Evaluation Report of
Title III Strengthening Institutions Grant:
Enhancing Persistence through Early Engagement, Experiential
Education and Campus Connection
For
Auburn University at Montgomery
Prepared and Submitted by
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Executive Summary

The overall goal of the U.S. Department of Education Title III Strengthening Institutions grant program is to help institutions become self-sufficient and expand their capacity to serve low-income students by providing funds to improve and strengthen the academic quality, institutional management, and fiscal stability of eligible institutions (adapted from Title III, Part A Program Description). Auburn University at Montgomery has met or surpassed the goal of strengthening institutional capacity in these three areas, using internal and external verification of the original project goals and objectives.

This final evaluation report documenting successful implementation of project goals and objectives was based on an array of quantitative and qualitative reports and data. This evidence of meeting project goals included internal and external documentation:

- campus leadership and support, including AUM President and Provost
- campus site visits, focus groups and meetings with project staff, faculty, and students
- Student-level data on enrollment, persistence, graduation, and course completion prepared by the AUM Office of Institutional Research
- National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)
- AUM's 2026 recognition by the Carnegie Corporation as a Community Engaged Campus
- AUM annual reports to U.S. Department of Education
- Prominent location of Experiential Education and Engagement Center within the Provost's office suite.

Although the statistical and other measurable outcomes are impressive in themselves, project staff, faculty and student participants, and university leadership contributed an intangible but crucial element of success. The original five-year projection of outcomes assumes a best-case scenario that does not include a global pandemic, staff retirements, resignations, illness, local, state and national politics, and other unexpected barriers. Nevertheless, this project met and surpassed expectations in many ways.

Background

Auburn University Montgomery (AUM) received a Title III Strengthening Institutions five-year grant funded at $2,166,930, with original project dates of October 1, 2019 through September 30, 2024. AUM engaged Dr. Marjorie Piechowski to provide external evaluation of project activities, measuring achievements against the goals and objectives proposed in the grant application. The grant proposal listed three Academic Program Goals, one Institutional Management Goal, and one Fiscal Stability Goal, each goal with measurable objectives, tasks and anticipated results. The detailed annual reports prepared and submitted by Auburn University Montgomery provided numerical and statistical analysis of progress toward original goals.

The evaluator, Dr. Piechowski, provided formative evaluation of activities in written reports that recommended actions to project outcomes. EEEC staff reacted positively and implemented these recommendations, including more faculty engagement, more accurate identification of service-learning courses, and improved data gathering and analysis. During two campus visits, she visited community sites, met with strategic planning groups, student peer mentors, faculty research mentors, and campus leadership. This report will use the proposed measurable objectives, baseline data, specific tasks and tangible results to evaluate overall success of this project, truly meeting the goal of strengthening the institution.

Project Abstract: Enhancing Persistence through Early Engagement, Experiential Learning, and Campus Connections

Low retention, persistence, and graduation rates for the institution, particularly for the financially disadvantaged students, underscore the critical need for student success programs that draw upon high impact practices and facilitate persistence and timely graduation of at-risk students. This proposal signals the next step in AUM's history of developing a support system to foster student success and reflects the student engagement goal in the 2019-2024 AUM Strategic Plan. The proposed Experiential Education and Engagement Center (EEEC) will serve as a communication hub for all experiential (including service learning) education and undergraduate research opportunities at the university. Experiential and undergraduate research opportunities will be developed in collaboration with faculty within specific programs and through partnerships with community organizations and firms.

Proposed expenditures include a Program Coordinator who will manage the daily operation of EEEC, a Learning Specialist/Research Coordinator who will assist faculty in identifying opportunities to incorporate best practices for experiential learning and undergraduate research within the classroom and a Data Analyst/Assessment Specialist who will work with representatives from the Office of Institutional Effectiveness to build an on-demand system of student information.

An important component of the grant proposal will be a peer mentoring program established as part of the Freshman Success course and student Success Coaches who will work closely with advisors within advising offices across campus. These students will serve as an additional point of contact for students as they move through their academic careers. The total funding requested is $2,166,936.88 over the five-year span of the grant.

ACADEMIC PROGRAM GOAL APG1. *Increase student engagement with the university.*
Objective AP1.1: Maintain student engagement as measured by the responses to the NSSE questions regarding **academic and intellectual experiences** to match the responses of similar Carnegie-class

institutions by Fall 2024.
Objective AP1.2: Increase student engagement as measured by the responses to the NSSE questions regarding **enriching educational** experiences to match the responses of similar Carnegie-class institutions by Fall 2024.
Baseline Data: For AP1.1, NSSE scores, specifically scores on items 1h, 3a, 3b, 3c (see Table 3) for NSSE administered in 2018. For AP1.2, NSSE scores, specifically on items 7d, 7h, 11 (see Table 3) for NSSE administered in 2018.
Specific Tasks: An Experiential Education and Engagement Center (EEEC) will be developed and institutionalized (with permanent university staff).
Tangible Results: A fully functioning Experiential Education and Engagement Center with staff including a Project Coordinator and Learning Specialist/ Research will be institutionalized and will become available to all incoming students. Peer mentors will be institutionalized within this office as well.
ACADEMIC PROGRAM GOAL APG2. *Establish strong retention and persistence rates for first-year and first-generation students.*
Objective AP2.1: Increase the annual 1st to 2nd year retention rate for **first-year students to** regional average by Fall 2024
Objective AP2.2: Increase the annual 2nd to 3rd year persistence rate for **first-year students** by **10%** by Fall 2024
Objective AP2.3: Increase the annual 3rd to 4th year retention rate for **first-year students** by **7%** by Fall 2024.
Baseline Data: Data for students will be compared to Fall 2018 retention and persistence rates for all first-year students.
Specific Tasks: Implement a peer mentoring program within the Freshman Student Success Course and a Student Success Coach program across the advising offices on campus.
Tangible Results: At the end of Title III support, **Experiential Education and Engagement Center** will be institutionalized and the **peer mentors and success coaches** will be fully funded by the University.
ACADEMIC PROGRAM GOAL APG3. *Establish strong graduation rates for first-time students, particularly those who are high-need.*
Objective AP3.1: Increase the 6-year graduation rate for **first-time students by 5%** by Fall 2024.
Objective AP3.3: Increase the 4-year graduation rate for **transfer** students by **5%** by Fall 2024.
Baseline Data: Baseline data will be compared with 2011 cohort data, which is 27.6%.
Specific Tasks: Develop and institutionalize **Experiential Education and Engagement Center** as described for Objective AP1.1 and AP1.2 above. In addition, implement a **peer mentoring program** within the Freshman Student Success Course and a Student Success Coach program across the advising offices on campus.

Tangible Results: At the end of Title III support, **Experiential Education and Engagement Center** will be institutionalized and the **peer mentors and success coaches** will be fully funded by the University.
INSTITUTIONAL MANAGEMENT GOAL Make Auburn University at Montgomery the institution of choice.
Objective IMG1.2: By Fall 2024, enrollment will increase to 7000.
Baseline Data: Baseline comparison will be enrollment Fall 2018.
Specific Tasks: Develop and institutionalize the **Experiential Education and Engagement Center** as described for Objective AP1.1 and AP1.2 above. Implement a **peer mentoring program** within the Freshman Student Success Course and a Student Success Coach program across campus advising offices.
Tangible Results: By the end of the grant period, enrollment increase will be observed.
FISCAL STABILITY GOAL FSG1. *Improve financial stability by providing infrastructure to increase student engagement and retention, leading to an increase in number of students ultimately graduating.*
Objective FSG1.1: By Fall 2024, through a successful implementation of these Title III activities and other activities related to university expansion, increase enrollment by at least 1500 students (34% enrollment growth).

Achievements in Year Six and Overall Project

The final evaluation asks *How has this Title III project affected the university overall?* Areas to consider area faculty and staff development, service learning, community engagement and field experiences, peer mentor and peer advising programs, internships and undergraduate research, and communication and marketing.

✓ *What successes has the project achieved? Which component of the project is considered to be most closely associated with this success?*

✓ *What challenges has the project faced and what actions were taken in response? Which component of the project is considered to be most closely associated with this challenge?*

✓ *What factors (internal or external) have affected project implementation? What were the impacts of these factors on implementation?*

✓ *What steps have been taken by the institution that demonstrate a commitment to sustainability or institutionalization of grant-funded personnel, programs, and services?*

✓ *To what extent was the project implemented as designed?*

✓ *To what extent were program components implemented according to best practices?*

✓ *To what extent were campus stakeholders involved in implementation efforts? What were campus stakeholders' opinions about the project?*

✓ *To what extent has the project met its goals, its intended objectives, and achieved its intended outputs?*

Major achievements included a significant increase in student research participation, with AUM continuing to provide internal research funds for faculty to engage students in research projects. Provost Mrinal Varma strongly supported student participation in 43 research courses and 15 internship courses, with $23,997 awarded in scholarships for 58 students. Mini-grants ($65,894) for faculty who included undergraduates in guided research projects supported 27 projects. A survey of undergraduate research experiences (94 responses) strongly reinforced the impact of the research experience.

✓ *87% of respondents who completed research projects shared their findings with a poster presentation off campus.*

✓ *37% of respondents contributed to a manuscript intended for a professional journal*

✓ *78% of respondents indicated that their research experiences positively changed their behavior in their courses.*

✓ *91% of respondents indicated that their ability to analyze data and other information improved as a result of participating on a faculty-led research project.*

Several group events demonstrated the impact of service learning, research, creative activity and community engagement. The Service-Learning Expo involved 57 students, 13 faculty, 19 organizations, with impressive feedback:

✓ *100% of students found a non-profit to volunteer with in the future.*
✓ *80% of students reported that they are more likely to volunteer as a result of attending the Service-Learning Expo.*
✓ *100% of participating organizations mentioned that they connected with students willing to volunteer with their organization.*
✓ *95% of respondents mentioned that they would recommend the event to a friend and that they plan to attend next year.*

The Celebration of Research, Creative Activity, and Community Engagement Recognition generated similar impressive outcomes:

✓ *123 attendees*
✓ *112 student presenters/authors*
✓ *53 projects*
✓ *8 community-engaged students*
✓ *4 community-engaged faculty*
✓ *2 community-engaged students*

These project components received widespread publicity and involvement across the campus. A significant indication of faculty engagement in EEEC activities was faculty members becoming presenters and panelists at faculty development sessions, sharing their experiences and encouraging other faculty to participate. Word of mouth and lived experience can be very convincing to faculty peers who have yet to engage in these faculty development activities.

Project management and administration achievements included enhanced communication and publicity activities, including a greatly expanded media presence, tracking system and data collection. Overall, the EEEC has become a visible presence on campus, located just steps away from the Provost's office, ***positively impacting*** AUM, an outcome that would not have been possible without the support of the Title III grant.

Highlights of Year 6

One of the most telling points of the project's success were the positive comments of faculty research mentors and student peer mentors, in separate meetings with the evaluator on the September 2025 campus site visit. Participants

Peer mentors also reflected project success in data provided by AUM in a Peer Mentor Survey and a Mentee Evaluation of Peer Mentors (286 responses).

Peer Mentor Survey Data
- ✓ *94% of embedded peer mentors mentioned that their communication skills improved as a result of peer mentorship.*
- ✓ *87% of mentors mentioned that they were able to engage students during class throughout the semester.*
- ✓ *92% of peer mentors were able to engage students online throughout the semester.*
- ✓ *76% of peer mentors engaged students through their office hours.*
- ✓ *391 interactions were recorded through the Peer Mentor Interaction Log (216 mentors)*

Mentee Evaluation of Peer Mentors (286 responses)
- ✓ *Students interacted with their mentor an average of 17 times throughout the semester.*
- ✓ *82% of mentees indicated that their peer mentor played a role in their academic success in the course.*
- ✓ *92% of mentees reported that their mentor was actively involved in course discussions, reviews, and in Canvas.*
- ✓ *81% of respondents indicated that they strongly agree with the statement that their peer mentor offered support to the course.*

Many of these group events confirmed AUM's engagement in high-impact educational practices, a focal point of the AUM Title III grant project. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) provides comparative longitudinal data for first-year and senior students. The most recent survey of AUM seniors (2024) confirms the positive impact of the Title III grant, comparing high-impact practices reported by seniors in 2018 (before Title III) and in 2024, when the Title III project was fully implemented. Results are demonstrably positive except for Study Abroad, which was not part of this project.

High-Impact Practice	2018	2020	2022	2024
Service-Learning (courses with community project)	59%	51%	54%	73%
Learning Community (formal cohort program)	16%	18%	15%	18%
Research with Faculty (worked on research project)	14%	18%	11%	18%
Internship or Field Experience (internship, co-op, student teaching, etc.)	32%	33%	37%	38%
Study Abroad (any study abroad program)	7%	5%	1%	6%
Culminating Senior Experience (capstone course, senior project, thesis, etc.)	35%	35%	33%	38%
Participated in at least one HIP	78%	76%	76%	94%
Participated in two or more HIPs	44%	46%	47%	52%

Impressive as the positive engagement of AUM seniors in high-impact practices, NSSE also showed that AUM's first-year and senior students compare well with three cohorts: Alabama institutions of higher education, Southeast Public Institutions of Higher Education, and the Carnegie Class of similar institutions (Mixed Undergraduate/Graduate-Master's Large/Medium).

First Year

AUM's first-year students scored significantly higher than other Alabama institutions and the Carnegie Class in reflective and integrative learning

AUM's first-year students scored significantly higher than all three comparison cohorts in effective teaching practices (Alabama Institutions, Southeast Publics, and the Carnegie Class).

AUM's first-year students scored significantly higher than the Carnegie Class in reporting that the *campus environment was supportive.*

Significantly higher – (students average was significantly higher than (p<.05) with an effect size of at least .3 in magnitude).

AUM's first-year students perform at or above average in all four NSSE Engagement Indicators except for Quantitative Reasoning, where we closed the gap from comparison institutions by 2% from 2022.

Seniors

AUM's seniors scored significantly higher than the Carnegie Class in discussions with others, *student-faculty interactions, and a supportive campus environment.*

Significantly higher – (students average was significantly higher than (p<.05) with an effect size of at least .3 in magnitude).

First-Year

AUM first-year students performed significantly better than the three comparison cohorts in service-learning.

- ✓ **72% - AUM**
- ✓ 55% - Alabama Institutions
- ✓ 52% Southeast Public
- ✓ 52% Carnegie Class

AUM first-year students performed better or on par with peer institutions in *faculty-led research.*

- ✓ 8% - AUM
- ✓ 8% - Southeast Publics
- ✓ 6% - Alabama Institutions
- ✓ 5% Carnegie Class

AUM first-year students performed significantly better than the three comparison cohorts in participating in at least *one-high impact practice*.

- ✓ 72% - AUM
- ✓ 55% - Alabama Institutions
- ✓ 58% - Southeast Publics
- ✓ 56% - Carnegie Class

<u>Seniors</u>

AUM seniors performed significantly better than the three comparison cohorts in *service-learning.*

- ✓ AUM – 73%
- ✓ Alabama Institutions – 63%
- ✓ Southeast Publics – 60%
- ✓ Carnegie Class – 60%

Finally, the most recent *external validation of this project's impact on the university* and the community is the following announcement, posted on the AUM website:

Auburn University at Montgomery (AUM) has been recognized with the prestigious 2026 Carnegie Community Engagement Classification (CE), awarded by the American Council on Education and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. AUM is one of only five universities in Alabama to hold the designation, which recognizes an institution's demonstrated commitment to community engagement.

"Higher education is a vital economic engine for us all. Our colleges and universities not only fuel science and innovation, they build prosperity in rural, urban and suburban communities nationwide," said **Timothy F.C. Knowles,** president of the Carnegie Foundation. "We celebrate each of these institutions, particularly their dedication to partnering with their neighbors — fostering civic engagement, building usable knowledge, and catalyzing real-world learning experiences for students."

AUM defines community engagement as "collaboration with our larger communities — local, regional/state, national, global — for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity."

"Our vision includes our aspiration for AUM to be recognized as an integral community partner and a resource for the enrichment and economic development of the Southeast region and beyond," said **AUM Chancellor Carl A. Stockton.** "Now more than ever, institutions of higher

education have a profound responsibility to connect with and serve our local, national and global communities in meaningful ways."

The Carnegie Community Engagement Classification marks AUM's first formal recognition of community engagement as a core part of the university's mission and values, **said Lynn Stallings,** interim dean of AUM's University College and director of the Honors Program. Stallings oversaw the application process along with **Amy Ingram,** director of AUM's Experiential Education and Engagement Center. "This well-respected Carnegie designation provides objective, external validation of AUM's longstanding commitment to community engagement," Stallings said.

Over recent years, that commitment has been reinforced through sustained institutional investment. In 2019, AUM strengthened its high-impact community engagement practices by establishing the Experiential Education and Engagement Center with support from a $2.16 million Title III "Strengthening Institutions" grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

The EEEC has since served as a hub for community-based partnerships. One of the five signature projects highlighted in AUM's CE application is the Shady Street Trailhead and Park, a City of Montgomery revitalization effort carried out in partnership with the EEEC. Since 2020, the partnership has brought together community members and university volunteers to help revitalize the park for public use. The EEEC website effectively summarizes this permanent contribution to Auburn University at Montgomery:

"The Experiential Education and Engagement Center is an on-campus resource with a mission to increase student retention, persistence, and graduation rates through early engagement. We connect students to campus and the community through high-impact practices including peer mentoring, undergraduate research, internships, service-learning, and community engagement. Additionally, we provide support and development opportunities for faculty and staff."

Conclusion:

Auburn University at Montgomery has largely delivered many of the services and activities described in the Title III grant application. The impressive growth in experiential education and community engagement, student retention, persistence and graduation rates has made a significant impact on strengthening AUM, the whole purpose of the Title III grant program.

Respectfully submitted,

Marjorie P. Piechowski, Ph.D.