Middle Georgia State University

Academic Affairs Provost Fellow 2018 – 2019

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E Pluribus Unum: Establishing and Advancing Learning Communities
at a Multi-Campus University

I.   Introduction

How can one successful university emerge from five amalgamated colleges?

As the University System of Georgia's (USG) most recently constituted university, the institutional identity of Middle Georgia State University (MGA) is still being constructed. As that emerging university ….

> we are *both* carrying five distinct campus legacies *and* leaning into new cultural and community realities;
> we *both* strive to be a standard bearer of the USG mission *and* serve as the purveyor of the greatest opportunity for our student-client's personal progress and growth;
> we are *both* malleable *and* susceptible.

Amidst a query of questions regarding our institutions formation and future, let us focus on one significant facet of our trajectory: learning communities. For the purposes of this white paper, learning communities shall be defined as collaborative partnerships across the institution centered around student success. Learning communities can provide a flexible structure through which institutional goals can be realized. If institutions in a growth phase such as ours can 'approach learning communities' with intentionality, vision, and resourcing, the opportunity to 'do it well' is exponentially increased.

When considering the soul of our institutional identity, sequence matters. We are well-served to address the "who" before the "what". Before we figure out *what* type of learning communities our new university needs, we need a firmer – fuller -clarified assessment of *who* our evolving student-clients are. In addition to a measure of clarity regarding *who* our student-clients are, this brief white paper offers a few preliminary observations regarding the latest effective modelling for learning communities embedded within an emerging university setting.

As a 2019 Provost Fellow, my applied insights and findings are significantly informed by an AY 2018-2019 series of conversational focus groups with our university community including students, professional advisors, and administrators on our five constituent campuses.

II.   Data Gathering

Focus Group Format:

(a) Beginning in late-February and through late-early May, 2019, small groups of students were convened on all five campuses using a focus group format. Each focus group consisted of four to six students. Participation in the focus groups was voluntary. The five following core categories of questions, presented in Table 1, were used in formal focus group settings with students on all five campuses.

Table 1. Focus Group Questions

Category	Core Questions
Category1: Decision to Attend MGA	• What was the most attractive factor in your decision to attend MGA? • What was the least attractive factor regarding MGA, that you had to overcome to attend MGA?
Category 2: Community Perception of MGA	• How does your broader community perceive MGA? • Where does our [MGA's] greatest potential lie?
Category 3: Course Delivery Format	• What type of class instruction do you prefer, i.e. face-to-face, hybrid, or online? Please explain your preference.
Category 4: Describe Our Brand	• What do you tell others (non-MGA peers and community) about our university?
Category 5: Sustaining Learning Communities	• What are your post-graduate plans? How can MGA help you in realizing these goals? • How can MGA add value to your post-graduate plans, both professionally and personally?

(b) Professional advisors and administrators were forthcoming as I engaged these individuals across three campuses. As one might expect, conversations with my peers delivered a level of candor and collegiality which serve emergent themes as confirming, and in others as countering points to the findings from student conversations.

Findings:

(a) Student Focus Groups:
Several overlapping themes emerged from student conversations across all five campuses. Table 2, on the following page, highlights the common themes that emerged from reviewing student focus group responses (n = 67).

Table 2. Analysis of Student Focus Group Conversations: Emerging Themes

Campus	# of Focus Groups	Emerging Themes: Strengths	Emerging Themes: Opportunities
Cochran	5 (n = 24)	Affordability Campus size and location Supportive faculty and staff	• Housing – living spaces • Cafeteria hours • Inter-campus transportation to Macon and Warner Robins • Technology (especially for video conferencing and bandwidth) • Student Activities -lack of visibility for inter-campus activities
Dublin	2 (n = 8)	Affordability Campus size Supportive faculty and staff	• Cafeteria – need to consider including one • Inter-campus transportation to Macon and Warner Robins • Technology (especially for video conferencing and bandwidth) • Class format – increase face-to-face instruction • Student Activities – lack of visibility for inter-campus activities
Eastman	2 (n = 12)	Affordability Campus size Supportive faculty and staff	• Housing – living spaces • Cafeteria hours • Inter-campus transportation to Macon and Warner Robins • Technology (especially for video conferencing) • Student Activities – lack of visibility for inter-campus activities
Macon	3 (n = 15)	Affordability Campus size and location Supportive faculty and staff	• Housing - availability • Cafeteria hours • Technology (especially for video conferencing)
Warner Robins	2 (n = 8)	Affordability Campus size Supportive faculty and staff	• Cafeteria – need to consider including one • Library – study rooms • Technology (especially for video conferencing) • Student Activities – lack of visibility.

Across all five campuses, students noted that faculty and staff were helpful and caring thereby enhancing that feeling of "a home away from home." While students are appreciative of improvements being made to campus life, they wanted to draw attention to certain challenges they face with technology, transportation, and the on-campus physical environment in which they function as students.

The themes noted in Table 2, both *the strengths* and *the opportunities* are not unique to our institutional community. Furthermore, a branding study previously conducted by the Center for Applied Research and Education (CARE) reported that in comparison to institutions of higher education in our local region, MGA lies in the middle-of-the-pack on academic quality values but scores high on affordability (CARE, 2017). Additionally, the FY19 MGA Student Affairs Annual Strategic Plan incorporates a focus on learning communities through expanding student engagement, expanding experiential opportunities, and cultivating engagement with local communities.

(b) Conversation with Professional Advisors and Administrators:
   Additional conversations with professional advisors augmented our student focus group. In this way, we are able to triangulate emergent themes and layer additional professional insights. The cross-contextualization between student voices and staff/administrative voices provides a helpful tool as we assess our community's current condition and consider best practices going forward.

These conversations with professional advisors suggest that beyond meeting fiscal challenges and academic preparation, our student-clients need scaffolding in learning how to navigate the higher education environment. Skills that are fundamental to academic success such as time management, note-taking, organizing content, and how to balance life and coursework (especially with online classes/ environments) are critical elements that impact the continuing capacity of our student-clients.

III.	Applied Insights and Recommendations

Insights:

As our university community moves forward embracing the restructured framework of professional schools, it becomes an institutional imperative to build capacity for our restructured learning communities. This white paper suggests a starting point in providing a common vision for promoting transformational change.

Julie Wollman's article (2019), A Burst Pipe Brings a Flood of Insights for a University President enhances the student experience. Three of these aspects are also echoed in the common themes that emerged from student focus group conversations across our five campuses. First, the importance of *the student perspective* in balancing work life and academic rigor. Second, *the maintenance of the physical environment*, attention to establishing a physical infrastructure conducive to learning. Third, *the buzz of the campus*, including visibility and access to student activities on all campuses.

Emerging institutions often struggle to turn down 'acceptable pursuits' for that which offers the highest 'return on investment'. Strong leadership requires a discipline and focus which says 'no' more often than it says 'yes' - a lesson well-learned from Geoffrey Canada's work with the Harlem Children's Zone (Tough, P., 2009).

Recommendations:

DEVELOPING GRIT.   Our institutional priority regarding retention has everything to do with the construct of **grit**. We need to consider developing not merely academic acuity, but **grit – that quality of resilience and perseverance** (Duckworth A., 2016). How can our campus settings be structured and prioritized to create *grit* within our student-clients as well as the rest of our campus community? How can our student-clients more fully own their responsibility for learning – the acquisition of knowledge and the professional disposition that will be required in the workplace? Developing the growth mindset, according to Duckworth, is a necessary component in keeping learners motivated about their own learning (2016). In order to enhance *grit* we must create intentional space designed to empower learners.

CONTINUOUS INDUCTION.   In keeping with our institutional mission to sustain a community of learners in the middle Georgia region, it would be worth our while to adopt a student induction process that continually contributes to the arc of the student-client' matriculation. Furthermore, what would it mean for our institution via alumni relations to continue that induction past graduation as our student-clients become community members/alums? Intra-campus Pilot Grant(s) could provide a pathway to explore such initiatives and build capacity for attracting external funding through community / business partnerships.

BUILDING LEADERSHIP BRIDGE(S).   Should/could our institution take an active role in not only (a) the maturation of our students while enrolled, but also (b) the application of their accrued leadership into their early career?   The likelihood of this accrued undergraduate / graduate knowledge being transferred into a professional setting is greatly enhanced when knowledge is acquired in a

constructive community environment. In the educational context, Parker Palmer (2013), aptly notes the "power of conversations to help change challenging realities into promising possibilities."

IV.   Conclusion

Finally, learning communities cannot be established using merely a curricular context. In conceiving a transformational difference in our student-clients' lives, we need to establish learning communities that integrate academic structures within our unique campus climate – by supporting student-clients in building academic capacity while balancing their work-life equation. Integration across campus entities is generally more challenging than segregation of services. Given our recent upward trend in enrollment (15.67% increase in new applicants), and a student body that is largely part-time (on average 38% full time versus 62% part-time), maintaining systemic integration of internal benchmarks between academic affairs, student affairs, and campus services becomes critical (MAG Data Dashboard, 2019). The plasticity needed to respond to our student-clients' needs might be achievable by ***lean[ing] in to conversations*** that leverage learning communities (Sandberg, 2013). So very often, institutions that outperform internal benchmarks and external peers produce more salient questions than easy answers. I look forward to further responding to these raised questions with a deeper sweep of actionable items as the opportunity is afforded.

References

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