



## GORDON STATE COLLEGE

### INSTITUTIONAL MISSION AND STUDENT BODY PROFILE

Gordon State College's mission is to be a catalyst for exceptional and accessible education through innovative teaching, engaged learning, and transformative experiences for the benefit of our students, the communities we serve, and the world we live in. As an access institution, we provide engaged faculty-student interaction through intimate classroom experiences; innovative and effective teaching strategies; excellent advising and mentorship programs; and effective student support services. GSC offers baccalaureate and associate degree programs. The institution has focused more in recent years on meeting the needs of underrepresented populations and dual-enrollment students.

Final Fall 2019 enrollment was 3,485; Fall 2020 post-midterm census enrollment is 3,231. We saw some dramatic changes in the make-up of our Fall 2019 first-time, full-time freshman cohort:

- 49.5% had learning support requirements, down slightly from 53% in Fall 2018.
  - 11% of entering FTFT freshmen had only a Math requirement (N=80), down dramatically from 34% in Fall 2018
  - 11.9% had Math and English requirements (N=87), roughly the same as in Fall 2018
  - 26.67% had English requirements (N=195), up dramatically from 2% in Fall 2018
- 51.2% were African-American, up from 46.4% in Fall 2018
- 19.2% self-identified as first-generation college students, down slightly from Fall 2018's 24.2%; however, another 31% chose not to answer the question, and we suspect our first-generation population is actually much larger

To better serve our student population, Gordon State College was one of the first institutions in the USG to take remediation transformation to scale, and we continue to see improved success rates in gateway courses like ENGL 1101 and MATH 1111. Also, we have targeted traditionally underserved populations such as African-American males for increases in access and completion. At the same time, our institution continues to see high numbers of dual-enrollment students each year (275 new dual-enrollment students in Fall 2019).

### IMPROVEMENT PRACTICES

When GSC administration reviewed the outcomes for the Fall 2017 freshman cohort, we faced some ugly realities. Retention had dropped to 48.3%, and barely half of that cohort ended their first year in good academic standing. Even more disturbing were some clear equity gaps—African-American male retention, for example, lagged 6 points behind the overall cohort rate, at a dismal 42.2%. We immediately committed to making improvements. We rebuilt our New Student Orientation for the Fall 2018 cohort; implemented a new freshman seminar, FIRE 1000, that was approved as part of the core curriculum; procured an African-American Male Initiative grant and invested other campus resources into that program; and started our own branding of the Momentum Year, The Highlander EDGE. With the new NSO, FIRE, a reinvigorated AAMI program, and the Highlander EDGE, we hoped to connect students to the campus, identify the expectations they would face as college students, help them make a purposeful choice, and instill a growth mindset and sense of belonging. Initial results were encouraging in that first year, as retention improved by 10 points, to 58.4% (not including students in our FVSU-GAP initiative). Even more encouraging was the improved retention rates for student subpopulations that we have struggled to support in the past, particularly African-American males, where we saw an improvement of almost 13 points, from 42.2% to 55.1%. Similarly, retention for self-identified first-generation students rose 12 points, from 44.4% to 56.5%.

For Fall 2019, we added FORGE, a series of pre-orientation modules; made some adjustments to our FIRE class; confirmed our commitment to the AAMI program, and continued to flesh out our Highlander EDGE initiative. We also added a Probation By Appeal program, targeting new freshmen who had performed so poorly in their first (Fall) semester that they ended up on academic suspension. We offered them a chance to return for the Spring 2020 semester provided that they agree to a set of conditions: biweekly meetings with assigned faculty mentors;

mandatory success workshops on topics like time management; and regular meetings with faculty members. We saw a 3.3 point jump in retention for the Fall 2019 cohort, to 61.7%. We are pleased with our progress over the past two years, but we know we still have much work to do, particularly with equity gaps. For example, African-American male retention dropped for the Fall 2019 cohort to 50.4%. While that is still an improvement over the 42.2% we saw in Fall 2017, we are concerned by this move in the wrong direction. In fact, overall male retention dropped from 59.1% in Fall 2018 to 54.2% in Fall 2019.

Moving forward, the Academic Affairs leadership team—Dr. Knighton, the Provost; Dr. Ric Calhoun, the AVP-Innovative Education and Strategic Initiatives; Mr. Peter Higgins, the AVP-Academic Excellence; Drs. Barry Kicklighter, Victor Vilchiz, and Joseph Jones, the Deans of our three schools; and Mr. Britt Lifsey, our Director of Institutional Research—will continue to look for ways to improve our student success rates and close equity gaps. We have already launched a Highlander EDGE Task Force, to discuss ways that we can promote the four identities of the Highlander EDGE—Engaged Innovator, Dedicated Scholar, Gifted Communicator, and Ethical Leader—to our students from the time they first set foot on our campus to when they graduate, through participation in high-impact practices like undergraduate research, for example. We are also strengthening our Probation By Appeal program by including mandatory study halls as part of the contract that PBA students sign. Additionally, we are looking at adding post-midterm study hall this Fall 2020 semester following an uptick in midterm Fs with our incoming freshmen cohort.

## **MOMENTUM UPDATE: OBSERVATIONS AND NEXT STEPS**

### **SECTION 3.1 EXISTING MOMENTUM WORK**

<b>PURPOSEFUL CHOICE</b>	
Strategy or activity	<b>Continued to improve our New Student Orientation experience for incoming students.</b>
Summary of Activities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. We implemented FORGE, our online pre-orientation program that students were expected to complete before their on-campus orientation experience. We added videos highlighting the different academic focus areas and included information about possible majors within the focus area.</li> <li>2. Worked to standardize the 75-minute presentation given on NSO day at each of the academic focus areas.</li> </ol>
Outcomes/Measures of progress	Retention for the Fall 2019 cohort rose 3.3 points over the previous year, to an all-time high of 61.7% (this is excluding our FVSU-GAP students, who, if successful, moved on to Fort Valley State after their freshman year). Since we rebuilt our NSO experience for incoming students for the Fall 2018 cohort, retention has risen a total of 13.4 points, an overall improvement of 27.4% in only two years.
Lessons Learned and Plans for the Future	Our biggest lesson learned is that investing campus resources into building an outstanding NSO experience is a wise investment, even—or perhaps especially—in a challenging budget environment where resources are limited. We need to continue to work on standardizing the advising piece of the NSO day across all focus areas, as a sense of territorialism among entrenched administrators made that effort difficult. With new deans on board for each of our three schools, we believe we can make progress in that area.
Changes because of COVID-19	For Fall 2020, COVID forced us to hold our NSOs in a virtual format, blunting some of the momentum we had built. FORGE became even more important in this new environment, and because we are not guaranteed an on-campus NSO experience for Fall 2021, we will continue to work on FORGE and our online NSO advising sessions.
Strategy or activity	<b>For Fall 2019, we refined and improved our still-new freshman seminar, FIRE 1000.</b>
Summary of Activities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. We “themed” FIRE 1000 by academic focus area, and attempted to get all the students with majors in a specific focus area into an appropriately themed FIRE class (Nursing and Health Sciences; Business; Social Sciences, etc.).</li> <li>2. Advising and other activities in the “themed” class are then focused on majors/programs within that specific focus area.</li> </ol>

- We instituted a speaker series, with individuals from the community (and our faculty) giving presentations to students in the themed FIRE courses on careers and opportunities in those fields.

<b>Outcomes/Measures of progress</b>	ABC rates for FIRE rose almost four points, to just below 75%, compared to FIRE's first Fall (2018). Also, as noted above, our retention rate for the Fall 2019 cohort rose 3.3 points to 61.7%, even in the midst of the pandemic and the abrupt move to remote instruction in March.
<b>Lessons Learned and Plans for the Future</b>	Getting students into a FIRE class themed for their academic focus area during the schedule-making process was our biggest challenge, as all the expected obstacles (class time conflicts, students' work schedules, and so on) popped up. Similar scheduling issues were a challenge with our speaker series. For example, we needed to get students from two or three similarly themed FIRE sections that met on different days and at different times to an auditorium to hear the scheduled speaker.
<b>Changes because of COVID-19</b>	In some ways, COVID made the schedule-making process easier in Fall 2020, as we had more online FIRE sections than in Fall 2018 and thus fewer time conflicts. However, COVID has wreaked havoc with the speaker series. Another challenge that we already see is that the online NSO, a one-hour Zoom event with an abbreviated advising session, has resulted in students being less sure of their majors; thus, we seem to have more students in the "wrong" themed FIRE class.

## TRANSPARENT PATHWAYS

<b>Strategy or activity</b>	<b>Continued work on accuracy and availability of program maps.</b>
<b>Summary of Activities</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reviewed all program maps for accuracy.</li> <li>To make them more accessible to students in the first year, posted program maps in a central online location (the Student Success Center website).</li> <li>Also posted all program maps in the GSC Academic Catalog.</li> <li>Encouraged all FIRE instructors, who double as academic advisors for the first-year students in their FIRE sections, to highlight program maps during advising and make students aware of them.</li> </ol>
<b>Outcomes/Measures of progress</b>	We are hoping that our continued work on program maps will pay off in improved graduation rates and lower average hours to graduation metrics, but those outcomes will not be clear for another year or so. Again, we did see a higher retention rate for the Fall 2019 cohort.
<b>Lessons Learned and Plans for the Future</b>	Program maps are very helpful but come with the struggle to balance the need to provide a clear direction but not overwhelm the student with excessive details/options. Maintaining standard formatting has also been an ongoing challenge.
<b>Changes because of COVID-19</b>	With more students off campus and most advising taking place remotely, it is more important than ever to have clear program maps. We will continue to work on our program maps.

## ACADEMIC MINDSET

<b>Strategy or activity</b>	<b>Continue to make growth mindset the focus of our mandatory freshman seminar, FIRE 1000.</b>
<b>Summary of Activities</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regular FIRE team meetings to discuss the success and effectiveness of the academic growth mindset assignments and activities in FIRE 1000, eliminate ineffective assignments, and add new, more effective assignments.</li> </ol>
<b>Outcomes/Measures of progress</b>	<p>According to the results of the 2019 USG Mindset Survey results, GSC outperformed the state college sector for the following categories, which suggest the focus on growth mindset in FIRE 1000 is paying dividends:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Math Growth Mindset Composite: GSC responses showed an improvement of .41 between the early and late Fall administrations, compared to .16 improvement for the state college sector as a whole.</li> <li>English Growth Mindset Composite: GSC responses showed an improvement of .48 between early and late Fall administrations, compared to a .17 improvement for state colleges as a whole.</li> </ul>

We also saw encouraging progress in ABC rates for new freshmen in Area A Math and English courses that we believe is in part due to FIRE 1000’s continued focus on growth mindset:

- For the 2019 freshman cohort, ABC rates in MATH 1111 improved two points, to 69%, compared to the Fall 2018 cohort (that ABC rate was at a grisly 37% for the Fall 2017 cohort, before we implemented FIRE 1000).
- For the 2019 freshman cohort, ABC rates in ENGL 1101 improved two points, to 73%, compared to the Fall 2018 cohort (that ABC rate was at 65% for the Fall 2017 cohort, before we implemented FIRE 1000).

<b>Lessons Learned and Plans for the Future</b>	We believe the FIRE 1000 emphasis on mindset has had a huge positive impact on our success and retention rates. We will continue to tweak and improve FIRE 1000 as the course matures. One challenge for us—and this is probably a challenge for all freshman seminars on all campuses—is to maintain a clear vision of FIRE 1000’s purpose and to fight off attempts to squeeze other, extraneous, unrelated content into the course. Staffing is also a challenge—we have five full-time Academic Success Lecturer/Advisors who teach the majority of the FIRE sections, but we regularly need to recruit faculty from academic focus areas and even staff to fully staff the sections. And of course, coherence and consistency is a challenge whenever new faculty who are not part of the FIRE Team are called upon to teach each Fall semester.
<b>Changes because of COVID-19</b>	Because we see FIRE 1000 as a crucial part of GSC’s First Year Experience program, the increased number of online sections due to COVID concerns us. We feel that growth mindset is a topic better addressed in face-to-face classes, and a secondary focus of FIRE—developing a sense of belonging—is more difficult to address online. Also, we learned in Spring 2020 that too many of our students lack access to computers and reliable internet connections when they are in online classes.
<b>Strategy or activity Summary of Activities</b>	<p><b>Continue to promote a sense of belonging for all of our students.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Continue to encourage all students to complete Stanford University’s PERTS social belonging intervention as part of FORGE (our online pre-orientation modules).</li> <li>2. Continue to promote a campus-wide discussion on diversity and inclusion, through our Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, our African-American Male Initiative program, and other campus organizations.</li> <li>3. Organize and implement Sophomore Induction Ceremony, to make new freshmen feel part of their academic units as they transition from their first-year FIRE 1000 advisors to faculty advisors in their chosen majors.</li> </ol>
<b>Outcomes/Measures of progress</b>	<p>We have already mentioned the overall rise in retention, from 48.3% for the Fall 2017 cohort, before we implemented PERTS and FIRE 1000, to 58.4% for the Fall 2018 cohort, to 61.7% for the Fall 2019 cohort, which is a clear sign of overall progress. But digging deeper into that retention data, we see encouraging progress for minority and historically underrepresented groups that suggest our emphasis on social belonging is working (again, these numbers exclude students in our FVSU-GAP program):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• African-American retention rose from 54.3% for the Fall 2018 cohort to 58.4% for the Fall 2019 cohort (it had been well below 50%, at 41.9%, for the Fall 2017 cohort).</li> <li>• Hispanic retention rose from 61.1% for the Fall 2018 cohort to 65.1% for the Fall 2019 cohort (it had barely been above 50% for the Fall 2017 cohort).</li> <li>• Retention rates for self-identified first-generation students rose from 56.5% for the Fall 2018 cohort to 67.4% for the Fall 2019 cohort—which is actually almost a full point higher than the Fall 2019 retention rate for continuing generation students (66.5%).</li> </ul>
<b>Lessons Learned and Plans for the Future</b>	We believe we have made great progress in understanding that our students must feel a sense of belonging—both socially and academically—before they can be successful, and that we need to intentionally create interventions—for both students AND faculty—to foster that sense of belonging. It is perhaps especially challenging on our campus: an access institution in a small town in semi-rural mid-Georgia with a significant percentage of our student population coming from the South Metro Atlanta

area; and, of course, recent developments in our country have sparked intense debate on race and the concept of inclusion and belonging. These are often difficult conversations to have, but we will continue to have them on our campus. Here in Fall 2020, for example, our senior administration has set up a Presidential Commission on Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity, which will sponsor a series of campus-wide dialogues on those topics.

<b>Changes because of COVID-19</b>	With fewer face-to-face classes and fewer students on campus, fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion is more challenging, for reasons mentioned in previous sections above. We will continue to encourage students to complete the PERTS social belonging intervention, even if NSOs remain virtual, and we will continue to seize every opportunity to engage the entire campus in discussions regarding including and belonging, even if they are virtual and not face-to-face.
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## GENERAL OVERVIEW AND OBSERVATIONS

As noted above, our rebuilt NSOs and our still-evolving FIRE 1000 class contributed most to our improved Momentum Year metrics for the 2019-20 academic year, particularly our improved ABC rates in English and Math classes, and overall gains in retention. We still have work to do developing consistent, clearer program maps and ensuring students have access to those maps. Also, although we have come a long way towards recognizing how important a sense of belonging is for our students, culture change is not complete, and we still have work to do on that front. One big concern for the Fall 2020 cohort is that, because of COVID, they did not receive the same NSO experience as students in the previous two cohorts. We will need to work even harder to keep our retention momentum going.

## SECTION 3.2 FOLLOW UP FROM MOMENTUM SUMMIT III - "CAMPUS-WIDE" MOMENTUM APPROACH ACTIVITIES (BEYOND THE CLASSROOM)

### PURPOSE

<b>Priority Work</b>	<b>Helping students towards making a purposeful choice before they arrive on campus.</b>
<b>Description of Activities</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Included a career services module in FORGE, our pre-orientation experience for new students.</li> <li>2. Included a question in the scheduling survey asking students if they would like some early career counseling before they arrive on campus.</li> </ol>
<b>Activity status and plans for 2020</b>	Both activities have been implemented. For 2020, for the first time, every incoming freshman was required to complete FORGE, including the career services module. We plan to continue requiring FORGE (including the career services module) for future cohorts.
<b>Lessons Learned</b>	A significant number of incoming freshmen requested early career counseling on their scheduling surveys. Given the virtual nature of our NSOs and our campus in general this past summer, it was a challenge coordinating with Career Services and providing this intervention.
<b>Priority Work</b>	<b>Helping students make or confirm a purposeful choice about an academic focus area and program of study.</b>
<b>Description of Activities</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Assign faculty advisors to hold regular advising hours in the residence halls.</li> </ol>
<b>Activity status and plans for 2020</b>	We had a faculty advisor/Academic Coach keep 3-5 "office hours" per week in our residence halls in 2019-2020 and are continuing that practice here in Fall 2020. While in 2019-20 the advisor set up shop in one specific residence halls, in Fall 2020, she is rotating among the five residence halls on our campus.
<b>Lessons Learned</b>	The practice of "meeting students where they are" is an effective one. We believe that offering advising and academic coaching in the residence hall contributed to the improved retention numbers for residential students. The

COVID restrictions (social distancing in particular) and having fewer students on campus have complicated things this semester. Traffic seems to be down, with fewer student contacts.

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## MINDSET

<b>Priority Work</b>	<b>Help students develop a sense of belonging, both social and academic.</b>
<b>Description of Activities</b>	1. Student Life and Residence Life developed a “Welcome Week” for the Fall 2019 freshman cohort that included an academic session designed to help students get to know their professors.
<b>Activity status and plans for 2020</b>	Welcome Week was implemented in August 2019, and reprised in Fall 2020.
<b>Lessons Learned</b>	It is difficult to quantify the impact of activities like Welcome Week, but we believe it helped contribute to the increased retention rates we saw for the Fall 2019 cohort.

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## PATHWAYS

<b>Priority Work</b>	<b>Help students and faculty understand how financial aid works and how important it is to their academic pathway.</b>
<b>Description of Activities</b>	1. Develop workshops to cover basic financial aid issues.
<b>Activity status and plans for 2020</b>	First workshop is scheduled for this month (October 2020).
<b>Lessons Learned</b>	No results yet.

## STUDENT SUCCESS AND COMPLETION TEAM

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