptive moments?" Rather, the question is, "How might we better support people through such encounters in ways that might enable more transformational learning and relationships?" Many social movements, cultural traditions and scholarly fields have developed approaches for supporting open-minded and open-hearted encounters (including in and through conflict), based on principles like dignity, consent, care, curiosity, humility, accountability and mutuality.

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THEME: Community service and impact

Shape: A Strategic Plan of Impact (core commitments)

Collaboration – We succeed by working together, within and beyond the university and across traditional boundaries. We prize relationships, and we create opportunities for mutual benefit. We celebrate each other's achievements and help each other to thrive.

Igniting Purpose: Student Experience Action Plan (principles)

Connections are fostered – Students are supported by a community that values and respects all perspectives, histories and worldviews. Through connecting with community members on and off campus, students enjoy a rich, transformative experience that inspires personal, academic and professional success.

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Braiding Past, Present and Future: Indigenous Strategic Plan (guiding values and principles)

Reconciliation – The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) defines reconciliation as an ongoing process of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships between Indigenous Peoples, the state and non-Indigenous peoples.

Self-Determination – The inherent right of Indigenous nations, communities and Peoples to determine their political status and freely pursue economic, educational, social and cultural development.

Sovereignty – The inherent right of Indigenous nations, communities and Peoples to autonomy, legitimacy and recognition as self-determining authorities.

Changing the Story: An Integrated Action Plan for Transforming Our Vibrant and Interconnected University Community (values-based practices)

Engaging our Critical Consciousness – Engaging our critical consciousness is active intellectual work that is available to anyone. It requires becoming familiar with theories and tools that illuminate how particular systems, structures, policies, and practices are inherently relational. This is a different way of thinking about the world. It suggests that our social, political and economic systems (such as colonialism, predatory capitalism, racism, ableism, sexism and other oppressive systems) are not “things” in and of themselves. Rather, they only exist because of particular interactions between people. When we awaken our critical consciousness we therefore acknowledge that oppressive systems – because they are upheld by the interactions of people – can (and must) be transformed. We can be part of transforming those systems.

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THEME: Organizational culture and environment

Shape: A Strategic Plan of Impact (core commitments)

Safety – We are committed to our people’s physical, psychological and cultural safety and to providing a safe and healthy work and study environment that enables high-quality education and research.

Sustainability – We strive to be a sustainable institution because we know the well-being of our people depends on our long-term viability. We lead through the prudent stewardship of resources and by stewarding our environment and the lands on which we reside.

Creativity – We embrace opportunities to innovate to make things better. While coming together as one university to reach new heights, we break down barriers, transform systems and remain flexible to create the conditions that support our students, faculty and staff to flourish.

Collaboration – We succeed by working together, within and beyond the university and across traditional boundaries. We prize relationships, and we create opportunities for mutual benefit. We celebrate each other’s achievements and help each other to thrive.

Forward with Purpose: Strategic Plan for Research and Innovation (guiding principles)

We foster **collaboration** within and beyond the university and across traditional boundaries. We are committed to working with government, industry and communities to co-create and co-define research areas to meet our aspirational goals as an institution.

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Braiding Past, Present and Future: Indigenous Strategic Plan (guiding values and principles)

Inclusivity – Validating the value of and enacting work to provide equal access to opportunities, resources, experiences and education to those excluded or marginalized from greater access.

Strength-Based Approach – A focus on the strengths and competencies of individuals and communities and an acknowledgment of structural barriers in opposition to deficit narratives that perpetuate inequity by assuming deficiencies

Changing the Story: An Integrated Action Plan for Transforming Our Vibrant and Interconnected University Community (values-based practices)

Promoting Mutual Flourishing for All – Mutual flourishing is the outcome of a world-making project that strives to ensure all living beings, both human and non-human, are thriving, peaceful and connected. The concept of mutual flourishing is rooted in an acknowledgement that all living things are simultaneously interconnected and interdependent. Those who are committed to the realization of mutual flourishing are therefore committed to transforming decision-making frameworks, interpersonal relationships and institutional cultures in ways that promote access, create belonging and cultivate healing.

Realizing the Possibilities of Uncomfortable Encounters – Encounters tend to be understood as new or unexpected meetings, within or across species, ideas or with the world around us. Every one of us carries a history of encounters that contribute to who we are. Encounters contain within them the possibility to catalyze something new, such as a new perspective or approach; when not held with care, they can also make us less willing to engage with new ideas or perspectives. When thinking about encounters, the question isn't, "How do we reduce or eliminate uncomfortable, unfamiliar, or disruptive moments?" Rather, the question is "How might we better support people through such encounters in ways that might enable more transformational learning and relationships?" Many social movements, cultural traditions and scholarly fields have developed approaches for supporting

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open-minded and open-hearted encounters (including in and through conflict), based on principles like dignity, consent, care, curiosity, humility, accountability and mutuality.

Investing in Processes of Creation and Community Building – In order for us to build and sustain a different future, change needs to happen right now. We cannot wait to build tomorrow. There will never be a finalized vision of the future that we will all begin to work toward. There is only a present that moves towards what we choose to imagine, value and resource. By creating the communities where we reckon with the weight of our past, recognize our interconnectedness and continuously improve our relationships, we are acting in the present. And it is through these day-to-day actions that we will craft the cultures and strengthen the infrastructure — from our built environment in labs and classrooms to our human connections in student groups and work teams — required to build and sustain a vibrant and interconnected university community.

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THEME: Indigenization and Access, Community and Belonging

Shape: A Strategic Plan of Impact (core commitments)

Equity, diversity and inclusion – We incorporate Indigenous identities, languages, cultures and worldviews across the university. This includes working to dismantle systemic barriers and celebrating the diversity, strength, complexity, resilience and beauty of Indigenous Peoples, cultures, languages and knowledge systems. *Braiding Past, Present and Future: University of Alberta Indigenous Strategic Plan* is a crucial foundation for our next decade.

Indigenization and decolonization – We work to achieve a more diverse, equitable, accessible and inclusive environment for all who work, learn and live within our community. We value academic freedom and welcome and celebrate a diversity of perspectives and experiences.

Braiding Past, Present and Future: Indigenous Strategic Plan (guiding values and principles)

Reconciliation – The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) defines reconciliation as an ongoing process of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships between Indigenous Peoples, the state and non-Indigenous peoples.

Self-Determination – The inherent right of Indigenous nations, communities and Peoples to determine their political status and freely pursue economic, educational, social and cultural development

Sovereignty – The inherent right of Indigenous nations, communities and Peoples to autonomy, legitimacy and recognition as self-determining authorities.

Inclusivity – Validating the value of and enacting work to provide equal access to opportunities, resources, experiences and education to those excluded or marginalized from greater access.

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Strength-Based Approach – A focus on the strengths and competencies of individuals and communities and an acknowledgment of structural barriers in opposition to deficit narratives that perpetuate inequity by assuming deficiencies

All my relations – Acknowledging the interconnectedness, interdependence, worth and mutual responsibility of all peoples, creatures and lands; a common conceptualization of all things living among Indigenous Peoples, known as wahkohtowin by the Cree and Métis

Decolonization – Repudiating the racist justifications and dismantling the colonial structures aimed at disenfranchising Indigenous Peoples of their legal, social, cultural, religious and ethnic rights; reclaiming Indigenous identity, language, culture and worldviews

Indigenization – A process of highlighting and incorporating Indigenous worldviews, knowledge and perspectives into non-Indigenous educational, political and social structures in recognition of exclusion and erasure; celebrating the diversity, strength, complexity, resilience and beauty of Indigenous Peoples, cultures, languages and knowledge systems

Indigeneity – Belonging to specific lands and places; the unlimited right to self-identification by Indigenous Peoples

Indigenous Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing – Affirming the validity, diversity, sophistication and beauty of Indigenous understandings, practices and modes of learning from the people, animals and plant nations; acknowledging the holistic viewpoints of Indigenous Peoples that take into account the whole person (mind, body, spirit) and the connection to peoples, lands and living things

Intersectionality/confluence – Recognizing the relationship between various constructed categories such as race, gender, sexual orientation, class and all forms of ableism that inform the converging influences of systems of oppression as they occur on Indigenous territory

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Changing the Story: An Integrated Action Plan for Transforming Our Vibrant and Interconnected University Community **(values-based practices)**

Engaging in Acts of Collective Remembering – Having a collective understanding of history is essential when attempting to embrace our interconnectedness. Learning from the past through multiple, divergent perspectives and methods better equips us for understanding and collectively engaging with complex contemporary and future challenges. In this sense, history – when shared by a number of diverse voices – is a teacher. It teaches us about the injustices of the past, highlights the strength of those who have survived these injustices and reminds us that there is no such thing as a predetermined future. This is how collective remembering becomes a tool for collective action. If we look back with a critical curiosity we not only reckon with the weight of our past, we can also use this knowledge to build more loving, peaceful and joyous futures for all living and nonliving beings.

Promoting Mutual Flourishing for All – Mutual flourishing is the outcome of a world-making project that strives to ensure all living beings, both human and non-human, are thriving, peaceful and connected. The concept of mutual flourishing is rooted in an acknowledgement that all living things are simultaneously interconnected and interdependent. Those who are committed to the realization of mutual flourishing are therefore committed to transforming decision-making frameworks, interpersonal relationships and institutional cultures in ways that promote access, create belonging and cultivate healing.

Positioning Love as a Guiding Ethos – The word love, as noted by the civil rights activist James Baldwin, should not be used “merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace ... of quest and daring and growth” (The Fire Next Time, 1963, p. 78). Suggesting there is much to learn from those with whom we most differ, Baldwin encourages us to cultivate a deeper, more vulnerable human connection by leaning into the possibilities of love – not as an individual feeling but as a reciprocal and ongoing practice. When we love in this way, we exchange pieces of our humanity with one another. When we love in this way, we dare to become vulnerable with one another. When we love in this way, we deepen our collective kinship in ways that allow us to promote dignity and mutual flourishing for all.

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Investing in Processes of Creation and Community Building – In order for us to build and sustain a different future, change needs to happen right now. We cannot wait to build tomorrow. There will never be a finalized vision of the future that we will all begin to work toward. There is only a present that moves towards what we choose to imagine, value and resource. By creating the communities where we reckon with the weight of our past, recognize our interconnectedness and continuously improve our relationships, we are acting in the present. And it is through these day-to-day actions that we will craft the cultures and strengthen the infrastructure – from our built environment in labs and classrooms to our human connections in student groups and work teams – required to build and sustain a vibrant and interconnected university community.