

6/30/05

Response of the University of Massachusetts Boston to the June 7, 2005 Report of the Evaluation Team Representing the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges

The University of Massachusetts Boston Executive Staff and NEASC reaccreditation Steering Committee thank the visiting team for the care and seriousness they put into their visit and their report. We appreciate their comments that our self-study was well done, that our process engaged many individuals from all across the campus, and that the visit was well-organized. We presented the university in as clear a manner as possible with pride in what we achieve, but with a clear sense of what we need to do better. We are fortunate that the visiting team defined its role as that of a 'loving critic' helping move UMass Boston forward.

The visiting team sees UMass Boston as combining a concern for academic excellence with a commitment to access for both traditional and non-traditional students who come from widely varied social, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. The team's acknowledgement that we are continually monitoring our campus mission in order to fulfill the original land grant university vision in the urban environment gets at the core of the dynamism here on campus. Our strategic planning process gives direction to our decision-making, and we work hard to connect budget decisions to the retention, research, and reputation priorities of the 2008 Strategic Plan. As the team report states, we are allocating resources in support of the plan, and programs drive the budget, not the other way around.

Most of the visiting team's comments and evaluation of programs and services at UMass Boston corroborate the appraisal and projections that we have made in our self-study. We would like to respond to the team's report primarily in regards to the three pressing challenges that we outline in the overview of the self-study: improving the physical infrastructure, rebuilding the faculty, and stabilizing student enrollment.

Improving the Physical Infrastructure

First, the team agrees with us that the long-standing deterioration of the foundation megastructure of the original UMass Boston buildings impairs the campus' reputation, functionality, and attractiveness. The repair of this structure is the number one priority on campus. The Governor of the Commonwealth has publicly pledged funds to deal with our physical infrastructure problem. With the support of the UMass President's Office and the state Department of Capital Asset Management (DCAM), we are beginning this project. Being able to address this serious structural issue may also offer us some opportunity to improve the appearance, orientation and lighting in our garage, beautify the central plaza area and create additional student and program spaces at the edges of the plaza, all of which will make the campus more attractive. We also agree with the visiting team that a master plan is necessary to plan for future facilities to

meet our strategic priorities. A facilities master planning process will begin in 2006 with the financial and project management support of DCAM.

Rebuilding the Faculty

Second, we are rebuilding our faculty, recovering from the loss of senior faculty members through state early-retirement incentive programs, and hiring more full-time tenure track professors. Our strong commitment to reducing our numbers of sections taught by part-time instructors is reflected in the hiring of 42 tenure line faculty for this coming academic year, continuing our program to replace 80% of the faculty lost through early retirements while also addressing ordinary turnover of faculty lines. Our numbers continue to be strong in the hiring of women and people of color. We are not simply replacing faculty who have left, but are reassigning positions to meet strategic priorities. Our efforts to rebuild our faculty are focused on a faculty that is excellent in both teaching and research. Our role as a research university with excellent undergraduate teaching is something that informs all academic decision-making on campus. As mentioned in our self-study, we are working on the issue of lower course loads for our most productive researchers. We wish to correct one comment made in the team's report. In our strategic plan and our self-study we discuss areas of research emphasis, including the environment and public policy. We also do important work in some of our centers to serve the high technology community and have faculty strength in this area, but contrary to what the visiting team mentions "high technology manpower needs" is not a designated area of research emphasis in our strategic plan.

Connected to the rebuilding of the faculty are our academic programs and our initiatives in teaching and learning. The team report states that the range and quality of our academic programs are appropriate for our mission. Our general education program outlines the capabilities that we expect all students to develop and these capabilities are clearly stated in our catalog, web site and advising materials. We take great care in the assessment of student learning in our general education program, particularly in regards to writing. Our Writing Proficiency Requirement is a very serious and labor-intensive assessment of the reading, writing, and critical thinking capabilities of our rising juniors. A similarly rigorous approach to assessment is taken with our First Year Seminars and their assessment by faculty teaching in the program. The team report applauds these activities. We agree with the team that we have to do a better job of assessing student learning in the major, a challenge faced by most of our peer institutions. Our AQUAD program review process requires all departments to demonstrate the assessment of student learning in the major, but, as we report in the self-study, some departments do not have comprehensive assessments, and many arts and science departments are still working on how to best assess student learning. The Provost is committed to working with the deans to explore the best ways to have meaningful assessment for curriculum improvement in the major. The Provost is also reviewing how to better assess teaching excellence and will work with the faculty in the Center for the Improvement of Teaching on this matter. In addition, the Provost is working with the Faculty Council to review the structure of graduate governance and has revamped our office of sponsored projects in order to provide more support for faculty research and scholarship.

Stabilizing Student Enrollment

Third, we have continuing and new initiatives to address the decline in our student enrollment. The source of our recent decline is a decrease in the number of part-time students, the population that seems to be most affected by the increase in our tuition and fees over the last three years, and a decline in our international student enrollments post-9/11. We continue to work to provide as much financial assistance as possible to our students and we are reorganizing our admissions staff to assign additional responsibilities for international student recruiting.

Over the last eight years, the Enrollment Management Division has worked to develop a culture of planning to support our recruitment and enrollment efforts. We use information from the reports of our Office of Institutional Research and Planning (OIRP), studies done within the Division, and outside consulting reports to establish our annual goals; to assess, develop and improve our promotion and recruitment strategies; and to set mid-course corrections during an enrollment cycle. For example, Enrollment Management has been conducting the Admitted Student Questionnaire (ASQ) to all admitted students each summer since 2002. This survey tells us why students choose or do not choose to enroll at UMass Boston and helps us to understand how we might modify our strategies, communications or services to improve yield of the admitted population. Each year the ASQ results point out the need for housing, which has led us to strengthen our housing placement and roommate matching services.

Most recently, in 2004, with our increased admission standards in place and in response to some decline in enrollment, we asked STAMATS enrollment research to help us address the issue of admitting a more competitive pool of applicants and competing in a different mix of institutions for those students. STAMATS reviewed all of our recruitment materials and advertising, reviewed our existing enrollment research and data, conducted a number of focus groups on campus, and conducted interviews with business and community leaders. Their research is helping us to understand what is important to our changing student population, what we should be emphasizing in our promotional materials and advertising, and where we have opportunities for growth, especially given the opening of the Campus Center and the future planned improvements to infrastructure and facilities.

All of the enrollment research that we have conducted has pointed out the need to incorporate more “enrollment thinking” into our overall campus planning. The Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Management and Provost are meeting monthly to stay informed about issues and concerns that affect each other’s division and the Vice Chancellor attends the Provost’s Academic Council meetings regularly. The Enrollment Management Division has reached out to all of the deans to expand their involvement in planning for Open House, Welcome Day for Admitted Students, and other recruitment and yield activities. The colleges, the library, athletics, and student affairs personnel are integrally involved in training admission staff to keep them up to date and informed about

new developments or changes and to prepare them with targeted recruiting information and strategies.

Regarding retention, we have been engaged for many years in the serious study of our undergraduate retention rates and have retention as one of the three priorities of our strategic plan. Each unit on campus has developed initiatives to improve retention with a prime focus being on building more connections between our students and the university. The 'students come first' philosophy of student services lauded by the visiting team carries through to enrollment services and was one of the reasons for the development of the "One Stop" student service center. The office deals with multiple registration, billing, and financial services and refers students elsewhere only when an appeal or an exception needs to be made. The focus on better connections with students has informed our recently developed learning communities of linked courses for new freshmen, improved new student orientation program, mentoring program for new students, and expanded student affairs programming. At the same time, we are working to improve our transfer student articulation agreements with our principal community college feeder institutions, develop stronger faculty advising systems for declared majors, and strengthen academic support services to students. As stated above, we continue to increase student financial assistance. To date, our retention rates have remained constant, but we will continue to increase the student-university connections that all national research suggests is the key to increased retention. Regarding graduate student retention, the Provost will work with the deans to develop an enrollment and retention plan. OIRP and the Dean of Graduate Studies have already begun to examine patterns of retention and graduation in graduate programs.

Additional Items

We agree with the suggestion of the visiting team that we create staff and faculty handbooks. The Assistant Vice Chancellor for Human Resources and Employee Relations has convened a group to work on a staff handbook. The outline for the handbook includes sections on University policies, general employment information, benefits, leave programs, and university services. Our project plan provides for review of the handbook by senior staff and by the Human Resources Advisory Committee which is a broad-based group of faculty and staff. The Provost's Office will work with Human Resources, the Faculty Council, and the Faculty Staff Union to develop a faculty handbook to consolidate materials available in our contractual bargaining agreement and other policy materials. We plan to have this completed during the 05-06 academic year.

The visiting team agreed with our appraisal that we needed to make major improvements in our development efforts and alumni relations. New Chancellor Michael Collins has already appointed a new Vice Chancellor for Institutional Advancement and a new Associate Vice Chancellor for this area. The new Vice Chancellor is a member of the Chancellor's senior leadership team and will work closely with the campus community and the UMass Boston Alumni Association to develop this critical university function.