Creating a Student-Ready Campus

Becoming a "student ready" campus requires colleges to redefine elements of their culture, shared understandings, and values as a community. Deeply rooted ways of thinking, structures, and invisible systems must be identified, assessed, and changed with the support of both a top-down and bottom-up approach. This requires a shift from a deficit model, in which students must overcome challenges that are viewed as their own shortfalls, to that of a campus that is prepared to serve all of its students and to meet those students where they are.

Central to such a change is the need to challenge traditionally held hierarchies across campus. As the volume *Becoming a Student-Ready College: A New Culture of Leadership for Student Success* puts it,"[a]ll individuals who work on the campus can understand that they have leadership and educational roles within the enterprise as a whole. *But they need to be invited to regard themselves in this way*" (McNair et al., 2022). This document of recommendations will continue to raise this point and emphasize the need for this shift. Macalester must embrace and empower individuals around the idea that everyone on campus is an educator, helper, advisor, and learner and integral to the system where *all* members of the community contribute to student success. The concept of student success, however, is not uniformly defined at Macalester. McNair et al.'s book emphasizes that student-ready campuses should and must be able to define student success and take action on strategies they implement based on this definition. Even in our small group, we were challenged to find clarity on what we mean by "student success." **Macalester needs a definition of student success that avoids the pitfall of a deficit mindset and creates a support system that encourages students to define their own vision of success.**

Step zero: decenter the dominant culture by addressing structural privileges and marginalization

From its very inception, higher education was designed by and for certain types of students (rich, white, and cisgender men, to name just some of the privileged identities). Even as college access has grown to include folks from a wider variety of backgrounds, the legacies of higher education's roots remain in many policies and procedures. At Macalester in particular, diversity and inclusion are core values, yet we are still a predominantly white institution with a culture that systematically privileges some students and marginalizes others. As a result, students from marginalized backgrounds are more likely to face structural barriers to success at Mac.

Indeed, our goal is not assimilation; the solution to the problem is not to force marginalized students to assimilate to the culture that already exists at the college. Instead, the goal is to change our culture to be truly inclusive so that all students from all backgrounds can come to Macalester and, as they do so, co-create a culture in which they feel a sense of belonging.

In order to create a culture that is truly inclusive, the specific ways in which systems of oppression and marginalization manifest in the day-to-day functioning of the college need to be identified. We propose a campus-wide audit that uses existing surveys and related data to

identify the main sites of exclusion on campus. From the point of view of a student-ready campus, adequate support cannot be provided for students—especially those who hold marginalized identities—when faculty and staff who offer support work within systems designed to assimilate or exclude those identities.

A non-exhaustive list of tasks on this audit include:
- Identifying the specific (on-the-ground) ways that structural privileges, racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, US-centrism, and other marginalizations manifest in our day-to-day work (e.g., what types of work are compensated and which are not, classroom policies, etc.).
- Including voices that are typically absent from surveys (e.g., who is able to speak up about their mental health struggles, and who is suffering in silence?).
- Identifying best practices and examples of success at other institutions and within Macalester (i.e., building upon existing sources of trust for students with marginalized identities).

Our three frameworks

The Student-Ready Strategic Plan implementation group used three frameworks as a guiding foundation in the creation of the recommendations below. In order to achieve any of the following, these prerequisites permeate Macalester's ability to implement a student-ready campus. As the group approached our charge, we found terms, ideas, and challenges that continued to arise. As we sorted through these concepts, themes began to emerge. Our recommendations below are organized by these frameworks and are the overarching foundation by which we define our work.

Universal Design for Learning

Universal Design is the design of products and environments that are accessible to all people without the need for adaptation or special design. Developing an inclusive campus model allows the college to address and reduce systematic barriers and exclusionary practices that center dominant and able-bodied culture. We propose a model broadly informed by Universal Design where Macalester addresses the barriers, both hidden and visible, that prevent some people from fully participating in the life of the college and in their own learning. Implementing principles of Universal Design would ensure Macalester is ready for *all* students.

Everyone is a helper, educator, advisor, and learner

In a student-ready campus, everyone is engaged in a holistic culture of learning. In this framework, we envision that every individual (faculty, staff, and students) at Macalester takes the role of helper, educator, advisor, and learner. This would mark a significant change in how we think about our day-to-day tasks, and the college should be on board with helping *everyone* transition to this new mindset. Among other things, Macalester needs to support departments and individuals in understanding their roles within this framework; moreover, this new approach should explicitly include these roles in job descriptions and in the way we talk about how

learning happens at Macalester. Embracing this philosophy requires Macalester to ensure that everyone (again, staff, faculty, and students) has time to engage in this valuable work—and that this crucial work should be compensated or acknowledged and valued in the community.

Student well-being

Research and Macalester-specific data support that institutions of higher education should aim to create an environment that fosters health and well-being, so that students can flourish and thrive (Okanagan Charter, 2015; Keyes, 2007; Schreiner, 2013; Seligman, 2011). Students' self-reported physical and mental health is inextricably correlated with GPA, retention, self-reported belonging, engagement, and other markers of student success; higher levels of self-reported physical and mental health are also correlated with dominant identities (e.g., cis, white, hetero, not identifying as having a disability, etc.). By facilitating the process of health promotion and the support of well-being, Macalester can move beyond primarily relying on individual knowledge and behavior and leverage its ability to become more student-ready by creating environments, policies, and systems where the health-supporting choice is the easier choice (e.g., quiet hours in residence halls that enable students to get more sleep) and available to *all* students. This shift requires a cultural change at the college, and it cannot happen without the work of a cross-functional team representing departments across the entire college seeking to advance and define health and well-being.

Paths Forward

Throughout the process of discussing our charge to "flip the question, *are our students ready for Macalester?*, and ask, *is Macalester ready for current and future students?*," we came up with an extensive list of twenty-two recommendations. What follows are our top five proposals, determined through the consensus of the committee. In the early drafts of this report, we outlined obstacles for each of our recommendations; in this version, we have omitted those for the sake of brevity. However, we want to underscore that *time* and *money* are the major obstacles that were listed over and over again. We need to ensure that community members are compensated for their time and that these recommendations are in no way meant to add to the already full plates of the community as a whole. Finally, the *structures that lead to silos and hierarchies* among faculty, staff, and students on campus was an obstacle that emerged frequently throughout our discussions and is relevant to all of the following recommendations.

1. Create a new First Year Experience (FYE) that starts in Orientation and spans the entire year–and beyond

Macalester should have structures in place for students to be equally equipped to be successful once they arrive. We can't assume that *all* of our students know how to "do college." Macalester should move away from deficit thinking about what students are "prepared" or "unprepared" for and instead should provide the tools for every student to be successful in college. Put differently, Macalester should structure an FYE that ensures that all students have the same potential to succeed. This experience would intentionally connect the FYE and Orientation, providing a comprehensive and integrated transition to college.

Potential ideas for implementation:
- Re-launching the summer small-group zoom meeting for incoming students. (In the summer of 2020, faculty and staff were given the opportunity to volunteer to host conversations with groups of 10 incoming students in July–to do some ice breakers, to hang out, and to address any questions that students might have about starting at Mac.)
- Combine the FYC preceptors and Orientation Leader roles to build an intentional mentor relationship that spans the orientation and the FYC experience, connecting the co-curricular with the curricular experience.
- Make *all* first-semester courses pass/fail.
- Coordinate collaboration among all groups providing information, programming, and curricula specific to first-year students to determine how to amplify one another's learning outcomes, fill identified gaps, and reduce unnecessary redundancies.
- Redesign the FYC into a multi-semester course with common elements as proposed by the Curriculum Committee that was convened by EPAG.

Who/what benefits from this change?
- Incoming students would have a more intentional, coherent, and scaffolded welcome to Macalester as compared to the current information deluge during Orientation.
- Faculty and staff would have a better understanding of their individual role in helping students transition to college and the campus-wide approach is to the FYE. This is in contrast to the ad hoc way in which new student-facing faculty and staff end up covering these gaps in student knowledge. A comprehensive FYE also contributes to the philosophy that everyone on campus is an educator, as this shift will require collaboration across academic and student affairs.

2. Create a multidimensional advising infrastructure through which students can holistically explore the college with the support of multiple mentors

In our current system, formal advising for every student comes exclusively from their FYC instructor and later, from their academic advisor. However, some students receive additional structured advising and mentoring in pockets across campus; for example, athletes get advice from their coaches and international students get support from International Student Programs.

Advising needs to be more uniform, intentional, and formalized. Similar to the idea that everyone is an educator, we believe that everyone should be an advisor as well. Moreover, a Universal Design approach to advising must create a culture in which everyone assumes that all students know nothing about college but can leverage their talents to be successful in the Macalester community. This approach increases the equity of advising by making sure that students are not missing anything to the "hidden curriculum" and asks the community to meet students where they are.

Potential ideas for implementation:
- Redesign the advising model to ensure that every student gets support from multiple sources. For example, each student would now have three advisors: a faculty academic advisor, a staff mentor, and a student or alumni mentor. Students spend their time at Mac building out their mentor map/support network to see the connection between curricular, co-curricular, and post-Macalester life.
- Create a system for staying updated on how and what students are doing that shares information on student wellbeing with the right people–and with *all* of the right people. In this way, support is a continuous process that doesn't fall on individual employees.
- Ensure that this mentoring work is recognized as a crucial component for any employee at Macalester and set aside a minimal number of work hours for each member of the Macalester community to participate in this new structure.

Who/what benefits from this change?
- Students, as the entire community is invested in knowing about student experience and the shared knowledge would help in making sure no student feels they can't reach their educational, personal, career and other goals.
- This recommendation is also an opportunity to build community more broadly: to connect staff and faculty to students and the college's mission in a deeper way and to build ongoing and deeper connections with alumni.

3. Create a *readily discoverable* and *centralized* resource geared towards current and prospective students and current staff and faculty, which can provide a conduit to other resources on campus and remove a siloed culture of referral

A centralized resource for the Macalester community would shift the burden of resource knowledge away from the student who is experiencing Macalester for the first time and onto the campus community as a whole. By creating different accessible versions of this guide to navigating Macalester, this makes the culture of help-seeking explicit and uncovers expectations we have for each other as community members. With these expectations we empower all members of the community to be helpers and advisors to each other. Students, staff, and faculty should be trained on when, where, and how to use the resource.

Potential ideas for implementation:
- Implement a chat-GPT-like "help/chat" function, where anyone in the community can type a question in and the chat function returns a list of potential answers. (This is *not* like a Google-type search query.)
- Survey current students about "What would I have liked to know when I was a FY/Sophomore/Junior/Senior?" and use this knowledge to develop a Q&A-style fact sheet and determine what type of outreach/resources would be the most effective campus wide.
- Audit the college's current sources of information and generate a list of all available resources and where they are located. Then, ensure that everything is in a single location and all community members know how and when to access it.

- Run a campus-wide campaign about help-seeking on campus (e.g., the Hamre Center or the MAX Center) and what resources are available provides, as well as about why students should visit and make use of these resources (e.g., require a MAX Center visit as part of the FYE/FYC, similar to the library visit, so that students are educated about where and how to access the resources of the MAX Center).

Who/what benefits from this change?
- All current students but particularly students with marginalized identities.
- Prospective/incoming students will also see the support network available.

4. Create a continuing education curriculum for faculty and staff

Creating and requiring continuing education for faculty and staff embraces the student-ready philosophy that *there will always be something to learn* to improve the experiences that we are designing for students. We cannot create a student-ready campus without educating ourselves about the students and where they are coming from, what they have experienced, and what they bring to campus. Similarly, the vision of "seeing everyone on campus as an educator" cannot happen unless we educate ourselves about what people do on campus and what role each program/individual plays in the educational process. Continuing education is vital to our ability to do our jobs well, but when continuing education is left to the individual, there is too much variation in the topics in which we engage and the extent of that engagement. Notably, none of the other recommendations that we propose (a new FYE, a new advising system, a centralized resource) can happen without a strong model for continuing education and communication on campus.

Potential ideas for implementation:
- McNair's book on *Becoming a Student-Ready Campus* emphasizes the importance of understanding our student population in order to serve their needs appropriately. A training on how variation in students' lived experiences affects their navigation of college would help faculty and staff understand how to best serve an increasingly diverse student population.
- Training on how to be an effective advisor (see proposal related to advising system) within any role in the institution, drawing upon the excellent mentoring that many programs already provide.
- Learning about other employees' roles. Many employees outside of our "bubbles" do wonderful work that is relevant to ours and could unify the student support experience while breaking down silos referenced above.
- Develop a campus-wide effort to train faculty on alternative grading methodologies. This (bottom-up) effort should be complemented with a (top-down) institutional statement about flexibility in grading at the college.

Who/what benefits from this change?
- Students would ideally be helped by having better course and out-of-course experiences–and more explicit connections between the two. In addition, they would benefit from a *help-giving* rather than the current *help-seeking* culture.

- Aspects of our proposed continuing education program have the potential to increase a sense of community across campus. People who would not normally connect have the chance to work together and to intimately value the contributions of others, decreasing the existing siloed culture.
- Faculty/staff would benefit from professional development and career advancement.

5. Create a cross-functional team to prioritize a lens of well-being into everyday operations, business practices, and academic decisions

"Cross-functional processes must ensure comprehensive and campus-wide approaches that implement multiple interconnected strategies focused primarily on everyone in the campus community (universal prevention)" (CAS, 2018). Students' self-reported health and mental health is inextricably correlated with GPA, retention, self-reported belonging, engagement, and other markers of student success. By taking an institutional approach, Macalester can leverage its ability to become more student-ready by creating environments, policies, and systems where the student well-being is more fully supported. As with DEI work, well-being must be addressed by entities across the college, in an integrated fashion for our campus to truly become student-ready. Too often, well-being work is a late consideration rather than a primary lens, which puts the onus back on the individual; this burden falls unevenly across our student body. An identified group must be accountable for this specific piece of the Strategic Plan and ensure assessment work related to well-being is conducted and communicated. This approach recognizes different communities will have different visions of well-being, helping our campus be ready for *all* students. Well-being will be made more concrete: *we don't value what we don't measure.*

Potential ideas for implementation:
- Create a cross-functional team with participants representing all functional areas of the college. Meet regularly to assess progress and report out to key stakeholders.
- Define *what we mean* by well-being and health and how that definition connects to the various populations on campus.
- Determine *how to measure* well-being, including, but not limited to, a thorough environmental scan of the practices, policies, and protocols related to the areas of health and well-being.
- Set short- and long-term outcome goals for universal, selected, and indicated strategies; measure how well-being relates to student success.
- Educate the campus community about how to advance health and well-being through prevention and health promotion, and integrate into departmental assessments.

Who/what benefits from this change?
- People traditionally excluded from health care and higher education. This approach addresses the social determinants of health and well-being that we can influence. It's key for our commitment to social responsibility and institutional equity and provides opportunities to challenge the "isms" often present in uncritical understandings of well-being (e.g. ableism, racism, anti-fat bias) making our campus ready for *all* students.