State Council of Higher Education in Virginia
Pell in Virginia Institution-wide Barrier Review Report

George Mason University
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Executive Summary

The Institution-wide Barrier Review (IwBR) Taskforce was created and charged with assessing the current state of the Pell-eligible student experience at GMU and identifying common barriers that prevent the university from recruiting and retaining Pell-eligible students. The report addresses the following: (1) review current programs, services, policies, and practices that impact the Pell-eligible student experience, (2) research and evaluate best practices for recruiting and retaining Pell recipients at other institutions in the region and national leaders, and (3) conduct a quantitative and qualitative exploration of current campus trends related to the Pell-eligible student experience.

Through cross-functional sub-committees, this report identifies best practices and barriers from our self-assessment along with promising and innovative practices from peer and aspirant institutions. While there are indeed new opportunities for exploration, GMU has already implemented or created several effective recruitment programs and support services for Pell-eligible students. This report also showcases descriptive statistics and focus group themes to show the comparability between Pell-eligible and Non-Pell-eligible student demographics, their experiences, and their outcomes. As shown throughout the report, there are very little differences in experiences and outcomes between Pell-eligible and non-Pell-eligible students, which we recognize is a unique strength of GMU.

The findings of the IwBR Taskforce self-study revealed the following areas of strength for Pell-eligible student success:
- Institutional Brand and Reputation
- Robust Pre-College and Recruitment Programs
- Transfer-Friendly Policies and Practices
- Coordinated Academic and Social Support
- Targeted Support for Contemporary Student Populations

The findings from the IwBR Taskforce self-study also revealed institutional barriers for Pell-eligible student success:
- Financial Affordability Capacity
- Matriculation and Transition Capacity
- Postgraduate Support
- Data Infrastructure

The following solutions are proposed to increase Pell-eligible recruitment, enrollment, retention, and graduation:
- Increase affordability through increased financial assistance for financial aid, housing, experiential learning opportunities, parking, and emergency/completion grants.
- Innovate recruitment and enrollment communication through new translation services and Marketing Cloud tools.
- Increase capacity for the summer bridge program, college readiness programs, the mathematics summer program, and 1:1 pre-orientation advising.
- Centralize learning support services for tutoring and supplemental instruction.

- Increase capacity for mental health and well-being services.
- Implement first-generation and low-income student training for faculty and staff.
- Create post-graduate transition programming.
- Leverage technology for early alerts, mid-term grades, and dashboards for student service providers, and allow PIV-funded positions to have access to Pell-eligible students for outreach.

Through this institutional focus and coordinated effort on supporting Pell-eligible students, we hope to increase the enrollment and success of Pell-eligible students. An undertaking of this scope and size will require strategic resource allocation and bold leadership to ensure GMU is a destination institution for Pell-eligible students to enroll, graduate, and contribute to the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Introduction

George Mason University is a comprehensive, public research university with a mission to create a more just, free, and prosperous world. The university started as a branch campus of the University of Virginia in 1957 with only one building and 17 students. In 1972, the George Mason College branch campus separated from the University of Virginia to become George Mason University. Since then, GMU has evolved to become Virginia's largest and most diverse public university with more than 40,000 students from all 50 states and over 130 countries. The GMU campus community is fueled by celebrating differences and diversity of thought, and its faculty, staff, and students all share a common vision to change the world and create a better tomorrow.

GMU strives to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for all people. The university has long been a leader in providing educational opportunities for under-resourced student populations, and it currently enrolls and graduates the largest population of Pell Grant recipients in the Commonwealth on an annual basis. GMU takes great pride in developing the talent of first-generation and low-income students, and the university currently ranks as the top institution in the Commonwealth for social mobility according to U.S. News and World Report (2024) and #22 overall "Friendliest College for Pell Eligible Students" per University Business (2024). Additionally, the Carnegie Foundation and American Council on Education (ACE) recently named GMU to the highest tier of its list of "Opportunity Colleges and Universities" in recognition of its commitment to accessibility, return on investment, and upward mobility.

Pell-Eligible Student Enrollment and Outcomes
In Fall 2024, 9,599 Pell Grant recipients enrolled at GMU, which accounted for 33% of the undergraduate student body. This was the largest cohort of Pell recipient students enrolled in GMU's history, and it represented a 15% increase from Fall 2023. Although Pell enrollment is on an upward trajectory at GMU, the retention and graduation rates for Pell-eligible students are trending downward. The first-year retention rate for the Fall 2023 cohort of Pell recipients was 83.7% compared to 86.3% for the Fall 2022 cohort. The six-year graduation rate for the Fall 2018 cohort of Pell-eligible students was 64.0% compared to 66.9% for the Fall 2017 cohort. For comparison, the first-year retention rate for the Fall 2023 cohort of non-Pell students was 85.9%, and the six-year graduation rate for the Fall 2018 cohort of non-Pell students was 68.8%. Due to the recent decline in persistence rates among Pell recipient students at GMU, the university now falls below the state average for degree completion/attainment within 6 years among Virginia 4-year public institutions.

In order to improve the outcomes for Pell-eligible students, the university commissioned an institutional self-study in October 2024 to (1) review current programs, services, policies, and practices that impact the Pell-eligible student experience, (2) research and evaluate best practices for recruiting and retaining Pell recipients at other institutions in the region and national leaders, and (3) conduct a quantitative and qualitative exploration of current campus trends related to the Pell-eligible student experience. The Institution-wide Barrier Review (IwBR) Taskforce was created and charged with assessing the current state of the Pell-eligible student experience at GMU and identifying common barriers that prevent the university from recruiting and retaining this student population at the desired levels of the strategic plan. This report will share the finding of the IwBR self-study to allow the executive leadership to better understand the current state of Pell-eligible students on campus and provide recommendations to enhance GMU's recruitment practices, campus climate, and support services to better serve them moving forward.

Preliminary findings of the IwBR indicate that unmet financial need is the primary barrier to GMU's recruitment and retention efforts for Pell-eligible students. Pell recipients have an average unmet need of $12,685 at GMU, which is well above the national average for public institutions. This is a result of GMU receiving some of the lowest levels of funding per student in the Commonwealth, and the university also has one of the smallest endowments among the major 4-year institutions in Virginia. The disparity in funding at GMU leads to an overwhelming difference in its capacity to support students with the highest financial need. JLARC Report 594 indicated that GMU students have a combined **$72.1M in unmet need**, (GMU, 2023) **more than 50% higher** than ODU (2023) and VCU (2023) students, and **more than 300% greater** than the other 12 Virginia public universities (UVA, 2024; VT, 2024). GMU's location compounds affordability challenges for its students. Situated in the DC Metro area, George Mason is in one of the highest cost-of-living areas of the Commonwealth, which translates to higher costs for students for both housing and food.

Structure and Calendar

George Mason's core values include that "our students come first" and that "we are careful stewards" of our resources. These beliefs and values are visible in George Mason's overarching mission to provide "access to excellence." In this context, the executive sponsor of this study and the co-chairpersons are committed to understanding and meeting the needs of the growing, diverse, and constantly changing student body. The task force initiated a self-study to understand the existing recruitment operations and ongoing support systems for Pell-eligible students at George Mason, identify best practices for recruiting and retaining Pell-eligible students nationally, gather and explore a rich data set to understand Mason's current state for Pell-eligible students, and make recommendations for a state-of-the-art approach to meeting the needs of our student body. This group intentionally included broad representation from multiple units, to allow for a holistic assessment of needs and resources at George Mason University.

The task force is specifically charged with the following:

1. Develop a list of current programs and services at Mason that directly or indirectly serve Pell-eligible students and provide an overview summary of each program.
   a. Briefly describe the model of support, goals and objectives, and the current resources committed for each program.
   b. Where possible, present data/information on the program's usage, success, and/or barriers to success. Identify any lacking data that would be helpful in evaluating program effectiveness.
   c. Identify common problems in locating and/or accessing existing support services cited by students, instructors, and support staff.
2. Review policies, procedures and practices at the institution that may provide opportunities or barriers for Pell-eligible students.
3. Gather information on programs and support services in place at other institutions similar in scope to Mason (in terms of size, complexity, and student body). Identify our top competitors in the region for Pell-eligible students and aspirational peer institutions in terms of enrollment and student outcomes.

4. Initiate qualitative and quantitative research on service utilization for Pell-eligible students at Mason and the impact of our services on student outcomes. Compare academic progress, retention rates, graduation rates, average debt at graduation, and student satisfaction between Pell-eligible and non-Pell students.
5. Based on the information presented above, provide recommendations for increasing enrollment and improving student outcomes for Pell-eligible students at George Mason University. Identify the areas of most pressing need for Pell-eligible students in terms of campus climate, academic progress, support services, cost of attendance, and financial aid.

The task force findings and recommendations are presented via this written report to university leadership and to the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV).

Project Structure
The task force used three primary working groups to establish a significant data set, using currently available data along with survey and focus group data. Additionally, working groups provided narrative on existing institutional programs that serve Pell-eligible Virginians, along with key policies that impact their success. A final working group conducted a literature and practice review to identify national best practices and promising opportunities employed by other institutions across the Commonwealth and nationally. Using these inputs, a cross-divisional retreat was conducted in March 2025 to engage all facets of the institution in education and dialogue surrounding serving Pell-eligible students, and culminated with the development of a set of key recommendations for the institution to embrace moving forward. This self-study has been nested under the institution's current Strategic Direction, with links specifically to Actions 1.4.2, 3.2.2, and 4.1.2.

Additionally, as stated in the SCHEV 6-Year Planning Report for George Mason University, "Receipt of PIV funding is contingent upon completion of a SCHEV-required Institution Wide Barrier report due in September 2025. George Mason hired a faculty member to organize the report, held a PIV self-study retreat in March and is currently preparing the final report, with a draft expected to be shared with university leadership in July. Mason's Executive Council recently became involved in the development as part of the annual planning activities. Mason members of the Board of Visitors [were] engaged during the Summer Planning Conference and BOV meeting July 30-August 1."

Calendar

Task	Target Completion Date
Proposal Submitted to SCHEV	September 20, 2024
Task Force Kick Off and Charge Meeting	October 21, 2024
Working Groups Complete Analysis and Document Findings	Nov. 2024 – Feb. 2025
Full Taskforce Meeting	January 27, 2025
Submit FY26 PIV Grant Proposal	February 3, 2025
Retreat: Review Findings and Draft Recommendations	March 27, 2025
Draft and Finalize Report	April – July 2025
Leadership Review and Sign-off of Report	August 2025
Submit Report to SCHEV	September 2025

Methodology

Descriptive Statistics
The quantitative data presented in this report was gathered from a collaborative effort between the Division of Enrollment Management and the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Planning. Since international students and undocumented students are not eligible for federal financial aid, they were not included in descriptive statistics. (Tables 1A – 4C).

Focus Group Qualitative Research
For the focus group research, researchers collected data from 72 participants (38 non-Pell-eligible; 34 Pell-eligible) in 18 focus groups. As the financial aid is the only office on campus that can have access to Pell-eligibility status of students, researchers partnered with the office to send solicitation emails to a random group of 500 students in the following undergraduate categories:
1. First-year, first-time students
2. Sophomore students (Earned 30-59 Credits)
3. Upperclass students (Earned 60+ Credits)
4. Part-Time (Students taking under 12 credits in Spring '25)

Students were asked to sign up for pre-determined focus group times. Focus groups ranged from two to seven participants and were facilitated by at least one research team member. For participant demographics, see appendix (Appendix 1).

Each one hour-long focus group was conducted between February 10th – 19th, 2025, and was transcribed using Zoom software and checked by a research team member for accuracy. Each transcript was then coded by at least one research team member using Dedoose qualitative analysis software. Analytic codes were grouped by topics and analyzed to highlight consistent and meaningful themes with both similarities and differences between Pell-eligible and non-Pell-eligible students. This study was approved as exempt by the Office of Research Integrity and Insurance.

Institutional Factors for Student Access & Success
Based on the list of institutional factors provided by SCHEV, the Taskforce created a practice/policy matrix to track programs, initiatives, and experiences. Taskforce members engaged subject matter experts from seven divisions and multiple units across the university to internally evaluate the current state of each institutional factor. A total of 61 unique factors across the four student lifecycle stages were included in the review (some factors are cross-listed across stages; Appendix 2).

The evaluators recorded the following for each institutional factor: working definition, description of current programs/practices/policies, the responsible units, current resources, strengths and barriers, and any available data. Information was collected from university websites, interviews with faculty and staff experts, available data, and previously written reports (for instance, the Undergraduate Learning Supports Task Force's May 2024 Report and Contemporary Student Services' FamilyU Post-Engagement Cohort June 2024 Report). From these data, working group members identified themes in strengths and barriers.

Benchmarking Interviews

The scope of benchmarking focused on national peers, Virginia 4-year public institutions, and institutions from *Forbes'* best Pell-friendly institutions (Swanston & Catalano, 2024) with profiles closest to GMU's profile (Appendix 3). The working group conducted outreach to each institution and interviewed colleagues at 18 institutions that responded, which consisted of 7 national peers, 7 Virginia 4-year publics, and 4 Pell-friendly institutional contexts.

Findings: Recruitment and Access

Access to higher education encompasses the collective institutional policies and actions that culminate in an opportunity to earn a college degree. Access is provided through proactive outreach and recruitment of students along with visit days, activities, and admissions conversations to encourage students who have applied and been admitted to ultimately enroll. GMU receives tens of thousands of applications for admission each year and admits a large portion of those that apply, especially Pell-eligible students. Only a small percentage of Pell-eligible students are not accepted to George Mason, and a higher proportion of Pell-eligible students matriculate to GMU than their counterparts (Table 1A). Even though GMU is the largest public university in the Commonwealth, most enrolled students reside in surrounding Northern Virginia counties (Table 1B).

In this section, researchers describe the institutional strengths and areas for growth that contribute to undergraduate recruitment at GMU. In addition, the university provides promising practices from peer institutions that could accelerate access to George Mason University.
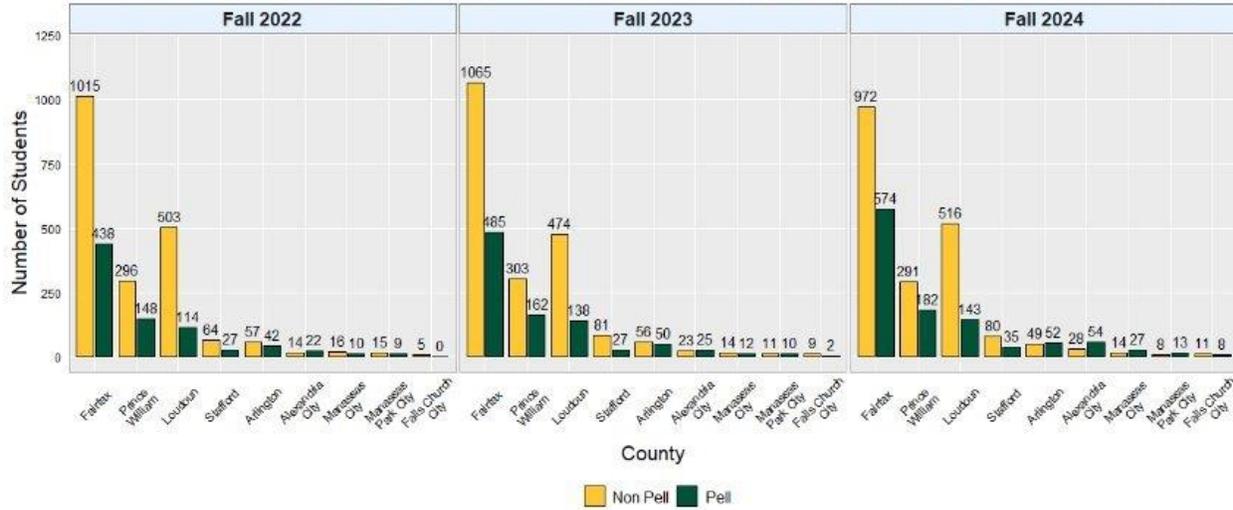
Table 1A

Fall Freshmen Applications, Admissions, and Enrollment by Pell Eligibility (Fall 2022 - Fall 2024)
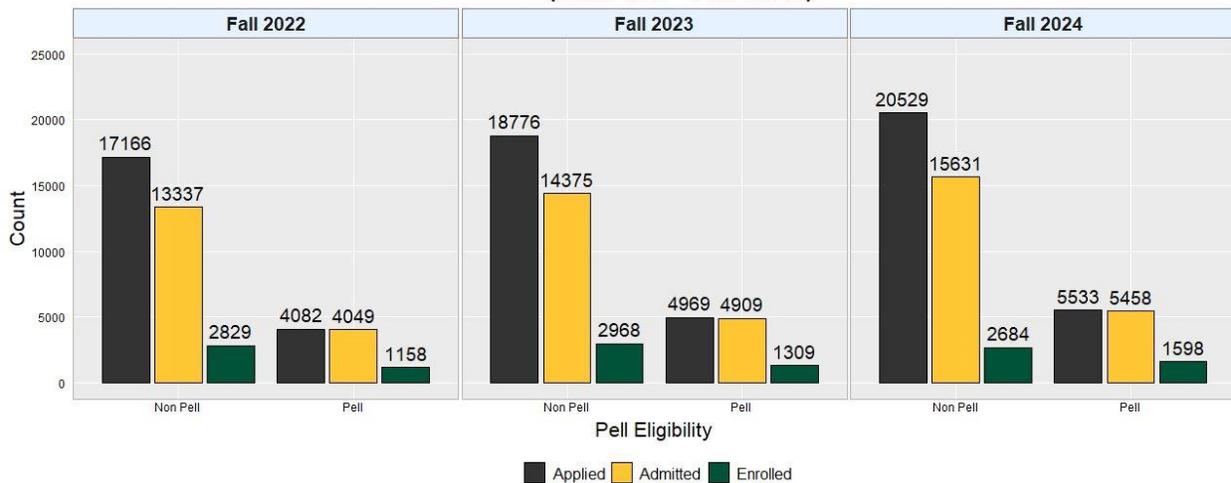
Table 1B

Enrolled Northern Virginia High School Graduates by County (Fall 2022 - Fall 2024)

Institutional Practices

To understand how such a socioeconomically diverse class of students is created, researchers identified strengths in admissions policies and outreach programs that created opportunities to identify students and facilitate enrollment.

Strengths

GMU has multiple units involved in student recruitment, and the following items are examples of the institution's strength in this area.

- **Inclusive Culture**: GMU has utilized the diversity of the student population and inclusive social culture to its advantage. Through the *All Together Different* branding, students and families are met with an ethos of compassion, care, and inclusion that has created a welcoming atmosphere for all prospective students. In addition, many admissions materials are provided in both English and Spanish to ensure families can participate fully in the recruitment process.

- **Proactive Outreach Communication & Summer Programs:** GMU has spent significant time and resources in creating partnerships across campus, with community-based organizations, local non-profits, and school districts. Outreach campaigns are created via social media accounts, text messaging campaigns, recruitment events, and targeted emails. In addition, GMU has created programs such as the Early Identification Program and other summer programs offered by the Office of Admissions to introduce middle and high school students to Mason through academic enrichment experiences.

- **Recruitment Events:** Admissions events (e.g., Fall Premiere, Spring Preview, Access to Excellence, Alcanza) ensure that a broad array of students have awareness and access Mason's resources and application processes. The group tour program, which brings thousands of students to campus each year, is run by a dedicated K12 coordinator, and the Assistant Director of College Success and First-Generation Recruitment focuses on bringing groups to campus.

- **Peer Ambassadors:** The Student Ambassador program within Admissions is a peer leadership experience where student volunteers guide campus visitors. This program showcases exemplary GMU students and allows students to connect with students and

families through genuine interactions. Ambassadors are provided scholarship monies after completing a required number of tours. This program is a complement to the paid Admissions Fellows program, which provides campus tours for the group tour program.

Barriers

Based on stakeholder feedback, the following challenges were identified that likely impact this population:

- **College Affordability**: The price of higher education is the most common barrier to college attendance for economically disadvantaged students. According to Mason's non-yield survey for admitted students who did not enroll in fall 2023, 65% of respondents said GMU did not provide them with enough financial aid, or they received a more favorable financial aid package at the institution where they enrolled. This financial barrier was most prevalent among Pell-eligible students, and many of them did not enroll in college anywhere in fall 2023 according to the National Student Clearinghouse (2024).
- **Language-Accessible Materials:** Because of the diverse student population of GMU, students and families may be more fluent in a language other than English. Especially for prospective families and guardians, additional print and electronic materials translated into multiple popular languages would be helpful to provide more access to recruitment information. In addition to print and online materials, there are very few multilingual staff that are available for in-person events to translate to prospective families and students.
- **Recruitment Staff Capacity:** Although there is a centralized undergraduate admissions office and staff, there is a decentralized distribution of staffing resources for college access. Some colleges and schools within George Mason University have additional recruitment personnel, while others do not. The uneven staffing capacity can create differences in recruitment and yield programming, specific to certain academic disciplines. There were also ~20 group tour requests that were denied due to staffing capacity.
- **Transportation Financial Assistance**: Shuttle reimbursements are available for campus visits, however accessing the form can be difficult to navigate for many prospective students. There is no funding/staff available to help more distant students reach campus events, unless they attend through their school district as part of a group tour.
- **Summer Programs:** Summer programs are an invaluable tool to provide access to GMU early in the college-going process for middle and high school students. Although this is an effective tool, the operational capacity needed for executive summer programs, especially for minors under 18 years old, is resource-intensive. The oversight and liability challenges make this type of outreach difficult to sustain and expand.

Promising Practices

Based on interviews with other institutional leaders, researchers found the following promising practices to be helpful recruiting, admitting, and yielding Pell-eligible students: early engagement, pre-orientation programs, TRIO programs.

Early Engagement & TRIO Programs

The Federal TRIO Program is designed to provide equitable support for low-income students, first-generation students, and disabled students. TRIO encompasses several programs to target students through early identification (i.e., Talent Search and Upward Bound), to bolster access (i.e., Educational Opportunity Centers), and to support retention (i.e., Student Support Services).

Institutions like the University of Kansas, Virginia State University, and Virginia Tech articulated the benefits of TRIO programs to create pathways for Pell-eligible students interested and matriculated to their university. Further, coordinated statewide efforts such as College Ready AZ and the Pell Initiative for the Commonwealth of Virginia were identified as catalysts to create access and opportunity for Pell-eligible students.

Beyond Federal and state programs, institutions across the interviews noted that other national efforts, such as American Talent Initiative, Big Brothers and Sisters, and 4-H were helpful partners to connect middle and high school students to institutions. Almost all of the benchmark institutions identified high school partnerships as a useful tool for direct recruitment of Pell-eligible students. For example, Florida International University and Florida State University invite Title I high school students to campus to provide opportunities to feel "at home" on their campuses before applying.

Pre-orientation Programs
Pre-orientation programs varied across institutions, but all focused on demystifying higher education, building social capital, and revealing the "hidden curriculum." While most of the programs were in-person, a few institutions noted hybrid or fully virtual options to support access and affordability. For example, Christopher Newport University offers a "Maymester" (summer course sessions) for special admissions students and others that provides extra support in a concentrated academic schedule. For transfer students, Florida International University's Connect4Success is one of myriad examples of intentional and guided transfer pathways that enhances both the academic and social success of transfer students. The pre-orientation programs often connect to the longer and more intensive bridge programs which are discussed in the enrollment practices.
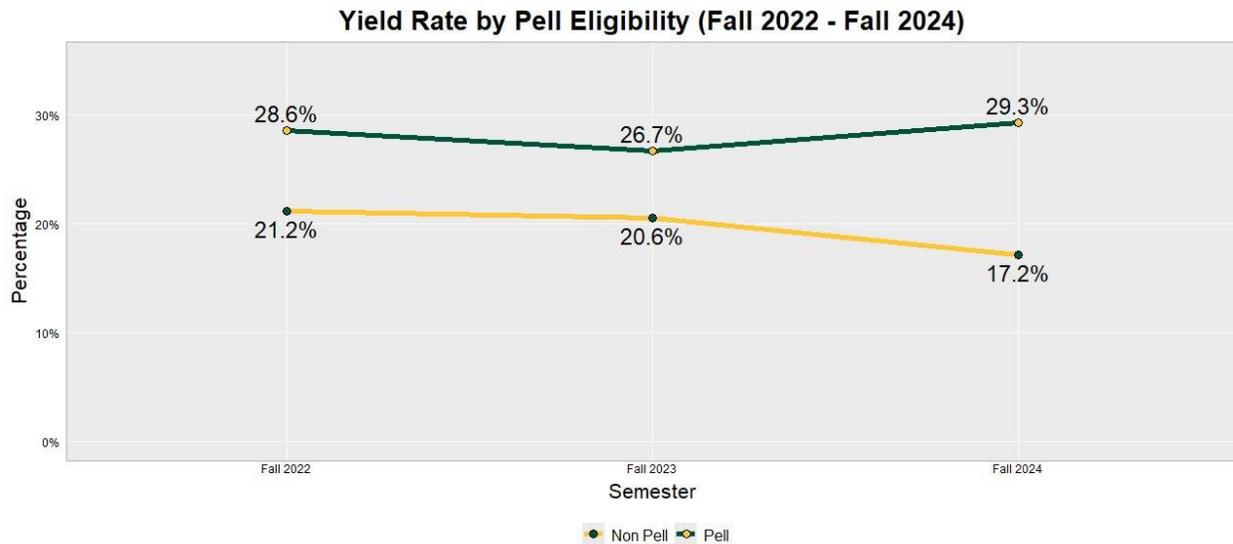
Findings: Enrollment and Transition

Structured and intentional support is provided to help students transition into their academic journey. This includes tools and guidance for academic and financial planning, course selection, and institutional navigation.

GMU is a destination campus for local Pell-eligible students. In general, Pell-eligible students who apply and get admitted are more likely to attend GMU than non-Pell-eligible students. For example, for Fall 2024, Pell-eligible students were 12% more likely than their counterparts to enroll at Mason (Table 2A). This yield rate equated to a first-time, first-year class that comprised over 1/3 students who were Pell-eligible (Table 2B), and transfer students were almost 50% Pell-eligible (Table 2C).

This section describes the strengths and opportunities for growth for George Mason University to enroll and transition Pell-eligible students along with qualitative data that describes the top reasons students ultimately chose GMU. In addition, promising practices are identified from peer institutions that could enhance matriculation and enrollment.

Table 2A

Yield Rate by Pell Eligibility (Fall 2022 - Fall 2024)

Table 2B

Freshmen Enrollment by Pell Eligibility (Fall 2022 - Fall 2024)

Fall 2022 | **Fall 2023** | **Fall 2024**

Fall 2022: 1158 (29%) Pell, 2829 (71%) Non Pell

Fall 2023: 1309 (30.6%) Pell, 2968 (69.4%) Non Pell

Fall 2024: 1598 (37.3%) Pell, 2684 (62.7%) Non Pell

Semester
Non Pell | Pell

Table 2C

Transfer Students by Pell Eligibility (Fall 2022 - Fall 2024)

Fall 2022: 1071 (40.9%) Pell, 1548 (59.1%) Non Pell

Fall 2023: 1134 (43.4%) Pell, 1478 (56.6%) Non Pell

Fall 2024: 1329 (47.7%) Pell, 1458 (52.3%) Non Pell

Count axis: 0, 1000, 2000

Semester

Non Pell | Pell

In addition, Pell-eligible students represent a diverse array of identities and experiences. For example, about half of those Pell-eligible students were considered first-generation college students (i.e., parents did not earn a bachelor's degree) (Table 2D). GMU is the most racially diverse public university in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Pell-eligible students have an even distribution amongst four races: Asian American, Black American, Hispanic/Latino American, and White American, while the non-Pell eligible students are majority White and Asian American (Table 2E and 2F).

Table 2D

First Generation Students by Pell Eligibility (Fall 2022 - Fall 2024)

Table 2E

Pell Undergraduate Students by Race (Fall 2022 - Fall 2024)

Table 2F

Non Pell Undergraduate Students by Race (Fall 2022 - Fall 2024)
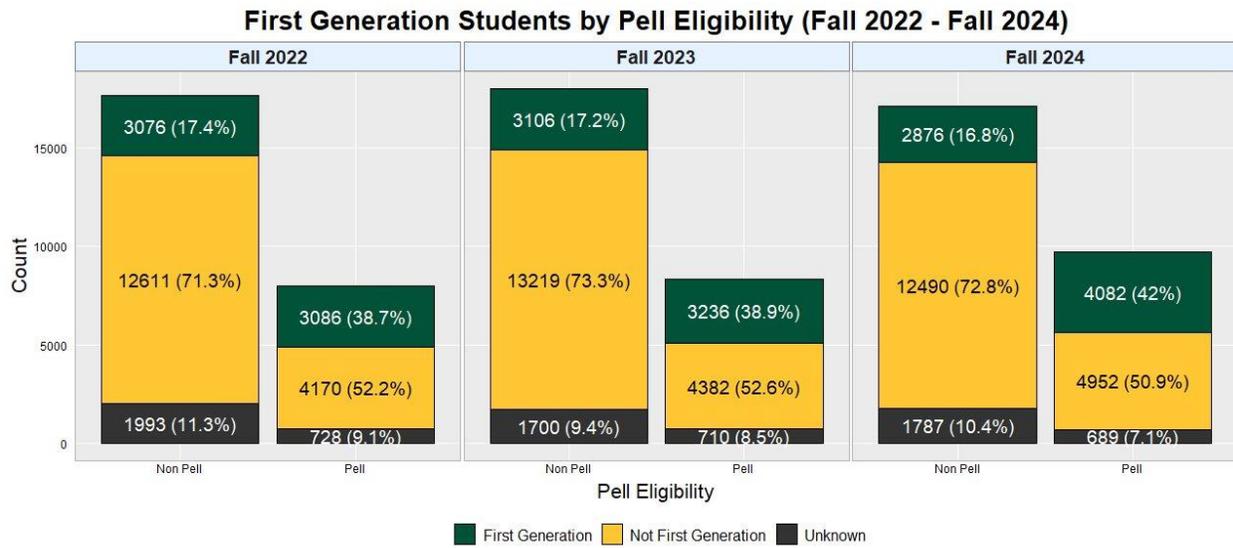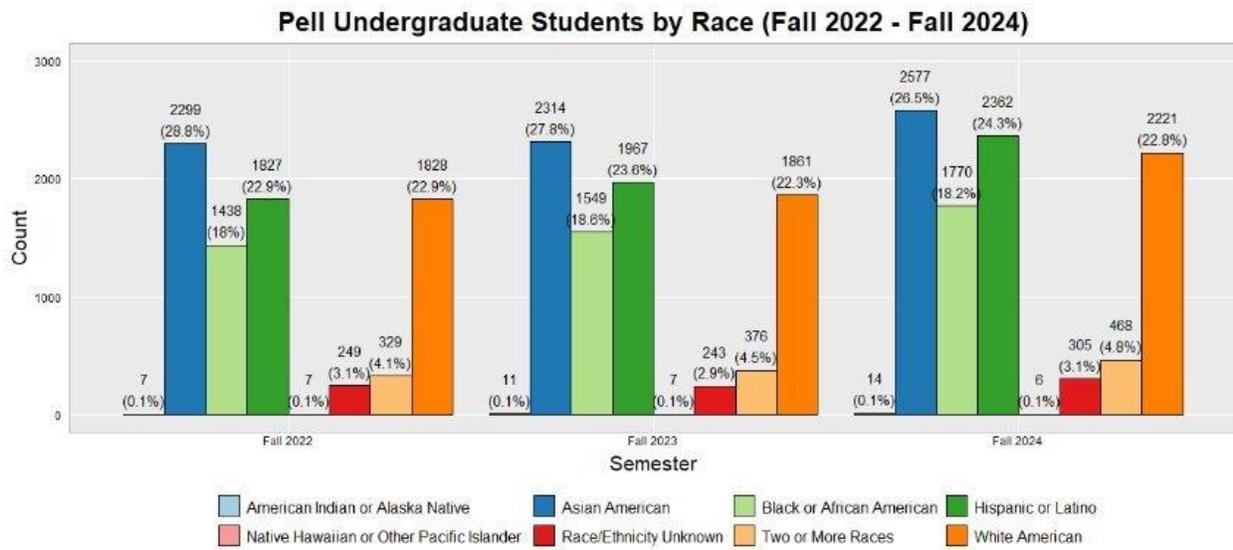
Lastly, what is important to recognize is that Pell-eligible students, even with federal financial aid, attend GMU with significant unmet need compared to their counterparts. Pell-eligible in-state students have a ~$13,000 gap in unmet need (Table 2G). Despite significant unmet need, GMU continues to be a destination institution for Pell-eligible students.
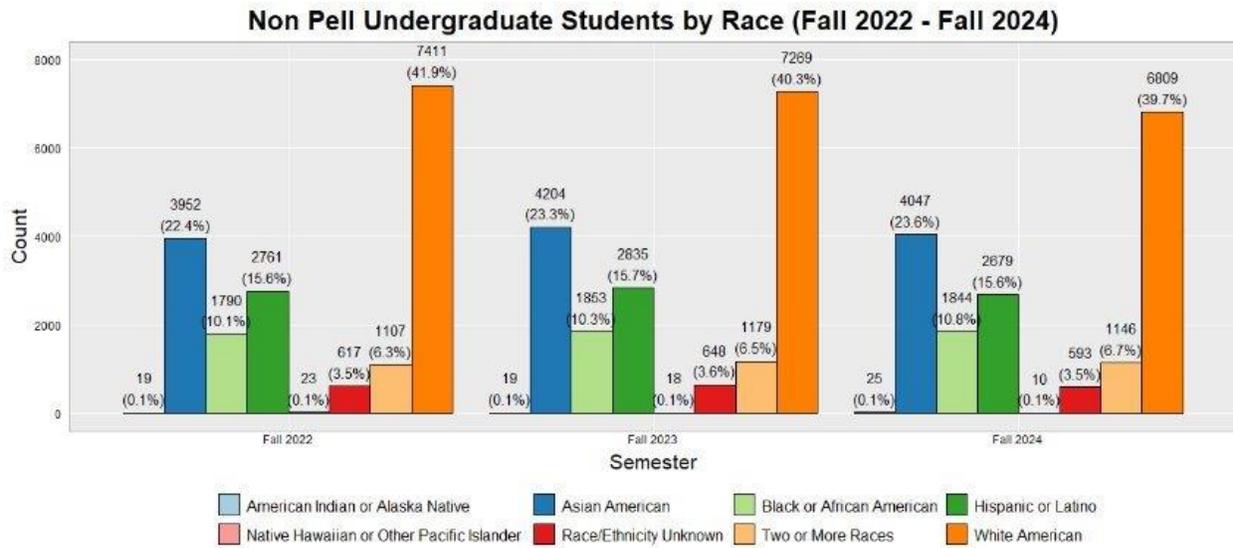
Table 2G

Unmet Need by Residence Category and Pell Eligibility (AY22-25)
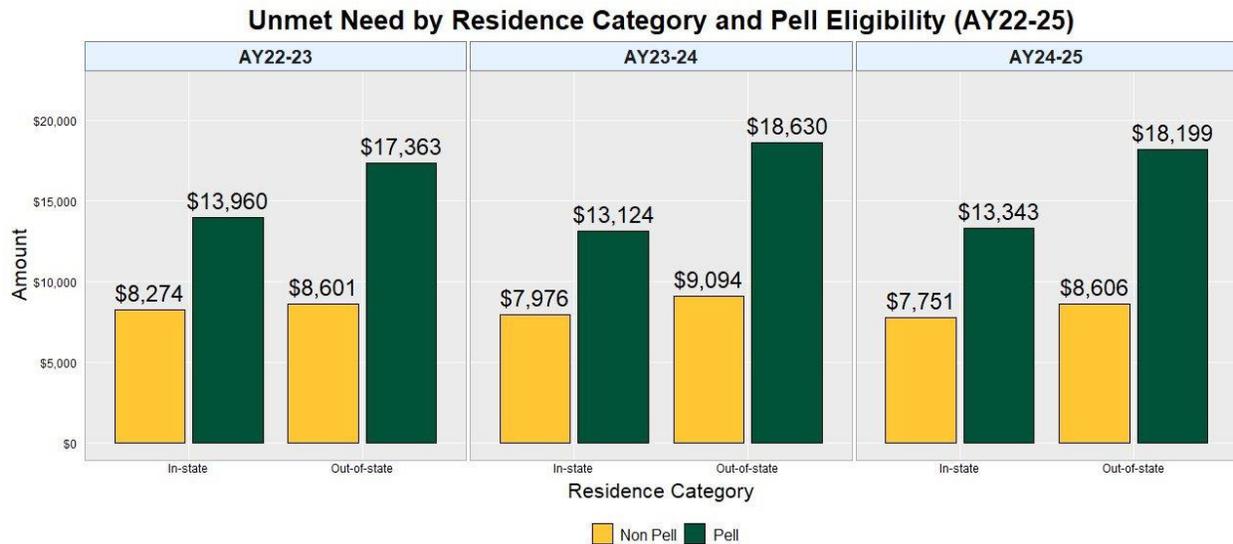
Student Focus Group Findings
College Choice: Why did students choose Mason?
Students choose George Mason University for a variety of reasons. All student participants spoke about location in regard to proximity to home and proximity to Washington, D.C. as a factor in why they chose GMU. In addition, another important factor was the proximity to Washington, D.C.-based career options, such as public policy, political advocacy, and criminal justice work.

Both Pell and non-Pell students discussed favorably the price of tuition, influence of financial aid, and the total cost of attendance compared to other higher education options. The racial and

social diversity at George Mason University helped students make decisions to attend the institution. For some, it was an attractive characteristic that made them interested in Mason, and for other students it wasn't an original factor that led them to GMU, but it influenced their decision to attend and/or reinforced their reason for matriculation.

There were however a few differences between Pell and Non-Pell students regarding why they chose GMU. Pell students spoke about their reason for attending mostly in terms of optimal decision-making between cost of attendance and academic offerings. Non-Pell students discussed more often a deliberate choice of attending GMU because of their return-on-investment from their decision.

In addition, Pell students accessed Mason more often through unique admissions programs, transfer pathways, and financial support.

Differences

	Pell	**Non-Pell**
Geographic Proximity	Pell students described proximity to home ("close" vs "close enough" vs "far enough, but still in-state")	Non-Pell students were more likely to discuss the proximity to DC as opportunity for potential internships and careers
Perspective on Affordability	Mason was the cheapest, or one of the cheaper, option for attendance compared to other institutions.	Non-Pell students recognized Mason as a good investment for future career opportunities.

Institutional Practices
Strengths
The following institutional practices are areas of strength for enrollment of Pell-eligible students:

- **Application Accessibility.** Mason increased Pell-eligible enrollment by making the application process more easily accessible. The following institutional practices have specifically targeted Pell-eligible students to apply to Mason.
  - The direct admissions program partners with local high schools that serve large populations of low-income students to provide an abbreviated application process that does not require letters of recommendation, admissions essays, or an application fee.
  - Prospective students are engaged through phone and email to complete applications.
- **Application and Fee Waivers:** Since financial barriers of any size can be a barrier for application and matriculation, Mason provides multiple opportunities for Pell-eligible students to apply and engage in orientation through fee waivers.
  - Use of the Common Application provides fee waivers for low-income students.
  - Use of the College Board and National Association of College Admissions Counseling (NACAC) application fee waivers as well as for special initiatives such as Virginia College Application Week.
  - Direct admissions high school receive an application fee waiver.
  - The Office of New Student and Family Programs provides automatic waivers of the New Student Fee in partnership with the Office of Financial Aid and Student Accounts for all Pell-eligible students with a 0 Student Aid Index (SAI).

- **Pre-Orientation Programs**: There are a variety of pre-orientation programs hosted by offices on campus that help to demystify college success with topics such as financial literacy, academic support, and developing social networks. Collaboration among Admissions, Student Success Coaching, Student Support and Advocacy, Early Identification Program, and First Gen+ Center strengthens the content and reach of pre-orientation offerings. In addition, high school workshops for incoming students are offered locally, along with Access to Excellence Seminars on campus.
- **Student Transition Empowerment Program (STEP)**: A premier summer bridge program, STEP serves incoming, in-state, first-generation students an opportunity to earn three college credits over the summer and provides intensive academic and social support to ease college transition stress.
- **Financial Transition Assistance**
  - The Mason Virginia Promise (MVP) Grant, combined with other sources of federal and state funding, will meet the cost of standard tuition and fees for Pell-eligible students in the ADVANCE and the Early Identification Programs.
  - Deposit deferment allows students to defer their enrollment deposit until their financial aid is activated. Staff proactively communicate with students in programs like the Early Identification Program and the DC College Access Program (DC-CAP) to create awareness.
  - In Fall 2025, First Time in College (FTIC) and Transfer (TR) Pell-eligible students will be eligible to apply for a laptop to use during their enrollment at George Mason University. At the completion of their degree program, the laptop will be theirs to keep. Laptops have been secured through the SCHEV PIV grant to support approximately 20-25% of entering Pell-eligible FTIC and TR students for Fall 2025 (variation depending on total yield).

Barriers

The following barriers were identified to better serve Pell-eligible students during enrollment and matriculation:

- **Information Overload:** During undergraduate orientation and leading up to the first day of class, students report forgetting key details and are overwhelmed by the number of emails from multiple departments—even receiving several in one day.
- **Pre-Orientation:** There is a need for more dedicated, systematic, and accessible pre-orientation programs to ensure that all incoming students and families, particularly those from Pell-eligible backgrounds, have access to pre-orientation programming. Staffing and funding capacities restrict the scalability and frequency of pre-orientation programs.
- **Orientation**: Although there has been a positive gain in individualized advising at orientation and improved course seat allotment, there is still a need for additional supplemental training and staff support for summer orientation to make sure all students receive consistent individualized support. More advisors, summer stipends for additional peer advisors, and dedicated retention/attainment personnel to initiate anti summer melt initiatives for each department could improve student outcomes.
- **Family Resource Challenges:** Not all students and families can participate in in-person orientation programming due to transportation, time, financial, and childcare resource barriers. Although waivers are automatically issued to eligible students for the New Student Fee, scholarships are not available to cover the costs listed above.

- **Unmet Financial Need:** Unmet financial need for Pell-eligible students remains a barrier, as students often struggle to pay for housing, parking, books, and other costs associated with attendance. Even with tuition mostly covered, unmet financial need remains a significant barrier for Pell-eligible student enrollment. This is paired with many students needing to balance other life commitments, such as work and caregiving, which are required activities for many of the contemporary students at George Mason University.

Promising Practices

Benchmarking interviews and literature review explored the structured and intentional support provided to help students transition into their academic journey. The best practice themes which emerged for enrollment practices included high-touch orientation advising, structured bridge programs, and funded summer start programs. Additionally, one of the Pell-friendly institutions, San Diego State University, has a federally recognized Prison Education Program (PEP). While the PEP is not a recurring theme, it is an innovative opportunity for GMU to lead in an area of access for Pell-eligible students.

High-touch Orientation Advising

Quality academic advising is essential for effective student transition to college (Witkowsky et al., 2020). There were many promising practices for advising during the orientation period from peer institutions. Both the University of Florida and the University of Kansas provide group and individual advising sessions at new student orientations. The University of Kansas is able to achieve this due to its fully centralized advising structure, which allows it to marshal professional advising personnel as needed. The University of Florida accomplishes this through funding from the Office of the Provost, which supports the training of a large cohort of 9-month teaching faculty who augment the institution's advising staff during the summer. Virginia Commonwealth University accomplishes individual orientation advising sessions by mandating a robust pre-orientation advising survey, requiring any placement tests to be completed before orientation attendance, and utilizing their advising CRM platform as the only mechanism for advising appointment scheduling. Finally, Virginia Tech provides a scaffolded series of virtual advising opportunities across their summer orientation cycle, including mandatory individual, group, and specific college information sessions.

Structured Bridge Programs

Bridge programs were successful interventions to provide additional support and proactive socialization to college for specific student populations. Hallmarks of the programs included:
- Well-funded programs that allowed students to earn 3-7 credits with on-campus housing at no cost to the student
- Robust academic support, particularly in math and writing
- Coordination of faculty instruction, staff advising, and peer mentorship
- Residential learning communities to facilitate social connection, belonging, and community

Prison Education Program (PEP)

The educational journey for justice-impacted, incarcerated, and formerly incarcerated students is uniquely challenging. San Diego State University utilizes the Hood to Higher Education framework to better support justice-impacted and formerly incarcerated students. Establishing a

federally recognized prison education program can provide a new pathway for Pell-eligible student enrollment.

Findings: Retention

Retention is the proactive and ongoing engagement with students to address challenges, foster persistence, and support academic, personal, and professional growth to ultimately graduate. Because GMU has a significant amount of transfer students, it is important to understand not only first-time, first-year student retention, but also those of new transfer students. Among both first-year and transfer students, ~85% of students are retained into their second year (Table 3A). This study also provides quantitative data for two initiatives that drive student success: Student Success Coaching and On-Campus Housing. Many students take advantage of student success coaching for at least one session in fall semesters, but a higher percentage of Pell students engage with success coaching than non-Pell students (Table 3B). In contrast, there is a widening gap between Pell-eligible and non-Pell-eligible students choosing to live on campus (Table 3C). Lastly, successfully earning credits after the first year is helpful for successful graduation and both full-time and part-time Pell students earn about the same amount of credits regardless of Pell-eligibility (Table 3D).

This section highlights multiple data points that contribute to retention and success. These data show there is very little difference between Pell-eligible and non-Pell-eligible student retention outcomes. In addition, qualitative data explains how students experience classroom environments, perceive belonging, and what resources they utilize to be successful. This is followed by strengths and opportunities for growth through internal evaluation, and promising practices from peer institutions that could provide additional innovations for student retention.

Table 3A

1-Year Retention Rates by Pell Eligibility (Cohorts 2021-2023)
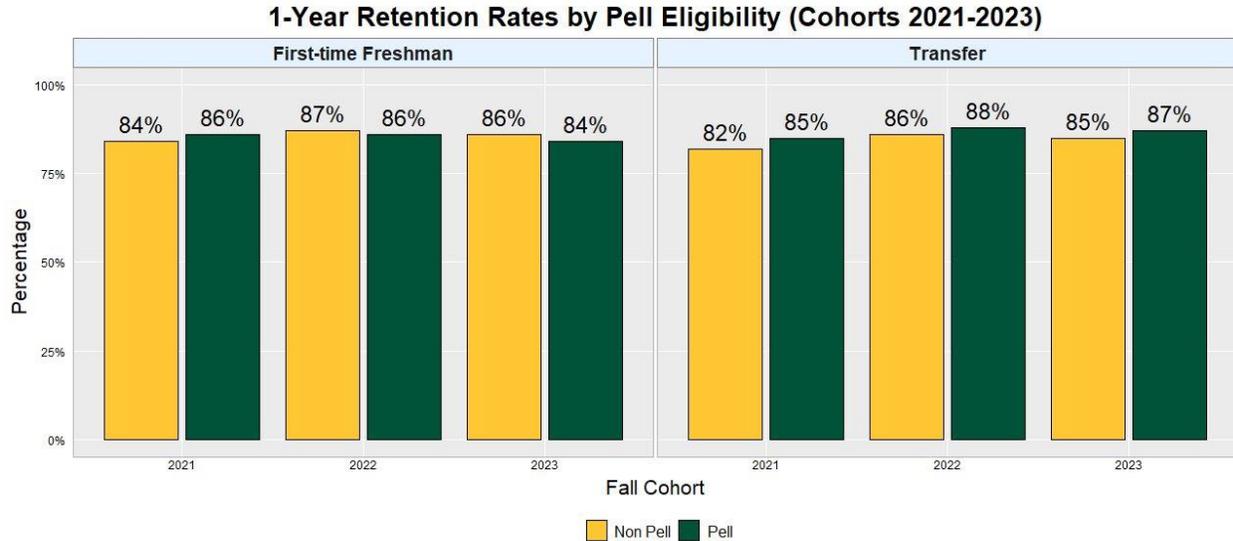
Table 3B

Unique Undergraduate Students Served by Student Success Coaching by Pell Eligibility (Fall 2022 - Fall 2024)
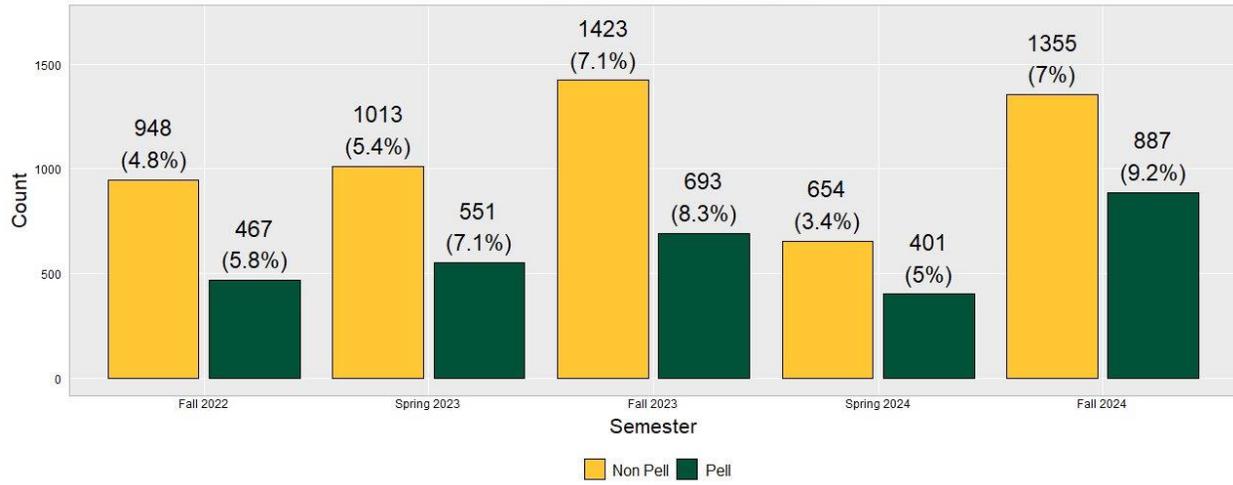
Table 3C

Housing by Pell Eligibility (AY22-25)

Table 3D

First-time Freshman Fall Cohort Credits Earned in 1 Year by Load and Pell Eligibility (Cohorts 2021-2023)

Student Focus Group Findings

Academic Experience: What faculty connections and in-class experiences do students have?
In general, students had a wide range of experiences with their classroom learning and faculty interactions. Students appreciated the instructors (including TAs and grad students) wh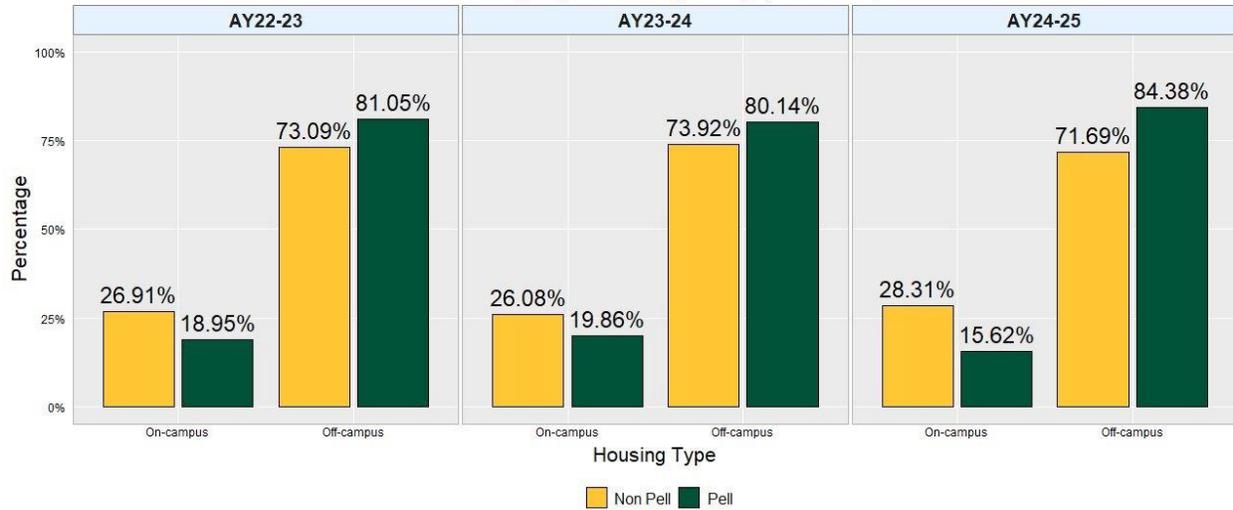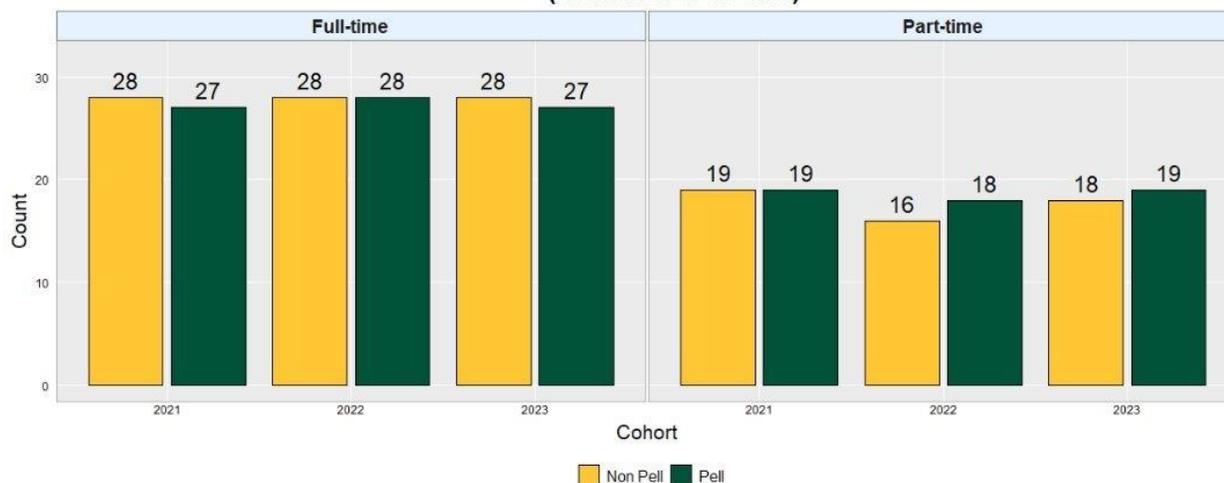o seemed to care for their general well-being and who they got to know on a more personal level. While they enjoyed the flexibility and access online and asynchronous classes provided, they also struggled with being connected to peers and campus through this medium. Students most observed and appreciated the passion faculty brought for their area of expertise and teaching quality. Because many students did quite a bit of research to get a class that would meet their optimal criteria, they became most frustrated when courses were disorganized or expectations were unclear or changed throughout the course.

- *Instructor Passion:* Students were more engaged and reported positive experiences with faculty who were "passionate" about their subject and teaching.
- *Online Learning:* Online classes provide access but less satisfaction and opportunities to engage with faculty and peers.

Research identified only one significant difference in academic experiences between Pell and non-Pell students. Twice as many non-Pell eligible students engaged in research to form faculty connections than their Pell-eligible counterparts. This finding highlights the importance of undergraduate research as a gateway to faculty connections that enhance the undergraduate experience.

Belonging: How and why do students feel like they belong?
Belonging is one of the most important factors that contribute to student retention and success. All focus group participants were motivated to make social connections with peers as a definition for their sense of belonging. Students made connections with peers most often through classroom interactions, residence hall interactions, and joining student organizations (academic and non-academic). Among those students who live off-campus and commute, most initially struggled to connect with peers.

Students were mostly positive about the overall interactions with peers at Mason. They mentioned how the diversity of Mason contributed to interactions with peers who were similar and different from them, and how most students were friendly and inviting. They also mentioned feeling supported by the many academic and social resources Mason has to offer to encourage belonging.

The two major differences between Pell and non-Pell experiences with belonging included making social connections and feeling lonely:

	Pell	Non-Pell
Connection	Pell students struggled to make peer, faculty, and staff connections.	For non-Pell students, there were no first-year participants that discussed struggling to connect socially, even though some upperclass students discussed how they struggled in their earlier years.
Loneliness	Pell students were more likely to identify with feeling lonely at Mason.	Non-Pell students did not specifically identify with being lonely.

Success Resources: What resources did students utilize to be successful?

Students drew upon a variety of resources to support their success: Peers, family, and existing relationships (e.g., academic advisors, faculty, success coaches). Students who had complex situations that required multiple campus offices found it more challenging to navigate student success services and often needed an intentional and personal staff guide to be successful. Students recognize their own agency in their success and do not just rely on university resources. Success coaching, career services, and counseling and psychological services were mentioned often and overwhelmingly positively. Academic advising and financial aid, two offices that most students interact with, had mixed positive and negative experiences.

a. *Peers and Existing Relationships:* (e.g., advisors, faculty, success coaches, work supervisors, resident assistants) were the most meaningful student success resources.
b. *Self-Ownership:* Students recognize their own agency in their success and do not just rely on university resources. Students reported conducting online research to find answers related to their college experience. The reasons for choosing to research online rather than visiting a campus office varied. Some students preferred independently searching for information rather than asking staff directly, while others cited long wait times to meet with advisors or a general discomfort with in-person interactions.
c. *Customer Service and Compassion:* Negative interactions detailed by students often had themes of feeling like the faculty or staff member they interacted with had insufficient customer service skills, demonstrated poor communication, or overall lacked compassion or empathy for their personal situation.

There were a few distinct differences of what information sources Pell and non-Pell students utilized along with customer service experiences with the Office of Student Financial Aid.

	Pell	Non-Pell
Success Coaching	Several Pell students discussed using Success Coaching as a	Success Coaching was mentioned less frequently as a resource, and half of

	resource and discussed forming a relationship with their coach.	those comments simply noted awareness of the service without having utilized it.
Family	Family was mentioned frequently as an information resource.	While non-Pell students also mentioned family, it was less frequent. Most of the students who indicated they would ask their family included that their family member specifically attended Mason.
Financial Concerns	There were very few experiences mentioned regarding financial concerns or working with the Office of Student Financial Aid, and those that were noted were positive.	Among non-Pell students, there were more negative customer service experiences with the Office of Student Financial Aid.

Institutional Practices

Strengths

The following areas are strengths for current policy and practice to retain Pell-eligible students:

- **Financial literacy:** There are currently three full-time staff members and multiple financial well-being peer mentors who provide financial literacy workshops to students with information about financial planning and well-being, including education about financial aid and student loans.
- **Reducing Non-Tuition Costs**
    - The **Parking Citation Diversion Program** allows parking ticket forgiveness once per academic year if students pass an online learning module and quiz.
    - **Food Assistance programs:** The Patriot Pantry, Meal Swipe Program, and the Greenhouse and Gardens Produce Program all provide access to various food sources for students in need. George Mason University is growing its Digital Purchasing Card program for groceries to support students who are in the greatest level of need with weekly funds for groceries via partnership with the Capital Area Food Bank and allocation of SCHEV PIV grant dollars in FY26.
    - **Patriot Packout** is a community-based initiative collecting like-new and gently used donations that are freely redistributed.
- **Emergency Financial Support:** The Stay Mason Student Support Fund offers vital temporary aid for unexpected financial emergencies and hardships that can be used for expenses related to support student retention.
- **Student Success Coaching:** Success coaching for undergraduate students was launched at GMU in 2020, and with aid from SCHEV PIV funds, this program offers Pell-eligible students a dedicated success coach who provides one-on-one, personalized guidance focused on academic, personal, and career goals. While students are part of a larger cohort to foster community and shared programming, all coaching appointments are individualized and tailored to each student's unique needs and circumstances. In addition to one-on-one coaching, students benefit from targeted outreach and group engagement opportunities explicitly designed to support the success of Pell-eligible students across multiple areas of their college journey. Success Coaches partner with Financial Wellbeing Mentors to ensure Pell-eligible students are connected into those planning resources as well.
- **Contemporary Student Services (CSS):** CSS provides additional support for adult learners, off-campus students, transfer students, students who are married, widowed, or divorced, pregnant or parenting students, veteran and military-affiliated students, students

who have experienced foster care, and justice-impacted students. With such a varied student population of multiple identities and experiences, CSS helps advocate and provide support to offices on campus serving students and directly serves students from various populations that may have additional and overlapping unique needs.

- **Peer Mentoring, Advising, and Tutoring**: There are multiple examples of opportunities for Pell-eligible students to engage with additional advising support, tutoring assistance, and peer mentorship. Some examples include the Patriot Leader Program, Early Identification Program (EIP), Learning Communities, Student Ambassadors, UNIV Course Mentors, College-specific Peer Advisors, and Knack tutoring.

Barriers

To better support and retain Pell-eligible students, the following areas were identified as areas for growth:

- **Emergency Financial Support**: The Stay Mason Student Support Fund offers vital temporary aid but often runs out mid-year and cannot serve students who have multiple needs. In AY24-25, 766 applications for a total of $3.6M were filed, while only 369 applications and a total of $1.1M could be awarded. Emergency financial support is especially important for students in their final semester of college. Additional finances are needed to meet the varied needs of students.

- **Academic Advising:** Advising models vary across colleges (faculty-only, professional-only, or mixed), creating an inconsistency of experience and outcomes. In particular, high caseloads of students for advisors makes individualized attention for students unattainable, especially those transitioning to Mason with limited financial and familial support.

- **Well-being and Mental Health Services:** There are many services available for mental health and well-being, but they are often not available for tailored and individual needs. And even though these resources exist, not all students are aware of how to access and utilize them, which requires more proactive communication and outreach. Additionally, programming is often in-person and less accessible to students who need virtual or hybrid options.

- **Tutoring Services:** Knack peer tutoring services launched in fall 2024 for 28 specific UG courses and served 660 students through 3,120 sessions and more than 3,600 hours of tutoring in the first two semesters. Though popular and free for students, there is the need to expand resources to more courses (only 28 UG courses are covered by Knack) and a need for tutors with advanced pedagogical and content training.

- **Faculty Involvement**: There's a need for faculty to implement student-centered pedagogical strategies and to foster engaging learning environments. Additional training for faculty on how to create student-centered and engaging classroom experiences, as well as understanding service referral systems, could enhance student success.

- **Research Opportunities:** Programs like the Undergraduate Research Scholars Program, Summer Team Impact Projects, and the Office of Student Creative Activities and Research (OSCAR) Federal Work-Study Research Assistants Program offer paid research roles for students interested in research. Unfortunately, capacity is limited, which makes access to the program competitive and not accessible to all students who are interested in research. In addition, targeted outreach to Pell students is not currently a practice for the program.

- **Childcare Access:** Mason's partnership with Generation Hope's FamilyU aims to improve outcomes, but survey data shows large gaps between childcare eligibility and access. The on-campus Child Development Center offers limited spots and no subsidized childcare for students. There is ample need for full-day, part-time, drop-in, and subsidized care for student parents.
- **Data Collection and Tracking Gaps**: Inadequate tagging and tracking in university data systems hinder understanding of long-term outcomes of programming for Pell-eligible students due to recent federal regulation changes. The current available data is mostly about enrollment and lacks additional data points to analyze and predict barriers to retention.

Promising Practices

Efforts focused on proactive and ongoing engagement with students to address challenges, foster persistence, and support academic, personal, and professional growth were considered for retention practices. In discussions with colleagues at peer institutions, the best practice themes that emerged were intrusive academic advising, robust math support, and thoughtful use of language for academic programs and policies.

Well-structured and Intrusive Academic Advising

The relationship between quality academic advising and student persistence and retention is well established in academic literature (Tippetts et al., 2022). Though effective advising can take many forms, there were notable similarities in the analyzed institutions, particularly in the robust staffing, the intrusive advising practices for first-year students, and the intentional and strategic institutional advising structure.

At both the University of Kansas and Virginia Commonwealth University, first-year students are given specialized advising from a centralized unit that emphasizes building strong academic habits, setting goals, and integrating into the campus community. At the University of Florida, the Promise Scholar and Opportunity Scholar programs, both of which focus on Pell-eligible, low-income, and first-generation students, provide specialized academic advisors and mandate regular meetings to be eligible to register for courses.

Part of what enables institutions to deliver effective academic advising is their choice of advising structure. Debates over academic advising structure at large, complex institutions typically center on two variables: 1) Centralization, and 2) Professional/Faculty advising. There are many well-documented benefits and advantages to each approach. For example, fully centralized academic advising, like at the University of Kansas offers consistency, clarity, and flexibility. In contrast, decentralized advising creates greater specialization, allowing for more nuance and program-level support. Professional academic advising allows role focus, greater availability, and heightened incentive to cultivate NACADA competencies and learning advising technologies. Faculty advising, on the other hand, can provide greater field-specific academic and career insight, and may augment a previously developed teaching relationship. Recent national trends show a tendency toward college-level centralization with university-level coordination and oversight, with a focus on professional advising while retaining faculty mentorship for undergraduates like at the University of South Carolina (Cahill, 2023; Tippetts et al., 2022).

Coordinated Service Culture and Delivery

Institutions need to have an intentional and coordinated culture to effectively deliver student support and services (Thomas & McFarlane, 2018). One example from William & Mary is the Office of "Care Support Services" that coordinates case management and student support with a myriad of issues they may encounter (e.g., hospitalization, death of a family members, interpersonal conflict, basic needs insecurity) by connecting them to on-campus and off-campus resources. Lack of service coordination led students to internalizing, feeling as though there was something wrong with them as a student as opposed to a lack of coordination within the institution (Thomas & McFarlane, 2018). The University of Arizona's Thrive Center is another example of a one-stop-shop that focuses on campuswide collaborations to foster student persistence and attainment.

Robust Math Support
Insufficient math preparation and its ramifications on student success, especially in STEM majors, is an enduring issue in higher education and causes significant retention issues (Chang et al., 2014). There is also a meaningful racial disparity in STEM degree attainment, with little evidence of disparity in non-STEM programs (Riegle-Crumb et al., 2019). The National Center of Education Statistics (2013) found that socioeconomic background and institutional selectivity were also meaningful variables in STEM student degree attainment. The well-documented learning loss in mathematics because of the Covid-19 pandemic (Dorn et al., 2020; Betebenner & Wenning, 2021) combined with increasing student interest in math-heavy majors (National Student Clearinghouse, 2024) further intensifies the need for significant institutional support for mathematics instruction and learning.

At the University of Florida (UF), the Office of Academic Support provides free and accessible math tutoring to the Promise Scholars population, who are largely Pell-eligible, first-generation students. Additionally, UF's degree-progression policies mandate early and continuous taking of required math sequence courses, which has a positive correlation with ultimate degree attainment (Chang, 2014).

Thoughtful Curricular Review and Alignment
The transition from high school to university-level coursework can be challenging, but the structure of the curriculum itself should not be. To ease the challenges of curriculum navigation, the Association for Undergraduate Education at Research Universities (UERU) launched the Curricular Analytics Project (CAP) with 30 national institutions, including GMU. The CAP investigated how well degree programs were scaffolded to ensure opportunity for high-impact practices and the ability to meet robust learning outcomes.

The GMU ADVANCE program is a national promising practice, but other programs can be helpful to understand institutional policies that encourage successful transfer pathways. In 2012, Florida International University (FIU) launched the Gateway Project. This initiative identified key courses that were high enrollment (>1,600), high failure (>15%), and high impact (predictive of dropping out or delayed graduation). In their report, FIU notes that failing these courses has a heightened negative impact on students from traditionally underserved populations. This project involved thoughtful engagement with instructors, department chairs, and students, and curricular and pedagogical approaches were shifted as a result of the work. In 2018, FIU reported a 15% increase in students who passed all gateway courses, an overall 30% decrease in failure rate in gateway courses, and a total of 8,000 additional course completions.

In 2025, the University of Illinois-Chicago published a report of their CAP project The Illinois Initiative, which sought to simplify transfer student pathways through curricular alignment with area community colleges (Varelas, 2025). Through transfer agreements, coordinated advising, and aligned student success plans, the Illinois Initiative was able to produce the Chicago Roadmap, which guaranteed that students who graduated with an associate's degree from an area community college could transfer with zero credit loss, and graduate with a baccalaureate degree in 60-61 credits. Curricular analytics supported this program by helping identify bottleneck courses, compare curricula across institutions, and identify trends between curricular complexity and student outcomes.

Intentional and Thoughtful Language

Whether describing an initiative, an academic status, an event, or even the students themselves, language has the potential to be either aspirational or discouraging. For example, many institutions with dedicated support programs for Pell-eligible or similarly situated students took great care in their naming decisions, producing things like the "Promise Scholars" and "Opportunity Scholars" (UF), the "Golden Scholars" (FIU), and the "eleVaTed Scholars" (VT). Such achievement- and aspiration-oriented language is energizing, momentum-building, and visible, without being patronizing or contributing to a deficit-oriented framing.

Many institutions are also shifting their academic standing terminology. The most common institutional term for a student in significant academic precarity is "probation." A recent institutional self-study by California State University-Fullerton revealed that 93% of their students felt scared by the word "probation" (Boretz et al., 2021). As a result of their institutional self-analysis, CSU-Fullerton and other institutions have changed their language from "academic probation" to "academic notice," to encourage positive results. In addition to the use of "Academic Probation," students who become academically ineligible from their academic programs, though still eligible to pursue their education at GMU, are formally referred to in university policy as "Terminated." Possible replacements to deficit-oriented terms could be, "redirected" or "academically ineligible."

Opportunity Grants

Tuition along with room and board, additional fees, and course materials are common student expenses. Experiential opportunities such as joining student organizations, studying abroad, or doing an internship can be cost-prohibitive (Mowreader, 2024). The financial barriers often discourage participation in these high-impact educational opportunities.

George Washington University considered these additional expenses "necessary." Florida State University highlighted not only the need to fund these opportunities, but also to encourage faculty and staff to develop opportunities with grant funding options for low-income and Pell-eligible students. William and Mary responded to data that low-income students were not participating in experiential opportunities as much. After creating the Promise Program (covers tuition for in-state Pell-eligible students) and creating more scholar programs in the First Generation Engagement Office, opportunity gaps have lessened.

Additionally, Arizona State University (ASU), offers a Global Education Planning Scholarship targeting first-generation, undergraduate students with the goal to support these students in also being "the first in their families to participate in a Global Education program by reducing the financial barrier that may prevent some students from considering this option" (Global Education

Office, n.d.). Institutions such as Georgia State University and University of Memphis have also established initiatives to support study abroad preparations and costs (Mowreader, 2024).

Findings: Attainment

Helping students to graduation is not without intentional polices, practices, and support system. A small gap exists between graduation rates between Pell-eligible students and their counterparts although there is no gap in final GPA (Table 4A). What is noticeable and remarkable about GMU is that there are so few equity gaps between Pell-eligible and non Pell-eligible students. The average time-to-degree is 4.2 years for both Pell and Non-Pell eligible students (Table 4B) and there are no difference in the amount of credits earned at the time of graduation (Table 4C). While transfer students do have more credits, which is common in U.S. higher education, both Pell-eligible and non Pell-eligible students at GMU graduate with the same amount of credits when they graduate. The lack of equity gaps are noticeable and quite remarkable.

This section provides data on graduation outcomes and the parity between Pell-eligible and non Pell-eligible students. In addition, qualitative data showcases how prepared students feel for life after graduation. Lastly strengths and opportunities for growth are identified based on current institutional practices – along with promising practices from peer institutions that could increase attainment and success after graduation.

Table 4A

6-Year Graduation Rates and Average GPA by Pell Eligibility (Cohorts 2016-2018)
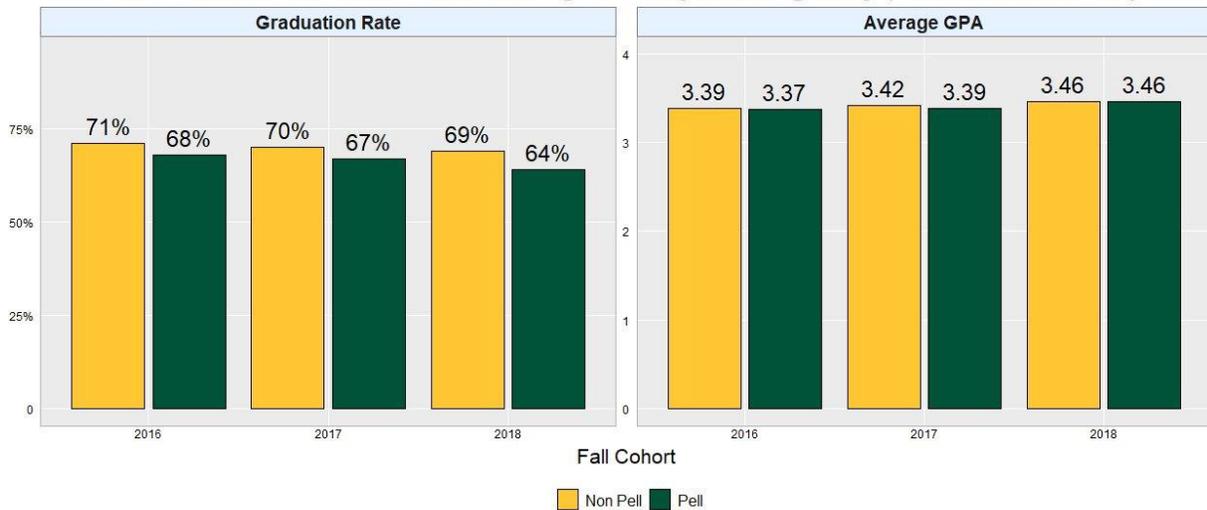
Table 4B

Freshman Average Time to Degree by Pell Eligibility (Cohort 2016-2018)
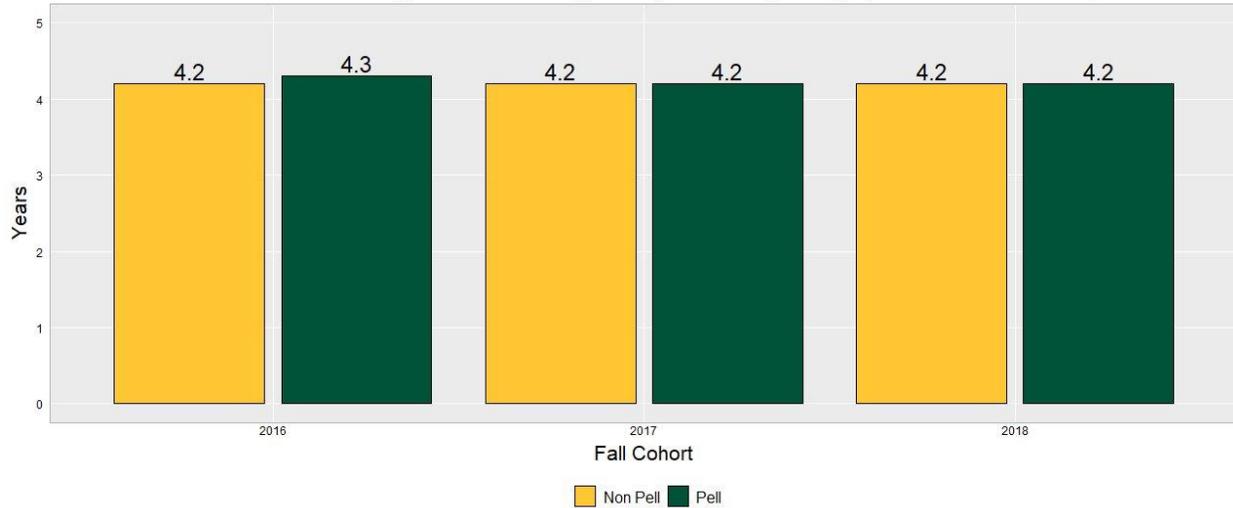
Table 4C

Credits Earned at 6-Year Graduation (Cohorts 2016 - 2018)
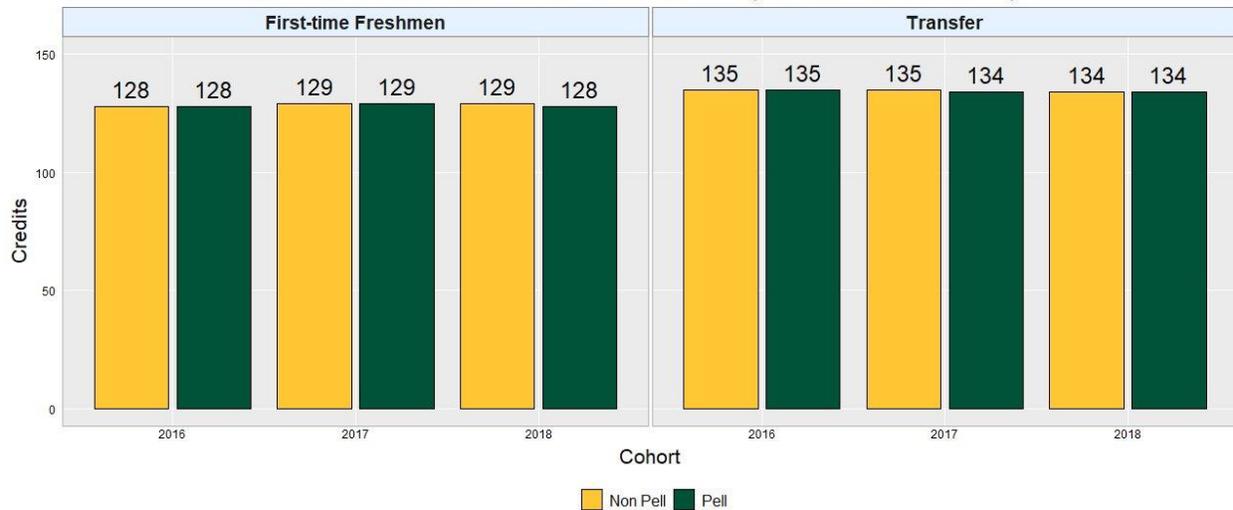
Focus Group Results

Graduation Preparation: How prepared do Mason students feel to be successful after graduation?

Both Pell and non-Pell students expressed that they feel Mason is preparing them well for life after graduation. Students connected their preparedness for graduation directly to finding a job in their field upon graduation. The perception of career resources being so strong was evident by the intensity of students who described Mason's career preparation resources as positive, without having utilized them. These resources include University Career Services, career fairs, internship opportunities, and resume workshops.

   a. *Networking:* Students understand the importance of networking for career success and consider faculty, guest speakers, career fair representatives, and other students as potential members of their networks.

b. *Skill Development:* Both Pell and non-Pell students mentioned developing hard and soft skills through academic coursework and co-curricular involvement, including internships, field experiences, research, study abroad programs, and on-campus employment.

There were no significant differences between Pell and non-Pell thoughts on their preparedness for success after graduation.

Institutional Practices
Strengths
Many of the strengths highlighted in the prior section on retention directly impact Pell-eligible students' attainment of a degree. The following are additional programs are specific to degree attainment:

- **Degree Progress**: George Mason is in the midst of a transition to an improved degree audit software system. This new tool will make it easier for students to understand degree progress, outstanding graduation requirements, and resources for additional assistance.
- **Graduation Requirements**:
  - There are no fees associated with the application for graduation or the conferral itself.
  - The Gowns for Grads program targets low-income students to borrow graduation regalia, which is ~$100 for a bachelor's degree. In AY24-25, 539 students were lent gowns for graduation, representing over 5% of Mason's graduating class.

Barriers
The taskforce identified the following opportunities for improvement to increase attainment among Pell-eligible students.

- **Course Offerings:** Some departments face challenges hiring instructors, leading to last-minute course cancellations. Data on course cancelations is tracked locally but not consistently monitored at the institutional level. Delays like this can alter graduation plans for students who only need a specific course to graduate.
- **Wellness and Mental Health Support:** Students need sustained mental health and wellness services from college entry through graduation. Because of limited resources, GMU prioritizes transition into college and college success and provides less resources and support for the transition after graduation.
- **Transition Programs**: While the Student Transition Empowerment Program (STEP) serves as a meaningful resource for students and their transition into college, the program resources are not able to support and sustain career and graduate education planning for the transition after graduation.
- **Data Transparency:** Lack of tagging and identification in university information systems (e.g., Banner, Patriot Connect, Salesforce) restricts the ability for offices to target outreach, services, and support for Pell-eligible students. Unlike Pell-eligible students, other student populations that may need specialized support (e.g., First-generation students, DC-CAP, EIP) have a formal designation in information systems, which allows for ease of access to services and support. Challenges in data collection, tagging accuracy, and tracking engagement impede the ability to measure the true effectiveness of initiatives on specific populations, including Pell-eligible students. Because there is a lack of formal designation through information technology, there is also no longitudinal analysis to understand factors that contribute to success and degree attainment. In order to

make data-informed decisions, it is important to understand how particular programs and lifecycle experiences contribute to student success. Without appropriate tagging, additional analysis cannot be conducted to understand such nuanced and unique factors that contribute to Pell-eligible student success.

Promising Practices

Graduation-focused Academic Policies

At both the University of Florida and the University of Kansas, strict academic progress policies are enforced, particularly for the high-demand and high-attrition majors. The institutions monitor strict GPA requirements, specific course sequences, and semester-over-semester progress expectations. Students who do not satisfy success markers are flagged for intrusive advising or made academically ineligible to continue in the major. Though this approach might appear punitive, there is a positive relationship between timely major-change and six-year bachelor's degree attainment (Morris et al., 2023).

Intrusive Career Readiness Initiatives

There are several examples of the integration of career services, academic programs, and curriculum among the institutions interviewed. One specific example is Virginia Commonwealth University's College-to-Career Blueprint. For students pursuing graduate education, vertical pathways enable progression from an undergraduate degree to a graduate degree. Intentional collaborations, well-leveraged opportunities, and robust lifetime career services proved paramount in our interviews, as Pell-eligible students can lack connections, informal networks, and resources that are valuable in the transition from college to career.

Completion Grants

Completion grants are financial awards designed for students who are close to graduating but face financial hardships that could impede their graduation. For low-income students with limited resources, an emergency expense can quickly become a hardship that is not easy to overcome. Florida International University (FIU) recognized that the majority of students accessing their grants were Pell-eligible students. Completion grants bridge retention practices to attainment practices. George Mason University is launching completion grants using SCHEV PIV Grant funding in FY26.

Strengths, Barriers, and Recommendations

Based on extensive self-review, benchmarking, and internal research, this section will summarize institutional strengths, potential barriers, and proposed solutions for the Pell-eligible student access and success.

Institutional Strengths
Institutional Brand and Reputation
GMU leaders have done a significant amount of outreach and marketing work to position Mason as an affordable and inclusive destination institution for students, especially in the Commonwealth of Virginia and around the globe. The *All Together Different* campaign resonates with internal and external audiences to showcase how the diverse student body receives a quality undergraduate education leading to positive graduation and career outcomes without the elitism of other research-intensive institutional competitors.

Robust Pre-College Programs and Recruitment Strategies
GMU actively recruits high-achieving students who come from a variety of backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses. Mason achieves these aims through intentional recruitment strategies by easing the burden of application processes through programs like the High School Direct Admissions program that partners with Northern Virginia High Schools that enroll large proportions of students who qualify for free lunch. There are additional financial waivers for application and orientation fees to ensure qualified students are not stymied from enrolling because of small financial barriers. In addition, Mason hosts summer programs and leads initiatives like the Early Identification Program (EIP) that builds college-going pipelines for many Pell-eligible students who benefit from individualized academic and social support.

Transfer-Friendly Policies and Practices
While many four-year institutions see transfer students as ancillary, Mason has prioritized the recruitment and success of transfer students. This is important to note because about half of transfer students are Pell-eligible. The nationally-recognized ADVANCE program was created to integrate Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC) students into the academic and social fabric of Mason before they are officially a Mason student. ADVANCE students are able to join clubs, attend events, and have special advisors to assist in their successful transfer and graduation from NVCC to George Mason. Because of ADVANCE and the institution-wide commitment to transfer success, transfer students are not overburdened with a significant amount of uncounted credits and have similar outcomes to students who begin college at Mason.

Coordinated Academic and Social Support
From recruitment and matriculation to retention and graduation, GMU provides a coordinated approach to social and academic support. For example, EIP provides a social community for middle and high school students to create a college-going culture, but once students enroll, there are pre-orientation programs such as the STEP bridge program to build community and help Pell-eligible and other students become acquainted with the rigor and resources of academic success. Once at Mason, there are numerous learning communities and support systems that coordinate services and create community so students develop a sense of belonging and have the necessary affordability, academic, and social resources necessary to succeed.

Targeted Support for Contemporary Student Populations

Not only are there coordinated programs that integrate academic and social experiences, there are intentionally targeted support services for student populations that require additional assistance to be successful. For example, the Office of Contemporary Student Services serves as a "compass and a bridge" for transfer students, older students, pregnant or parenting students, veteran and military-affiliated students, students living off campus, system-impacted students, and students who experienced foster care. Since Pell-eligible students often have multiple needs, the Office of Contemporary Student Services is an excellent resource for direct student support as well as creating a campus culture that is inclusive and welcoming of all students.

Institutional Barriers
Financial Affordability Capacity
Even though Mason is known for being an affordable option for students in the Commonwealth, the needs of low-income students far outweigh institutional capacity. For example, Pell-eligible students have significantly more unmet financial need than their counterparts (See Table 2G). And while there are emergency grant programs, those programs often are not sustainable for all needs throughout the entire year. This is especially true for contemporary students who have financial needs for caregiving and childcare, transportation, and other life circumstances.

Matriculation and Transition Capacity
While Mason is increasingly a destination institution for Pell-eligible students, this report reveals capacity issues with staffing, advising, course allotment, and efficient communication due to the growing student population and stagnant resource allocation. There are campus visit requests that go unfulfilled because there are not enough staff to organize and work events. In addition, as first-time students and especially transfer students seek to enroll, there are staffing inconsistency issues with academic advising along with course allocation capacity, which can keep students from enrolling in needed courses.

Postgraduate Support
Because Mason has many dedicated student success programs to achieve high retention and graduation outcomes, there is a need to create better postgraduate support programs to prepare students for lives and careers after graduation. Although there is robust career programming both centralized through University Life and decentralized in some academic colleges, there is a need to assist students in post-graduate planning.

Data Infrastructure
This report identifies strengths and barriers from internal audits and data collection. It also highlights the need for more robust and transparent data collection and analysis to better understand the student journey from recruitment to graduation. There are assessment data gathered by individual offices and coalesced by institutional researchers, student programming data is inconsistently collected and has not been systemically used to identify and predict barriers to student success. With a more coordinated effort to collect meaningful data with the ability to use analytic techniques to understand and predict student success, more intentional and precise student success interventions could be identified and executed.

Identified Barriers that Need Further Investigation
The following barriers were identified, but are not identified for prioritization at this time, and will require further investigation to understand and consider change.

Barrier	Context
Recruitment	
Recruitment Staff Capacity	Additional staffing is always needed in recruitment and outreach; however, at this time, other functional areas have a more critical need for increased staffing.
Enrollment	
Pre-Orientation	Pre-orientation programs (EIP, STEP, existing summer bridge) are essential assets to the university. The primary barrier is related to access and capacity. Further analysis is needed to understand the cost and infrastructure needed, along with the student demand/propensity to participate.
Retention	
Academic Advising	Overall, academic advising at the institution is decentralized and uses mixed methods of staffing. Efforts to ensure a minimum standard of caseload size and service availability/delivery would aid all student success but is not specific to Pell-eligible student support. Solutions that focus on Pell-eligible students were not readily identified in the study.
Childcare Access	Childcare access is critical to student success for those who are parenting and caregiving. However, due to the federal changes currently in progress or under consideration, the Childcare Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) grant, which is the most common source of childcare funding in the United States for college students, is not accepting applications. Further sources of sustainable funding would need to be identified in order to improve this area.
Graduation	
Data Infrastructure	GMU is currently transitioning to new customer relational management (CRM), learning management software (LMS), and degree planning/audit tools. Full integration across these tools will take several years. Data infrastructure continues to be an issue and priority for the university. Additionally, the federal guidance on visibility of Pell eligibility data severely limits the ability for staff to identify Pell-eligible students to target support services.
Course Offerings	Further study is required to understand course sequencing and gateway course availability, along with total course availability, modality, and timing in day/week and terms. George Mason University is currently engaged in the Curricular Analytics Project, a national study led by the Association of Undergraduate Education at Research Universities, to better understand the impact of course sequencing on student outcomes.

Barriers and Solutions with Timeline

Over the next five years, the following solutions to Pell-eligible success will be piloted, assessed, and implemented. It is also important to name that some of these solutions are ongoing efforts, that are never actually fully complete, but through further analysis, interim markers of success will be documented.

Priority	Barrier	Solution	Timeline
Recruitment			
7	College Affordability	Increase need-based aid to reduce unmet need for Pell-eligible students	Fall 2025
8		Provide financial support for on- and off-campus housing	Fall 2025
9		Increase Financial support for experiential learning opportunities (e.g., internships, study abroad, undergraduate research, etc.)	Fall 2027
10		Offer parking subscription options for off-campus students to increase their campus engagement	Fall 2027
6	Recruitment Material Language Accessibility	Invest in translation resources for up to 5 primary languages	Fall 2026
11	Enrollment Communication Efficiency	Using the newly implemented Marketing Cloud tool, establish a coordinated effort to map and strategically disperse messages in a timely and coordinated way to avoid overwhelm for students and families, from point of prospect through the first year.	2027
Enrollment			
12	Individualized Orientation Advising Experience	Enhance academic advising during orientation through availability and utilization of 1:1 appointments in a pre-orientation environment	Pilot in Summer 2027
2	Capacity for Pre-Orientation Programs	Expand support for mathematics during summer term	Begin Summer 2026, build out through 2028
1		Increase capacity for summer bridge and college readiness programs and coordination across programs to ensure access for as	Begin Summer 2025, build out through 2028

		many qualifying students as possible	
Retention			
13	Emergency Financial Assistance	Expand funding for emergency scholarships and completion grants	Fall 2025 and beyond
5	Campus Awareness of Pell-eligible Student Needs and Experiences	Improve customer service by implementing training for faculty and staff to support first-generation and low-income students	Pilot in 2026
3	Tutoring Services	Centralize learning support services and expand tutoring resources and supplemental instruction	Phase 1 implementation by end of 2026
14	Transparency and access to data regarding student retention	Build data model and leverage technology for early alerts, mid-term grades, and dashboards for success coaches and academic advisors, along with other student support staff	2026 and beyond
4	Data Access	Allow PIV-funded positions to have access to identify PE students for personal outreach	If allowable under federal terms, implement by Summer Term 2026
Graduation			
15	Most student service capacities are focused on retention of students and have not had capacity to focus on post-graduation support.	Post-Graduate Transition Programming	2028
Universal			
**	Continuous Improvement Review	Per the guidelines provided by SCHEV for IwBR reports, continuous improvement review was added in August 2025. This will be incorporated into the planning process for actions, and sequenced based on institutional	Ongoing

		funding and prioritization of the various initiatives.	

Conclusion

There has never been a more vital time to recruit and cultivate the success of all students, especially low-income/Pell-eligible students. The experiences of low-income students are especially important to understand considering low-income students are represented by all races, backgrounds, majors, and identities, but are more likely to be a first-generation student, a student of color, and a transfer student – all student populations that Mason excels at recruiting and graduating.

The prompt from SCHEV to examine internal and external benchmarks, along with conducting new research on the experience and outcomes for Pell-eligible students, has been a beneficial exercise to refine a targeted focus on student access and success. The task force committee was comprised of a broad range of community members representing multiple student services, functional areas, and stakeholders (i.e., students, faculty, staff). Through the intensive work from sub-committees, the campus-wide retreat, and development of this report, campus leaders from multiple departments have a renewed sense of purpose and vigor to recruit, retain, and graduate low-income students to contribute to the Commonwealth and world.

Moving forward, George Mason University can accelerate current plans for improvements and create additional opportunities for further investigation and investment such as:
- Increase affordability through enhanced financial assistance for housing, experiential learning opportunities, parking, and emergency/completion grants.
- Increase capacity for onboarding and transition programming (ex; a summer bridge program, college readiness programs, mathematics summer bootcamp, and 1:1 pre-orientation advising.
- Centralize learning support services for tutoring and supplemental instruction
- Leverage technology for early alerts, mid-term grades, and dashboards for student service providers, and allow PIV-funded positions to have access to Pell-eligible students for outreach

To continue Mason's success with recruiting and graduating Pell-eligible students, it will take strategic leadership, a coordinated campus effort, and increased resources. With the commitment from SCHEV and additional resources, Mason will continue to be a place where all students can be challenged, learn, thrive, and create lives of meaning and purpose.

Through this institutional focus and coordinated effort on supporting Pell-eligible students, GMU can increase the enrollment and success of Pell-eligible students. An undertaking of this scope and size will require strategic resource allocation and bold leadership to ensure GMU is a destination institution for Pell-eligible students to enroll, graduate to contribute to the Commonwealth of Virginia and the world.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Task Force Committee Members

This list represents all members who served. Those who have departed the institution during the process have been listed as "Former".

Executive Sponsors:
Dr. Jim Antony, Provost and Executive Vice President
David Burge, Vice President, Enrollment Management
Rose Pascarell, Vice President, University Life

Committee:
Dr. Alan Byrd (Co-Chair), Dean, Admissions
Dr. Sally Lorentson (Co-Chair), Assistant Vice President, University Life

Patricia Appiah, Research Analyst, Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Planning
Melissa Bevacqua, Director, Transfer Recruitment, Undergraduate Admissions
Dr. Ryan Braun, Director, Undergraduate Advising, Undergraduate Education (Former)
Tom Butler, Sr. Associate Registrar, Office of University Registrar
Rachel Cleaver, Sr. Associate Director, K-12 Partnerships, Undergraduate Admissions
Glenda Cosby, Assistant Director, Student Success Coaching
Dr. Khaseem Davis, Executive Director, Early Identification Program (Former)
Birgit Debeerst, Director, University Life Project and Process Management
Mariel Del Castillo, Assistant Director, Undergraduate Admissions
Daniel Fisher, Director, Business Intelligence and Analytics
Dr. Jeffrey Grim, Faculty, College of Humanities and Social Sciences and Faculty Fellow, University Life
Zayd Hamid, GMU Alumni and Graduate Assistant, University Life
Betty Hernandez, Student Success Coach
Kerin Hilker-Balkissoon, Director, Education and Career Pathways, College of Science
Dr. Mia Hines, Interim Director, Early Identification Program
Liam (William) Keen, Undergraduate Student and Secretary of Govt. and Community Relations, Mason Student Govt
Dr. Maggie Olszewska, Director, Student Support and Advocacy Center
Marisa Parikh, Undergraduate Student
Pam Promisel, Director, University Business Consulting
Dr. Joisanne Rodgers, Director, Contemporary Student Services
Alethia Shipman, Director, Student Financial Aid
Nikki Smith Acierto, Senior Consultant, University Business Consulting
Barbara Snyder, Director of Undergraduate Student Affairs, Costello College of Business
Amanda Torres, Assistant Dean, College of Humanities and Social Sciences
Dr. Girum Urgessa, Faculty, College of Engineering and Computing
Nakia Waters, Interim Director, First-Gen+ Center

Appendix 2: Focus Group Demographics

Characteristic	Non-Pell Participants	Pell Participants	Total
Asian	12.50%	9.72%	22.22%
Black	13.89%	9.72%	23.61%
Hispanic / Latinx	4.17%	9.72%	13.89%
Multiracial	6.94%	4.12%	11.06%
White	15.28%	13.89%	29.17%
Man	18.06%	18.06%	36.11%
Woman	31.94%	23.61%	55.56%
Non-binary / Transgender / Other	2.78%	5.56%	8.34%
Out-of-state	11.11%	11.11%	22.22%
In-state	41.67%	36.11%	77.78%
First Year	15.28%	11.11%	26.39%
Second Year	13.89%	11.11%	25.00%
Junior Year +	23.61%	20.83%	44.44%
Part-time	0.00%	4.17%	4.17%
Continuing Generation	40.28%	25.00%	65.28%
First Generation	12.50%	22.22%	34.72%

Appendix 3: Institutional Factors for Review

Var #	Variable to Review
Att.01	Appropriate non-competing scheduling of advanced courses/Appropriate frequency and sequencing of advanced coursework and prerequisites offerings
Att.02	Appropriate pedagogy for today's students
Att.03	Completion grants
Att.04	Sufficient, in number and level, tutoring services available
Att.05	Adequate academic advising
Att.06	Student & family programming to build social capital and support mechanisms
Att.07	Availability of childcare where students are parents
Att.08	Aid to assist with graduation expenses
Att.09	Peer tutoring
Att.10	Wellness and mental health opportunities in sufficient quantity
Att.11	Welcoming and invitational nature of the campus to all student demographics
Att.12	Unnecessary fees and practices surrounding graduation requirements
Att.13	Appropriate campus customs
Enr.01	Application form requirements (Common Application)
Enr.02	User-friendly application/overly complex application process
Enr.03	Application fee waivers
Enr.04	Vouchers to assist student/family campus visits
Enr.05	Appropriate application review protocol
Enr.06	Intense follow-up of incomplete applications
Enr.07	Pre-orientation workshops/seminars for students and families including topics such as paying for college, exploring majors, building social capital
Enr.08	Adequate admission or financial aid application deadlines
Enr.09	Provisional acceptance status
Enr.10	Waiver of enrollment deposits

Enr.11	Welcoming/invitational campus atmosphere to all demographics
Enr.12	Tuition coverage guarantees
Enr.13	Meeting full financial need
Enr.14	Assistance in purchasing a computer
Enr.15	Strong orientation for both student and family
Enr.16	Book and supplies vouchers
Enr.17	Careful matching of dorm roommate if living on campus
Enr.18	Appropriate campus climate
Enr.19	Continued student & family programming to build social capital and support mechanisms
Enr.20	Use of peer counselors
Enr.21	Availability of child care where students are parents
Enr.22	Adequate academic advising
Enr.23	Transportation vouchers where public transportation is available
Enr.24	Part time work study
Enr.25	Appropriate campus customs
Enr.26	Faculty involvement
Enr.27	Summer jump-start programs with aid coverage
Enr.28	Availability of mental health support mechanisms
Rec.01	Student awareness of the institution
Rec.02	Social media presence & targeting social media by demographic
Rec.03	Collateral Materials
Rec.04	Ensure appropriate visual representation of the student body
Rec.05	Outreach through high school visits
Rec.06	Outreach through community/religious organizations

Rec.07	Partnerships with regional/local access organizations
Rec.08	Campus visits
Rec.09	Financial aid workshops
Rec.10	College prep workshops/seminars
Rec.11	Purchasing targeted student names with contact via electronic means or mail
Rec.12	Dual enrollment opportunities
Rec.13	Vouchers to assist student/family campus visits
Rec.14	Summer programs
Rec.15	Student & family programming to build social capital and support mechanisms
Rec.16	Appropriate campus climate
Rec.17	Appropriate campus customs
Rec.18	Use of peer enrollment counselors
Rec.19	Faculty involvement
Rec.20	Welcoming/invitational nature and atmosphere of the campus to all student demographics
Ret.01	Academic continuance policies appropriate for today's demographics
Ret.02	Financial aid satisfactory academic progress policies in alignment with the academic continuance policies
Ret.03	Institutional scholarship renewal gpa/enrollment requirements appropriate
Ret.04	Summer aid available to remedy sub-par academic year achievement
Ret.05	Adequate academic advising
Ret.06	Other areas particular to the institution - Citation Diversion Program
Ret.07	Appropriate quantity of general education and gateway courses to meet student demand during summer sessions
Ret.08	Appropriate quantity of general education and gateway courses to meet student demand during the academic year
Ret.09	Appropriate course scheduling to avoid core course competing availability

Ret.10	Appropriate frequency and sequencing of advanced coursework and prerequisites offerings
Ret.11	Appropriate pedagogy for today's students
Ret.12	Sufficient, in number and level, of tutoring services available
Ret.13	Student & family programming to build social capital and support mechanisms
Ret.14	Peer mentoring, advising and tutoring
Ret.15	Availability of childcare for students who are parents
Ret.16	Welcoming/invitational nature and atmosphere of the campus to all student demographics
Ret.17	Faculty involvement
Ret.18	Emergency financial aid grants
Ret.19	Emergency loans
Ret.20	Part time work study
Ret.21	Financial literacy
Ret.22	Appropriate campus customs
Ret.23	Research opportunities with stipends
Ret.24	Wellness and mental health opportunities in sufficient quantity

Appendix 4: Benchmark Institutions

Benchmarking Institutions by Focus Category

Focus Category	Included Institutions
National Peers	Arizona State University
	Boston University
	Florida State University
	George Washington University
	New York University
	North Carolina State University
	Northeastern University
	Rutgers University
	Stony Brook University
	SUNY at Albany
	Syracuse University
	Temple University
	University of Arizona
	University of Connecticut
	University of Florida
	University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
	University of Kansas
	University of Maryland-College Park
	University of Massachusetts-Amherst
	University of Minnesota-Twin Cities
	University of Nebraska-Lincoln
	University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill
	University of Southern California
	University of Washington-Seattle
Virginia Publics	Christopher Newport University
	James Madison University
	Longwood University
	Norfolk State University
	Old Dominion University
	Radford University
	University of Mary Washington
	University of Virginia
	Virginia Commonwealth University
	Virginia State University
	Virginia Tech
	William & Mary
Forbes Pell-friendly	Appalachian State University
	Ball State University
	Florida International University
	Indiana University - Bloomington
	Ohio State University
	San Diego State University
	San Jose State University
	University of Central Florida
	University of North Texas