

Background

Georgia Highlands College began its strategic plan refresh in the summer of 2024 with a survey to assess the alignment of the strategic plan with the current direction of the college and the new [USG Strategic Plan](#). This survey was offered to all employees at the college. Leadership reviewed the results and agreed to update the strategic plan. The survey is [published online](#).

The Department of Institutional Effectiveness and Strategic Initiatives conducted a SWOT analysis to inform the strategic plan refresh. The results from the SWOT analysis are also [published online](#).

Based on the results from the survey and SWOT analysis, GHC then conducted nine focus groups: two in Cartersville, two in Rome, one in Marietta, one in Paulding, and three virtually. Fifty-nine employees, four community members, and three students attended. The focus groups were advertised via GHC Inform, “Everyone on All Campus” emails, campus-specific emails, and targeted emails. The following section details the key findings of the focus groups.

Key Findings

The focus group protocol followed a semi-structured interview approach, allowing participants to openly share their ideas and opinions on each strategic priority. Active listening, note-taking, and transcripts were used to conduct a thematic analysis. Below are the prominent themes that emerged from the discussions of each strategic priority.

Access & Opportunity

GHC will provide access and opportunities to high-quality academic programs by focusing on comprehensive enrollment management processes and employee recruitment and retention processes across the institution.

- There is little to no discussion of quality teaching in the strategic priority list. This priority may provide an opportunity to include it.
- Participants suggested shortening the strategic priority to: “GHC will provide access and opportunity to high-quality academic programs.”
- Several participants discussed affordability as it relates to access.
- Students spoke about how much employee interactions matter to their overall success. They stressed the importance of the availability of employees, as well as employee retention being important to their overall college experience.
- Many Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) were discussed. The most prominent were:
 - Overall enrollment
 - BA/BS enrollment
 - Retention rates
 - First generation student retention
 - Financial aid awarded
 - Job placement rates

Inclusivity & Engagement

GHC will engage with our communities to ensure we meet the needs as a state college and to meet the needs of those diverse communities by being inclusive in all that we do.

- There were several discussions about the phrasing of this strategic priority, with suggestions to rename it “Community Impact” or “Regional Impact” to better align with the USG Strategic Plan.
- Participants debated whether “community” refers to the internal GHC community or the broader service region. If the focus is internal, considerations could include professional development funding and/or employee retention.
- There was also discussion about the “as a state college” in the strategic priority and if that is a positive or negative.
- The focus groups encouraged viewing this priority through the lens of the college’s overall impact on the region, particularly in supporting broad groups such as first-generation students, adult learners, and non-traditional students.
- Students stressed they would like to engage more with their faculty members and other employees at the college. They suggested hosting more family friendly events, as well as online events.
- Many Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) were discussed. The most prominent were:
 - Alumni Engagement
 - First generation enrollment or success
 - Adult student enrollment or success
 - Non-traditional student enrollment or success
 - Economic impact
 - Employee retention rates
 - Community events or visitors to campus
 - Career placement rates
 - Economic impact dollars

Student Success

GHC will provide services, experiences, and resources that support student success across all modalities, programs, and courses.

- Many participants discussed the inclusion of the word “modalities” in the strategic priority, as well as the absence of a clear value statement.
- This priority focuses on “what” rather than “how.”
- The focus groups noted that “student success” can be a nebulous concept and difficult to measure. One group suggested asking students before graduation, “Did we help you get to where you wanted to be?”
- One group mentioned that some students feel misled by GHC because they cannot access all student services at every location, despite that being the stated goal.
- Another group emphasized viewing student success through the lens of resources provided to employees, as well as setting clear expectations and widely sharing that information.

- Several groups discussed how 3-year and 6-year IPEDS rates may not be the best measures for GHC students, as many are working adults or unable to attend college full-time.
- Several students discussed issues relating to their overall success. These issues included lack of resources, childcare, and work/life balance. They also shared that the interpersonal relationships and awareness of resources offered by the college are essential.
- Many Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) were discussed, with the most prominent being:
 - Retention rates
 - Graduation rates
 - Post-graduation outcomes
 - ABC or DWF rates
 - Some post-graduation measure of success
 - General education course success rates
 - Number of withdrawals

Efficiency & Effectiveness

GHC will create and maintain a culture of continuous improvement allowing GHC to maintain low tuition and fees while increasing services to students to support academic achievement.

- All focus groups noted that the words “Efficiency” and “Effectiveness” do not appear in the full text of the strategic priority. They suggested renaming it “Responsible Stewardship” to align with the USG Strategic Plan.
- Focus groups also discussed how the strategic priority’s mention of “maintaining low tuition and fees while increasing services” is problematic, as GHC does not set tuition and fees.
- Some groups suggested incorporating employee-related metrics, such as salaries, retention, and new degrees earned, into this revised strategic priority.
- Discussions of 3-year and 6-year IPEDS graduation rates also emerged in conversations about this priority.
- Traditional institutional health metrics were considered, including operating budget, enrollment efficiencies, and fundraising activities.
- Students commented that this pillar sounded “like fluff.” They also said overall graduation rates did not matter to their college choice.
- Many Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) were discussed, with the most prominent being:
 - Employee retention rates
 - Employee salaries
 - Time to completion rates
 - Low-cost/no-cost courses

Conclusion & Next Steps

The focus groups provided valuable insights that will help refine Georgia Highlands College's strategic priorities to better reflect the needs and aspirations of its diverse stakeholders. Themes such as affordability, employee engagement, regional impact, and accessible student services emerged across all discussions.

These findings will guide the next phase of the strategic plan refresh, which includes drafting revised strategic priorities, refining measurable outcomes, and engaging stakeholders in the review of the updated plan before final approval and implementation.