

Summary of Small Group Sessions Conducted September 2014

Preface

The higher education landscape is undergoing a revolutionary transformation due to a highly competitive marketplace and rapid technological change.

To meet these challenges, and as a supplement to the University of Maryland University College's strategic planning process, President Javier Miyares invited global business leader and UMUC Board of Visitors Chair Mark Gerencser to lead a team of volunteer, outside experts in a process called *ideation* that included a far-reaching evaluation of the higher education environment.

The Ideation Group's goal was to identify opportunities and challenges that are most relevant to UMUC and to offer recommendations.

As part of the process, the Ideation Group reviewed UMUC's existing business model as well as alternatives that would help the university achieve a sustainable growth path.

The group completed its work and recommended that the most effective business model going forward would be a not-for-profit entity affiliated with the University System of Maryland.

Key points:

- UMUC needs a sustained growth rate of 5–7 percent per year to be able to keep tuition down and continue to invest in academic quality and innovation. As a tuition-driven university that receives relatively little state funding, this can only be accomplished by increasing enrollment.
- In its present form, as an institution that primarily serves Maryland citizens and military personnel, it has become increasingly difficult for UMUC to achieve this level of growth, because Maryland is a relatively small state and the military is shrinking. So, the university must compete for students on a national basis.

- To do that, UMUC needs a business model that allows for greater flexibility to compete with large state universities and for-profit institutions while maintaining its historic public mission and purpose.

On July 10, 2014, President Miyares initiated a community dialogue on the Ideation Group's report in a global Town Hall meeting at the university's Academic Center at Largo. The purpose was to seek input from faculty, staff, students, alumni and other stakeholders on the findings of the Ideation Group as part of the process of review by senior leadership.

At the Town Hall, President Miyares emphasized that, while the Ideation Group explored a number of business models, the university will *not* become a for-profit entity, nor will it leave the University System of Maryland. He also indicated that, once community input was received and assessed, he would offer a recommendation to the USM Chancellor and Board of Regents for their consideration.

Input was sought through a variety of means including a new "UMUC Future" Web page, which offered background, updates, resources and answers to frequently asked questions. The president also met with the university's advisory councils and members of the undergraduate and graduate faculty, offered views on specific subject areas via his blog and responded to e-mail and blog comments.

This process broadened during the month of September with the initiation of a series of seven focus group sessions (including five face-to-face sessions in Largo and Adelphi, Maryland, and two global WebEx focus group sessions for university stakeholders across the nation and overseas). These roundtable discussions were specifically designed to allow faculty, staff, students and alumni to talk about their ideas of the university's path forward and how UMUC should change. Most participants were selected because they showed an interest by submitting comments after reviewing the information on the university's UMUC Future Web page.

The focus group sessions were conducted as qualitative research designed to elicit individual views and responses. One hundred eighty-eight UMUC community members from around the world were invited and 67 participated. These individuals self-selected to participate, and these sessions did not produce quantitative data that could be used to extrapolate the views

of the entire university community. To stimulate open and frank conversation, the participants were assured of anonymity. Participants in the small groups were reminded that no final decision had been made about organizational change and that their comments would help inform President Miyares as he considered what to recommend to the Chancellor and Regents.

Written synopses of each roundtable were drafted, and the following summary draws on those comments to sum up the hopes, challenges and concerns the participants voiced, not only about the proposal but also about the state of the university. This report divides the comments into nine themes, some of which focused on operational matters.

The sessions were designed to elicit individual comments, suggestions and criticism. No attempt was made to have the groups come to consensus. There were some common themes that emerged across the sessions. Comments ranged well beyond the Ideation Group's recommendations about organizational structure and included past and present operational concerns.

This summary is being shared with university administration for evaluation and where appropriate, action. In recent weeks, President Miyares launched several initiatives which address some of the concerns expressed. These initiatives include a study to update the university's strategic plan; an effort to more clearly articulate the university's vision, mission and goals; and a discussion to better define the cultural aspirations for the future of UMUC.

Overview About Potential Organizational Change

On the whole, the participants supported the mission of the university to provide low cost, quality education with the backing of the University System of Maryland to adult learners who are seeking innovative ways to complete their bachelor's degree or seeking advanced degrees that help their careers. Some participants said the mission had not been clearly articulated.

While many said they were worried about what this [the business model recommendation] means for them personally, they were relieved that President Miyares promised to grandfather in their benefits, and they hoped that included the generous health benefits. The decision to remain in the University System of Maryland and not seek for-profit status helped reduce anxiety, some said.

Several said they were glad the university is exploring new ideas, especially to free it from state regulations. They appreciated the opportunity to have some input and hoped the university's leadership would take seriously their concerns. Some volunteered that once a decision is made, they are ready to get behind it 100 percent, whether or not they agree with all of it. Some, who had UMUC degrees, told how the opportunity to get an education through such a flexible learning system changed their lives and enhanced their careers.

The Need for Change

One participant said he is glad President Miyares is doing something because it sounds as though doing nothing would damage the university. Recent layoffs have been bothersome, he said, so if the leadership can figure a way to restore the university's health, it should be supported.

UMUC has the worst of all worlds now with its connection to the state government, one participant said. The state required furloughs when the university didn't need them during the recession, but now that the university needs financial help, it is not forthcoming. The university should have more control over its revenue.

How an organization is regulated makes a big difference in how it can operate, one participant said. Going from a state entity to a nonprofit would put UMUC on a more level playing field with other nonprofits, making it better able to compete for students. As long as the quality of education and the university's mission remain intact, then he is in favor of it.

As a state entity, said one, UMUC must be so transparent, and it takes so long to get an idea to market, that the competition knows what we are doing and can beat us. Certain things just can't get done as a state entity, one said, because of "the stupidest" rules and regulations. Few people at the university understand that, so the leaders need to do a better job explaining it.

A couple of participants asked if it would be possible to find a case study of an institution that has left the state of Maryland to see what happened to it and to its employees. The University of Maryland hospital could be one. But, said another, nonprofits usually have endowments. Not only does UMUC not have one, it will lose the money it now gets from the state if it no longer is a state institution. Where is the money going to come from? The 5-7 percent

enrollment increases that President Miyares said are necessary do not seem possible without a major increase in support, one participant said.

One person said he could see the benefits of being out from under the state payroll structure. While the university could cut salaries, it would also have the ability to save jobs by paying less, which might be good in bad economic times. The university also would be able to give larger pay increases because individual pay would not be subject to state regulations. Whatever decision is made, we can't go back, warned another. Putting out this idea without specifics makes UMUC seem like it is throwing a bunch of ideas up against a wall and seeing what sticks. It's hurting our reputation.

How the Ideation Study was Prepared

Several participants expressed concerns about how the ideation study was conducted. No educators were on the committee responsible for this proposal, said one. An educational institution should not be guided by a secret committee without any educators, another participant said.

One asked why the committee limited the investigation to seven models. Perhaps creating a nonprofit center within the university would be the way to go. He was suspicious that the Ideation Group's report was presented only as good news. Unless some cons are presented, he didn't think everything had been examined.

One said she wants to see more information from the Ideation Group, not just a video and executive summary. It's great we are providing feedback, said another, but it would help if we had a proposal greater than a one-sentence idea.

One asked whether the Ideation Group has worked out a strategic plan that looks at the university's present strengths and weaknesses, looked at its operations and laid it all out on a chart. He didn't see how UMUC could change the business model without a strategic plan.

One participant said he understood the reasoning the Ideation Group gave for its recommendation, but he could not understand the rationale for rejecting some of the other ideas. His favored solution is subordination—putting UMUC back under the University of Maryland, College Park. The Ideation Group rated

that as easy to do but did not assign it much potential value, he said. He believes there is great value in adding College Park's alumni base and opening the door to a huge market that is already known. It also gives an instantaneous nationally recognized brand. So why did it rate so low in value?

One participant complained about how the proposal was dropped on us "like a bomb." One participant would have liked to see more conversation about the seven options. Nothing that has been made public gives the pros and cons of other options so that we understand why the Ideation Group chose this one option. He said the tone of what is being said is, We do this or we are all going to die. It has created a lot of fear, doubts and resistance because we don't know what would happen. He said he has concerns about what would happen to the value of his degree.

One participant questioned the underlying premise that the university has to grow. It has become the nation's largest public university because of its military contracts. So, if the military is cutting back, why does it still have to be the nation's largest public university? This participant asked, Why not downsize and continue to provide a quality education? Several participants said they were concerned that the Ideation Group had not presented a risk assessment of its proposal. One asked how UMUC could make an informed decision when only the pro arguments have been presented. Another said there must be cons to this proposal. But when he raised that question online, he said he got an evasive answer. Have they done pros and cons? Or are they hiding something?

If the plan succeeds, the university in 15 years could be global with a brand name that stands for quality, a couple of participants said. But if it fails, and people would rather go to their local online universities, then UMUC would be weakened financially with poorer oversight, and no way to go back, one participant said.

One participant called the proposed change an incredible opportunity but still called for an independent risk analysis. If the analysis does not turn up unintended consequences, then the university should go with the change because it provides the university an opportunity to do something completely different, and that is good.

Mission

The mission of the university seems to be getting muddled, a couple of participants said. It must be brought back into focus, one said. The university lacks a clear mission, said another. Is it education? If so, what type? Or is the mission growth? If it is, then say so. But there must be a North Star for everyone to follow. If a clear mission were established and a plan for improving the university were clearly stated, then the faculty and staff would be willing to do everything they can to make it happen. The people are hungry for this. They would work 12 hours a day if the mission were defined and the leadership inspiring, she said.

The focus of UMUC has been lost, said another. Is it online or not online? Is it trying to reach out to working adults or not? Is it just for military? It's all over the map. The eight-week curriculum is not popular. The online courses are not popular. People want more face-to-face. Hybrid seems to work, but eight weeks is a tight timeline, one participant said. Instead of focusing on who we are and what we have to offer, one said, we need to focus on who the students are, what they need and how we can help them.

We have to do things that make us thought leaders once again to get us ahead of the curve of higher education trends, one participant said. That's how UMUC succeeded for so long. There's nothing wrong with eight-week classes, but they shouldn't all be eight weeks. There's nothing wrong with online books, but not all books can be free online. We have a constituency that's a tapestry of different needs. If we want to grow, we can't be a one-size-fits-all.

Branding and Marketing

The biggest concern by far among the participants is the branding of the university. Now that universities with nationally recognized names are pushing into the online market, how can UMUC compete? Now, they say, too much of its reputation is tied to people thinking it is the University of Maryland, College Park.

Our students often come to us because they think we are the University of Maryland, College Park, said one participant. If we come up with a new model that emphasizes that we are not, then what are we? If we shine a light on our difference, it could chase students away who want to be part of a university

with higher name recognition. But another countered that as long as the university is within the Maryland system and the change doesn't affect accreditation, what difference does it make?

This proposal appears to be comparing UMUC to the "very bottom feeders" such as the University of Phoenix, one said. That is comparing ourselves to the wrong people. Competing with Phoenix is a race you can't win, a couple of participants said. UMUC can't compete with Phoenix's huge marketing budget. Our value is our Maryland brand name. We need to have our own niche. UMUC should be in a different market from the for-profits, one said. It should be for people seeking a "near College Park experience" rather than people who probably will fail after taking out student loans.

In the growing competition from other state universities for online students, UMUC must offer something special to students that they can't get elsewhere, said one. If it doesn't, the numbers inevitably will be whittled away. A couple participants said the only way to compete with brand-name schools coming online is by providing a quality education and improving name recognition.

UMUC grew because it pioneered online education and was the most convenient way for an adult learner to get an education, said one. That advantage is gone. That means we are now competing on brand. But what is our brand? If our only advantage is open access, then smarter students will go elsewhere.

If the goal is to attract students nationwide, one participant asked, what would UMUC offer to attract a student in California to enroll here rather than pursuing an online education from a California state university? UMUC must do something to get national attention. For example, Georgia Tech is offering a master's degree for \$7,000 and is attracting a lot of students because a name-brand school is offering something so inexpensive. UMUC's flagship programs are cybersecurity, MBA and data analytics. If the cost is reduced significantly for these program, people will start talking about the university nationwide and the numbers will go up for all programs. One said that while he got a great education at UMUC, no one recognizes the name now that he lives in Philadelphia. At the same time, Penn State is marketing online degrees and graduates get a Penn State diploma, which is nationally recognized. (He has seen Penn State billboards in the Raleigh-Durham airport.) Therefore, it might be best for UMUC to become a subdivision of College Park, he said.

Too many prospective students think it is a for-profit school like Strayer and Phoenix because they see lots of ads for it, said one participant who deals with applicants. That means UMUC has to do a lot more to emphasize that it is part of the University System of Maryland.

Retaining students is linked to brand name, said a staff member. Some students will take a few courses here because they are inexpensive and convenient, but then they transfer to College Park because they really don't want their degree to say UMUC. The Ideation report was all about structure and efficiency in making a decision, one said, but it didn't include anything about how to grow the brand name outside of Maryland and the military. Only the academic offerings and the quality of the brand name will let this university grow. Branding and marketing are intertwined, and several participants had ideas of how to better market the university. UMUC's advertising is broadcast to a lot of people who do not need its services, one said. The university needs to target its advertising more directly. Why are there not ads in the University of Maryland Diamondback, asked one? That's 40,000 people that should be UMUC's best market.

Don't give up on military marketing, said another. The university has a great reputation there, and military cutbacks will produce many more veterans seeking an education to get into the civilian job market.

An untapped market in the United States is Hispanics, said one participant. And, since UMUC's students are about two-thirds female, there must be a way to attract more men, she said.

If the university must charge higher prices for out-of-state students than in-state students, it will have trouble marketing outside of Maryland, a couple of participants said. Do Penn State, Southern New Hampshire, Central Michigan and Arizona State charge higher out-of-state tuition, one asked?

Student Retention

Retention of students is as big or bigger challenge than finding new ones, several participants said. The higher the graduation rate, the happier the students are and the more likely they are to recommend UMUC to friends, said

one. We are losing that word of mouth because students are leaving here angry. Student success does not seem to be a priority, said one. We have students taking six, seven courses in a semester and we let them. We'll take their money. We don't tell them that they will be back again because they will fail. More personalized service would help with student retention, said one participant who works in an off-site location. She gets thousands of online queries because the call center doesn't give individual attention. People in her office can follow up to make sure things are going well for those students and that they are enrolled for the next semester. Those students tend to stay in UMUC while others drop out. More one-on-one work would do wonders in retention, she said.

Students have too much trouble getting answers to questions, one participant said. You tell students they have to call student accounts for this and financial aid for that and student services for another. They are left with a long list of phone numbers. At Strayer, a student can go to one place and get all questions answered. But at UMUC, students put in a lot of phone calls and often don't get their calls returned. Students also are frustrated because they must rely on adjuncts who are operating out of other schools and don't know how to help them. The students need more handholding. All this frustration leads to departures. With all the changes going on at UMUC, one said, the university must do a much better job of communicating to students about how these changes will benefit them to get a quality education at an affordable cost, one participant said.

Technology Concerns

Many participants said they were frustrated by the university's technological problems and felt that solving them is essential to attract a national online student body and retaining students. Some of these participants were alumni who had attended several years ago. One said that what propelled UMUC to its former glory was being ahead of the curve in technology. It has lost that edge, and it should be a top priority to regain it.

The online application is ridiculous, one said. UMUC has become more difficult for students, not easier, one said. It should be a leader in providing streamlined services to make it easy for students to apply, pay, get their courses scheduled and get questions answered, but those services are broken. One person who had taken courses recently said what was innovative were

not the courses but all of the obstacles to the learning system. If he had two hours to work at night, he would take an hour just to figure out the changing learning platform. If the school could get more money for course development that made the classrooms more personally interactive, it could get ahead of the competition, one participant said. But the cost is not cheap.

One participant said the university's website often is wrong and academic offerings are missing. Getting it fixed seems to take an act of Congress. If potential students can't find a program on the website, they go elsewhere. One participant described a computer problem that caused her considerable trouble while she was working on the MBA program. When the software was changed halfway through her program—without telling the students the change was happening—it created a weird glitch on her transcript that makes it appear as though she had transferred from somewhere else. As a result, when she shows her transcript to prospective employers, they ask why she transferred from UMUC to UMUC? Another participant said she had taken online courses at Phoenix and at North Central University. The tech support she got from UMUC was the worst of the three. UMUC's tech support did not want to look into a problem until several students said they had the same problem. She said she felt like there was a wall between her and tech support. The attitude was, It's your problem because you don't know what you are doing.

Removing barriers to enrollment and student satisfaction could become the university's new brand: the online university with the human touch, one participant said. Implement a keep-it-simple approach; streamline customer service. Instead of having to explain the latest bottleneck, one said, we can work with the students to help them decide what they want to study.

Administration

Regardless of the organizational model the university adopts, many participants saw several structural problems with the present system that are holding back the university from growing and providing a quality product. The university's infrastructure is broken, compared to other universities, said one. In his 27 years in academia he has never seen so many assistant, associate or senior vice presidents in a university. An infrastructure that's all over the map cannot implement change, he said. One participant asked, Why do we have all these buildings that are half empty? Why are we so top heavy

with vice presidents? Why did you get rid of everyone we need to do our day-to-day job? You just got rid of all of the IT people we need to do our job but you just hired five more AVPs, and we have this building that's empty, one said. All of these new vice presidents not only get in the way of student-professor relationships but also get in each other's way, said one. Another participant questioned why consultants are brought on for exorbitant fees while the expertise exists on staff. One person noted that, in his department, he could not offer raises or increase staff, but he had millions of dollars to spend on contractors and consultants because that money was in a different bucket.

One participant said he could see huge benefits with changing the business model, but it won't work unless the university's "culture of mismanagement" is changed. In fact, he said, with less state oversight, things could get worse. A new era may need entirely new leadership to change the culture, said one.

Morale

Several participants said low morale at UMUC was an overarching problem. The students see in the paper that UMUC is planning all these changes but they don't understand them, said one participant. They wonder if their degrees will be worth anything. They think the university is about to topple. UMUC can't just change the business model and expect to succeed, said another, because the business is academics and the two are tied. Are students and faculty leaving because of the operating model or are they leaving because of the decline in the academics?

Layoff procedures have been awful, one said. Employees don't know when they are coming, so everyone is on edge all the time. Said another, the way layoffs are done, with people escorted out the door the same day, is demeaning. Another said he worked at a place that had layoffs but that gave the employees 60-day notices without any problems. The present system undermines loyalty and drives away good employees before they are laid off. Adjuncts are the face of the university for the students, but they feel like they are at the bottom of the totem pole, said one.

Many of the changes UMUC has undertaken recently have caused problems for faculty and students, several participants said. One participant said the university has had too many changes packed on top of each other. In an

attempt to do everything as quickly as possible, academic quality has declined, he said. Added another, all these changes are being pushed through while the faculty and staff are being cut, leaving the work to a skeleton crew.

If our brand is being the most convenient university, then we have a lot to do, said one. All of the reorganizations have been like having a patient on the operating table without anesthesia, and we keep cutting into him until we can find out what's wrong. President Miyares called for innovation, innovation, innovation, one said, but most of the innovations have been putting patches on a tire; with so many patches, we don't know what the tire looks like. When one initiative was beta tested, it had all the bells and whistles that made it work, another said, but when the final product arrived, it was nothing but the basic shell. We tested something we didn't purchase. We are often told to push through an initiative and then we can come back and perfect it later, complained another. But then another new change comes along and we never have time to go back and fix the earlier one. Added another: Then we find out changes were made because of what some corporation wanted, not what we needed to be able to monitor our students.

This is a global university, said one. It will take time to make any changes. We are changing too many things at the same time. We can't measure the results. If we were to fail, we are not going to know why. Then we will spread the responsibility, no one is going to take the blame and we will start all over again. A couple of participants complained that the university's decision to go completely to free online textbooks has deteriorated academic quality. Free online resources are fourth rate, one said. Free textbooks don't exist, said another. It would be okay if students could purchase an e-book at a lower price than a printed text. But the new requirements mean courses must be put together with free online resources. Links to them often break. He said he had a link lost in the middle of an eight-week session and had to scramble to put the course back together. Another said there is a lot of free online information. But access to it must be maintained in UMUC's library so it is always available. That takes time and money. Some students want textbooks that they can leaf through and read, said another.

An instructor participating from Europe said the strategies for changes stateside should be different from the ones for the European division, whose main client is still the military. The military has a lot of control over where and when we teach, he said, and bringing a lot of changes from Adelphi gets tricky.

Specifically, he said, there is a policy that forbids adjunct faculty from teaching more than seven hours a session. That makes sense stateside because anyone teaching more than seven credits must get benefits. But in Europe, adjuncts don't need UMUC benefits because they are mostly foreign nationals whose governments pay their health care costs and retirement benefits. But when UMUC reduced European faculty by 50 percent, it put more teaching burden on adjuncts. Now UMUC cannot offer enough classes because of the limit on the number of hours an adjunct can teach.

Ideas for New Offerings

The participants offered several ideas for changes and new offerings. To attract and retain students, the university should create a better pipeline between the university and employers, said one participant, so that a student knows where jobs will be available when they graduate. One participant said that UMUC needs more of a physical presence near Metro stops in Washington because that's where the students are and so many universities have set up classrooms there.

Undergraduate courses must focus on teaching skills that will get jobs, one participant said. Replacing the homeland security undergrad program with public safety administration was a bad idea because undergrad students don't care about learning administration to help their careers in the future. They want to learn practical skills that allow them to get out of school quickly and get jobs now.

One person suggested that UMUC create short certificate programs that would train people in a specific skill. That would get them a foot into the university and they might expand their participation to get a full degree. Another suggested that UMUC work with professional organizations that require classes for recertification of licenses. Finding the right mix of online, face-to-face and hybrid courses is essential, a number of participants said.

One participant, who teaches on military bases, says a number of students don't want online classes. They like face-to-face and the handholding. If the university is going to do mostly online, then the technology has to be the most up-to-date, and students have to be walked through the process gently so they understand it.

UMUC opportunities in Asian markets was the main topic during one focus group discussion. One participant said she used to work in Asia where she saw a lot of demand for American universities. If UMUC already has a worldwide presence, she said, why couldn't it partner with other universities? Wouldn't there be a way to reach for enrollment of students in countries where UMUC already is situated either on or off military bases? Another participant said UMUC has a couple of partnerships internationally, but the partnerships are limited because UMUC has chosen to be associated with the military and to come under the status of forces agreement that generally bars it from taking students who do not have a direct U.S. military connection. One participant said that even if UMUC can't teach those students directly in the foreign countries, it could use its presence in those countries to recruit students for online courses. Professionals overseas are always looking for educational opportunities. Even if there is a regulation or law blocking local partnerships, the least we can do is help these students find UMUC courses online.

Another said he works in Asia, and UMUC is able to reach out to local nationals where the governments have permitted it. In Japan, UMUC can reach out to foreign nationals as long as the majority of the students in the class are Americans, according to U.S. Forces in Japan instructions. In Korea, it's more restrictive. The government does not allow UMUC to market to local nationals. But if foreign nationals work on U.S. bases, they can be allowed entry to classes. It is a good idea to market to them, as long as UMUC Asia is not providing the courses. A participant who taught in China for a New Jersey university said many people around the world want to learn English and the American system. Many countries are willing to fund that. China is paying to build an entire university. There's a lot of money there for people who want American English. It is a lucrative market.

Conclusion and Next Steps

This summary of the focus group sessions has been conveyed to university leadership for evaluation and, where appropriate, action. Some participants who commented on operational problems indicated they graduated from UMUC several years ago. Some of their concerns have already been addressed and efforts are underway to ensure that appropriate steps have been taken or are in progress to resolve remaining concerns. In addition to addressing the operational concerns, President Miyares has launched initiatives to update the

UMUC strategic planning process; articulate vision, mission, and goals; and define cultural aspirations for the future. Moreover, President Miyares said he will carefully consider the views of faculty, staff, students and alumni in making his recommendation about organizational change.

If you have comments you would like to add, please do so now so they can be considered before President Miyares finalizes his recommendations to the Chancellor and Board of Regents of the University System of Maryland. (LINK to UMUC Future website).

(Summaries of the focus sessions were prepared by journalist Gil Klein with input from facilitators Blair Hayes, Robyn Seabrook and Ford Rowan. The process was overseen by Michael Freedman and Maureen David.)