

Mason Vision Working Document
Working Draft
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1. Introduction

Higher education has become a front-burner national issue. Even as the economy is demanding more college graduates, and the college wage premium is rising, the percent of young Americans who complete a college degree has leveled off. Over the last decade in particular, at state institutions the cost of a college education has increased faster than most other costs driven for the most part by declining levels of state support, and faster than the household incomes of the students who are paying for it. Student and household debt taken on to pay for college has reached disturbing levels. As a result, increasing numbers of Americans are beginning to view a college degree as unaffordable. Some have even begun to question its value.

While the environment is challenging, it highlights our institutional strengths. George Mason is already a low-cost, low-tuition institution when compared with other Virginia universities or similar public and private universities nationally. And it is also a high-value institution. A 2010 analysis by Virginia's House Appropriations Committee identified George Mason University among the best performers in the Nation in terms of low per-student cost and high production of degrees. And a 2012 survey by the State Council of Higher Education of Virginia found that Mason graduates had earnings well above the state average and above the average of peer institutions in all degree categories.

In addition to economic pressures, traditional universities are being challenged by new models of higher education that leverage the power of the Internet and availability of private capital. From the emergence of for-profit on-line universities and hybrid for profit/nonprofit models, to the explosion of free content and courses, entrepreneurs are finding ways to create value by leveraging the weaknesses of the traditional university, including its cost and its rigidity to accommodate student preferences.

Here too, we believe we are well positioned to benefit from these trends rather than falling victims to them. Our reputation as an innovative, diverse, and entrepreneurial institution and our strategic location among an IT intense industry in Northern Virginia provide us with a unique opportunity to exploring new forms of higher education while being true to the principles of academic rigor of a great Virginia public university.

Meanwhile, on the research front, fiscal imbalances have reduced the availability of federal funds. This is forcing research universities to explore new funding avenues, including partnerships with the private sector as well as more aggressive efforts to monetize inventions, through business incubation and commercialization of intellectual property. Our strength in translational research and our location at the intersection of business, government and nonprofit organizations in the National Capital Region gives us some natural advantages in navigating this changing landscape as well.

Against this backdrop, on August 17, 2012, the Board of Visitors adopted a resolution charging President Cabrera with the creation of a new strategic Vision for the University in collaboration with the university community and key internal and external stakeholders. Based upon input provided at the President's annual planning conference, and with the Virginia Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2011 (the "Top Jobs Act") as a point of departure, the President launched an inclusive community-wide process with the goal of

bringing a new Vision to the Board of Visitors for their approval at the March 20, 2013 meeting. The new Vision and the supporting materials developed through this process provide the foundation for our next strategic plan and our new comprehensive capital campaign.

Throughout the Fall 2012 semester, working groups, which included broad representation from the university community, gathered input from a variety of sources, including external and internal reports, and from the Mason community at large. The working groups focused on issues related to: Mission, Values, and the Mason Graduate; Student Value and Affordability; Research; Program Innovation and Growth; Online and Executive Education; Regional Strategy; Global Strategy; and Funding and Resources.

What has resulted is a new vision that recognizes our strengths and positions Mason for the future. We summarize this vision as the Mason *idea*, a conception of a university that is innovative, diverse, entrepreneurial, and accessible. A university that strives to deliver value to our students and our community, that is devoted to finding solutions to the world's greatest challenges, that defines its ultimate mission as promoting a more just, free and prosperous world as educators and scholars. In short, the Mason *idea* is a university that does not try to be the best in the world, but the best *for* the world.

In the process of crafting our new vision, we have written a concise mission statement that connects us with our historic motto “Freedom and Learning” and highlights our shared purpose as an academic institution. We have articulated a set of core values that should serve as guiding principles for all members of our community. We have profiled the attributes we wish all of our graduates to share (“The Mason Graduate”). And we have laid out a set of overarching commitments for the next decade.

More than 3,000 individuals have offered their input to this process in some way or another. The working groups translated the input into a thoughtful analysis and proposed a set of “big ideas”. A steering committee then integrated all this input into a set of concepts that try to be realistic yet aspirational, concrete yet inspirational. And yet, this is only the beginning. The real work begins now.

2. Trends in Higher Education

Higher education is currently facing a dramatic crossroads that promises to reshape the industry for decades to come. Financial pressures including rising tuition, declining state support, increased student indebtedness, depressed family incomes, and reduced philanthropic support have combined with technological and social change to present an unprecedented challenge to traditional models of higher education.

Confronted with these pressures, higher education has been slow to adapt and, as a result, has come under fire from all quarters. Students and families increasingly view a college degree as unaffordable. Taxpayers have begun to question the expenditure of public funds on education. Politicians have leveled charges of inefficiency and have reduced state support for public universities. Businesses have questioned the connection between university curricula and real-world issues.

At the same time, technology has reshaped the world around us. Communication has become instantaneous. Young people grow up in a world where constant connection means instant gratification and a deep integration of technology into everyday life. Technology has also altered the manner in which knowledge is shared. YouTube videos offer step-by-step guidance on everything from how to calculate compound interest to how to fix your garbage disposal. Knowledge is no longer proprietary and the distinction between teacher and student has blurred. In a connected world, ideas are shared and debated at warp speed while the boundaries of space and time have eroded. In this world, Nobel Prize winners share their knowledge online for free, universities have made their full curricula available to anyone with an Internet connection, and students use social networks and online search guides to help them do their homework.

As a result of these changes, universities have begun to face increased competition, especially from for-profit or exclusively online universities. University of Phoenix has grown to become the nation's largest university and numerous other schools have attempted to copy the Phoenix model. Similarly, a technologically-adept generation of learners is putting pressure on traditional delivery models and demanding an educational experience that mirrors their lifestyle outside of the classroom.

At the same time, the value of a college degree has continued to increase. Moreover, the demand for educated workers has also risen. In fact, one of the primary stories of the recent U.S. recession was the mismatch between applicants and jobs -- the result of a dearth of qualified, educated workers for the new jobs that are being created. In terms of student demand, the picture also appears positive. While demographic trends point to the possibility of slight declines in enrollment, strong growth in international student applications and an uptick in economic growth should ensure a strong supply of students.

While Mason has been quite successful in weathering change, it has not been immune to the pressures building in the industry. Enrollment, which had grown strongly over the past decade, has begun to level off. As is the case with students virtually everywhere, Mason students are graduating with larger amounts of debt than ever before. Fortunately, because Mason students get higher-paying jobs than do their peers from other Virginia institutions, our graduates have lower default rates and a greater financial return on their investment. Nevertheless, tuition rates have risen in order to offset a decline in state funding, thereby putting a strain on students' ability to pay.

In seeking solutions to this financial squeeze, Mason has limited options due to the fact that it receives less state funding per student than any other doctoral institution in Virginia. Moreover, a modest endowment hinders the university's ability to provide tuition discounts for highly-qualified students.

On the positive side, Mason enjoys a largely efficient cost structure and an innovative, entrepreneurial culture that embraces change. Moreover, as the largest institution of higher learning in Virginia, Mason is rich in resources. Its faculty includes world-class teachers and researchers and the university's proximity to the nation's capital allows it to draw on part-time expertise from the elite ranks of government and business. The university's location is also an asset in attracting research money from government and in recruiting out-of-state students.

In sum, while Mason is subject to the same industry pressures as other institutions of higher learning, it is more well-positioned to respond than most of its competitors. Specifically, Mason's youth and innovative culture represent an advantage in seeking creative solutions to today's problems in higher education. Simply put, the can-do spirit that has been the source of much of Mason's success to date is its greatest asset in facing the challenges of the present and future.

3. Motto, Mason Idea, Mission, Values, and the Mason Graduate

The *Mission, Values, and Mason Graduate* working group was specifically charged with identifying concepts that should be captured by our mission statement, our core values and the signature characteristics of a Mason Graduate. Together with *MasonLeads*, they gathered input from over 2,600 members of the Mason community. The work of other working groups also provided input and supportive materials that were incorporated in developing these components of the Mason Vision.

In addition, the input they gathered informed the reaffirmation of Freedom and Learning, foundational concepts that are incorporated into the Mason Seal and now formally adopted as our Motto. The process also reinforced and expanded on ideas that have served us well in the past and that will continue to serve us well in the future: the Mason *idea*. The Mason *idea* is that Mason at its core is innovative, diverse, entrepreneurial, and accessible. This Mason *idea*, which describes our unique institutional strengths, reminds us that we are committed to be a university *for* the world, drawn together to work across cultures bringing new perspectives and solutions to the world's most pressing problems and teaching our students to do the same.

3.1 Our Motto

Our Motto, "Freedom and Learning," connects our mission with the work of our namesake, American Patriot and father of the Bill of Rights, George Mason. Our motto reminds us that freedom and learning are mutually interdependent. One cannot happen without the other. In order to be free—free to be who we are and who we want to become, free to act for positive change—we can never stop learning. In order to learn, we need to be free. As an academic community, we are committed to advancing both.

3.2 Our Idea

As we pondered how we could best serve our mission we asked ourselves several questions. What kind of university we should become to best respond to the evolving needs of our students, Virginia, our Nation, and the world? What kind of university would allow us to provide better education to more people throughout their lives, to help our community thrive, and to help find solutions to the world's greatest challenges? In other words, how do we become, not the best university in the world, but the best university *for* the world? And, we have an idea – we call it the Mason *idea*.

The Mason *idea* rests on a solid foundation and resonates with our past, but it also provides a compelling picture of our future. It represents our unique institutional characteristics – some of the words are ones we have heard before, but their meanings have been powerfully

reframed, enriched to capture the strength of who we are. Our idea, the Mason idea, will propel us to conquer current and future challenges that we face.

Mason idea

***innovative** = we do not cling to old ways just because they have worked in the past. We strive to create new forms of education that serve our students better and new paths of research that can help us discover solutions to the world's greatest challenges*

***diverse** = we bring together a multitude of people and ideas in everything that we do. Our culture of inclusion, our multidisciplinary approach, and our global perspective, make us better educators and scholars*

***entrepreneurial** = we take ideas into action. We educate students to become agents of positive change, to do or create jobs, to create value through government or business, public or private organizations, academia or the arts. We pursue discoveries that can make a difference in the world. We help our community thrive culturally, socially and economically*

***accessible** = we are an open and welcoming community. We partner with public and private organizations in our region and around the world. We proactively engage with our community. We define our success by how many talented students with potential we serve, not how many we leave out.*

3.3 Our Mission

The purpose of a mission statement is to describes *who* we are and *why* we do what we do. Our goal was to produce a concise, memorable, and meaningful statement that would describe the type of institution that we are and the purpose of our work. The resulting mission statement was derived from central ideas emanating from the various working groups, most notably, the Mission, Values, and Mason Graduate group.

The preamble to the mission statement describes our legal status as a public, comprehensive, research university established by the Commonwealth of Virginia in the National Capital Region. The mission statement then describes the identity we have developed as an academic institution as well as the purpose of our work.

Mission

A public, comprehensive, research university established by the Commonwealth of Virginia in the National Capital Region,

We are an inclusive and innovative academic community committed to creating a more just, free and prosperous world

The notions of inclusion and innovation are the strongest ideas emerging throughout this vision process. They are the terms we use most often to describe who we are and the strongest source of collective pride and shared values in our community.

The concepts of justice, freedom and prosperity link our mission to our motto and to the work of our namesake, George Mason. They emphasize our responsibility to advance the society we are part of through education, research and service. And they explicitly affirm our commitment to values that are central to an American democracy and human rights.

3.4 Our Values

Our core values capture our guiding principles for how we work with each other or values that we rely on when we are at our best. They are our touchstones that guide our actions and behavior.

Our students come first

We are committed to providing our students with a transformational learning experience that helps them grow as individuals, scholars and professionals

Diversity is our strength

Diversity of people and ideas is central to everything we do and helps us be more effective educators and scholars

Innovation is our tradition

We foster a spirit of innovation and strive to find new and better ways to deliver on our mission while honoring time-tested academic values

We act with integrity

We hold ourselves accountable to the highest ethical standards as educators, scholars, students and professionals

We are careful stewards of our resources

We manage the economic and natural resources entrusted to us efficiently and sustainably

We nurture a community where all members can thrive

We all share the responsibility for creating and nurturing a positive and collaborative environment that helps all of us be successful

3.5 Our Graduates

The vision work on the signature characteristics of the Mason Graduate built on prior work done during the last academic year by a team of faculty and staff. When combined with the information gathered by the *Mission, Values and Mason Graduate* working group, they provided the foundational work to identify those characteristics that we hope all of our graduates will possess.

The Mason Graduate

- ...is an engaged citizen
 - ethically oriented and committed to democratic ideals; respectful of individual differences, rights and liberties; focused on the well-being of others and building a just society

- ...is a well-rounded scholar
 - a critical and creative thinker who demonstrates professional competence, possesses an inquisitive nature, appreciates science, humanities and the arts, is committed to lifelong learning

- ...and is prepared to act
 - innovative, resourceful and entrepreneurial; ready to do or create a job, interested and practiced in working with individuals from other cultures, backgrounds and perspectives in order to lead positive and meaningful changes in society

4. Our Commitments

Mason excels at testing and exploring new ideas and breaking boundaries—we are leaders not followers. Our ambitions are aspirational and inspirational and as with our past pursuits, the vision process revealed a new set of ideas we think are worth exploring. Our new commitments do not abandon our past, but instead build on that strong foundation, as we plot our future course.

From the work of the eight working groups, consistent themes emerged. Themes that not only foster change but will direct our course for future endeavors—we call them commitments. Commitments are the ideas that will drive our attention, innovation and investments over the next decade. These commitments inform our next steps and lay the foundation for the important work ahead—identifying important strategies to advance the work of our academic units, organizing and identifying priorities for the next comprehensive campaign, investing for a sound future and securing our partnerships with public and private organizations.

The commitments are: innovative learning, research of consequence, economic and cultural engine, engagement with the world, sound investment, enriching work environment and foundation for the future.

4.1 Innovative Learning

We will apply new and emerging learning technologies, environments and methods to improve learning effectiveness and student completion, and to better serve the evolving needs of students, working professionals, public and private organizations

We have been and continue to be committed to transformational learning for our students, integrating scholarly learning, cultural literacy and student development. Given this, engaging students in active learning environments both inside and outside of the traditional classroom

has been and will continue to be our top priority. While we honor time-tested academic pedagogies, we are focused on improving both the effectiveness of student learning and providing a diverse set of paths for degree completion and continuing professional education. The Internet and technology, which are the most powerful and disruptive forces in higher education today, are transforming how, when, and where students learn. We are committed to being a leader, rather than a follower, in improving and enhancing the learning experience of our students.

Changing student demographics, new market demands, and innovations in technology are reshaping the face of higher education. Historically, institutions of higher education do not change quickly. In the current climate of reduced public funding, changing workforce needs, and increasing societal expectations, however, the alternative to change is even less attractive.

Over the past decade, online enrollment in higher education institutions has grown more quickly than overall higher education enrollment. In fall 2011, over 6.7 million students, almost one third of the total enrollment in U.S. degree-granting postsecondary institutions, took at least one online course, an increase of 9.3% over fall 2010 (Allen and Seaman, 2013). Total higher education enrollment, in contrast, dropped in the same period (Supiano, 2012).

The growth in online enrollment is powered by advancement of technologies, educational needs of a diverse set of students, adoption of innovative pedagogies and diversified delivery modes, and increased competition in the educational market. And, according to a 2012 Horizon report, six new technologies will have a significant impact on education in the near future—cloud computing, mobile devices, game-based learning, open digital content, personal learning environments, and individual teaching with learning analytics.

Higher education is now part of the technology revolution and today's learners expect institutions of higher education to deliver. The next generation of learners expect personalized, flexible, interactive and engaging, relevant, organized, constantly informed, collaborative, agile and supportive, challenging, but achievable, and available education overall (Calkins and Vogt, 2012).

The student demographics of those seeking higher education are changing as well. Universities now serve a diverse set of students, many of whom come to develop new skill sets based upon a new knowledge base. At Mason, we too, have a large number of diverse, including older students (in terms of chronological age) and those who have had other, earlier careers. Such students seek accessible, affordable higher education with “real world” connectivity and have needs quite distinct from residential undergraduate university students. We need to identify ways to better serve these students. In doing so, we will also be responding to the Commonwealth call to increase the number of baccalaureate degrees and to make education more accessible and viable for these Virginia citizens.

These realities are daunting. However, George Mason has an advantage. We have proven experience with diverse student populations: working adults, and transfer, international, residential and commuter students. Our faculty and staff are engaged and connected to external stakeholders locally, nationally, and internationally. We have the growing capabilities

to support quality technology-enabled instruction. We are located in Virginia and the National Capital region and are accessible to working professionals and employers with available transportation to and from most areas in the region. The Center for Teaching Excellence provides leadership in this area with many faculty devoted to teaching using newer pedagogies and researching their efficacy.

Examples of strategic initiatives to consider:

- Competitive portfolio of online undergraduate and graduate degrees in high-demand areas, including creative online solutions for degree completion
- Integrated professional and executive education unit to offer tailored, multidisciplinary programs to companies and government entities
- Technology-enabled innovation in curriculum delivery across multiple courses and programs

4.2 Research of Consequence

We will make consequential, innovative research a central element of our mission; and we will work to translate our discoveries into interventions and applications with social, cultural and economic impact

Research has been and will continue to be central to our mission. Innovations by research universities in knowledge production and use have a significant impact on social, cultural and economic advancements and growth. Scholarship produces new insights that can be applied to important and pressing problems that lead to social, cultural, and economic improvements. Research and scholarship contributes new and useful knowledge, and Mason has a strong record in this regard in a host of fields.

Research initiatives attract and retain some of the brightest and most able faculty and students, and contribute significantly to economic, social and cultural development. In addition, research contributes directly to high quality learning, through direct student opportunities for collaboration and the excitement that work on the frontiers of existing knowledge adds to the teaching process.

Programs and research initiatives in a variety of fields are establishing Mason as an educational and industry leader. Mason has a strong record in interdisciplinary and collaborative research. We host nationally and internationally recognized research centers. In addition, we have proven experience in research leading directly to economic development, where commercial spinoffs directly result from research activities.

Examples of strategic initiatives to consider:

- Development of core capabilities in intellectual property management
- Increased funding from federal sources
- Improved support for highly-talented graduate students
- Creation of an ideas laboratory, space for incubating business and social enterprises

4.3 Economic and cultural engine

We will act as a catalyst for the economic and cultural vibrancy of our region, as a growing source of talent in high-demand disciplines, as an incubator of business and social enterprises, as a hub of life-long learning, arts and athletics, and as research and learning partner for business, nonprofit and government organizations

External stakeholders are enthusiastic about partnering with Mason on regional strategy and broad-based economic planning, but they do not always see us as offering expertise on challenges they face both in private or public sectors. High quality economic development efforts succeed when there is effective collaboration between business, higher education, government, foundation and non-profit sectors.

Mason has an opportunity to shape the future of the region by acting as the convener, connector across sectors, and intellectual driver. Through the development of a targeted regional strategy that provides both broad-based and specialized leadership, the university can effectively inform and contribute to the aspirations and needs of our regional partners. Our geographic location in the heart of northern Virginia and the National Capitol Region is arguably Mason's greatest underexploited asset.

Our future success depends on our ability to become a fully integrated and strategic "knowledge economy" asset to our region. This means shifting our current approaches toward a market-strategy that more fully aligns with our regional partners' specific strengths and opportunities. The key is to develop integrated partnerships with businesses, government and academic communities, bridging both public and private sectors.

Mason has clear advantages as an economic and cultural engine. We are the leading public university in Virginia and the National Capital region, the leading degree and second largest STEM producer in Virginia and the only public university in northern Virginia. Our distributed campus model provides opportunities to partner with government leaders in ways that can bring research initiatives to the university as well as influencing regional, national and global policy. The university's large sports and arts facilities bring thousands to the campus annually, contributing to the cultural vibrancy of the region.

And while industry leaders predict that over the next 20 years there will be a critical regional labor shortage in fields such as science, math, business and management, education, art and entertainment, and healthcare, we believe we have the ability to grow our programs and produce graduates important to these fields. We are a life-long learning hub with about two-thirds of alumni remaining in the area with a significant number of alumni choosing to continue their education, seeking an advanced degree.

Examples of strategic initiatives to consider:

- Focused program growth towards fields that serve the region, resulting in more four-year, graduate and professional degree graduates in high-demand growth occupations.
- Regional campus strategies coordinated with local economic development agencies
- Serve as catalyst and key convener to enable regional economic development initiatives.
- Establish entrepreneurship as a "top three" mission for the university.

4.4 Engagement with the world

We will prepare our students to thrive in a global context by infusing global awareness, citizenship values and learning opportunities across all fields; and we will partner with other organizations in solving global problems where our impact will be highest

The distinctive features of today's global world represent both opportunities and risks for institutions of higher education in the U.S. The breadth and flexibility of higher education means that it is possible for universities to take on new roles and have significant impacts across a wide range of sectors beyond the traditional core mission of undergraduate education.

With worldwide demand for tertiary and professional education at an all-time high, and the U.S. still viewed—at least for the time being—as the gold standard in higher education, there are enormous new student markets to be tapped. But along with new demand has also come new supply. More specifically, a number of emerging economies such as Brazil, China, India, and South Korea have begun to position themselves as world leaders in science, engineering, and technology. The well-known phenomenon of outsourcing is testament to the fact that the availability of knowledge intensive and highly skilled labor for sectors such as biotechnology and software development is no longer the sole preserve of the U.S, and other advanced industrial economies in the global north.

U.S. universities can today best serve their students and local communities by embracing the global approach and leveraging their particular areas of competitive advantage. For Mason, this means that we must prepare our students to be global citizens and make them competitive in increasingly globalized labor markets. By virtue of its close association with federal government agencies and the national defense industry, the Commonwealth already enjoys a high level of worldwide exposure and interconnectedness. Virginia also is a major player in the information technology and engineering sectors and, for many global companies, a highly attractive place to do business.

Indeed, governors of Virginia past and present have recognized the power of globalization and worked to make the Commonwealth a global player. For example, the Virginia Economic Development Partnership, a state authority, has an international trade team—with offices in Japan, China, India, and Europe—dedicated to identifying export opportunities for Virginia businesses while attracting new foreign investment in the Commonwealth. By the same token, universities like Mason can best serve Virginians by forging strategic global partnerships that offer our best expertise and services to the world while simultaneously working to bring the best of the world to the Commonwealth.

If Mason aspires to become a “university for the world” then the cultivation of global collaborations and new partnerships that traverse national boundaries need to be seen as a form of ethical commitment on the part of the university. Identifying and implementing an appropriate global strategy is crucial to George Mason's future success and its ability to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

At Mason we have substantial advantages. We have a highly diverse globally engaged student body and our location is ideal with extensive connections to the world and proximity to the

nation's capital. International airports, embassies, and global organizations are at our doorstep. We are bold with a flexible and entrepreneurial culture that allows Mason to consider global opportunities other institutions might pass up and a strong foundation of campus internationalization and global programming on which to build.

Examples of strategic initiatives to consider:

- Focus global engagement efforts on emerging nations and global mega-cities
- Position as a pre-eminent global convener
- Invest in global-problem solving where our likelihood of impact is highest
- Apply clear and consistent criteria in assessing the strategic value of global opportunities
- Develop organizational structures and support services that reflect best practices for enabling global success
- Foster global citizenship in all our teaching and throughout the Mason community
- Improve opportunities and services for study abroad
- Partner with global partners who share our values and commitments

4.5 Sound investment

We will be a valuable investment for our students, taxpayers and donors by focusing on outcomes, operational efficiency and affordability:

We will expand the career opportunities for our graduates, the number of graduates, the impact of our research, and the value we provide to enrich our community

We will improve the efficiency of all our operations and will be sensitive to trends in household income in our region in making decisions about tuition and financial aid

In an era of shifting priorities and expected decreases in federal funding, continued state constraints in higher education funding, pressures against tuition increases, and concerns about the affordability of a university degree, institutions of higher education are under increased pressure to demonstrate the benefit they provide to those that support them.

Federal and state entities are expecting more from colleges and universities. They are expecting state institutions, even with the shifts and reductions in state and federal funding, to produce more skilled, talented and employable citizens. For Virginia, the Virginia Governor's Commission on Higher Education Reform: Reform, Innovation and Investment is calling for 100,000 more degrees, improved retention and graduation rates and additional graduates in STEM and other high-demand fields. In addition, economic forecasting indicates a looming labor shortage on our horizon, creating a significant need for highly educated workers to fill new and replacement jobs in our region and our nation over the next 20 years.

Americans are beginning to question the value of a college degree. *Time* magazine, in a recent special issue on higher education, reported that 80 percent of the general population believes that "at many colleges, the education students receive is not worth what they pay for

it.” The Time survey attempted to identify the major factors in the value of a college degree. The top responses dealt with economic factors – 40 percent said the most important value was “to gain skills and knowledge for a career,” while 17 percent cited increasing one’s earning power. The non-economic factors included “gaining a well-rounded general education” (14 percent), “learning to think critically” (12 percent), “formulating goals and values for life” (11 percent), and becoming “an informed citizen in a global society” (6 percent).

The landscape for college graduates has also changed, and is much more problematic now than it has been in the past. Once number one in college degrees held by individuals between the ages of 25 and 34, the United States is now 12th out of 36 developed nations.¹ This same report indicates that graduation rates lag, tuition rates are rising, the unemployment rate for recent graduates is very high, and college graduates graduate with large debt.

Although enrollment rates are indeed growing, graduation rates have slowed. Degree completion, once something taken for granted, is now a problem for many universities and colleges throughout the United States. The time needed to complete a bachelor’s degree has increased by one third year and the proportion of completers fell from 57.8 percent to 43.6 percent.² This is a timely issue, and deserving of attention. In fact President Obama, in his 2012 State of the Union address, named college completion as the economic issue of our time.

In addition to the problem of college students not completing college, there also exists a problem of colleges and universities not properly preparing students for the current workforce. The problems of students not completing their degrees, not completing degrees in a timely manner, or not being properly prepared, signal that changes need to be made in higher education.

At Mason we have many advantages in meeting this challenge. Our interdisciplinary approach to programs and research allows us to connect theory to practice, make valuable real-world impacts and bridge student experience on campus with their communities and the world. A Mason degree is considered a good value by those who have it, based largely on the quality of the educational experience and the enhanced jobs prospects and higher earning potential of its graduates. Our faculty and staff are committed to student retention, engagement and success and have created intentional programming to support students (and their families) needs as they work toward graduation. We are among the best values in Virginia higher education. George Mason is already a low-cost, low-priced institution when compared with other Virginia universities or similar public and private universities nationally.

¹Ann Kirschner. “Innovations in Higher Education? Hah!” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (April 8, 2012), <http://chronicle.com/article/Innovations-in-Higher/131424/>.

² John Bound and Sarah Turner. “Collegiate Attainment: Understanding Degree Completion.” *The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) Reporter*, no. 4 (2010), <http://www.nber.org/reporter/2010number4/bound.html>.

Examples of strategic initiatives to consider:

- Work with the governor and general assembly to close the per-student funding gap of more than \$1,600 per year and increase annual funding to align with household incomes in Virginia.
- Allocate a portion of any future cost savings to increase financial aid in order to improve accessibility for low- and middle-income students.
- Investment in and better use of our current infrastructure, including facilities, technology and program innovation.
- Launch an initiative to assist and encourage students to complete their degrees within four years.

4.6 Enriching work environment

We will invest in recruiting and retaining talented and diverse faculty and staff, strengthen our culture of celebration, and will create a positive work environment where all members of our community can thrive

Attracting and retaining talent is vital to sustain George Mason's success as a world-class research and teaching institution. As an institution we believe that nurturing a community where all members can thrive is both a moral imperative and critical for the success of the organization.

We are a just and caring community. At Mason, we are committed to civility, respect and inclusion in all we do. Through our collaborative partnerships in research, scholarship, economic development and social action, Mason positively contributes to solving significant local, national and global issues. Our community is diverse and we learn from and engage in difference with a willingness to advocate personal principles when key values are at stake.

Our location in northern Virginia and the National Capital region offers our employees and their families a wealth of opportunities. We are committed to providing opportunities for lifelong learning and career advancement through leadership, personal and professional development programs, and free educational opportunities.

Examples of strategic initiatives to consider:

- Increase funding for faculty and staff salaries and support move us from the 25 percentile to the median for our peer institutions.
- Increase funding for our graduate research and teaching assistants to be on par with our peer institutions and adjusted for the cost of living.
- Recruitment plans: Create recruiting and retention plans in all colleges and departments.
- Continue to invest in a thriving work/life culture to support all faculty and staff.

4.7 Foundation for the future

We will aggressively seek additional sources of funding through higher levels of philanthropy, expanded online and executive education programs, research grants and the commercialization of intellectual property. We will strengthen the Mason brand nationally and internationally and will communicate more effectively the value of Mason to stakeholders throughout Virginia and the National Capital Region.

Given the reduction of state support and limits on future tuition increases, the university needs to develop a stronger base of philanthropic support and other revenue sources. We are on an unsustainable fiscal path and there are clear risks to Mason's core academic mission if new sources of revenue are not identified.

We need a strong brand to expand philanthropy, online and executive education programs, and the diversity of our student body. Strengthening and, more importantly, communicating our brand value to both internal and external stakeholders is critical in establishing a sustainable future as an institution.

Mason does have a modest but growing donor base. Over the past five years, giving to George Mason has increased 17% per year, or nine times the national average.

In spite of the challenges, Mason does have advantages. Mason's location in Northern Virginia and proximity to Washington, D.C. make it a key component to the region's economic growth and allows Mason to position itself as a regional and global convener for economic development. Mason is well positioned to increase the level of engagement and philanthropic support among its constituents. Mason has entrepreneurial strength across multiple academic colleges and programs. Our alumni base is not only growing, they also are becoming more engaged and connected to the university.

Finally, Mason does have some existing brand strengths that can be leveraged. The marketing and communications firm Greatest Creative Factor in January 2012 specifically examined the Mason brand identified the following Mason's strengths: a culture of innovation and entrepreneurial, a perennial "up-and-coming" university, diverse, career power in a Mason degree, rapid growth, a number of innovative, highly regarded schools, colleges, and programs, and the critical role it plays in the economic advancement of Fairfax and Prince William counties.

Examples of strategic initiatives to consider:

- Aggressive funding around academics, arts and athletics that uses volunteer leadership programs, cornerstone to public university foundations, to drive gift-giving in these areas.
- Improve and develop existing relationships with external stakeholders to advance research and general fundraising initiatives by connecting state and federal priorities with local businesses and Mason's programs.
- Expand executive education offerings and research partnerships, both locally and nationally, thus connecting Mason with current and future leaders and sources of future gift revenue.

- Become a meeting point for local, national and international business by establishing a world-class center for investment and development of start-up companies and research commercialization in the Northern Virginia and Washington DC metro area.
- Better communicate our value and visibility with our alumni, community and local, state and federal officials by creating a new model of higher education akin to the “third wave” paradigm proposed in Harvard’s Advanced Leadership Initiative; by cultivating young alumni’s connection to Mason; by developing a government relations handbook; by instituting “Lobby Days in Richmond” for students, faculty and staff; and by participating in the Virginia Business Higher Education Council.
- Align campaign priorities with university strategic goals and invest in University Development and Alumni Affairs to expand philanthropic activities.

5. Looking forward

This Vision for Mason’s future will serve as the basis for the strategic planning process by providing a framework for future decision-making. The final version of this document will be presented to the Board of Visitors at their March 20, 2013 meeting. If adopted, the Vision process will immediately fold into strategic planning. Currently, the Vision team is working with the President’s and Provost’s offices to create the structure and timeline for strategic planning and is partnering with University Communications to adopt a roll-out plan, to begin after the Vision’s adoption. In addition to strategic planning, the Vision will inform the Comprehensive Campaign, led by University Development.