

An aerial photograph of a dense, green forest. A light-colored, unpaved path winds through the trees, starting from the top left, curving to the right, then back to the left, and finally curving to the right again towards the bottom. The path is well-defined against the dark green foliage. The overall tone of the image is serene and natural.

# A Second Decade on the Path to Excellence

PRESIDENT'S WHITE PAPER | CONVOCATION 2025

An aerial photograph of a dense green forest. A narrow, light-colored path or road winds through the trees, starting from the top right and curving towards the bottom center. The trees are lush and green, with varying shades of green and some darker patches of shadow.

## Dear Faculty and Staff,

Welcome back to AY25-26! I hope you enjoyed a wonderful summer of rest and renewal with friends and family.

Today Middle Georgia State University (MGA) celebrates a major milestone in beginning our second decade as a state university of the University System of Georgia (USG). It is right today to look back over the years, noting our many accomplishments and owning shared pride in this collective journey of success. Let me start by honoring and thanking each of our faculty and staff. Your work has shaped that journey in inestimable ways, and your professionalism and commitment to students have built the foundation upon which we now stand ready to reach even greater heights.

I have, at earlier Convocations, said that a university is a “community of scholars.” That concept has underpinned universities in the western world for one thousand years, and we are a community that is committed to the discipline of Learning, as esteemed in our fourth institutional Core Value. Last year I stated that MGA has never been so strong and exciting. Today, I am confident that we are stronger not only than last year, but stronger than at any point in the past decade. Today we are serving more students with wider numbers and levels of degrees, articulating our mission and vision at higher levels, and delivering more positive impact on Georgia’s economy and communities than before.

A decade is also a fitting time to consider the future. That is the purpose of this reflection paper and its accompanying appendix. Our best strategy for understanding and planning our future is mapped in our Middle Georgia’s Path to Excellence strategic plan, which clearly expressed our priorities for the period of 2023-28. We are at the midpoint of that plan, and our Convocation will address elements of progress to date.

Yet it is important, especially when considering the next ten years, to consider the wider national and global context that is shaping higher education. Ten years ago, we had no idea how rapidly our lives would change with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic or artificial intelligence. These examples illustrate how “best laid plans” are best laid if they predict the unexpected as well as the expected. What we can do today is describe the current condition of MGA within the broader context of higher education trends and judge the future challenges and opportunities.

In this reflection, I will focus on four critical areas that will define our success in the decade ahead: strengthening our academic reputation and external recognition; enhancing student experience and success outcomes; using data and courageous leadership to fulfill our mission; and deepening engagement with our external stakeholders.

## Academic Reputation

In 2018, I wrote a reflection paper titled *2020 Vision: Toward a clear-sighted view of greatness*, and in this publication charged the campus community to identify which strengths will drive our priorities and to build momentum with “intentionality, identity, and relentless focus on serving our students well.” In the years since, we’ve steadily worked to establish confidence in who we are as a university.

In terms of academic quality and aligning our degrees with market needs, we have made great strides, evolving from a curriculum of a state college to that of a SACSCOC Level 5 university with a Carnegie classification of “Professions-focused Baccalaureate Medium.” This designation recognizes that we have a primary academic role in providing relevant, career-focused baccalaureate degrees and graduate programs. Our graduate programs have also grown impressively these past eight years.

Our large total number of students (8,400 last fall) today have many opportunities for learning across the spectrum that tangibly support their lives and livelihoods in Georgia, with distinctive and large programs of direct value to the economy. We have raised the bar academically, supported stronger faculty outcomes in teaching and scholarship, and provided programs of career-relevance and necessary knowledge in the national economy.

However, we must acknowledge that this internal progress has not yet translated into the external recognition our quality deserves. In 2025 we ranked 115th in the “Regional Universities South” category by *U.S. News & World Report*. While our work should not be judged by one publication, this ranking shows a broader challenge of external uncertainty about our strengths — understandable for a young institution, but something we must address more strategically in our second decade.

This presents an opportunity rather than a limitation. Given that we have six academic schools that directly feed the economic needs of the state, each school with well over 1,000 enrolled students, and collectively graduating about 1,500 students annually, it is imperative that we display our impact more effectively to external evaluators and stakeholders.

We have a significant advantage in this effort: 81% of our faculty work full-time at MGA, a number much higher than the national average of 47%. This gives us the ability to plan for faculty stability and strength, which are essential to our academic success and reputation. It also requires that some of our faculty become nationally recognized individuals, whose scholarship and work are shaping public knowledge of emerging fields and practices. In an age of disinformation, I challenge our faculty to be scholars in the public domain through serving on national boards, being available for media engagements, and obtaining grants for nationally significant work.

## Prioritizing Student Experience and Success

In *2020 Vision*, I stated that student success is fundamental to our institutional success. I stressed the need to create robust systems supporting student progression and graduation as we grew as a university. The measures implemented since then have established the foundation for priorities we must address today and in the years ahead, as external expectations for student outcomes have intensified.



Our faculty and staff performance will increasingly come under scrutiny and be judged by the success of our students and the employment of our graduates. That is the message from the USG and from the public at large, and for which we are accountable. The value and worth of our brand of higher education lie in our student outcomes and the success of their careers as a direct result of what they learn and gain from an MGA education.

Here we face our greatest challenge and our most significant opportunity. Currently, only 23% of our students fall within a six-year graduation window, the classic national comparison factor, while our State University sector peers average 42%. Our first-year retention is just over 65%, while our peers outperform us with an average of 73%.



However, these figures should be viewed within the context of our mission as an access university. We serve students who might not otherwise have the opportunity for higher education, and that service is both a responsibility and a source of pride. The challenge is ensuring that access leads to success, not just opportunity, and then to graduation and careers.

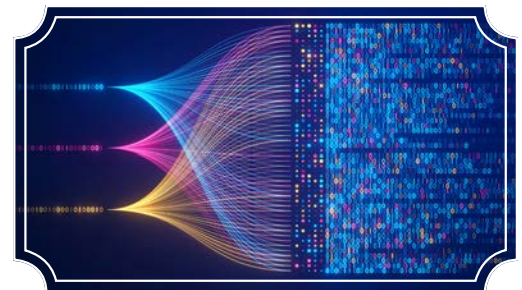
Encouragingly, we are seeing promising signs of improvement. As the university invested in stronger advising and student support programming, especially for learning support, we saw a marked increase in retention in the Baccalaureate programs for first-time, full-time students. From Fall 2022 to 2023, retention rates for that group rose by nearly 5%. This shows that targeted interventions work, and we must now scale these approaches across our broader student population.

Our tuition level now matches the sector's norm, so we finally have the resources to perform more equitably with our USG peers. As our academic programs have evolved, so have our student experiences. Our athletic programming is moving to NCAA D2 status, an exciting development that will enhance our regional and national identity. After the major negative impact of the pandemic on our housing numbers, we have seen a remarkable resurgence in residential life with a 17% increase over last year.

The variety, complexity, and diversity of MGA give us strength, but they also complicate our task. It is a major challenge of the decade ahead to raise this to the next level, ensuring that each graduating student knows they gained a stellar learning experience that rewarded them with a credential promising lifelong opportunity to succeed in their life and work choices.

## Strengthening Mission & Values – Data and Leadership

The data-driven culture that the USG has promoted and which holds us accountable can directly enable us to achieve our graduation outcomes and institutional purpose. The development of a Data Strategy has been a hallmark of heightened thinking in recent years, illustrated by our excellent outward and inward facing online dashboards. These dashboards have already improved our decision-making processes, enabling more responsive recruitment strategies and targeted interventions for at-risk students.



What we now need to do is use data more fully for planning purposes and decisions about how to use our resources most effectively. One clear way our second decade requires that heightened level of data usage is through predictive analytics. We have charted a path forward in using historic data and live data to date. Now the task facing us is developing stronger predictive tools that will help inform decision-making regarding future performance needs. This is what our core value of Stewardship requires.

Our recent investment in Salesforce as a CRM platform highlights the transformative potential of data analytics, but it relies on both the technological and human elements to work together. To fully realize the return on this investment, we must

continue to cultivate strong cross-departmental collaboration.

To do so effectively requires courageous leadership more than state-of-the-art products. We often talk about “trial and error.” That truism means we must be honest and comfortable with learning from our mistakes and taking the risk to improve ourselves and our working relationships. The integrity of numerical outcomes and professional relationships should drive us to courageous change and a willingness to adapt when evidence and systems indicate we are under-performing.

This is why our core value of Adaptability is both the most necessary and the hardest to undertake. We need data not only to guide us but to empower us to make complex decisions. Equally important, we must help our students understand that their lives and learning involve trial and error. We might do them the greatest service by helping them cope with falling short as well as aiming high. That is our mission: to educate lifelong learners.

## Engaging our External Stakeholders

Being a public institution means we serve not just our enrolled students, but the broader communities and the state that invest in our success. We are accountable to taxpayers, responsive to regional economic needs, and committed to advancing the public good through education, research, and service.

In *2020 Vision I* stated we had to “do more with less” – and, as a campus community, you rose to that challenge. This spirit of Stewardship has not only strengthened our financial position but has also deepened our commitment to building meaningful partnerships with external stakeholders. Our dedication to responsible resource management and collaborative engagement has positioned MGA as a trusted partner worthy of significant investment.



We need a sophisticated understanding of what it means to serve as a public university. The foundation for doing this well lies in the relationships we have in the communities where our campuses work and thrive. It is imperative that we continue to listen to those communities and provide pathways that our students and local employers can walk together.

Most notable in the past ten years have been the many ways we work with local communities and the investment made by public entities in supporting our work. Over \$70 million in public government funds, much of which are for aviation programs, testifies to the confidence that our external stakeholders have in MGA. We completed our largest private philanthropy campaign at nearly \$12 million in 2021, and we are now planning a new campaign that will significantly exceed that total.

These investments reflect trust in our mission and belief in our worth. A constituency we need to engage much more powerfully in the coming decade is our Alumni. We have graduated over 11,000 students from MGA since we became a public university. They join a family of more than 47,000 alumni across the nation. The future notoriety and respectability of the university hinge on how primarily engaged our Alumni are with their alma mater, not just in financial terms, but in being ambassadors for MGA.

The Center for Middle Georgia Studies and the new unit of Educational Outreach will be key players in our second decade, helping the public engage with MGA through degree learning, continuing education, and partnerships for training and scholarship. Equally important, the recent launch of our Office of Research and Sponsored Projects will enable us to secure resources that allow us to give back to the public with new forms of knowledge supporting business, industry, technology, and science.

Our primary way of fulfilling this mission will be in graduating students who work and live in public agencies and communities, and then partnering with those agencies to advance public knowledge and serve the common good.

## Conclusion: A Second Decade on the Path to Excellence

I have shared publicly on occasions that very few of us are given the thrilling and daunting task of building something completely new in our careers. To us at MGA, that honor has been given over the past ten years. We have been tasked with building this unified institution of higher learning from the ground up, laying the foundation of what is already a wonderful university and will become, I believe, something truly stellar in the region.

Our second decade is upon us, and we must embrace that with energy and vision. When I look at our MGA family, I see the ability, dedication, and innovative spirit needed to elevate our mission and amplify our value for the people of Georgia. We have the foundation, we have the resources, and, most importantly, we have each other.

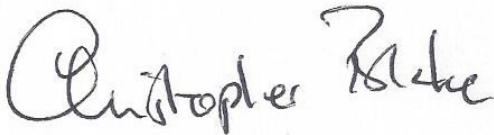
The challenges ahead are significant but not insurmountable. We must raise our external profile to match our internal excellence. We must ensure that our commitment to access translates into student success at levels that match our aspirations. We must use data courageously to make the tough decisions that will propel us forward. And we must deepen our engagement with the communities and stakeholders who have invested trust in us.

The appendix to this paper provides a detailed comparison of MGA to our peers in the State University sector, illustrating key data and indicators of performance against our sector. I encourage you to study this data and consider how your work contributes to our collective success.

Last year I shared at Convocation the vision of the knights of centuries ago, who sought to immerse themselves in a world of need and bring strength and health to the societies where they worked. A similar vision commands us now. Let us be ready to embrace this calling and do wonderful, noble work in the decade ahead. The future of MGA — and the students and communities we serve — depends on our courage to act on the opportunities before us. Together we can — and we will — write the next chapter of excellence for Middle Georgia State University.

Go Knights!

Chris



Christopher Blake, Ph.D.  
President, Middle Georgia State University, GA, USA  
August 2025



# Appendix

					Prioritizing Student Experience and Success			Academic Reputation		Engaging our External Stakeholders	
	Total Enrollment 1	Undergrad Enrollment 2	In-State Tuition & Fees 3	Out-of-State Tuition & Fees 4	1st Year Retention Rate 5	4-Year Graduation Rate 6	6-Year Graduation Rate 7	US News Ranking 8	Student-Faculty Ratio 9	Special Designation	Setting
Middle Georgia State University	8,409	7,633	\$6,082 (#1 Most Affordable)	\$21,232	65.3%	14.0%	23.8%	#115 (#55)	18	Multi-campus, NCAA transition	Multi-campus (5 locations)
Albany State University	6,809	6,129	\$6,710	\$21,290	78.6%	14.9%	33.1%	#97 (#49)	20	HBCU	Urban
Clayton State University	6,172	5,510	\$6,284	\$20,474	70.9%	11.2%	40.5%	#86 (#43)	17	Career-focused	Suburban
Columbus State University	7,937	5,986	\$7,020	\$22,080	69.7%	19.0%	43.0%	#65 (#32)	18	Regional health hub	Urban
Fort Valley State University	2,905	2,692	\$6,600	\$21,180	78.5%	16.0%	41.1%	#62 (#30)	18	HBCU, Land-Grant	Small city
Georgia College & State University	7,097	5,988	\$9,176	\$30,062	82.3%	50.1%	63.6%	#15 (#6)	16	"Public Liberal Arts"	Small city
Georgia Southwestern State University	3,704	2,839	\$7,144	\$22,204	57.6%	19.3%	40.6%	\$104 (#51)	18	Small institution focus	Small city
Savannah State University	3,208	2,935	\$6,794	\$20,984	74.6%	20.0%	27.8%	#112 (#54)	21	HBCU	Urban
University of North Georgia	19,298	18,030	\$6,910	\$22,330	73.4%	28.8%	50.1%	#47 (#20)	18	Senior Military College	Multi-campus

## Strengthening Mission & Values - Data and Leadership

1: Fall 2024, from USG | 2: Fall 2024, from USG | 3: USG AY2025-2026, 15 credit hours per semester | 4: USG AY2025-2026, 15 credit hours per semester

5: 2023 Cohort FTDS Bachelor's, from USG | 6: 2020 Cohort, FTDS Bachelor's, from USG | 7: 2018 Cohort, FTDS Bachelor's, from USG

8: USNWR Regional Universities South (& Top Public Schools) | 9: 2023 IPEDS



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### **MGA's Mission:**

Middle Georgia State University educates and graduates inspired, lifelong learners whose scholarship and careers enhance the region and the state.

### **MGA's Core Values:**

Stewardship • Engagement • Adaptability • Learning