

SPRING 2021 INNOVATION COMMISSION FINAL REPORT

JUNE 11, 2021

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Innovation Commission was formed during Spring 2021 to reflect on the lessons of the pandemic and generate bold, innovative ideas that could position George Mason University to continue advancing toward becoming one of the nation's leading public research universities. The commission began with a thorough discussion of Mason's mission, strengths, and weaknesses. A clear emergent theme was that the notion of *access to excellence* is core to our institution and has the potential to be a key differentiator for Mason among R1 universities.

Commission members reviewed a variety of resources related to Mason, the commonwealth and National Capital Region, and the broader landscape of higher education, and engaged in extensive ideation to generate a range of potential innovations. The commission evaluated ideas according to their fit with Mason and their potential impact. Ultimately, the commission agreed on five overarching recommendations and eight sweeping innovations for consideration. The eight innovations ranged from evolutionary to revolutionary in scope. All were viewed as potentially transformative for Mason.

OVERARCHING RECOMMENDATIONS WERE AS FOLLOWS:

1. Mason should *prioritize* the initiatives it considers as primary and ensure adequate funding and infrastructure support to sustain top-priority initiatives long-term.
2. The work and recommendations of Mason's Anti-Racism and Inclusive Excellence Task Force should play a prominent role in the future of the institution.
3. Mason's branding and marketing requires serious attention and investment, which will hopefully be addressed by the newly formed Brand Advisory Council.
4. Mason should create a systematic method to connect major university efforts to each other and to ensure major groups are regularly updated on what is being done elsewhere.
5. Mason needs to continue its efforts to address salary concerns for faculty and staff.

PROPOSED INNOVATIONS WERE AS FOLLOWS:

1. **Debt-free university.** Every undergraduate can graduate free of student debt.
2. **Guaranteed on-campus employment.** Every undergraduate student is guaranteed employment on campus.
3. **Office of Pre-College Programs.** This would serve as a home for a dramatically expanded Early Identification Program and facilitate further pipeline efforts.
4. **Experiential learning for every student.** Experiential learning is provided in every degree program at the university.
5. **Re-envision approach to promotion and tenure.** The criteria for tenure and promotion include recognition and reward of activity that is of significant value to the institution.
6. **Hybrid remote/in-person work as norm for staff.** Some degree of telework becomes the expected starting point in Employee Work Profiles for all positions.
7. **Culture of staff/faculty mentoring.** Mason develops a robust infrastructure and set of supports for individualized mentorship and career progression across all employee types.
8. **Revamp infrastructure and incentives for extramural funding.** Each academic unit receives strong investments in research infrastructure and develops incentives for faculty to engage in grant activity commensurate with their disciplines.

INTRODUCTION

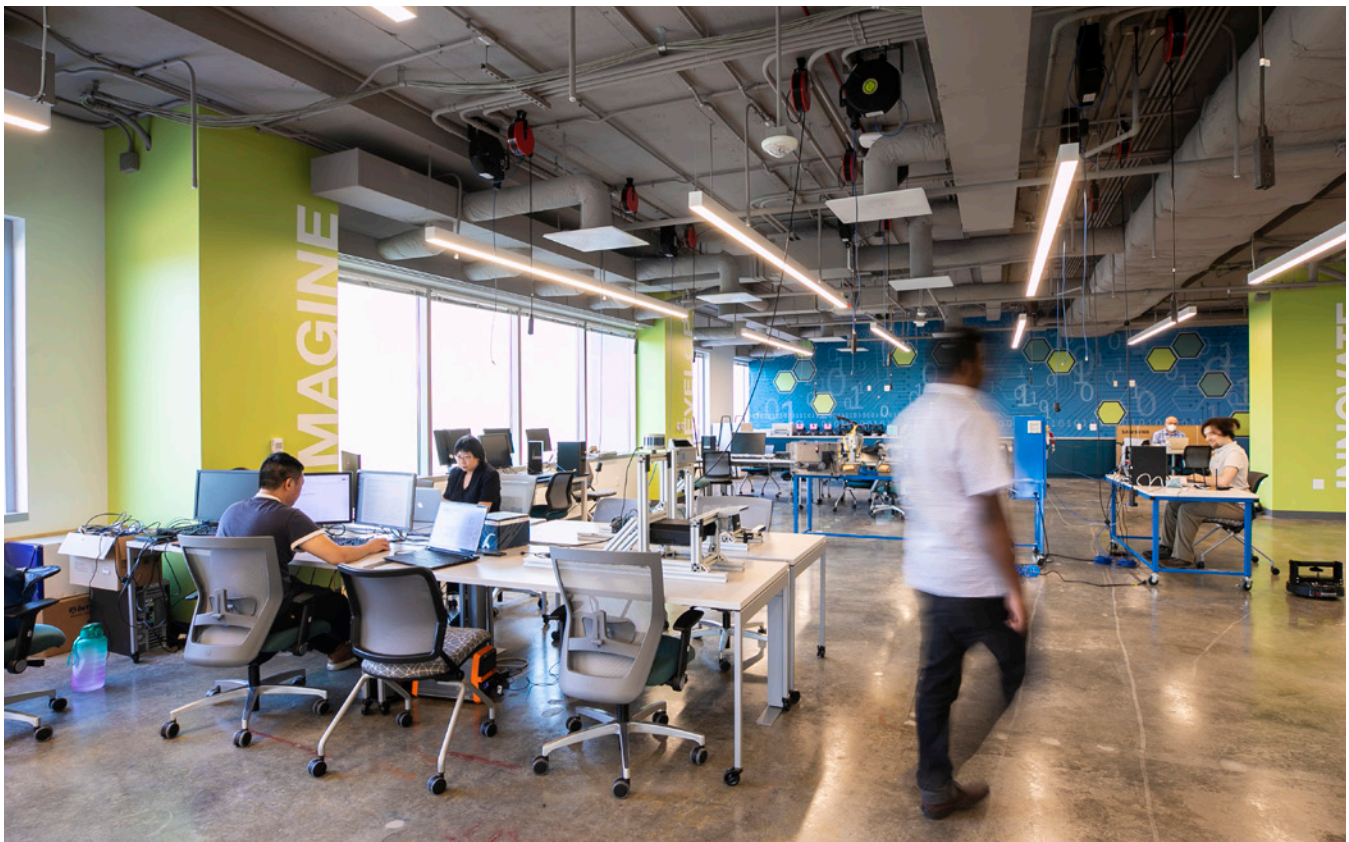
In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and racial inequity crisis in the United States, George Mason University's President Gregory Washington established the Mason Innovation Commission during the spring semester of 2021. The full charge to the commission is presented in [Appendix A](#). The following excerpt provides a summary of the motivation for the formation of the commission:

Following the framework of the Mason Idea; Innovation, Diversity, Entrepreneurship, and Accessibility, George Mason University has set its sights on being renowned for world-class leadership in teaching, research, and service. Our campus is currently managing three simultaneous national crises: A raging pandemic, a racial inequity crisis, and a financial crisis. These challenges represent a real existential threat to operations as we know them, and they have already altered the manner in which we conduct business as a university.

While there are current challenges, the time has come to plan for our future in a post-pandemic society. It would be a missed opportunity if we endeavor to return to pre-pandemic operations without leveraging the changes in our society and the lessons the pandemic has taught us.

The commission was tasked with reflecting on the lessons of the past several months and making "*specific and bold recommendations for positioning the university to continue on an accelerated path to become among our nation's leading and most respected institutions of higher education.*" These recommendations will be broadly shared across stakeholders for the campus community and provide input to the upcoming strategic planning effort, which will kick off during the summer of 2021 and be completed during the 2021-22 academic year.

The commission membership was drawn from across all the academic units and from academic and administrative leadership. Members were nominated by deans and senior leadership and appointed by the president. A complete membership listing is presented in [Appendix B](#). The timeline of activity is presented in [Appendix C](#).



COMMISSION PROCESS

Initial Grounding

The full set of agendas and meeting notes are accessible [here](#). To ensure that our thinking would be grounded in identifying key innovations that were *right for Mason*, the commission began its work with two primary efforts. First, we reviewed key data related to Mason's strengths and weaknesses relative to other public universities, especially among R1 institutions (see [Appendix D](#)). Second, we engaged in a thorough discussion of the core of Mason's overarching mission and a broad SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis. The graphical results of these discussions are shown in [Appendix E](#) and [Appendix F](#).

The review of data and discussions generated broad agreement among commission members that the notion of "access to excellence" is a key element of Mason's core identity and a key strength of Mason. More specifically, we focused on Mason's dual strengths in (a) producing high-quality, high-impact research and scholarship, as reflected by our R1 status, and (b) being accessible and inclusive, with a strong commitment to (and record of) high levels of success across a very diverse student body. These strengths were also seen as a key opportunity to differentiate the Mason "brand" from that of our R1 peers.

Other aspects of general agreement that emerged from these discussions were that Mason has key strengths in interdisciplinary research and curricula, and that Mason has a collaborative, striving culture, with high-achieving faculty and staff who are deeply dedicated to the university's mission. There was also widespread agreement that key internal weaknesses and external threats included current salary levels (particularly given the cost of living in the area), a lack of adequate infrastructure to support the work of the institution and the dramatic growth in the student body, the upcoming decrease in college-aged students across the United States, and what was seen as a major deficit in the public identity and branding of Mason.

One point that generated significant discussion with commission members was the historical focus on "innovation" as part of Mason's identity. Some members expressed a belief that this focus should be reduced or eliminated, whereas others felt that innovation had been key to our rapid growth and emergent strengths. There was broader general agreement that a "culture of innovation" may not be what Mason needs now to solidify and build upon the strengths that

have emerged over the years. Instead, what our group saw as a critical need was a stronger infrastructure to support the long-term execution of innovative initiatives.

Other points that emerged from our discussions were: (1) our location in the National Capital Region was seen as a strength but not necessarily as a defining element of our core identity; (2) we need to do more to capitalize on the extensive unrealized opportunities for engagement with employers and the broader community in our region; and (3) we need to recognize and connect the important, large-scale efforts being done in multiple areas across the university.

Ideation and Evaluation

With this shared understanding of Mason's core mission and existing environment, subsequent commission discussions focused on innovations that could support Mason's mission. Using our own evaluation of Mason together with the areas of the charge laid out by President Washington, we identified four overarching areas of potential innovation: (1) Student Experience, (2) Faculty/Staff Experience, (3) Programs, and (4) Infrastructure. Subgroups were formed to address each of these areas.

Subgroup members reviewed Mason-specific data and documents (e.g., current six-year plan submitted to SCHEV), as well as articles, documents, webinars, and other forms of information related more broadly to innovation in their areas (see full set of resources consulted [here](#)). The subgroups met independently to generate ideas, then reported to the whole commission to obtain feedback and identify additional potential initiatives to be explored. In the context of these iterative discussions, the commission also evaluated the 11 areas laid out in the President's Charge, to identify gaps and discuss whether further ideation was needed to address any gaps.

Subgroups then independently evaluated their potential initiatives across several dimensions: (1) relevance to the core features of Mason, (2) general feasibility, (3) where the initiative fell on a proposed spectrum from "evolutionary" to "revolutionary," and (4) a subjective assessment of the potential impact. These evaluations were presented to the full commission for further discussion, after which, all ideas were prioritized by commission members independently, using a dot voting method.

COMMISSION PROCESS

Outcomes

Ultimately, the commission arrived at a set of five overarching recommendations and eight sweeping innovations that we believe should receive strong consideration in future strategic planning. The commission also discussed several additional sweeping innovations that did not rise to the level of being included in the report—a list of these is included in [Appendix G](#).

OVERARCHING RECOMMENDATIONS

First, the commission strongly recommends that Mason prioritize the initiatives it considers as primary and ensure adequate funding and infrastructure support to sustain top-priority initiatives long-term. Providing that type of support will involve making decisions about some initiatives that will not be pursued as primary—such prioritization is essential to the long-term success and viability of our key initiatives and will help bring greater clarity to our brand and public identity.

Second, the commission strongly endorses the importance of Mason's Anti-Racism and Inclusive Excellence (ARIE) initiative. Our nation is in the midst of an awakening and reckoning with issues of racism, inequities, and inclusion. The broad scope of the ARIE work is precisely the type of university-wide focus that is needed to propel us forward not only in addressing these issues at Mason but also in becoming a national leader in this work.

Third, the commission recommends that Mason's branding and marketing requires serious attention and investment. It is essential to crystallize Mason's brand and public identity to successfully compete for students, recruit and retain a diverse faculty and staff, and strengthen fundraising and philanthropic efforts. The newly formed Brand Advisory Council should provide an excellent venue for such work, which we view as critical to Mason's future success.

More broadly, the commission recommends that Mason devise a systematic method to connect major university efforts to each other and to ensure major groups are regularly updated on what is being done elsewhere. Examples of such efforts include but are not limited to: (1) the Anti-Racism and Inclusive Excellence Task Force, (2) the Graduate Education Reimagine Task Force, (3) the University Master Plan, (4) the Quality Enhancement Plan on Anti-Racist

Community Engagement, (5) the Tech Talent Investment Program, (6) the COACHE Faculty Engagement work, and (7) the Brand Advisory Council. These are but a handful of major initiatives aimed at addressing crucial aspects of the university.

Finally, the commission strongly endorses the continued work by the university's administration to address salary concerns for faculty and staff. Without strong improvements in our salary support, we are at risk of losing talented employees who are committed to our mission but simply cannot justify remaining in a high-cost-of-living area without adequate compensation.

INNOVATIONS

The Mason Innovation Commission proposed eight sweeping innovations for consideration by the university as it moves into its strategic planning in the coming year. These innovations are tied to our perception of Mason's core mission of "access to excellence"—namely, maintaining and increasing the highest level of research and scholarship commensurate with an R1 institution, while maintaining and increasing our accessibility to and support for learners from all backgrounds, and providing them with the educational experiences they need to succeed and thrive in their professional and personal lives as Mason graduates.

Innovations 1–3 focus on accessibility, Innovation 4 focuses on the student educational experience, Innovations 5–7 focus on faculty/staff work and career progression, and Innovation 8 focuses on research infrastructure. The innovations range from evolutionary to revolutionary in scope. Some are less dramatic than others and, in that light, may seem less innovative. From the perspective of the commission, however, all were viewed as innovative and potentially transformative for Mason.

INNOVATION 1

Debt-Free University

CHALLENGE/OPPORTUNITY

A major impediment to a college education for a wide swath of the population is the financial cost. Even with academic aid, students often [struggle to afford the full cost](#) of a public research university, which includes room, board, and the cost of experiential learning opportunities (e.g., study abroad, research experiences, internships). From a societal standpoint, U.S. student debt is now [more than \\$1.5 trillion dollars](#), second only to the mortgage debt in America. Importantly, student loan burdens and loan defaults disproportionately impact [first-generation students](#) and [students from communities of color](#).

INNOVATION

Becoming a **debt-free university** for undergraduates would revolutionize Mason's mission of accessibility by creating the potential for all students—regardless of background—to obtain a quality education from a prestigious R1 institution, without fear of crippling economic consequences. Students would be able to focus fully on their academic endeavors and begin their post-academic careers at an economic advantage.

KEY IDEAS/CONSIDERATIONS

- Consider a menu of financial options for students, possibly including:
 - Guaranteed On-Campus Employment for four to six years (see Innovation 2)
 - 10-Year Academic Contribution Deferral
- Have students who use the Academic Contribution Deferral sign a “Declaration of Financial Contribution Aspirational Intent,” wherein students are encouraged (not required) to repay costs that were waived for them, after 10 years.
 - Base repayment on income over the 10-year period, with adjustments of the declared “Aspirational Intent” as needed.
- Offer proactive career support services for 10 years post graduation.
- Create partnerships with employers to hire Mason graduates at competitive wages based on our track record of providing superior talent to the National Capital Region and beyond.
- Offer additional discounts to students who continue at or return to George Mason for graduate degrees or certificates.

IMPACT

Becoming a debt-free university would require substantial investment on the part of the institution and the commonwealth. Doing so at a large, R1 institution like Mason would truly operationalize the notion of *access to excellence*.

INNOVATION 2

Guaranteed On-Campus Employment

CHALLENGE/OPPORTUNITY

As noted in Innovation 1, a major impediment to a college education for a wide swath of the population is lack of financial means. Given this cost, it is no surprise that [43 percent of full-time and 81 percent of part-time college students](#) are employed on a part-time or full-time basis. Mason students frequently cite work as a primary reason for being unable to engage in meaningful community and/or career-building experiences that would enhance their overall education.

INNOVATION

One component of the “debt-free university” proposal (see Innovation 1) is a financial option that could be moved on independently: **guaranteed on-campus employment for any student who needs and wants it.** Given the large percentage of first-generation and Pell-eligible students at Mason, on-campus employment may be an ideal mechanism to provide a paid learning and engagement opportunity that can support students and enhance their connection to the university community as students and, subsequently, alumni.

KEY IDEAS/CONSIDERATIONS

- Use the *Handshake* and *Growth* programs in University Life to provide the technological infrastructure that supports the process and assessment/evaluation of student employment across the university.
- Use a combination of Federal Work Study (FWS) and non-FWS positions to meet demand.

IMPACT

Developing an institution-wide culture for student employment and creating conditions that facilitate high-impact employment practices would allow students to meet their financial obligations, experience less stress due to commuting/travel time between work and school, better connect to campus support networks, and increase their career readiness. The opportunity may be particularly useful to international and undocumented students, whose off-campus work options are limited. Moreover, guaranteed on-campus employment can put student talent to work to extend the university’s staffing capacity. Finally, guaranteed on-campus employment can also be tied to Mason’s diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) related student retention efforts.

INNOVATION 3

Office of Pre-College Programs

CHALLENGE/OPPORTUNITY

Even if financial barriers to college are removed, many middle and high school students do not even consider college as a viable option until later in high school, which reduces their chances of obtaining adequate preparation to succeed in college. This is particularly true for those who would be the first in their family to attend college. Mason has already begun to address this problem through the Early Identification Program, a college preparatory program for middle and high school students in Northern Virginia who would be the first in their family to attend a college or university. Since 1987, approximately 2000 first-generation students from seven Northern Virginia school districts have participated, with over 95% matriculating to post-secondary education, including a third at Mason. In its current donor-funded capacity, however, the program can accept only about 18% (about 150 of 850) of eligible applicants each year.

INNOVATION

A dramatic investment in the Early Identification Program (EIP) could expand the program to become the **Office of Pre-College Programs**. This office would centralize and strengthen Mason's (currently dispersed) efforts at providing pre-college preparation K–12. It would work with a broader reach of middle and high schools in the National Capital Region and, potentially, throughout the commonwealth. Capacity would broaden to accept ***all qualified applicants***, even with an expanded applicant pool.

KEY IDEAS/CONSIDERATIONS

- Identify funding sources to allow the office to serve up to 1,500 students and their families per year.
- Increase the number of students in the STEM Fusion program from 300 to 1100 per year.
- Create an early engagement initiative with academic enrichment and support to serve 300 to 500 low-income, first-generation 6th and 7th grade students.
- Expand the reach of the program into the community by creating fully staffed offices on each of Mason's three regional campuses.
- Engage students in education-related programs at Mason in the work of this office in applied internship settings.

IMPACT

This office would revolutionize Mason's ability to offer first-generation students access to the opportunities that prepare them for a college education and establish a pipeline for undergraduate, graduate, and professional students representing the full diversity of the National Capital Region who would, in turn, contribute to the regional workforce. Furthermore, it would increase Mason's visibility and reputation as a community partner and as an antiracist university committed to access, fostering a stronger case for philanthropic support, increased attractiveness to faculty and staff from underrepresented minority groups, and increased alumni engagement and giving.

INNOVATION 4

Experiential Learning For Every Student

CHALLENGE/OPPORTUNITY

Experiential learning can take many forms, from internships and practica, to study abroad, to community-based learning, to fieldwork, to engagement with research/scholarship/and creative work. Experiential learning offers students significant opportunities to engage with and test theories and concepts they have learned from class-based activities by applying knowledge, contributing to solving pressing problems, and actively analyzing and reflecting on their learning. These experiences excite students about their area of study and motivate them to learn on their own, while simultaneously widening their networks and providing valuable mentorship opportunities. It also is well-documented that effective experiential learning programs foster positive student outcomes and provide graduates with the knowledge, skills, and abilities they need not just to compete but also to thrive in today's ever-changing job market. Mason has a rich history of embedding experiential learning in many of our programs through the leadership of the Office for Scholarship, Creative Activities, and Research (OSCAR), Mason Study Abroad, Social Action for Integrative Learning (SAIL), and several academic programs.

INNOVATION

Implementing an experiential learning requirement at Mason so that **experiential learning is embedded in every academic program** would benefit students and further differentiate the Mason educational experience. Extending experiential learning as a required element of every degree program would be a transformative step that builds on existing curricular strengths.

KEY IDEAS/CONSIDERATIONS

- Build on existing infrastructure of OSCAR, Mason Study Abroad, and SAIL.
- Amplify support for programs and instructors across the university to create experiential curricular and classroom-based activities (e.g., case studies, simulations, mock trials).
- Strengthen investment in the cultivation of community and industry partners as settings for experiential learning (e.g., small grants to develop academic-community partnerships, awards and recognition of outstanding community partners, providing community partners with access to resources, such as library access).
- Connect efforts to the Anti-Racist Community Engagement QEP Leadership Team.

IMPACT

Ensuring access and providing support for all modes of experiential learning across the university will differentiate the Mason student experience in a manner where students can thrive. If done with intentionality, creativity, and flexibility, this will yield a significant competitive advantage over our peer institutions. Moreover, a deliberate commitment to experiential learning would increase our contributions to and footprint within the greater Washington, D.C., area, within the commonwealth, and beyond. Mason's profile and brand could be greatly enhanced by this elevated level of commitment to experiential learning.

INNOVATION 5

Re-Envision Approach To Promotion/Tenure

CHALLENGE/OPPORTUNITY

Within academia, promotion and tenure are typically understood to be rewards for faculty who have accumulated a sufficient portfolio of *individual* accomplishments aligned with long-standing academic traditions (e.g., publishing articles in respected scientific journals, authoring books, creating works). This approach not only prioritizes one form of accomplishment over all others, but it also neglects recognition of or reward for non-research/scholarship/creative activity that is fundamental to advancing a university's broader institutional goals.

INNOVATION

Mason can become a national leader by **re-envisioning criteria for promotion and tenure** to be inclusive of a more holistic, dynamic embodiment of the university's *highest-value personnel needs*. This would mean that promotion and/or tenure could be earned **not only** through "genuine excellence" in research and/or teaching (which of course reflect essential personnel needs), **but also** through genuine excellence in advancing the university's highest priority *organizational* goals, such as: (1) anti-racism and inclusive excellence efforts; (2) producing research, scholarship, and/or creative works that are interdisciplinary in nature; (3) securing extramural funding; (4) engaging students in research; and (5) significant leadership roles.

KEY IDEAS/CONSIDERATIONS

- Ensure that significant contributions to Mason's goal of becoming a national exemplar in anti-racism and inclusive excellence and other key organizational goals would "count" in promotion and tenure evaluations.
- Create a "leadership track" (i.e., genuine excellence in leadership) for promotion to full professor to facilitate the cultivation of effective senior academic leaders at Mason.
- Ensure that descriptions of these efforts focus on the intrinsic value of the work (rather than declaring simply that candidates should not be penalized for that work).
- Consider how and whether veteran term faculty (perhaps those who have earned the rank of full professor) could be eligible for "appointment without term" through tenure or another mechanism (e.g., "evergreen" contracts).

IMPACT

Promotion and tenure would become more than methods for rewarding individual faculty accomplishments; they would become strategic organizational methods for rewarding faculty for the type of work needed to ensure that Mason can successfully strive for its highest aspirations. Such a change would help Mason make accelerated progress on the dimensions most crucial to its mission and success.

INNOVATION 6

Hybrid In-Person/Remote Work As Norm For Staff

CHALLENGE/OPPORTUNITY

During the pandemic, most staff were fully remote. Although in-person work can facilitate learning, collaborative problem-solving, and a sense of belonging and commitment, most tasks continued to be accomplished during the pandemic, and there were some powerful benefits associated with this disruption: gaining time by not having to commute, enhanced autonomy and control over how and when work assignments were completed, and financial benefits from transportation and other cost savings. Even before the pandemic, research on workplace satisfaction indicated that the majority of office workers would prefer to spend at least some of their time working from home or some other setting ([with some estimates greater than 80 percent](#)). If Mason does not actively support these preferred hybrid arrangements, the university is likely to lose many of its best staff and best opportunities for future hiring.

INNOVATION

There is an opportunity to capture the now well-established benefits of remote work by making **hybrid in-person/remote work the norm** for all positions where this is feasible.

KEY IDEAS/CONSIDERATIONS

- Make some level of telework the ***presumed starting point***, rather than a possible exception, for all positions.
- Have each unit undertake an assessment of the acceptable ranges of percent telework versus in-person work for each position, accounting for the wide diversity of staff roles and responsibilities.
- Have each employee collaborate with their supervisor to determine the best arrangement within the acceptable ranges, given their own personal circumstances (with allowances for exceptions as needed).
- Revise all Employee Work Profiles (EWPs) to include a section that characterizes, in quantitative terms, the extent to which that position affords telework opportunities (e.g., specify the maximum amount of telework that would be feasible, if preferred by the employee).
- Prioritize investments in hardware and software to effectively support a hybrid telework scheme that equitably distributes telework opportunities broadly.

IMPACT

This innovation would mean that hybrid work becomes the norm for staff jobs (just as it already is for most faculty), albeit with substantial variability around that norm with respect to the optimal balance of on- and off-campus work for each particular job. Such a change would allow Mason to maintain marketplace competitiveness with respect to staff recruitment and retention, while also optimizing employee motivation and well-being for those who have elected to join the Mason community.

INNOVATION 7

Robust Culture of Staff/Faculty Mentoring

CHALLENGE/OPPORTUNITY

Recruitment and retention of staff and faculty remain critical issues for Mason. Professional staff often feel as though they need to leave the university to “move up” in their career, and professional development opportunities are not consistently available or encouraged. Faculty mentoring programs remain mostly ad hoc across the university, and the COACHE Faculty Satisfaction Survey identifies faculty mentoring, across all ranks and appointment types, as an area in need of improvement.

INNOVATION

To help our staff and faculty develop to their fullest potential, to facilitate a deeper sense of belonging, and to gain a competitive edge over our peers, we propose **cultivating a robust culture of staff/faculty mentoring**. With this innovation, Mason would map out and invest in a robust infrastructure that would support the development of communities of mentorship and individualized career progression opportunities across all employee types. This would include ensuring intergenerational, intra-institutional, and inter-institutional mentoring activities for faculty and staff, appropriate to appointment type and rank.

KEY IDEAS/CONSIDERATIONS

- Explicitly include time and resources for professional development in work expectations for staff and faculty alike.
- Provide professional development opportunities to help staff and faculty develop the capacity to effectively mentor colleagues.
- Carefully cultivate a common set of goals, expectations, and outcomes related to both formal and informal mentoring aptitudes and capacities.
- Ensure that staff and faculty supervisors are given time and training to develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to provide constructive feedback on and assistance with individualized professional development plans.
- Include significant mentoring activities as one form of evidence related to a leadership criterion for promotion of faculty (see Innovation 5).

IMPACT

With deliberate attention to developing deep mentoring networks, formalizing mentoring opportunities, and providing opportunities to learn how to effectively support a positive work climate, the strength of our community would increase tremendously. Across the university, staff and faculty members would use a mentoring lens when interacting with colleagues and understand the value of contributing to others’ professional development. If implemented at scale, Mason would become a premier destination for all professionals, staff and faculty alike, due to its emphasis on career-long learning and professional development. This innovation would also greatly support our broader mission of inclusive excellence.

INNOVATION 8

Revamp Infrastructure and Incentives For Extramural Funding

CHALLENGE/OPPORTUNITY

Mason's external funding portfolio has progressed at a remarkable rate since the university earned R1 status in 2016, but the gap between current funding levels and those needed to escalate Mason to "Top 50" R1 status remains quite large in dollar terms. In addition, the Office of Sponsored Programs is an underfunded unit with systems and staffing that are, for the most part, still at the pre-R1 level. Even with the essential infrastructure changes needed to empower this office, OSP will not provide the primary fuel needed for *transformational* growth, as it is an administrative unit, not an entrepreneurial unit.

INNOVATION

Mason could make tremendous gains by fundamentally **revamping the infrastructure and incentives for faculty to seek and obtain extramural funding**. Key investments in the basic infrastructure of support for seeking and securing extramural funding need to be made at the level of the academic units in which PIs and their research teams reside. In addition, fundamental changes are needed in the incentive systems employed to motivate faculty to engage in large-scale grant activity.

KEY IDEAS/CONSIDERATIONS

- Make cultivating external funding opportunities a criterion for appointing and retaining deans, associate deans of research, and named/endowed professorships.
- Establish and fully staff *within each individual academic unit* pre- and post-award research administration teams with knowledge of the unit's faculty, funders, and needs.
- Have each academic unit identify primary gaps in their extramural funding enterprise and take concrete steps to fill them (e.g., hiring of grant-savvy faculty, funding a grant writer, appointing senior faculty as unit-wide research mentors, grant-writing "boot camps").
- Incentivize faculty to submit "big money" proposals. Examples of such incentives include: amplifying resources for highly productive PIs and their research teams (beyond summer salary coverage for 9-month faculty), providing protected time for faculty to develop such proposals, and returning a significant portion of faculty salary savings to individuals PIs (e.g. in the form of professional spending accounts).
- Ensure sensitivity to differences across areas of study. Mechanisms, expectations, and incentives for external funding **cannot** be developed with a "one-size-fits-all" approach.

IMPACT

Mason will maintain its current growth trajectory, allowing it to continue to "move ahead" of dozens of more established research universities, and enter elite R1/Top 50 status in the foreseeable future. The increased funding will also support additional initiatives and research across the university.

APPENDIX A

Commission Charge

COMMITTEE CHARGE AND STATEMENT OF TASK

Following the framework of the Mason Idea; Innovation, Diversity, Entrepreneurship, and Accessibility, George Mason University has set its sights on being renowned for world-class leadership in teaching, research and service. Our campus is currently managing three simultaneous national crises: a raging pandemic, a racial inequity crisis, and a financial crisis. These challenges represent a real existential threat to operations as we know them, and they have already altered the manner in which we conduct business as a university.

While there are current challenges, the time has come to plan for our future in a post-pandemic society. It would be a missed opportunity if we endeavor to return to pre-pandemic operations without leveraging the changes in our society and the lessons the pandemic has taught us.

A brief but incomplete listing of those changes are:

1. We are preparing our students to enter arguably one of the most difficult and uncertain economic environments in recent history. National unemployment rates for college graduates are currently at 9.1 percent, which is higher than at any time since the great depression.
2. The pandemic has significantly impacted all higher education institutions, both public and private: More than 350,000 COVID cases have been reported at more than 1,600 universities. Some institutions have become major spreaders of the virus into their respective communities. Even institutions who have done well in managing the COVID crisis, including Mason, require constant crisis management as outbreaks can happen at any time.
3. Higher education is challenged by a significant financial crisis. After 60 years of expansion, the work force that serves higher education has shrunk by at least 7 percent since COVID-19 arrived. Over the coming months, more reductions in faculty and staff could occur as state governments manage contracting budgets and private institutions adjust and adapt to reduced revenue. Conservative estimates suggest that colleges and universities have collectively shed more than 337,000 jobs since the pandemic began.

In addition to the aforementioned crises, our university must overcome many additional challenges. Some of the most formidable of these challenges include:

1. Significant competition for the best students, faculty, and staff.
2. A national racial inequity crisis.
3. A global and interdisciplinary environment that has stretched the boundaries for what higher education must provide and deliver.
4. A rapidly changing research funding landscape with changing requirements in reference to broader impacts and intellectual property from both industry and government.
5. Negotiating the fiscal realities of a large comprehensive university where the university must meet its fiscal needs in competition with other successful universities and components of state government.
6. At Mason significant investments have been made in buildings and facilities over the last decade. Given the growth and emphasis in research, these investments may not be in alignment with future use needs.

APPENDIX A CONTINUED

In order to accelerate Mason's ascent into the top tier of academic institutions, a commission of many of the university's most creative and eminent faculty, staff, and administrators is being established.

This commission will, in the context of Mason's fiscal situation, based on the projected outcomes of the pandemic, the social upheaval that our nation is experiencing and consistent with evolving university planning priorities, make **specific and bold recommendations** for positioning the university to continue on an accelerated path to become among our nation's leading and most respected institutions of higher education. These recommendations and suggestions for their implementation and integration within our university will be discussed with academic units, the Faculty and Staff Senates, the Graduate Council, the Board of Visitors, Student Senates, and the external community. All of these "communities of interest" will be asked for feedback. This extensive and inclusive community dialog will provide the basis for an informed framework for a next-era Mason Strategic Plan. The goal is to complete this work toward the middle of the spring semester and to reserve the bulk of the spring and summer for vetting, continued deliberation, and developing a plan for implementation.

The primary output for the commission will be ideas in the form of recommendations for future operation. Toward that end, the Innovation Commission *will list and prioritize the specific directions* that the university should take optimally to position itself for future success and to differentiate Mason from our peers. These ideas can be as simple as new investments in academic units and research programs or conversion of programs to hybrid or online, or as complex as the elimination or merger of academic departments. In addition to whatever other topics the commission considers, the commission must consider the following issues in its deliberations:

1. *University Structure:* Do we have the correct configuration of academic units adequately to manage ourselves in a post-pandemic environment? How do we best structure our university to make it resilient in a future where pandemics and other disruptions could occur? Can some employees work from home permanently or have a partial in person work week to optimize building usage?
2. *Undergraduate and Graduate Teaching:* For an institution that is often criticized for moving very slowly in some areas, the pandemic forced an almost overnight transition to online learning, which has been a reasonable success. What does this short-term shift to online for public health reasons portend for the long run? Should we permanently incorporate some virtual options into course offerings? Can we utilize virtual instruction in such a way that will enable us to leverage utilization of our three campuses?
3. *Graduate Education:* As we progress as an R1 university, graduate education is of paramount importance. An overwhelming majority of R1 institutions have a graduate school with the expressed role of supporting and growing graduate education. Should we reconsider the implementation of a graduate school?
4. *Future Funding Opportunities:* The funding landscape for Mason was far from great prior to the pandemic, and it is clear now that real fiscal challenges lie ahead. Mason must examine alternative ways to increase revenue that may not be in alignment with our traditional processes. Aggressive and novel methods for increasing revenue must be adopted and implemented if we are to avoid making dramatic cuts in the future. How can the university evolve with innovative funding and support models to deal with its financial realities? How can universities incorporate shared services in key administrative areas to create efficiencies? List recommendations in this arena.
5. *Faculty Workload and Expectations:* Are the current faculty teaching loads appropriate when compared to research productivity? Is the research performance of our faculty acceptable? Is it in alignment with our expectations? What expectations are acceptable? List recommendations and remedies for improvement.
6. *Scholarship and Research Emphasis:* What specific foci, and associated integrated and cross-discipline initiatives, could be identified and what specific topical areas (beginning with a consideration of the concept of "grand challenges" and reflection about the UN Sustainable Development Goals) could become a place of "signature research" for our university in its next era?

APPENDIX A CONTINUED

7. *Research and Educational Space Allocation:* Are we making optimal use of our current space? Should space be distributed by colleges, schools, and departments or by a combination of research thrust and unit need? How should we handle the space occupied by research inactive faculty?
8. *Business Community Engagement and Support:* Before the pandemic, 47 percent of the U.S. economy was at risk due to automation, artificial intelligence, and digitization. There have been thousands of jobs lost in Virginia due to the pandemic, and it's clear that many will not return. The economic fallout from the pandemic has put a spotlight on the value of higher education. Given its state support, what responsibility does Mason have to help individuals who may have lost their jobs get back on their feet? Any ideas for initiatives, partnerships, or programs would be helpful. (Perhaps partnership with businesses on offering re-training program for individuals is an option.)
9. *Staff Support and Environment:* Are the environments in which our staff operate productive, positive, and supportive? How can we be sure our staff operate in an environment that is conducive to their critical roles, that they are motivated to support faculty and students in achieving the set-out goals, that they have the flexibility needed to be nimble in an increasingly high-change world, and that they have opportunities to build their careers at Mason?
10. *Student Support and Engagement:* How do we provide support and services that are inclusive of all learners receiving instruction in all delivery modes? How do we ensure we are responding to the diverse needs of emerging student populations and responding to the social, global, and economic conditions that our students are facing? The pandemic has presented us with opportunities to reimagine student support in ways previously thought unworkable. And there is an in-

creased urgency to create just and equitable communities in which students can thrive. How do we strengthen the student life journey that connects enrollment, persistence, completion, and career readiness? List recommendations for improvement.

11. *Enrollment (Size and Composition):* As a requirement for the investments emanating from the State of Virginia, Mason made a commitment to increase enrollment to meet the requirement of the state's Tech Talent Investment Program. When considering this growth, consider the balance of enrollment—particularly the online versus on-campus balance. How about diversity goals, including age diversity? Should we make a significant effort to engage older students? Given the rapidly changing employment disruptions, should we redefine lifelong education?

Based on the information gathered and the output of its deliberations, the Innovation Commission will prepare a report that provides a set of overall recommendations and guidance for future funding. The goal is not just managing the university under difficult conditions, rather it is about the organization of our units in a manner that will allow us to thrive in a global interdisciplinary environment that is emerging from a once-in-a-century pandemic.

APPENDIX B

Commission Membership

CHAIRS

Keith Renshaw, **Commission Leader**
Professor and Department Chair, Psychology
College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Kenneth Walsh
Vice President for Strategic initiatives and Chief of Staff
Office of the President

MEMBERS

Zofia Burr
Dean, Honors College

Christopher Carr
Chief Diversity Officer
College of Engineering and Computing

Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera
Associate Professor
Schar School of Policy and Government

Edward Dittmeier
University Auditor

Liza Wilson Durant
Associate Dean, Strategic Initiatives and Community
Engagement
College of Engineering and Computing

Kimberly Eby
Associate Provost for Faculty Affairs and Development
Office of the Provost

Craig Esherick
Associate Professor, Sport Management
College of Education and Human Development

Martin Ford
Senior Associate Dean
College of Education and Human Development

Emily Ihara
Associate Professor and Chair, Social Work
College of Health and Human Services

Alison Landsberg
Professor, History and Art History; Director, Center for
Humanities Research
College of Humanities and Social Sciences

David Miller
Executive Director, Innovation and Entrepreneurship
School of Business

Michael "Doc Nix" Nickens
Associate Professor, Music; Director, Green Machine Ensembles
College of Visual and Performing Arts

Rene Stewart O'Neal
Associate Vice President for Strategic Budgeting & Planning
Office of Budget and Planning

Rose Pascarell
Vice President
University Life

Padmanabhan Seshaiyer
Associate Dean, Academic Affairs; Professor, Mathematical
Sciences
College of Science

Solon Simmons
Associate Professor
Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter School for Peace and Conflict
Resolution

John Yun
Associate Professor
Antonin Scalia Law School

ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

Jeanmerie Lagos
Executive Assistant and Office Manager
Office of the Senior Vice President

APPENDIX C

Commission Timeline

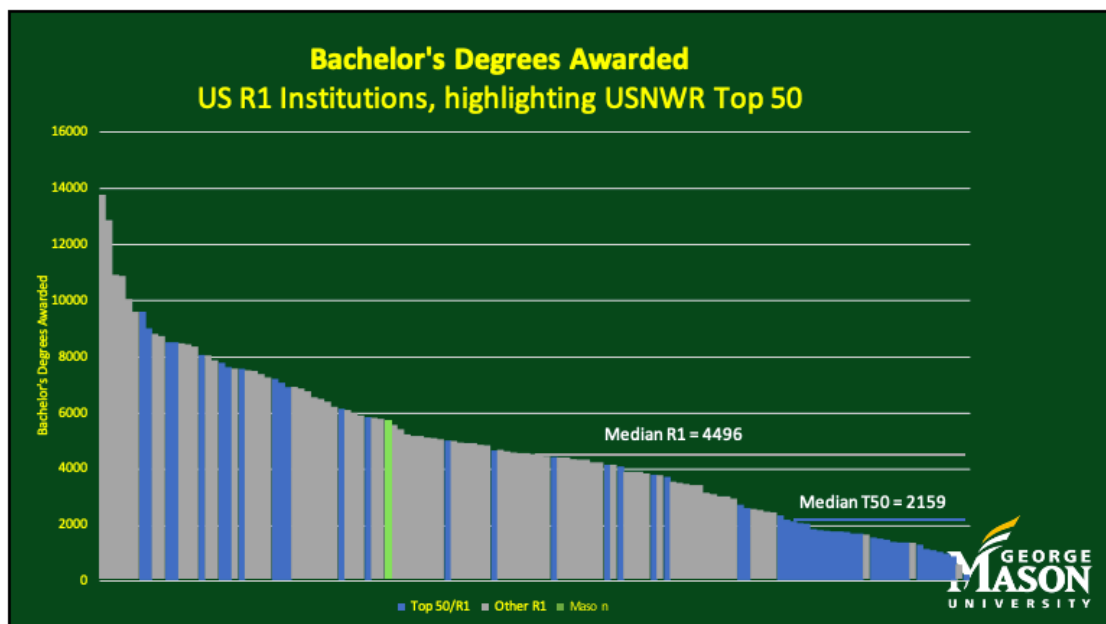
DATE	COMMISSION ACTIVITY
February 23, 2021	Presentation of team charge from President Washington, introduction of team members, general discussion
March 12, 2021	Discussion of norms for group behavior, presentation of data situating Mason among R1 institutions on several dimensions, group brainstorming on core of Mason and SWOT
March 25, 2021	Review of the brainstorming from previous session, grouping and summary, presentation of resource materials, identification of subgroups (Student Experience, Faculty/Staff Experience, Programs, and Infrastructure)
April 7, 2021	Report on initial brainstorming activities from subgroups
April 22, 2021	Review of brainstorming outcomes against the core of Mason concepts, charge, and discussion of an evaluation framework
May 10, 2021	Report on subgroup activities to evaluate and prioritize their concepts, framework for upcoming overall prioritizing activity
May 27, 2021	Review of dot voting and decisions on final innovation proposals, report outline, and planning

APPENDIX D

Data on Mason in Context

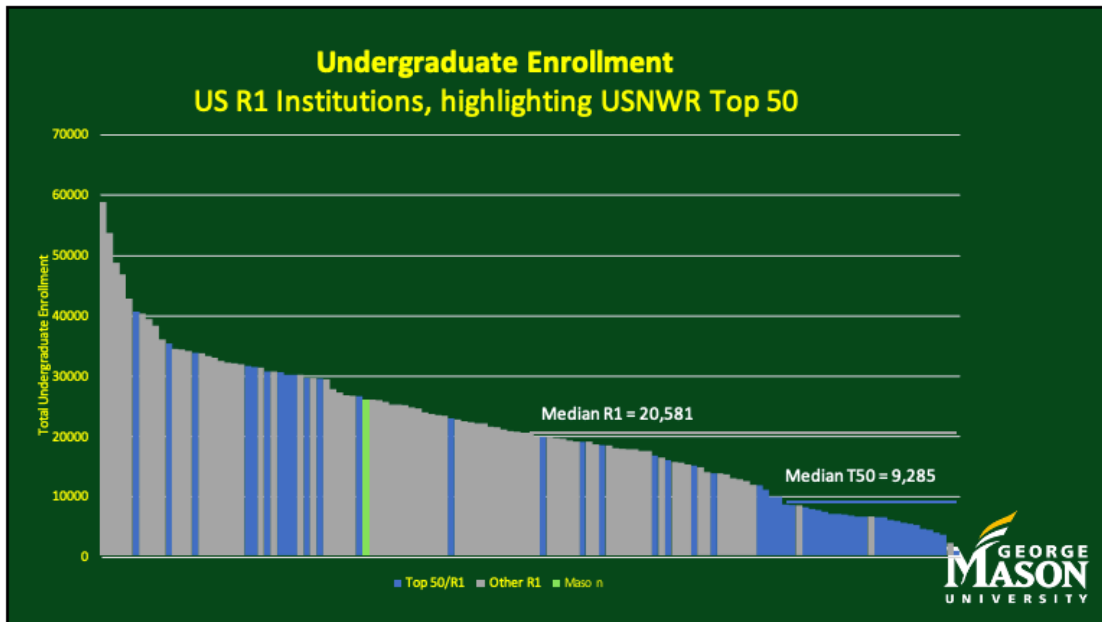


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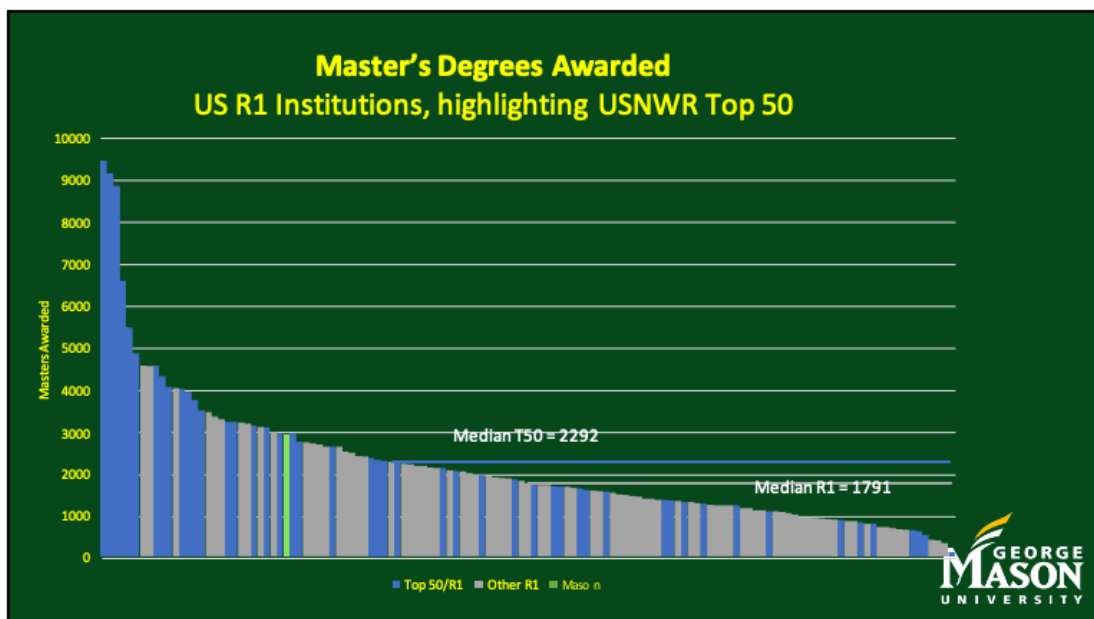


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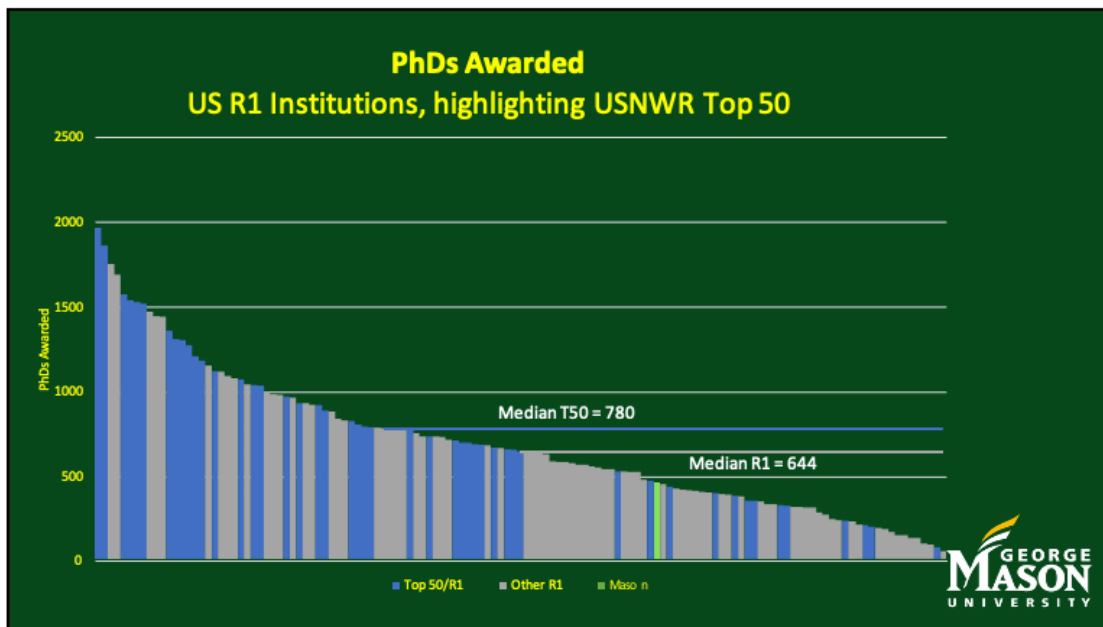


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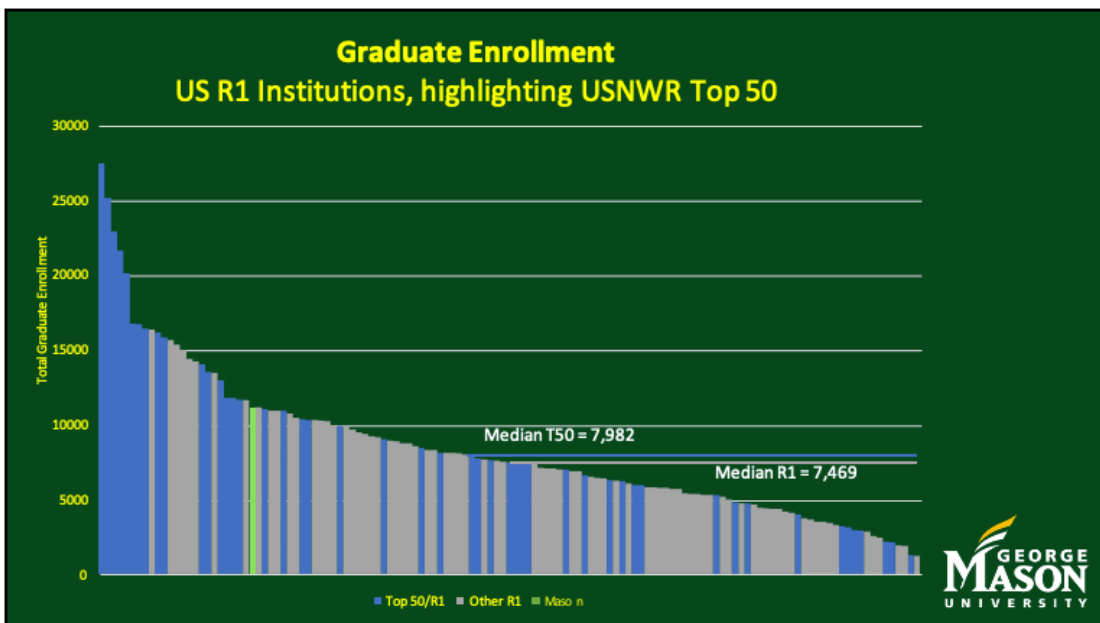


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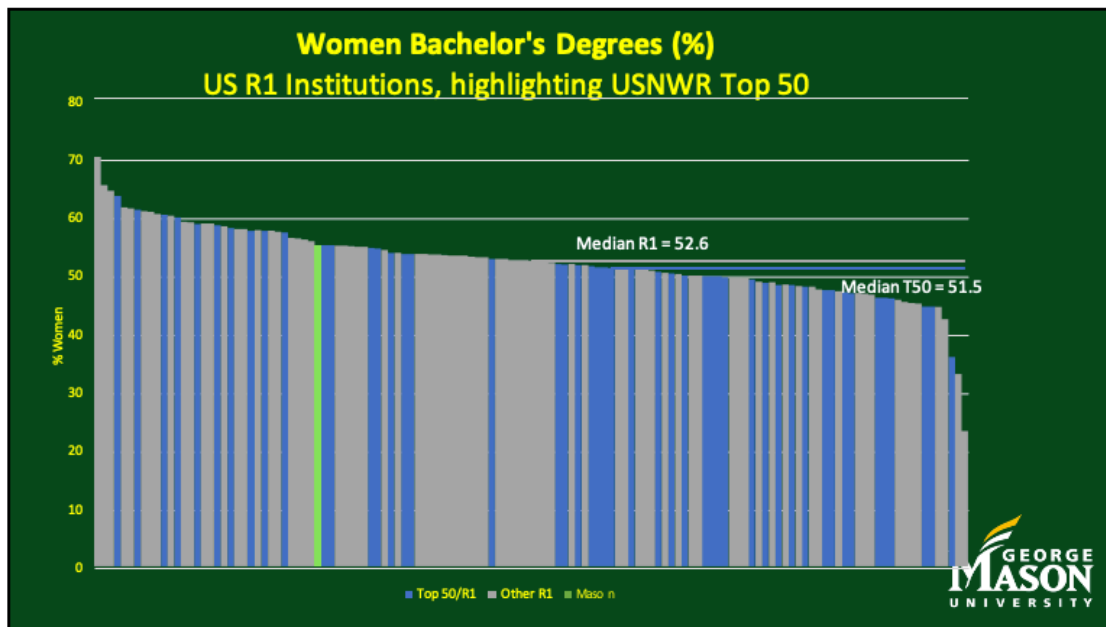


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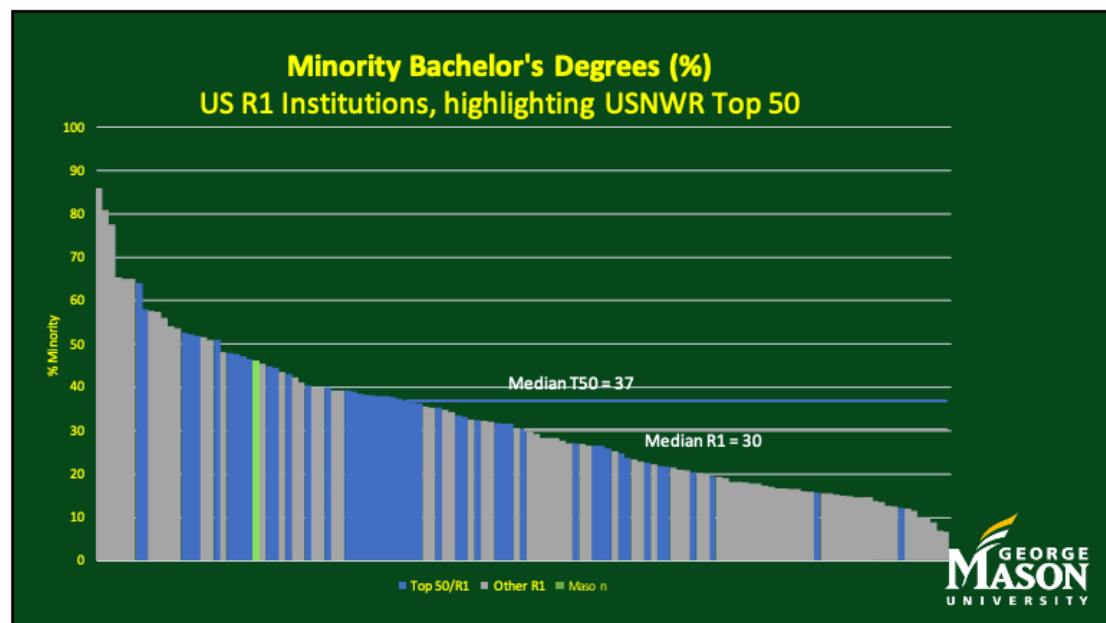


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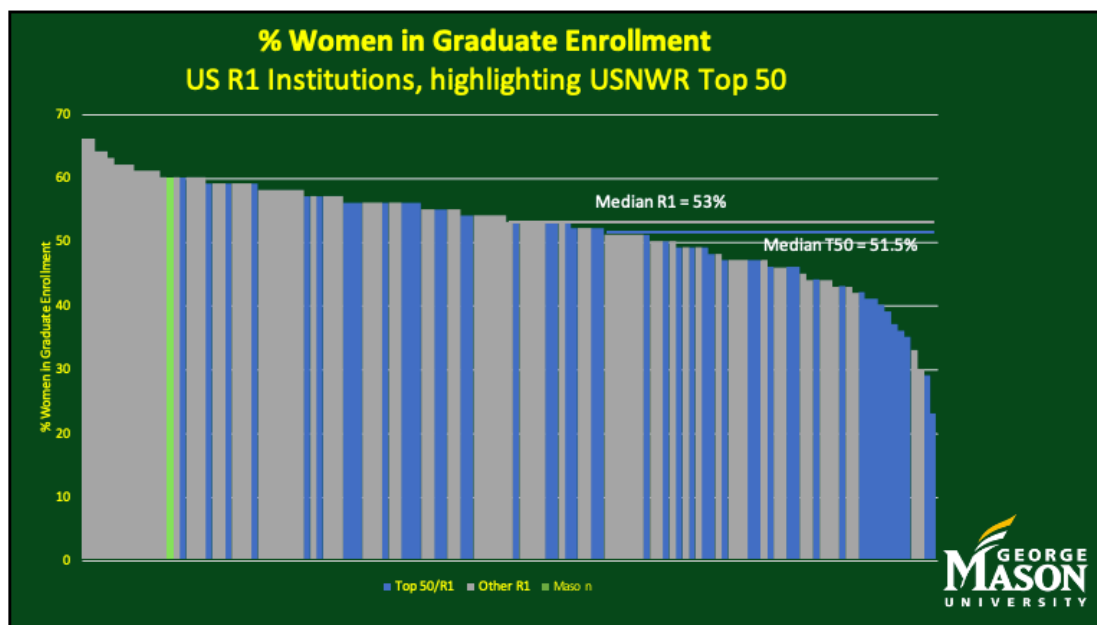


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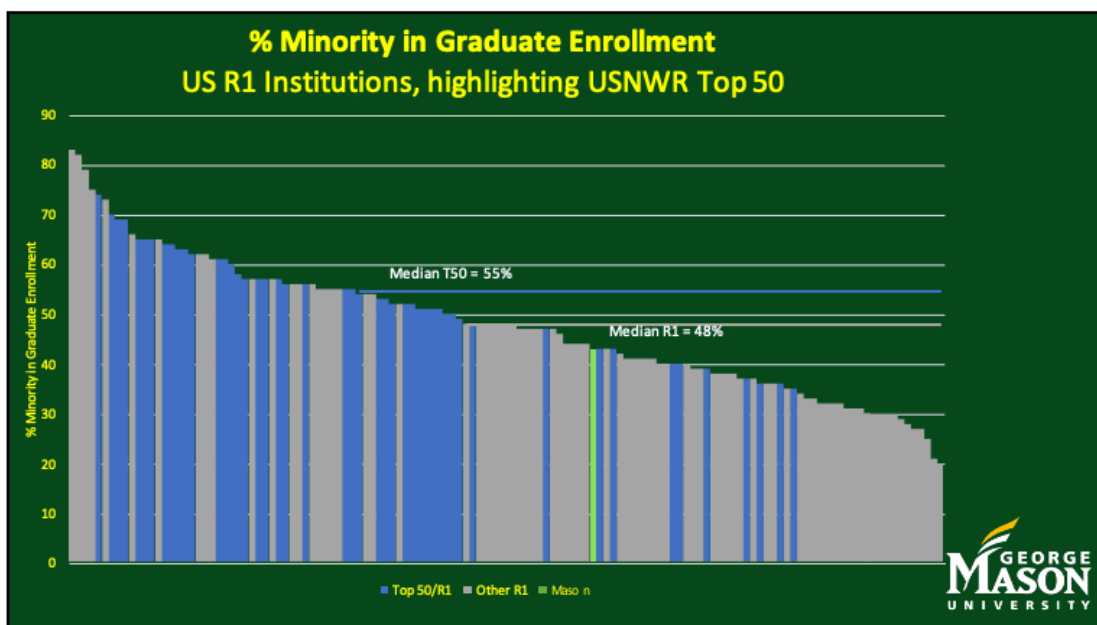


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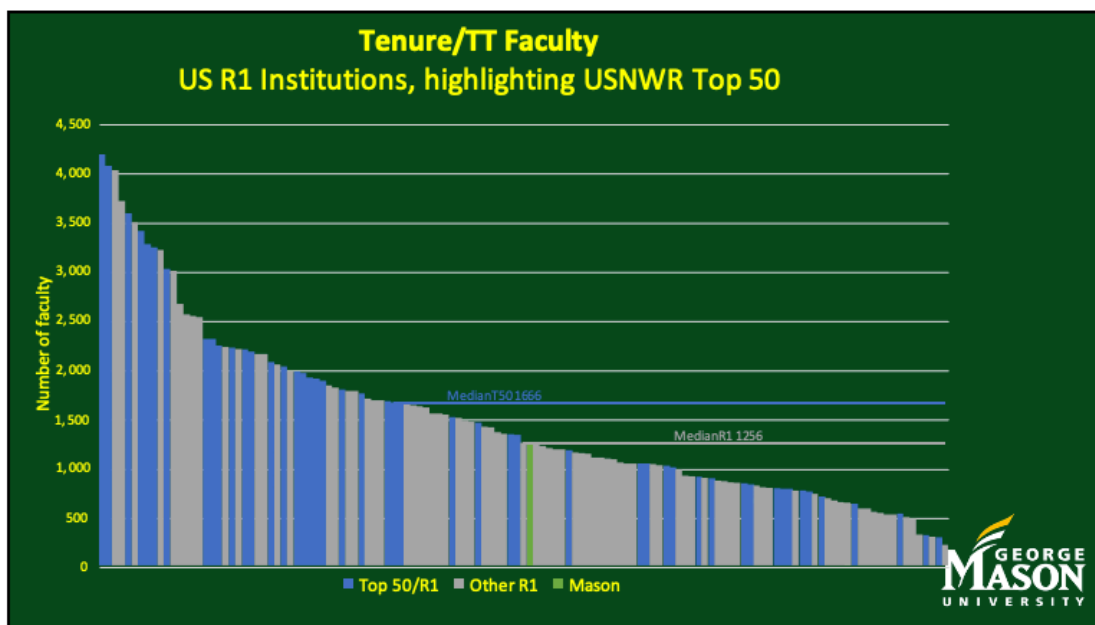


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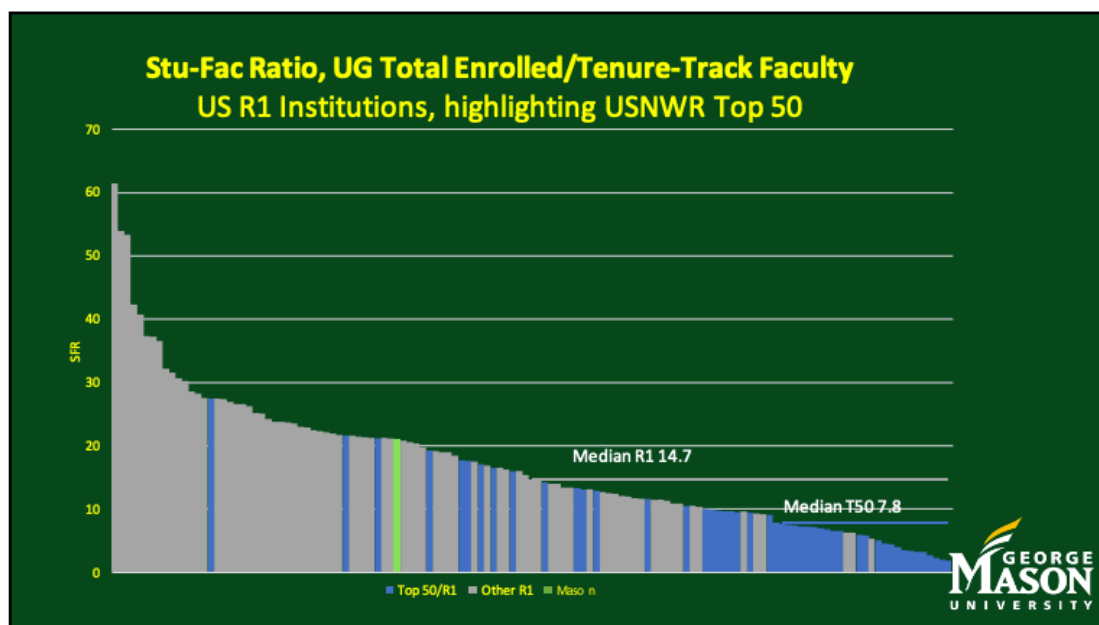


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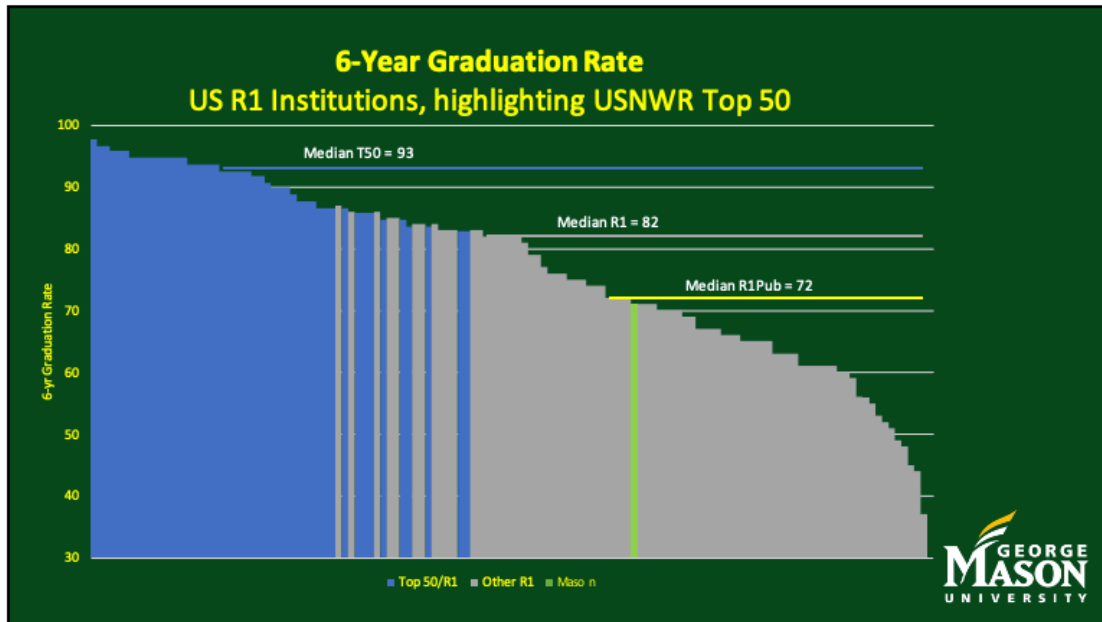


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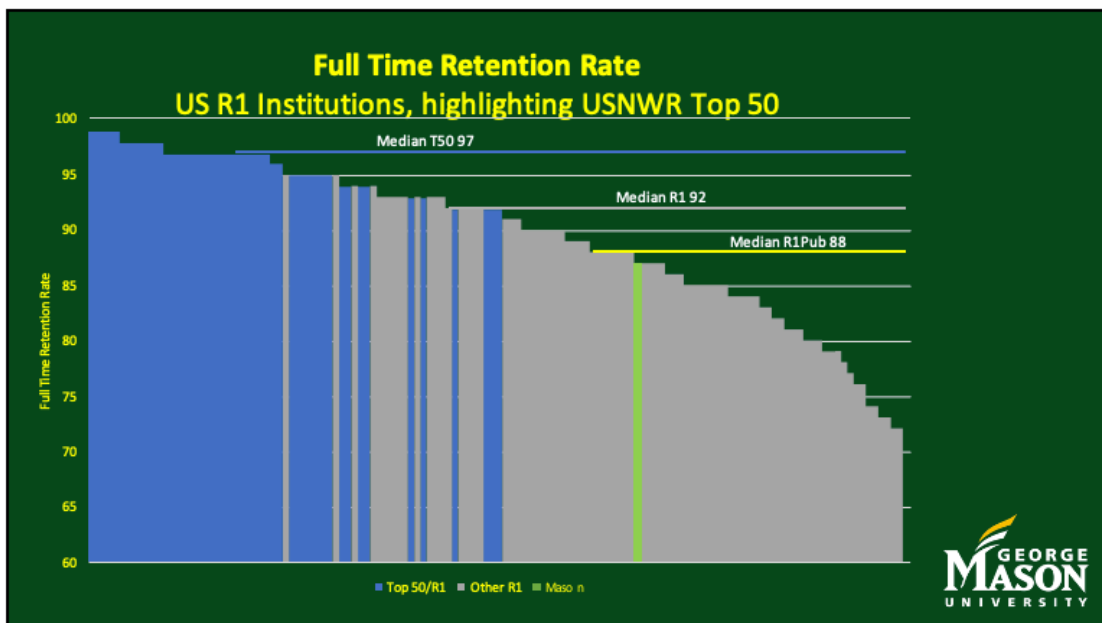


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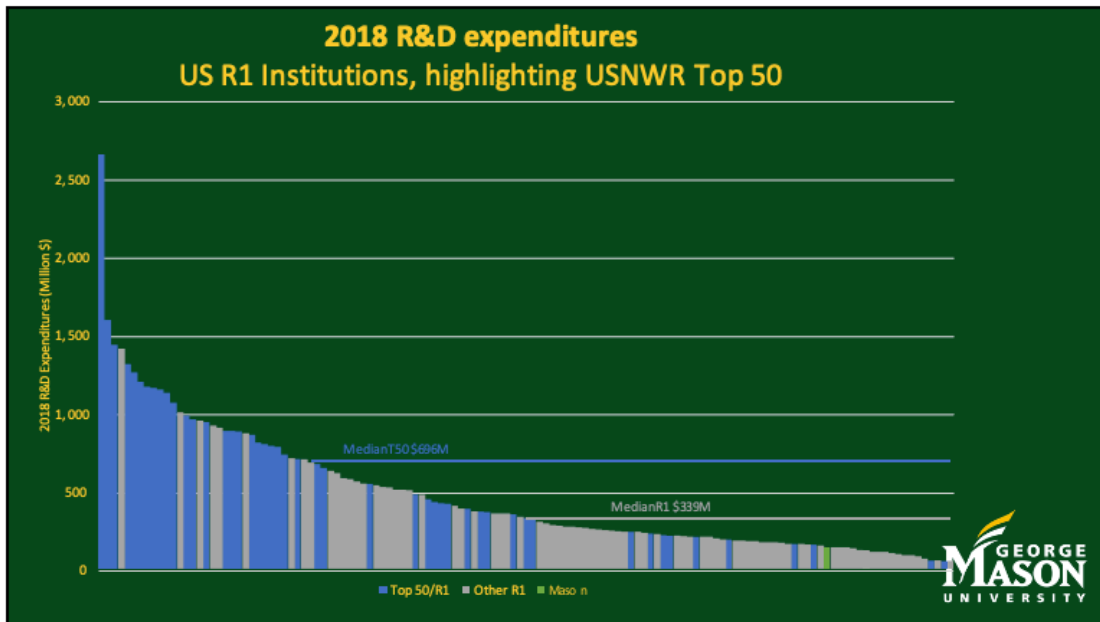


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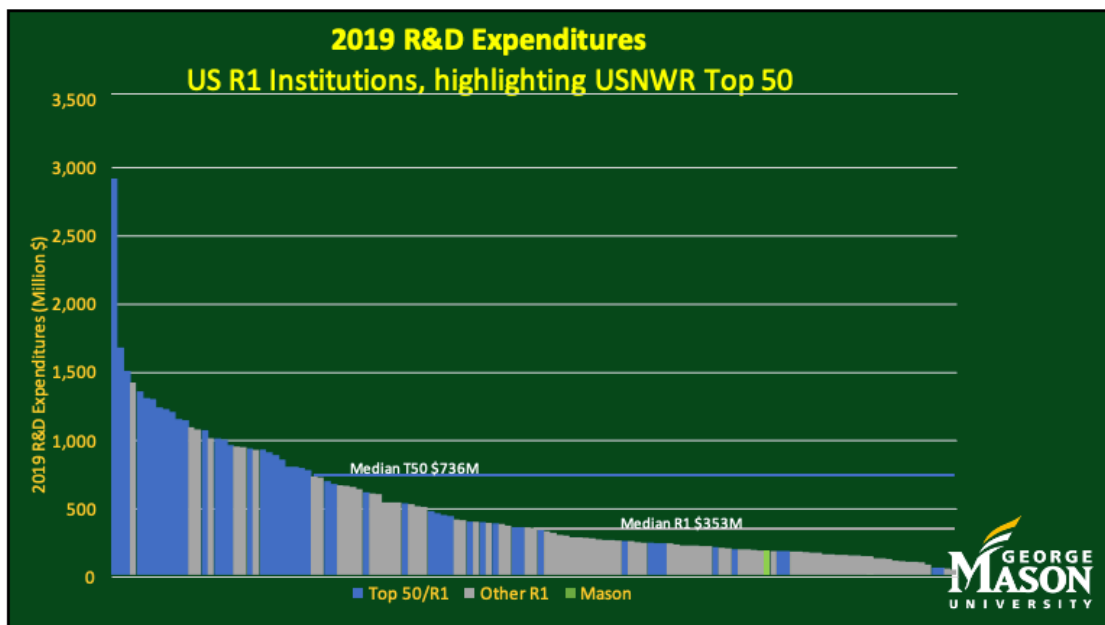


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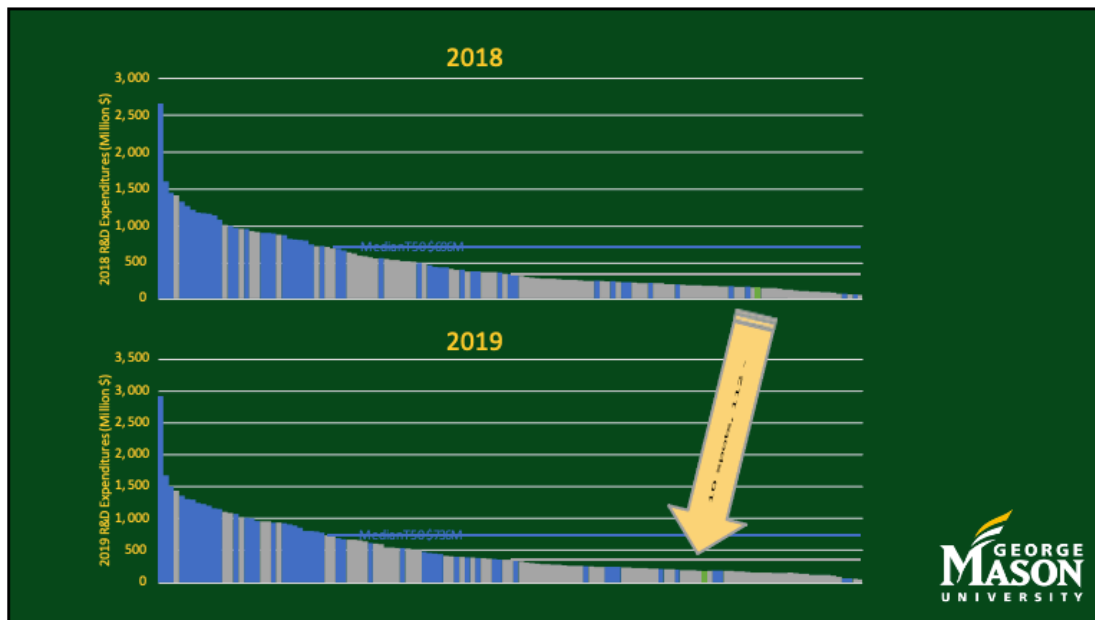


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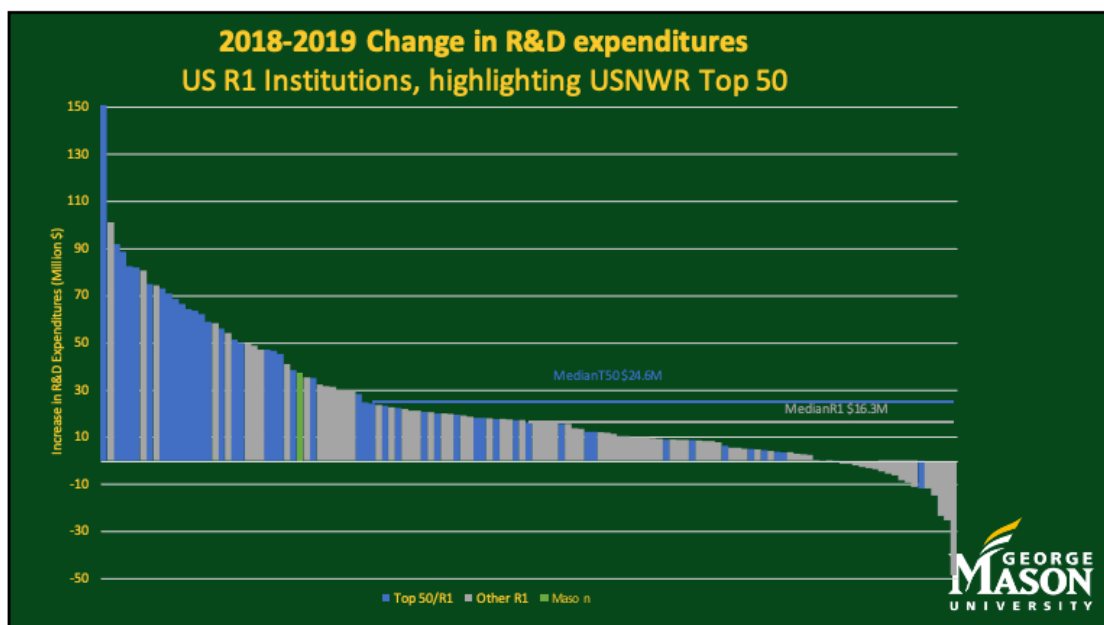


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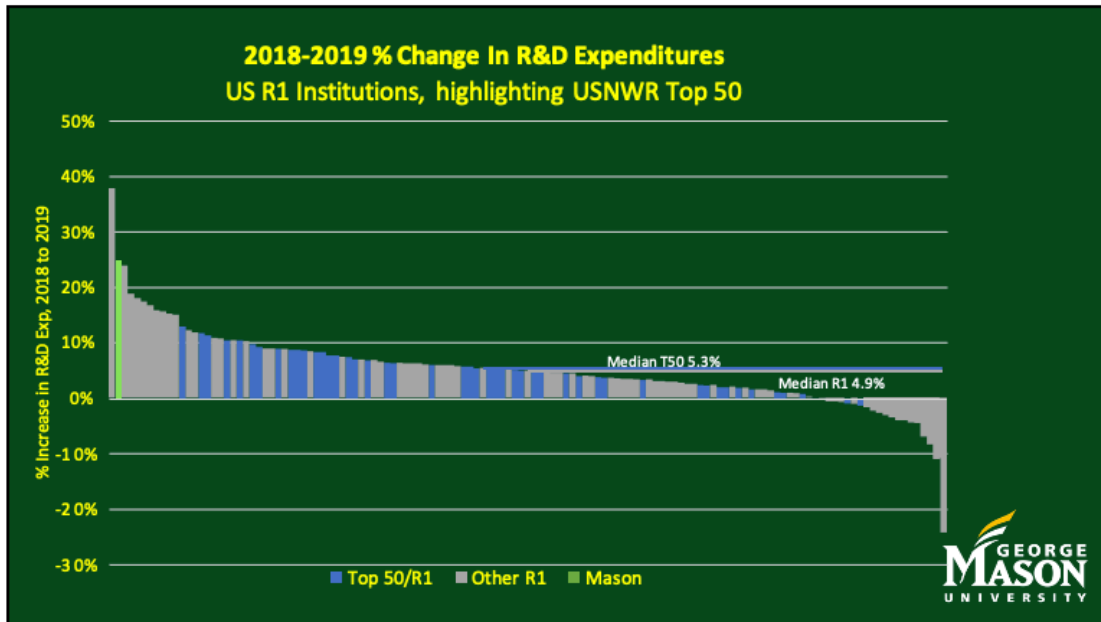


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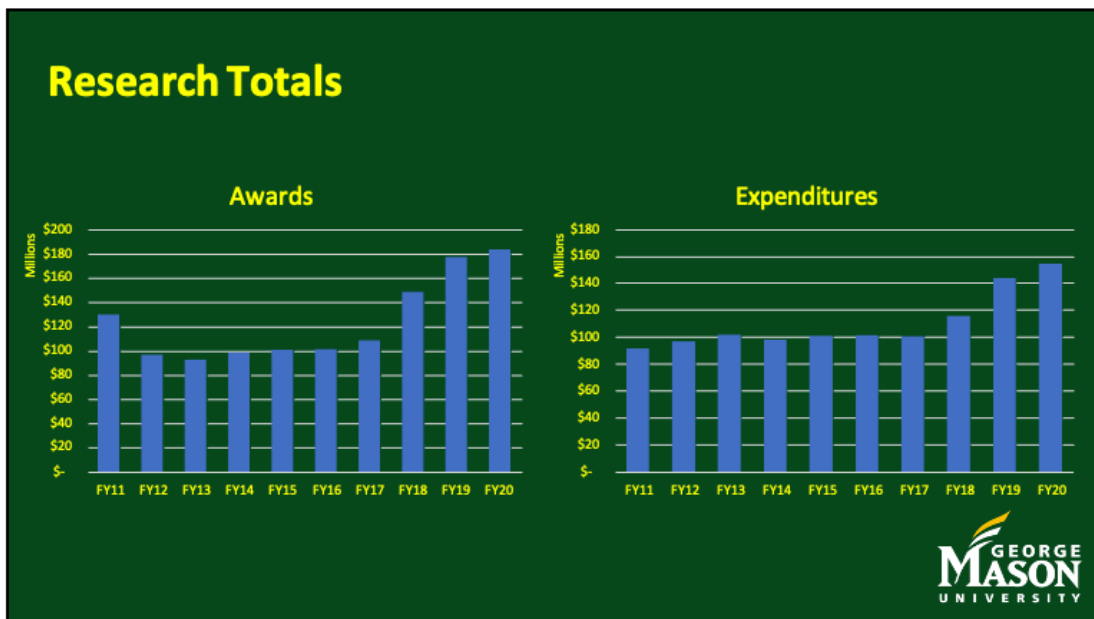


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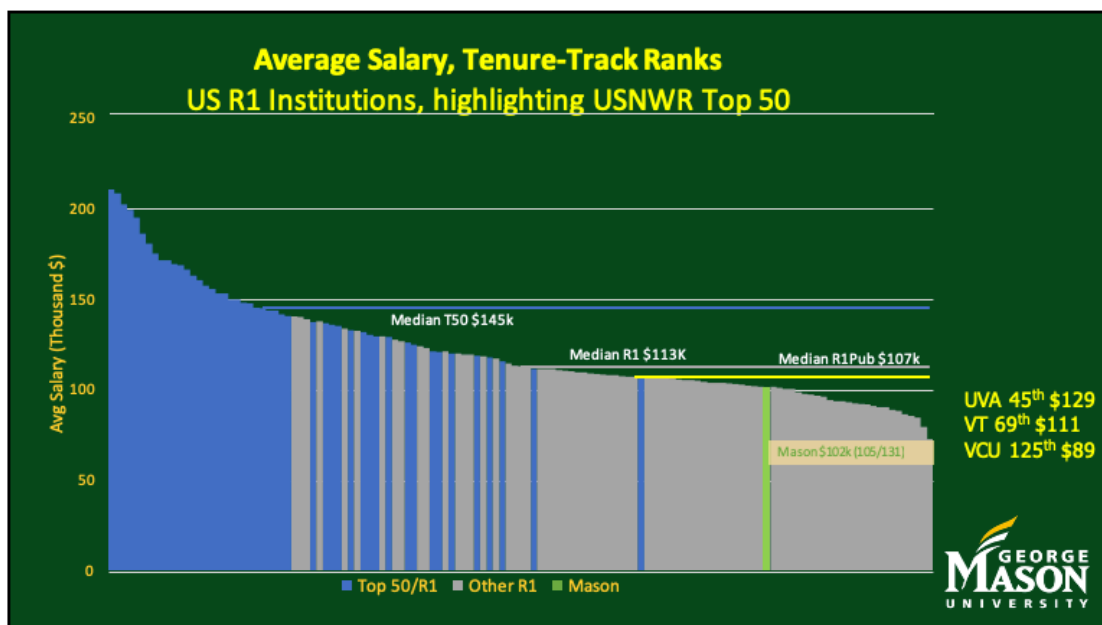


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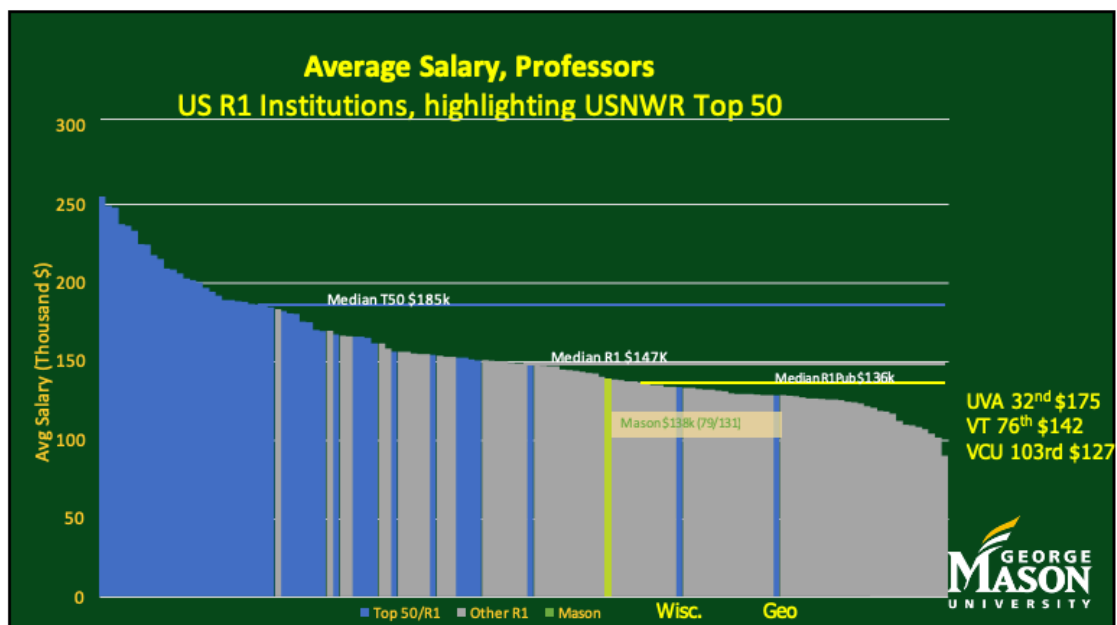


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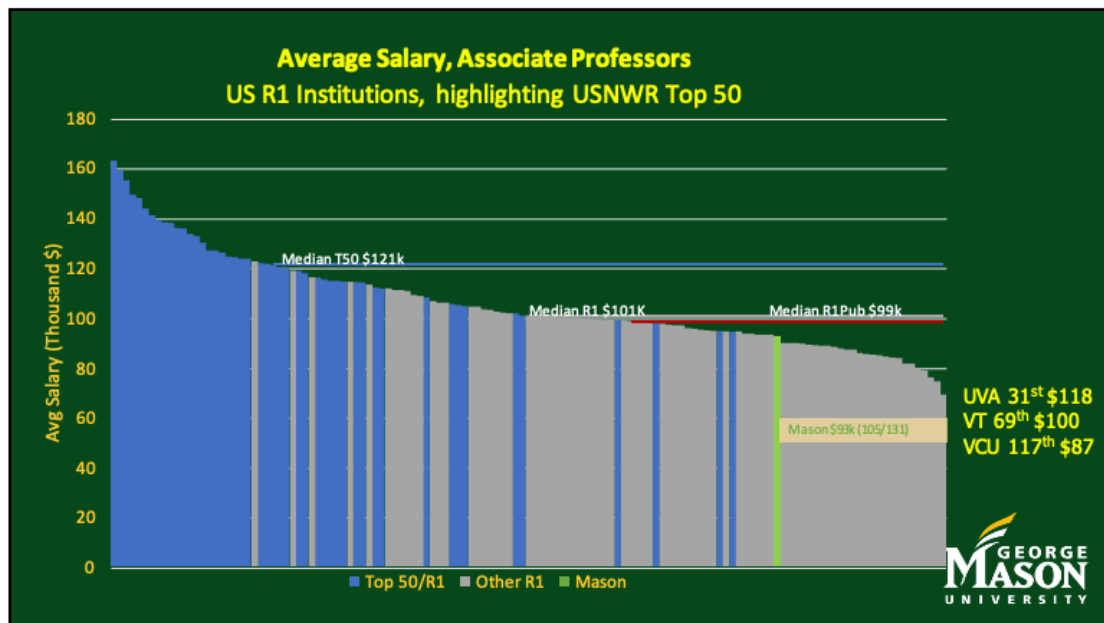


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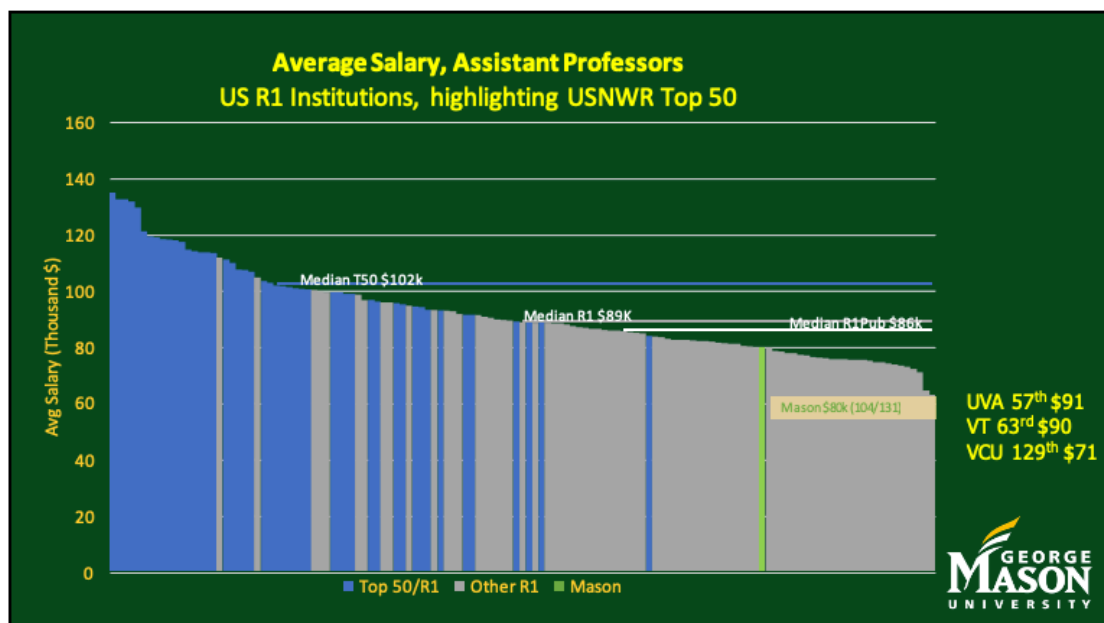


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APPENDIX D CONTINUED



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APPENDIX D CONTINUED

Who are we?

- Are we a legit Top 50 Institution?
- Significantly larger UG, larger MS, **significantly smaller PhD**
- Average number of faculty, which leads to higher SFR
- Among the best in % Female graduate enrollment
- Below Average in % Minority graduate enrollment
- Tenure Track faculty salaries are lower but only by about \$10k
- Retention and graduation rates are lower, but not as much as one would think given our admit profile (near open enrollment)



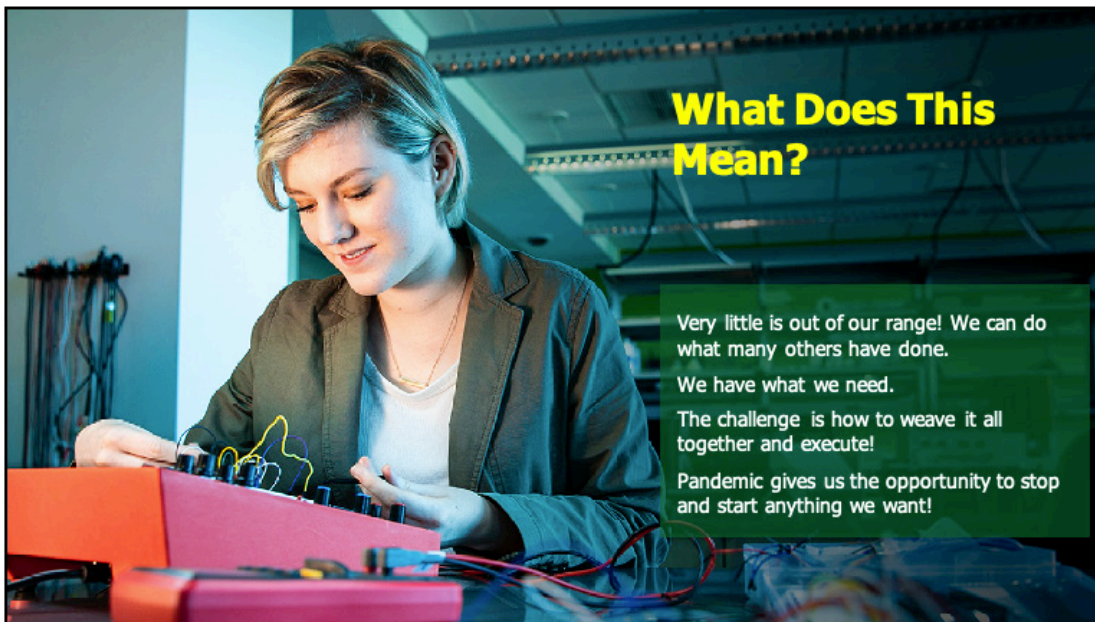
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Tremendous Assets

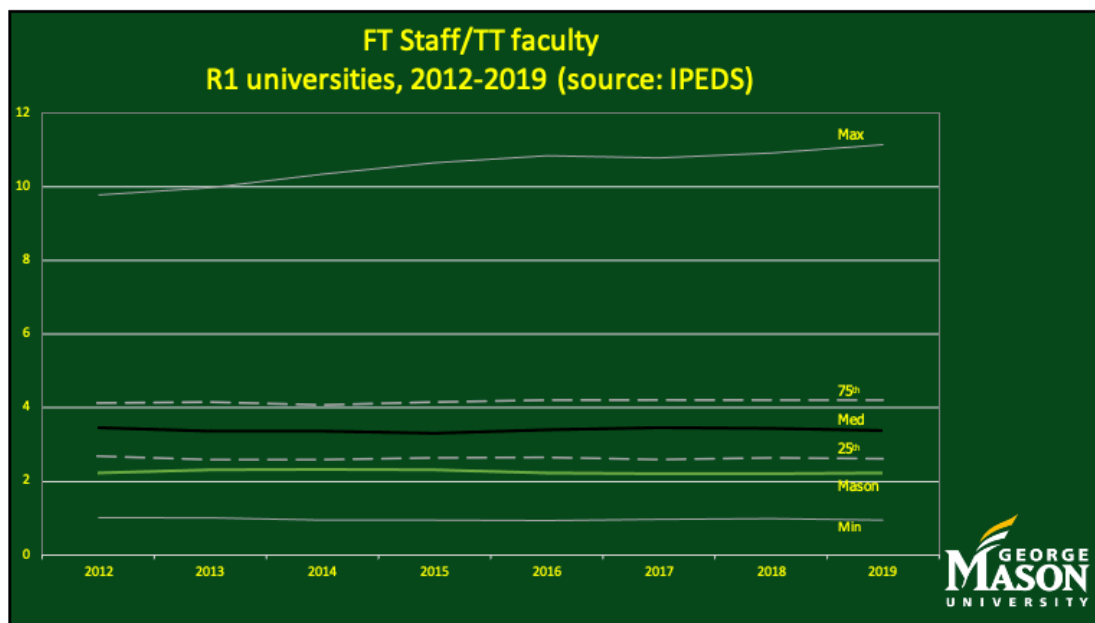
- > 7.8M GSF of space on all three campuses
- World Class performing and visual arts
- Biomedical Research Lab (BRL)
- Hylton Performing Arts Center
- Freedom Aquatic & Fitness Center
- Two broadcast-quality studios with bandwidth on cable
- Serve three of the six wealthiest counties in America
- Part of the nation's capitol and 6th largest media market

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APPENDIX D CONTINUED

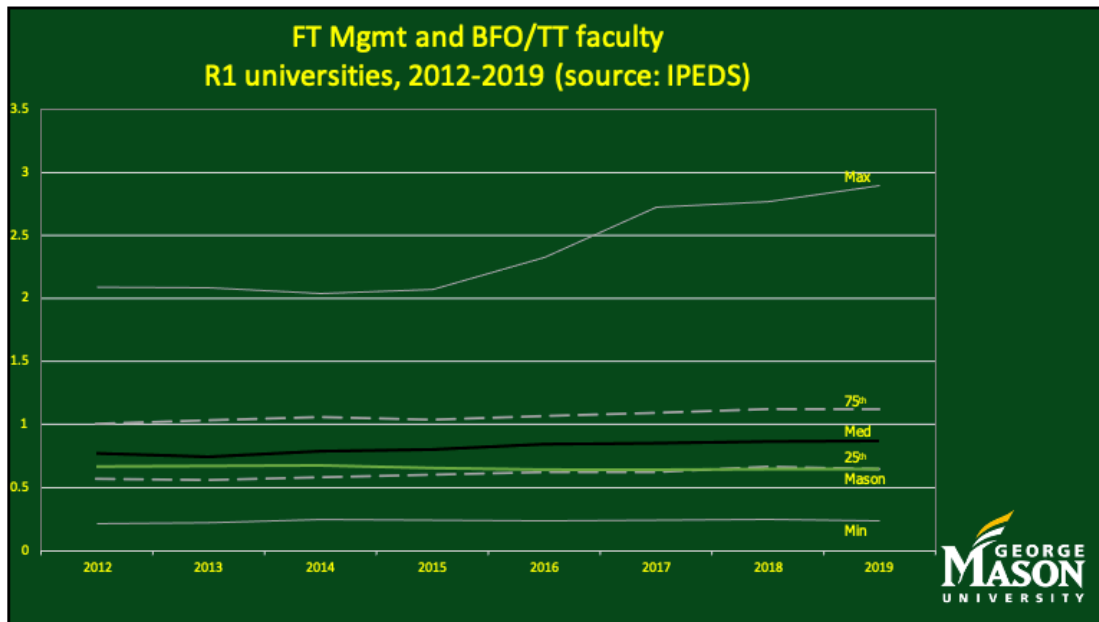


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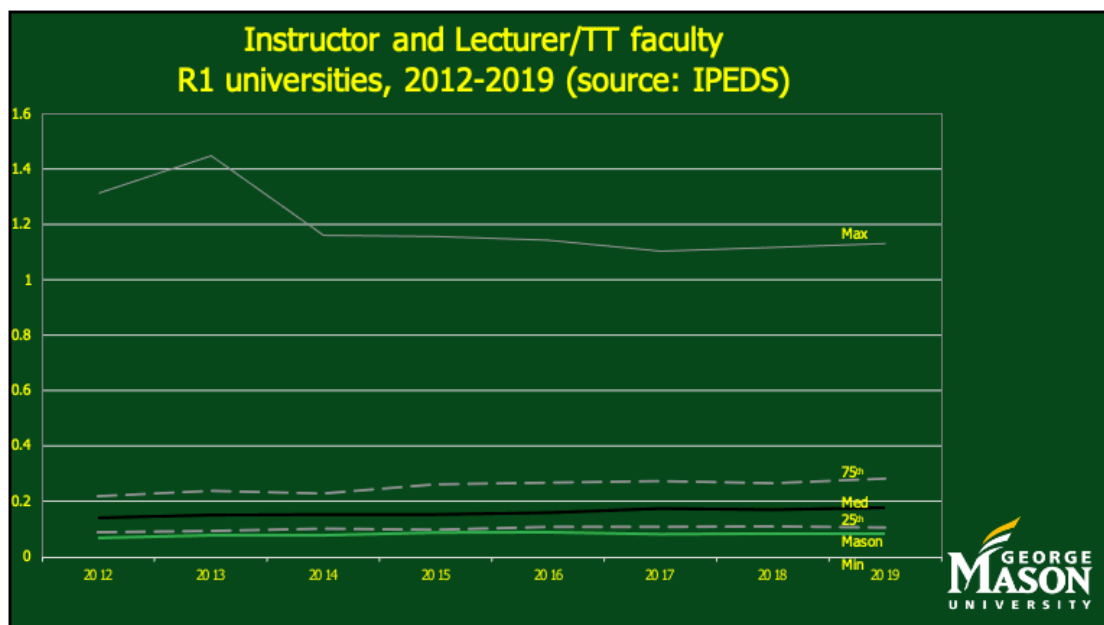


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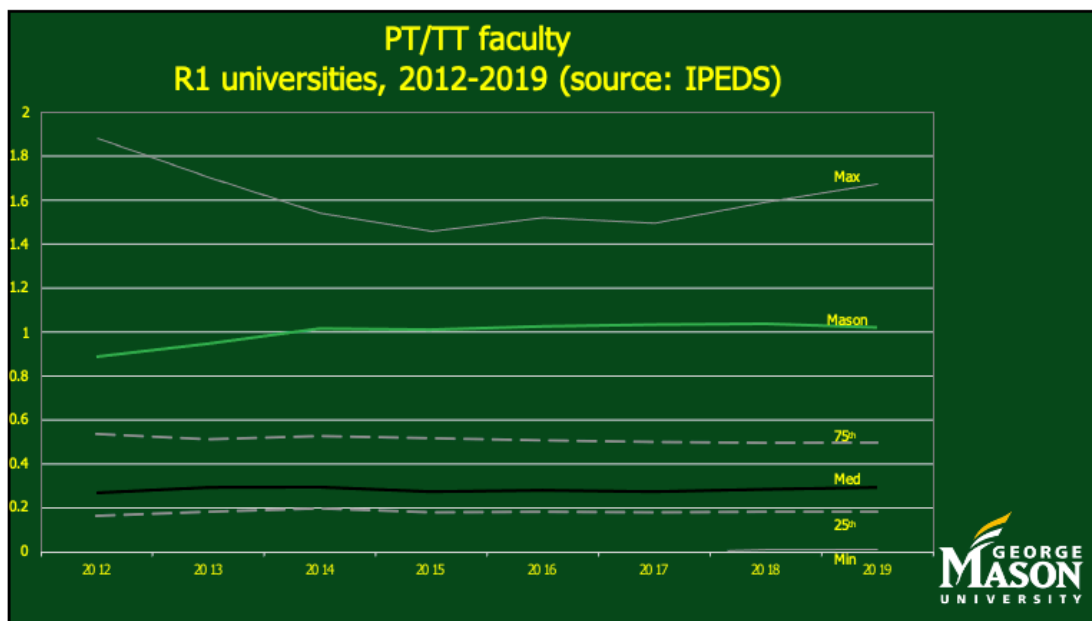


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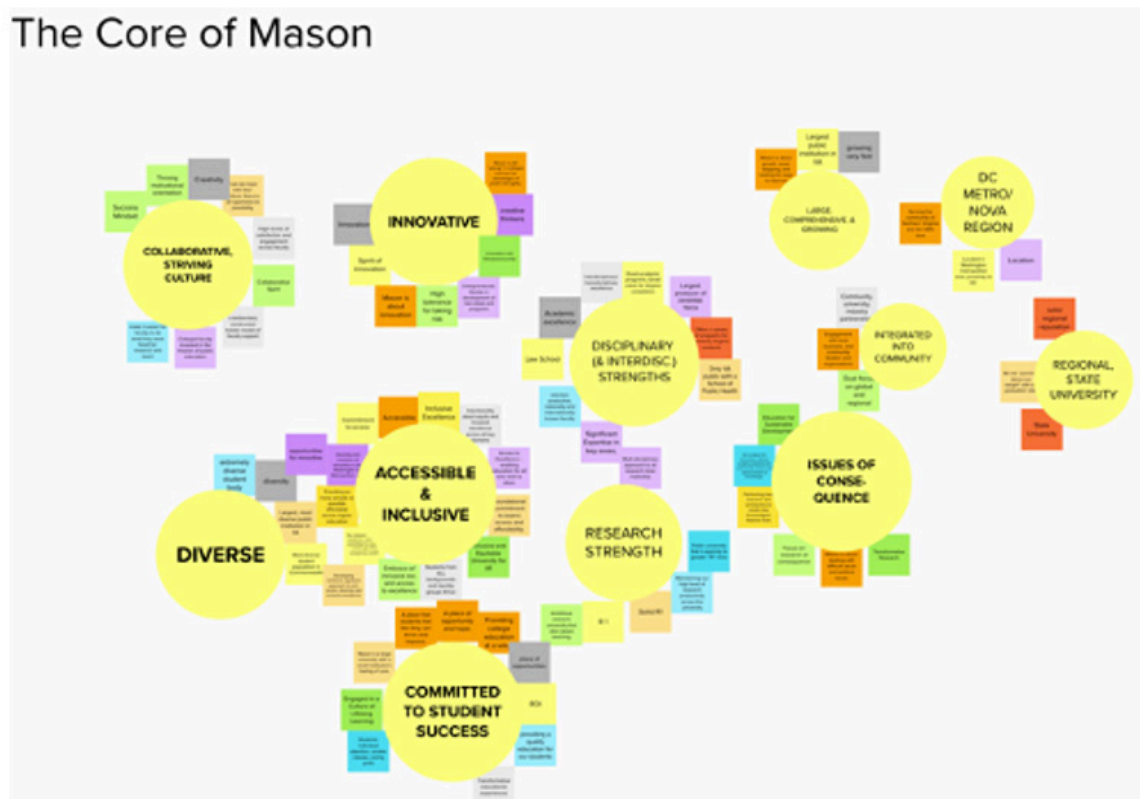
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APPENDIX E

Graphical Representation of Commission Discussion of Mason's Mission



APPENDIX F

Graphical Representation of Commission Discussion of Mason's SWOT



APPENDIX G

Additional Innovations

Below are ideas that were discussed and included in the final “dot voting” that the commission used, but that did not rise to the level of inclusion in the report as either a “general recommendation” or “sweeping innovation.” For context, each commission member had seven “yes” and two “no” votes that they could distribute however they wished. Fourteen members cast votes.

STUDENT-FOCUSED IDEAS	YES	NO
• Automatic admission for anyone in VA (or National Capital Region) with a high school degree (first class at Mason is free)	4	1
• Free, high-quality tutoring for all students who need it	3	0
• Develop segment-specific supports and structures for different types of students (e.g., working adult vs. 18-year-old freshman)	2	0
• Universal, intensive course (combination of UNIV 101 and HNRS 110) for every first-year student	1	3
• Change from content-based education to competency-based education	1	4
• No grades for undergraduates in first year at Mason	0	3
• Faculty mentorship (outside of curricular programs) for every student	0	0
FACULTY/STAFF-FOCUSED IDEAS	YES	NO
• Create staff advocates within each unit (academic and operational)	2	0
• Transform faculty workload policies (transparency, inclusion of all forms of work)	4	0
ALUMNI-FOCUSED IDEAS	YES	NO
• One free class per year for alumni—lifetime	0	0
INFRASTRUCTURE-FOCUSED IDEAS	YES	NO
• Fix transportation between campuses (e.g., WiFi shuttles with high frequency)	3	0
• Fix parking/access to Fairfax campus (e.g., gondola/monorail that runs from I-66 to Fairfax campus)	1	3