

Abstract: CU Forward

Concord University (CU) is a public, career-focused liberal arts institution located in rural southern West Virginia serving one of the poorest areas of the country. Despite an excellent history of serving the region with quality educational programs, Concord has experienced an enrollment decrease and fiscal challenges due to a declining high school aged population and significant cuts to higher education by the state legislature. To address these issues, CU completed a strategic analysis resulting in the proposed Title III project described in this narrative. The **CU Forward** project aligns with the University's mission and focuses on the identified weaknesses: low retention and graduation rates, lack of college readiness of students, declining enrollment, need for innovative course design, use of organizational data for strategic decision making, and large, continued state budget cuts.

The CU Forward Project proposes three primary goals to address the institution's academic, institutional management, and fiscal stability problems: (1) Increase affordable access to general education and market-driven degree programs through online courses; (2) Provide student engagement with research/internships that lead to graduation and a career; and (3) Develop a robust and transparent office of Institutional Research to share data with students, parents, the community, faculty, and staff. CU Forward proposes 22 measurable activity objectives related to these overall project goals. The identified solutions/goals were chosen to ameliorate the weaknesses or needs cited in this proposal, but they were also chosen because the solutions are extensions of the strengths of CU.

CU Forward provides the needed structure to increase and modernize online courses to three populations of students: high school students to increase college readiness; typical college students to increase online degree programs; and adult learners who may have some college but have not completed a degree. Second, CU Forward will create a pipeline for students to engage in high-impact practices including research and internships earlier in and throughout their time at Concord to increase retention and completion and ultimately move directly into a career. Finally, CU Forward will develop an Office of Institutional Research so that the University can continue to report to students, the community, faculty, and staff the efforts of the University in a transparent way.

Through newly developed online courses/degree programs, expanded career pathways through research and internships, and institutional research to inform decision-making, the CU Forward project will improve retention and graduation rates and strengthen enrollment by providing affordable and flexible education to students coupled with the support necessary for success. A strong management plan, comprehensive evaluation plan, based upon strong theory and the project logic model, allows for continual improvement and progress toward project objectives and goals.

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