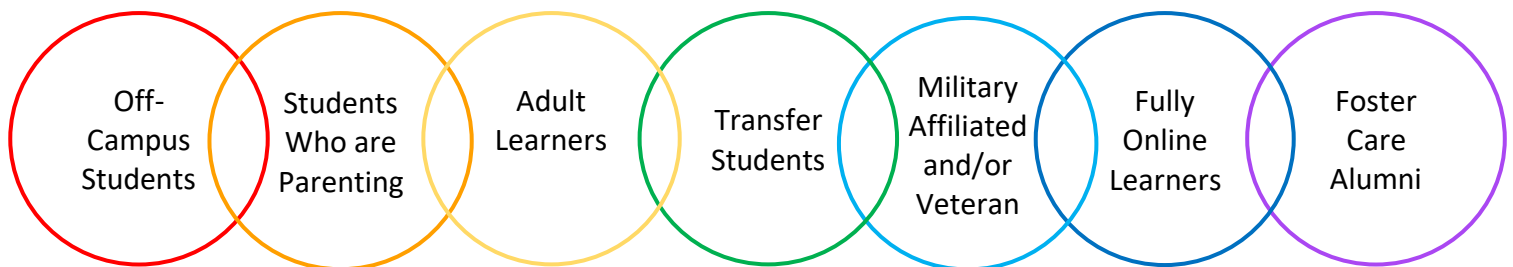# Starting with Why in University Life: Expanding Access Through Collaboration and Consensus for Contemporary Student Communities

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Presented by Contemporary Student Services, George Mason University

Off-Campus Students • Students Who are Parenting • Adult Learners • Transfer Students • Military Affiliated and/or Veteran • Fully Online Learners • Foster Care Alumni

The Issue:

Post-secondary institutions often focus on the 18-23-year-old residential student but that isn't the most relevant student community at Mason. Contemporary, or nontraditional, student populations are growing nationally on college campuses but not everyone has an understanding of their needs and how to incorporate them into their resources, programs, and classrooms. Contemporary students need accessible campus services and flexible design because their most salient identity is usual not that of *student*. While they are more likely to take their education more seriously than their traditional 18 to 23-year-old counterparts, campuses and classrooms are not usual designed with their needs in mind.

How do we shift institutional norms, administrative pressures, and historical assumptions to incorporate flexibility, understanding, and meaningful efforts for contemporary students into campus services and classrooms?

Our Work:

In Contemporary Student Services, our focus is dual pronged. While we have student-facing components in our office, we are also institutionally and systemically focused. It is our mission to create environments that are conducive to academic success for contemporary students and disrupt normative views of who is the college student of today.

The Tools:

Consensus building is a broad term that encompasses many collaborative styles in creating a comprehensive and sustainable effort to assess and seal a gap or solve a problem. It is a tool that supports organizations, teams, and communities to be solution-oriented when dealing with complex, controversial, and/or contextually shifting problems. The other component that is often not discussed fully is the need for transparency within consensus building. As an institution, office, or as an individual educator it is important to be willing to learn publicly. Transparency lends itself towards accountability and dialogue. Allowing for more opportunities to learn solutions we may not have thought of alone or in a hegemonic group.

Our Results:

Through relationship building, learning opportunities, and creating a shared understanding about the importance of contemporary students at and to Mason we are beginning to build more robust and tangible initiatives that are cross-functional and network driven. The presence of contemporary students are becoming normalized and so are their needs. Units that we work with closely have also shared that they have found that by taking into consideration the needs of contemporary students they are able to create a general climate of accessibility and equity.

Innes, Judith E. "Consensus Building: Clarifications for the Critics." *Planning theory (London, England)* 3.1 (2016): 5–20. Web.

Innes, Judith E, and David E Booher. "Consensus Building as Role Playing and Bricolage: Toward a Theory of Collaborative Planning." *Journal of the American Planning Association* 65.1 (1999): 9–26. Web.

Flood, Robert Louis. *Rethinking the Fifth Discipline : Learning Within the Unknowable*, Taylor & Francis Group, 1999.

Sample Consensus Process:

Stage One: Introduce and clarify the issue.
Create a shared understanding of the issues at hand and the information that is already known.

Stage Two: Create Dialogue
Make space for stakeholders to share their needs and opinions before attempting to solve the problem. Build sincere relationships with your stakeholders. What are their reservations? What are their motivations? What are their experiences?

Stage 3: Explore ideas in a Broad Discussion
Come up with lots of multiple ways forward. Explore the pros and cons of different options. Identify key concerns, needs and objectives.

Stage 4: Form a Proposal
Look for a solution that meets everyone's most important needs. This might involve weaving together elements of different ideas.

Stage 5: Amend the Proposal
Look for changes that will make the proposal even stronger. Look for voices and perspectives that may not have been incorporated.

Stage 6: Test for Agreement or Understanding
Clearly state the proposal and check whether there is real agreement.
Ie: Any **reservations**? Do we have **consensus**?

Stage 7: Make a Plan for Implementation
Make a clear plan. What are the logistics? Create a timeline that includes tasks and deadlines. Delegate responsiblities and opportunities to check in.