

**Foundations of Excellence in the First Year of College**

**Campus Readiness Profile**

**Middle Tennessee State University**

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**Describe your institution's current approach to the first year. Please show your campus's length of experience with major components of this total approach. Where appropriate, indicate the proportion of first year students served by each component.**

Initial efforts targeted toward addressing the needs of first-year students at MTSU began in 1985, when the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) mandated the implementation of a developmental studies program for at-risk students. Both developmental and remedial courses in the areas of reading, writing, math and learning strategies were offered. A freshman seminar class was introduced on the campus in 1987, but few other coordinated services for first-year students existed for nearly ten years.

During the spring of 1997, John Gardner and Bill Zeller were invited to the campus of Middle Tennessee State University to help kick-off a new initiative to expand services for first-year students. By fall 1997, Housing and Residential Life at MTSU initiated a major program to create living-learning centers to serve first-year students. By 1999, nearly 1000 of the 3200 spaces available on campus were committed to FYE and Honors living-learning centers; these communities served approximately 30% of the entering first-year class. By 2002, learning communities were in place to support students who had not yet declared majors (Deciding Students), first-year women studying math and science, and first-year students majoring in Aerospace or Recording Industry Management.

Today, nearly 50% of our 3136 first-time freshmen students enroll in the University 1010 Freshman Seminar. Approximately 300 students are involved in Raider Learning Communities (RLC) that link pairs of popular first-year courses such as the University 1010 Freshman Seminar, Biology, Speech, and Freshman Composition to form an academic cohort of students. While remedial courses are no longer offered at the university level, typically as many as 40% of first-time freshmen enroll in one or more Developmental Studies courses.

The revised orientation program improves academic advising services and highlights academic and community expectations; more than 90% of first-year students participate in summer orientation. Recently, the MTSU/Rutherford County Summer Reading Program and Opening Convocation have been established as significant components of new student orientation. The 2002 Opening Convocation was attended by more than 5000; the 2003 Opening Convocation will highlight Rick Bragg as the keynote speaker. Bragg is the author of the 2003 summer reading program selection, *All Over but the Shoutin'*, which will be required reading in nearly 100 sections of first-year courses for the fall semester.

Academic advising services for undeclared students and underprepared students have been reorganized under the auspices of the Academic Support Center (ASC) which provides academic advising, career counseling, and transitional programs and services for approximately 2800 first-year students. The ASC also coordinates the Raider Book Club, in which freshman seminar students read books recommended by the President or other select faculty and then share a meal during which they discuss the book with its "recommender."

Most recently, President McPhee has charged the campus with creating a plan to establish a first-year college unit to serve as the entering unit for all MTSU freshmen. Such a unit will provide and coordinate all first-year services, including academic advising, the University 1010 program, placement testing, TRIO programs, orientation, linked courses, other freshman learning community programs, and tutoring services.

**Describe your institution's past experiences with, and current capacity for, assessing the first year.**

Middle Tennessee State University has a strong history of conducting assessment and evaluation programs in support of institutional decision-making, planning, and reporting. Strategic planning, institutional effectiveness, and performance funding initiatives are an integral part of the functioning of the University and are centrally coordinated through the office of Institutional Effectiveness, Planning, and Research.

The Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) created the Performance-Funding Program in 1978. The Performance-Funding Program is “an incentive-based funding initiative for public higher education that financially rewards exemplary institutional performance on selected measures of effectiveness.” Under the Performance-Funding Program, institutions can earn up to 5.45% over their operating budget. Since its inception, Middle Tennessee State University has received close to \$41 million, which has been used to improve the quality of the University’s academic programs and administrative services. The Enrolled Student Survey is administered in the first and fourth years of the five-year performance-funding cycle. The survey includes items designed to assess student engagement in a variety of educational activities and campus programs. The survey additionally gathers data regarding students’ satisfaction with their level of faculty interaction and asks students to self-report gains in a number of academic skill areas.

In addition, MTSU conducts other assessments of student satisfaction with programs and services periodically and uses these results in review and planning activities. The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey has been conducted on campus since 1998. The curriculum of University Seminar 1010 is reviewed annually via survey data gathered from students enrolled in the course. Housing and Residential Life annually conducts the ACUHO-I Student Satisfaction Survey.

Research and evaluation efforts within the Student Affairs/Enrollment Management Division are centrally coordinated through the office of the Associate Dean of Student Life/Director of Student Affairs Research. In addition to other on-going assessment projects, that office coordinates the Residency Choice and Student Expectations Survey, which is administered to all incoming students during summer orientation. Included items assess student expectations for involvement in various campus programs and other educationally purposeful activities, explore how the student chooses their fall term housing accommodations, and assess satisfaction with various aspects of the summer orientation and advising process. This office has also registered MTSU for participation in the 2004 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).

MTSU has begun the reaccreditation process of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS); the year of record for its self-study will be 2003-2004. As a part of this undertaking, all University academic and support units will reassess their efforts to support the goals of MTSU’s Academic Master Plan.

Although MTSU has not yet undertaken a coordinated approach to assessing the first-year, all offices and staff are committed to undertaking such an effort. We will continue to examine ways to effectively collect and use data to help us to understand more fully the needs of our first-year students.

**What is your campus vision for participation in Phase II of the Hallmarks Project? What do you hope will be the outcome of your campus's participation in this project?**

MTSU President Sidney McPhee has indicated that the creation of outstanding academic support services for students is one of his highest campus priorities. The MTSU Academic Master Plan, revised in 2003, lists as its second of three major goals: "Middle Tennessee State University will create and nurture a student-centered learning environment responsive to the needs of a diverse student body." Coordination of a comprehensive array of services and programs for first-year students will be critical to achieving this goal. The President has made it clear that significant change to orientation, advising, and academic support services will receive both administrative and budgetary support.

This is a particularly opportune time for MTSU to participate in Phase II of the Hallmarks Project. In addition to public distribution of the revised Academic Master Plan, Dr. McPhee has recently outlined a goal of improving MTSU's six-year graduation rate by 12% over the next five years. State governing boards have undertaken discussion of enrollment caps and other limits on growth. At the same time, a state lottery-funded scholarship program goes into effect for fall, 2004, making college affordable for a much broader segment of Tennessee's population. Remedial coursework has recently been removed from four-year institutions in Tennessee, and Developmental Studies programs continue to be closely scrutinized. Effective fall 2004, new General Studies requirements will go into effect for all Tennessee Board of Regents schools, and credit hours required for graduation will be reduced from 132 to 120 hours. Combined, these initiatives prompt significant review of the curriculum and of academic support services.

Prior to our decision to participate in the Hallmarks Project, MTSU had already begun initial discussions concerning implementing the NSSE during 2004. We will move forward with this plan, regardless of the outcome of the selection process for Phase II. Data that help us develop a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of our existing programs and services will be crucial as we make decisions to reframe, revise and move forward. Our goal is to create a first-year support program consistent with best practices known to be related to our desired outcomes for students.

President McPhee has requested the development of a comprehensive plan for coordinating first-year and other academic support services, to be completed 2003-04. His vision includes the development of a unit specifically designed to assist entering students in their matriculation to the university. While various committees and task forces have made similar recommendations since early in the 1990's, the University has not yet undertaken the kind of structural changes required to support such an approach. Participation in Phase II of the Hallmarks project will assist MTSU in carefully crafting a plan that builds upon existing strengths to create a coordinated, integrated, and focused program distinguished by excellence. Such a program will be the cornerstone to providing MTSU students the most effective learning environment.

MTSU has a long, deeply held tradition of students being our highest priority. The campus is hopeful that the most significant outcome of our participation in the Hallmarks Project will be seen in the increased success of our students. MTSU is committed to being recognized for creating and nurturing a student-centered environment that fosters student learning by addressing effective teaching and learning strategies, technology, responsive student services, and quality academic advising. Phase II of the Hallmarks project will give us a template to follow in our effort to become a truly student-centered institution.

**What will be the role of the office of (a) the chief academic officer and (b) the chief student affairs officer in Phase II?**

Support for MTSU's participation in Phase II of the Hallmarks Project comes from the very highest levels of the institution. President Sidney McPhee's professional experience began in the area of academic advising, and he knows full well the potential impact of an integrated approach to coordinating services to first-year students. As noted previously, the MTSU Academic Master Plan, "Blueprint for Excellence," outlines three major goals for the University, summarized as enhancing academic quality, creating and nurturing a student-centered learning environment, and establishing partnerships with business, industry, and non-profit organizations.

In its entirety, the second goal states "Middle Tennessee State University will create and nurture a student-centered learning environment responsive to the needs of a diverse student body." Strategic directions related to this goal have been outlined and include promoting a responsive learning environment, expanding service-learning initiatives, creating a coordinated and effective academic advising program, and recruiting and developing faculty with a commitment to excellence in teaching. Dr. McPhee has publicly committed MTSU to the pursuit of these goals; timelines are in place, and budgetary decision-making is tied to achievement of these goals.

Dr. Kaylene Gebert, Executive Vice President and Provost and Chief Academic Officer of the University, is firmly committed to MTSU's participation in Phase II of the Hallmarks project. In moving the Academic Master Plan forward, she is leading a campus-wide collaborative initiative to advance the goal of a student-centered learning environment in both academic programs and academic support services, especially as they relate to the first-year student. The ultimate goal of the collaboration is to bring the resources of the University together to provide a coordinated, concerted, and integrative learning experience to our first year students--to ensure not only their first year success, but also their continuing successes as they matriculate through the University to graduation and beyond.

Fundamental to this collaboration is the identification and development of curricular and co-curricular partnerships to foster learning inside and outside the classroom. Among these collaborations are a renewed and more focused emphasis on service-learning, inquiry-based learning, and the use of technology to expand and deepen learning opportunities in traditional and distance education classrooms. Additionally, the Provost has made a commitment to strengthening academic advising during the 2003-2004 academic year by increasing the significance of advising as it relates to the role of faculty. Additional advising training will be provided to faculty, and faculty reward structures will be reviewed to explicitly include quality advising.

Dr. Bob Glenn, Vice President for Student Affairs and Vice Provost for Enrollment Management, shares Dr. Gebert's commitment to Phase II of the Hallmarks Project. Dr. Glenn serves as the chair of the Phase I Task Force and will continue in that role in Phase II. His strategic goals and objectives for 2003-04 include a number of items directly related to the improvement of the first-year experience; these priorities reflect the well-articulated vision of President McPhee. Dr. Glenn has been charged with production of a strategic plan for establishing a comprehensive unit to coordinate all academic support services for incoming students. He expects the plan to be completed in concert with the continuing work of the Hallmarks Task Force's during Phase II of the project.

**What unique qualities and areas of expertise would your campus bring to the Hallmarks Project? Why should the panel select your campus?**

Poised at an extraordinary intersection of changing regional demographics and rapidly evolving academic programs of excellence, MTSU is uniquely positioned and challenged by our growth. MTSU has experienced annual enrollment increases since 1987, growing from an enrollment of 10,397 FTE at that time to a fall 2002 enrollment of 18,151. While the population of the middle Tennessee area continues to climb, the demand for access to MTSU is not just a predictable consequence of regional population growth. It is also a reflection of the academic quality of the institution and the strong leadership of the institution by its faculty and staff.

Perhaps the greatest strength of MTSU is its ability to creatively harness and channel energy and resources to create superior educational experiences for students, even in the face of declining state support for higher education. MTSU produces approximately one third of the teachers for the entire state. The College of Mass Communication and the department of Aerospace are consistently rated as top programs in the country. The Recording Industry Management major is regularly ranked in the nation's top five. The Agribusiness program has been rated number one in the Southeast. Our Concrete Management program is a national model for public/private partnerships.

No other university in the state has so effectively managed such remarkable growth. Responding to the challenge to balance both access and quality, MTSU has implemented the first public Honors College in the state and increased average ACT scores of incoming freshmen to above the state and national average. For seven straight years, MTSU has been the number one college choice of mid-state valedictorians and salutatorians, eclipsing Vanderbilt University and the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. At the same time, the Developmental Studies program, certified by the National Association of Developmental Educators, continues to serve those students entering the university with academic performance deficiencies.

With the public release of the MTSU Academic Master Plan, President McPhee has clearly articulated his goal of creating a student-centered learning environment that is characterized by academic support programs and services that maximize the potential success of each MTSU student. MTSU has a record of collaboration and of implementing effective first-year support programs, including first-year living-learning communities, the first-year seminar, linked freshman courses, the summer reading program, and University Convocation. However, there is still much more work to be done. Currently, less than 18% of Tennessee residents possess the bachelor's degree; at MTSU, less than 40% of students who enroll complete their bachelor's degree within six years. Effective first-year support will be key to the success of our students, the institution, and our state.

Clearly, there are deficiencies in MTSU's structure that have become even more apparent through the process of completing Phase I of the Hallmarks Project. MTSU is prepared to address those deficiencies and is poised to initiate a comprehensive first-year program that will be a model for similar institutions nationwide. The weight of the offices of the President and of the Executive Vice-President and Provost is solidly behind these initiatives. We see the need, we have the support of key administrators, and we have a proven commitment to students. We look forward to the opportunity to participate in Phase II of the Hallmarks Project as a Founding Institute.