



Division of Student Affairs

2025 Department Conversations Summary

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Executive Summary

In Spring 2025, the Strategic Planning Steering Committee (SPSC) for the Division of Student Affairs facilitated a series of SOAR (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results) focus group conversations with each department to gather insights that will inform divisional strategic planning. 23 hours of conversations took place. The conversations were specifically centered on the experiences of staff in their department. This was not an opportunity to reflect on divisional experiences around SOAR. This report summarizes high-level themes that emerged across departments, highlighting shared strengths, promising opportunities, collective aspirations, and intended results. The insights shared by departments reveal both the passion driving the work and the shared aspirations for a stronger, more connected, and impact-driven division.

This document:

- Outlines key themes related to strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results,
- Identifies notable patterns and insights,
- Connects conversation themes to institutional strategic priority areas,
- Provides a master list of the themes that came up and where they came up in department conversations, &
- Includes a list of the specific questions asked during department conversations.

Strengths

- **Deep Commitment to Student Success:** Staff expressed a strong sense of purpose in supporting students and fostering belonging, particularly among diverse and underrepresented populations. This support is grounded in a person-centered approach.
- **Collaborative Culture:** Departments described effective collaboration within and across units, as well as with campus partners, as a hallmark of their work. This was also an area where more expansion can be done, especially intra-divisionally.
- **Innovation and Responsiveness:** Units noted a willingness to innovate and respond to emerging student needs, often with limited resources.
- **Passionate and Mission-Driven Staff:** A shared sense of pride in the division's values and the work being done to create inclusive, student-centered experiences was evident.

Opportunities

- **Strengthening Internal Communication:** A need for more transparent, timely, and clear communication from leadership and across departments was frequently raised.
- **Strategic Alignment and Clarity:** Staff voiced a desire for clearer priorities, goals, and expectations to ensure alignment with the division's mission and institutional direction. Tied with this was a reflection on difficulties in navigating change and shifting into new priorities.

- **Professional Development and Capacity Building:** Many departments emphasized the importance of continued investment in staff training, onboarding, and leadership development.
- **Leveraging Assessment and Storytelling:** There is untapped potential in using data more effectively to measure outcomes and communicate the impact of Student Affairs work.

Aspirations

- **A More Cohesive Division:** Staff hope for greater unity, shared vision, and collaboration across departments to enhance collective impact.
- **Expand Marketing and Promotion:** Departments identified opportunities to better promote their services, support, and programs with the campus community.
- **Excellence and Innovation in Student Support:** Many departments aim to expand and enhance their programs and services to better meet student needs and adapt to changing circumstances. This was especially evident relative to graduate students.
- **Excellence in Innovative and Transformative Student Experiences:** Staff expressed a desire to not just reflect best practices in student support, but to develop innovative practices as a model for others.

Results

- **Enhanced Student Experience:** The desired end result for many departments is a measurable, positive impact on students' sense of belonging, engagement, and success.
- **Improved Operational Effectiveness:** Several departments aspire to streamline processes, improve use of data, and enhance cross-functional collaboration.
- **Staff Retention and Engagement:** A key outcome includes creating an environment where staff feel valued, supported, and motivated to grow.

Notable Patterns and Insights

Cross Department Patterns

- **Strong Ethic of Care and Student-Centeredness:** Nearly all departments emphasized their commitment to student belonging, wellbeing, and success, reflecting a division-wide alignment with UMBC's mission.
- **Resource Constraints as a Common Barrier:** Departments described working with limited staff, time, inadequate workspaces, or funding. While staff took pride in being resourceful, this also signaled potential risks related to burnout and sustainability.
- **Improving Communication:** Departments expressed the need for more consistent and transparent communication about divisional goals, decision-making, and clear information about the services, support and programs division departments provide.
- **Appetite for Professional Development:** There was a widespread desire for increased opportunities in onboarding, leadership development, and skill-building, particularly around data-informed storytelling.

Connection of Themes to Institutional Strategic Priorities

Overall, the focus group themes strongly support the university's strategic priorities, especially in student success and organizational innovation, while revealing opportunities to deepen engagement in teaching/learning transformation and community integration.

Grow Student Opportunity and Success

This area is deeply embedded across the themes, with strong representation in aspirations around equitable access, student retention, holistic growth, career and life readiness, and resource navigation. Departments voiced a desire to improve access to support, enhance student wellbeing, and remove barriers.

Transform Teaching and Learning

This appears less directly but is implicitly addressed through themes such as data-driven practice, mentoring, student empowerment, and the desire to clarify roles and expectations. These reflect a commitment to creating co-curricular learning environments that complement the academic mission.

Redefine Excellence in Research and Creative Achievement

This is the least directly referenced. While innovation, employer engagement, and staff use of data suggest an openness to high-impact practices, there is minimal explicit mention of expanding student research opportunities or advancing faculty-student scholarly collaboration through Student Affairs.

Cultivate Organizational Innovation and Vitality

This is strongly reflected in staff challenges and aspirations. Themes around infrastructure, hiring, onboarding, cross-divisional navigation, communication, and a desire for centralized systems highlight the need for operational coherence and agility in adapting to shifting demands. There is also a clear call for structural reform, process clarity, and internal culture building to increase vitality.

Strengthen Maryland and Its Communities

This emerges in reference to serving students' families and the broader community, as well as aspirations related to civic engagement, community development, and inclusive access. These themes show promise in connecting UMBC's campus life to the regional landscape, though this area could be developed further with more intentional outward-facing strategies.

List of Conversation Themes and Department Conversations Where Theme was Mentioned

Following the conversations with departments, members of the SPSC coded conversations based on themes. There was a primary code, a secondary code, and a description of what the code reflects. For example, "aspirations" is a primary code, "centralized support" is a secondary code, and "To facilitate the student experience, implement "one stop shops" for particular demographics (ex. Veterans) to ensure all of their needs can be either met or referenced in a single physical space" is a description of what the code refers to.

The following is a list of primary codes, secondary codes, descriptions, and which department(s) talked about the code area during the focus group conversations. An [additional spreadsheet](#) highlights how frequently a code came up during the conversation with that department.

Aspirations

- Centralized support: To facilitate the student experience, implement "one stop shops" for particular demographics (ex. Veterans) to ensure all of their needs can be either met or referenced in a single physical space.
 - Campus Life; Career Center; Commuter and Transfer Student Programming, Initiatives for Identity, Inclusion, and Belonging Areas (CTSP/i3b); Retriever Support Services (RSS)

- Clarifying role and perceptions: Addressing student shame or anger in having to interact with the office.
 - Student Conduct and Community Standards (SCCS), Student Affairs Communications and Marketing (SACM)
- Common definitions: Example includes coming up with a common definition for "student wellbeing."
 - Career Center; Executive Leadership Team (ELT); Residential Life (RL); RSS
- Cross-division navigation: Describes the need for clearer coordination and guidance across departments or units for staff and students.
 - ELT
- Data-driven practice: Better use of assessment and evaluation, outcome sharing.
 - Career Center; Center for Democracy and Civic Life (CDCL); Commons Operations, CTSP/i3b; Event & Conference Services (ECS); ELT; RL; RSS
- Employer engagement: Refers to work with employers to expand internship pipelines, connect with recruiters, and co-develop career pathways.
 - Career Center
- Equitable access: Customer service to provide inclusive and accessible programs for all students-undergraduates and graduates.
 - Career Center; CTSP/i3b; ECS; ELT; RL; Retriever Integrated Health (RIH); RSS; SCCS; SACM
- Full staffing: Getting to the place of being fully staffed to meet operational needs (both internal to department and divisionally).
 - Graduate Student Life (GSL); Student Affairs Business Services Center (SABSC)
- Graduate student support: New framing of what grad student support should look like.
 - Campus Life; Career Center, CTSP/i3b; ELT; GSL; RL; RSS
- Infrastructure: Updating outdated technology, physical structures.
 - Campus Life; Career Center; Commons Operations; ELT; GSL; RL; RSS
- Innovation: Keeping pace with trends, tech, or higher ed best practices. Also setting trends for best practices.
 - Career Center; ECS; RL; RSS; SCCS; SACM
- Institutional commitment: Call for division-wide and university-wide recognition of grad student priorities.
 - ECS
- Marketing of services/supports: Increasing ways that others learn about the services/programs/supports a department provides.

- Campus Life; Commons Operations; RL; RIH; RSS; SABSC; SCCS; SACM
- Serving families and outside community: Interest in addressing needs of students' families and/or communities in the local region
 - RIH; SCCS
- Structural cultural change: Desire to build students' long-term capacity to engage with systems and power
 - CDCL
- Student holistic growth: Considers student development both in and out of classroom experiences. Describes factors that contribute to developing this goal.
 - Campus Life; Commons Operations; ECS; RSS; SCCS; SACM
- Student retention: Helping students understand resources that are available to support their success, continuing to refine services and programs to ensure student success.
 - Campus Life; Commons Operations; RSS; SCCS; SACM
- Student support: Creating events/spaces where students' needs are met and they are comfortable, satisfied, and eager to replicate the experience.
 - Campus Life; Commons Operations; RSS
- Transformational experience: From transactions to lasting impact and development.
 - Campus Life; Career Center; CDCL; Commons Operations; CTSP/i3b; ECS; RL; RSS; SCCS; SACM
- Undergraduate student support: New framing of what undergraduate student support should look like.
 - ECS; RL; RSS; SACM

Barriers for Students

- Academic advocacy: Students needing help with navigating academic system, getting into classes, advocating with faculty, etc.
 - Campus Life; RIH; RSS
- Academic demands: Students may feel unable to branch out in their UMBC experiences due to demands and expectations put on them by advisors in their academic spaces. They may also not be getting the type of support they require from advisors (and be uncertain where to get that deficit addressed).
 - Campus Life; CDCL; GSL; RL; SACM
- Attitudes: Negative attitudes or perceptions about different groups of students by faculty and staff (e.g. for example, mindset that grad students are here to focus on academics and don't require holistic approach).

- SCCS
- Basic needs: Students are often in positions where they cannot afford the basics needed to sustain their presence at UMBC. This includes money for food, housing, health care, childcare, etc.
 - Commons Operations; CTSP/i3b; GSL; RL; RIH; RSS; SCCS
- Emergency support funds: Conversations about funding that could be more flexible and responsive to urgent student needs.
 - ELT
- Family-friendly policies: Lack of lactation rooms, childcare, and policies that account for student parents.
 - ECS
- Funding: Salaries/ stipends are too low at UMBC.
 - Campus Life; Commons Operations; GSL; SCCS; SACM
- Graduate student recognition: The recognition of graduate students at UMBC is lacking. Events are not available to them or, when they are, don't reflect graduate student interests.
 - Campus Life; CTSP/i3b; GSL; RL; RIH
- Housing/transportation: Need for more safe, close, affordable housing within 20 minute bus ride.
 - RSS
- Job availability: Lack of available on-campus jobs for students.
 - Campus Life; Commons Operations; SCCS
- Legal/policy constraints: Visa and work authorization complexities for international students.
 - Campus Life; Career Center; RIH; RSS
- Mentoring: Outside of their official academic advisors, students need intentional mentorship to provide support, share knowledge, and provide a sense of belonging.
 - Campus Life; Commons Operations; CTSP/i3b; GSL; SACM
- Misunderstanding of department work: Students confuse department work with other departments on campus.
 - SABSC
- Support gaps: Cultural competency, mental health awareness, evening services or capacity of staff to support students seeking resources or assistance.
 - Campus Life; Career Center; GSL; RL; RSS; SACM

Goals for Students

- Career and life readiness: Applied learning, employer engagement, and job/internship outcomes.
 - Career Center; Commons Operations; CTSP/i3b; ECS; SABSC; SACM
- Holistic growth: Considers student development both in and out of classroom experiences. Describes factors that contribute to developing this goal.
 - Campus Life; CTSP/i3b; ESC; RL; RIH; RSS; SCCS; SACM

Guiding Values

- Accessibility: Asynchronous resources, universal design.
 - Career Center; RIH; SACM
- Adaptability: Responsive to student needs, continuous learning.
 - Campus Life; Career Center; Commons Operations; ECS; RL; RIH; RSS; SABSC; SCCS; SACM
- Collaboration: Strong internal and external partnerships.
 - Campus Life; Career Center; Commons Operations; RL; RSS; SCCS; SACM
- Equity and diversity: Every student, regardless of background, has equitable access to support, fairness, that system is unbiased and staff represent backgrounds students are coming from.
 - Campus Life; RL; RSS; SCCS; SACM
- Person-centered support: Student partnership, empathy, care-oriented approach.
 - Campus Life; Career Center; Commons Operations; ECS; RL; RIH; RSS; SABSC; SCCS; SACM
- Transparency: Help students understand why things are the way they are.
 - SABSC

Other Challenges

- Trust and relationship-building: Maintaining credibility with student orgs and clients: sudden changes to events undermine trust.
 - ECS

Relationships

- Areas of opportunity: Areas where there are opportunities to build strong, collaborative partnerships both within and beyond UMBC.
 - Career Center; CDCL; GSL; RL; RSS; SCCS; SACM

- Areas of strength: Areas where there are strong, collaborative partnerships both within and beyond UMBC.
 - Campus Life; Career Center; Commons Operations; ECS; RL; RIH; RSS; SCCS; SACM

Space Challenges

- Academic scheduling impact: Academic calendar limits access to event spaces early in the semester.
 - ECS
- Configurations: Even when space is available, its formatting is not conducive to the kind of work taking place in it.
 - Campus Life; ECS; RL; RSS; SACM
- Emergency preparedness: Concerns about safety and access for students with disabilities during emergencies.
 - ECS
- Insufficient space: Staff are working in shared offices, open space cubicles, or other spaces that are not conducive to the nature of their work.
 - Commons Operations; ECS; RSS
- Policy awareness: Understanding and communicating campus rules, especially around food and fundraising.
 - ECS
- Quiet meeting areas: Not enough space for private/quiet conversations.
 - Campus Life; Commons Operations; RSS; SACM
- Safe spaces for students: Areas where students not only have access to a physical location but further feel welcomed/able to be their authentic selves.
 - Campus Life; CTSP/i3b; ECS; RL; RIH; RSS; SACM
- Space and access equity: Comments about insufficient access to space or perceived prioritization of some groups over students.
 - ELT

Staff Challenges

- Capacity and resources: Tech demands, lack of specialized support roles, increase in responsibilities without extra support.
 - Campus Life; Career Center; CDCL; Commons Operations; ECS; GSL; RL; RIH; RSS; SABSC; SCCS; SACM

- Communication: Missing information need to clarify a shared vision or to meet (unstated) expectations; learning about a request/goal too late to address/implement it; not getting necessary updates.
 - CDCL; Commons Operations; GSL; RIH; RSS
- Continuity planning: Lack of consistent off-boarding with staff. Examples may include outlining passwords to department social media, points of contact, aspects of how to navigate the role.
 - Campus Life; SACM
- Culture around work hours: Work hour expectations.
 - SABSC; SACM
- Data and research use and access: Difficulties in connecting with data and research, struggles of being able to communicate about difficult-to-measure outcomes, etc.
 - CDCL; RIH; RSS
- Decision-making: Having a seat at the table, rather than being reactionary.
 - Campus Life; ECS; RL; RSS; SCCS; SACM
- Diversity: Having a staff that reflects the representation of the student body.
 - Commons Operations; RSS
- Finances: Lack of clarity regarding continued financial support for the whole department.
 - CDCL; SCCS
- Having a department plan to follow: Clearly defined processes, roles, systems and knowing when/where to refer to other resources.
 - RIH; RSS
- Hiring and vacancies: In addition to department vacancies, the slowness of being able to fill positions compounds staffing deficits.
 - Campus Life; Commons Operations; ECS; RL; RIH; SABSC; SACM
- Information deficits: Need more ways spread the word about department locations, programs, and supports.
 - Campus Life; Commons Operations; CTSP/i3b; ECS; GSL; RIH; RSS; SCCS; SACM
- Intra-divisional relationships: Within DoSA, departments aren't aware of each other's work and/or aren't reaching out with intention to form strong working relationships to benefit our students.
 - Campus Life; CTSP/i3b; ECS; RL; RIH; RSS; SABSC; SCCS; SACM
- Isolation in role: Solo office structure creates barriers to strategic work and sustainability.
 - ECS

- Lack of student involvement in planning: Students aren't using resources because we don't ask them to be part of the creation and discussion process.
 - RSS
- Language of value: Difficulty articulating long-term impact using institutional metrics.
 - CDCL
- Navigating change: Navigating shifting division priorities, divisional staffing, and other changes that are taking place.
 - Campus Life; Career Center; RL; RSS; SABSC; SCCS; SACM
- Old habits and resistance: Staff are stuck in old ways of seeing their jobs and are resistant to change, including changing understanding of requirements of their job now.
 - Career Center; SACM
- Onboarding: The onboarding process for individual staffers as well as entire departments is lacking, resulting in loss of time and duplication of efforts.
 - Campus Life; ELT; RL; RSS; SACM
- Reactive progress: Many (predictable) situations aren't anticipated in advance, leaving people scrambling to address them in retrospect. This can also be seen in lacking centralized processes/resources for experiences that happen across the entire division.
 - Campus Life; Commons Operations; RL; RSS; SACM
- Recognition: Much of the department's work is "invisible" until something goes wrong; others don't always appreciate the direct impact of the work and the time involved in doing it.
 - Commons Operations; ECS; GSL; SCCS
- Staff role clarity & onboarding: Reflections on confusion or uncertainty about roles, team structure, or university systems during staff transitions.
 - Career Center; ELT
- Structural limitations: Fragmented systems.
 - Campus Life; Career Center; ECS; RL; RIH; RSS; SABSC; SACM
- Student expectations: Misconceptions about the work and services of a department.
 - Campus Life; Career Center; Commons Operations; ECS; RIH; RSS; SCCS; SACM
- Tempering expectations: Students and staff wanting guarantees, clarity, and perfect solutions for issues that are impossible to provide.
 - Campus Life; ECS; RL; SABSC; SCCS; SACM

- Training: For student and professional staff, ongoing training is required to remain proficient and qualified. Options for full departmental training are extremely limited and student staff trainings often conflict/overlap with one another in ways that prevent students from working for more than one department.
 - Commons Operations; ECS; RSS
- Wellbeing: Work-life balance issues.
 - Campus Life; ECS; GSL; RL; RSS; SACM

Strengths

- Creating a safe space: Place where students can go even with challenges and be welcomed and safe.
 - RIH; RSS
- Data-driven practice: Use of assessment and evaluation, outcome sharing.
 - Career Center; ELT; GSL; RL; RSS
- Equity-focused practice: Access, removing barriers, inclusive of diverse majors and backgrounds.
 - Career Center; CDCL; RL; RIH; RSS; SABSC; SCCS; SACM
- Intentional programming: Competency-based approaches, cross-campus workshops, intentional design.
 - Career Center; CDCL; RL; SCCS; SACM
- Internal culture: Cross-team collaboration, leadership advocacy, flexibility.
 - Campus Life; Career Center; ECS; RIH; SABSC; SCCS; SACM
- Mission alignment: Team understands and aligns with broader mission to support students.
 - CDCL; SABSC
- Problem-solving: Responding to concerns (often in real time) that center around unforeseen/previously unexperienced problems and implementing strategies and solutions quickly.
 - Commons Operations; RSS
- Student empowerment: Confidence, clarity, communication, and self-advocacy.
 - Career Center; Commons Operations; ECS; RIH; RSS; SCCS; SACM

Student Needs

- Career development: High-level coaching, early exposure, networking.
 - Career Center; ECS; SACM
- Resource navigation: Access to information, opportunity awareness, communication.

- Campus Life; Commons Operations; RL; RSS; SABSC; SCCS; SACM
- Underserved populations: Support for international, neurodivergent, disabled, veterans, and graduate students.
 - Campus Life; Career Center; GSL; RL; RIH; RSS; SCCS

Student Retention Factors

- Community development: Offering access to programs and services that build community among students.
 - Campus Life; Commons Operations; EVS; GSL; RL; RSS; SCCS; SACM
- Engagement opportunities: When students feel seen and heard, it increases engagement. Students who feel seen and heard are more likely to stay.
 - Campus Life; CDCL; Commons Operations; ECS; GSL; RIH; RSS; SABSC; SCCS; SACM
- Finances: How we price our facilities, dining to cover operating costs.
 - ELT; RL; SACM
- Mental health: How we handle intervention, coping skills, building resilience among our students.
 - GSL; RL; RIH; RSS; SCCS
- Resource navigation: Access to information, opportunity awareness, communication.
 - Campus Life; Career Center; RL; RIH; RSS; SCCS; SACM
- Theories/literature: Referencing literature and/or specifically student development theory to simply state that X support leads to good student development.
 - SCCS

Appendix: Department Conversations Questions

Strengths Questions

1. How would you describe the kinds of goals you have for your work with students? How do you define “success” in terms of what students get out of your work?
2. We’d like to get a sense of connections outside of the Division of Student Affairs that you consider important to your work. Who do you currently work with outside of the Division that you think is critical to your success?
3. What about within the Division? Who do you currently work with inside of the Division that you think is critical to your success?

Opportunities Questions

1. As you know, colleges and universities are often concerned about the extent to which students are retained and persist toward graduation in a timely manner. How does your role and department’s work contribute to this measurement of student success?
2. We all have different kinds of contact with students, so we all likely hear different things. Are there student needs or requests you are aware of that you do not have the ability to provide, whether that’s because you don’t have the capacity or because you do not think it would be appropriate to provide it?

Aspirations Questions

1. Your work involves interactions with students, whether you are intentionally creating specific student experiences or serving as a resource to students on a by-request basis. Could you talk us through what an “ideal” experience for students interacting with your department looks like?
 - What do you hope students feel and believe as a result of their interactions with you?
 - What do you hope students understand and learn as a result of their interactions with you?
2. What would you say are some of the challenges or barriers you face in being able to effectively accomplish your goals?
3. What do you think would need to change about your department (e.g., resources, finances, facilities) to accomplish the ideal kinds of successes that you’ve talked about during this discussion?

Results Questions

1. Please share what you consider as success in your work. How does your work lead to you achieving that success? How are you currently measuring success personally and as a department?
2. Do you have any sets of standards or values that guide your work? These could be things that you have developed yourself or things from professional organizations or research in your field.

Final Question

1. Do you have any other things you think the strategic planning committee should know about your department, the work you do, and your vision for the future?