



Evaluation Report of

Title III Strengthening Institutions Grant: Year Three

**Enhancing Persistence through Early Engagement, Experiential Education
and Campus Connection**

For

Auburn University Montgomery

Prepared and Submitted by

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Independent Evaluator

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ORIGINAL PROJECT ABSTRACT

Enhancing Persistence through Early Engagement, Experiential Learning, and Campus Connections

Low retention, persistence, and graduation rates for the institution, particularly for the financially disadvantaged students, underscore the critical need for student success programs that draw upon high impact practices and facilitate persistence and timely graduation of at-risk students. This proposal signals the next step in AUM's history of developing a support system to foster student success and reflects the student engagement goal in the 2019-2024 AUM Strategic Plan. The proposed Experiential Education and Engagement Center (EEEC) will serve as a communication hub for all experiential (including service learning) education and undergraduate research opportunities at the university. Experiential and undergraduate research opportunities will be developed in collaboration with faculty within specific programs and through partnerships with community organizations and firms.

Proposed expenditures include a Program Coordinator who will manage the daily operation of EEEEC, a Learning Specialist/Research Coordinator who will assist faculty in identifying opportunities to incorporate best practices for experiential learning and undergraduate research within the classroom and a Data Analyst/Assessment Specialist who will work with representatives from the Office of Institutional Effectiveness to build an on-demand system of student information.

An important component of the grant proposal will be a peer mentoring program established as part of the Freshman Success course and student Success Coaches who will work closely with advisors within advising offices across campus. These students will serve as an additional point of contact for students as they move through their academic careers.

The total funding requested is \$2,166,936.88 over the five year span of the grant.

Overview and Introduction

Auburn University Montgomery (AUM) received a Title III Strengthening Institutions five-year grant funded at \$2,166,930 for the project period October 1, 2019 through September 30, 2024. AUM has engaged Dr. Marjorie Piechowski to serve as an external evaluator of the project, measuring achievements against the goals and objectives proposed in the grant application. The grant proposal listed three Academic Program Goals, one Institutional Management Goal, and one Fiscal Stability Goal. For reference, the goals proposed in the grant application are shown below.

Overview AUM Title III CDP Objectives
ACADEMIC PROGRAM GOAL APG1. <i>Increase student engagement with the university.</i>
<u>Objective AP1.1:</u> Maintain student engagement as measured by the responses to the NSSE questions regarding academic and intellectual experiences to match the responses of similar Carnegie-class institutions by Fall 2024.
<u>Objective AP1.2:</u> Increase student engagement as measured by the responses to the NSSE questions regarding enriching educational experiences to match the responses of similar Carnegie-class institutions by Fall 2024.
<u>Baseline Data:</u> For AP1.1, NSSE scores, specifically scores on items 1h, 3a, 3b, 3c (see Table 3) for NSSE administered in 2018. For AP1.2, NSSE scores, specifically on items 7d, 7h, 11 (see Table 3) for NSSE administered in 2018.
<u>Specific Tasks:</u> An Experiential Education and Engagement Center (EEEC) will be developed and institutionalized (with permanent university staff).
<u>Tangible Results:</u> A fully functioning Experiential Education and Engagement Center with staff including a Project Coordinator and Learning Specialist/ Research will be institutionalized and will become available to all incoming students. Peer mentors will be institutionalized within this office as well.
ACADEMIC PROGRAM GOAL APG2. <i>Establish strong retention and persistence rates for first-year and first-generation students.</i>
<u>Objective AP2.1:</u> Increase the annual 1 st to 2nd year retention rate for first-year students to regional average by Fall 2024
<u>Objective AP2.2:</u> Increase the annual 2 nd to 3rd year persistence rate for first-year students by 10% by Fall 2024
<u>Objective AP2.3:</u> Increase the annual 3rd to 4th year retention rate for first-year students by 7% by Fall 2024.
<u>Baseline Data:</u> Data for students will be compared to Fall 2018 retention and persistence rates for all first-year students.

<u>Specific Tasks:</u> Implement a peer mentoring program within the Freshman Student Success Course and a Student Success Coach program across the advising offices on campus.
<u>Tangible Results:</u> At the end of Title III support, Experiential Education and Engagement Center will be institutionalized and with the peer mentors and success coaches will be fully funded by the University.
ACADEMIC PROGRAM GOAL APG3. <i>Establish strong graduation rates for first-time students, particularly those who are high-need.</i>
<u>Objective AP3.1:</u> Increase the 6-year graduation rate for first-time students by 5% by Fall 2024.
<u>Objective AP3.3:</u> Increase the 4-year graduation rate for transfer students by 5% by Fall 2024.
Baseline Data: Baseline data will be compared with 2011 cohort data, which is 27.6%.
<u>Specific Tasks:</u> Develop and institutionalize Experiential Education and Engagement Center as described for Objective AP1.1 and AP1.2 above. In addition, implement a peer mentoring program within the Freshman Student Success Course and a Student Success Coach program across the advising offices on campus.
<u>Tangible Results:</u> At the end of Title III support, Experiential Education and Engagement Center will be institutionalized and with the peer mentors and success coaches will be fully funded by the University
INSTITUTIONAL MANAGEMENT GOAL Make Auburn University at Montgomery the institution of choice.
<u>Objective IMG1.2:</u> By Fall 2024, enrollment will increase to 7000.
Baseline Data: Baseline comparison will be enrollment Fall 2018 – 5211.
Specific Tasks: Develop and institutionalize the Experiential Education and Engagement Center as described for Objective AP1.1 and AP1.2 above. In addition, implement a peer mentoring program within the Freshman Student Success Course and a Student Success Coach program across the advising offices on campus.
Tangible Results: By the end of the grant period, enrollment increase will be observed.
FISCAL STABILITY GOAL FSG1. <i>Improve financial stability by providing infrastructure to increase student engagement and retention, leading to an increase in number of students ultimately graduating.</i>
<u>Objective FSG1.1:</u> By Fall 2024, through a successful implementation of these Title III activities and other activities related to university expansion, increase enrollment by at least 1500 students (34% enrollment growth).

This formative evaluation will examine activities and outcomes during project year three based on the five program goals established in the original grant proposal. Each of these goals listed specific and measurable objectives to be met during the five project years. This report will

use the proposed measurable objectives, baseline data, specific tasks and tangible results to evaluate success of this project during the third year of operation to describe major achievements, note challenges and problems, and offer suggestions for improvements in project year four. In addition to the original grant application as an overall reference, the following seven documents were submitted with relevant data for this evaluation:

Annual Report to the U.S. Department of Education: Experiential Education & Engagement Center (EEEC) 2021-2022 ANNUAL REPORT PR/Award #P031A190185

Appendix A: AUM Accounting Budget to Actual Report

Appendix B: Faculty and Staff Development

Appendix C: Service Learning, Community Engagement, and Field Experiences

Appendix D: Peer Mentor and Peer Advising Programs

Appendix E: Internships and Undergraduate Research

Appendix F: Communication and Marketing

An important factor in evaluating achievements compared with original goals and objectives is the lingering impact of the coronavirus. In the 2021-2022 academic year planned in-person activities and services were resumed, students returned to campus and classes were offered in-person. Consequently, AUM was in a position to accomplish many of the proposed tasks and meet the proposed goals but adjustments still need to be made both in activities and in more aggressive use of federal funds for the remaining two years of federal funding.

Achievements in Year Three

The year three annual report executive summary described accomplishments in the following areas: faculty and staff development, service learning, community engagement and field experiences, peer mentor and peer advising programs, internships and undergraduate research, and communication and marketing. Major achievements included a significant increase in student

research participation, with AUM continuing to provide internal research funds for faculty to engage students in research projects. This project component received widespread publicity and involvement across the campus, with student research participation more than doubling from the previous year.

Another achievement was the presentation of thirteen faculty development programs throughout the academic year, a huge increase from the two in the previous year. Topics were greatly expanded, including undergraduate research, culturally responsive course design, internships, experiential education opportunities and resources, and embedded peer mentors. Many of these topics addressed high-impact educational practices that are a focal point of this Title III grant project. An *advisory committee* on experiential learning was established, with a broader scope than the evaluator's recommendation to establish an advisory committee on faculty engagement. A significant indication of faculty engagement in EEEEC activities was faculty members becoming presenters and panelists at faculty development sessions, sharing their experiences and encouraging other faculty to participate. Word of mouth and lived experience can be very convincing to faculty peers who have yet to engage in these faculty development activities.

Project management and administration achievements included enhanced communication and publicity activities, with a greatly expanded media presence, tracking system and data collection. As the executive summary notes, "Overall, year three saw an increase in engagement by students, faculty, and staff as the Center has become a more visible presence on campus. Data indicate experiential learning is *positively impacting* AUM and our students and would not have been possible without the support of the Title III grant."

The peer mentor component of this Title III grant shows evidence of success and should be expanded for the remaining years of this project. The peer advising program will be piloted

during year four, rather late to have a large impact on retention, persistence and graduation but still another example of developing a program that should continue beyond federal support. By year five of federal support the peer advising program should be strong enough to continue with institutional support.

One of the most telling examples of success is the *increase in retention* for second to third year and third year to fourth year students. These are the students who were most affected by the coronavirus campus closing and the fact that they are back is a strong indication that AUM is doing the right thing to retain them through graduation. A *key indicator* to demonstrate Title III success and impact already is this statement in the executive summary: “As indicated in the data provided by OIE, students participating in experiential education are being retained and graduated *at a higher rate than those who are not.*” This is very strong evidence of Title III’s permanent impact on AUM’s students even through three years of the project.

Challenges in Year Three:

Staffing: One of the changes during year three, although not exactly a challenge, was the retirement of Dr. Joy Clark, who guided the original Title III grant application, designing the objectives and project activities and leading the project during its first two years. Such staff changes are not unusual in a long-term project such as a five-year Title III grant. However, this change was anticipated and Dr. Lynn Stallings was selected to step in as project manager for the final two years of the grant. Dr. Stallings is well qualified to manage the Title III project, as an experienced faculty member and administrator with 15 years of leadership experience in a variety of roles and 27 total years of experience in higher education. Her areas of expertise include honors education, college student success initiatives, mathematics education, and teacher education. She holds a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Mathematics Education from the

University of Georgia's Mary Frances Early College of Education and a Master's in Education from Auburn University at Montgomery.

Ms. Amy Ingram continues to serve as director of the Center. She had been actively involved in establishing the AUM peer mentoring program and directed the workings of the freshman success course. The EEEEC is now fully staffed and well positioned to carry out planned year four activities successfully.

Faculty Engagement: A remaining challenge is increasing and diversifying faculty engagement in EEEEC activities. The goal for year three was 60% of faculty participating in professional development activity, but actual participation dropped to 56%, despite a return to on-campus activity. A positive sign was that 33 more faculty attended sessions than last year. However, numbers can be misleading. Thirteen faculty development sessions were presented and many faculty members returned from previous sessions. Thus, the percent does not always show actual engagement of newly participating faculty members.

It would be useful to see ***more data about academic units represented*** in these faculty development sessions in addition to listing the topics and the numbers of participants. For experiential learning to be truly integrated across the campus, much more faculty engagement is needed, whether in student research experiences, internships, and peer mentoring. A table showing the spread of departments, numbers of faculty from each, and the distribution of faculty across the range of sessions would be useful information to see how extensively these faculty development workshops are distributed across the campus. It is not clear whether this effort is reaching a wide range of faculty from across the institution.

Implementation of Experiential Learning: Although data are presented about the numbers of students engaged in experiential learning, participation fell short of the very ambitious target of

2908 students. However, the number of courses offering experiential components increased dramatically, showing more faculty engagement in this initiative. The Provost supported a one-credit-hour scholarship for students enrolled in an internship course but no data were presented about its implementation and enrollment. The request for *mini-grants to support external student internships* is an excellent new approach that should be implemented in the remaining two years of this grant to engage and motivate more students to do internships outside the classroom and campus.

Retention and graduation rates: The Title III grant application proposed ambitious annual and long-term improvements in retention and graduation rates as a result of implementing high-impact educational practices. There is a significant gap between the projected and the actual retention rate for first-year students, not surprising because they were the group most affected by the corona virus. The challenge remains to ensure their retention as they move into their final years in college during the remaining two years of Title III support to determine if additional interventions are needed.

Recommendations for Year Four:

1. ***Continue to publicize*** the EEEEC more widely and continuously across campus since it was established later than planned as a result of the coronavirus and many of its activities were curtailed, including faculty training and engagement. This publicity should help to attract and inform more faculty, students, staff and the general public about the existence and value of the center. Because of the success of student research engagement, AUM could consider recognition at graduation with special cords for these students, similar to what is proposed for student peer mentors. AUM also should consider some sort of ***recognition for faculty*** who engage undergraduates in research projects in addition to the internal grants.

The memorandum of agreement with the Montgomery Department of Economic and Community Development should be expanded to allow more hands-on service learning experiences for students but also significant publicity for the impact of this grant beyond the campus. The examples presented in Appendix C of community engagement are impressive and a good start but more student engagement in external experiences would reinforce the importance of such activities. AUM should continue to take advantage of this highly competitive Title III grant award and widely publicize these external project activities within the university and the wider community. This is more evidence of demonstrating to the U.S. Department of Education that AUM is indeed using Title III for permanent improvements to the institution.

2. *Demonstrate awareness and involvement of AUM's leadership* in the Title III EEEEC program. One of the requirements of Title III grants is ongoing presidential awareness and oversight of the program activities. It was not clear from the year three annual report how AUM's top leadership other than Provost Mrinal Varma is involved in or aware of the EEEEC. How are program activities and accomplishments communicated to university leadership? How widely is the annual report distributed? Are top leaders invited to EEEEC events or asked to participate? During year four it would be good to show ***more evidence of AUM's leadership's*** awareness and involvement in this program. The planning retreat in year four is a good example of engaging top leadership but more involvement of AUM leadership should continue as an ongoing effort for the final two years of Title III support.

3. *Make more and better use of the federal funds to expand and enhance project activities.* The coronavirus left a very large carryover budget after the first year that needs to be applied more vigorously to ensure that project goals and objectives can be achieved more fully and on the proposed schedule. Although the budget was adjusted to allow purchase of software and

delivery of faculty development virtual and in person programs in years two and three, more aggressive and creative use of federal funds will help make long-term institutional improvements that would not otherwise be possible. The original goals, objectives and budget are a long-term projection that needs annual scrutiny and revision, which is carried out in a formative evaluation such as this one.

4. ***Expand and enhance faculty participation.*** There needs to be ***a plan for more intense and comprehensive faculty participation*** now that faculty are back on campus. Faculty engagement is crucial to the success of student involvement in undergraduate research and experiential learning. More publicity and outreach to faculty should be a goal of the fourth-year activity, expanding workshops to reach more faculty from more departments and taking advantage of those faculty already engaged to encourage their peers to become involved.

5. ***Follow up with participants from year three professional development.*** The year three annual report provided descriptions of a greatly increased number of faculty workshops, with a good array of content. However, there was no discussion of follow-up on the impact of this program on courses involving undergraduate research or experiential learning. A mechanism is needed to follow up with participants to ensure that they are actually using the faculty development training. Appendix B gives a screen shot of a survey given to AUM faculty but there is nothing further in that appendix about faculty development activities. The rest of the appendix appears to be articles and examples of student surveys, probably for faculty reading material, but there is no commentary about the relationship of these materials to Title III actual year three activities. Again, there needs to be ***analysis and interpretation of these appendix materials to show how they were used and their relevance to faculty professional development.***

The original Title III abstract noted that faculty were expected to ***incorporate best practices***

for experiential learning and undergraduate research within the classroom. Is there any indication that faculty changed their course design as a result of this development program? Were new courses developed? Participants' evaluations from year three workshops requested more information on *evidence-based approaches for experiential learning* to incorporate into their courses. This would be a good suggestion to incorporate into any planned faculty workshops during year four. Next year's annual report should include more information and examples of courses that benefited from experiential learning and undergraduate research in addition to numbers of courses and students. It is not clear from the year three report which courses and departments added or modified their courses to include experiential learning.

6. Improve data collection and evaluation of participation in experiential learning and student research experiences.

The year two report from the external evaluator noted, "The proposed goals and objectives mention the NSSE questionnaire results by 2024 but what kinds of measures are being done in the meantime? How will students participating in undergraduate research report during each project year before 2024? How often is NSSE administered? Is this the only validated and formal measure of student satisfaction with undergraduate research and experiential learning experiences?" There is no indication that these suggestions were considered or implemented during year three or any references at all to administration of NSSE although it was mentioned in the project objectives. It is not clear if NSSE has been administered at all during the first three years of this grant or what the plans are to administer NSSE before the grant ends. If NSSE data collection no longer is part of the Title III project, that should be made clear in the annual report.

It is important as a measure of project success to conduct external as well as internal measures, so this is a ***repeated strong recommendation to consider more structured and rigorous***

measures of student participation in experiential learning and student research. Several well-validated external measures exist on student research experience, in particular David Lopatto's The Survey of Undergraduate Research Experiences (SURE), available without cost. More information can be found in Lopatto, D. (2008). Exploring the benefits of undergraduate research: The SURE survey. In R. Taraban & R.L. Blanton (Eds.), *Creating Effective Undergraduate Research Programs in Science*. NY: Teacher's College Press (pp. 112-132).

The primary evidence of accomplishments in experiential learning presented in the year three report is the database of coursework that counted the number of students who participated in "courses of experiential learning types, as well as courses submitted through faculty survey. Data for experiential learning outside of the course was collected by counting the number of students that had been tagged in the database by our EEEEC activities and attributes." This collection of raw numbers is only the beginning of examining the impact, nature and value of experiential learning. During year four significant efforts should be devoted to *gathering more detailed information about the coursework*. The work on integrating experiential learning has a long way to go.

6. Invite the project evaluator for an on-campus visit, if possible for the planning retreat mentioned in the year three report. The year three annual report states, "A Title III strategic planning meeting with AUM's leadership is planned for year four. We are gathering data to present to attendees, including the provost, associate provosts, deans from all five AUM colleges, dean of the library, the dean of students, and senior directors from departments across academic affairs and student affairs. In addition to reporting data, the grant and center status, and programming, we will discuss *ways in which we can make better use of federal funds to help make long-term institutional improvements.*"

Having the project evaluator present at this planning retreat would provide an excellent opportunity for her to observe engagement and commitment to the Title III activities planned for

the last two years of the project. The evaluator could help to stimulate in-depth responses and evaluation from retreat participants, and also provide time for interviews, focus groups and other in-person engagement with students, faculty, staff and university leadership. A separate meeting with Title III staff and with campus leadership would provide another perspective about the impact of Title III on the overall campus environment. The original intention in the proposal and budget was to have the evaluator make annual visits to the AUM campus but the covid pandemic made such visits impossible. This planning retreat would be an excellent opportunity to fulfill this plan.

7. If the pilot project on *peer advising* is successful, it should be expanded and integrated as a regular practice that continues beyond Title III support. It will be important to publicize this opportunity to students, conduct rigorous training, and gather data to show how it is being implemented across the campus.

8. Overall, *data collection* has improved during the last year but more data collection and analysis should become a regular activity during the last two years of the Title III grant. Because the grant is awarded to permanently strengthen the institution, the U.S. Department of Education will expect evidence of the permanent improvements AUM was able to undertake with federal support. One suggestion is to *increase the commitment of personnel and financial support for data collection and analysis*, designing new ways to demonstrate the permanent changes that federal funds have made on the institution. There has been very little evidence of data collection and analysis of student involvement and impact so this is another area to consider for data collection and analysis. The overall impact of this project on student retention and graduation needs to be highlighted even more than the brief mentions in the year three report. This information is very exciting and promising so more attention needs to be given to those measures of accomplishment and impact.

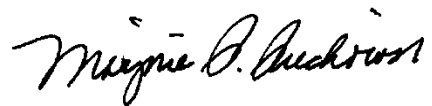
Conclusions:

Auburn University Montgomery has delivered many of the services and activities planned for the third year, some of which were curtailed by the coronavirus. This project year had many impressive accomplishments but the goals and timelines for the fourth year need to be re-examined and adjusted so project activities can more fully meet the original timeline, outcomes and budget.

In addition, budget adjustments may be required to allow increased faculty participation in workshops and other training programs, more conference travel to disseminate results and expose faculty and staff to best practices, enhanced use of technology, and more data collection and analysis.

The most important recommendation is to carry on and provide as much as possible of the original program, striving to adjust the budget as necessary to make up for the decreased activity during the coronavirus hiatus. This project already has made a significant impact on strengthening AUM, the whole purpose of the Title III grant program. The final two years of the project are important to complete the project objectives and institutionalize the many improvements already begun.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Marjorie P. Piechowski". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Marjorie P. Piechowski, Ph.D.

External Evaluator

July 12, 2023