



AUBURN

MONTGOMERY

AUM

Evaluation Report of

Title III Strengthening Institutions Grant

**Enhancing Persistence through Early Engagement, Experiential Education
and Campus Connection**

For

Auburn University Montgomery

Prepared and Submitted by

Marjorie P. Piechowski, Ph.D.

Independent Evaluator

December 19, 2020

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 EEEEC, 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.

Overview and Introduction

Auburn University Montgomery (AUM) received a Title III Strengthening Institutions five-year grant funded at \$2,166,930 for the project period October 1, 2019 through September 30, 2024. AUM has engaged Dr. Marjorie Piechowski to serve as an external evaluator of the project, 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. For reference, the goals proposed in the grant application are shown below.

Table 6. Overview AUM Title III CDP Objectives
ACADEMIC PROGRAM GOAL APG1. <i>Increase student engagement with the university.</i>
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. <i>Establish strong retention and persistence rates for first-year and first-generation students.</i>
Objective AP2.1: Increase the annual 1 st to 2nd year retention rate for first-year students to regional average by Fall 2024
Objective AP2.2: Increase the annual 2 nd to 3rd year persistence rate for first-year students students by 10% by Fall 2024
Objective AP2.3: Increase the annual 3rd to 4th year retention rate for first-year students 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 with the peer mentors and success coaches will be fully funded by the University.
ACADEMIC PROGRAM GOAL APG3. <i>Establish strong graduation rates for first-time students, particularly those who are high-need.</i>
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 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 with 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 – 5211.
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: By the end of the grant period, enrollment increase will be observed.
FISCAL STABILITY GOAL FSG1. <i>Improve financial stability by providing infrastructure to increase student engagement and retention, leading to an increase in number of students ultimately graduating.</i>
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).

This evaluation report will use these proposed measurable objectives, baseline data, specific tasks and tangible results to evaluate success of this project during the first year of operation. In addition to the grant application, other reference documents for this evaluation

include the 2019-2020 Annual Report of the Experiential Education and Engagement Center (EEEC) that was established with grant funding and a budget report of first-year project expenditures prepared by AUM Contracts and Grants Accounting.

Achievements in Year One:

An important factor in evaluating achievements against goals and objectives is the profound impact of the coronavirus, which effectively closed the campus in spring of 2020. Most planned in-person activities were suspended and classes were converted to online instruction in March, 2020, halfway through the grant's first year. Nevertheless, AUM was able to accomplish many of the proposed tasks and meet several of the proposed goals.

The most significant of these was the establishment of the *Experiential Education and Engagement Center*, including appointing three staff members. These staff members have strong credentials and a commitment to AUM and the program goals.

Other accomplishments included the important task of establishing baseline metrics for student participation in experiential learning and undergraduate research and establishing the peer mentor program. The list of courses and external opportunities for experiential learning is impressive and holds great promise for student participation once the coronavirus no longer affects such in-person activities.

Another accomplishment is determining the baseline for long-term improvement in retention and graduation rates. The underlying and long-term purpose of this project is improved student outcomes so this was an important task to undertake in the first year.

Recommendations for Year Two:

1. Publicize the EEEEC more widely and continuously across campus since it was established later than planned and many of its activities were curtailed, including faculty training

and engagement. This publicity should help to attract and inform more faculty, students, staff and the general public about the existence and value of the center. Strengthening the web page, producing an electronic newsletter and internal and external news stories, especially featuring students, would improve the visibility of the center and its services.

The first-year report does not mention efforts to publicize the program across campus, although there is a web site accessible from the main AUM website. That is a good start for visibility; what is the physical location and how visible is it for students and faculty? Do the EEEEC staff make visits to department and college-wide faculty meetings? How are faculty made aware of the program? Is there any connection with the admissions office to publicize this program to future students?

One of the requirements of Title III grants is presidential awareness and oversight of the program activities. What is the involvement of higher administration in this program? How are program activities and accomplishments communicated to university leadership? Was the annual report widely distributed?

2. Make more use of the federal funds to expand and enhance project activities; the coronavirus left a very large carryover budget after the first year that needs to be applied more vigorously to ensure that project goals and objectives can be achieved more fully and on the proposed schedule. It is possible and allowable to expand from the original proposed activities; the whole purpose of these Strengthening Institution grants is long-term improvements that would not be possible without federal funds, so a rethinking of project goals and objectives should be considered in the second year.

3. Consider using one of the externally validated evaluation tools to provide more robust evaluation of the peer mentors and their experience, satisfaction and growth from the program.

Several excellent examples are available online and there is a rich literature about the use of students as peer mentors. Peer mentoring should be a learning experience for the mentors as well as for their mentees. The evaluation questions used during the first year do not seem to gather much information about the proposed personal skills to be developed as a result of the mentoring process. As the peer mentor program expands, it will be very useful to get feedback from the mentors about the value of the experience for them as well as problems they may have encountered in the mentoring experience. It also is not clear whether the peer mentors can return to serve for more than one year or academic term. It might be useful to have a longitudinal study of peer mentor growth as a result of their mentoring experience as part of the overall project success when the grant is completed.

Another consideration is the grade point qualification for serving as peer mentors, a 2.5 gpa. That seems rather low, midpoint between a B and a C grade. Do the time commitments for serving as peer mentors affect the academic performance of the mentors themselves? Should a higher gpa be considered for serving in this role, since these peer mentors also are role models for the mentees? Many other institutions require at least a 2.75 or even a 3.0, especially when the mentor also is serving as an academic tutor. Your website says that peer mentors should excel in their academics but a 2.5 does not seem excellent.

4. It is not clear how many faculty are aware of this program and its value and benefits to them. Again, as a result of the coronavirus and campus shutdown, faculty participation in professional development focusing on experiential learning and undergraduate research awareness was greatly curtailed. Perhaps some grant funding could be repurposed to provide incentives for faculty to participate in professional development activities. The first-year goal of 40% of faculty was a high metric in the first place, so there needs to be a plan for more intense faculty participation

in future years to make up for the deficit. Faculty participation is crucial to the success of student involvement in undergraduate research and experiential learning so publicity and outreach to faculty should be a goal of the second-year activity.

Another suggestion is to gather more detailed information about faculty participation than a simple sign-in sheet. Are there plans to analyze the demographics of faculty who already participated in development programs? The goal should be broad participation across the curriculum but there was no indication in the report that any analysis was done about the breadth and depth of faculty involvement in such activity.

There also was no discussion of follow-up or evaluation of the impact of this program on courses involving undergraduate research or experiential learning. Is there any indication that faculty changed their course design as a result of this development program? Were new courses developed? Did more faculty participate in undergraduate research activity or plan to do so? A more detailed evaluation of faculty participation would be useful data to measure program success.

5. Data collection for undergraduate research consisted of counting the number of students enrolled in “courses of research type” and “courses submitted through faculty survey.” This is very limited information about the spread and impact of undergraduate research experiences so a recommendation is to design a more robust and detailed method to measure the success and impact of these research experiences. There are many excellent and validated survey instruments available for both faculty and students to measure the impacts of undergraduate research. Using such tools in the second year and following would provide useful information for formative evaluation of this part of the program’s goals and objectives.

The proposed goals and objectives mention the NSSE questionnaire results by 2024 but what kinds of measures are being done in the meantime? How will students participating in

undergraduate research report during each project year before 2024? How often is NSSE administered? Is this the only validated and formal measure of student satisfaction with undergraduate research and experiential learning experiences?

Conclusions:

AUM has made a good start in establishing baseline metrics for the proposed goals and objectives of this project and has delivered many of the services and activities planned for the first year. This is an impressive accomplishment given the unanticipated effects of the coronavirus. However, the goals and timelines for the second year of this project need to be re-examined in light of the curtailed on-campus activities. The most likely scenario is that in-person and on-campus activities will be limited for the rest of the academic year and possibly into the summer so more creative methods may need to be employed to remain on track with student and faculty participation. Budget adjustments also may be required in conjunction with decreased or reimagined project activities. The most important recommendation is to carry on and provide as much as possible of the original program, which has such great promise in strengthening this institution, the whole purpose of the Title III grant program.

Respectfully submitted,



Marjorie P. Piechowski, Ph.D.
External Evaluator

December 19, 2020

