



Middle Georgia State University

20/20 VISION: TOWARD A CLEAR-SIGHTED VIEW OF GREATNESS

By: Christopher Blake, PhD
President
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Vision, Values and Planning

"We transform individuals and their communities through extraordinary higher learning"

This was the Vision Statement that we published four years ago, shortly after my appointment as President. It was conceived for a recently consolidated institution on a trajectory to University status, which was to be built upon the best of established traditions and the excitement of new possibilities. This vision was right and achievable because of the successes of our two former institutions which had for decades powerfully served the people of middle Georgia.

Our Vision Statement also provided the bedrock to our first Strategic Plan for the years 2015-18, *Greatness Begins Here*. We have now reached a new milestone at Middle Georgia State University, as we shall soon conclude that first plan, and it is time for us to consider and take our next steps. This White Paper is issued to the University community of students, faculty, staff, University Advisory Council, Foundation trustees, and friends across the region in order to prompt thought and discussion as we begin the process of building a new Strategic Plan, a plan that will indeed allow us to take our next steps.

Our vision has emanated from the core values we have powerfully lived out and demonstrated: Stewardship, Engagement, Adaptability and Learning. This conviction in the power of the past and the promise of the future drove us successfully forward through historic transformation into a state University, tasked by the Board of Regents to continue being accessible both academically and financially to a broad range of middle Georgians. In short, our mission speaks to opportunity and growth for our students, building on the past. Our four core values encapsulated both our historic experience and our future aspirations.

We can take pride in the knowledge that we have indeed achieved much in these post-consolidation years and have successfully provided extraordinary higher learning in multiple ways. Like any organization that aspires to extraordinary results, we knew that we needed a plan to guide and focus our energies. And so our first Strategic Plan—*Greatness Begins Here*—was designed to help chart our course in driving both our mission and our vision as a public University. That plan's progress is being reported quarterly on our website as we near its conclusion.

Five years into our existence as a single institution, at the end of our first Strategic Plan, it is again time for us collectively, as a community of scholars and learners, to look afresh at where we are and where we want—and need—to go as Georgia's newest and most affordable University. Planning is not a one-time event. Effective planning requires rooting our daily operations in the bigger picture, and making necessary adjustments—to short and long term strategies—based on results, or lack thereof.

Our Next Milestone

Last fall, at the Board of Regents meeting on our Macon campus, I used in my address an analogy to describe the changes we have managed and the challenges we now face. That

analogy suggested that just as young persons at age five are expected to leave the full-time security of home and to embrace new ways of being and learning in Kindergarten, so after five years as a single institution it is now time for us to affirm more confidently our place, our role and our identity in the fabric of higher education.

The first five years of human life witness extraordinary human growth and development, and then we require something new and bigger for young people as they grow. The same principle can apply to us as an organization, as a University that has grown up from its birth over the past five years. At five, we now also embark on a new rite of passage, in a sense we now must “go to school” by expanding our horizons, our insights and our experiences in serving the people of middle Georgia. That is the challenge and calling of the next period of life and work for Middle Georgia State University.

To meet this challenge, and to set the scene for how we should do this, I share here some observations.

Intentionality

Firstly, we must live more strongly the intentionality of our work. There are more educational opportunities, needs and options than we can realistically address. So we must be targeted and selective about programs for students that are strongly “mission and market” aligned, that are resource-effective, and that will drive enrollment growth and volume. Given our finite resources and our broad geographic presence, it is critical that we identify our key intentions and efforts, and do so from positions of proven strength rather than untested aspirations.

That is why our next Strategic Plan is so important. Just as we know the early years of schooling are absolutely critical to the lifetime potential of a person, so will what we do in this next phase be vital to our sustainability and highly formative in our trajectory. We have a six-month window in which I am challenging the campus to build a new plan. Our new Provost will be the executive officer tasked with its development, supported by the University's Strategic Planning Board.

While this White Paper is not the place to prescribe what that plan will produce, there are some obvious principles that come into play. One of these I shared with the Board of Regents: namely, that it is going to be easier for us to present ourselves to the public and to make the right institutional choices for the public if we understand that at our core we are a hybrid institution. That is something to celebrate! Middle Georgia State University is a union of diverse places, energies and opportunities. The task is to continue building that union, which we have begun well, so that a clearer sense of our identity and brand can be lived, resonated and expressed.

Academic Identity & Strategy

Our identity will be in our intent to be a University with an access function, rather than in any single form of delivering that promise. In short, we must embrace a sense of hybrid mix that

builds on our diverse strengths across our five campuses, with their local communities, and also in an online non-geographic mode. Traditional and non-traditional; academically strong and prior learning experience; new and returning student; resident and commuter; online and face-to-face; full-time and part-time; arts and professional; science and business; certificate and degree: these and other examples of a hybrid identity are ways that we truly are Middle Georgia State and must now grow as an access function University.

This institutional complexity should be welcomed as our norm and promise, and not cause us anxiety. We are truly a “both-and” University, rather than an “either-or” institution. In that sense we reflect well the multiple realities that now impact our students, and the human experience generally, in the digital revolution of recent decades. Instant access to information and personalized communications have transformed human activity, and placed global interaction and accessibility at our fingertips. Global competition and global accessibility are realities to be embraced, and made available for our graduates to apply in their lives and livelihoods. They must be locally competent and globally confident. We are already in a strong position to capitalize on that need, given our career-building, professional orientation and strengths.

That institutional distinction means that we are overdue in terms of articulating and expressing a clear academic strategy for the University. It is time for us to be resolute in terms of our programs, our delivery and our formats; in short, our academic promise and the educational appeal to our students. There is still uncertainty about where, how and when our students can complete their certificate or degree programs, and in what formats. There is still hesitancy about how best to structure and promote the differing values of residential, commuter and online opportunities. There is still uncertainty about pathways to program completion across our five campuses. There is still a lack of systematic planning for academic delivery through graduation. In short, there is not yet a sufficient academic plan that is student-focused and resource-effective. That is not acceptable as we enter this new phase of our institutional life and must be addressed expeditiously and strategically.

Student-Focused

A student-focused curriculum, a student-focused schedule, and student-focused service in every academic and administrative department must therefore be developed to ensure that our programs are indeed accessible and lead efficiently to degree completion. In support of this focus, a richer understanding of the kinds of student life that underpin learning must be organized for our student cohorts. That will take imagination about the structure of learning, the delivery systems of content, the concept of an academic calendar, the scale of faculty-student engagement, and the repertoire of student support and extra-curricular programs we have in place.

We have made significant strides in the past five years, and now need to systematize those more coherently. For example, the old semester calendar, with sixteen weeks and four days of teaching per week, will no longer suffice. The traditional teaching calendar must be supplemented aggressively by a new understanding of time, locus and engagement through to

degree completion. Similarly, if students are residents or commuters, how can we build a student culture outside the classroom that supports their progression through graduation?

Faculty expertise and success is central to a student-focused academic strategy, and we have made progress these past years in building expectations of what constitutes a university-class faculty. But further work on faculty growth and support is essential if we are to meet the academic standards our students need and expect. A robust learning environment for students is only possible if we provide diverse routes for faculty excellence and create an entrepreneurial spirit of how faculty can foster student learning and creativity. One of the greatest assets we enjoy is the life and intellectual capital of our outstanding faculty—they are often who students credit for helping them gain a new perspective. But that resource must be built and developed, and faculty development needs a new level of commitment, resourcing and expectation across our campuses.

Momentum Year

It is, therefore, fortuitous that the University System of Georgia is investing new energy and action in its Year of Momentum, designed to maximize student clarity about program coherence and ensuring the first 30 hours of a degree are clearly available. This gives an excellent statewide context for us to think about how our programs directly lead to enrollment and graduation. It also pushes us to identify which strengths will drive our priorities and energies and how our programs will provide that momentum for students to succeed and proceed to graduation in a coherent, planned, available program of study.

Building momentum will require a combination of intentionality, identity, and relentless focus on serving our students well. We clearly need to have a confidence about who we are, and who we want to be. That confidence will shape our message to the public and will help determine which of the myriad options we select to target and resource, to achieve that same Momentum which the USG is asking us to embrace. Clearly we have seen extraordinary growth in specific professional areas, and our academic reputation is taking a new shape, building on demonstrated successes and strengths.

Aviation and Information Technology are two clear examples of reputational advantage, helping position us at the forefront of new knowledge in high-demand and niche fields. That experience may suggest expanding our niche professional promise and asking our faculty how best to unite professional career outcomes with new iterations of pedagogy, curriculum and course delivery. For example, our QEP program has delivered to large numbers of students the experience of community-based learning. How can we expand this to consider it a possibility for every one of our degree-seeking students?

To fulfill our goals of enrollment, retention, progression, and graduation, we must now embrace powerfully the reality of lifelong credentialing and qualifications for our students. The average age of our student body is 26 years, and our recent graduate programs have shown the potential of adult learning. We must show the agility to respond with appropriate programming to empower this hybrid student population so that we can support their aspirations and provide

a means to transformation in their lives at different ages and stages of career development. We already have built the foundation to do this well.

We have made extraordinary strides in developing a repertoire of academic programs and awards: Associate, Bachelor, Master Degree and Certificate Programs. We have begun to provide learning and credentialing across a range of high-demand careers and niche professional needs in middle Georgia. This alignment of programming promise to professional potential can be more finely tuned, to ensure that we are the most affordable University of choice for career-minded, degree-seeking citizens in middle Georgia. Our region of Georgia is primed for economic fulfillment, and while we cannot be “all things to all people”, we can be the University that provides the pipeline from aspiration to education to employment in degree-based careers, such as Health Science, Business and Aviation.

Agility Required

Our capacity is not only achievable through intentionality, as I mentioned, but also requires agility. A hybrid identity requires skilled nimbleness in identifying and addressing that mission-market alignment. I have always had a fondness for our core institutional value of Adaptability, which speaks directly to this nimbleness and agility. While each of our four values supports and integrates with the others, the selection of Adaptability four years ago was a shrewd choice.

The concept of change sometimes plays out dialectically in our human experience, both exciting and exhausting us. We can both desire it and seek to avoid it. What is clear is that change will happen, regardless of our stance, and that we have navigated it at MGA with extraordinary skill in the past five years. Just as human development from birth through age five sees inestimable change, so our first five years have witnessed an amazing rate and scope of transformation. So we have a great track record on this!

Now we need to systematize how to organize that agility to leverage maximum efficiency and effectiveness in academic enterprise and outcomes. There is no question about our work effort these past five years. Our faculty and staff have stepped up robustly to the many tasks of educating and graduating thousands of students through the stressful change-processes of consolidation and university transition. Each of us has worn many hats on most days! Now we should apply our fourth value, Learning, to the tasks of administrative efficiency and effectiveness.

This past year demonstrated that principle in the work of the Enrollment Action Team, which worked across department and office lines and has learned to build collaborative processes. We have seen the effect of its work in this spring's positive enrollment story. That principle now needs applying more broadly across the University to ensure an agile and effective working culture, uniting our campuses and uniting our working responsibilities.

Beyond Doing More With Less

The primary reason why we must and can be agile is the double-edged economic sword that hangs over us. Our return on investment is indisputable, but our ROI is borne at the price of extraordinary frugality and efficiency. It is fitting that the USG is currently examining efficiency and effectiveness across all its colleges and universities. I am truly convinced that we provide an exemplary model of an institution that has been ahead of the curve, living through some of the tough challenges and economic conditions now facing higher education at large.

We will, I believe, be a living example of what others will need to emulate, especially in terms of keeping down costs and avoiding tuition dollars as the answer to financial resource needs. The reality is that tuition rates are going to stay near flat for years to come, and that as of FY19 the elevated price of online tuition—one of our strongest yields—is facing rapid elimination. In short, student tuition payments are not the answer to new dollar needs, and that is the right approach for the financial health of our students and our society.

This reality then requires us to rethink our economic model and to adjust accordingly, as we have been doing recently. Enrollment volume growth must be a core solution to economic strain. In the same way that enrollment decline over five years followed a trend line without the same rate of decline in faculty and staff employment, let us be candid in recognizing that enrollment growth must now outpace new levels of staffing in both administrative and faculty positions.

While we will of course find the need for new positions that clearly demonstrate a positive ROI, our first instinct must be to attract and retain greater numbers of students largely within our current levels of staffing and budgets, and using efficiency and effectiveness to resource those students. In short, we must increase our enrollment, and then use a nuanced balance of continued “austerity” and specific new investments to support those students and ensure continued institutional sustainability in finances.

Enrollment growth alone, though vital, will not be solely responsible for ensuring our economic resurgence. Increased philanthropy has begun with our Campaign and it must now gain pace quickly. Many of our academic aspirations—new leadership programs, study abroad opportunities, national accreditation goals, among others—will need private support and investment funding from donors. To that end, we have authorized a grant writing staff position, precisely to offset the increased cost of that position with a clear ROI edge in its outcomes of increased external funds for the University. Similarly, we have restructured Auxiliary Services to provide a stronger mindset of entrepreneurship to drive revenues. New business contracts with partners within our regional communities offer another method of enlarging our thinking and practice regarding non-E&G revenues.

Universities must do this, and in so doing grow to be places of plurality, diversity and augmentation in their thinking and organizational practices. That principle of plurality must govern our economic model in the next few years. While enrollment will be the primary driver for our human and economic model, it alone will not complete the task. A broader base of

revenue generation must be fostered and engaged across our campuses, with our donor base, with partners and with our alumni. To do that will require a powerful presence, voice and partnership with agencies in our communities.

We have recently done this very well with the creation of Advisory Boards at the College/School level, and the new University Advisory Council. We have established grant-based partnerships with the Department of Justice in the new School of Education & Behavioral Science. We have built pipelines of employment in Aviation for our graduates to move directly into the aviation business base. These are the ways to foster resource-rich partnerships that will bring new students and new funds to MGA. Our next plan must look at building this culture of engagement with the public sphere that is the hallmark of a public university.

Data-Informed & Technologically Competent

None of this will be achievable if we do not know and do not rely at all levels on the metrics by which we can measure how we are doing. This issue has concerned me for a while. We have some powerful tools for data collection and for providing a technological infrastructure to support our unity, but are not yet using them broadly or intrusively to assist sufficiently in critical decision-making.

In the past year we have made great strides in the professional leadership, regular reporting and data infrastructure at MGA, but much more needs to be undertaken quickly. In short, a complex university needs a robust set of data “dashboards” to chart progress and assist governance across its organization. A data-rich culture is a friend to us all, and not a threat. Exposure to performance allows for improvement, as well as accountability.

The weekly reports that have been shared this past year with large groups and departments concerning enrollment trends have been a clear step in the right direction. But many of these are still manually produced and not available or used informatively across offices and campuses. Whatever platforms, warehouses or reporting systems we use, a culture of analysis and sharing of data through enhanced technology usage must be driven by our next plan. We need to know how we are performing, and we need to be able to tell the story that the data is showing us.

The primary purpose of a technologically-contemporary, data-rich environment is to help us know best how to serve our students and to manage the conditions and choices that will optimize the chances of their success. Chancellor Wrigley's re-affirmation of Complete College Georgia's primacy requires us to show to how we will “move the needle” on retention, progression and graduation. We cannot make the right decisions to foster and support that commitment without a data-rich environment and the stakes for our students are too high for us not to redress this data-gap promptly.

I have through my career found that when universities tell it for what it is, and let all stakeholders know what it is, then there is the growth of consensus, agreement and

collaboration, rather than the opposite. We and our students will win when we know where we stand. Data will be a friend to MGA and to us each, and now is the time for us to find more confident application of that principle in our daily work.

Clear-Sighted

Going to school for five-year olds is exciting, daunting and transformational. We each remember our early experiences of starting Kindergarten, and for those of us who are parents, we each remember that special day when we took our sons and daughters to their first school. It is a rite of passage that builds identity and purpose in our children, and shapes them lifelong. We at MGA stand at a similar point of passage organizationally. We must now take the brave and daunting step of moving our young and promising University to a new level of identity, being and doing.

The term 20/20 Vision refers to clear-sightedness and the capacity to perceive reality both close up and far off with accuracy. The principle applies aptly now to MGA, as we approach the year 2020. We need a strategy for the next several years that will give us the agility to lead change and make effective decisions that will enable that change, while never losing sight of our direction and trajectory toward a new horizon.

To be clear-sighted is to be discerning. Our call to action when we recruit prospective students, when we encourage current students, and when we invite the public onto our campuses is clear: "Find your greatness" at Middle Georgia State. We help them discern where that greatness lies, and in so doing find our own greatness.

As we reach our fifth birthday and we reflect on our four-year old vision statement, it is clear that our horizon view is full of promise and envisions a University that has a better sense of self and a clear-sighted understanding of its service to higher education in the public square. We must now chart a new course—a new plan—that will indeed take us to that next level.

Comments on this white paper are invited at: comments@mga.edu.