

Miami University
Strategic Planning Committee
Transformational Student Experience Subcommittee

March 19, 2019

A *transformational student experience* has long been promoted by Miami as a strength of the university. Many of our graduates reflect fondly on their unique experiences with faculty both inside and outside the classroom: opportunities to pursue their own interests through co-curricular activities, independent projects or off-campus study, and so many other experiences that made their time at Miami meaningful and memorable. Miami has always attracted engaged students in search of diverse, challenging experiences as well as faculty committed to teaching and to making a difference in the lives of their students. This is underscored in Miami's mission statement, which cites the university's "highly involving residential experience [and its] unwavering commitment to liberal arts undergraduate education and active engagement of its students in both curricular and co-curricular life."

The TSE Subcommittee believes the student experience remains a strength, but that several recent factors may have diverted our attention away from the need to place this goal at the center of our decision-making. Competitor schools now match or exceed the student experience we promote; budget pressures have prioritized efficiency and lean operation, possibly at the expense of effectively meeting the basic needs of our students so that transformational student experiences are possible. A decentralized operational model has likely siloed students' curricular and co-curricular experiences, and increasingly faculty are not incentivized to engage with the student experience outside the classroom in their promotion criteria or in the assignment of workload. Further, as we continue to prioritize a more diverse population, this brings with it a need to rethink how we define the student experience and what this means for different types of people. Our students (and their employers) increasingly demand a more customized academic experience, including new delivery methods and different skill sets needed for a fast-changing world. To the extent we fail to deliver this, students will not find their experiences enriching or transformational.

Following discussion with numerous constituent groups, the TSE subcommittee proposes the following recommendations that we believe can have an immediate and positive impact on the Miami student experience. While there are cost implications in some cases, many of these recommendations are resource neutral.

Recommendation 1: Identify strategies and metrics for improving the Miami student experience for diverse student populations, including domestic underrepresented students, international students, commuter students, graduate students, off-campus students, first-gen students and economically challenged students.

A majority of students acknowledge that the Miami experience is indeed transformative, combining a rigorous academic experience with multiple co-curricular activities. The *Transformative Student Experience* subcommittee identified a need, however, to continue to improve the student experience for several of these underrepresented populations. We support the report of the Diversity and Inclusion subcommittee advocating for Miami to transform itself in order to become welcoming to a diversity of students, faculty and staff. If Miami claims to be developing students for careers in a global society, it must do better to ensure that students from diverse backgrounds are not only recruited to Miami but are welcomed as co-learners. Students reported instances where they have regularly experienced micro-aggressions and outright discrimination by fellow students *as well as faculty and staff*. Such behavior is not consistent with this mission of global citizenship and must be mitigated in order to create an inclusive transformative student experience. Righting the ship on expectations for our community with regard to how we treat each other is essential. Miami should use this moment of strategic planning to make a firm commitment to this end by establishing appropriate

broad oversight mechanisms to ensure that all members of the Miami community remain committed to ensuring diversity and inclusion.

A specific challenge relates to economically challenged students, independent of other group associations. Evidence suggests that this group is least likely to describe their Miami experience as “transformative.” While scholarships may allow this group to attend Miami, several other activities associated with a transformative experience (study-abroad, Greek life, holiday travel, etc.) may be beyond their financial means and may serve to highlight the disadvantage. As we work to create a truly transformative experience for our students, we cannot lose sight of the costs associated with doing so and should work to define a Miami experience that is accessible by all groups.

Subcommittee collaborations:

Diversity and Inclusion subcommittee

The TSE Subcommittee has determined that transformational student experiences aren’t possible without inclusion.

Transformational student experiences are not possible without serious attention to the following specific recommendations for next steps:

Explore a range of strategies, including:

- *regular and ongoing cultural competency training for all faculty, staff and students,*
- *more 24/7 facilities with food service,*
- *critically evaluate meal plan options in order to ensure that diverse student populations’ needs for flexibility are being met (students have consistently provided feedback about how needs are not being currently met)*
- *a facility or space dedicated to international students along with increased programming and support in and outside of the classroom*
- *enhanced education of international and other students on the expectations for college experience (e.g., academic dishonesty policy, the hidden curriculum), and*
- *enhanced commuter student facilities.*

Recommendation 2: Ensure mechanisms are in place that effectively ensure that student voices are heard and that decision making by the university is transparently shared with the student body.

As a university, Miami needs to move toward a focus on being agile, transparent and prepared to respond to the changing needs of the modern student. Similarly, Miami needs **to listen** to the student population, **be transparent** in our decision-making and **effectively communicate** the decision-making processes that affect the daily lives of students.

Specific Recommendation: *Setting up a 21st century method to gather students’ concerns and to explain why/how decisions are made*

Recommendation 3: Better integrate the Miami academic experience and the Miami co-curricular experience.

Here again, the *Transformative Student Experience* subcommittee identified a disconnect between the curricular and co-curricular Miami experience, in spite of the fact that this has traditionally been viewed as a defining strength of the university. Student experience is supported across many Miami divisions (Academics, Student Life, EMSS, Athletics, etc.), but the explicit integration is too infrequent. Miami has the potential to be

a leader by developing mechanisms (e.g., professional lead advisors, co-curricular transcripts, experience matching web-based platforms) to help students find co-curricular experiences that match their career goals/interests and intentionally help them identify and articulate their mastery of career-readiness skills. Some strategies would be to:

1. Explore the concept of road maps of co-curricular pillars that require the incorporation of experiences that address moral reasoning, cultural competency, health and wellness, leadership and engagement, and career preparation into the “academic” experience. A strength of the Miami experience is that students already participate actively in student organizations (often in leadership positions), pursue off-campus study abroad and internship experiences, engage in undergraduate research and engage in numerous activities that build on their curricular experience. These experiences are similarly valued by employers post-graduation. **Perhaps a co-curricular road map that explicitly incorporates these experiences into general education requirements would recognize and celebrate this and could provide an opportunity to better market the Miami student experience to prospective students and potential employers.** The benefit of such a road map would need to be carefully evaluated against the cost of implementing it.
2. Enhance and support the Healthy Miami Collaborative as a comprehensive, collaborative initiative that brings together faculty, staff and student stakeholders to address alcohol and drug misuse, sexual assault/healthy relationships/interpersonal violence, and mental/physical health within the Miami/Oxford community.
3. Examine ways to highlight and acknowledge faculty and staff for engaging with students outside the classroom (e.g., inclusion in tenure/promotion/annual evaluation expectations).
4. Strengthen the Living-Learning Communities (LLCs) by better connecting them to the academic experience and to faculty through incentivizing faculty engagement.
5. Explore a stronger social network integration of the first- and second-year experience.
6. Explore ways to better connect the living and learning experience for off-campus students.

Subcommittee collaborations:

Academic Excellence

Specific Recommendations for Next Steps:

Create an ad hoc committee that, in conjunction with revisions to the overall advising structure, is charged with proposing strategies for better integrating curricular and co-curricular experiences, exploring mechanisms for implementation and envisioning the characteristics of such programs that would set Miami apart from its peers. We note that former Dean of Students Mike Curme is spearheading a project addressing these goals, so work is underway to provide greater detail on how this might work. The steering committee could formally acknowledge this initiative and bring others into the conversation.

Recommendation 4: Strategically strengthen the university’s relationship with the city of Oxford.

The *Transformative Student Experience* sub-committee was made aware of the need to have the university engage with the city of Oxford in a collaborative, consistent and transparent way. Because these two entities depend on each other for the support of students’ residential experience, the deepening of this mutually beneficial relationship is a must. In particular, Miami students and the Oxford community are currently not well served with regard to students’ residential support (e.g., roommate issues, negotiating with landlords, learning to become an adult community member) beyond the first two years when students are required to live on campus. Similarly, the subcommittee sees great potential to engage in development and other activities that can showcase Oxford as a destination for both students and faculty (e.g., Uptown development). There are many town-gown coordinating groups that currently exist but are not well-positioned or lack the power to

address specific operational areas (e.g., business communication, students and off-campus living, promotional efforts etc.).

Specific Recommendations for Next Steps:

- *What appears to be most needed is a leadership team made up of key decision makers from Miami (e.g., University President, VP of Finance, VP of Student Life) and Oxford (e.g., Oxford City Manager, Mayor, Finance Director, Economic Development Director, Chamber of Commerce President, representative from Enjoy Oxford). This leadership team would not need to meet more frequently than every semester, but it would ensure that key decision makers are in regular communication.*
- *An ad hoc committee should be created to answer the question of how community-based residential living is related to student retention and success. This could include addressing issues such as health and wellness concerns [e.g., extending the mandated alcohol/SIV education to span all four years, extend the residential experience by looking at having a wellness/university presence in the mile square, (outpost/extension office, neighborhood hosts), co-created infrastructure with community partners (EMS, Police) to all take responsibility for consequences of high-risk alcohol use.*
- *enforcement of the new IFC regulations,*
- *the use of off-campus housing resident mentors,*
- *improved alternative, after-hours opportunities for students (e.g., movie theater, "third spaces," entertainment).*

Recommendation 5: Revise our student advising to better centralize, professionalize and connect the various advising entities across campus.

The *Transformative Student Experience* sub-committee received consistent feedback that our current system of advising is too often disconnected, that there is a specific disconnect between curricular and co-curricular advising, that students would benefit by having a "lead advisor" contact (i.e., success coach) throughout their time at Miami, and that a more integrated advising system could enhance students' sense of belonging and engagement in the college experience and thus improve retention. Deficiencies in the current advising system may be due to the recent decision to assign lead advisor status to faculty. While this probably works well in many cases, the feedback was that this is inconsistent. Faculty may not be skilled at advising outside the academic realm, may not fully understand general education requirements and are typically not incentivized to perform this function at a high level. Under a revised system, faculty would contribute to, but not oversee, student advising. A more professionalized advising system could be anchored in the academic divisions (as per the current FSB system) or we may wish to consider a more centralized advising system given a trend towards students' interest in creating unique combinations of majors and minors as they prepare for an interdisciplinary world. Possible benefits of this recommendation are higher student retention and/or improved reputation for student experience.

Subcommittee collaborations:

Academic Excellence

Specific Recommendations for Next Steps:

- *Appoint an ad hoc committee with broad representation to propose a revised student advising system that would distinguish Miami against peer and aspirational institutions.*
- *Examine resource implications of (possible) new staff or facilities*
- *Examine implications of a professionalized system on the delivery of UNV101 content, summer orientation, the Center for Career Exploration & Success, the Honors Program, and other advising entities that function more independently under the current system.*
- *Develop a staffing plan that merges, and reassigns, current and new advisors.*
- *Develop metrics for assessing benefits and costs of a revised system.*

Recommendation 6: Strengthen the Honors Experience.

The *Transformative Student Experience* subcommittee found consistent support for strengthening the honors program(s) so as to be competitive with peer and aspirational schools. Key to the success of this initiative would be a reduced population of students (+/-1000 or 250 per year) with selective admissions, an enhanced curriculum that would be attractive to high-achieving students, an integrated residency requirement and a targeted promotional effort. This could constitute an Honors “college,” but the resources associated with a separate academic division would need to be carefully evaluated against its benefits. What the TSE subcommittee has been hearing is that the current model is not effective in that it is too large and not appropriately selective. Given the competitive academic profile of the Miami student body generally, the question needs to be asked, “What does it mean to be an honors student at Miami?” In addition, the current model does not offer unique enough experiences to attract top students. Finally, the TSE subcommittee suggests that all aspects of the honors experience, including our “divisional scholars” programs, should be centrally coordinated and, where appropriate, distinguished from each other.

Subcommittee collaborations:

Academic Excellence

Specific Recommendations for Next Steps:

At the direction of the Director of Honors, create an ad hoc committee to explore ways that the honors experience can be strengthened and better compete with peer and aspirational institutions. Provide an assessment of curricular, staffing, space, and budget implications of a reimagined Honors experience.

Recommendation 7: Create a dynamic general education requirement that attracts students and that (re)positions Miami at the forefront of liberal education.

Since students rank “academics” as most important in the selection of what college to attend, a key component of any transformational experience is the extent to which academic experiences challenge students and prepare them for their future (or are perceived as such). Key to providing a transformational experience in the first year or two at Miami is the general education requirement (“Miami Plan”). While Miami has had a reputation for being at the cutting edge of liberal education, the current Miami Plan is arguably not unlike what is found at competitor schools. Further, student feedback suggests that it does not positively influence students’ decision to attend school here. Miami has traditionally evaluated its general education requirement every 5-10 years, but we suggest that this evaluation should be ongoing to insure that the core remains current and transformational. A reexamination of the Miami Plan should consider the following:

1. Can we meet the requirements of the Ohio Transfer Module (OTM) without specifically requiring these courses as part of the Miami Plan? Given the value of a broad-based education, many students see this as an extension of the high school “check-box” mentality and as a series of courses typically disconnected from each other and their future goals. Can we offer a limited number of OTM-approved courses, and/or revise transfer requirements, in a way that supports a revised Miami Plan but that continues to meet state requirements? Can we think about foundational requirements in a way that doesn’t just distribute courses to the academic divisions?
2. Many students now meet the requirements of the thematic sequence by earning a minor or by creating a customized thematic. Acknowledging the benefits of developing secondary expertise outside the major, can we accomplish this by simply requiring students to earn a minor or certificate?
3. Much emphasis has been placed on the value of cross-disciplinary, project-based, “horizontal” learning that connects students across discipline (and with collaborators outside the university) in solving complex “big idea” problems. Both the thematic and capstone requirement in the current Miami Plan

support this in concept, but neither really does a good job of incentivizing this type of learning experience *outside the major*. Can the Miami Plan be repurposed to address this?

4. Employers are increasingly citing the importance of “soft skills” in the workplace. As described in Recommendation 3, can we better integrate co-curricular attributes into the Miami Plan?
5. Should we consider prioritizing *specific* courses in the Miami Plan that all students would be required to take? These could include a first year seminar; foundational courses in literature, history, or philosophy; or courses that address current workplace requirements for computer coding, data analysis, and digital proficiency.

Subcommittee collaborations:

Academic Excellence

Specific Recommendations for Next Steps:

Appoint an ad hoc task force to reexamine the university’s general education requirement and propose alternative models. Consider allowing small groups of students and faculty to beta-test revised versions of the plan instead of trying to shift the entire plan all at once to a new model. Carefully consider resource implications with an eye towards simplifying requirements and allowing students to customize the plan to their specific interests and needs.