

December 16, 2022

To: Dr. Rodney Rogers, President, Bowling Green State University  
Dr. David Jackson, President, BGSU Faculty Association

From: Regional Higher Education (RHE) Study Committee – Firelands College

Re: RHE Committee findings and recommendations

Below is a record of the work of the RHE Study Committee, including its charge, membership, meetings, processes, findings, and recommendations.

### **CHARGE**

In April 2022 BGSU President Rodney Rogers and BGSU-FA President David Jackson invited faculty and staff members to serve on the Regional Higher Education Study Committee. The committee was tasked to evaluate the challenges facing regional higher education, in the context of BGSU Firelands, and to envision a future in which the college not only maintains regional relevance but also thrives in a challenging enrollment environment. In imagining the future of BGSU Firelands, the committee was asked to consider:

- 1) Enrollment challenges and the sharp demographic shifts.
- 2) The portfolio of academic programs and the appropriateness of the delivery method.
- 3) Comparable services (i.e., counseling, advising, etc.) across both campuses.
- 4) Organizational and reporting structure.
- 5) Long-term financial vitality.

### **COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

Andrew Kurtz (Dean, Committee Chair), Theodore Bach (Humanities Department), Michelle Brodke (Applied Sciences Department), Robert Drapcho (Director of Enrollment Management), Megan Green (Humanities Department/Pathway), PJ Mays (Assistant Dean, Institutional Effectiveness), Elsy Thomas (ASD Department Chair), Sharon Swartz (BGSU Director of Budgeting), and Alyson Wilson (Natural & Social Science Department)

### **MEETINGS AND PROCESSES USED FOR DIRECTING RECOMMENDATIONS**

In addition to two retreats in April 2022, the committee met every Friday, from August to December. To direct the RHE Committee's focus, SWOT analyses were used to guide initial discussions. Advising was sought from university experts (VP for Finance and Administration Sheri Stoll, Director of Budgeting Sharon Swartz, and VP for Enrollment Management Cecilia Castellano). Additionally, a visit from a Firelands alumnus currently serving as a manufacturing engineering manager at Ventra Plastics provided a lens through which the committee was able to view workforce development opportunities. The committee provided updates to and sought feedback from President Rogers, Provost Whitehead, and the BGSU Firelands community. In a November 18, 2022 memo to Presidents Rogers and Jackson, the committee indicated that

additional time was needed to investigate BGSU Firelands' academic portfolio in order to fully meet the 5-point charge.

Below, please find the RHE Committee's recommendations to the charge items.

**CHARGE #1: Envision the possible future of the BGSU Firelands response to enrollment challenges and the sharp demographic shift.**

The committee recognizes that a stable and growing enrollment pipeline is fundamental to BGSU Firelands' ability to operate and a requisite for its ability to innovate. Given recent downward trends in enrollment for Firelands College and regional campuses generally, as well as new demographic challenges on the horizon, the committee has determined that addressing enrollment challenges at BGSU Firelands will require several simultaneous and coordinated efforts, including in areas addressed elsewhere in this report:

- Assess the academic portfolio to ensure alignment with regional needs.
- Emphasize student-centered course delivery through strategic use of face-to-face, online, and hybrid modalities.
- Forge partnerships with regional employers.
- Enhance student resources – particularly career services and mental health services – that support continuing student enrollment and retention.

*Recommendation: Recognizing the shifting demographics of the region and the opportunity to retool and upskill the existing workforce, Firelands College should place renewed emphasis on the recruitment of post-traditional students.*

*Recommendation: Firelands College must be prepared to deploy additional resources in support of new marketing and enrollment strategies.*

The committee believes strongly that the multipronged effort above must be supported by additional investments in both marketing and enrollment resources. These investments will allow an increasingly targeted approach to the student populations that are projected to be most strategically valuable to meeting the campus' enrollment goals. In particular, the committee recommends a renewed focus on post-traditional students. With respect to the administration of enrollment, Firelands College should continue to leverage existing infrastructure and resources of the University's enrollment and marketing teams, as both campuses recognize the shared value of stable enrollment at Firelands College. However, the committee recommends that within this collaborative relationship there should be greater prioritization of the specific enrollment needs of Firelands College, especially as concerns the recruitment of post-traditional students on the Firelands campus. In making this recommendation, we are aware that prioritizing the recruitment of post-traditional students may mean that Firelands' marketing and enrollment strategy deviates from that of the BG campus.

The recommendation for increased marketing and enrollment resources will require additional investment beyond the funds currently allocated to marketing in the Firelands operating budget. Here, the committee recommends that, following academic portfolio redesign, BGSU centrally budgeted funds reserved for strategic initiatives be strongly considered for supporting the college's rebranding effort and strategic marketing push. To justify this recommendation, we note that the education of both regional and post-traditional students is: (a) closely aligned with several commitments as codified in the BGSU Forward strategic plan (specifically, redefining student success by broadening access), and (b) a task for which Firelands College, relative to all other colleges of BGSU, is uniquely positioned and qualified to provide.

*Recommendation: In coordination with the BG campus, Firelands College should continue to invest in the Pathway program through planned enrollment growth and concomitant resourcing of faculty and student services.*

The committee recognizes the important impact that the Pathway program has on Firelands enrollment and more generally the financial well-being of Firelands College. The Pathway program is a model for delivering student outcomes (with its cohorts outperforming its peer groups on the Firelands campus), and its transformational impact on students makes good on several key commitments provided in the BGSU Forward strategic plan. Given these factors, the committee recommends exploring cost sharing models in which BGSU central budgeting subsidizes a portion of the Pathway program (see also the section on financial vitality).

**CHARGE #2: Envision the possible future of the BGSU Firelands portfolio of academic programs and the appropriateness of the delivery method.**

*Recommendation: The committee recommends inclusive deliberation of its academic portfolio take place over the spring semester 2023, following shared governance processes and recognizing the expertise faculty and staff from all units will bring to the discussion.*

As a significant amount of BGSU Firelands' success relies upon its academic portfolio, specifically the portfolio's ability to respond to students' needs and to regional fluctuations, the committee decided that more deliberate review of its academic programs and delivery methods was necessary, to include consultation with possible third-party experts. At the same time, the committee recommends the following framework to inform these discussions:

- The college academic portfolio going forward should place emphasis on Associate Degrees.
- The college academic portfolio going forward should place emphasis on industry-recognized credentials.
- The college academic portfolio going forward must recognize the challenge of single-faculty programs and disciplines.
- The college should focus on maintaining and enhancing its regional relevance. While opportunities may present themselves to serve populations beyond north-central Ohio, Firelands' core mission should remain regional in nature.

- Firelands must develop criteria to inform the mix of online and face-to-face courses, recognizing that a vibrant campus life is an important aspect of its mission.
- The college should stand-up a new non-credit training unit.

**CHARGE #3: Envision the possible future of BGSU Firelands with regard to comparable services offered across both campuses.**

In alignment with Forward objective I, initiative 2 (Intensive focus on outcomes), objective III, initiative 11 (Community well-being), and requirements set forth in the Collective Bargaining Agreement (Article 5, Section 2), it is vital that Firelands College maintains services comparable to those at the Bowling Green campus. To understand comparable services, the committee focused primarily on student services, placing them into three categories: equitable services between campuses (e.g. academic advising), services that are available to Firelands' students but may not be as accessible (e.g. counseling services), and services that are not available (e.g. recreation center). Within the last two categories, the committee prioritized services that enhance student success.

*Recommendation: Establish a visible and available Counseling Services presence at BGSU Firelands, to include on-site coordination of mental health services and referrals to on-site and off-site companion services. Additionally, establish a visible and available social services presence at BGSU Firelands to coordinate referrals and support students in time of need.*

Chief Health Officer Ben Batey has identified student mental health support as a priority for BGSU. The RHE Committee overwhelmingly identified this recommendation as the top priority of the “comparable services” charge. Firelands Student Services currently provides referrals to BGSU Main Campus virtual counseling assistance or to external agencies, but Firelands does not employ an on-site professional counselor. Additionally, as health insurance is not required of Firelands students, some may not have access to mental health services through a plan.

For years, Firelands College has investigated ways of connecting students with mental health support, with limited success. Most recently, which is to say just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the college was in exploratory discussions with Firelands Regional Medical Center to establish a presence on the campus. The University's COVID-19 response expanded virtual counseling opportunities for all students, although the extent to which Firelands College students avail themselves of this service is unclear. Virtual counseling is a valuable option, offering flexibility, convenience of scheduling, and removal of transportation barriers. However, conditions such as a distracting, threatening, or non-confidential environment, and the therapist's limited ability to evaluate helpful non-verbal cues make virtual counseling challenging. These contingencies may be especially apparent in the non-residential context.

The committee believes that Firelands campus students should have the same access to mental health services as Bowling Green campus students, with a counselor available for on-site, in-person interactions, in addition to virtual options. The coordination of services would ensure continuity from semester to semester and, following models on other regional branch campuses, should be efficient and economical.

As a non-residential, open admissions college that serves a region marked by economic disparity – e.g. Sandusky’s poverty rate being 23% versus 13% statewide (census.gov) – many of our students and prospective students struggle with basic needs. Following models established on other regional campuses, the committee recommends that the college establish coordinated social services for students. Most likely a full-time or part-time position, depending on the type and range of services being provided (which also may include synergies with Human Services and Social Work academic programs), coordination of services would, at the very least, centralize internal student resources (e.g. food bank, emergency funds) and establish partnerships with external agencies. Such coordination will provide greater access to students needing support through life challenges and will ultimately become a positive driver for persistence, retention, and graduation.

*Recommendation: Restore a designated Career Services position to oversee career counseling and Life Design at BGSU Firelands.*

An outgrowth of the redistribution of staff responsibilities and budget reductions, services that support student career exploration, and coordination of local job opportunities were either handed off to the BG campus (e.g. Handshake support) or to BGSU Firelands’ Academic and Career Counseling staff as an additional task. Currently, the BGSU Firelands website directs students to the BGSU’s Career Services on the BG campus for career development resources. As with virtual counseling, the committee cannot determine with any precision the extent to which Firelands’ students utilize this service, but it is likely very little.

In addition to more traditional career services resources, students on the BG campus can access enhanced strategic goal setting through the Life Design initiative. Life Design prepares college students for meaningful careers and enhanced livelihoods. Currently, one-to-one Life Design counseling is not available to Firelands’ students. Similarly, Life Design courses are implemented on the Bowling Green campus but are not offered to Firelands students. In fall 2022, there were 46 listed in-person classes of BGSU 1910 offered to students on the BG campus. Robust course offerings are just a piece of the large investment the university has committed to Life Design. In spring, 2022 over \$13 million in donations allowed BGSU to begin construction of the Jeoffrey H. Radbill Center for College and Life Design and the Michael and Sara Kuhlin Hub for Career Design and Connections, both of which will offer invaluable support and networking opportunities to BG campus students. Currently, this network is out of reach to those attending Firelands.

Because of its emphasis on intentionality, a form of Life Design/Career Counseling structured specifically for Firelands students will become a bridge between the college experience, graduation, and career success designed for Firelands’ unique populations—individuals who are starting their college career, who struggle in academia, or who are balancing family and work with the college experience. To meet Forward’s mission of offering transformative experiences and to address achievement gaps, the empowerment Life Design offers is essential.

A hybrid Career Services/Life Design position will, in part:

- In coordination with our existing academic advising structure, become a positive retention and completion driver.

- Work with the college's strong College Credit Plus demographic on career exploration and Life Design, thus directly and indirectly becoming a positive enrollment driver for this population of students.
- Strengthen the BGSU brand in the region (and possibly statewide) by coordinating partnerships with local business and industry, including the establishment of internships/co-ops and direct paths to employment.
- Support Firelands' academic programs and program coordinators through the centralization of communication with business and industry.
- Establish intentional tracking of Firelands College alumni for reporting purposes.

*Recommendation: Use the existing committee structure to further investigate comparable services in 2023.*

In this report, the Regional Higher Education Committee focused on services that directly enhance student success. However, additional services and resources exist, some on the faculty and staff side that are unavailable or have limited reach beyond the BG campus. These include:

- Recreational facilities/health and wellness programming.
- Legal services for students.
- Intramural and club sports.
- Food service options.

While it is unclear if additional services such as these would ultimately promote student success or have other positive impacts, it remains that these services are beyond the reach of Firelands' students and thus are worth investigating. Currently, the college governance document allows for the establishment of ad-hoc committees reporting to the Dean and Faculty Chairperson. The RHE committee recommends using this structure to establish an ad-hoc committee on comparable services.

#### **CHARGE #4: Envision the possible future of the BGSU Firelands organizational and reporting structure.**

The committee recognizes that changes to the college academic portfolio may directly impact Firelands' organizational and reporting structure. Nevertheless, the committee is recommending two important changes that do not so much connect to the organizational structure of the college as they do with the way in which the college interacts with the Division of Academic Affairs and shared governance processes.

*Recommendation: While adhering to university-level compliance and due-diligence requirements (e.g. fiscal justification and HR requirements), Firelands College should be free to exercise more autonomy in the hiring of faculty and staff.*

*Recommendation: Recognizing that Firelands College is the only college at the university chartered to grant Associate Degrees, the committee recommends the establishment of a "Firelands Fast Track" curriculum review process that bypasses the university-level review process.*

Both recommendations seek to institutionalize aspects of organizational autonomy that are unique to Firelands College. With respect to the approval process for faculty and staff lines, something that can take months from beginning to end, an expedited review recognizes that the college operates within the constraints imposed by the profit-centered budget structure. Similarly, an expedited review of new curriculum proposals connected to Associate Degrees recognizes the academic autonomy the college exercises in offering this level of undergraduate degree. At the same time, the committee is *not* advocating for the elimination of review for either faculty/staff lines or curriculum proposals. For example, the committee understands the important role Undergraduate Council plays in the curriculum review process. We would, however, advocate for the elimination of shared governance approval beyond Undergraduate Council for proposals that are determined not to have significant impact on degree programs on the BG campus. Ultimately, the committee believes that streamlining approval processes by eliminating some university-level organizational barriers will enhance the type of institutional nimbleness required for adapting to a rapidly changing employment and technological environment.

**CHARGE #5: Envision the possible future of the BGSU Firelands long-term financial vitality.**

With tuition, state share of instruction, and fees comprising nearly 100% of the college revenue stream, the RHE Study Committee recognized that long-term financial vitality is possible only in conjunction with an academic portfolio that meets the needs of the region and drives enrollment growth.

As BGSU Firelands is the only self-budgeted college of Bowling Green State University, it is important that the committee respond to long-standing concerns that, relative to our sister colleges, BGSU Firelands operates at a unique disadvantage. These concerns became especially acute in discussions around the fairness and equity of the General Services Charge, which BGSU Firelands pays to central administration on an annual basis. The committee benefited from the expertise of Sharon Swartz, who spent hours tutoring the committee on university-, divisional-, and college-level budget processes. Additionally, the committee consulted with VP Sheri Stoll and President Rogers on more strategic questions emanating from the current budget structure. In the end, the committee achieved clarity around the benefits and challenges associated with the current model and alternative models. We therefore submit four recommendations relative to long-term financial vitality.

*Recommendation: Firelands College should remain a profit-center with an independent budget.*

The Regional Higher Education Committee considered a recommendation to become a cost-center under the Division of Academic Affairs, like the other colleges of the university. In doing so, the committee noted several challenges to the profit-centered model under which the college currently operates, including:

- Declining enrollments resulting in budget cuts that ultimately translate into deferred maintenance situations.

- Historically conservative budget processes that discourage innovation and new program development.
- Lack of decision-making authority in the hiring of new faculty and staff.
- Absorbing CBA-mandated salary adjustments for faculty and central administration's annual salary adjustments for staff.

At the same time, the committee noted strengths that ultimately outweighed the items above, including:

- Firelands' ability to respond quickly to situations with budget impact, including enrollment shifts within a fiscal year.
- Autonomy to deploy campus resources to areas of need.
- The ability to "bank" annual carryover as a hard asset.

To the extent that weaknesses of the current budget structure can be mitigated by enrollment growth, and that enrollment growth will be realized through a revitalization of the academic portfolio, the committee believes the autonomy afforded by the current model outweighs any possible benefit from a restructuring of the budget model.

It should be noted that the committee took a thorough look at the general services charge and concluded that the charge is neither a strength nor a weakness of the profit-center model, but rather a component of the model which recognizes how the college is tied into BGSU's operational infrastructure.

*Recommendation: Explore new revenue streams by monetizing the campus.*

The committee recommends that a renewed emphasis be placed on using campus spaces for external private and public events which generate revenue. Longer-term, the committee recommends that BGSU Firelands create a plan to reinvent non-credit programming/training aligned with its academic portfolio.

The wholesale migration of virtually all of its classes to the online environment during the COVID pandemic has resulted in a "new normal" where 48% of the Firelands College schedule has remained online. As a result of reductions in face-to-face classes, few evening or weekend courses, and the discontinuance of theatre programming, there is an abundance of unused space on campus. These spaces include an auditorium with adjacent meeting rooms and a catering kitchen, gymnasium, a 250-seat theatre, and a 300-acre arboretum. Acknowledging on-going staffing challenges in our Plant Operations and Maintenance area, this committee nevertheless recommends that the college move forward with a plan to host fee-based events on campus. On the advice of VP for Finance and Administration Sheri Stoll, the committee also recommends the college begin this planning in conversation with the Bowen Thompson Student Union, which has had notable success in this area.

It is not lost on the committee that raising awareness of our campus by hosting events is also a marketing strategy for the college, overall. The individuals attending such events are potential students, parents of students, business leaders, alumni and donors, all experiencing first-hand the benefits of a university presence in their region.

*Recommendation: Leverage university resources to support innovative programming and strategic initiatives.*

As noted above, conservative budgeting addresses immediate needs but fails to resource new initiatives, including academic programs, that would bolster Firelands' response to regional economic shifts and the need to reach new audiences through creative course modalities. To be fair, this situation is not unique to Firelands College; the Division of Academic Affairs as a whole struggles to find resources for new programs and initiatives. However, where a new program or initiative seems uniquely aligned with the university's strategic goals, central administration may receive a proposal from the Division of Academic Affairs to help resource said program or initiative. In discussions with the committee, both President Rogers and VP Stoll invited similar proposals from Firelands College. Understanding the rigorous analysis any proposal of this sort will undergo, the committee nevertheless acknowledges that being able to avail itself of university resources beyond those generated by the college itself is an important shift in the way the university has understood the strategic value of Firelands College.

*Recommendation: Create a cost-sharing model for the Pathway program.*

Since its inception in 2014, the Pathway program has grown to over 300 full-time students. 2023's enrollment goal is 325, and this number will likely grow to 350 in 2024. These numbers represent approximately 6% of the entire cohort of first-year students on the BG campus. With an average retention rate of 65% (averaged over 8 years), the Pathway program represents a significant enrollment pipeline for the BG campus and Firelands College. Knowing that not all Pathway revenue can be reinvested into the program, the committee recommends that both campuses explore a cost-sharing model for the Pathway program. While we are not in a position to make specific recommendations, possible approaches include funding a new or existing faculty line or incentivizing the achievement of agreed-upon success metrics (e.g. retention >70%) by sharing in the cost of academic support services, such as academic coaches.

The RHE Committee's recommendations reflect extensive deliberation of its charge and Firelands' welfare. It is the committee's hope these proposals may forge a stronger relationship between Firelands and Main Campus while instituting new avenues for Firelands' success.

The committee welcomes any inquiries if further information or clarification is needed and looks forward to a continued dialogue about BGSU Firelands' future.