



# **Quick-Look Assessment for Texas A&M University Higher Education Center at McAllen**

*Feb. 20, 2024*

Submitted by: Joe Pettibon



The Path Forward, adopted Dec. 14, 2021, by then-President M. Katherine Banks, cited a need to elevate the branch campuses, including the Higher Education Center at McAllen (HECM). The original MGT report for Texas A&M University called for a need to elevate the leadership of HECM, both within the Provost office and in McAllen, *“to provide additional support and strategic direction, thus enhancing programmatic offerings and student success.”* The Path Forward “wholeheartedly” agreed but expanded the focus to all remote teaching sites. The working group that was formed for remote sites noted specific areas to address for HECM, including space for student life activities and studying, access to courses and necessary teaching spaces, confusion over faculty reporting lines, increased awareness and collaboration from main campus, and improved marketing to address the perceptions of the center. This report will touch on centralization concerns as well as each of the areas noted above, as they remain needs two years after the Path Forward was adopted.

## **General Observations**

Texas A&M University Higher Education Center at McAllen is still in its early stages of development and growth, now offering nine undergraduate A&M degree programs in the heart of the Rio Grande Valley. The physical center opened in Fall 2018 after initially operating in a temporary location during the 2017-18 academic year. The HECM advertises itself as offering “the best of two worlds – a smaller college setting with the same rich, loud and proud Aggie Spirit,” and the only local tier 1 AAU educational option. The HECM is unique within the university as it is the only location offering degree programs from each of the three state institutions (College Station, Galveston, and the Health Science Center) that comprise Texas A&M University.

A hallmark of Texas A&M is the dedication and passion of the faculty, staff, and students who work and study here. This is no less true for those endeavoring to bring the Aggie education and experience to the Rio Grande Valley. These individuals have worked tirelessly and, in some cases, well beyond the specific requirements of their individual positions to foster the success for the center and ensure those who encounter it, encounter Texas A&M.

Their efforts are not without challenges. The biggest challenges facing the HECM are: (1) the need to have a clearly defined vision and a plan to achieve that vision, (2) creating a campus environment that is sustainable and attractive to prospective students and their families, (3) integrating the Aggie culture and experience in the operations and offerings of the campus, and (4) ensuring the continued growth of academic degree programs are consistent with the needs of the community and industry of the Valley.

Overall, the Path Forward changes have not resulted in major concerns in McAllen. There were some small concerns raised about human resources and information technology, but their larger concerns regarding centralization are about the significant majority of employees who have no direct supervisor in McAllen which limits the effectiveness of the organization. This reporting relationship challenge impacts both faculty and staff.

Below are observations and recommendations for the Higher Education Center at McAllen. This information and assessment reflect feedback collected from 10 meetings with individuals and groups as well as observations from the strategic planning day on Jan.11, 2024. It is recognized that these observations and recommendations are limited and should be vetted further as these recommendations are not the only possible solutions. This report is organized into the following sections:

- Organizational Structure
- Facilities Planning
- Academic Needs
- Campus Life
- Student Affairs
- Recruitment & Marketing
- Centralization of the Five Areas from the Path Forward in College Station

## ORGANIZATIONAL REVIEW COMPONENTS

### Organizational Structure

#### **Observations:**

- The overall plan for McAllen is not known or understood among most audiences. Is the plan for Texas A&M's engagement in McAllen intended to just be a center with limited services and offerings or is the plan to grow the center into a branch campus?
- Faculty, staff, students and even local industry often refer to the center as Texas A&M University at McAllen which implies the center is intended to be a branch campus, not just a center.
- Two-thirds of the employees in McAllen report back to a unit in College Station. McAllen leadership cite this as a challenge for collaboration and planning processes for HECM.
- Primarily among staff but also some faculty perceive that individuals receive unequal treatment depending on where they report – College Station vs. McAllen. For example, there is a perception among staff that local reporting in McAllen has improved their career growth and opportunities.
- Faculty report to a department head in College Station who may not understand well the needs or issues in McAllen, creating red tape and additional bureaucracy. For example, approval to offer low-enrollment courses resides with department heads in College Station rather than with local leadership.
- All faculty are expected to recruit and/or market the center; some have this articulated in their duties.
- Faculty evaluations are done in College Station without an understanding of the impact faculty are making on behalf of the center beyond the classroom. Some supervisors seek input from the Assistant Provost while others do not. HECM faculty have a different scope of duties and expectations than their counterparts in College Station, but that is not well understood.
- Assistant Provost in McAllen is viewed as having informal supervision of faculty and tries to provide local support.
- The staff-supervisor relationship varies for those supervised by someone in College Station. For example, some supervisors rarely visit McAllen and have a limited knowledge of the work environment and load, and others do not regularly engage with their employees.
- Because there is a lack of clarity about how the HECM fits into the overall university structure, McAllen faculty and staff often get confusing or inconsistent guidance from College Station about which rules, processes, and policies should be followed and when they have flexibility.
- Faculty have expressed concerns that the college-level leadership in College Station has less appreciation for the uniqueness of HECM than department-level leadership.
- There needs to be a bigger push for college- and department-level leadership to physically be in McAllen. A half day or full day each year is not enough. They need to experience the classroom environment and connect with students through events.
- HECM faculty need more communication and guidance on the promotion process for faculty with clear answers to how these faculty can advance.
- Education and Engineering were both held out as good examples of engagement between faculty in McAllen and their leadership in College Station.

#### **Recommendations:**

- The university leadership needs to articulate a vision for McAllen. There are two options: (1) continue to operate as the Higher Education Center at McAllen with a limited scope or (2) push toward the campus transforming into a full branch campus with residential students and a much larger scope of operations.  
*Note: If the university wants to move HECM forward as a full branch campus, additional coordination and steps will need to be taken with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.*
- After a vision is set, the university leadership needs to develop a comprehensive plan for McAllen that would move the campus toward that vision over the next 10 years with appropriate investments and a formal financial plan.

- Unless there is a compliance issue, all staff in McAllen should report locally in a unified structure under the direction of the Chief Operating Officer for HECM. Vice Presidents still should engage in partnering to bring resources from College Station onto the McAllen campus.
- The Provost should form a committee of the faculty in McAllen and with college leadership in College Station to address the reporting structure for faculty that includes a matrix approach for issues that need to be handled locally, such as course offerings and scheduling.

## Facilities Planning

### ***Observations:***

- The original campus plan for the HECM was envisioned in 2016. Given the growth of the campus, the current plan is outdated.
- The second HECM building was established as a single-purpose facility for nursing, but the size of the HECM does not afford such an approach in meeting the local needs. Nursing is needed, but not a facility only for nursing.
- Some space in second building is being shelled, not fully built out.
- The third building must be a multi-purpose facility, addressing student spaces, additional teaching spaces, and research spaces.
- There is a perception among faculty, staff, and students in McAllen that the second building, because it was built under the HSC, is only for HSC programs and students, not for the Higher Education Center at McAllen students as a whole. The separation between HSC and main campus creates challenges for the HECM.
- Students report a lack of study and collaboration spaces, access to onsite library facilities, and places for student activities. All audiences noted a lack of facilities, including recreational spaces, residence hall space, library space, and student space
- Insufficient space is available in McAllen facilities. The Chief Operating Officer does not have an office. Faculty and staff are forced to double up and/or work out of cubicles when an office would be more appropriate.
- Lack of transparency for office assignments. As a result, staff appear to be prioritized over faculty for office space.
- Facilities lack space for tutoring services.
- A workshop at the end of the first building could be better utilized, but faculty and staff do not have access to training on how to better utilize this space.
- Distributed scheduling of classrooms leads to inefficient use of these spaces on campus. Students have no mechanism to reserve a room and no good way to know what space is available to host external groups.

### ***Recommendations:***

- The comprehensive plan for McAllen needs to include a campus master plan that details facilities that will support the vision.
- All facilities at the HECM should be under the management of the Chief Operating Officer, and decisions on planning, space allocation, and future facility needs under the COO's purview. The COO should consult with Provost, Deans, and VPs on needs to ensure offerings have needed space for programming, courses, research, offices, and student activities.
- Scheduling of courses and rooms should be centralized under a single individual in McAllen.
- The third building should address student spaces as well as the education, health, and research needs.

## Academic Needs

### Observations:

- The academic programs have grown, allowing for the center to appeal to a broader group of students, but the enrollment in a more diverse set of programs is putting additional pressures on the current infrastructure.
- Alignment with community and industry needs of the Valley is essential to evaluating current and future academic offerings.
- The smaller nature of the campus allows for increased student and faculty interactions.
- Students would like a larger variety of courses/electives and additional faculty.
- Students noted that there are only two Public Health faculty, but they are very supportive.
- Disability resources on campus are limited.
- Students perceive that Entry to a Major (ETAM) is designed to create barriers and “weed” people out.
- Students perceive that complaints are not taken seriously and there are concerns of retaliation because of the small community.
- Classroom technology does not always work the way it is expected. This may have been resolved as there was an upgrade scheduled in December.
- It is not clear how academic programs are evaluated in McAllen. Are they included with the Academic Program Reviews for departments in College Station?
- Core curriculum courses offered in person are too limited. Many are only available online from College Station faculty. Students want more options.
- Class scheduling is done by academic advisors in McAllen (not something counterparts in College Station do). The lack of a centralized scheduling approach in McAllen is causing issues and conflicts for limited classroom resources.
- Common exams are on the schedule, but faculty make alternate arrangements and/or switch rooms without central administration knowledge, which results in confusion.
- Currently, only one person provides student academic resources, particularly for tutoring, to all students at HECM. Inadequate time for training students to tutor.
- Limited enrollment makes it hard to hire students as tutors. Top students are often lost to College Station when the student changes curriculum or location to College Station.
- Aggie merchandise has been used effectively as an incentive to drive tutoring support, and now demand for tutoring services is outpacing resources – in terms of available tutors, space for services to be offered and other tutoring tools used in College Station.
- HECM does not offer an Honors Program. There is no protocol or support for how to offer Honors opportunities in McAllen when the center has limited enrollment and cannot have separate sections of Honors courses.
- Faculty in McAllen feel they are “out of sight, out of mind” too often by College Station supervisors and leadership.
- The HECM does not offer graduate programs. Therefore, there are no Graduate Teaching Assistants locally to assist the faculty, which means faculty lead labs in addition to classroom work. This results in many faculty often teaching an overload for which they are not compensated. However, due to the small enrollment, additional compensation has not been considered to be justified.
- Faculty in McAllen are often teaching different courses rather than multiple sections of the same course like faculty in College Station. The demands this imposes on faculty time for preparation and maintaining excellence in service is not well understood or recognized by leadership in College Station.
- Faculty are almost exclusively Academic Professional Track (APT) with only tenure-track faculty associated with the Agriculture and Life Sciences program. This provides limited opportunity for students to work with research faculty, which is a key component to the academic engagement students receive in College Station.

- Multiple solutions for the equivalent of teaching assistant support have been discussed, but no solutions in place. BIMS faculty previously had the option of peer mentors, but funding disappeared with move to Arts & Sciences. Funding and policy solutions are needed.
- The Biomedical Sciences program previously had TA support for the faculty, but this funding was cut when the program transitioned to the College of Arts & Sciences in College Station. Faculty are seeking to reverse this loss.
- A lack of depth in the faculty creates issues when courses need to be covered and limits the HECM's ability to provide better support for service opportunities.
- Faculty are driving students to College Station for professional engagement opportunities.
- Summer courses are limited at the HECM.

### ***Recommendations:***

- As part of the development of the campus vision and plan, consideration needs to be given to the make-up of the faculty located at McAllen, including the hiring of tenure/tenure-track faculty, not just APT faculty, as well as ensuring appropriate support for faculty in the form of TAs or graduate assistants.
- A review should be conducted of the existing academic programs and consideration given as part of any plan for the campus to include graduate programs.
- The faculty in McAllen should develop a recommendation for appropriate core curriculum courses to be available at McAllen and the university allocate resources for hiring additional faculty.
- The Vice Provost of Faculty Affairs should work with the colleges on appropriate workload and promotion opportunities for faculty specific to the McAllen environment and expectations.

## **Campus Life**

### ***Observations:***

- Students commented on the great sense of community that exists at HECM, described as a “second family.”
- Students want more spaces for studying and gathering.
- There is a student lounge, but no quiet study locations. Students just use open spaces and hallways.
- There is a bus (van) available for transporting students, but it is inconsistently used due to a lack of hiring a bus driver and current pay scale for such a position.
- While there is great camaraderie among students, faculty, and staff, more could be done to imbue the Aggie Spirit in the culture at HECM.
- McAllen has an international “flavor” to it already, viewed positively.
- Transportation concerns were expressed due to the dispersion of students throughout the Rio Grande Valley and the current approach as a commuter campus.
- There is an interest in having affordable housing options in proximity to the HECM.

### ***Recommendations:***

- Expansion of student spaces must be a priority in the third building if the campus is to develop a robust campus life.
- The comprehensive plan for McAllen must include opportunities for recreational spaces, library services, and space for student organizations. Further, based on enrollment plans/targets, consideration should be given for residential and dining options, as well as transportation services.

## Student Affairs

### Observations:

- Students are having difficulty navigating post-graduation opportunities, particularly advising on graduate school opportunities and career opportunities. For example, Local Career Center staff did not have the ability to assist a student, and after asking 5-6 individuals in College Station for help, the student gave up.
- No local career fairs are offered for HECM; students are able to plug in to the Engineering online career fair in College Station, but not other program's students.
- There is no dedicated support in McAllen for employer engagement coordination.
- There are only two student affairs professionals in McAllen handling support for many programs, including Big Event, Ring Day, graduation celebrations, new student conferences, Howdy Week, Palm Camp, and student organizational support.
- Students want more flexibility and support to assist in the creation of student organizations. They believe freedom to approve student organizations locally would speed up the process.
- College Station manages holds on students in McAllen. This often results in delays in removing holds after a student has provided information that would enable them to register for regular college-level courses. *Note: Many of these holds are Texas Success Initiative (TSI) related.*
- Engagement among student leaders in McAllen and College Station is minimal.
- Student leaders in McAllen are ambassadors for the center, and there may be more opportunities to better leverage their stewardship of the center.
- The HECM does not have a contact for Family Programs for Family Weekend. The center has expressed interest in a family night rather than a full weekend, but they lack support to implement it.
- The HECM lacks budget needed for additional and consistent travel between College Station and McAllen for building relationships between students in both locations and allowing McAllen students to more actively participate in activities in College Station.
- Some students expressed support for enhanced mental health services.

### Recommendations:

- Growth of staff must be planned and consistent with the generation of resources. However, engagement with local employers and expansion of career and graduate school planning support is a critical addition and should be prioritized as this can create additional value for the HECM.
- In order to create a more robust Aggie culture at the HECM, invest in Student Affairs staff must be prioritized as well, if possible, doubling the current staff from two to four.
- The Vice President of Student Affairs should examine ways to make expansion of McAllen services for disability resources and student organization management.

## Recruitment & Marketing

### Observations:

- Approximately one-third of students from the Rio Grande Valley who enroll at Texas A&M University are enrolled at the HECM.
- Students do not understand the value of multidisciplinary engineering technology and interdisciplinary engineering or the differences in those programs before they arrive.
- The Prospective Student Center can promote the HECM more as a local opportunity for an Aggie degree.
- The student recruitment materials for the HECM are embedded in the overall university student recruitment materials, getting just a passing mention overall. The center could get more real estate in student recruitment materials that are relatively equal.
- Faculty, students, and staff believe the center needs to be marketed more in the local community to explain its location and value. Further, they view a unified approach for marketing the center could

increase visibility within the Rio Grande Valley (RGV). Such an effort could engage all local schools and community organizations in the RGV.

- No research has been done in the RGV to understand prospective students' knowledge of HECM.
- There is not a clear articulation of the advantage of McAllen. Advantages mentioned included small classes, strong faculty/student interaction, community, opportunities to lead, international flavor, cost savings, and staying close to home.
- Staff and students expressed interested in the possibility of a Howdy Crew exchange program, whereby there could be more coordination of the visitor experience between College Station and McAllen to improve how McAllen offers this service.
- Center faculty, staff, and students have an immense pride in being Aggies.
- A more robust transfer admissions program is desired to expand enrollment opportunities at the HECM.
- The expansion of the Aggie Assurance program to family incomes of \$95K for McAllen is appreciated and helps recruitment, but it is not publicized or competitive with The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. Staff have identified a need to broaden the program to include families with up to \$125K in income.

### ***Recommendations:***

- The VP and Chief Marketing and Communications Officer should work with the McAllen COO to determine how best to structure the marketing support for the HECM as well as develop a strategic marketing strategy for both community awareness and engagement and for student recruitment in the Valley. For recruitment, the Assistant Vice President and Executive Director of Admissions in College Station should be engaged.
- The McAllen COO should determine what are the key characteristics that make up the McAllen Advantage for prospective students, including potentially new, innovative concepts that could be developed to further differentiate why a student should enroll at McAllen.
- The Assistant Vice President over Scholarships and Financial Aid should provide an analysis of the costs of increasing the Aggie Assurance program for the HECM to the Strategic Budget Council for funding consideration.

## **Centralization of the Five Areas from the Path Forward in College Station**

### ***Observations:***

- HECM faculty and staff have concerns over contract processes and timeliness, including for MOUs.
- Many viewed the centralization in College Station as a non-issue because so much was operating that way already in HECM.
- The center has experienced frustration over Human Resources' hubs. McAllen personnel are processed through different hubs depending on where the employee reports. HROE personnel in McAllen cannot service employees in McAllen reporting to College Station.
- Onboarding is not consistent for McAllen employees as some hires are not coordinated locally and can show up for work without receiving an appropriate HECM welcome.
- Training/development opportunities are limited for McAllen employees.

### ***Recommendations:***

- The CFO should review any issues in McAllen contracting processes and determine if recent changes in processes in College Station have resolved those concerns.
- Placing all staff under the purview of the McAllen COO will resolve most of the issues identified with hiring processes and onboarding of new employees.