RAISING HIGHER:
OneGW's PATH to PREEMINENCE

Foundational Excellence Initiative
Final Report

Fall 2026

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Why GW Launched the Foundational Excellence Initiative

In 2024 and 2025, GW developed a new strategic framework, "Raising Higher: OneGW's Path to Preeminence." Early drafts of the framework were focused on strengthening GW's interdisciplinary research ecosystem and improving student success outcomes. Throughout the framework development process, however, the university heard consistent feedback that unless we fixed certain administrative operations, progress in research and student success would be difficult. This community feedback led to the creation of the framework's third priority: Strengthening our Foundation for Excellence.

In recent years, despite the university's best efforts to increase revenue and contain costs, GW's expenses have grown faster than our revenues, creating a significant structural deficit. The costs of the financial challenges related to the MFA, and the efforts to finally resolve them, also significantly widened this gap. Additionally, GW, like most institutions of higher education, is navigating a convergence of headwinds with serious financial implications. These include enrollment declines driven by intensifying competition from peers recruiting our admitted undergraduate students, declining international enrollment due to visa constraints, and softening graduate enrollment due in part to changes to federal financial aid. Inflation is accelerating rising operating costs in largely non-discretionary areas such as infrastructure, utilities, transportation, technology, cybersecurity, compliance, and interest expenses. These factors make this pillar of our strategic framework even more important.

In response to both the feedback from the framework development process and these financial challenges, GW launched the Foundational Excellence Initiative ("FEI" or the "Initiative") in February 2026. FEI was a structured effort to identify, evaluate, and prioritize a set of opportunities to contain costs, generate new revenue, and improve operational effectiveness – priorities that leadership could stand behind for the next several years, and that would resonate with the GW community.

President Ellen M. Granberg appointed an FEI Steering Committee (see Appendix) of GW faculty and staff to inform and guide the opportunity development process. Steering Committee members were chosen for their proximity to the university's day-to-day operations, which helped provide insight into the likelihood of opportunity success. GW also engaged Huron Consulting Group as its partner to design the Initiative, analyze institutional data, and facilitate a process that gathered input from across the GW community and equipped university leadership to evaluate and prioritize opportunities. The Steering Committee's expertise and knowledge of GW, combined with Huron's analytical support, created a framework for evaluating opportunities with both institutional context and practical implementation in mind.

The Steering Committee identified opportunities that reflected input and ideas from the GW community, grounded in data, and validated by functional leaders. The Initiative also considered ways to align with and support parallel university initiatives already underway, including the budget model redesign, a finance alignment effort, the AI@GW Mapping exercise, and the strategic framework working groups making recommendations around the research and student success priorities in the strategic framework.



Identifying the Opportunities

Throughout, this process has been guided by a commitment to GW's mission and its people. The Foundational Excellence Initiative engaged nearly 500 participants across GW's Board of Trustees, executive leadership, the GW Leaders Forum, and faculty, staff, and student leaders, through individual interviews and listening sessions. The Steering Committee also hosted a feedback website to receive ideas and recommendations from the broader GW community.

Across this engagement, several consistent priorities for attention emerged, including overly complicated administrative processes; fragmented systems and data sources; duplicative tools and platforms; reliance on informal workarounds and personal networks; and a desire for greater clarity around decision-making and institutional priorities. Taken together, the feedback reflected a broader desire for greater transparency, simpler processes, clearer roles and decision pathways, stronger alignment across schools and units, and consistent communication.

Functional leaders across procurement, human resources, facilities, real estate, construction and management, public safety, enrollment, student affairs, finance, and technology provided substantial data and participated in meetings to validate and review applicable operational realities and institutional context. The Steering Committee met several times between February and August to provide feedback on opportunities.

This process ultimately yielded 90 initial opportunities in two categories:

» **Financial impact opportunities** focused on cost containment and revenue enhancement and included initiatives expected to generate measurable financial impact. These opportunities span areas such as procurement, organizational structure, academic operations, enrollment, and student services.

» **Organizational efficiency enablers** focused on improving the underlying processes and tools that support university operations. These opportunities address challenges such as fragmented processes, limited data visibility, and inconsistent controls that can make it difficult to operate efficiently. While these opportunities are expected to improve operations, several, such as those related to procurement, are also expected to have positive financial impacts.

Of this initial group, the Steering Committee Co-chairs eliminated approximately 35 opportunities, either because they were not well suited to the needs and context of the GW community or because their expected return on investment was not significant enough to merit the time and effort required to implement them.

The Steering Committee then evaluated the remaining 55 opportunities against the Initiative's criteria of potential financial impact, feasibility of implementation, and degree of community impact, and advanced approximately one-third that showed the strongest combination of impact and feasibility for further review and validation.

Ultimately, 15 opportunities were presented to GW's Executive Leadership Team (ELT), each accompanied by an assessment of its potential financial impact, level of effort to implement, degree of community impact, and alignment with GW's broader goals and objectives. After thorough discussion, the ELT coalesced around three opportunity areas to move forward for immediate implementation. Together, these priorities pair near-term financial and operational benefits with improvements to the GW community's everyday experience.

With the Initiative's work complete and these opportunities now identified, the work now shifts to the university leadership to determine how best to implement them, closely engaging the GW community members most directly affected to design action plans that reflect GW's unique needs and operational realities.



Prioritizing the Opportunities

PRIORITIES FOR THE NEAR-TERM

The 15 opportunities presented to the Executive Leadership Team comprise an informed set of options that we now have available. Any of the opportunities identified by the Initiative may be considered for implementation as priorities, resources, and institutional needs evolve over time. However, the opportunities highlighted in this section include those that should meaningfully help address GW's structural gap and/or improve how we function as they are implemented over the next few years. In other words, this work strengthens GW's financial foundation while also removing "sand from the gears," making it easier for us to do work across the university.

» **Streamlining the Hiring Process** – Hiring is one of GW's most complicated processes, involving schools, divisions, HR, and Finance. Huron's analysis found that the current process includes multiple reviews, handoffs, and varying approval practices across units, which often extends timelines and creates added work for both the teams that manage hiring and the managers who depend on it. Streamlining the hiring process is a shared opportunity expected to benefit everyone involved and will involve reviewing approval requirements for efficiency, consolidating handoffs and approval steps to reduce time-to-hire, and establishing mechanisms for visibility into hiring actions.

» **Procurement and Strategic Sourcing** – GW's current decentralized procurement environment limits visibility into overall spending, reduces the university's collective buying power and negotiation leverage, and creates missed opportunities for cost savings. Redesigning how GW manages procurement can build the capacity to be more strategic in how it procures goods and services. This will necessarily involve modernizing the procurement management platform, consolidating vendors, negotiating enterprise-wide agreements with core vendors, expanding use of systems like the Concur travel portal, and simplifying the expense report approval process to reduce administrative burden.

» **Strengthening Student Health Services through Third-Party Billing** – GW currently does not bill health insurance for services provided by the Student Health Center, forgoing a potentially significant revenue source that could be reinvested to expand the quality and range of these services. Any implementation would include privacy protections from the outset, particularly for sensitive services, including reproductive and gender-affirming care and behavioral and mental health services. Students' use of these kinds of sensitive services would not be billed to insurance unless students make the choice to do so. Beyond these core privacy safeguards, implementation carries real operational considerations, including the need for dedicated billing capability, provider training in medical coding, attention to provider capacity as visit volume grows, and staffing and operations, including promoting use of the Center, that would scale alongside revenue. These considerations will be fully assessed as we determine how best to implement this opportunity.

POSSIBLE OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE

Beyond the priorities identified for immediate action, the Initiative identified additional opportunities to strengthen GW's financial foundation and remove the "sand from the gears" by improving operational efficiency that GW may pursue in the future. Any chosen opportunities would be advanced thoughtfully, in coordination with related university efforts and with careful attention to institutional tradeoffs, to support GW's people, mission, and long-term sustainability. Some of these opportunities include:

» **Optimize Personnel and Organizational Structures** – Streamline administrative processes, including through greater standardization across units where appropriate, and modernize workflows to create efficiencies that can be used to invest in staff development and retraining, and shift open vacancies to high-growth areas.

» **Technology and Digital Infrastructure** – With a new CITO, review GW's technology to identify opportunities to reduce, consolidate, or enhance tools and platforms, in coordination with the AI@GW Mapping effort and an ongoing IT assessment.

» **Space and Physical Plant** – Review GW's physical footprint and identify options to lower operating and maintenance costs by deactivating or demolishing facilities with low utilization and/or high deferred maintenance needs. This would be done in concert with the 2027 Campus Plan currently in development, as well as ongoing efforts to reduce GW's occupancy of leased spaces.

REJECTED OPPORTUNITIES

Of the many opportunities generated through the Initiative, GW's leadership chose not to pursue several. These include reducing tuition benefits for current employees, which are highly valued by faculty and staff, increasing parking rates, and increasing student fees. These decisions were guided by the same considerations used throughout the review process: potential financial impact, feasibility of implementation, and the anticipated impact on the GW community.



Conclusion

Since the Initiative launched, GW has made meaningful progress toward greater financial stability through broader university actions and is on stronger footing than it was at the outset of this work. At the same time, the underlying financial and operational pressures facing the university have not disappeared and continue to evolve. The opportunities identified through FEI therefore come at an important moment: one in which GW can build on recent progress while continuing to address the structural challenges that remain. By acting together as OneGW, remaining agile, and being willing to reexamine how we educate and operate, the university can strengthen its long-term resilience and better position itself to invest in its people, mission, and strategic priorities.

The Foundational Excellence Initiative represents one piece of a broader, coordinated effort to advance GW's strategic framework and strengthen the university's operational and financial foundation. Throughout fall 2026, GW will develop and implement near-term plans and socialize them within the broader university community. This work will include action planning with functional leaders, project planning with clear milestones and ownership, and defining resource, risk, and change-management steps required to move forward.

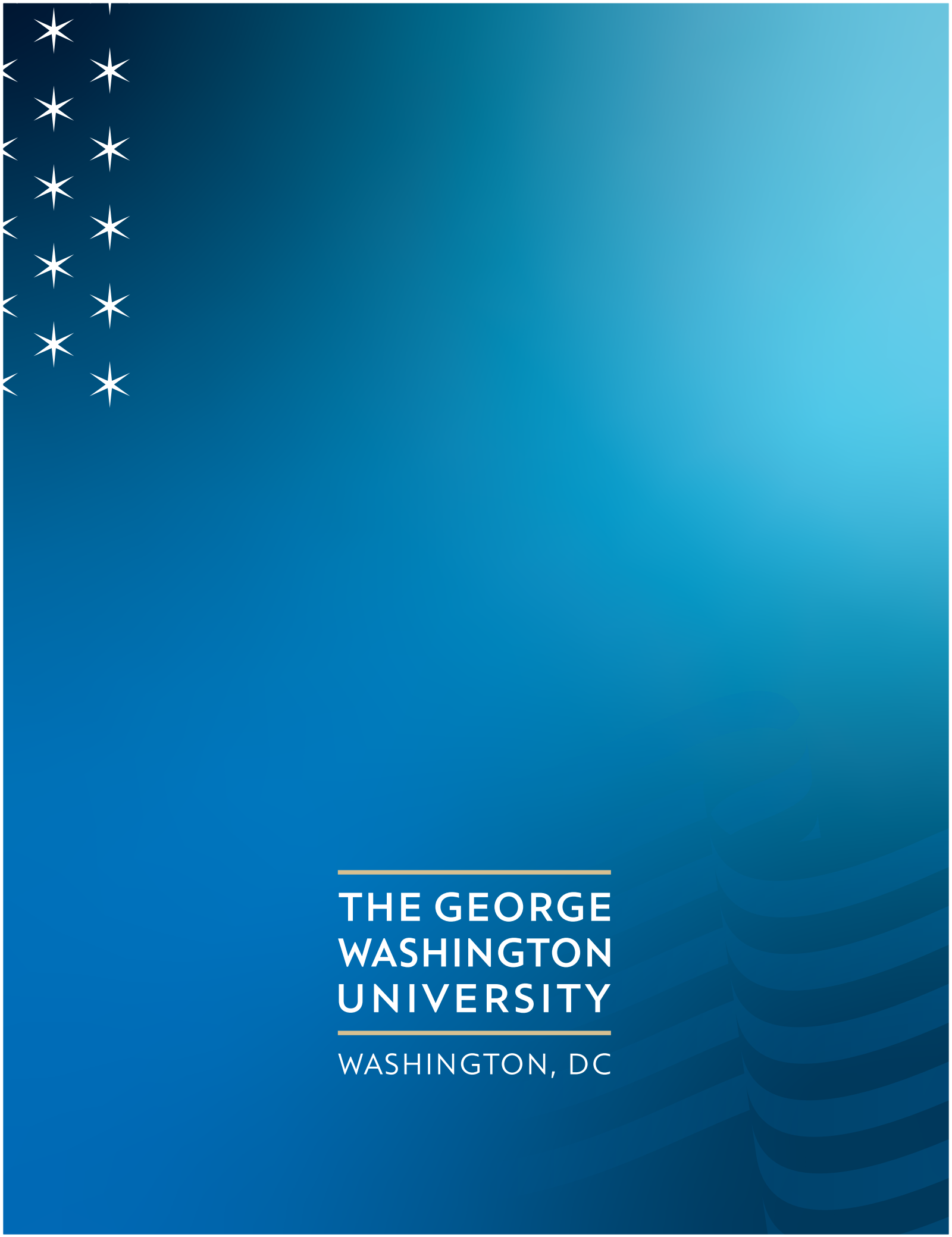
The opportunities described in this report are grounded in extensive community engagement, rigorous data analysis and benchmarking, vetting by the Steering Committee, and validation with the functional leaders closest to the work at GW. As these opportunities move into implementation, the university will continue to engage faculty, staff, students, and leaders to thoughtfully and deliberately make meaningful change. Taken together, these opportunities reflect a proactive, structured approach to strengthening GW's financial future and administrative operations, one that pursues meaningful change in service of the university's mission and community.

Appendix: Foundational Excellence Initiative Steering Committee

The following faculty and staff members* served on the Foundational Excellence Initiative Steering Committee, which provided project direction, institutional expertise and perspective, and vetted opportunities identified through the Initiative.

- **J. Zoë Beckerman**, Teaching Professor and Vice Chair, Department of Health Policy and Management, GWSPH (Co-chair)
- **Scott Mory**, Senior Vice President and Chief of Staff (Co-chair)
- **Kasey Brzezanski**, Managing Director, Financial Planning and Analysis, GW Law and SEAS
- **Jodi Caldwell**, Director, Digital Transformation and Planning, GWIT
- **Katie Cloud**, University Registrar
- **Tarek El-Ghazawi**, Professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering, SEAS
- **Nick Gingue**, Associate Vice President for Campus Operations
- **Susan Kulp**, Professor of Accountancy, GWSB
- **Rodney Lake**, Teaching Instructor of Finance; Director, GW Investment Institute, GWSB
- **Eric Lawrence**, Chair, Department of Political Science, CCAS
- **Jennifer Lopez**, Associate Vice President, Total Rewards
- **Lorenzo Norris**, Senior Associate Dean for Education, SMHS
- **Steve Schooner**, Professor of Government Procurement Law, GW Law
- **Jason Zara**, Senior Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, SEAS

**Names and titles reflect those in place when the Steering Committee concluded its work in August 2026.*


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