

Middle Georgia State University
Office of the Provost
Academic Strategy and Structure (2/2019)

Introduction

Over the last year we have spent significant time together developing, refining, and shaping our academic identity and strategy. Our academic strategy is focused on accomplishing three objectives: enthroning teaching and learning, elevating program-completion thinking, and extending research, scholarship and creative activities. This effort has resulted in some efficiencies in scheduling and academic program delivery across our five physical campuses and online. It has also been one key element in our ability to increase enrollment and balance our budget. More importantly, it has helped more students build a program of study that will lead them toward graduation from Middle Georgia State University (MGA).

However, within the context of our institution, we have fundamental strategic issues that remain. In framing these issues, as an access institution with a blended function, we must keep student retention, progression, and graduation as top priority. We must also be intentional, clear-sighted, and willing to change and create structure that delivers increases in student success.

One fundamental challenge for MGA is student retention. In the Fall of 2014, we had a cohort of 479 freshman enter the institution. Through the summer of 2018, only 34.7% had either completed a degree or were still attending. This is compared to an average of 47.2% for our sector peers, among whom we finished second to last. Those retained in the USG system bring the number to 50.1%, still second to last in our sector. These retention challenges are found at all levels of our institution, except for graduate education. From the Fall of 2018 to the Spring of 2019 there were 1,381 students who did not graduate and did not return in the spring, while we only added 726 new students to the pipeline. Retention is clearly an issue for our institution and for our students.

Another fundamental challenge we must address is why students have so many credits at graduation? Reducing the number of credits at the time of graduation is also a key element of our Momentum Year work. A bachelor's degree should be able to be earned in 120 credit hours. At MGA, in the fall of 2018, graduates had on average 141 credit hours. This is 21 credit hours students paid that for they should not have needed if they began and stayed on track to graduation. That is roughly one additional year of school debt, housing expense, loss of income, etc... that students are experiencing in an effort to earn a 120 hour bachelor's degree. Certainly there are issues related to students changing majors, students transferring between institutions (we are a transfer positive institution at a rate of early 2 to 1), and clinical or career program requirements. But there are also structural problems within some of our bachelor's degree programs.

Many of our bachelor's programs require a restrictive set of 60 credit hours after a student has completed areas A-F. When a bachelor's degree program requires a specific 60 hours of upper

division credit, it does not allow much diversity in a student's learning experience and does not allow a student to have space for a minor or to study other areas of interest.

A restrictive set of 60 upper division hours within a bachelor's degree program also means if students change majors after their sophomore year, the credits earned outside the core do not count towards their degree. The Board of Regents Academic and Student Affairs Handbook¹ requires only a 21 hour major and 39 upper division credits. Creating flexibility within our majors (requiring closer to 21 hours in a major rather than 60) will drive down the average credits at graduation. It will also save students money and time as they work toward earning a bachelor's degree. While 21 hours may be too few for some programs, certainly having 18 hours of free electives seems a reasonable consideration. This freedom in baccalaureate programs returns us to our liberal arts heritage by building interdisciplinarity into the undergraduate experience at the junior/senior level.

A third fundamental challenge is our graduation rate of the freshman cohort mentioned earlier. Only 10.9% finished a bachelor's degree (all in the cohort were bachelor's degree seeking freshmen) within 4 years, compared to 23.8% in our sector. As our enrollment increases we must be mindful, intentional, and vigilant about guiding students through graduation. This is an institutional problem that needs to be supported by both strategy and structure.

The outcome of our strategy and our structure should be increased enrollment, retention and graduation rates.

As an update on the implementation of our academic identity and strategy, this paper addresses the structural changes needed to better accomplish our strategic academic objectives of: enthroning teaching and learning, elevating program-completion thinking, and extending research, scholarship and creative activities. This paper also identifies areas that need to be addressed in the near future. I begin with elevating program-completion thinking because it has become a pre-eminent need for our institution and our students.

Elevating Program-Completion Thinking

Over the last year I have met often with faculty, staff and administrators across the institution in an effort to identify ways we can help more students choose to study at MGA and choose to stay through graduation. We have made significant progress (as shown by our increases in enrollment). Our focus on student progress and retention must continue so more students complete their degrees with us and are prepared for employment and to contribute to the communities in which they live.

To enhance this work we have moved to a college or school-centered strategy in an attempt to connect students at the point of admissions to the college or school from which they will eventually graduate. To support this effort we have expanded data sharing with academic administrators and faculty (including data regarding new and current students). We have also

¹ https://www.usg.edu/academic_affairs_handbook/section2/C731/#p2.3.1_majors_and_minors

moved advisors to reside within academic units to facilitate social connections with faculty and students. This school-centered approach is an attempt to create small communities within each of our campuses that can welcome students and help them have "a home away from home" while they progress through their academic programs.

As noted in previous communications, we have two dean positions that are opening up as of June 30 (Business and Arts and Sciences). As such, now is an optimal time to revisit our academic organizational structure to see if we can find ways to build cohesive academic units that integrate similar areas of study and provide an organizational structure and space that will enhance this school-based strategy.

This school-based strategy also supports the Momentum Year efforts driven and supported by the University System. One element of the Momentum Year is to have students identify an "area of focus" when they begin. These areas of foci will easily align with a school-based structure that will support small communities of scholars, students, advisors, and mentors all working together in shared space within a building and an organizational chart.

In addition to having cohesive academic units in which similar disciplines reside, this structure allows each school to engage in retaining students at all levels. Each school will own part of the core curriculum as well as develop or enhance a professional focus within its baccalaureate degree programs. In an effort to support our access function, it is essential that everyone is involved in a student's success as they matriculate through a degree program. A school-based organizational structure creates an interdisciplinary approach to student success that integrates general education and professional curriculum.

Each school will offer courses in the core curriculum (not all areas, but in some area(s) of A-E), and every degree program will focus on professional preparation. Indeed, we should expect that a graduate in biology, history, mathematics, or music should be equally prepared to enter their chosen profession as will a graduate in education, information technology, or accounting (as well as any other discipline). Additionally, the faculty members that are housed in what have been referred to as "professional schools" should be as equally engaged in students' success as they progress through the core curriculum as a faculty member who teaches in English, Math or History would. With this new discipline-based professional school structure we will have schools that are heavily engaged in effectively delivering the core curriculum and focus on preparing students to be professionally prepared to enter their chosen field of study, regardless of major.

It is anticipated that the departments associated with each school will be identified in the coming weeks with all searches for leadership positions completed and the new structure implemented by July 1, 2019.

Enthroning Teaching and Learning

In the area of teaching and learning, we continue to review policies and practices that draw resources away from our primary mission of teaching. This year all academic administrators

(including me) are teaching in the classroom. We are also actively engaged in system-wide initiatives related to the Momentum Year (assuring students take 9 credit hours in a focused area during their first year, completing English and Math in their first year, planning a four year program of study, etc...) and Gateways to Completion (G2C, focused on redesigning gateway courses that the data suggest are hindering student progress). A number of faculty have been involved in these activities, and I am confident that these efforts have played a significant role in our increases in enrollment.

Additionally, during the fall semester I convened a group of faculty to review the role of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning and to consider how it could contribute to building a shared culture of academic engagement on our campuses. The report from that group is attached for your review. Based on that report and additional analysis, I am announcing several structural changes to the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning to better align the efforts of that area with our academic strategy.

One clear message from the report and from an analysis of current activities across campus is that we have a large opportunity to enhance our support for faculty development in the face-to-face classroom.

With this email I am opening a search for a Provost Fellow to focus specifically on methods and processes to enhance a culture of faculty engagement in improving face-to-face instruction in the classroom. This person will work with the Chancellor Scholars and coordinate other teaching-oriented development efforts across campus. The person filling this role must be credentialed to teach in the classroom, an avid student of faculty development practices, and an excellent communicator and community builder within Middle Georgia. The successful candidate should be recognized by his or her colleagues as a model teacher in the classroom and respected by and respectful of colleagues from all disciplines.

Those interested in filling this role should discuss the possibility with their department chair or dean. A formal call for nominations will be forthcoming with the anticipated start date being this summer. This Provost Fellow will be responsible for reviewing the white paper on the CETL and evaluating the feasibility of implementing the recommendations as noted here:

- Re-establish and strengthen the collaborative, leadership role of faculty in professional development programming and delivery.
- Create Faculty development programming that serves faculty across their professional lifespan and that covers the spectrum of faculty competencies with a focus on teaching and scholarship.
- Foster collegiate culture and build faculty engagement within the institution and across the wider community.
- Create a baseline of professional quality, while promoting and celebrating excellence.

Additionally, there has been exceptional work on online course-level development from the CETL. We are now expanding and redirecting that focus with a primary mission of supporting

online programs (also in line with elevating program-completion thinking). The staff and resources currently allocated to online delivery support and training will now shift to owning the primary mission of preparing a select set of programs to be delivered fully online (under a marketing slogan of MGA Direct). These staff positions will be reallocated to the schools who deliver online programs. These programs will be aimed at recruiting students from markets we don't adequately reach. This also supports our school-based strategy. These shifts will be finalized in the coming weeks and implemented as of July 1st.

Extending Research, Scholarship and Creative Activities

We have had a number of successes in extending research, scholarship, and creative activities outside the campus. These include the significant work of the QEP. They include a number of student groups who have won awards across the state including but not limited to our internal audit team and coding team who both recently won state-wide competitions. These efforts also include a number of our faculty who have published in a wide variety of journals, written books, presented at conferences, and presented creative works in our communities. I am confident the new school-based structure will continue to define and refine our efforts to extend the great work that is happening outside the physical boundaries of our campuses.

Unanswered Questions and Next Steps

Building discipline-centered professional schools at MGA will be a significant step forward in our efforts to increase student retention, progression, and graduation. These organizational changes will create the structure and space for faculty and students in similar disciplines to build a shared culture and create pockets of success across our campuses.

Assuring levels of institutional support across all of our campuses is a continual challenge we will face. Shortly upon my arrival last year, we were facing a \$1,000,000 reduction in the budget due to changes in the e-tuition rate charged to students. Much of this shortfall was filled by eliminating administrative positions. Two senior level positions in the Office of Provost were eliminated that covered about 25% of the shortfall. Also, in the last year the President's office has shifted responsibility of campus coordination to the Office of the Provost. These tasks have been assumed by the Associate Provosts, who already had full lists of responsibilities. We will continue to streamline upper administration in an effort to drive more resources to the classroom to support the retention, progression, and graduation of students. Consistent with these decisions, modifications to the school or department structure will be resource neutral. No new resources will be added to administration, but any changes will be reallocated internally, and if possible, will redirect more funding toward our core mission.

In our effort to create discipline-centered professional schools, there are a number of questions about the scope of responsibilities of the administrators in academic affairs. Currently we have some departments with as few as 3 faculty members. We have other departments with close to 40. Moving to a discipline-based school structure should also include a review of department size so that a department chair job description has some similarity in terms of scope and responsibility across schools and departments. In administrative support areas, we also need to

look at staffing levels across schools and departments. Much of this work will come from the Comprehensive Administrative Review (CAR) the institution is currently involved in with the recommendations forthcoming.

In summary, there is a lot of work that needs to be done to assure we have a structure that supports our strategic academic objectives of: enthroning teaching and learning, elevating program-completion thinking, and extending research, scholarship and creative activities. This paper outlines many (but not all) of the challenges we face and some steps we are taking to support more fully what happens in the classroom.

I very much appreciate the opportunity we have to work together as we elevate Middle Georgia State University and create processes, systems, and structures to support growth and student success.

To many good days ahead!