

**BOARD OF VISITORS
GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY**

**Planning Conference Meeting
July 25, 2024
MINUTES**

PRESENT: Rector Horace Blackman and Secretary Mike Meese; Visitors Armand Alacbay, Lindsey Burke, Ken Marcus, Bob Pence, Nancy Prowitt, Nina Rees, Jeff Rosen, Marc Short, Cully Stimson, and Farnaz Thompson.

ABSENT: Vice Rector Jon Peterson; Visitors Reg Brown, Anjan Chimaladinne and Dolly Oberoi.

ALSO, PRESENT: Will Gautney, Staff Representative; Solon Simmons, Faculty Representative; Maria Cuesta, Student Representative; Carolyn Faith Hoffman, Student Representative; Gregory Washington, President; Ken Walsh, Executive Vice President for Strategic Initiatives and Chief of Staff; Jim Antony, Provost and Executive Vice President; Deb Dickenson, Executive Vice President for Finance and Administration; Trishana Bowden, Vice President for Advancement and Alumni Relations/GMUF President; Scott Hine, President of Alumni Association; Anne Gentry, University Counsel; Board of Visitors Committee Faculty Representatives, Members of the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees, Members of the President's Council, and Sarah Hanbury, Secretary pro tem.

I. Call to Order

Rector Blackman called the planning session to order at 8:17 a.m. and expressed excitement about the opportunity to assess where Mason is and where it is going. He noted that Mason is in the middle of a \$1 billion capital campaign (Mason Now: Power the Possible) and is currently \$539 million from the goal. Rector Blackman solicited donations and introduced Dr. Washington for opening remarks.

II. Welcome Remarks & State of the University

Dr. Washington provided remarks with the following highlights:

- Bottom Line Up Front:
 - Mason is performing in alignment with Governor's higher education agenda.
- Higher Ed in Crisis:
 - One university is failing per week due to economic challenges.
 - Four institutions in Virginia are growing: University of Virginia, Virginia Tech, William & Mary and Mason.
- Higher Ed in Crisis – Are We All Together Different:
 - National Challenges:
 - Value proposition in question: Mason's solution is that it has the highest ROI in the state.
 - Economic challenges: Mason's cost of attendance has grown less than inflation.
 - Enrollment cliff: The official start of the enrollment cliff is 2026, but most are already experiencing it. Mason has had continuous enrollment growth and is limiting growth to 1.5% to ensure infrastructure can support it.
 - Mental health crisis: On-campus mental health support has been increased by 35%, in addition to implementing TimelyMD to provide students with access to 24/7 care.
 - Academic disciplines are under scrutiny.
 - National Headline:
 - Cost of college: The cost of college has exploded. Mason's cost of attendance has been moderated since 2019.
 - Student debt: A college education equates to lifelong debt. At Mason, the average borrower owes less than \$26,000, and per-student debt has declined.
 - ROI of a college degree: The ROI of a college degree is declining. Mason's ROI has never been higher.
 - To summarize, Mason's reality does not align with the higher ed crisis headlines.

- George Mason Challenges:
 - Operates in one of the top 10 most expensive regions in the country. Faculty struggle to find affordable housing within a 50-mile radius.
- Changing Athletics Landscape:
 - Will cost \$400,000 a year to compensate athletes.
 - Need \$4.5 million in permanent funding over the next three years to compete in men's and women's basketball. This amount covers just the student-athletes and does not include coaches.
- 2023-2024 Presidential Performance Metrics:
 - The metrics are meant to be specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound.
 - All priorities met except growing graduate and law school enrollment by 1.5%, indicating that Mason is doing well.
- The Youngkin Administration's Higher Education Agenda:
 - Governor Youngkin's four pillars were highlighted:
 - Prepare students for high demand jobs in Virginia:
 - Points of emphasis:
 - Redefine success as career-aligned job attainment, efficient attainment of credentials and degrees, and continual upskilling and reskilling for all. Dr. Washington expressed Mason has been doing this for years.
 - Prioritize aligning curriculum, programs, and requirements with our state's most in-demand workforce needs. Mason has added more new academic programs than all its four-year, public institution competitors combined, focusing on the programs with the highest demand. Additionally, Mason has discontinued more programs than its four competitors.
 - Promote a vibrant, safe and healthy campus:
 - Point of emphasis:
 - Value and promote a campus culture that embraces and prioritizes free inquiry, civil discourse and a commitment to free speech. Dr. Washington stated that there is not another institution in the state that is more committed to free speech than Mason.
 - Maintain affordability and reduce the cost of higher education.
 - Build the college and career ready pipeline in partnership with K-12 schools.
 - Mason is either far exceeding the points of emphasis or doing fine with room for improvement.
 - How overall enrollment is trending over time (governor's data):
 - Over the last four years, total fall enrollment headcount by degree level has increased by 1.5%, which was intentional.
 - Expanding to address talent and economic needs, rather than pursuing growth for its own sake.
 - How much excess wages are generated by higher-ed degrees vs. high school degrees (governor's data):
 - Mason graduates are earning a median income of \$64,000 annually, with their earning potential increasing over time.
 - Virginia high school graduates earn less than those with degrees, and their earning potential decreases over time.
 - How wages for the largest programs compare to other schools (governor's data):
 - Overall, Mason is making a positive difference in most areas.
 - Increasing enrollment does not mean decreasing quality (freshman deposits vs. student GPA):

- Number of 4.0+ students has increased as well (27% of entering freshman class).
- Greater than 70% of the entering class has a 3.5 or above.
- Mason leads the state in transfer students and has increased the number of colleges participating in the Mason Virginia Promise by six.
- Transfer students have an 80% completion rate with receiving their bachelor degree in a six-year period. The national average is 18%.
- Student Success: All demographics at Mason graduate at about the same rate.
- The Mason Difference – What do I see: broadly diverse, fiercely inclusive, supporters of academic freedom, and innovative.
- Our Plan for Success FY25 – Redefining Excellence:
 - The following four pillars are aligned with the strategic plan and in alignment with the items that have to be accomplished this year:
 - Students First
 - Believes in developing a student bill of rights, which will be created in conjunction with the students.
 - Free Speech Campus
 - Apollo-like internship program. Have an internship experience prior to graduation.
 - Reducing Cost of Degree:
 - Reduce the cost of the degree by 2% per year for five years.
 - Decrease time to a degree:
 - Mason has two lab schools through the governor’s program, with only one other institution in the state having more.
 - One of the lab schools offers the ability to obtain a degree in three years. By removing a year, this reduces the cost of the degree by 25%.
 - Grand Challenge Focus:
 - Two types: Level One and Level Two. Level One challenges can significantly reduce our way of life, while Level Two challenges disrupt our way of life.
 - Mason’s research will focus on addressing the challenges within these levels.
 - So Many Problems That Need Solutions:
 - To put in programs to solve the following:
 - U.S. Self-Harm Rates
 - Teens with Depression
 - Cumulative Gun Deaths
 - Obesity
 - Overdose Deaths
 - Why, AI, why now?
 - To do more in artificial intelligence (AI) through a holistic approach.
 - More than 60% of Mason students that were polled are using AI.
 - An institution-wide recognition of the centrality of AI to the future of knowledge creation, scientific discovery, creative expression, workforce development, and campus operations is needed.

- In the short term, graduates won't lose their jobs to AI; they will lose their jobs to peers who know how to leverage the technology.
- Most will need AI basics, not expertise:
 - Just like a basic understanding of the internet is needed.
 - 1% of the population are AI visionaries, 9% are AI manipulators, and 90% are common AI users.
 - Currently, the DMV has the highest need for AI workers in the U.S., even higher than Silicon Valley. This is because the largest customer of AI, the federal government, is located here.
- Partner or Perish:
 - Why develop/expand our campus and why do it through partnerships:
 - Student growth has significantly exceeded the number of rooms of Mason's residence halls.
 - Current capacity will not allow for a sophomore residence hall requirement. Studies show that students perform better when on campus.
 - Existing athletic and exercise facilities that were built in 1981 are antiquated and/or obsolete.
 - The individuals who planned and developed this campus willed the land on West Campus to fuel the university's growth.
 - Mason is the largest university in the state and utilizes the smallest foot print.
 - It is believed that housing can be built at no cost to the university through developers.
 - Process of Evaluation:
 - Is it aligned with the mission, can it be leveraged, and can it generate resources?
 - The Association of American Universities (AAU) recently inducted Arizona State University. There is no reason why George Mason University shouldn't be included as well, as it exceeds ASU in many ways. Gaining membership in the AAU is a lengthy process, so Mason is planning to implement a 10-year strategy to achieve this goal. AAU membership represents the highest level of quality an institution can attain.

Dr. Washington concluded by noting that Mason was birthed out of partnership and believes that partners are needed to continue our success. Partners have helped in four areas: resources, philanthropy, through connections, and through advocacy.

III. Introductions – New Board of Visitors Members

Rector Blackman introduced Ken Marcus, Nina Rees ('93), and Marc Short as the newest members of the BOV. He congratulated Vice Rector Peterson on his reappointment and added that he needed to depart for travel; Secretary Meese chaired the remainder of the session.

IV. Corporate Workforce & Alignment with Academic Degrees

Liza Wilson Durant, Associate Provost, Strategic Initiatives & Community Engagement,

facilitated a discussion with Julie Coons, President & CEO, Northern Virginia Chamber of Commerce and Jennifer Taylor, President & CEO, Northern Virginia Technology Council. Julie Coons and Jennifer Taylor lead two of the largest organizations in Northern Virginia, with missions to accelerate technology innovation and promote world-class workforce development. Both leaders have extensive experience in the nonprofit and technology sectors, providing valuable perspective on the workforce landscape. Dr. Liza Wilson Durant posed the following questions of both panelists:

- Question 1: What are the biggest challenges you are hearing from your constituents, and what are some of the barriers and challenges to meeting those workforce demands:
 - Answer, Ms. Coons:
 - Structural Challenges: employers, especially in government contracting, face difficulties filling workforce gaps independently and require a collaborative, holistic approach to address these issues.
 - Demand and Supply Gap: There is a significant gap between the demand for skilled workers and the available supply, necessitating more efficient solutions to bridge this gap.
 - Technical and Soft Skills: The rapidly changing technological landscape demands updated technical skills, while employers also emphasize the importance of soft skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and teamwork. Educational institutions, including universities and community colleges, play a crucial role in developing these skills.
 - Leveraging Diversity: The region's diverse population is eager to work, and collaborations with community colleges are helping to address workforce needs, but continued efforts are necessary to fully leverage this potential.
 - Overall, a concerted effort from educational institutions, employers, and other stakeholders is needed to create a skilled and adaptable workforce.
 - Answer, Ms. Taylor:
 - Research Study: Working with McKinsey on a research study, to be completed by early September, involving top leaders from major companies like SAIC, Google, Microsoft, Micron, Nvidia, and Northrop Grumman. The study aims to identify opportunities and challenges for our region's technology hub through surveys and aggregated data, highlighting the region as a leading tech hub driven by federal government modernization.
 - Access to Talent: The major challenge identified is access to talent with the right skills. Government contractors often require staff with advanced degrees, presenting an opportunity for George Mason University to meet these needs through its strong programs in data engineering, cloud computing, and cybersecurity. Additional challenges include the high cost of living, but George Mason's location and familiarity with the area provide an advantage for students and local talent.
- Question 2: How important are degrees:
 - Answer, Ms. Coons: Credentials are important and highly valued. An apprenticeship is important, but a degree is more critical for the government. A four-year degree is still essential, along with experience.
 - Answer, Ms. Taylor: A degree is not always required if the candidate has the proper skills.

V. Fulfilling Our Vision: How *Power the Possible* is Transforming Mason

Trishana Bowden, Vice President for Advancement and Alumni Relations/GMUF President presented the following fundraising philanthropy information.

- The first \$1 billion comprehensive campaign in Mason's history will power Student Success, Research, Innovation, Community, and Stewardship, all of which have similarities to Governor Youngkin's agenda.
- As of July 1, 2024, \$461 million has been raised, outpacing the previous campaign by a 2:1 ratio.
- Dr. Washington would love to close the campaign early and aims to exceed the goal.
- Strategy and Engagement:
 - Emphasis on partnerships and collaboration with schools, colleges, and units within the university.
 - The importance of alumni engagement and increasing the participation rate in giving.
 - Highlighting the significance of endowed chairs and the impact of philanthropy on the university's mission and goals.
- George Mason University Foundation:
 - The foundation's role in receiving, managing, and investing private gifts for the university.
 - Importance of aligning donor intentions with the university's needs and priorities.
 - Emphasis on increasing the endowment and the long-term impact of endowed funds.
- Volunteer Leadership and Alumni Engagement:
 - Recognizing the contributions of volunteer leaders and their role in advancing the university's mission.
 - Examples of successful volunteer engagement and the importance of storytelling in fundraising efforts.
 - Encouragement for alumni to give to specific funds that resonate with their personal experiences and interests.

To conclude, Ms. Bowden expressed gratitude for the support and dedication of the university community, emphasizing the transformative impact of philanthropy on the university's future.

VI. Lunch Recess

Secretary Messe called for lunch recess at 12:03 p.m. and advised the planning session would reconvene at 1:15 p.m.

Secretary Messe reconvened the planning session at 1:17 p.m.

VII. Building Financial Sustainability & Effectiveness

Deb Dickenson, Executive Vice President for Finance and Administration, presented Growth & Efficiency: Building Financial Sustainability & Effectiveness:

- Personnel Changes:
 - Recognition of departing leaders: Jackie Ferree (Senior VP), Mary Lucal (VP and CHRO), and Sharon Heinle (VP for Finance, retiring in December).
 - Introduction of Michelle Lim (Interim VP) and Julie Zobel (Chief Risk Officer and Interim Senior VP).
- Budget Update:
 - Overview of the budget process and update since the May meeting.
 - The university has a balanced budget with a slight positive margin on an all-funds operating basis.
 - Education and General (E&G) budget is still managing a deficit, with a plan to close the gap by the end of FY 25.
- Budget Details:
 - Total budget update reflecting the latest state budget.

- The Virginia Military Survivors & Dependents Education Program (VMSDEP) received additional funding, reducing the shortfall from \$13 million to \$9 million.
- Emphasis on budget mitigation actions and cost-saving initiatives across the university.
- Position Eliminations:
 - Explanation of position eliminations across academic and non-academic units.
 - Most eliminated positions were vacant, avoiding layoffs.
 - The process included critical vacancy reviews and new position additions where needed.
- Capital and Deferred Maintenance:
 - Overview of funding sources for capital and deferred maintenance projects.
 - Highlighted major projects: Fuse building in Arlington and Life Science and Engineering building in Manassas.
 - Deferred maintenance remains a challenge, with a goal to increase funding to meet benchmarks.
- Efficiency Initiatives:
 - Significant funding disparity between George Mason University and peers like Virginia Tech.
 - State support per student is much lower for GMU, creating challenges in compensation and retention.
 - Advocacy for equitable funding is a key focus for the university.
- Key action items include updating the classroom technology plan, conducting a staff compensation study, and continuing advocacy for more equitable state funding.

VIII. Keynote: Generative AI – A Force for Positive Disruption

Dr. Washington introduced, Ravi Pendse, Vice President for Information Technology and Chief Information Officer, Special Advisor to the President for India, Professor of Engineering Practice in Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, University of Michigan

Dr. Pendse provided the following information:

- Overview of AI initiatives at the University of Michigan.
- Importance of AI in educational institutions and its role in increasing efficiency.
- Michigan's approach to integrating AI, including developing personalized AI assistants for students and 24/7 AI tutors.
- Emphasis on responsible use of AI, human in the loop, and continuous training for faculty and students.
- Future plans to make some AI tools open source and collaborate with other institutions.

IX. AI Across Mason Nation

Dr. Washington introduced, Amarda Shehu, Associate Vice President of Research, who provided the following information:

- Overview of AI research, education, and workforce development at George Mason University.
- Emphasis on responsible AI innovation and interdisciplinary collaboration.
- Examples of AI initiatives including robotics, large language models, and AI for policy and ethics.
- Pilot projects such as the generative AI chatbot "PatriBot" for student assistance.
- Strategic initiatives to transform George Mason into an AI-powered university.

X. Reflections & Closing Comments

Dr. Washington closed the meeting by thanking everyone for their engagement and participation.

XI. Adjournment

Secretary Meese relayed that the Executive Committee meeting scheduled for the following morning has been canceled due to a lack of quorum and that the Annual Meeting would begin at its normally posted time. He adjourned the session at 4:08 p.m.

Prepared by:

Sarah Hanbury
Secretary pro tem