Engagement and Connection at George Mason University

PERSPECTIVES FROM FACULTY FOCUS GROUPS

COMMUNITY
BUILDING INSTITUTE

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Perspectives from Faculty Focus Groups

Introduction and Methodology

The Community Building Institute, at the request of Provost Mark Ginsberg and Faculty Senate Chair Melissa Broeckleman-Post, facilitated seven focus groups of faculty members to learn more about:

- The reasons and factors faculty choose to engage or not in the campus community.
- How Mason can create a more engaging campus culture for faculty
- How the Mason Club programming, presence, and hours could be more attractive to faculty members and better serve efforts to build a campus community

The 44 participants, diverse in rank, tenure, and location, were invited to join somewhat homogenous focus groups defined by those categories. It should be noted clearly that while this document offers an analysis based on the number of faculty members who reported similar viewpoints, the participants do not constitute a representative sample of faculty members.

The report is primarily a collection of quotes from faculty members organized into major themes. Some quotes have been slightly edited for clarity, conciseness, and to remove identifying information. Quotes that delineate defining perspectives are included in the body of the document. More quotes, which offer additional nuance, can be found in the Appendix.

Focus group participants offered a diversity of perspectives and concerns. They might be read in the context of this quote:

> *I do think Mason's a great place and in these kinds of settings we tend to pile on for what we'd like to see change and it can come off as very negative. **I do want to stress that I personally am grateful to be an employee of Mason.** I think the mission of Mason as a public institution in the population that we work with is for me, it's been my favorite place to work just because of the students that we work with and who we serve. So, I think that's really important. On a lighthearted note, one way we could perhaps increase participation in these focus groups is to incentivize it with free basketball tickets.*

Faculty members were promised complete confidentiality. Where quotes include personally identifiable information, the faculty member has granted permission to use the quote.

The Questions

The focus group conversations were organized around the following questions.

- What was it like when you arrived on campus? What were your first experiences?
- How have your experiences evolved over time at Mason?
- What would help engage you and your colleagues and make Mason feel like a place you belong?
- Mason has had Faculty Club that primarily has been a setting for faculty to dine together and informally gather. It has been in a variety of places over the years. It is now located in the Southside Dining facility and is called the Mason Club. Have you heard of it? Ever been? Perception? What would make it better?

Contents

First Impressions Matter

The responses to the first question uncovered dramatically different onboarding differences that often appeared to frame an enduring perspective of Mason campus culture. Many participants reported a warm welcome from their department and not much of a welcome from the university.

> *When I first came to George Mason, I can speak first of all about my hiring unit. And we've gone to a reconfiguration since that original hiring. But my original hiring unit was fantastic. It was collegial. It was supportive. And it was an unbelievable introduction to George Mason.* ***That said, the university itself felt very backwards, very parochial***. *A lot of things that made no sense whatsoever. There was a very heavy administrative burden for too many things. So, I mean, the sense of welcoming was a "people welcoming" from within my own unit. The sense of the "university welcoming" was, in many ways, incredibly burdensome and just getting acclimated to so many things that were Mason in 2010-2011.*

> *I think that, for me, the experience has been somewhat opposite of what you just shared [name].* ***I found that the university was very welcoming when I was first hired. I had opportunities presented to me to become involved in a variety of activities at the university.*** *I attended activities to get acclimated to the higher ed environment. My individual unit wasn't hostile, but everybody worked primarily in silence. That has changed over time. But I believe it's changed because of the turnover in people with whom I'm working. So, at this juncture, we are very collaborative in the work that we do, whereas historically, everyone just kind of walked past each other. Meetings were set up, decisions were made in advance, whereas you were just informed this is what's going to happen. There was never any opportunity to contribute to decision-making, but it's completely flipped.*

Additional quotes can be found in the Appendix.

COVID-19, You Know, Changed Everything

COVID-19, of course, did not change everything. However, the experience of the pandemic clearly informed how faculty members analyzed current conditions at Mason. Going back to the pre-pandemic patterns is unlikely and, in many cases, unwanted. Post-pandemic patterns can also be unwanted, like Zoom meetings where participants turn off their cameras and microphone. The uber frame in this conversation is how to build a post-pandemic engaged faculty community.

Faculty members had many observations about patterns, practices, and policies that inhibited faculty engagement. Those observations are found mainly in the sections that follow. The closing sections offer a wide range of ideas for strengthening faculty engagement.

Quirkiness and the Role of Central v. Departments

Faculty members frequently reported tensions around who decides what between the central administration, departments, and schools. As important, faculty members repeatedly emphasized the need for departments to have their own personalities, their own quirkiness as several said.   The comments suggest it might be helpful to develop some shared principles to guide what should be managed by central administration and what might be managed more effectively, with more nuance and ownership, at another level.

> ***Tolerance of the local academic unit is important**. Divergence and autonomy. That generally makes it a healthier environment for engagement with the university, even though it doesn't mean engagement with the center. It just means if you feel better about your ownership of your unit and your ability to decide how you do things, then you feel better about the center. Even though the center becomes a step removed at that point if they allow for more local autonomy, I think it's actually healthy for overall attachment to the university as a whole when we resist this bureaucratic movement toward standardization. My hobby horse in all my time as chair was to try to advocate for local autonomy and the ability to design and do things differently. But there's just an army of administrators who, in well-intentioned ways, fight against that cause.*

> ***There does seem to be this increasing trend towards centralization**, which I see as a faculty senator, which doesn't work for my school. Like we're just in a totally different market, we're in a totally different norms structure. When we compete with other schools, we actually even have different tenure norms that we need to follow if you want to be competitive. And it just seems like more and more something is happening administratively at main campus that is rigidizing many levels of decision-making. There seems to be almost no room without a huge fight for leeway within departments or schools. Maybe some departments don't feel that they need it or maybe there's some benefit to standardization across departments that interact a lot at the undergraduate level. But in the same sense, it seems like the main campus does not know what the best is for us and we feel like we are increasingly being pulled into a bureaucratic structure that has costs for us.*

> *The only thing I would add, and it's consistent with what [name] said, **because my school also has its own quirky identity.** That is part of its DNA, I sometimes roll my eyes at it, but it's very much part of our identity and to try to homogenize that with the law school or any other department would weaken the school. Just let us alone on that, you know, let us do our thing. We're transparent about what we're doing. There's no problem there you need to solve. By and large, on an ideological level, I think we're fine. I'm not sure some of the centralization of bureaucratic procedures are worth the effort. Seems to me it's just going to add another training to my future or another set of forms that I have to figure out.*

I felt that too many decisions that should have been faculty decisions were not within faculty hands. *I think that over the last couple of years, because of a lot of the stuff that a lot of people here, participating in other breakout groups, and across the campus have engaged themselves with projecting the ideals that are written down in the faculty handbook about faculty governance making it become a more active part of the way that the institution makes decisions. Now, have we been completely successful? Absolutely not. But has faculty had a greater voice in a lot of different ways? I think absolutely yes and* ***we're moving in the right direction insofar as faculty governance is concerned****. That's probably the biggest long-term trend I've seen since I've been here.*

Trend #1: Uneven Growth and its Consequences

The specific illustrations of the tension between departments and central often transitioned into an analysis of the departments as Mason became an R1 institution. Often, this was characterized as two Masons. The topic of Mason's growth was predictable. Uneven growth was spotlighted as contributing to some of the issues around organizational culture and centralization; uneven, not fully articulated, performance criteria; and the grappling with tensions among Mason's strategic priorities.

As Mason has grown over the past 15-20 years, ***the growth has been uneven across units*** *leading to different trajectories of the units. Some have found their space and place as they might in a traditional big school or college in an R1 university. Other programs are not historically structured that way and have been unable to take that leap. I don't mean it as a bad way or a good way. So, I think Mason is at an inflection point. At this point in time, COVID has definitely kind of shaken everybody a little bit, but I think we are at an interesting point to figure out who we need to and want to be. Because some structures are formally or informally cultivated around the old version of Mason, and there are some structures that have moving towards the newer version of Mason, there is this kind of pull and push that is taking place. I think that's the challenge that I think we are facing.*

I think the R1 status is a thing, but not all units need to be looked at in that way. Right? There are some units where the strength is the teaching aspect, and there are some units, where the strength is the external grant-getting perspective. ***And I think at this point, Mason, I don't think has reconciled itself to look at those types of units with differential lenses.***

I think also from a systems perspective there are two parts to it. I think what has evolved, I think there has been a change in central and the role of central in terms of running the university. There has been a decentralization of autonomy of local units versus the centralization of all the decision-making processes. That has been a very interesting kind of dialectic. I know a few years ago, when David Wu was a provost, we talked extensively about a resource-centered model, and then that kind of went away a little bit. So that's been a very interesting kind of flex and pull and push towards what the role of the central administration is versus autonomy.

Trend #2: Who Commutes

The second trend, how Mason has evolved from a largely a student commuter school to "faculty commuter" school was not mentioned frequently yet seemed to inform the conversation about the Mason Club and faculty perks that follow. Indeed, many faculty have become sporadic commuters with the increase in virtual and asynchronous classes and more faculty living further from campus.

> *And thank you for reminding us that we've been through COVID. Because I think there's this twin. Mason has a commuter school history where students were coming on and off campus and it still feels like that to a certain extent. **Now, we're a faculty commuter school**, where faculty commute virtually and sometimes long distances and I'm not sure we've fully grappled with what does that mean? How do you create community? How do you think about connection? Where do we need it? Where do we just think we need it, because we're used to it. I'm aware that sometimes when I want to feel connected, it's with people who aren't around and maybe they don't need to feel connected. I don't want to make them come in just so we can have a hallway conversation, but I know I get a lot more done on the days when I can run into five people I had small pieces of business with, and just get it taken care of. So, I think we've done this flip, and there's this thing that's happened. I'm not sure we've fully thought about what it means to have far-flung faculty.*

Does the Financial Model Support Engagement and Connection?

Several participants spoke passionately about the financial model and how it discourages collaboration and fosters misplaced competition.

> ***It's insane doing this, where we're just competing with ourselves rather than competing with our competitors.***
>
> *I'll just share one line from a previous Provost, not the current Provost, that continues to shape everything we do. And I think it is incredibly unfortunate. The previous Provost said to us in a faculty meeting," You eat what you kill, right?" Meaning the money that your unit gets is based on the enrollment in your classes. It hadn't always been that way. And now that that's how we've been incentivized, **I think it really discourages collaboration**. Not only at the teaching level, but, because we're not sharing classes and we're not sharing instruction, it reduces the interpersonal interactions that we would have from that teaching and at the research level as well. And again, I want to stress that it's not the current provost.*
>
> *I've noticed a **significant drop in students taking classes outside their majors**. And that clearly shifts the pathways available for connection.*
>
> ***Echoing some of what's been said, we're stunningly not transparent. We'***re so not transparent. Faculty Senate committees have asked for budgets, at least at the college and*

school level, shared performance indicators, etc., and no one at the university is forthcoming with it. I'm not unsympathetic to the position that Deb is in where she's in a new job, and they've lost executives like underneath her across the board. I'm sympathetic to her workload issues, but I think that we do need to try and work as a university to try and solve this transparency thing to make us better understand ourselves. And moreover, put faculty in a better position to talk to administrators about why budgets are the way that they are. If we don't even know what the budgets are, it's impossible.

Time, Faculty Responsibilities, and Support

The feeling of a persistent time crunch threaded through the discussions. Faculty articulated the consuming demands of heavy teaching and administrative loads; faculty service, often carried by a narrow group of faculty members; and constant requests to complete surveys and forms to support bureaucratic needs. Faculty who serve as center and project directors described additional time investments they had to make due to a lack of program support.

Part of the issue is that very few people do a lot of the service*. When we started this meeting, I saw half of these people in the last two days in other meetings. It's the same people and, with several thousand employees, that's not really the right way to do it.*

*And I think a lot of us have experienced this, the **administrative load for associate professors is off the charts. I**'m in my fifth year now directing something. As an Associate Professor, [name] has been chair. It's just what we're asked to do. I think it makes it very difficult to do advanced research.*

. . . every week another rubric. I don't know how to map that, but I feel that that trend of assessment has just exploded. The more I teach, the more verbs I have to justify.

*So if we did not have to fill out so many forms and rubrics, maybe I will eat lunch with my colleagues. **But I eat lunch in front of the computer and I fill out forms and other things that I have to do.***

Raising the Level of Faculty Engagement

Faculty took care to offer ideas that are practical. Many of the recommendations recognized that Mason is not like other universities. Faculty engagement in the organizational life of Mason, many noted, needs to be balanced with the rich opportunities for social and intellectual engagement in the Washington, DC metro area. Others, often those with young children, would talk about a reasonable work-life balance.

Recognition is Essential in Fostering Excellence and Commitment

Faculty repeatedly reinforced one central point; they wanted to be seen, recognized, and valued for their service, academic achievements, and their centrality to the excellence of the university.

Evidence for faculty members included the lack of direct recognition by colleagues and the university in general; an absence of support typical of R1s; and community building aspects such as an inviting faculty club and other perks. While this sentiment is captured throughout this report, several faculty members spoke directly to this topic.

> ***There is no recognition of folks who go above and beyond.*** *Over time, you get to that point where it's like, Okay, I've proven myself. I was self-driven to get to this point, but there is not really a reinforcer in place for me to continue to push at this rate unless I go elsewhere. I think that ceiling effect is real. I just got done two years chairing the [name] committee and I can see what happens with folks who feel like if it's just a box that you're checking and there's no recognition. There's no "hey, you're in the top 10% in [department name]. We're in the top 15 in the United States for our program, and you're one of the reasons that that's happening. There is no recognition.*

> *There's a real mixed message. Hopefully what you're hearing from this incredible group of folks that you have this morning in this focus group **is that we're doing excellent work but we're being treated like we're just some folks off the street**. That's the tenor of what I'm hearing. I hope that this is heard by Mark Ginsburg, and this is heard by President Washington. That you have administrative bloat, you've got some of the top scholars in their fields in the country at Mason, but the resources aren't finding their way to us. In fact, it's going the other way. We're giving resources, creating our own websites, doing lots of unpaid labor. We're teaching more courses (three-three) than any other R1 faculty teach. What I'm saying is that either you treat us well or you're going to lose us, but it doesn't seem like the university wants to make a commitment. They're still playing as if they're a commuter school, i.e., We'll take $10 million to rename a school. **That $10 million barely gets you a chair at other universities.***

> ***I find recognition nationally in my work more so than I do within my own university.*** *Folks nationally know who I am, know my research, and understand the contributions I'm making. But colleagues that I'm sitting in meetings with have no idea. I think part of that is we don't really create channels for sharing. I go to brown bags and the only people who are at those research brown bag discussions are the people who have been asked to present their research We don't have folks interested in engaging in this or we haven't figured out a way to really bring them together to have that talk. I think that's just one example of how to nurture research culture, but we don't share and celebrate.*

Fostering Interdisciplinary Connections with Intention

Faculty members appreciated connections outside their department and shared how initial connections blossomed into long-term partnerships and collegial relationships. Multi-disciplinary centers were consistently seen as an effective vehicle for connecting faculty across disciplines and campuses. Faculty members extolled their virtues and the resulting value of those connections. This was expressed alongside concern about how little support seemed available for centers and suggested this was not typical of other R1 universities.

> ***One final thing is trying to find opportunities like this for people across units to talk to each other really helps****. I think that will be helpful as we are getting bigger and bigger and more widespread. The Center for the Advancement of Well-Being is doing some of this work. I'm sure several of us have been through developmental pathways, whatever leadership, this and that. I think helping to create more programs like that, where different units and people from different units are smushed together in a way that they see each other and talk to each other would be beneficial. I think that would really be helpful because some perceived inequities might be alleviated or be brought to light.*

> ***I have found the faculty development people that do the support groups for first year tenure track have been amazing****. Their support groups bring in people from different departments and I've been getting more guidance from them. I'm really glad that they're there. I want to offer a shout-out to the faculty development people because I felt more community in just doing three or four meetings, I've been able to get to than I have for my entire department. The campus culture, I think, is fine. I think it's my department that needs work.*

> *Here's some ideas. Offer course buyouts to build relationships in interdisciplinary labs or maker spaces. **Offer more incentives to explore interdisciplinary work together***. Create visiting roles in other departments (teaching fellow or visiting research fellow) that are compensated and where a department is given resources to hold a brown bag, make introductions across departments, and host that person when they are in that role.*

> ***There's lots of unpaid labor that goes on at George Mason****, lots of it. I direct a research center and I don't even get a course buyout, much less a stipend. My colleagues at the University of Connecticut, Penn, Harvard, Stanford, and other places get buyouts and stipends to direct the exact same types of centers. So, you're asking faculty members to do labor that they're not getting paid for.*

Building Faculty Morale and Connectedness

Participants recognized the challenges that face Mason for building community. These challenges are often the flip side of the positives that attracted people to Mason such as a lively metropolitan area, availability for locating for multiple commutes, and a variety of teaching modes and needs for the diverse Mason student body. Discussions around morale were linked with engagement and recognition. Building community connections for

faculty looked at informal social or interest-based gatherings to build interpersonal connections. They looked to have their recommendations work for the scale of Mason, where faculty live and work, or the variety of life stages of our faculty, recognizing that it will take a sufficient variety and quantity of opportunities to meet people's needs. Providing incentives for local community efforts was a common thread.

> *I would say Deans and particularly department chairs have a huge role in influencing faculty morale and faculty sense of community in particular. We've had a very strong one, we've been fortunate.* *She was the shield from a lot of the incoming fire from our old Dean. There were other chairs that were weaker and those faculty were really upset. I provided therapy to several over the years.*

> *Our staff has decided to do "Together Tuesdays."*

> *I do like the idea of maybe creating more opportunities for faculty to get connected to broader university events.* *I went to homecoming; I've been going to homecoming at Mason most years because I'm an alumni and I've kids at Mason. I was at the tailgate in Lot A this past February wishing more of my faculty members and my colleagues were here to see the students having so much fun. Just watching the students be college students in Lot A was a blast. We're not known for being a party school or a school where students have a lot of fun on campus. We could have more tents, a school sponsor a tent, and get the faculty out there to also have fun, too. Things like that would be nice.*

Faculty want Spaces that Feel Special

When we asked one focus group about the Mason Club, virtually every person on the screen spontaneously offered a thumbs down. Dissatisfaction with the current form of the Mason Club was virtually universal.

> *Again, it sounds kind of like a silly thing, but* *I actually think it's a real blow to faculty cohesion to not have a gathering place that is sort of dressed up for us.*

> *I've taken guest speakers to George's across the street in the mall to have a nice place to take them where it's quiet.* *I would not bring a visiting speaker, guest researcher, or faculty candidate to the current faculty club* *because of the method of having to get the food. It's confusing and they have to walk through all of the students. The way Mason Club is separated and allows for the sort of private kind of conversation that you may want to have amongst a group of faculty is really important. But if you have to keep going back and forth in order to get your food and waiting in line and all of that, it really prevents that kind of more relaxed conversation. The only other way that I've been able to do it is to preorder from Panera and then sit in our cramped office. I really don't find the current faculty club to be appropriate at all for anybody external. It's kind of embarrassing, actually.*

Many preferred previous incarnations of the Faculty Club (such as the one at Pilot House) or previous faculty dining options, particularly at the Johnson Center. Faculty members described their efforts to find suitable places to gather, many of which are now closed.

Participants discussed the plaza in front of Mason Square, other restaurants in the Johnson Center, the little, now closed, cafeteria area in the Law School basement, the closed hotel, the open space in front of the RAC, and other spaces around the campuses.

Desired characteristics of a faculty club included:

- Substantial enough in size that it is possible to seat a small group or join other colleagues, spontaneously, for lunch.
- Efficient means of getting reasonably priced food that is separate from students.
- Regular hours and courteous staff.
- Accessible location at Fairfax with consideration given to creating something appropriate at branch campuses.

Discussions about the Mason Club often led to a conversation about the dearth of alternative places.

> *I think Mason needs a new meeting place. I wouldn't call the Mason Club or the faculty lounge a great meeting place simply because it's sitting out there in Skyline and not really in the center of campus. We do need another hotel-like space to plop, to eat, or simply to meet up. I don't see that right now.*
>
> *To echo some of the things that are in the chat, I would really like to see some shade brought to Mason Square Plaza. If I'm going to be sunburned in 20 minutes, I just can't sit at the table. Of my irritants, it may not seem that big, but it radically impacts my presence as it means I'm often indoors and squirreled away in the faculty lounge rather than out where the students can get me. Of the things that I would like to see changed, I think this is number one on my list. They recently added some umbrellas, but they're small and don't do the job. I think that's a big deal.*

Perks: Basketball, Volleyball, and Philosophy

In one of the early focus groups, a participant talked about her enthusiasm for Mason's basketball team, especially when they made it to the Final Four. She expressed disappointment that free tickets to basketball games are no longer available, as did others, especially when there are available unsold seats. For some participants, the lack of perks was another way Mason doesn't show appreciation of faculty.

> *I'd be happy with basketball tickets. Every time I have the opportunity, every basketball coach see, I say, "Hey, tell the president to make it free for the faculty." I would be there all the time. I will not go to a single one because there's not even a reduction to speak of for faculty to do so. And I just think, why aren't they? What would they lose doing that? It's not like the venues are full. It would increase my buy-in and my time on campus.*
>
> *I would attend. Volleyball is my favorite. I've been to a few volleyball games here at Mason. They have the men's volleyball going on now. But I would love some free tickets as well. That's one way to socialize with other colleagues. I got to know some people just by attending some of these games.*

*I mean, I love events. So, for example, the NCAA volleyball championship is being held at Mason, April 30 to May 15. Oh, wow. So that's a neat thing, right? **Maybe the university could encourage faculty to attend with free or discounted tickets.** Before COVID, they gave a 50% discount to all faculty who paid for three concerts or more at the Center for the Arts. That was fun and I brought my wife, sometimes my kids. I bump into other faculty and we talked about different events we liked, et cetera. So that's another informal way to bring people who are interested in the arts to participate. There are lots of little things that can be done. As long as it's not mandated, as in thou shalt do X. But it's hey, if you'd like to be involved and you like basketball, volleyball, arts, philosophy, what have you, then there's a place for you.*

Closing Reflections

The passion and commitment of faculty members to the university was clearly evident in every focus group. And the desire to make things better was palpable.

There was an unexpected outcome. Cate Rodman, a member of the facilitation team, noted at the end, "I have been in six of the focus groups. I would say for me, one of the surprise outcomes is that, at the end of every single one, participants have expressed gratitude for the opportunity to talk with other faculty." Faculty members do not appear to have regular opportunities to connect with colleagues to have constructive conversations about the future.

Self-selection, as we all know, can lead to skewed outcomes. Across the focus groups, between 10-20% of invitees participated. The one exception was comprised of faculty who are already active in the Mason community. That group had an attendance rate of 80%. While there is much to learn from what was said in these focus groups, there is likely as much to learn from those who did not to join the conversation.

Appendix

These additional quotes found here provide nuance and perspectives on the topics.

First Impressions Matter

I actually remember meeting Mark Ginsberg at the Center for Arts. All new faculty came, I guess this was the first week of classes or maybe in late August. I thought that was nice. Kind of "we value you as new faculty members", and actually just kind of informally, I had a chance to meet with some other faculty from other departments and colleges and that was really fantastic. That was my first sense of a community of faculty, we're all in the same boat kind of orientation, etc. Once you transition and you're starting to meet with the department chair, and you're getting into things that I felt like it was much more in a silo.

*Things were very different 20 years ago. What I loved about those times where everyone was around. I remember being in Robinson Hall, which now doesn't exist anymore. We have the Horizon building in place. And I remember going in every morning, and I always had an opportunity to talk to my colleagues. Doors were open. There was plenty of time to socialize and also collaborate with others in the building. That's where most of our college faculty were located at the time. I also had the opportunity I remember the first year to meet a lot of people from other departments. **And serving on committees gave me the opportunity as a young faculty member to network and establish collaborations and conduct research with faculty members from around campus.** I remember vividly working with people in the [department] and other departments at the time. So there was definitely a sense of community. That's what impressed me the most about being at Mason.*

***I will say that my first experiences on campus were positive.** There were individuals who reached out to me, such as the division director and there were a few faculty members in the division who reached out as well. So it was welcoming. I do have to contextualize my initial experiences because the position was open in response to the racial unrest that the country was experiencing. So that also meant that for students and faculty, there was still some question about what my position would be, there was still question and even apprehension about what and how the college , and even Mason was to respond to racial unrest? I think in some ways that created probably a little bit of apprehension and tension for some of the students and faculty that I was interacting with. But overall, it was still fairly positive. And I do think with time, it has even been an upward trajectory.*

*When I first arrived, we were in the old PE building, which is now the RAC. It's across the street and kind of isolated. So, I would say yes, it was a welcoming environment, but for within the department itself as opposed to across campus, I rarely went across campus, even though I started out full time. **I will say once the hotel was built across the street, that was a whole, a whole new, new thing. And we felt like we were no longer isolated in our building because we had that beautiful hotel across the street.** At the*

time that I came, we were very much a commuter school, prior to lots and lots of dorms who have totally changed the landscape of Mason.

*I'm thinking of my very first experiences. The day I arrived I was in an all-day orientation meeting. I came from a very toxic previous institution where people were fighting in the hallways, and whispered threats behind closed doors. I found Mason to be the most open, welcoming, and kind environment that was really driven by my department. It was driven by my department chair, it was driven by my area, my group head of [department] and other senior faculty reaching out to welcome me and emails about a paper that I had published right before I got to campus. **My initial experiences were really quite positive.** Because I was in this all-day experience and then I also had all of my department orientations happening within the next couple of days and all the graduate students in a room together. So that piece for me was really great and I actually missed those days pre-pandemic.*

Does the Financial Model Support Engagement and Connection?

*Yeah, no, I think. So just on [name] last point, and just three quick points. Shifting the financial burden of faculty to raise external funds, is going to shift faculty to organizations like the RAND Corporation, which operates on soft money, right? **Either you fund your faculty based on their contributions, and the markets that they operate in,** whether it's the economics market, the sociology market, and frankly, recognizing that the opportunity costs across these disciplines and across these markets vary. So while we're trying to compress salaries, all you do is that just regression to the mean, you're going to compress salaries, and you're going to compress quality. That's just the first point with respect to this administrative effort, as [name] described, to kind of compel faculty to go out and get big grants when either they may not need the grants, or that's in place of the university actually putting money and having some skin in the game with respect to adequately and frankly, fairly compensating faculty.*

***I feel like the fiscal model creates this kind of competition between colleges**. Students not taking classes outside of their majors is because of the fiscal model. That's because colleges want these credits for themselves, especially lesser-funded colleges like mine. One of our majors used to send students to engineering for class. Now we offer that class in-house. That means there are missed opportunities for interdisciplinary interaction for students and faculty.*

*Budgeting around administration versus faculty, it'd be really interesting to know who's getting paid to do what broken down by category. **I have a strong sense that what some people consider administrative bloat is a lot of actually important needed work.** You know, if you get a lot more students with mental health issues, you have to crank up the mental health budget. If you've got more computer intensive work, then you crank up your IT budget. Greater transparency might just make people feel better about the number of*

*jobs and the amount of money going into central administration or it might reveal some pretty significant waste. But we just don't know and can't FOIA a document that doesn't exist. So, **I just feel that as faculty, we're not really informed about some of the most important decisions at the university**.*

*Since that is stated as a major university priority, **I think that this element of sustained connection is an important part of the DEI work as well**. The quality of relations, to some extent, dictates how deep people can go and honest people can go in developing solidarity across the university. That's another way that we can think about sustained facilitated convergence and incentives for faculty to participate and not having to drive towards an immediate, short-term research goal. And then there's something that's happened. I don't know what it is. But there's been a shift in how our class billing structure works in the time I've been at Mason.*

Time, Faculty Responsibilities, and Support

*Right. So, you are asked to do so many things as service. But when we were having a meeting with some AAUP representatives trying to understand the workload, and **we said that there is no measure to quantify the service at George Mason**. They said what did I mean? How is that possible? Meaning service requires time? Yeah. Right. And maybe you don't have to quantify every single little thing but some measures should be put in place, because people devote a lot of time to surveys. It's not that you are not being paid, but it comes down to your time and there are only 24 hours in the day. And then you cannot stretch this time. So, people I mean, the administration should have an idea of how many hours people are putting into service.*

*And it's strange because there are both redundancies and gaps when it comes to research administration. For example, I have my psychology grants people, my CHSS grants people, and then I have the University Grants people. **They don't even use the same terminology when they talk to each other.** So, when I have a grant that has some cost share, we ended up having this sort of email chain that lasts for 48 hours and requires nine phone calls to get OSP and CHSS and my psychology grants people on the same page. Not to mention that one of my co PI's is in [two other Schools] and to get her group and her graduate students integrated into that grant also is a problem.*

*As we're discussing service, I am thinking about recalibrating the teaching load. As a term faculty member, I teach four courses a semester and that's a lot. Plus, I'm interested in research. I don't have to do it, but I'm interested in it and would like to pursue it and do. I also have responsibilities for service. Even if we could have a reduction of one course, that would be huge. I know that as I've worked across the university in different committees, I've learned that four/four is not standard. Or it doesn't seem as though it is. I'm wondering, **can we consider having a standard that doesn't kill people?** I know I'm starting to feel very tired.*

Recognition is Essential in Fostering Excellence and Commitment

*I would say that my loyalty to the university, and attachment to it, is conditioned significantly by how the university represents itself and then how it represents my unit's role within the university. Here's the sort of the typical humanities professor complaint about higher administration. When the university represents itself to the public, and to itself, the humanities are usually invisible. Research is always defined in terms of robots and cancer cures. What humanities faculty contribute to the university, rhetorically and in real substantive ways, is downgraded. Even though I'm not looking for my university to provide me with my source of personal meaning or social interaction, that detaches me from the university when the upper administration talks about the university in a way that does not include or value what I see as the contribution of me and my colleagues in my department. **That has pretty repeatedly been a source of detachment and alienation**. I haven't had negative personal feelings towards administrators, but the way that they talk and create processes and procedures all the time devalues in a way that makes it hard to feel close affinity and identification with the university as a whole, even though my sense of affinity and attachment to my department is very strong.*

*If you just do a simple comparison of the PhD hires in the last six or seven years, looking at the doctorate degrees, Google citations, or any measure of productivity of faculty that were hired legacy Mason, and we're not even talking about the same faculty. But we're being treated the same. There's a reason that faculty [at School] keep leaving. There's a reason that I imagine most people on this call have been actively recruited by other universities. Mason is in a fantastic location and can recruit people based on the amenities of the DC metro area. So you're going to get top people who want to be in urban communities, urban with amenities of a DC, Northern Virginia, but then you're going to treat us like we're still George Mason 1988. **The fact that you move one of the most important perks, the dining hall, into the student dining hall is an example of how you tell your faculty that you really aren't that special, you aren't that important, and you're replaceable.***

*That's actually a big problem. I think we have a lot of very underpaid faculty here in a very expensive part of the country. If President Washington doesn't understand that the underpaid faculty are the ones with the greatest motivation to seek better compensation elsewhere, just hurting ourselves. It seems to me the only way that we ever address this issue is with retention pay **which says to our faculty, what you need to do to succeed here is to always be on the job market**, looking at some other job. When you get that other job, come talk to us, and maybe we'll decide to keep you, right? It's a horrible strategy. Why don't we reward the people who have shown that they're willing to stay here and do the work.*

I just think that this is a microcosm for generally how faculty are being treated at George Mason University. That if you really want to claim the mantle of excellence, access to excellence, as the university likes to run around and scream and put into bus stations and

*airports, **then treat us as if we're excellent**. Don't force us to wait in line with undergraduates to get a slice of pizza. What that signal sends is that we're in a third-rate place. So, if we're a third-rate place, let's just be clear about that. But let's then not also run around and promote George Mason in all its excellence at the same time.*

Faculty want Spaces that Feel Special

*I think a Faculty Club is wonderful. But again, it's small. I mean, you're, you know, if it's crowded, you're on top of people, you can't have a decent conversation. **You just don't really want to share what's going on at work with the 10 people sitting close to you.** I went over there one time at almost 1:30. And there was nobody there, which was nice, except the woman was cleaning up and she just basically told us no, it's too late. You can't come. So yeah, and I mean, I feel sorry for her. She's back. She was worked to death. But so, my, the person I was having lunch with and I just went over to the JC.*

*When I think about what the faculty club has been through different iterations, I think usually it's been associated with a place to have meals. **It wasn't always clear to me what the rules were and the expectations around those meals.** Are students welcome? Is this a place that you can bring students? It felt there's a version of faculty club that has felt sometimes a little restrictive, that it's an "in" thing, and smaller numbers join? It's not clear to me that it had an expansive view. I wasn't sure how I could use it. Could you have a big boisterous lunch there? At one point my distinct impression was that it was not okay to bring students.*

*Since the Faculty Senate meetings are now virtual, I have less reason to come to the main campus and go to the Mason Club. When I did go more frequently, **I liked going to the Pilot House.** I thought that was a nice place. I would make a point of having lunch there. I found the food decent and could either sit with people you know or just sit with people you didn't know. I really would like a place like that. It would be great to have something like that in Arlington. I would worry that we couldn't support it though.*

***I frankly think it was best when it was that basement room itself in the JC**, I think that was the best experience we had.*

***Southside is inappropriate in my view**. It's part of student dining, not separated, you have to fight the students to get food, it is cramped, and it is not very clean. The old one was great—a place to sit and talk, comfortable and clean, no students, and so you can have personal conversations.*

*I was crazy and I thought I'll buy 10 meals. I've used three and two of them have been in the last two weeks. I agreed the bistro and George's were two amazing places, and they didn't have the fee. **My biggest problem with the Mason Club is the room is tiny. You'**re never assured that you're going to be able to get a seat. It's not the most convenient place. If it was larger, I would maybe make the effort to walk there more or get a group of people there more. I would love to have something like the bistro. I don't know why it no longer*

exists because it was almost always full. And some days you couldn't get a table there. The food was decent, it was edible, they had a salad bar, and it was in a convenient location. I understand why the Mason Club was made, but I don't think that—especially not in a space the size of a shoebox, it's not able to fully come to what they thought it might. The size of the area is a huge problem.

So I have also been to the old Mason Club, and now the new Mason Club. And so there is a definite difference. The old Mason Club was its own entity. It was wonderful to go and have lunch and collaborate and talk about ideas and have the lunch piece not be an issue. ***When you're at Johnson Center, everyone is waiting in line and by the time you get your food, you actually have only five minutes to talk with your colleagues****. Or even just to go and have tea and have a place that's outside of your offices. And it's like neutral territory for everyone to feel like they're on equal footing where you're not at Starbucks, trying to accomplish that. So I really saw the benefits to it.*

What would it look like to have a faculty club that was distributed?* Where there was a faculty club component to events where you could have dinner somewhere on campus before a performance and there were discounted rates for faculty? What would it look like to have a faculty club spot at some of the large events such as homecoming that faculty could come back to. There would be something interesting in thinking of faculty club more than a lunch place to buy lunch. But that was more expansive, and more flexible. Special in some way without losing the steadiness.*

For the first time I was there, I paid for Mason Club because we had a junior faculty gathering in our department. We chose to dine in the Mason Club. We had to have someone to be the member so the whole group could dine there. For that time, because some of my colleagues, they were really confused with the two-door thing. And they were yelled at by the lady who works the dining hall because she thought my colleagues skipped their payment. And so my experience there was not that positive. ***So I stopped paying for the Mason Club and now go to Ike's, which feels much more positive.**** For those who haven't tried a university dining hall, there is another one called the Globe in the building next to the RAC gym and is also very good.*

[Mason Club at Southside] is terrible. You go there and you're getting Southside food with salty service.* I interviewed at the [university] and at the end of my job talk, they took me to their faculty building which had a great hall like it was from Hogwarts or something. I was like, Yes, I could see faculty coming here all the time. {cont'd by another focus group participant} [university] had one of those with books, big easy chairs, and stuff.*

The loss of the faculty dining hall for lunch has been really bad for my sense of community, the ability to say to a colleague, hey, let's go grab a lunch real quick at the Faculty Club.* To know that we don't have to wait in line, that the food is pretty good, that there are going to be other faculty members that we can say hi to while we're there. Or you can go by yourself and sit at this community table where other people are sitting. We could take our guest speakers there. It was a special place. I could take grad students for a*

*celebratory lunch. The loss of that and the room. That space was beautiful. It was welcoming. It was quiet. It was grown up. The movement of that into the dining hall. **I don't know if anybody's been to the new faculty club but it's actually kind of gross, and it's not clean.***

*Idea for currently building community— I would love a place that is outside (for COVID safety) and is under a roof and has chairs and tables for meetings outside. The Mason Square plaza has an overhang, but often there are not tables and chairs under the overhang. So, outdoor meetings for coffee or lunch with colleagues are dependent upon the weather. Some of us are immunocompromised and are still under doctors' orders not to take masks off indoors around others, so the social meetings for coffee and lunch are not inclusive. **If we had an outdoor space protected from rain with tables and chairs, I would really use them. I'd sit there with doctoral students to have big talks on their dissertations over tea/coffee or lunch.** That would make coming into the office for these meetings worth it, instead of usually doing these meetings by Zoom these days. So, I'd like to ask the Arlington campus facilities managers to place tables and chairs under the overhang at Mason Square. This seems an easy fix. We are able to officially reserve that space and pay for tables to hold events there. Why not have tables and chairs there all the time?*

*I don't think you can force people. But I'm home right now. I was on campus but it's super dead. Frankly, I came home for lunch, because it's so much cheaper for me to come home for lunch. I could sit there and go buy a $12 lunch or, I can just go and eat my own lunch. If there was a one o'clock meeting there, or if this was in person or whatever, I would have stayed, of course. **But there's no real value add that makes it better for me to sit in my office alone doing Zoom versus being at home doing Zoom**, when maybe there's some incidental things I can do for the family. So I think that there's got to be some kind of conversation. I don't think it can be coercive. Mason Square is doing some really cool stuff. There's some yoga and other things. I thought I'd like to do that. I don't know that I will, but it's a good vibe. It's making me feel good about being on Mason Square. I kind of wish we were on the main campus in a certain way. But that's its own story. But yeah, I think the incentivization and maybe even getting just people to maybe talk about committing like to come in a couple days and let's try to meet. I met my RA today in person. That's one of the reasons I went, because I think it makes a difference. So little conversations of that kind just for people to be a little bit more intentional, just to recognize it and maybe help solve the problem, rather than being forced to show up three days a week and be in your office or lose your office or something.*

Fostering Interdisciplinary Connections with Intention

I am a director of a research center that nobody knows about. It has no website. It had no rollout of an introduction. It's the first of its kind. And yet it's like a ghost of a research center. There was no help to get a donor. There was no welcome party, there was no newsletter put out. It was like a bullet point at the end of something or other that maybe

*people noticed. **It was a huge, missed opportunity for our college and for the university to say we have one of the most unique research centers** in the [name] space in the United States, and yet no one knows about it. So, not only is there no course buyout or support, there's no administrative support. There are not even basic facilities in place. I found that to be the case for most of what I'm doing. The other thing I will say is I need help infrastructurally. I'm trying to build my own infrastructure while I'm trying to do my job. **We don't have the infrastructure in place to be a real R1 and yet we're trying to act as an R1.** So, for me, it's really about helping to build the infrastructure behind me to allow me to do that work. If you say you value research, then please show that through actions. Again, infrastructure is one really important way to do it. I think things as simple as having a full-time Associate Dean for Research is a good way to start, rather than saying we'll just have someone do this part-time as part of their other day job. I've seen that many times at Mason at different levels. They'll say we value something and then they will devote 20% of someone's time to that initiative. Is that really in line with saying you value it?*

***I think it's also important for just the socialization of graduate students**, to be blunt, to see how people critique papers, how people work with ideas at an early stage, and what that conversation is like. It's not necessarily about getting faculty to show up, sometimes it's hard to get graduate students to show up to things unless it's very specific to what they're doing. I think just part of the culture, the sort of multigenerational culture of a university— whether it's between senior professors and junior folks like me, or professors and graduate students, etc, —to have these kinds of things where people can do some norm entrepreneurship and highlight what scholarly life can be like.*

*Rather than just saying, "hey, there's pizza in the plaza", **why don't we all show up to say, "hey, there's a series of 10 workshops on a thing that's interesting and valuable to you."** That's a very different way of bringing people together. I tend not to just hang out. But if there was a workshop, or something like that it would make it much more encouraging to me. The other thing that might also serve somewhat of that purpose would be a regular kind of invited lecture series where there was enough money to bring somebody in to give an interesting lecture that would get people to say, "I'm going to hang out on campus because so and so speaking and I really want to see what she has to say." Those are things that would get me to hang out on campus more than offering pizza in the plaza.*