GW OFFICE OF THE PROVOST

Future-Focused Conversations Summary Report

May 2024

During the first few months of the Spring 2024 semester, the Provost Office invited stakeholders from across GW to join a series of future-focused conversations to share their thoughts on key questions that will inform a more detailed strategic framework to be created in the next academic year. In these conversations, faculty, students, staff, and administrators, and alumni weighed in on **the future of the workforce, the future of higher education, and the future of knowledge**. The Provost Office also opened a web form where community members could submit their feedback on these topics.

What follows is a summary of their comments and a list of key points where there was overlap among groups.

Faculty Conversations

With respect to the future of **work and the workforce**, faculty stressed the importance of strengthening many of the skills we already teach students as part of their general education curriculum. Among the key intellectual skills faculty think our future workforce needs are:

- Communication – in particular, the ability to understand all sides of an issue and to be able to explain those perspectives orally and in writing
- Critical thinking and research skills – the ability to formulate and analyze problems
- The ability to validate information
- Technical (programming) and quantitative skills

Faculty members also highlighted the importance of "soft skills" in the workforce of the future, including:

- The ability to work with different kinds of people, even if you do not share the same beliefs, viewpoints, or outlook on life
- Emotional intelligence
- Preparation to be adaptable

Breadth of engagement is also important for a future workforce. This would include:

- The ability to think and work across disciplines, with an interdisciplinary approach
- Cross-cultural competency as global citizens

Finally, faculty members noted the importance of leadership as a key quality needed in the workforce of the future.

With respect to the **future of higher education**, faculty were cognizant of the demands students would face in the future as well as the opportunities that our location in Washington, D.C. provides for GW in particular. They stressed that we should capitalize further on our location in D.C. through:

- Community engagement
  - First-year students who are not ready for college work have more elaborate internships
- Civic engagement that defends democracy
- Attention to public policy

With respect to remote instruction, faculty felt that the university should:

- Investigate areas for expansion
- Be cautious in offering forms of instruction that other universities can offer more cheaply

Related to engagement with our location is an engagement with the world around us. Faculty noted the importance of:

- Engaging real world problems that show the practical value of education
- Strengthening and formalizing internship opportunities and co-op experiences
- Creating international partnerships that have a global impact in order to teach students how to communicate across cultures and to grow international enrollments
- Taking on grand challenges and tackling the world's greatest problems, such as climate change, hunger, and inequality
- Growing research in areas that have the greatest impact

In addition, faculty suggested that the university develop a curriculum for undergraduates that is both broad and challenging, but also seeks to accomplish key objectives, such as:

- Teaching students how to use AI and big data to analyze the information of the future
- Enhancing media literacy
- Fostering interdisciplinarity among disciplines and majors while promoting continued excellence within disciplines
- Ensuring students can read in a sustained fashion
- Training students in the analytical approaches of humanities, social science, and STEM fields
  - In particular, D.C. is great environment for study of both politics and technology
- Offering research opportunities that promote creativity and innovation
- Mapping the skills that students have learned (not just courses), so that these skills are visible to future employers (and students)
- Re-inventing first year experience courses and living and learning communities (LLCs)

Finally, faculty members recognized the important university values of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) and affordability. Faculty expressed particular concern about the university's ability to meet the full need of residential undergraduate student in the way that many of our peer institutions have been able to do.

When asked about the **future of knowledge**, faculty highlighted the importance of conducting research and producing knowledge within an ethical framework, as well as a need to continue

asserting the value of scientific and evidence-based knowledge creation and education in our global society, particularly in the context of producing solutions to the world's grand challenges.

Faculty also singled out new developments in AI as impacting the ability to create new knowledge, and the need to establish "trustworthy" AI applications that can produce reliable and responsible new knowledge.

Student Conversations

Students merged their concerns about the **future of work and the workforce** with their concerns about **higher education**. They stressed the value of:

- GW's location in D.C. facilitating institutional connections and practical applications of knowledge gained in class – they believe that this differentiates them from other students
- Access to practitioners in D.C. who have a distinctive way of filtering and applying knowledge
- Internships and the Career Services Office helping them to find a job (note that there is some variation between schools – the Business school has its own career center, for example)
- Meeting and interviewing people in professions they want to enter
- Classmates who are engaged with the world around them
- A wide variety of student clubs – particularly the arts majors in the Innovation Center in the basement of Tompkins

Graduate students emphasized the valuable research training and opportunities they received, but also noted the distinctive experience of meeting and speaking with practitioners in their fields.

With respect to the **future of higher education**, both graduate and undergraduate students stressed the value of live, in-person instruction over pre-recorded material. They especially appreciated the importance of students interacting in the classroom and learning different points of view – something they believe a more costly private school education should offer over a state school. They highlighted that geographic diversity helps to promote different points of view in class, and the creation of a robust campus community begins with accessibility.

In terms of specific recommendations to improve higher education, undergraduate students suggested that the university:

- Provide students with job placement skills, such as how to successfully interview for a job
- Increase quantitative rigor in the social science and liberal arts disciplines
- Ensure a diverse array of viewpoints in liberal arts courses
- Emphasize the importance applying one's education to improve the country (and democracy)

Graduate students had a slightly different take on higher education. For example, although most graduate students appreciated in person instruction, graduate students in online master degree

programs expressed satisfaction with their experiences and their instructors. Some recommended that the university explore flexible learning models (including hybrid modes of instruction). They also suggested that the curriculum be tailored to provide a competency- based model of education.

In terms of specific recommendations to improve higher education, graduate students suggested that the university:

- Train students in using AI (many future jobs will expect students to have this skill) as well as other programs such as Python
- Increase quantitative skills training and rigor (especially in some disciplines)
- Improve access and affordability
- Assist students in networking with other graduate and professional students and with employers
- Provide additional support to international students in order to facilitate adjustment to campus life and make students with diverse opinions and backgrounds feel welcome
- Adopt a "global" perspective (as opposed to an America-centric one)

With respect to the **future of knowledge** and the opportunities for research, undergraduate students observed that it was not entirely clear whether investment in research should be prioritized over investment in the physical infrastructure or career placement. However, for those students that prioritized research, they noted that it can be difficult to get involved in the research enterprise. For instance, students in the social sciences and humanities expressed difficulty in finding a research opportunity, whereas the school of public health has abundant research opportunities for students. Indeed, some students remarked that the school of public health feels more like a research institute than a school.

Staff Conversations

Many staff who participated in these conversations have received or are receiving degrees here using their tuition benefits. By and large, they are passionate about the value of education and its ability to transform the world, and they value their opportunity to work at a university.

Many staff expressed enthusiasm for helping students on their way to facing the world.

With respect to the **future of the workforce**, staff suggested the importance of:

- The ability to use AI
- A global understanding/ perspective (examples of which include intercultural competence, tolerance for the ideas of others, and listening as well as communicating effectively)
- Emotional intelligence
- Critical thinking, including the ability to think and act independently
- Media literacy
- Taking initiative
- Resilience/ability to pivot later in life
- Forming networks
- Integrating classroom learning with workplace needs
- Learning how to solve problems as a team

On the topic of the **future of higher education**, many staff members see their graduate degree programs as a way to become more strategic and effective in their jobs at GW. However, staff view the undergraduate experience much like the other cohorts. In terms of skill development, staff emphasized the importance of training students think ethically. They also emphasized the importance of interdisciplinarity. Staff recognized the importance of a diverse student body as essential to preparing graduates to be successful in an increasingly global society.

Staff also highlighted the need to take advantage of our location in Washington, D.C., and emphasized the relevance of social science and liberal arts (history, sociology, and foreign languages) education as important context when making larger strategic decisions out in the world. At the same time, staff recommended that the university train students on data security, how to use AI, and how to communicate effectively.

Regarding research, staff acknowledged that research will remain foundational within all disciplines and also focused on the importance of working outside of silos and developing interdisciplinary avenues for collaboration to maximize impact in tackling the world's greatest

challenges. Researchers will need to remain adaptable and nimble in order to keep pace with changing technologies.

Staff also offered some operational suggestions, which included expanding remote learning opportunities, increasing financial aid/ benefit package for students and staff, and perhaps provide additional training in change management given the accelerated pace of societal changes. Staff suggested that the university should more fully engage with employers to help students find jobs upon graduation.

Finally, with respect to the **future of knowledge**, staff believed that research collaborations will happen more quickly in the future, but that the biggest challenge for GW will be all the free or cheap learning opportunities available virtually. They pointed to a series of intellectual issues that present both challenges and areas of opportunity for education and research within the academy, including but not limited to AI, climate change, democracy, and diversity, equity and inclusion.

Alumni Conversations

With respect to the **future of work and the workforce** (and workforce development), alumni have emphasized the importance of:

Types of learning experiences and skills to be fostered

- Meaningful experiential learning and internships
- Data analytics and statistics
- Critical thinking
- Soft skills, particularly learning to be attuned to other people
- Communication – interpersonal, written, and oral
- Resilience: Failing fast and learning from mistakes
- Being a lifelong learner

Characteristics and habits to be developed

- Soft skills, particularly learning to be attuned to other people, managing conflict when necessary
- Resilience: Failing and learning from mistakes
- Agility and adaptability
- Understand, predict, and mitigate risks
- Time management
    - Attaining the college degree as a demonstration of ability to complete a long term project
- Being a self-starter
- Entrepreneurship: being able to look for opportunities
- Curiosity

With respect to the **future of higher education** (especially at GW), alumni have suggested an emphasis on:

- GW's location in D.C. and the important connections that result from this, particularly with regard to potential employers – connections are crucial, and alumni should be leveraged
- More events that bring important leaders to campus and encourage GW community attendance
- International and global experiences; gaining a global perspective

Key educational goals

- Learning to think and get outside one's comfort zone
- Focusing on solving problems
- Embracing diversity and learning to listen respectfully
- Studying political science at GW, one of its strengths
- Hands-on experience; legal and medical clinics
- Being able to verify information and sources