Report of the University Academic Initiatives Committee
Spring 2019

Membership: Peggy Brouse, Molly Davis, Timothy Leslie (chair), Nirup Menon, Danielle Rudes, David Straus

The committee met in sub-groups and online this year focusing on several initiatives across the institution: Mason Impact, Academic Theming, Academic Advising, and Community Partnerships. As a committee, our administrative support came from Associate Provost Muir, with other engagements with Provost Wu, Associate Provost Eby, Associate Provost Usher, and Dean Brown Leonard.

**Mason Impact**
The Undergraduate Education Advisory (UEA) Committee began as the Leadership Council in 2011 with a charge to advise staff of the Undergraduate Education Office at GMU on implementing and assessing several activities and initiatives including Mason Impact, OSCAR, and the Office of Community Engagement and Civic Learning. Key topics completed by the group this AY include the Mason Impact Learning Outcomes and program Mission Statement. This included an intensive discussion around the Mason Impact Timeline, the Mason Impact Logo Contest, and several initiatives sponsored by Mason Impact including the piloting of courses, small grant program, and team projects for summer and possibly semester terms. The UEA group provided input regarding all of these and also discussed URSPs, the National Council for Undergraduate Research conference and the Celebration of Student Scholarship events at GMU.

One item that included a large and prolonged, deep discussion is the definition of the Mason Impact Experience. This experience prepared students “to pose a meaningful question, solve a problem, create new knowledge, and have a positive impact on the world. The Mason Impact transforms the Mason Student into the Mason Graduate—an engaged citizen and well-rounded scholar who is prepared to act.” The UEA group considered two existing Mason experiences: the Entrepreneurship Experience and the Community Engagement and Civic Learning Experience as part of this discussion. They also thoroughly discussed the Mason Summer Impact Team grant structure and considered ways to possibly add this experience to the fall and spring semesters. We support Mason Impact as cornerstone to our commitment to creating transformative learning experience for our undergraduate students.
Academic Community Partnerships
Academic community partnerships are an important element of the life blood of a university. These relationships provide opportunities for the university community, students, faculty/staff and other stakeholders. They can be a vital component of employment and workforce initiatives, and enhance the classroom experience, providing enriching learning laboratories for students and vital research collaborations. There is evidence across the university that these academic community partnerships exist, however, they are not generally known. We sought to explore these partnerships and understand their activity and rationale for such partnerships. Community partnerships at Mason focused mostly on ways to benefit students (and within that, particularly on undergraduates). While there are a number of initiatives taking place across the University, we have found a limited self-awareness across the institution with regard to what partnerships exists, the contributions to the university of those partnerships and whether other entities within the university might benefit. existing partnerships and with whom.

We believe that community partnerships are important for the development, growth, and success of our faculty. These engagements can keep us connected to our local community, aid in our research, and enhance our teaching. In an institution interested in keeping its Research I status and with limited resources, leveraging energy of the surrounding community is an important element of our continued success.

As the University centralizes faculty activity reporting, we believe that such a system should capture engagements and relationships that have been developed through community partnerships outside the University. This cataloging should recognize community engagement and allow for networking and institutional flexibility by sharing information on existing partnerships and strategic development of new academic and community partnerships. There are several exemplars of how these partnerships might benefit both the university community and the community at large. Academic programs that require extensive internships/clinicals/practicum experiences often maintain a substantial database of training sites within the institution.

These ongoing relationships are a foundation for building upon expanded partnerships. The Research Partnerships and Grants Initiative launched in 2015 through the Business school is designed to promote partnerships to support research, cross disciplinary collaborations and industrial partnerships. The SAIL program through the School of Integrative Studies uses academic and community partnerships locally and globally to achieve goals of positive social change. These are just a sample of clearly identified academic community partnerships, but they simply represent a few of many that could provide new resources and opportunities that would have mutual benefits to the
Developing strategic ways to create and catalogue these partnerships should be a goal of the Mason University.

**Future Directions**
Several years ago, George Mason sought to receive the Carnegie Community Engagement designation. Although the university was not granted the designation for a number of reasons, it seems that strengthening academic–community partnerships has the potential to move the university closer to being able to achieve this designation. There is currently a search for the Director of Community Engagement. It is hoped that this position might move George Mason toward solidifying community engagements efforts university wide, to build expanded academic–community partnerships and produce an infrastructure and meet additional standards which will be necessary to apply in the future for designation as a Community Engagement institution. Using the standards that Carnegie has identified as criteria for achieving community engagement designation, might provide the guidance and direction necessary to strategically move forward academic community partnerships.

**Carnegie Definition of Community Engagement**
Community engagement describes the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial creation and exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.

The purpose of community engagement is the partnership (of knowledge and resources) between colleges and universities and the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching, and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good.

**Interfolio Data System (Faculty Information System)**
There is currently an effort to develop and utilize this system to create a single source faculty verified, searchable faculty database. This system will have many strengths and benefits but most notably, it may provide a means of sharing information about academic community relationships and partnerships that exists university wide. It could provide a means of sharing information that might stimulate greater collaboration and expansion of community resources that might support research, student learning experiences, collaborative grant writing, etc. As this platform is being developed, there should be consideration and capturing of community engagement activity data and outcomes, as a valued activity that is reflected in the faculty evaluation criteria. In addition, there would need to be an infrastructure developed that facilitates ongoing
communication and relationships across the boundaries of academic community partnerships. This is a positive sign of potential future developments of community engagement. A newly created faculty learning community has the potential as well in promoting greater collaboration and problem exploration as we move toward greater community engagement.

In conclusion, there is positive movement toward greater awareness and disclosure about academic community partnerships at George Mason. The efforts to develop community engagement strategies that promote academic-community partnerships at George Mason and the surrounding community is still needing attention to move forward with the goal of perhaps achieving Carnegie designation. If this data system is something that is valued by the university, faculty, students and stakeholders, it must be reflected throughout the University.

**Academic Advising**

Mason, as an institution, focused more intently over the past year on the quality of academic advising within units, partially because of the emphasis on retention and four-year graduation rates. This is especially important in the context of students with a wide variety of academic needs (e.g., first generation college students may not be aware of the need to declare a major, what it really means; many students need help and guidance with financial aid, and help to recover from traumatic situations). This year, the Provost’s office made some large decisions to redefine the central role advising plays in this process as part of the “Student Experience Redesign” initiative.

In the new scheme being planned, *Thematic Coaches* serving in a crossover role between Undergraduate Education and University Life will be responsible for broad academic planning in the early years of undergraduates at Mason. As the student progresses and has picked a major, the advising is done by the Major advisor. However, students will likely still use the Thematic Coach for some needs. There remains a number of details on the reorganization and case load still to be determined. No communication plan or firm timeline appears to be in place. A rough diagram of the proposed advising structure is provided below, with higher levels of the pyramid being more discipline-specific.
The new advising system will also leverage the Salesforce software. It appears that the 2019-20 academic year will include developing and adjusting the technology elements needed for advisors. It is unclear what training or knowledge base the centralized thematic coaches will have. We remain concerned with the level of discipline knowledge of the coaches – do they really know the difference between geology and geography (which are in different departments), between applied math and engineering, etc. We are also concerned that much of the holistic development in advising skills will be lost in the transition to this new system. In addition, we see overlap with successful major advising taking place in some units (such as CHSS) and are concerned that the boundaries will not be clear to faculty or major advisors.

**Academic Themes**
Mason offers a large variety of degree programs and also changes course offerings in these programs frequently. Prospective students generally have heard of some of these programs before joining Mason but can have difficulty in differentiating among programs and deciding which program is best suited for their educational needs. Current majors have been mapped to themes. Students will either choose a major and then be associated with the related theme or choose to be exploratory (formerly undeclared) within a theme. These themes will also feed the academic advising plan underway noted above.

Beginning in the fall, students in majors will be assigned to themes behind the scenes. This assignment is intended to make it easier for students to explore majors and make more informed decisions about which major(s) and complementary minors match their skill, interests, and strengths. We anticipate centralized development of first-year
curricula and processes to facilitate the process by which students pivot to a good-fit major.

**Online Education**
The shift of the discussion of online education into broad public forums with Provost Wu, along with Vice President Marks, pushed this topic to a lower priority for the committee during this academic year.

**INTO Mason**
INTO Mason is the ongoing collaboration of GMU with INTO now finishing up its 5th year. INTO Mason is now responsible for all developmental English language instruction and is responsible for a number of curricular-specific admissions pathways into the institution. Over the past year they have been piloting efforts in combination with the Volgenau School of Engineering with waived GRE scores and lower GPAs for initial recruitment into the graduate pathways, to apparent success.

At our request, they have assembled a set of metrics documenting their growth and success to date. Their report is submitted in tandem with ours.

**Mason Korea**
Mason Korea is a continual source of news and change. As of Spring 2019, Robert Matz, previously the Senior Associate Dean and Acting Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, was appointed as Campus Dean for Mason Korea. Because of these changes, the Mason Korea endeavor was of low interest to the committee, and this year we provide new student entry data by major, by semester. The Global Affairs and Management majors continue to be the most popular, although the Conflict Analysis major had a notable surge in students entering in Spring 2019.

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