

Advancing a Culture of Engagement

Georgia Southern University's Quality Enhancement Plan

A Tradition of Engagement

Georgia Southern University has a rich academic tradition steeped in cultivating student learning and success in addition to strong historical ties with the local community. Beginning with its origins in 1906 as the First District A&M School, citizens of Bulloch County demonstrated a commitment to education by successfully bidding for an agricultural and mechanical school to be constructed in the Statesboro community. From these humble origins, Georgia Southern rapidly evolved into a post-secondary institution dedicated toward teacher training. In 1959, Georgia Southern was recognized as a comprehensive institution of higher education, broadening its mission well beyond educating teachers but maintaining its commitment to quality teaching. Throughout its history, Georgia Southern has reached out to the local community to provide to members the benefits of higher education. During the latter half of the twentieth century, this focus has been expanded to include the global community, earning the campus university status in 1990.

Building on these dual traditions of quality teaching and regional focus, the Georgia Southern community selected *Advancing a Culture of Engagement* as the topic for its Quality Enhancement Plan.

Georgia Southern fosters a culture of engagement where the campus community actively seeks both knowledge and human connections, creating a community of mutual aspirations and collective support regarding student learning. Our culture of engagement represents the personal investment of students, faculty, staff, alumni, and other stakeholders in the learning enterprise and the close relationships that are born out of such engagement. It bridges theory with practice, extends the learning environment beyond the classroom, and promotes student growth and life success of all learners. Engagement prepares students for leadership and service as world citizens, inspiring in our students the values of integrity, civility, kindness, collaboration, and a commitment to lifelong learning, wellness, and social responsibility.¹

In our institution, student learning is defined as those changes in students' knowledge, skills, behaviors, and/or values that may be attributed to the University experience. At Georgia Southern, learning occurs in diverse contexts. The campus itself is a laboratory for learning. Students acquire general knowledge, critical thinking skills, understanding of the scientific method and specialized knowledge in a major field, and learn to appreciate the connections made to enhance learning, artistic expression, and the value of teamwork, mentoring, service, and leadership.²

As evidenced in Georgia Southern's *Mission Statement* and Strategic Plan, the concept of "engagement" has long been recognized as central to student learning at this institution. By choosing this topic for our Quality Enhancement Plan, it is our goal to ensure both the continued ubiquitous nature of this culture of engagement at Georgia Southern as well as ensure that this culture of engagement represents an experience of the highest quality for all stakeholders.

¹ "Culture of Engagement" as defined by the SACS Leadership Team, June 22, 2004.

² *Ibid.*

Linkage to Mission and Strategic Plan

The strength of *Advancing a Culture of Engagement* lies in its deep roots within the University's mission and Strategic Plan. As reflected in the [Mission Statement](#) adopted by the Board of Regents in June 2004, Georgia Southern operates under the teacher-scholar model where faculty have the primary responsibility for "the creation of learning experiences of the highest quality, informed by scholarly practice, research, and creative activities."³ It is a "university devoted to academic distinction in teaching, scholarship, and service," and its "hallmark is a culture of engagement that bridges theory with practice, extends the learning environment beyond the classroom, and promotes student growth and life success."⁴ At the same time, the *Mission Statement* reaffirms Georgia Southern's commitment "to advancing the State of Georgia and the region through the benefits of higher education."⁵

Likewise, Georgia Southern's [Level I Strategic Plan](#) further reaffirms this culture of engagement. In assessing Georgia Southern's comparative advantages, the Level I Strategic Plan clearly recognizes the University's "culture of engagement, where students work side-by-side with faculty and staff, participating in active learning related to the acquisition and use of knowledge for the benefit of humanity."⁶ The plan further states:

"Engagement" permeates explanations of who we are, what we do, and how we differentiate ourselves from other institutions, and is integral to Georgia Southern University's many advantages. Engagement refers to the psychological and physical energies invested in active participation in the learning process (in-class and out-of-class). At Georgia Southern University, expectations for engagement are set high for students to take the initiative and responsibility for their active engagement in learning activities, and for faculty and staff to invest in supporting student successes. All are partners in the learning process, and the result is a campus culture of participation and personal attention. The benefits of engagement accrue to the university community in direct proportion to the time and energy invested by all members of the community.⁷

The plan identifies the instrumental role faculty play within this culture.

The faculty bring alive the culture of engagement. Faculty are primarily full-time, terminally degreed, experienced in their professions, and committed to a student-centered university. Faculty are willing to forge personal relationships with students and involve students in their scholarship and service activities. Student Affairs provides co-curricular programming to enhance faculty interaction with students beyond teaching, scholarship, and service roles. At few other institutions will students find this level of engagement.⁸

And, the plan reaffirms the University's service ethic.

Service and leadership opportunities are promoted on and off campus, and these activities solidify connections with the internal and external communities. Students find opportunities to expand their active learning by taking part in service projects both on campus and across the community. Faculty and staff contribute their time and energies for their mutual benefit and to enhance the town-gown relationship.⁹

³ Georgia Southern University *Mission Statement*, adopted in June 2004.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Georgia Southern University Level I Strategic Plan.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

Capitalizing on the comparative advantages outlined in the Strategic Plan, Georgia Southern seeks to become one of the best public comprehensive universities within the next decade. To reach this destination, the Strategic Plan identifies six strategic themes to guide the University’s journey. One of the themes—**Academic Distinction**—forms the core of this plan with the other five themes being subordinate to and supportive of Academic Distinction. The themes are as follows:

- Academic Distinction
- Student-Centered University
- Technological Advancement
- Transcultural Opportunities
- Private and Public Partnerships
- Physical Environment

The Quality Enhancement Plan links to the Level I Strategic Plan through the common core theme of Academic Distinction. While the other five themes are not primary components of the Quality Enhancement Plan, they all contribute to fostering a culture of engagement. It is worthwhile to briefly highlight these connections as summarized in **Table 1**.

Table 1
Relationship of Level I Supporting Themes to a Culture of Engagement

Level I Theme	Implementation Plan
Student-Centered University	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. assess role of faculty & staff 2. include “commitment to engagement” in faculty/staff hiring criteria 3. reward faculty & staff who actively engage with students 4. offer training opportunities on participating in the campus culture of engagement 5. revise annual evaluation practices to recognize engagement as a desirable activity
Technological Advancement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. use of technology to foster & facilitate interpersonal engagement
Transcultural Opportunities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. strengthen multicultural & international programs on campus 2. enhance the Centers of International Studies, Africana Studies, & Performing Arts
Physical Environment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. use of space to facilitate human interactions (small groups & large) 2. remodel & refurbish existing structures with creation of spaces conducive to human interaction (e.g., College of Information Technology building & renovation of Henderson Library)
Public & Private Partnerships	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. promote private giving through capital campaigns (e.g., University’s Centennial Campaign) 2. encourage engagement with local community through campus outreach centers (e.g., Botanical Center, Planetarium, & Wildlife Education Center) 3. develop alumni university program (long-term goal)

Once the Level I Strategic Plan was articulated, the campus developed eight university-wide implementation plans that describe the strategies to be employed in order to attain the Level I goals. Ultimately, all units within the University are accountable for the implementation of these Level II plans. These eight plans form the **Level II plans** of the strategic planning process, are organized by functional areas, and are as follows:

- The Academic Plan
- The Enrollment Management Plan

- The Facilities Plan
- The Financial Plan
- The Human Resources Development Plan
- The Marketing and Communications Plan
- The Organizational Plan
- The Technology and Information Resources Plan

Table 2 (see appendix) shows the relationship between the Level II strategies and the Level I plan. *It is important to note that the University’s Quality Enhancement Plan will become the ninth plan of the Level IIs, making it an essential piece of an already extant plan—embedded into the University’s overall planning structure. This placement supports the University’s view that the plan is an intrinsic element of a much larger effort to which the campus community has already invested an enormous amount of time and commitment. This larger effort has also enjoyed widespread support and “ownership” throughout the campus community.*

Moreover, four of the eight Level II plans explicitly or implicitly describe strategies that directly relate to a **culture of engagement**, providing cross-linkages between Level II strategies and the University’s Quality Enhancement Plan. **Table 3** references these strategies by Level II plan and Level I theme.

Table 3
Level II Strategic Initiatives & Culture of Engagement

Level II	Academic Plan	Facilities Plan	Human Resources Development Plan	Marketing & Communications Plan
<i>Level I</i>	<i>Academic Distinction</i>	<i>Academic Distinction</i>	<i>Academic Distinction</i>	<i>Academic Distinction</i>
	Build a culture of engagement in the learning process.			Extend the culture of engagement .
	Broaden engagement of citizens in the lifelong learning process, regardless of where they live or work.			
	<i>Student-Centered University</i>	<i>Student-Centered University</i>	<i>Student-Centered University</i>	<i>Student-Centered University</i>
	Communicate to students the meaning and value of scholarship, lifelong learning, and engagement .			
	Integrate student learning and personal and career development into a holistic and seamless educational experience. (engagement implied)			

	<i>Technological Advancement</i>	<i>Technological Advancement</i>	<i>Technological Advancement</i>	<i>Technological Advancement</i>
	Continue to enhance the use of technology for teaching inside and outside the classroom and to encourage engagement.			
	<i>Transcultural Opportunities</i>	<i>Transcultural Opportunities</i>	<i>Transcultural Opportunities</i>	<i>Transcultural Opportunities</i>
		Provide a physical and social campus environment that encourages engagement in the exploration of diversity.		
	<i>Physical Environment</i>	<i>Physical Environment</i>	<i>Physical Environment</i>	<i>Physical Environment</i>
	Provide quality academic facilities and natural environmental areas to support the educational mission of the University and enhance the culture of engagement.			
	<i>Public & Private Partnerships</i>	<i>Public & Private Partnerships</i>	<i>Public & Private Partnerships</i>	<i>Public & Private Partnerships</i>
	Increase and reward engagement in local, state, regional, and national service opportunities.		Share the human resources of the University with external community. (engagement implied)	

Further evidence of Georgia Southern University’s commitment to engagement is found in the University’s [General Education Outcomes](#). This document articulates ten categories of outcomes for the core curriculum that the University seeks to instill in all of its graduates. The theme of engagement underpins two of the ten categories: “responsible citizenship” and “worthy use of leisure.” Responsible citizenship holds the expectation of active participation as a citizen in society, while worthy use of leisure suggests the pursuit of a lifestyle to promote the betterment of self and others.

Challenges to Engagement

Despite this common thread of engagement woven throughout the University’s *Mission Statement*, Strategic Plan, and core curriculum, and the University’s rich history in this culture, Georgia Southern faces constant challenges to its ability to maintain and advance a culture of engagement within its academic community. In light of these challenges, it becomes imperative for the University to be constantly vigilant for opportunities to focus on ways to strengthen its culture of engagement. Not only does engagement result in better prepared and more well rounded students, but it also impacts the University’s ability to successfully graduate a higher

percentage of students who enroll.¹⁰ Three conditions in particular demonstrate the challenges Georgia Southern faces.

1. Georgia Southern has experienced tremendous enrollment growth since the 1980s and this growth continues albeit on a more incremental level. Between Fall 1999 and Fall 2004, student enrollment at Georgia Southern University grew almost 9% (n=14,476/16,100). Simultaneously, Georgia Southern has experienced reductions in its state appropriation, which has resulted in a loss of faculty lines. With current enrollments exceeding 16,000, and expectations for continued growth, average class size at Georgia Southern has gradually increased, diminishing the ability of faculty to individually interact with students and become well acquainted with them. This growth is most apparent at the undergraduate lower division level, as depicted in the table below, where average class size has risen from 36 in Fall 1999 to 39 in Fall 2004. Student:faculty ratios are now at a six-year high of 20:1.¹¹ While these increases appear modest, it is important for the University to be cognizant of them and their potential to impact Georgia Southern’s tradition of engagement with its students. Georgia Southern must be vigilant to reaffirm its commitment to a culture of engagement and reinforce this culture within the University community.

Fall Semester	Enrollment	Average Class Size: Lower Division	Average Class Size: Upper Division	Average Class Size: Graduate	Student: Faculty Ratio
Fall 1999	14,476	36	21	8	19:1
Fall 2000	14,184	35	19	8	19:1
Fall 2001	14,371	38	20	9	18:1
Fall 2002	15,075	39	22	10	19:1
Fall 2003	15,704	38	23	11	19:1
Fall 2004	16,100	39	22	11	20:1

2. Another challenge that the University faces is faculty turnover. More than half of the University’s faculty have been with the University for less than five years. While Georgia Southern is energized by having so many new faculty with fresh ideas, enthusiasm, and skills, these faculty are not necessarily as familiar with or committed to Georgia Southern’s culture of engagement as the longer-term faculty. Georgia Southern must find ways to acculturate new faculty and staff to our longstanding tradition of engagement—highlighting the importance of this engagement not just to our students, but to the larger University community as well.

¹⁰ See discussion in Kevin Carey’s “One Step from the Finish Line: Higher College Graduation Rates are Within Our Reach,” A Report by the Education Trust, January 2005, and “Final Report of the University System of Georgia Task Force on Graduation Rates, July 15, 2004.

¹¹ Data provided by the Office of Strategic Research & Analysis.

3. As mentioned above, Georgia has experienced an economic downturn during the past few years, resulting in reduced state revenues.¹² Consequently, Georgia Southern received less support in state appropriations which impacted its ability to hire high quality faculty and staff, reward meritorious personnel, meet equipment and supply needs, and maintain and enhance its physical environment. Deferred maintenance is repeatedly cited as major consequence of budget reductions. Georgia Southern values and recognizes the importance physical environment plays in campus culture as reflected in its Strategic Plan. Natural and man-made spaces facilitate human interactions by bringing people together in comfortable areas that encourage sharing and dialogue from small groups to large assemblies. Because of the impediments of budget cuts and the concomitant low faculty and staff morale, it becomes even more vital for the University to proactively preserve and advance its most important comparative advantage—its culture of engagement.

Budget reductions also result in loss of staff which has the most visible impact within the Division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management. The University depends upon its staff in this division to facilitate many of the faculty, staff, and student interactions that occur outside of the classroom. These activities are an important feature of engagement and developing habits of lifelong learning.

Academic Distinction through an Enhanced Culture of Engagement

As designed, Georgia Southern’s Quality Enhancement Plan advances the University’s overarching goal of becoming one of the premier comprehensive public institutions in the nation by utilizing the student-centered focus of the campus community to reach heightened levels of academic excellence. According to a press release on the 2004 [National Survey of Student Engagement](#), the extent to which students are academically successful and graduate from college is directly proportional to their level of engagement in their college experience. Moreover, students who are actively involved in civic activities benefit through the development of a broader sense of ethical and societal responsibility. The National Survey of Student Engagement further identifies “comparative standards for determining how effectively colleges are contributing to learning: (1) level of academic challenge, (2) active and collaborative learning, (3)

¹²

Georgia Southern University
 Chronology of Budget Cuts

Date	Explanation	Amount	Cumulative
11/16/01	5% total budget	\$ 3,598,289	\$ 3,598,289
2/26/02	.86% total budget	\$ 618,465	\$ 4,216,754
5/13/02	1% holdback excluding instruction	\$ 313,963	\$ 4,530,717
8/8/02	2% holdback excluding instruction	\$ 627,926	\$ 5,158,643
11/13/02	2% holdback total budget	\$ 1,456,172	\$ 6,614,815
1/16/03	3% reduction of instruction	\$ 1,242,369	\$ 7,857,184
8/4/03	2.5% reduction	\$ 1,760,906	\$ 9,618,090
FY 2004	2.5% reduction	\$ 1,731,831	\$11,349,921
FY 2005	4.2% reduction	\$ 2,913,343	\$14,263,264
	Total September 9, 2004	\$14,263,264	
			% Budget Cut
	Present Budget 9/9/04	\$70,839,735	20.1%
	Total Budget Cuts	\$14,263,264	
	Budget without Cuts	\$85,102,999	16.8%

Source: Vice President for Business & Finance, January 24, 2005

student-faculty interaction, (4) enriching educational experiences, and (5) supportive campus environment.”¹³

The Quality Enhancement Plan

Using the National Survey of Student Engagement’s “comparative standards” as a guide, Georgia Southern University seeks to achieve higher levels of student learning through “advancing a culture of engagement.” To accomplish this objective, the Quality Enhancement Plan delineates five broad goals for engaging students. Within this framework, we have identified several focused initiatives for achieving progress in each area.

1. *engaging freshmen in the campus and community cultures.* To maximize each student’s university experience, it is imperative that we reach out to these students early in their academic careers to communicate a shared value system common to the university community. Moreover, students need to be aware of their responsibilities as learners and the expectations for their success as well as knowledgeable about the different facets of learning. Learning at Georgia Southern is more than just what occurs in the classroom. Efforts toward achieving this goal will be specifically directed at enhancing the First Year Experience Program to highlight freshmen opportunities for and the value of student engagement in campus activities and in the surrounding community. Additionally, the value of participating in campus academic traditions will be communicated to freshmen to reinforce a sense of academic community and shared values.
2. *engaging students in scholarship, research, and/or creative activities.* Georgia Southern faculty embody the teacher-scholar model and recognize the significant role that scholarship plays in optimizing student learning. Learning is reinforced and higher levels of comprehension achieved when students become directly involved in experiential learning opportunities, applying knowledge learned in the classroom. To that end, Georgia Southern will extend opportunities for students to become directly involved in original or meaningful scholarship, research, and/or creative activities; will communicate the value of these learning experiences to students; and will motivate students to participate in them.
3. *engaging students through active and service learning opportunities.* This goal extends the efforts undertaken in goal two above by expanding opportunities for student learning and personal growth, branching out beyond the scholarship of discovery into the scholarships of application and integration.¹⁴ Georgia Southern strives to make it possible for all undergraduates to have an experiential learning opportunity that is appropriate to their fields of study. This learning may take the form of active learning and/or service learning. Our focus will be to heighten campus and student awareness on the importance of participating in these learning initiatives and to promote active learning through study abroad experiences and service learning through a variety of campus and community initiatives.
4. *engaging students through capstone experiences in all academic programs.* The benefits to learning that accrue to majors who participate in capstone experiences are widely recognized throughout the academy. While some academic programs offer capstone

¹³ “[College Students Benefit from Civic Engagement; Campuses More Student Friendly.](#)” National Survey of Student Engagement press release.

¹⁴ For a full discussion of the different forms of scholarship see Boyer, Ernest L. *Scholarship Reconsidered Priorities of the Professoriate*. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990.

experiences to its students, these are not uniformly available across all disciplines at Georgia Southern University. We believe that focusing our efforts in this area will greatly strengthen student learning and enhance academic engagement. To accomplish this goal, the University will undertake a critical review of the capstone experiences currently in place and develop a model for extending opportunities to include all disciplines. Where applicable, capstone experiences will be designed to include service learning opportunities.

5. *engaging students in a campus and societal social contract*. While the previous four goals primarily frame engagement in terms of enhancing student learning, goal five is designed to impart to students their responsibilities as citizens of this university community as well as citizens of a much larger societal community. Through its participation in the American Democracy Project, Georgia Southern has ready access to the means for accomplishing this goal. It is important for Georgia Southern students to be cognizant of and reflective on their societal responsibilities.

While each of these five areas addresses engagement in terms of student engagement (even more specifically undergraduate student engagement¹⁵), it is important to recognize that underpinning that engagement is faculty and staff engagement with students, each other, the campus, and the larger community. Faculty and staff model this behavior for students.

The Plan

In discussing each of the five areas noted above, we will present each effort in detail, note progress made to date, describe the current environment and challenges posed by each issue, and develop an action plan for achieving these goals. The action plans will (1) describe the plan; (2) identify the institutional units responsible for implementation; (3) state the resources required; (4) provide a timeline for accomplishing each goal; (5) list assessment measures and benchmark criteria; and (6) note how outcomes will be used to inform ongoing implementation in each area.

¹⁵ Georgia Southern University proudly acknowledges the contributions and achievements of its Jack N. Averitt College of Graduate Studies, which offers master's programs in 42 fields, the Master of Fine Arts degree, the Education Specialist, and the Doctor of Education as well as several certificate programs. More than 2,800 graduate students are currently enrolled in this growing college, served by over 300 graduate faculty. The Graduate College plays a vital role in moving the University towards the goal of becoming a national model for post-baccalaureate education and in advancing the University in its mission and Strategic Plan. Nonetheless, given the nature of the Quality Enhancement Plan, the campus believes it is important to focus our efforts in the five focused areas identified above. Therefore, graduate education is not an element of the larger discussion as it relates to the Quality Enhancement Plan.

Goal 1: Engaging Freshmen in the Campus and Community Cultures

“Students learn by becoming involved... Student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience. A highly involved student is one who, for example, devotes considerable energy to studying, spends a lot of time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students.”¹⁶

Georgia Southern University encourages freshmen to become engaged and has created many opportunities that begin as early as the recruitment phase. These include recruiting receptions, campus tours, Open House, and orientation. These opportunities are essential activities because they help to acquaint the student with the campus and to communicate expectations even before matriculation.

When students arrive on campus, Georgia Southern builds on these early efforts through GSU 1210: University Orientation—a key mechanism for making connections between students and the academic and campus community and for communicating expectations for success. GSU 1210 is a required course for all new students during their first semester.¹⁷ This course is designed to “help first year students understand the purpose of a college education, learn about college resources and requirements, explore values and interests, learn to make decisions and realistic choices, explore career objectives and programs of study, and establish supportive relationships with faculty and staff.”¹⁸ GSU 1210, originally taught in the 1985-86 academic year, has become the mainstay of the First Year Experience at Georgia Southern University. The course, as currently taught, has evolved from its original form. For example, the original course used a standard syllabus and required the training of all faculty—both veteran and new instructors—on an annual basis. Over time, the variability of content has increased, and the requirement for annual faculty training has relaxed.

Action Plan

To ensure that freshman are engaged in the campus and community cultures, are comfortably familiar with campus resources and clearly understand their responsibilities as students, we will implement the following five-point plan:

1. develop anticipatory socialization mechanisms by advantageously using the period between a student’s acceptance to Georgia Southern and freshman orientation to reach out to newly admitted students and begin to draw them into the campus community;
2. enhance the GSU 1210 orientation course;
3. create systems to identify the interests of students and to measure the quality and amount of student engagement on campus;
4. expand the concept of living/learning communities by using GSU 1210 courses as a vehicle for encouraging greater freshmen engagement on campus—targeting specific student populations; and
5. create a campus culture that values student engagement and a community atmosphere.

¹⁶ Astin, Alexander W. *Four Critical Years*. Jossey-Bass Higher Education, 1985, pp. 133-134.

¹⁷ GSU 1210 is also required of all new transfer students with fewer than 30 semester hours.

¹⁸ *Georgia Southern University 2004-2005 Undergraduate and Graduate Catalog*, p. 355.

- 1. Strategy:** Develop anticipatory socialization mechanisms by advantageously using the period between a student's acceptance to Georgia Southern and freshman orientation to reach out to newly admitted students and begin to draw them into the campus community.

Georgia Southern University admits the majority of the new freshman class by March 1st in any given year; however, the University's focused two-day orientation sessions—Southern's Orientation, Advisement, and Registration (SOAR)—are not held until the months of June and July, leaving three to four months when new admits are generally not in contact with the University. We view this period as an opportune time to reach out to new students and introduce them to the Georgia Southern community we want them to know and to impart the campus community's expectations for the students. The campus will achieve this goal through the implementation of two specific initiatives.

Initiative 1: We will contact new admits in a warm, welcoming manner either through sending a letter or an e-mail and provide them with the preliminary academic plan and preparation for [SOAR advisement](#).

Responsibility: Academic Advisement Center.

Resources: Between 2001 and 2003, the University's freshmen acceptance numbers averaged approximately 4,555.¹⁹ Using this figure to estimate approximate mailing costs, we anticipate this initiative would require about \$1,700 plus the associated cost of staff time and materials.

Timeline: Mailings would begin in the Spring 2006 semester.

Assessment Measures and Benchmark Criteria: The success of this initiative will be judged by the new students' perceptions of both the campus and engagement. Using the [National Survey on Student Engagement](#), the University will compare Fall 2005 first-year student perceptions to Fall 2006 first-year student perceptions with the expectation of seeing improvement. In addition, SOAR advisors will be asked for feedback concerning their assessments on how well this initiative successfully communicated to new admits the University's culture and expectations (e.g., did students exhibit a higher degree of clarity about academic expectations?)

Feedback Loop: The University will use the assessment data to evaluate the degree to which this initiative achieved its objectives. Based upon the results, the initiative may be altered before the Spring 2007 next round of implementation.

Initiative 2: Prior to their arrival on campus for classes, freshmen will receive a second letter or e-mail from their GSU 1210 instructor which will warmly welcome them to campus and invite them to participate in freshman convocation.

Responsibility: GSU 1210 instructors and the First Year Experience Center.

Resources: Between 2001 and 2003, the University's number of freshmen enrolled averaged approximately 2,610.²⁰ Using this figure to estimate approximate mailing costs, we anticipate this initiative would require about \$1,000 plus the associated cost of staff time and materials.

¹⁹ 2003-2004 Fact Book, p. 20.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Timeline: Mailings would occur in Summer 2006.

Assessment Measures and Benchmark Criteria: Since the primary objective of this initiative is to promote freshmen participation in freshman convocation, this number will be used as the primary determinant of the initiative's success in meeting its stated outcome. The number of Fall 2005 freshmen attending freshman convocation will be compared to the Fall 2006 freshmen attendance number with the expectation of seeing higher levels of participation. The initiative also impacts a new student's perception of the Georgia Southern campus community, so again, the National Survey on Student Engagement could also be used to help measure the success of this initiative. It is recognized, however, that since several of the initiatives discussed in this section have the potential to impact student perceptions that it will be difficult to determine the individual impacts of each initiative. Nonetheless, this Survey is a valuable tool for assessing the overall impact of the University's plan to achieve its goal of engaging freshmen in the campus community.

Feedback Loop: Based upon the results of the assessment, this initiative will be evaluated, recommendations for improvements incorporated, and the initiative will be implemented a second time in the Summer of 2007.

2. Strategy: Enhance the GSU 1210 orientation course.

As mentioned in the introduction to this section, the University's orientation course has undergone many evolutions since first being offered in 1985-86. The trend has been a movement away from a common standard syllabus with required instructor training to greater variability in course content with less focus on instructor training. These changes have resulted in greater inconsistency in course outcomes. Strategy #2 is designed to ensure that GSU 1210 courses consistently meet their stated outcomes, regardless of the section. Two initiatives are offered to achieve this objective.

Initiative 1: Establish a uniform curriculum for the course that will encourage and facilitate the engagement of students, both inside and outside the classroom.

Responsibility: Task Force of GSU 1210 instructors and the First Year Experience Council.

Resources: Instructor and staff time involved in planning the curriculum modification.

Timeline: This initiative is already in progress, having begun during the Fall 2004 semester. Implementation is scheduled for Fall 2005.

Assessment Measures and Benchmark Criteria: Design and development of a new standard curriculum that clearly articulates stated learning and course outcomes, assessment measures, and benchmark criteria will be ready for implementation in Fall 2006. It is expected that a primary outcome of GSU 1210 will be demonstrated student engagement on campus and in the community. Therefore, the levels of student engagement would be one measure of the curriculum's success in meeting its stated objectives. Furthermore, we would expect students to understand the value of engagement to their learning, so once again, the National Survey on Student Engagement would be utilized to help assess this initiative.

Feedback Loop: The results of the assessment will guide future modifications to the curriculum to ensure that it achieves the student learning and course outcomes articulated.

Initiative 2: Require faculty training that encourages GSU 1210 instructors to value and promote student engagement and to help students make connections between that engagement and life/career plans.

Responsibility: Center for Excellence in Teaching and Office of Career Services.

Resources: Staff time and GSU 1210 faculty time for training.

Timeline: The faculty training curriculum will be developed during Summer and Fall 2005 with implementation of the first training sessions scheduled for Spring and Summer 2006.

Assessment Measures and Benchmark Criteria: One hundred percent GSU instructor training achieved. Our expectation is that this training results in heightened levels of student engagement and student awareness of the importance of engagement in life/career decisions. Again, the National Survey of Student Engagement will be used as one measure for determining the success of this initiative as well as student rate of participation in activities on and off campus.

Feedback Loop: Once the data from assessment is gathered, the results will be used to determine the degree to which the faculty training curriculum is meeting its objectives. Improvements will be recommended and incorporated into the curriculum before the next round of training begins.

- 3. Strategy:** Create systems to identify the interests of students and to measure the quality and amount of student engagement on campus.

This strategy has two initiatives associated with implementation.

Initiative 1: Implement an electronic “student interests checklist” that students complete during their SOAR session, Welcome Week, or GSU 1210 class. This electronic “student interests checklist” will be made available to all University departments so that they can access it in order to direct their programming towards specific interests and to target advertising of events to particular groups (e.g., Eagle grams sent to students who have expressed an interest in Ireland and Irish heritage), thereby facilitating student engagement in on-campus activities.

Responsibility: Office of Admissions.

Resources: Staff time to develop the electronic list.

Timeline: Develop the list during 2005-06 with implementation scheduled for Summer 2006.

Assessment Measures and Benchmark Criteria: The success of this initiative is dependent upon the degree to which departments utilize this resource in their programming efforts; therefore, the number of hits on the web site of the electronic “student interests checklist” will be tracked as a measure of its utility. Furthermore, it is anticipated that if the initiative is achieving its outcomes, the number of students who participate in campus-related activities will rise. This number will likewise be tracked and compared to data prior to the implementation of the electronic “student interests checklist.”

Feedback Loop: The results of the assessment will be used to find ways to improve both the functionality of the electronic “student interests checklist” and communicate its value to departments.

Initiative 2: Promote greater utilization of the student involvement transcript, available through the Office of Student Leadership Development and Outreach Programs. Educate students about the availability, purpose, and importance of this transcript during SOAR and Welcome Week, and promote its use by making it a required element of every GSU 1210 course.

Responsibility: Office of Admissions and GSU 1210 instructors to be responsible for informing students. Office of Student Leadership Development and Outreach Programs responsible for updating transcripts annually.

Resources: Staff time.

Timeline: Since GSU 1210 instructors will need to be familiar with the student involvement transcripts, this initiative must be a component of the faculty training discussed in *Initiative 2* of Strategy #2. Therefore, implementation will be scheduled to coincide with the implementation of the faculty training initiative—Spring and Summer 2006.

Assessment Measures and Benchmark Criteria: Since the main objective of this initiative is greater utilization of the student involvement transcript, we will track the rate of use of the student involvement transcript. Obviously, we would expect the rate increase with implementation of this initiative. Other measures of tracking the rate of student engagement in campus and communities activities will also be used.

Feedback Loop: The degree to which students are making greater use of the student involvement transcript will be used to determine future improvements that can be made to this initiative to ensure that it meets identified benchmarks and outcomes.

- 4. Strategy:** Expand the concept of living/learning communities by using GSU 1210 courses as a vehicle for encouraging greater freshmen engagement on campus—targeting specific student populations.

Three initiatives are proposed for achieving this objective.

Initiative 1: GSU 1210 courses will be linked to other academic courses. These linkages bring together the same group of freshmen for more than one course and facilitate the development of a sense of community. Furthermore, linking GSU 1210 with academic courses provides GSU 1210 with a more academic focus or mission that will promote greater student involvement.

Currently, less than one-half of all GSU 1210 courses are linked to core courses, organized around a theme, or taught by major. Those GSU 1210 courses that are linked, thematically oriented, or major-specific are primarily directed to on-campus students who are already significantly more likely to become engaged in the Georgia Southern community by virtue of on-campus residency. This initiative will be directed toward attracting more off-campus students to these courses in order to more broadly integrate off-campus students in the on-campus student population.

Responsibility: GSU 1210 instructors and the First Year Experience Council.

Resources: Staff time.

Timeline: Course linkages will be developed during the 2005-06 academic year with implementation scheduled for Fall 2006.

Assessment Measures and Benchmark Criteria: Offer **five** GSU 1210 linked courses. One expected outcome of this initiative is a heightened sense of community among the students enrolled regardless of campus residency status. We would also expect to find that the academic focus of the GSU 1210 linked courses results in higher levels of freshmen engagement in campus-related activities. Given these expectations, the National Survey on Student Engagement will be used as one means of assessment to determine the impact of this initiative on first-year students' perceptions of the campus community. Additionally, the rate of freshmen engagement in campus-related activities will likewise be tracked.

Feedback Loop: Based upon this feedback, the GSU 1210 linked courses will be evaluated for possible improvements which will be folded into the curriculum.

Initiative 2: Utilizing the electronic "student interest checklist" (discussed under *Initiative 1*, Strategy #3), design and develop specialty GSU 1210 clusters thematically focused on the interests of undeclared students. Under this initiative, faculty would propose topics based on the interest areas of undeclared students which would also incorporate other issues such as civic engagement, service leadership, or other American Democracy Project topics. Undeclared students taking these courses would thereby simultaneously receive exposure to these larger engagement issues. It is our expectation that this exposure would increase the degree to which undeclared students feel connected with Georgia Southern and result in higher levels of second-year retention for these students.

According to the *2003-2004 Fact Book*, almost half of the University's freshmen class enrolled as undeclared majors in the Fall 2003 semester (n=1,248/2,708 — see pp. 20 & 34). Furthermore, experience has shown that undeclared majors are the hardest student group to retain into the second year. Engaging this student population and imparting a sense of campus community is critical to the University's ability to address successfully retention issues.

Responsibility: GSU 1210 instructors and the First Year Experience Council.

Resources: Staff and faculty time.

Timeline: Since GSU 1210 instructors will need to be familiar with the electronic "student interests checklist," this initiative will also be a component of the faculty training discussed in *Initiative 2*, Strategy #2. Therefore, implementation will be scheduled to coincide with the implementation of the faculty training initiative as well as the electronic "student interests checklist"—Spring and Summer 2006.

Assessment Measures and Benchmark Criteria: Initially, we will design and develop **five** specialty GSU 1210 clusters for Fall 2006 implementation. A primary determinant of this initiative's success in achieving its stated outcomes will be the second-year retention of the undeclared student population who enroll in these specialty sections. A pre-determined benchmark will be established and compared against the second-year retention levels of undeclared students who have not taken these specialty sections.

Feedback Loop: The information obtained from assessment will be used to inform future improvements to the specialty GSU 1210 sections as well as guide the implementation of future roll-outs to include all undeclared students.²¹

Initiative 3: Create additional GSU 1210 courses that are linked to the student's intended major, thereby providing the GSU 1210 courses with a more academic focus and facilitating greater student involvement.

Responsibility: GSU 1210 instructors and the First Year Experience Council.

Resources: Staff and faculty time.

Timeline: Additional major-specific GSU 1210 courses will be developed during the 2005-06 academic year with implementation scheduled for Fall 2006.

Assessment Measures and Benchmark Criteria: Initially, we will design and develop **five** major-specific GSU 1210 sections. These classes will accommodate approximately 125 students. It is the expectation that students who take these sections will demonstrate greater inclination for engagement in campus and community activities; therefore, the number of students participating in campus-related events will be the main measure used to assess this initiative. A pre-determined benchmark percentage will be established for increased levels of student engagement and compared against this groups' percentage of student engagement.

Feedback Loop: The assessment data will be used to inform future roll-outs of this initiative. If assessment measures determine that these focused sections meet the intended outcomes, the number of sections offered will be expanded to include more students. Otherwise, the data will be use to guide improvement in course design to ensure that outcomes are being met before expanding to a larger audience.

- 5. Strategy:** Create a campus culture that values student involvement and a community atmosphere.

Initiative 1: Promote the active involvement of key administrators to model the attitudes and behavior that Georgia Southern seeks to instill in its students.

Responsibility: President's Cabinet.

Resources: Administrators' time.

Timeline: This initiative will be communicated during the 2005-06 academic year with visible results expected during 2006-07.

Assessment Measures and Benchmark Criteria: The key measure for assessing the success of this initiative in meeting its stated outcome will be the degree of heightened visibility of key University administrators both on campus and in the community, but especially at activities that attract first-year students. The terminology "key University administrators" will be defined, and

²¹ The 2003-2004 *Fact Book* identifies 1,248 undeclared students in the Fall 2003. Since Georgia Southern strives for enrollments of no more than 20-25 students in each of the GSU 1210 sections, we would need approximately 50 sections of these specialty clusters.

administrators' progress toward achieving greater involvement tracked through their annual self-reported activities.

Feedback Loop: The initiative will be promoted during the 2005-06 academic year with results expected during the 2006-07 academic year. Feedback will be provided to administrators regarding their personal levels of success in meeting this outcome. Ultimately, this initiative should also lead to higher levels of student engagement since they hopefully will be favorably influenced by the administrators' examples.

DRAFT

Goal 2: Engaging Students in Scholarship, Research, and/or Creative Activities

Georgia Southern University emphasizes the development of its faculty as teachers-scholars as articulated in Ernest L. Boyer's *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*. Our *Mission Statement* clearly references the teacher-scholar responsibilities and these are further outlined in the [2004-2005 Faculty Handbook, § 203.01](#) (p. 27). In particular, the University stresses the **dynamic** nature of scholarship as "the scholarship of discovery, the scholarship of integration, the scholarship of application, and the scholarship of teaching."²² Implicit in the successful implementation of this dynamic paradigm is the element of engagement—not just active faculty engagement with scholarship, but, perhaps even more importantly, faculty educating students about and engaging students in the various facets of scholarship. It is through experiential learning opportunities that students reach the higher levels of comprehension and learning that Georgia Southern expects of its graduates.

While many of Georgia Southern's academic programs require research papers and/or projects from their students, traditionally, this research focuses on gathering data and coalescing ideas related to course content. Students typically are not encouraged to develop original research projects which have long been relegated to the realm of graduate students. More recently, Georgia Southern has witnessed a growing interest in the value of undergraduate research as original scholarship, and there are opportunities available to students. While these opportunities are not new, they are also not promoted as effectively as they might be. Again, it is the opportunity for undergraduates to conduct original scholarship, research, and/or creative activities and share the results of these efforts that is most beneficial to the student's learning. Examples of current activities that inspire original work include the National English Honor Society, Sigma Tau Delta, which sponsors an annual conference at which undergraduates have the opportunity to present papers and panels; and the Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi which through its Promotion of Excellence Grants program promotes research- or development-focused projects. According to the program's criteria, research-focused projects must achieve greater clarity and further scientific understanding about some aspect of the promotion of academic excellence. Georgia Southern also publishes a semi-annual magazine of the arts—*Miscellany*—that features student work, sponsors gallery exhibits of student art work, and hosts concerts featuring student musicians. All of these efforts are open to the public as well.

In addition, the University participates in the Wildgame Supper—an annual spring event which showcases student research to state legislators and other dignitaries. In particular, the Poster Session focuses on undergraduate research and is a competitive event featuring projects done by undergraduate students in collaboration with a faculty member. Each student prepares a 3' x 4' poster describing the project with a two to four minute talk that guides listeners through the poster. The student then accompanies the faculty member to Atlanta to present the research at the Supper. At the event, the students stand next to their posters, and the dignitaries walk by, view the presentations, and discuss the research with the students. Currently, in its fifth year, the poster competition typically attracts as many 30 to 40 submissions. The organizing committee reviews and evaluates all submissions and selects a maximum of 10 for presentation at the Supper. A variety of disciplines have been represented at this event, including, but not limited to, biology, chemistry, physics, computer science, art, business, geology, geography, health, kinesiology, anthropology, public administration, political science, and psychology.

²² Boyer, Ernest L. *Scholarship Reconsidered Priorities of the Professoriate*. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990.

Beyond these formal venues that inspire original undergraduate scholarship, research, and/or creative activity, several academic programs at the University actively promote and/or require undergraduate research experiences. The University Honors Program strives to include a meaningful research experience each semester in the schedules of the honor scholars. This program also requires capstone experiences for its *1906 Scholars*²³, which will be discussed in greater detail under goal four of the Quality Enhancement Plan. While the research undertaken by *1906 Scholars* may not be original, they are required to do a significant amount of research, going far beyond what would normally be required for freshmen at Georgia Southern. This year, first semester *1906 Scholars* prepared extensive annotated bibliographies on a topic of their own choosing. During the second semester, the scholars are expected to write multi-genre research papers of 10-12 pages in length that utilize 7-10 sources and incorporate a variety of disciplines and genres. In both cases, the students are being challenged to select a topic, prepare a thesis statement, and do the research. The questions being asked or the problems posed begin with the students, and the end product is entirely the work of their own labors.

At least two faculty members in the Physics department actively engage undergraduate students in their own research programs. In one case, three students are currently working on computational models relating to Bose-Einstein condensation and are supported by the faculty member's National Science Foundation grant. All three students are working on original research and present their research at professional conferences. One of the students will be presenting a ten-minute talk at the upcoming March meeting of the American Physical Society.

The University's Biology department offers a course, BIOL 4890—Undergraduate Research, which might serve as a model for encouraging more disciplines to provide original undergraduate research opportunities. In BIOL 4890, biology majors tackle a research problem under the close supervision of a faculty member. A written abstract and an oral presentation of the results of the student's work must be presented at an end-of-semester symposium, although the course may be taken over multiple semesters. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this course is of considerable benefit to students applying to graduate and medical schools. Traditionally, the course attracts the most dedicated biology majors; the challenge is to extend interest in the course to other students who may not be as motivated initially, but will have their interest awakened through the experience. Other programs, in chemistry, physics, anthropology as well as programs in the College of Health and Human Sciences, also have formal structures in place for undergraduate research experiences, and the Department of Mathematical Sciences is currently developing an undergraduate seminar that promotes research. Again, the challenge is to reach more students and inspire them to participate in these experiences.

As illustrated above, undergraduate research is a critical component of both the University's emphasis upon student-centered learning and the empowerment of the teacher-scholar model. The [U.S. News and World Report](#) has identified the presence of student research programs as a key indicator of academic programs that lead to student success. A number of the University's peer and aspirational institutions have implemented programs in which “independently or in small teams, and mentored by a faculty member, students do intensive and

²³ The *1906 Scholars* are a select group of University honors students who are encouraged to take more demanding honors core courses. Their course of study also includes a weekly seminar to emphasize