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TENNESSEE
SYSTEM

**Insights and Recommendations Gleaned from Focus Group Research
Re: the UT System Acquisition of Martin Methodist College**

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BACKGROUND

On December 9, 2020, the University of Tennessee (UT) Board of Trustees voted to give approval for UT System leaders to continue negotiations which could lead to the potential acquisition of Martin Methodist College (MMC) in Pulaski, Tennessee.

In addition, on the same day, the Martin Methodist Board of Trustees voted to unanimously approve the merger. The potential acquisition must also gain approvals by the Tennessee General Assembly, the regional accreditor Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, the United Methodist Church of Tennessee and the Tennessee Building Commission.

If final approval is granted, the MMC campus in Pulaski, Tennessee, would become the fourth undergraduate campus in the UT system, joining the UT Knoxville, UT Chattanooga and UT Martin.

As part of a due diligence process requested by the UT Board of Trustees, further research is currently underway. For a first stage of primary research, qualitative research in the form focus groups were employed to gather thoughts and opinions of important stakeholder groups regarding the potential acquisition. Input was sought from current MMC students, faculty and staff members, alumni of the college, Giles County business owners, Pulaski city leaders, and influential voices in the southern middle Tennessee region.

The following research questions guided the development of the focus group moderator's guide (Appendix 1) and will serve as the basis of analysis for key themes:

- How do stakeholders feel about the possibility of MMC being part of the UT System?
- How do stakeholders describe Giles County and that part of the state from a geographic perspective?
- What does the athletic program at MMC mean to stakeholders and why?

METHOD

A total of 60 individuals were recruited for participation via email invitation from Randy Boyd and the UT System. Courtney Childers, Ph.D. then followed up with each individual via a personal email to further stress the importance of the research and request participation in the online focus groups. Willing, available participants signed up for one focus group time slot online.

As a result, four focus groups were held on Monday, December 14 and Tuesday, December 15, 2020 via Zoom with 33 (n=33) individuals participating (Appendix 2 for a full list of attendees). Note: Only one current MMC student signed up for participation. It was decided that waiting to speak with students at a later date and in person would be best for this phase of the primary research.

Each focus group lasted approximately one hour and was transcribed. Courtney Childers, Ph.D. moderated all of the focus groups with UT System Director of Marketing, Ellie Amador, present to answer system-related questions outside the scope of the focus group. A total of 52 single-spaced transcription pages resulted for analysis. The moderator kept extensive handwritten notes during all four focus groups to help the researcher with analysis.

Transcripts were read closely multiple times and codes were used to assign meaning. Interpretive codes helped the researcher answer the research questions and accumulate key themes from participants. Key insights resulting from the focus groups are overviewed in the next section.

KEY INSIGHTS

Themes emerged to address the research questions provided earlier. Those themes highlight (1) Strong positive sentiment for the opportunity of MMC joining the UT System, (2) New campus, new naming ideas and (3) Prioritize campus name; Athletic branding will follow. Each of these themes is fleshed out with direct quotes provided in the following pages.

Strong Positive Sentiment for the Opportunity of MMC Joining the UT System

To gain an understanding of sentiment with various stakeholder groups around the acquisition of MMC, focus group participants were asked a series of questions about what the “word on the street” is regarding the acquisition. Overwhelmingly, a key theme of positivity for the opportunity emerged. Many participants noted an “excitement among the community” when first hearing of the possibility of MMC being the newest UT system campus.

Other words used to describe this merger included “growth” and “potential” for the small, rural community. When probed further, a participant highlighted the “untapped potential in Giles County” by explaining:

Well, part of it goes to location. Part of it goes to the fact that we've got much lower than average educational attainment in Giles County. And I don't think it's because we're stupid. I think it's because of lack of access and this is going to expand our access. And I think it is also going to create a good synergy between business and community and the brain power potential that we have in the community.

Notable stakeholder groups with a vested interest and positive attitude to the acquisition include business owners, faculty and staff at MMC and city/county leaders. One participant, an alumna of MMC, student athlete and former employee, shared:

I have nothing but positive things about the transition. As you said, I am different, I come from all sorts of aspects. I live in the community now, I'm on that council, I've played sports there, I worked there. I mean, I have heard some people have some concerns. I think that the positives outweigh the concerns in any aspect I have looked at from the areas.

Several MMC faculty members also shared their excitement by providing the direct examples of how the potential merger with the UT system would benefit diverse areas of campus life:

I think that among the faculty, people are very excited about it and for many of the reasons that Kim mentioned, the potential for growth and the potential to reach out more to the community in Southern Middle Tennessee.

I do think that Martin is an opportunity for a lot of students that would not go to college otherwise. It offers them that closeness and the personal relationship with faculty and coaches. I feel like we are their family away from family because that's what they tell us. And it puts a lot on our shoulders. Not to sound poor us, but it is a lot right now without the proper infrastructure, funding sources. We have to come up with it on our own. And so it seems like a challenge for me that is maybe going to come to fruition with this merger because it allows for opportunities for advancement of certain programs. Hopefully all programs. Because the

faculty are here, we're doing our part, we have the credentials, we're ready to go. We're just hoping... And I think the coaches as well, so that maybe they don't have to depend on their own fundraising just to be able to carry the team forward. I think we owe our students that, and then this merger will really allow that to happen. And it's a really positive thing. And as Cheri said, I've not heard a single negative word. I think we all understand and respect the opportunity and see it for what it is in a positive way.

Now as an employee, well, especially in IT, we know that things are not cheap, right? What we are hoping is that by merging with the UT System, we're going to tap in into the resources, to make sure that we give our employees and our students the technology resources they need to carry on their school journey. Also collaboration, we will be able to collaborate with the other campus and brainstorm on technology stuff and things along those lines. I believe the positive outweigh the negative. Another thing I've failed to mention is scholarships, right? We, especially myself, could have never afford paying for school, okay? Especially being an international student and so forth. But Martin has this unique way of again, helping students also financially. I did get some help financially, that's how I was able to graduate. We are hoping that type of help will continue even when we merge with the UT System. (former international student at MMC and current faculty member)

There is hope that the campus can continue to offer a “home away from home” and family focused, “unique ministry” for students – especially those that fall into the categories of first generation and international students. MMC and the Giles County community tend to serve these students uniquely well as shared by a participant:

... home away from home. It really was. It was when I was at Martin, of course, it was very small 51 years ago. And it was like being in high school with all my friends, except it wasn't high school and my parents weren't right there all the time. And Pulaski was so friendly and so welcoming and it was just a great place to be. And still is. I went back to Pulaski, in fact, to start my teaching career after I graduated at MTSU. So I love Pulaski and the people there are so nice. It's just its own little island of kindness there. Can't say enough.

Several participants noted that the positives of the MMC joining the UT system definitely outweigh the negatives. Positive subthemes gleaned from the focus group conversations are in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Key Positive Subthemes of MMC Joining the UT System
• keeping high school graduates local
• continuing communication about possible merger
• stopping of the “brain drain” whereby potential students go to northern Alabama universities
• servicing the region with high school grads looking for a smaller university setting
• enabling first-generation students to stay closer to home
• boosting a stagnant economy in Giles County
• affordability to students for tuition
• potential for student activities to be positively impacted via UT system campus partnerships
• faculty and staff advantages with insurance and benefits is extensive

Important Concerns to Address

Participants stressed that MMC provides a “personalized education” and they want to encourage the campus to not “lose the heart and uniqueness” of what it offers to all stakeholders involved. Three current MMC faculty members shared:

I think I'm very fortunate to be there. It's a school that really attracted me to it because it was very similar to my undergrad experience. I went to a college in Ohio, that was a private liberal arts Christian school, that clearly I felt there were a lot of things I could identify with. I think in talking with my students about this, yes, I think there is a lot of excitement. I think if there is a concern it's losing the personalized education. I think they do like the student faculty engagement and the fact that they're smaller classes, to where you're not just a number. We know the students' names, we know everybody on the campus, pretty much the faculty, the staff. I mean, I've been here, like I said, going on my third year, and very early on, when I arrived, people extended themselves and I got to know a lot of people.

I haven't heard anybody say much negative about this at all. I'll share this because one student in one of my classes shared this with me. So it goes along with what you're talking about there, but she basically said, "Please don't take this as I'm talking against this move, but I came to Martin Methodist because it is a private school and I'm looking for a private education." I never really thought about it that way, but that was her concern in it. She expressed that and said, "Look, I'm good with going, I'm not going to leave just because we're going to do that." But it does kind of take away, "Hey, look, I was going for a private education and now that's going to be different."

And for my students, I'm not trying to be the negative person here, but I have heard a number of my students have been, I'll say, apprehensive on several different aspects of it. My students are a little different in that we have a lot of the Criminal Justice kids. So they have kind of a different take on a lot of the things that we see, but one, they were concerned with the change to adding in, as we move to UT, would it change much of our curriculum? Would it change some of the things that we do? One of the big things that we've tried to do with our criminal justice department is we try to keep our kids kind of, because it is rural, because it is a small town, because it is, and a lot of the students that we have here are either first generation or when they graduate from Martin, they plan on staying fairly local. We've got our 15-county little footprint here. So one of the things that they were concerned about is making sure that as we add UT, we add the branding, we kind of connect to this larger entity, that we don't lose our connection to the criminal justice partners that we've branched out with. So we try to work with the Pulaski PD, with Giles County Sheriff's Office, but some of our other local places, the local jails, and some of the things that we do here in the rural community, in the rural world are a lot different than what you're going to see at Knoxville or what you're going to see in Chattanooga or some of the larger places, or Memphis or some of the other, and some of the concerns and some of the things that we kind of focus on, especially in our department, are different than what we may do at a larger university.

Table 2 summarizes all of the potential concerns or negative subthemes address about MMC being a part of the UT System. Most of these negatives are associated with the unknowns of what's to come highlight an even greater importance placed on timely communication of the process.

Table 2

Key Negative Subthemes of MMC Joining the UT System
• overall apprehension to change
• going from a private school/education to public
• modifications to the MMC curriculum, including class sizes
• losing connections with local entities via the small campus
• UT system timeline and recruitment for fall 2021 (especially from athletic perspective)
• too much growth too quickly
• strain on student housing resources
• the unknowns to student athletes – what does this mean for athletic scholarships and division?
• some alumni sentimental about the “old MMC”
• recognition of “grief” for some with long family history that it’s not MMC anymore
• sadness for the TN Methodist Conference to lose the named connection

Overall, there is a very positive outlook for sentiment revolving around the potential merger of the MMC campus and the UT System. While older alumni highlighted some of the history of the campus and the longing to maintain the identity of MMC that they once experienced, most stated that the opportunity and growth possible for students, faculty, staff and the Pulaski community trumps any concerns and encourages tremendous excitement for the future. An older alumna participant shared her thoughts and sums up any initial concern felt by the announcement:

I think I had some classmates that felt like that at the very beginning, perhaps because they were just surprised with the announcement. They were not prepared for it, but now that a few weeks have gone by and they have heard the pros, and the pros, and the pros, I think they are beginning to quickly understand that the pros are so strong that there has to be a way to somehow keep that connection because they can't possibly lose the opportunities that they know realize that are out there.

Important Word Associations with MMC and the UT System

Participants were then asked to quickly share words and phrases they associate with MMC and the UT System to showcase any differences in current perception. Words and phrases are important and can impact future communication strategies with stakeholders. These words and phrases associated with MMC and the UT System are provided in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Associations with MMC	Associations with UT System
welcoming	collaborative
historic	progressive
civic involvement	football
encouragement	big
rural college	leap
opportunity	competent
connection	complex
home away from home	large
family	exciting
caring	sports
small	success
personal	resources
expensive	orange

New Campus, New Naming Ideas

To address research question two, participants were asked to share what makes Giles County, Tennessee geographically special.

Discussion consisted of several key variables. Participants referenced the low cost of living and location accessibility to Interstate 65 with Huntsville, Alabama to the south and Nashville, Tennessee to the north.

The cultural significance of the town cannot be ignored with Pulaski serving as the birthplace of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) on December 24, 1865. However, all participants were quick to note the positive steps taken to overcome historical race relations. In addition, Native American history is present in Giles County, Tennessee as two separate routes on the Trail of Tears dissect in Pulaski. There is a strong history in this small, rural county. Participants were proud to share about their heritage. A participant shared:

I would like to include that we have a lot of cultural significance here that maybe is not highlighted in a way that maybe would benefit the society and certainly move into a more positive future. The history of the KKK here in Pulaski is not something that we should pretend didn't happen. We shouldn't not talk about it. We have positive history as well, in more recent future, in regards to the town trying to shut the doors on that, but it's still something that leers. We need to move beyond it.

Participants were also asked to expand on their shared word and phrase associations by focusing on the uniqueness Giles County. Consistent words and phrases mentioned in the focus group are shared below in Table 4.

Table 4

<i>Associations with Giles County</i>
close-knit community
family
small
home
friendly
historical (people, connections and organizations)
birthplace of the KKK
prime location
untapped potential
synergy between business and community

Based on the feedback above and “rumors” circulating the community on the potential naming of the new campus in the UT System, participants were asked to share ideas. There was fruitful discussion about possible campus names and what each name represents to the diverse stakeholder groups.

Names provided by the participants were: UT Giles, UT Southern, UT South, UT Pulaski, UT Richland, UT Elk River, UT Southern Middle, UT South Central, UT Martin South, UT Martin Pulaski, UT Southern Tennessee and UT Virginia Martin. Several older alumni voiced that they “hate to see the Martin name go.”

Top Three Choices for New Name

Three potential campus names were mentioned in all four focus groups. These three names maintained the most frequent mentions and also the most positive sentiment for use in the future. Pros and cons for each are further explored below.

Naming Option 1: University of Tennessee South

One participant referenced this name as being reflective of “southern hospitality.” There are no counties south of Giles County in the state of Tennessee, so several participants found the name “fitting” for the new campus. They liked the regional aspect of the name. It was also mentioned that by incorporating “south” or “southern” in the name that it highlights that “location means something” and that “geography is represented.”

Cons of “UT South” include connotations and historical significance of “The South” dating back to the Civil War and that there might be negative historical challenges to overcome with certain potential students in light of recent social movements.

Naming Option 2: University of Tennessee Southern

The second name often discussed was “UT Southern.” Like the previous name, some participants appreciated the regional distinction. Others found UT Southern to be a “softer” name when compared to UT South. A few others noted a sense of prestige and properness that comes with this name opportunity. A participant shared his thoughts on this name early on in the first focus group by saying:

What we heard is that we will become the fourth institution in the State of Tennessee system. We have strong [positive] feelings about the University of Tennessee's Southern name.

Very few cons were provided, but many participants did mention the lack of consistency in UT System branding when all other system campuses are based on the city of campus location. This would be the only UT System undergraduate campus with a regional name.

Naming Option 3: University of Tennessee Pulaski

The biggest pro with naming the MMC campus UT Pulaski would be consistency in branding and naming across all UT System four-year institutions. This was a theme in all four focus groups. It would also be consistent with promotions by the local Chamber of Commerce and its “Visit Pulaski: Cut and Run to 31” campaign. This name would bring name recognition to a small, rural town in southern middle Tennessee, which could in turn inspire economic growth and interest in moving to the area.

The cons associated with a UT Pulaski (or “UTP”) campus are led by the complex history of negative race relations with the city. When many people hear the town of Pulaski, the first thing that comes to mind is, unfortunately, the KKK. One participant added that “perception is reality.” The historical piece has consistently “hurt” Pulaski as noted by multiple participants. A participant summed it up here:

Unfortunately, a lot of people outside of Tennessee, the name Pulaski is associated with the bad connotation of the KKK. Of course, we're long past that, but that's something that is sometimes identified with our name and I think that might be unfortunate. That's another reason. Perception is reality, a lot of times, and I think that perception will be hard to change. We all know that Pulaski has fought against that and done wonderful things, and come together and has really fought that, but that doesn't change the perception outside of us, I think.

To overcome this, there was a strong, positive push for the opportunity to “break that association.” The UT System could help Pulaski “put the past behind us” allowing the town to “make a new history” as the fourth campus in the system. A female participant shared:

I personally would love for it to be an opportunity for Pulaski to become known as something else. If it was UT Pulaski, maybe people ... Yeah, they're going to think KKK, but hopefully they would eventually think, "Yeah, there's a UT campus there." I mean, that's the first thing that pops into people's head and it sucks. And it hurts us. I mean, I think it hurts us to this day, but I do think given that the other colleges are named after the cities they're in, and that I think it could help Pulaski hopefully start putting that behind us, I like the idea of UT Pulaski.

Local banker and participant provided:

... we need to break that association. And I think all the other campuses are named for the cities that they're located in. And I would love nothing more for it to be called UT Pulaski because I'm proud of Pulaski. I grew up here, my grandparents grew up here. I mean, my

family's from here. Yeah, there is some history that's there, but it's time for us to start making new history and this is one perfect way to lay it out.

Participant and community leader added:

Well, sharing sentiment with using the name Pulaski, and then Randy, on the city council, since I've been in my position, we have talked several times about the name Pulaski and when you don't use it, you're not doing anything about it. And when you do use it, you are creating yourself an immediate issue, but it's something you can grow from. We recently made the decision, our tourism program, we have gone through an overhaul and we're now calling our area Visit Pulaski Cut and Run to 31. And so bringing it all back to the whole area, with the cut and run to 31, depending on where we're marketing, but we're using Visit Pulaski mainly to create that web presence with using the name Pulaski to start to try and put some of that positivity up there on the SEO of the word Pulaski, rather than what we get now, which is like our other group member said that we can't deny our history and we can't do it. I think we made good strides since our history, and we have a great story to tell, and we've been rewarded for that and awarded for that, which just makes the story come full circle. So there's a lot, it's not just naming a university, it's naming the home of the KKK. Yes, when people ask me about it from a tourism and the visiting standpoint, I always tell people we're the birthplace, but we're not the homeplace. It doesn't live here. And so there's always a conversation that can be had. We have a lot of visitors that want to just look at that backwards plaque and know that we're not that, that does not represent us. It's just a part of our history. So it's a fully loaded, it's not just naming a university. So eventually in 50 more years, the next time UT is considering adding a school, you're going to be looking at, did we help with that? Or did we hinder that in naming?

Other cons focus on the somewhat geographically “limiting” nature of the name when compared to the previous two options. There could be potential for mispronunciation of UT Pulaski and/or misspelling the name of the campus when conducting online searches.

Overall, these three names would best represent ideas shared in the focus group. Both UT South and UT Southern have more of a regional feel, while UT Pulaski provides strong opportunity to help the community overcome the race problems of the past. UT Pulaski could be viewed as the riskier choice, but it makes for consistent branding across all UT System four-year institution campuses.

Prioritize Campus Name; Athletic Branding Will Follow

To gain understanding of the affinity to the Redhawks mascot and any obstacles that might need to be overcome established in research question three, participants were asked questions regarding their support of MMC athletics. Specific probes were used to generate ideas about other possible athletic mascots and discuss potential changes/updates to the current color palette.

Overwhelmingly, participants discussed the need to brand the campus first, including an announcement of a new campus name to help in guidance of athletic branding issues. Timing is key and the campus name should come first, and further dictate the rollout of new athletic branding, including colors and mascot.

Alumni and Athletic Staff Members With Stronger Affinity to MMC Identity

As one can predict, alumni often hold strong connections to their educational institution. Throughout the focus group research, a key theme emerged – alumni and athletic staff members have a stronger affinity to the MMC identity. A participant said:

I think that our branding is something that we, as an athletic department, are very proud of, I think you can say. Just anything from our unique font to our different types of logos that we use to obviously the Redhawks.

Older alumni worry about the past and don't want to "completely lose the Martin identity." MMC alumnus/participant added:

This is just me being Debbie Downer, naysayer, or something. But I would just say that I know that people that I have been affiliated with, both in my classes at Martin long, long time ago, and other things have really expressed some apprehension on Facebook and other social media sites about completely losing the Martin identity into the UT system. And I would just throw out there cause I'm in favor cause I think it's a really great opportunity, but I think that changing everything all at once might be seen as completely just whitewashing that former identity. And I don't have an answer for it either, but whitewashing the identity that was Martin away, that would be a worry I would just express.

However, several senior alumni participants mentioned the connection they had with the Indians mascot of their time on campus rather than the 2004 mascot change to the Redhawks. Participants heightened affinity to the Redhawks mascot were current MMC staff members, specifically those working in athletics. In fact, one athletic department staff member reminded the group that there are "9 national championships under the Redhawks brand." One former student athlete and former MMC staff member said she would be "sad to see the Redhawks go, but I understand it."

As for timing, those with a strong affinity to MMC identity suggested a "years from now" approach to changing the athletic branding and color palette. They don't want to lose MMC identity "all at once." Several current athletic coaches mentioned challenges with uniform ordering, recruiting, etc. for when would be best to potential change athletic branding. Members of the athletic department addressed concerns with timing for fall 2021 enrolling student athletes:

The timeline to be able to actually bring in a recruitment class for fall of '21, is very difficult when you're not able to say a name, your cost structure, a scholarship structure, " And oh, by the way, every school around us is competing against us using that information." So fall of '21, if we have a terrible recruitment year, that's going to be with us for four years. That's need to be known across the UT system that we're being very hamstrung with the ability to recruit for this fall cycle. And that's going to impact us for the next four years in enrollment.

When asked specifically about adding orange to branding for UT system consistency, most alumni and athletic staff members want to see red remain in the MMC color palette for consistency and connection.

Other Stakeholders See "New" Opportunities

In addition to the new UT campus coming to Pulaski, other stakeholder participants – including local business owners, county leaders, and MMC faculty – want to celebrate the "newness" ahead.

Participants with no alumni distinction or employment in athletics at MMC placed importance on maintaining connection to the campus but also recognize that change is inevitable and the new opportunities that come with these changes are exciting. They stress that it's time to "start fresh and reinvent" the campus. Focus group participant and MMC alumnus stated:

I was going to say, when I played baseball at Martin Methodist, we were the Indians and we were red and royal blue. So then we transitioned to red and black and maybe it wasn't that big of a deal, but I think if we're going to be part of the University of Tennessee system, I think we need to have as close to the colors as possible. We're changing the name. You might as well change the color scheme and everything that goes along with it.

Another participant added:

From a recruiting perspective, and just from recruiting prospective students to the school, I'm torn on my opinion in that we want to try to keep elements of Martin Methodist with the name, with the mascot, logo, colors, that type of thing. Then part of me says, you're only going to get one chance to basically rebrand and you don't want to mess it up or not mess it up, but you don't want to have regrets about it. So in that, what I mean by that is I think you either stick to the same, or you completely overhaul it and you get a new mascot and you get a new color scheme and just, for lack of better words, leave the Martin Methodist color scheme and logo and things like that as just part of the past. But like I said, I'm torn on that because I know that Martin Methodist means so much to alumni and certain people. So I guess I'm just on the fence as far as what...

Several younger alumni participants mentioned that "transition from the Redhawks isn't a big deal." One particular MMC faculty member in sports management proposed the "UT South" name and the "Stars" (playing off of the TN State flag three-star design) as the mascot. He welcomes the UT System "think outside the box like minor league sports teams" and says "there is great opportunity here." A current faculty member participant also recommends an orange-red-black color palette like that of his alma mater, [Heidelberg University](#) in Ohio:

Again, I went to a school similar in size and mission, way back when, up in Ohio. We went from college to university, and still a private liberal arts college, but the colors are red and orange and black, and they go together better than what you would think, when you see them actually on a uniform. I've been through some branding things and logo change in professional sport. I do think a name like UT South, and I don't know what the name is going to end up being but it does give you the opportunity to look at potentially a mascot change. I'm very sensitive to the graduates, the former student athletes, Martin Methodist College. I like to listen and have, I guess, some empathy for what they're going through because even when we were going to change the name from college to university, I mean, I graduated from Heidelberg College and now it's going to be Heidelberg University, but I understood the reasons why we were doing it and it was for the betterment of our school.

To me, UT South, because there's three stars in the Tennessee flag, it could be the UT South Stars. Instead of the Redhawk, maybe you have the Superstar. I just envisioned some things like what minor league sport do, baseball in particular, they think a bit outside the box. Major professional sports have learned a lot from the minor leagues. I do know that the president of the UT System, he's very involved with minor league baseball. I know he can think outside the box, just studying his history and what he's done and the way he gives back.

Whether red is removed or it ends up being red, orange and black, which again, I understand why some people wouldn't like that blend or maybe just orange and black. I do think there's a real possibility there with the name of the school, the mascot, the logo, the colors, are something that's really going to heighten the university. Although there is some negative connotation on the history over people really understanding the school and the community, like up around the greater Nashville area where I live, I do think this is a great opportunity to remove some of that. Not the history. The history will always be there and we can learn from it, but clearly the negative connotation, the perception of what people feel outside of Pulaski.

Conversations about adding orange to the color palette for the new campus were a little more challenging to find consensus. Most see a tremendous opportunity in rebranding the campus and athletics. Most welcome the addition of orange as many are UTK football fans in the area as noted by the “we baptize in orange” comment.

Others worry about the orange-red combination in the color palette. A participant explained:

Orange is going to be a little hard for me, but it will happen, because I will support the school, but you definitely would have to get rid of the red. Red and orange do not go well together. That would definitely have to be a transition. But I think that this is an opportunity to rebrand. The school is moving from Martin Methodist to a UT System. The rebranding, again, I've been through that, with the Indians to the Redhawk as a student. I mean, I think it can be a good thing looking forward to the future. Again, I would be sad to see the Redhawks leave. I really did like that, but do understand also, you can't be a Redhawk and not have red in your color. I don't know. I don't know how there is a way to get around that, but that's just my opinion. I think in the long run, it could be a good thing, but I'm not going to say I won't be sad.

A few noted that if colors are changed, the Redhawks mascot needs to go. If the current MMC color palette remains the same, the participants feel as if the Redhawks mascot should stay. A few participants shared the same opinion of an “all in or all out” branding strategy. In fact, a 2019 MMC grad added that she was “excited but jealous” of the UT affiliated campus and rebranding to come.

There were a few questions about whether or not the MMC campus had to utilize a “hawk” like mascot due to UT Martin having the Skyhawks for its mascot. It was also questioned as to why the UTC campus doesn't feature orange predominately in its color palette. One faculty member suggested a new potential mascot of the Gored Hawk as it is closely associated with the current MMC athletics website URL of www.goredhawks.com. A participant detailed:

So we often laugh that when, Go Red Hawks is on a banner and it's all run together because of the website, that a lot of us read it as Gored Hawks. There is a gored hawk called a red shouldered hawk who is actually gray and orange. So I'm wondering if we could still maintain the hawks, but just evolve our hawk a little bit.

Campus Symbols and Connectors

Only one other campus symbol was mentioned as a recognizable and relatable connection to campus, other than the Indians and the Redhawks as mascots. An image of the current MMC logo is to the right.



The columns are something that makes MMC unique and are often used in current campus branding efforts. When arriving on campus, columns flank both sides of the street.

As one participant noted, “when you see the columns, you know you are home.” Another participant stated that the columns are “the foundation of MMC.” This is a symbol that transcends graduation year and mascot affiliation. The columns are a “proud connection” to campus. An older alumna and focus group participant shared her proud association with the MMC columns:

And I don't know how the rest of you feel about it, but I'm glad your brought columns up because when you've been away from Martin as a student as long as I have, and many, many of my friends, we think if Martin columns. We don't think of Martin Redhawk because when we were there, we were Indians. So it depends on that time period where there's so many of us that are graduates of Martin that we don't relate to the red hawk at all, but we relate to columns. I think all of us relate to those columns and are very proud of those columns. If I had a vote, I would prefer to see us make sure that we save the columns in the new branding and the marketing rather than the red hawk. And that way you literally can relate columns to everybody that lives in that geographic area. They know those columns and all of us students who have been there, regardless of the date we were there, we relate to those columns.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Active Communication and Transparency are Key

Consistent feedback during all four focus groups centered on the need for the UT System to constantly communicate plans and be transparent with timelines associated with the potential acquisition of the MMC campus. All participants stressed the need for timely updates to keep rumors and misinformation from spreading. This can also help to get/keep the community on board with changes that are inevitable to come. One participant, an alumnus of MMC who now resides in Los Angeles, explained:

I think your positives really outweigh the negatives completely. What I really liked, because being pretty disconnected from the region now, the email campaign you guys did was really, really helpful. I think it was in the fall where you had almost every other day, you had an email from either a student or a leader showing enthusiasm, but also showing a little bit more about what's going on...So I would just encourage, continue that transparency because the more that you're transparent, the more your alumni, the more your students, and especially the more your donors are going to feel connected to this experience and they're going to want to support it in the future.

When asked about the best ways to communicate and inform, probing on which media channels are best in reaching multiple community stakeholder groups resulted the following ideas: emails, Facebook, digital billboards, newspaper (both print and online versions), local radio (in particular, WKSR in the bonus hour segments at 6:30 am and 8:00 am and programming featuring local personality, Ty Garrett) and WKSR.com. The power of word of mouth and individual visits by community leaders and/or UT system leaders cannot be ignored either as stated by a local business owner and MMC alumna:

One of the biggest things I feel like with change, and especially for our community, is we're so tight knit and everybody is so in the know, is keeping everybody informed. The focus groups

will be very important in doing that, of talking this up and keeping the community informed and part of it. I feel like that's going to be huge. If they feel like they're a part of it then the connection is stronger, and just not making this so above and beyond, just keeping a connection, not letting there be a disconnect with the community and this growth opportunity. I just feel like the voice of actually having people out, their job is to just talk to people. I know I don't read emails a lot that ... I get a lot of emails. I don't read through all of them but if someone were to walk in my store and talk to me about it, I would definitely feel a lot more connected than I would with just an email. So just having actual humans walk around and talk to people is huge.

The most important factor is that this potential acquisition not get stagnant in community support. Participants stressed the importance of keeping the “momentum” going by timely updates from the UT System to keep rumors at bay. It should be noted that there was high praise for UT System communication thus far.

Challenges of Connecting with the Old and New

All focus group members agreed that the future branding efforts for the campus and the athletic department DO matter. There was diverging opinion on what the new campus name should be, but the three names most often mentioned were UT South, UT Southern and UT Pulaski. Each name has its own set of pros and cons as referenced prior in this document. The community is very excited to hear the chosen campus name in the near future.

The color palette and athletic mascot sparked fruitful discussion. Most feel that the new campus name needs to come first, with the remaining branding touchpoints coming soon thereafter. Older alumni and current MMC athletic department employees felt strongly that some consistency should remain with color scheme and/or the campus mascot. But, some alumni noted disconnect to the Redhawks and look forward to a revamp or rebrand of the entire campus.

MMC is a campus rich in history. As noted by countless focus group participants, Giles County is also steep in heritage. This presents an interesting dilemma for the UT System as it's vital to connect the old by maintaining some identity of what was MMC, all the while unifying the newest campus.

It's imperative to recognize the importance of linking the new branding efforts to FUTURE students, faculty and staff as well. The UT name will help recruit more students, and possibly better students, to this newest campus. The new name and campus branding should be attractive to prospective students as this age range makes decisions on where to attend college in the next few years. In addition, for many students, parents are the ultimate gatekeepers in decision making. They cannot be ignored and should be targeted with both campus information updates and future branding efforts.

It is suggested that focus group research follows with both current MMC students, high school students in Giles and surrounding Tennessee counties and guidance counselors as all these stakeholder groups will be the future to alumni support and possible enrollment.

With the positive sentiment associated with the merging of MMC into the UT System, it seems that most people will “get behind” the new campus name, branding and mascot and support the decision that is made. One participant illustrated this point below:

I mean, if people like me that love Martin Methodist, my husband started there in '92, I started there in '99, we've been around the Martin Methodist community for a long time and we're

going to support whatever. We want what's best for Martin. We want whatever is going to reach the most people, whatever is going to be the best brand, whatever is going to allow the college to be successful for years and years and years to come. That's what we want. This is just a group where we're talking about our opinions and things like that, but whatever decision is made by whoever, we'll support. Most people that love Martin Methodist are going to support whatever mascot we're going to have, whatever color scheme we're going to have, whatever situation and whatever decisions are made. . . . Martin does a great service to this community. I think you're going to have people that are upset about it. I mean, you just are, and we had that back in the Indians. I think whatever happens, like I said, most people are going to get on board with whatever decision is made. They're going to have strong feelings about it, they're going to voice their opinion, but I think if they truly love the college and they truly are happy about where it's going, then they are going to jump on board with whatever decision is made.

APPENDIX 1: MODERATOR'S GUIDE

University of Tennessee/Martin Methodist College Acquisition Focus Group Moderator's Guide

December 14, 2020

9:30-10:30 am EST [Click Here to Join](#)

12:30-1:30 pm [Click Here to Join](#)

December 15, 2020

9:30 – 10:30 am EST [Click Here to Join](#)

11 am – noon [Click Here to Join](#)

Welcome!

Hello everyone. Thank you for joining us today. My name is Courtney Carpenter Childers. I graduated from Giles County High School in 1997- I am proud to be born and raised in Pulaski. My parents' business is there (Giles County Furniture), the family grocery store (Davis & Eslick) is there and most of my family still resides in Giles Co. While I've lived in Knoxville for almost 15 years, I still call Pulaski "home." It's a blessing to work with the UT system on this project.

In addition, we have Ellie Amador here from the University of Tennessee to help monitor the chat and potentially answer any questions at the end of the today's session that I cannot address.

We welcome and appreciate in advance all of your thoughts and opinions regarding the potential for UT to acquire MMC. There is a due diligence process is currently underway. The measure must also gain approvals by the Tennessee General Assembly, the regional accreditor Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, the United Methodist Church of Tennessee and the Tennessee Building Commission.

As part of this due diligence process, we wanted to gather input from you all – your vision for MMC and the region and your thoughts on branding. Additionally, I hope we can also answer some questions you may have about the proposed partnership.

We will simply talk with one another for about 40 minutes and then leave time to take questions at the end.

There are no wrong answers. This is a safe space to share your opinions. Everyone has a voice. A few "rules" to get us started:

1. Please keep your video on at all times, if possible.
2. Please stay muted until you speak (that will help us mitigate the background noise).
3. Feel free to raise your hand either physically on camera or using the tool at the bottom of Zoom.
4. If you have a question or comment at any time, you can use the chat feature as well. You can chat me privately or the group as a whole. We will try to monitor the chat as best we can.
5. I want to hear from everyone, so you may be called upon... that's the professor in me...

Now, to get started, let's go around and introduce ourselves. When I say your name, please state your name and what (if any) connection you have to MMC.

- Call upon each participant.

OK. Thank you. Now it's time for a few questions:

What have you heard about the possibility of MMC being a part of the UT system?

ON DEC. 9, BOTH THE MMC BOARD OF TRUSTEES AND THE UT SYSTEM BOARD OF TRUSTEES VOTED TO APPROVE NEXT STEPS IN UT ACQUISITION OF MMC.

How do you feel about the possibility of MMC being connected to the UT system?

Probe: Any concerns?

How do you think others in the community feel about the possibility of MMC being a part of the UT system?

Probe: Any concerns?

To an outsider, what's one word you would use to describe Giles County?

Probe: For Martin Methodist?

Probe: For the UT system?

What makes Giles County geographically unique?

What is special about southern middle TN?

What makes MMC unique? Tell me about special characteristics of this college.

How might all of these ideas be used to name the newest UT campus here in Giles County? The name "MMC" will no longer be used (may have to explain this...). We want to hear your ideas!

Unfortunately, there is already a UT Martin, plus this gives us the chance to provide name recognition for not just the new UT campus but for Giles County and/or southern middle TN as well.

Switching gears just a bit...

MMC is well known for its success in athletics. Many students that attend MMC are on a form of athletic scholarship. You may have been a MMC athlete in the past. Raise your hand if you participated on a MMC sports team.

Let's talk about that.

Do any of you support any of the sports under the athletic department at MMC? If so, how?

What does the athletic program mean to you?

What does the athletic program mean to the community?

For many decades, the mascot for MMC was the Indians. Most recently, we've cheered on the MMC Redhawks.

If MMC joins UT, the school would utilize orange in its new color scheme, which could impact the red in the school's colors. How would you feel about Rowdy the Redhawk changing with the new affiliation with the UT System?

How do you feel that community members and alumni will feel about the transition to a new mascot?

Are there cons to a mascot change with the campus affiliation with UT?

Do you have any ideas for a potential mascot?

Take questions from participants.

APPENDIX 2: LIST OF FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS AND DESCRIPTORS

#	Relationship to MMC
1	Mayor of Pulaski, MMC alum ('91), MMC faculty member (business)
2	MMC faculty member (nursing)
3	President of MMC Alumni Association, MMC alum ('05), county commissioner
4	MMC alum ('12), MMC VP of Enrollment Management
5	MMC alum ('06)
6	MMC Admissions Counselor, MMC alum
7	MMC Director of Career & Vocational Services, MMC alum ('00)
8	MMC Director of Transfer Admissions, faculty member (English), married to Athletic Director
9	MMC Assistant Registrar, MMC grad ('17)
10	MMC instructor (criminal justice)
11	MMC Alumni Council, MMC alum ('71)
12	MMC faculty member (business)
13	MMC faculty member (biology)
14	MMC instructor (English)
15	MMC Men's Basketball Coach, adjunct instructor
16	Pulaski city alderman, rental property owner
17	MMC alum, former MMC Baseball Coach
18	MMC alum ('12), MMC faculty member (computer science), former international student
19	MMC faculty member (sports management), MMC alum
20	MMC alum ('03), MMC Alumni Council member, former student athlete, worked at MMC 2004-13
21	MMC alum, owner of local business, Lew Lew's
22	MMC alum ('19), MMC Admissions Counselor
23	MMC faculty member (psychology), lead on MMC Quality Enhancement Plan
24	MMC alum, current Giles Co Board of Education member
25	MMC Executive Assistant & Communications, Turner Center
26	MMC alum ('15), Reverend of First United Methodist Church of Pulaski, family history with MMC
27	MMC Director of Athletic Operations
28	MMC alum, VP Bank of Frankewing in Giles County, supporter of MMC

29	Employee at First National Bank Pulaski, partners with MMC
30	MMC faculty member (math)
31	MMC alum, MMC Alumni Council member
32	Giles County commissioner, close family ties to MMC, civil engineer
33	CEO, Giles Chamber