

Master Plan Phase One Draft Report

Comments from Faculty Senate representatives to the Master Plan Steering Committee

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Introduction

The master planning process now underway represents an enormous opportunity for George Mason University. Some of the questions being posed by the master planning team have not been explored since Sasaki Associates and MMM Design Group produced the current master plan in 2002. Other questions—such as the appropriate roles of Mason’s three major Virginia campuses—have never been explored in depth. The current effort thus represents a once-in-a-generation chance for the Mason community to take stock of its present physical assets and plan for the future.

The Phase One report mostly describes the current situation, offering detailed data and analysis about current enrollment, space needs, and building condition, among other indicators. It also includes some future projections, particularly concerning the expected size of future cohorts of high school graduates in Virginia, traditionally the largest source of students matriculating at Mason.

In addition, the report begins to raise more normative questions, offering initial recommendations and suggesting some of the assumptions that will inform Phase Two decisions. This analysis makes note of some key empirical findings, but it focuses on the preliminary recommendations and assumptions that will be of most interest to Mason faculty. It also raises some questions that we hope can be answered by the planning consultants.

The Need for a Statement of Principles

At the December 2020 town hall, Dr. Gregory Janks eloquently expressed the need for a master plan to reflect the university's mission:

We need to understand who we are. The master plan needs to express who we are. The master plan should never be changing who we are. This is about making sure that physical environment reflects our strategic and academic goals.

Similarly, the draft Phase One report notes that the master plan will “ultimately” include “a set of principles which can be used to evaluate future opportunities.” (9) But while the decision timeline (22) suggests that the “vision and principles” were to have been crafted between October 2020 and January 2021, no set of principles appears in the draft Phase One report.

Other universities' campus plans explain how the physical plans intend to embody those institutions' values.¹ To some extent, this is already implicit in the Mason plan as well, and some of the “Topics Synthesized” (26-27) seem to be principles. But more explicit treatment could aid in both the crafting and interpretation of the master plan.

For example, the statement in the Mason Vision that “We manage the economic and natural resources entrusted to us efficiently and sustainably” could imply both attention to the natural environment on the campuses and an effort to reduce dependence on single-passenger automobiles. And “We nurture a positive and collaborative environment that contributes to the well-being and success of every member” could be taken to favor a built environment that encourages students, staff, and faculty to come to campus and collaborate. Such goal statements could inform the design decisions in Phase Two, as well as helping future decision-makers weigh

1. University of Texas at Austin, 2013 (“Big Ideas”), <https://capitalplanning.utexas.edu/about/campus-master-plan/>; Virginia Tech, 2018 (“Plan Drivers”), <https://www.facilities.vt.edu/planning-construction/campus-master-plan.html>; University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, 2019 (“Planning Principles”), <https://facilities.unc.edu/master-plan/2019-master-plan/planning-principles/>

the trade-offs that will inevitably arise.²

Stated principles could also explain some of the recommendations about campus identity included in the Phase One report. Implicit in these recommendations, for instance, is the principle that some programs benefit from access to the federal agencies, law and lobbying firms, and corporate offices (particularly Amazon) in Washington and Arlington, so that these programs will function best on the Arlington campus. Another possible principle is that space-intensive activities are best located in Prince William County, though this is less clear.

Page 26 suggests that Mason “articulate clear and programmatic priorities.” The report could explain whether this is better done the university's strategic plan or its campus plan.

Empirical Findings and Data Collection

Key empirical findings: slower growth, connections, and Fairfax space

The Phase One report begins with a nine-page executive summary that serves as the best introduction to the process as a whole and specific empirical findings. Without redoing that work, we would like to flag three of those findings that may be particularly informative to Phase Two decisions.

First, the report projects a slowing of the rapid growth in in-state students that has fueled an increase in Mason’s student body of over 50 percent in only twenty years. Even if the university does achieve its goal of 50,000 students, up from the current 38,000, much of that growth will be in online enrollments. Thus, the consultants predict a total of only 4,000 new on-campus students by 2025. (231)

2. “Our Goal | Mason Vision | George Mason University,” accessed September 9, 2019, <https://vision.gmu.edu/the-mason-vision/our-goal/>.

Second, the report's section on Program Connections (157-162) shows that our undergraduates take courses across Mason's academic divisions throughout their time at Mason. As the report notes, these connections "highlight the challenges associated with relocating programs across the three campuses given how interconnected the divisions are. It is only at the graduate level that programs become somewhat self-contained, but even for these programs, relocations are potentially challenging because Mason does not have a separate graduate faculty, and so most professors teach both undergraduate and graduate students." (157)

Finally, the report finds that between open space and space currently occupied by buildings nearing the ends of their useful lives, "the Fairfax campus core has significant growth potential, and that real estate holdings are not likely to limit growth or building placement decisions for the foreseeable future." (73) This finding may challenge assumptions that new buildings must be planned for West Fairfax Campus or SciTech for want of space in the Fairfax core.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the Fairfax campus not only "offers unique opportunities for interdisciplinary connections and critical mass," but also has space that can be used to provide those opportunities for as many students as the university is likely to enroll in the foreseeable future. They offer an alternative to what has been described as "Mason's initiative to transform the Sci Tech Campus into a fully functional campus to serve STEAM-H students and provide those students with the full array of academic offerings and university life experiences associated with a traditional campus experience."³

3. Life Sciences and Engineering Building – Facilities, <https://facilities.gmu.edu/projects/list/life-sciences-and-engineering-building/>

Stakeholder consultations

The report recognizes that knowledge and wisdom about Mason's needs is broadly distributed among students, staff, faculty, administrators, neighbors, alumni, and other groups, and that "success of the master plan depends on broad and extensive stakeholder engagement with both Mason's internal and external communities." (14) The report documents impressive efforts to collect both written comments and other indicators through responsive websites and surveys.

The report is less clear about the information gained from live conversations with stakeholder groups. The appendix includes a meeting list showing the university units that met with the consultants from February through December 2020, but the list does not explain who represented these units at these meetings. It does not make clear if college and school meetings include students, staff, and faculty, or only senior administrators. It does not list specific meetings with subgroups, such as adjunct faculty, term faculty, tenure-line faculty, undergraduates, and graduate students.

The report appears not to include all the feedback submitted over the past year, such as concerns about light pollution voiced by faculty in the College of Science. The appendix includes eighteen pages of comments posted to the Master Plan website, but it makes no mention of the many comments and questions voiced at the town halls and typed into the chat pages of those meetings.

SciTech: The Nub of the Problem

At the December 2020 town hall, Dr. Janks candidly and persuasively identified SciTech as the greatest challenge in the planning process.

I've always felt that the SciTech campus is the nub of the problem, that finding the best way to leverage that resource tells you a lot of things about the other campuses. That's where I am. We want to make sure that that campus is successful. What's the best way to do that, given the array of program ideas that we've discussed today, given the investments that we've committed to in Arlington, given the things that need to happen in Fairfax?

As diagnosis, this seems just right. As Mason's official history notes, Mason launched its Prince William campus in the 1980s without any clear idea of what it would do there. Ideas included "professional programs," "a new residential campus, a satellite campus, or simply to establish a new graduate school.⁴ At another point, Prince William was considered as the potential home of the New Century College. Most recently, in 2015 the campus was renamed "SciTech," despite most science and technology teaching and research remaining in Fairfax.

The report suggests that the campus is less used than others, especially Fairfax. Page 177 shows 10 of the 15 classrooms listed being used less than 30 hours per week, and seven used less than 20 hours per week. Moreover, as the report notes, Sci Tech currently depends on students who also take courses at Fairfax (163). Yet "people expressed some reluctance to commute 'long distances' for one class at the SciTech campus if taking only a single class at SciTech." (147) Attendees of the December 2020 town hall expressed similar dissatisfaction.

The draft report appears to assume that the university cannot or should not dispose of its holdings in Prince William County, though it does not say so explicitly or give a reason for such an assumption. Instead, it offers several ideas for making the campus "successful." All raise significant questions.

A "primarily graduate campus"

The draft states that

4. "The Prince William Campus, 1996-2012, *A History of George Mason University*, <http://ahistoryofmason.gmu.edu/exhibits/show/presence/contents/princewilliamcampus>

From a program identity perspective, SciTech will focus on health, including the potential for a future medical school, innovation and research (including partnerships with the growing regional industry presence), and will likely be primarily (although not exclusively) a graduate campus. (16)

The notion of a “graduate campus” seems at odds with previous statements. At the December 2020 town hall, Dr. Janks acknowledged the difficulty of segregating programs on a graduate-only campus, given that many faculty are engaged in both graduate and undergraduate teaching and research. He noted at Georgetown University, his firm had explored the possibility of a standalone graduate campus for the business school, but rejected the idea based on the integration of graduate and undergraduate programs. “The faculty were teaching both graduate and undergraduate populations,” he explained, “and it proved to be a bit of a deal breaker. I could see that happening for us here not just at the business school, but in various areas.” And we have been unable to identify another university that has created a standalone graduate campus (as opposed to a campus devoted to professional education, such as law or medicine).

Location of a potential medical school

At the December 2020 town hall, Dr. Janks stated that no decision had been made about the location of a potential medical school:

We’re positing different scenarios, but I think a lot of it will come down to the eventual selection of a clinical partner . . . Really I think that choice of clinical partner and where that partner is physically located ends up being the big factor there and again I don’t believe that any of those decisions are ultimately being signed on the dotted line by just looking at existing partnerships and what that likely means for us. I think it’s probably leaning towards SciTech is a fair thing to say.

By contrast, the draft report appendix (pp. 144-146) presents a 70,000 ASF medical school as an option only for the SciTech campus.

The report does not indicate if a decision was made between December and April that any medical school would need to be located at SciTech, or if a clinical partner been chosen. It does not compare the pros and cons of building a medical school at SciTech, on the Fairfax campus, or elsewhere in Northern Virginia.

A research park at SciTech

Page 16 of the draft report states the goal of “Establishing a research park where Mason can relocate large research centers.” The Association of University Research Parks defines university research parks as “physical environments that can generate, attract and retain science and technology companies and talent in alignment with sponsoring research institutions that include, universities, as well as public, private and federal research laboratories,” while others define research parks as “property-based developments that accommodate and foster the growth of tenant firms.”⁵ Both of these definitions emphasize the presence of private-sector tenants, rather than university research centers. It is unclear if the report envisions that sort of arrangement or if it is using the term “research park” to mean something else.

Innovation Town Center

At the March 2021 town hall, SVP Carol Kissal stated that Innovation Town Center is “definitely going forward.” It is not clear from the report if that decision depends on Mason maintaining any specific number of students and faculty at SciTech, and whether the university is committed to maintain those numbers.

⁵ “What Is a Research Park?,” Association of University Research Parks, accessed April 20, 2021, <https://www.aurp.net/what-is-a-research-park>; Ian P. McCarthy et al., “A Typology of University Research Park Strategies: What Parks Do and Why It Matters,” *Journal of Engineering and Technology Management* 47 (January 2018): 110–22, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jengtecman.2018.01.004>.

"Continuing education" in computing

Page 16 of the draft report introduces a new set of goals for SciTech:

- Support existing data center needs with land leases
- Provide infrastructure to support upskilling, reskilling and, retraining in data center operations, cloud computing (applications, infrastructure, security, and services), and cybersecurity via continuing education
- Deliver entrepreneurship services related to SMEs that support data centers, cloud, and cyber activities

It is unclear what kind of instruction would be offered: graduate degrees, graduate certificates, or some other program. It is also unclear who would teach these students, especially if computing faculty will be in Arlington.

Academic VIII

The Facilities website describes a proposed Life Sciences and Engineering Building (LSEB) for SciTech Campus. According to the site, “Academic VIII will support students enrolled in STEM-H majors, such as but not limited to kinesiology, materials science, forensic science, bioengineering, and mechanical engineering. Academic VIII will also support post-baccalaureate and related graduate-level medical / health programs for students pursuing careers in the healthcare and wellness professions.”⁶

This vision for Academic VIII may not be consistent with the draft master plan recommendations. The draft Phase One appendix suggests that the eventual plan may suggest relocating many of these programs to another campus though “at the end of phase one, no

6. Life Sciences and Engineering Building – Facilities, <https://facilities.gmu.edu/projects/list/life-sciences-and-engineering-building/>

program relocation recommendations have been recommended. This work will continue in Phase Two and beyond.” (145) Yet the rendering of the SciTech campus in the Phase One report (256-257) shows not only LSEB but also a second academic building of roughly the same size.

SciTech's effects on other campuses

The plan offers fairly precise information about the present needs of each campus. For example, the appendix (p. 126) shows a 16-classroom deficit at Fairfax and a 12-classroom surplus at Arlington. Presumably, however, a major set of program relocations (such as those imagined on pp 144-146 of the appendix) would swamp such calculations, creating the need for whole new buildings costing hundreds of millions of dollars.

Looking Forward to Phase Two

Quads

While the bulk of the physical design will take place in Phase Two, the Phase One report includes some exciting proposals for large scale rethinking of the basic layout of each campus. The Fairfax section, in particular, opens the possibility of clearing space now used by some of the campus's older buildings to make room for “a series of linked quads cascading north-south down the campus.” (247) (One might note the resemblance to the Library Plaza, University Plaza, and Science Plaza proposed in the 1968 Warnecke & Associates plan for George Mason College.)⁷ These quads could transform the experience of the Fairfax campus, so this proposal is worthy of particular attention.

7. George Mason College of the University of Virginia, Master Plan, August 1968, 24, <http://ahistoryofmason.gmu.edu/items/show/141>.

Faculty workspaces

The report makes clear that most of the work of exploring faculty workspace needs will take place in Phase Two. (11) However, it makes some statements worthy of attention at this point.

First, it states that “We typically suggest that private offices have an average station size in the range of 80-120 assignable square feet, while shared workspaces should have 40-60 assignable square feet per occupant.” (213) The adoption of an 80-ASF office standard would be a decrease from previous Mason standards, which have specified between 100 and 120 ASF for most offices, with larger spaces for chairs and other administrators. Mason planners have previously stated that 90 ASF is the minimum needed to comply for furniture layout and Americans with Disabilities Act requirements.

The space assumptions in the appendix (pp. 136-137) apply a uniform 1.33 multiplier to office space to get the conference room and services spaces. That seems wrong. A faculty or staff member with a smaller office needs just as much conference room space as one with a larger office, and likely more, since they may need to leave their office more frequently to have adequate space to work or meet with others.

The plan (p. 213) states that “In Phase Two, we will further examine the university’s workspace guidelines.” It does not make clear what methods the consultants will use in this examination, or who will be included in the process.

Transportation

The Phase One report and appendix suggest that the planners hope to reduce dependence on private automobiles, especially those with just one occupant. For instance, the report applauds the absence of many parking lots within the core campus at Fairfax (49) and notes that

“Bicycling is a crucial component of a sustainable campus.” (99)

A Phase Two exploration could also benefit from more granular attention to transportation patterns. The Phase One report states that “In general, parking is not perceived as a major challenge for the [Fairfax] campus.” (124) While that may be true “in general,” adjuncts and part-time students arriving at campus late in the day may think differently.

Phase Two could expand on these beginnings by explaining how each campus could make alternatives to the car more attractive. For instance, the Arlington section has maps showing driving and walking, but not biking (108-109). The Fairfax section does mention biking, but it only notes where people bicycle, not where they *can't* bicycle for lack of good routes. The report is silent on the ways that improved storage and shower facilities could encourage biking to campus.

Conclusion

As valuable as the Phase One findings are, they remain mostly empirical findings, which can serve as common reference points going forward. In Phase Two, the consultants can be expected to make more specific recommendations that involve difficult trade-offs, so we encourage all members of the Mason community to continue to attend town hall sessions, to ask questions of the consultants and steering committee members, and to share their views.

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