

V. MONTGOMERY COLLEGE STRENGTHS, OPPORTUNITIES, THREATS, AND ISSUES

Montgomery College brings significant strengths to its academic planning for the future and has identified many opportunities to enhance its mission and vision. At the same time, it recognizes that it must be cognizant of threats and address major issues. The Academic Master Plan itemizes six strengths, ten opportunities, seven threats, and nine issues that were identified through visioning sessions conducted at each campus. These strengths, opportunities, threats, and issues have been taken into serious consideration by College administration and will continue to be addressed throughout the College's planning processes.

A. Strengths

- The College's mission is pervasive, articulated, and widely understood. It is very student centered and communicates well to its constituencies.
- Montgomery College has in place a comprehensive portfolio of academic and vocational programs that correspond well to the occupational needs of Montgomery County requiring postsecondary education; the College also has an ongoing process for reviewing and revitalizing those programs.
- The College is committed to providing, to the extent possible, state-of-the-art learning and service environments in support of its mission.
- The College has a productive history of partnerships and collaborations with Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), other higher education institutions, government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and the private sector in finding creative solutions for meeting joint needs.
- Highly qualified and talented College faculty, staff, and administrators are dedicated to assisting students in achieving their educational and career goals.
- The College is well located geographically and enjoys the continued support of the county.

B. Opportunities

- Relatively low educational cost, high program quality, and capacity constraints of the public four-year institutions enhance the College's attractiveness as an educational resource among postsecondary options.
- Expansion of the school-age population and continued immigration into the county will increase demand for postsecondary education opportunities. The county will continue to experience immigration ingress that will allow expansion of enrollment entry through English language training programs.
- Distance learning continues to present an expanding opportunity for growth, especially for the adult learner, and as a contributing solution to the College's capacity issues. Online delivery options may be particularly relevant for courses and programs in basic skills

(student development), health, health sciences, computer and information sciences, business, and the General Education program.

- On-site training programs for Montgomery County businesses—coupled with certificate, noncredit, and partnership programs—represent growth opportunities for Workforce Development & Continuing Education.
- Based on projected occupational needs, the College can anticipate growth potential in computer and information sciences, education, business, management, marketing, the health professions, and biotechnology.
- Partnerships and/or alliances with four-year educational institutions will create opportunities for county residents to complete baccalaureate and possibly graduate work within the county in such fields as biotechnology and the visual arts, areas currently not available at Shady Grove.
- Deepened relationships with MCPS, in conjunction with responsive program opportunities such as the College Institute, American English Language Program (AELP), and the Honors Program, will promote the College, assist in attracting students, and expand its reputation in the community.
- Designation of Silver Spring as an arts center, together with the recent merger with Maryland College of Art and Design, the planned renovation and construction of facilities at the Takoma Park/Silver Spring campus, and the recent initiation of the Arts Institute, present opportunities for the College to have a major leadership role in arts education and entertainment in the county.
- Regional Higher Education Centers, although not consistently funded by the state, have the potential to enhance the College's opportunities in interacting and developing new programs with the University System of Maryland (USM) and with business and industry and in creating additional outreach to potential students.
- The large number of professional persons living in Montgomery County presents an opportunity for the College to expand its resource base for part-time faculty.

C. Threats

- Increasing student demand for higher education will put additional stress on Montgomery College's facilities and support services. The campuses are at or above reasonable capacities. Further, increasing student enrollments may not be met with increases in state or county funds, possibly resulting in higher tuition charges and/or program limitations.
- Continued increases in enrollment among immigrant populations will require the expansion of support services and creation of additional services.
- Competition from nontraditional organizations, proprietary institutions, and corporations will increase to meet the emerging needs of business and industry through the development of certification programs, particularly in areas of highest potential revenue.

- The need for more full-time faculty, coupled with replacement requirements and limits on part-time faculty availability, will meet with heavy competition, especially from higher education institutions.
- Continuing expansion of distance learning will require new funding. International and national distance learning programs, including those of the College's neighbor, the University of Maryland University College, will increase marketing efforts to attract Montgomery County students.
- The availability of need-based student aid will remain a major obstacle for many low-income part-time students who want to pursue academic and career programs.
- Significant and continual funding will be needed to support the development and implementation of technologies in the College's academic and administrative functions.

D. Issues

- The structure of the curriculum and location of programs has continued to change and is not based on student outcomes and student needs.

The program direction survey results indicate significant concerns about the purpose and structure of the General Education program requirements and their transferability. Combined with student needs for student development courses, AELP courses, developmental courses, and advanced discipline courses, as well as the need for the College to develop an outcomes-based approach to student assessment, concerns are raised about curriculum structure.

Other structural issues include the relationship of credit and noncredit courses and the management of their differences when co-taught. Questions exist about program duplication across the three campuses. The College must address the issue of program location, particularly in light of the capacity and facilities issues.

- Students are challenged in having their coursework transferred to USM and other senior institutions.

Repeatedly in the surveys and interview processes, the issue of articulation and transferability of the College's courses was raised. Students must be secure in knowing that their transfer work at Montgomery College will be acceptable at other institutions so that their degree completion will not be hindered or lengthened.

- The College has not optimized its various resources for instructional and program delivery.

While the distance learning strategy is in place and growing as an option, its application is more often than not self-initiated and not managed to meet the long-range needs of the College. This modality presents an opportunity for the College to expand enrollment, deliver quality programs and services, provide students with flexible time and place, and contribute to the capacity solution. Consideration also should be given to other non-classroom modalities, including televised courses, and their future roles. Assessment of distance learning needs to be ongoing to ensure these courses are an effective way for students to reach their goals.

- Outreach and partnership strategies do not appear to be sufficiently coordinated.

Montgomery College is embedded in the businesses, organizations, industries, and agencies of Montgomery County. This is indeed a strength and is consistent with the College's vision that it is the "community's college." At the same time, concerns can be raised about the level of coordination and management of these relationships, particularly in light of survey results and brainstorming outcomes that point to partnerships and alliances as a key element of the College's future.

- Constrained facilities are heavily influencing academic decisions.

Adequate and sufficient facilities represent very significant influences in most academic decisions—from how to offer a chemistry class using collaborative learning strategies in a lab based on individual work to where to put a new faculty hire in the development of new programs.

From its inception, the College has actively and continuously pursued its mission of providing broad educational access to the people of Montgomery County. With changing and expanding demographic and economic trends, the College may have to reconsider or modify this commitment of service because of constrained campus capacities. Under these tight capacity conditions, the College may not be able to provide educational access and a diverse set of programming to all those who desire this opportunity.

- Academic decision making is not adequately connected to a shared understanding of direction by the academic community, nor is it fully supported by academic management information.

There is a general uncertainty by the College community concerning the academic decision-making process and the rationale, criteria, and information that are employed, despite a strong management culture based on shared decision making and collaboration. The processes used are long and difficult to navigate, which is not conducive to timely decisions. Concerns are also raised as to whether decisions are made at the best and most efficient management level. Another major challenge to the College is how to communicate academic decisions and information to key players at all academic levels. How can the College's academic community be informed as to academic changes that are being contemplated and decisions that have been made? How can the major academic players be apprised of what is occurring? Timely academic information does not appear to be disseminated to those individuals who are involved in the planning and administration of academic programs, leading to inefficiencies and frustration.

Finally, all levels of academic management need to be provided with relevant and timely data. Effective decision making requires that such information be available. Currently, most management information is stripped from administrative databases and focuses on aggregated financial and enrollment types of data. Since most data are collected to support administrative decision making, it is only of partial utility to the academic user. Few customized reports directly support the various academic program decision makers. For example, obtaining information such as the costs for English instruction across campuses would have to be done offline and would require a special one-time effort. Similarly, obtaining information concerning future program enrollments, faculty needs, and space and equipment requirements by using past, current, and projected data would be very difficult. Academic information based on valid and

reliable data is lacking at all levels of the College from Central Administration to the operating units; however, the program users are most seriously impacted. Information is essential to make informed decisions that can result in improved performance.

- The College's planning projections are not aligned with academic program strategies.

The Facilities Master Plan and the supporting processes for annually updating facilities needs and projections have set overall growth targets for the three campuses. Plans for new facilities to be constructed, one on each campus, are not anticipated to meet capacity constraints and projected enrollment growth. In addition, these construction projects are not linked with specific academic strategies that will allow the College to shape enrollment trends to meet those projections. Some strategies for the College to consider include expansion of the schedule to provide for a Weekend College and/or a full third semester, enrollment caps, program relocations, and distance learning options.

- Academic management appears uncoordinated and is not sufficiently supported at all levels.

The College has developed an implicit policy of organizing and operating in the most cost-efficient manner possible, and one attempt to achieve this has been through the continual delegation of new assignments to existing personnel. This has resulted in situations where less than effective practices have been implemented, particularly in academic areas. It can be questioned whether sufficient resources have been allocated to support the College's academic programs at all management levels, from the department chair to the executive vice president.

The College, similar to many other academic institutions, is continually confronted by the need to expand academic and support programs, and at the same time is restricted by the availability of resources. This has led to situations wherein persons holding existing management positions, particularly many of the best and most productive individuals in the College, are often assigned numerous additional duties. While the addition of a single new responsibility may be manageable, over time the accumulation of new responsibilities can be overwhelming and result in not only operating inefficiencies but also ineffective performance. Since adequate support staffing, including assistant and associate deans and directors, professional staff, and secretarial support staff, are not available, new responsibilities must be implemented by existing personnel.

Responsibilities are often given to a committee, temporarily assigned to an individual on an overload basis, or simply pushed to an even lower level within the College. This phenomenon exists at almost all levels of the College. An example is the short-term assignment of faculty to management activities as part of the College's faculty development program. While individuals are bright and able, they often are placed in positions where they have little or no knowledge about the requirements of the position and are not provided adequate training. In many situations after learning the job, they are then cycled back to their former positions or moved to other jobs. This approach results in costly "on-the-job training," relatively high turnover, and a waste of talent and expertise.

Another good example of this overall approach can be seen at the dean's level. As new needs are identified, these individuals are required to assume an increasing workload with no relief from existing assignments. Since they play a key leadership role in their areas, it is essential for them to be involved in many new and expanding activities, but resources must be provided if they are to be effective. In addition to accomplishing a particular new assignment, time-consuming coordination and meetings with other deans and administrators throughout the

College are often required. The campus vice president provosts are confronted with similar situations, which are exacerbated by their assignment to both campus programs and college wide initiatives.

- Strategies for implementing the concept of “One College” are not clearly articulated.

The College has embraced the “One College” concept that seeks to provide comparability of experience, yet is distinguished by each campus’s unique students, programs, and culture. An important prerequisite to the establishment of this concept is to define its underlying assumptions and to determine the policies and actions required to successfully implement it. Currently, varying levels of understanding and support of the concept by the several campus constituents exist in regards to its desirability, operational effectiveness, and potential outcomes.

Several College practices reinforce the perception that the College is not a singular entity but reflects the individual identities of the several campuses. One of the most obvious is that the hiring of new faculty is frequently done at a campus level and not at the college wide level. No policy requires representatives from all similar disciplines or programs from all campuses to participate in the search process. Once employed, faculty are assigned to a specific campus, which they view as their home base. Part-time faculty are hired at the campus level although they can teach at multiple campuses. These personnel practices tend to negate the perception of a unified College management model. Another example is that the services provided to distance learning students differs significantly by campus.

The College must reconcile what programs and services should be college wide and determine when the College brand is the critical factor or when campus identities should be distinguished.