



Executive Summary: Evaluation of the Florida Consortium of Metropolitan Research Universities

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INTRODUCTION

The Florida Consortium of Metropolitan Research Universities (“the Consortium”) strengthens Florida’s talent pipeline through sharing ideas and scalable solutions to accelerate learner achievement and access to economic opportunity. The Consortium is collectively committed to advancing the success of first-generation, diverse, and underrepresented learners. It leverages the unique assets of three metropolitan-based research universities: Florida International University in Miami, University of Central Florida in Orlando, and University of South Florida in Tampa Bay. In September 2020, the Consortium engaged Equal Measure to conduct a learning and outcomes-focused evaluation to understand its effectiveness in accelerating student achievement, increasing career success, and advancing momentum in Florida’s major urban areas.

The evaluation approach focused on three of the five goal areas in the Consortium’s 2019-2024 Strategic Plan—**Student Achievement, Career Success, and Fostering Conditions for Success**.¹ The evaluation relied on document review and qualitative data collected from a range of stakeholders in the Consortium as well as external partners in Florida. The scope was designed to answer a set of key questions aligned with early conversations with Consortium staff, the Helios Education Foundation, and operational leads at each university:

- In what ways and to what extent is the Consortium and its three university partners making progress on its student-centered goals through a selection of project-based initiatives?
- What processes and implicit factors undergird the Consortium’s approach and effectiveness?
- How can the Consortium leverage its external communications and partner relationships to advance its work?
- How can the Consortium continue to track its progress and refine its approaches with indicators tailored to its impact?

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The evaluation documented the effectiveness of the Consortium and its process strategies to foster conditions for change and success; and highlighted progress to date in two key project areas – transfer and career success.

The Consortium is expert at elevating ideas across university partners and making coordinated action possible. The Consortium is considered a “model” for convening university stakeholders in ways that promote cooperation and leverage institutional strengths. An intentional, sequenced approach has emerged from the Consortium’s major convenings and projects over the years. The Consortium brings the universities a level of focus and supports that allow staff to make resonant and concrete changes more efficiently. These efforts appear seamlessly executed, and, at their most effective, lead to critical policy and practice changes within each institution.

“It lightens the load to know we are all moving in the same direction, and with our Presidents.”

INTERNAL CONSORTIUM PARTNER

¹ The two remaining Strategic Plan Goals are *Operate with Excellence* and *Advance the Consortium*.



The Consortium's broad and enduring value is its readiness to meet complex institutional and partnership priorities effectively and efficiently. The Consortium can better communicate its most potent asset – its unique, dynamic, and strategic approach to institutional change on behalf of student success. Even as understanding of the Consortium has improved, some misalignment between its activities and its indicators of success, (primarily, student outcomes) continues to create confusion and raise questions. There is potential to develop a singular message and comprehensive brand resonant with broader internal and external audiences, emphasizing the Consortium's ability to take on large-scale, emerging student issues nimbly and effectively.

The Consortium is increasingly advancing narratives to support an equitable approach to Florida's future prosperity for residents, communities, and the state. In response to the racial justice movements in 2020, the university presidents confidently tapped the Consortium to lead Year of Reflection conversations amongst all three universities. Internally and externally, the Consortium is messaging a learner-centered commitment and helping others recognize the true diversity of students in Florida's metro regions in terms of age, race, and ethnicity as well as recognizing students as parents, caregivers, and full-time employees. For funders looking to scale the impact of their investments, the Consortium has great advantages to advance change across three major regions and benefit students and alumni, most of whom choose to live, work, and raise families in Florida.

Leveraging the power of external partnerships is nascent; dedicating more time, communications, and intention holds promise. The Consortium has identified a set of higher education, nonprofit, and business partners working in complementary sectors or regions and aligned with its priorities. They perceive the Consortium as a strong partnership, creating space for university stakeholders to learn from peers further along in their practices. However, there is interest among partners to learn more about the Consortium, potentially collaborating with greater strategic, actionable purpose and collective action toward systems change and state-level advocacy.

The evaluation team looked closely at two current projects—Transfer Success and Career Success—to understand the Consortium's contributions to measures of student success. As part of the analysis, we identified a set of process and intermediate outcomes that speak to the Consortium's efforts in more timely and direct ways. Here we present key takeaways:

Transfer Success

- Buoyed by the passage of a statewide transfer metric, Transfer Success is increasingly becoming an area of prominence for the Consortium and its member institutions who are well positioned to meet the state's goals. As a convener, the Consortium is elevating the conversation around transfer success and providing multiple avenues to strengthen these efforts at member institutions and beyond.
- The Consortium plays an essential role in enabling the growth of transfer success within and across members, as well as influencing efforts at non-member institutions. Through the opportunities facilitated by the Consortium to come together as peers, staff working on transfer success have strengthened relationships. By presenting an explicit forum for concentration on transfer success, the Consortium brings an intentionality to efforts which stakeholders suggest might otherwise have proceeded ad hoc and in silos.

"The partnerships we form across the institutions help us help students. It helps us with efficiencies and strategies. You might think we are competitors, but we are all working together. The power of partnerships is front and center in my mind."

INTERNAL CONSORTIUM PARTNER



PROGRESS ON TRANSFER SUCCESS OUTCOMES

- **PARTNERSHIP:** Creativity, experimentation, and ongoing connections among partners fostered; Enhanced learning on approaches and pitfalls from experienced perspectives
- **INSTITUTIONAL:** Improved access to latest research, trends, and ongoing professional development for key staff; Helped fulfill departmental goals and ensures compliance; Enhanced buy-in from decision makers, executives, and board
- **FIELD:** Included non-Consortium postsecondary partners for inclusive and coordinated learning and exchange

Career Success

- Partners are learning to integrate data-informed career resources and workforce trends into their practices. The Consortium contributes to institutional goals by elevating effective use of data to serve the developmental and career outcomes of students. By using a mutual set of data points and technologies, Consortium partners have the potential to advance learning and accelerate success at their home institutions.
- The Consortium is a key facilitator and data broker between faculty, career services staff, and field partners who want to design pathways toward high-demand areas. The Consortium's Executive Director "speaks the language" of the workforce and business sector, helping to identify and foster meaningful relationships with key external partners. In addition, the Consortium has become a visible advocate in the field for underrepresented students (e.g., first generation, Latinx, adults) and more equitable economic, business, and workforce approaches statewide.
- Vendor engagement and software cost sharing are key mechanisms of the Consortium's career success goal but may not be a unifying force across institutions. The Consortium is leading conversations with the universities to use data more strategically and purchase the same systems to potentially reduce costs while learning together. However, these tactics are a just a segment of efforts needed to ensure career success for each university's students. The Consortium will benefit from a deep understanding of distinct career strategies and resource deployment at each university to ensure the collaborative work continues to be resonant.

"The Consortium has the highest.... probability of working with first-generation students to break the cycle of inter-generational poverty, helping get students and parents job skills and an educational degree."

EXTERNAL CONSORTIUM PARTNER

PROGRESS ON CAREER SUCCESS OUTCOMES

- **PARTNERSHIP AND FIELD:** Shared knowledge of state economic modeling, careers, and labor market data, including equity-related trends
- **INSTITUTIONAL:** Shared use of career services platform to enhance learning and effective strategies across partners; Improved capacity for data-informed review of in-demand/marketable skills, academic programs, and curricula



CONSIDERATIONS

With the evaluation findings in hand, the Consortium is positioned to better understand its role in complex institutional and state-level change and refine its strategies to deepen impact. From the evaluation findings, we offer considerations in three key and interrelated areas: Learning, Communications, and Strategic Use of Data.

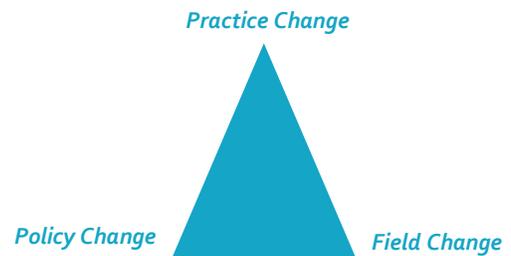
1. Ground the Consortium in a resonant learning framework

In future evaluation and learning efforts, center the Consortium's most successful outcomes that are critical to student success. Across its projects and evolution, the Consortium has effectively impacted practice, policies, and—while still emergent—the field. Naming these **three forms of change** will guide stakeholders involved in the work to identify appropriate tactics, track their progress toward the right form of change, and know when they have reached the desired outcome.

2. Communications

University and external stakeholders have an improved understanding of the Consortium since its early years, and those involved in working groups and convenings see how the partnership aids campus efforts toward student success and meeting state benchmarks. The Consortium's efforts to tailor messages to different audiences are working well. The Consortium would benefit from a "refresh" of its branding efforts to help all stakeholders understand not just what it does (which is often tied to projects of the moment), but how it works and its commitment to institutional change in service of learners and equitable outcomes. Three additional considerations for communicating the Consortium's significance include a focus on:

- **Fluidity:** The Consortium's strong and unique position to lead and facilitate collaborative and informed institutional change on emerging issues critical to student success.
- **Forms of Change:** Amplifying the practice, policy, and field change outcomes attributable to the Consortium in service of student success.
- **Values:** Emphasizing the space the Consortium creates for learning, vulnerability, collaboration, and thoughtful sequencing that is rarely found in higher education; in addition, a commitment to success for Latinx, first generation, adults, transfer and limited income students across campuses and across Florida.



3. Strategic Data Use

The Consortium has made significant strides in aligning data indicators across the three university partners. Its capacity to determine common indicators, align definitions, develop sharing agreements, and create a process for seamless collection, analysis, and use is very impressive. However, internal and external stakeholders would benefit from more strategic and grounded use of data, with **intermediate markers of progress** that are formatively useful as the Consortium's progress and continuous improvement.

The evaluation report offers advice on strategic types of data and tools to distinctly support policy and practice change, continuous improvement, and public commitment efforts. The Consortium is



well positioned to draw in experts from three university systems to guide strategic use of data, leveraging partners' expertise in analytic thinking, research, facilitation, visualization, and communications.

About Equal Measure

[Equal Measure](#) is a Philadelphia-based nonprofit consultancy working with national and regional foundations, nonprofits, and public entities to advance social change. Equal Measure offers program design, evaluation through a wide range of methodologies, capacity building, technical assistance, and communications services to help those who do good, do even better. For more than 30 years, we've partnered with clients across a broad spectrum of content areas, sharing fresh insights and translating good ideas into meaningful change—strengthening our clients' efforts to make our communities healthier, more equitable, and more inclusive.