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UMass/Boston Comes of Age

Created by the state legislature in 1964, when times were golden, UMass/Boston has come a long way in relatively short order. During the past three decades, it has not only attracted a superb faculty, but it has also established a solid academic reputation. In so doing, the red-brick commuter school has gradually evolved from a conventional liberal arts college into a modern metropolitan university. The secret to its success lies in this transformation.

By 1986, *Time* magazine selected UMass/Boston as one of "nine fast-rising colleges in America that were challenging the nation's elite schools." This accomplishment is fully justified. More importantly, perhaps, our early graduates were already beginning to make their mark in pursuing their careers.

What makes the Boston campus such a special place to teach is the excitement of the classroom. Our students, whose abilities and social backgrounds range far and wide, offer a constant but healthy challenge. Watching them develop a passion for learning and an intellectual zest is very rewarding.

A few years after the *Time* magazine article appeared in print, conditions began to change sharply as the economy took a turn for the worse and the sources of funding declined. Caught in the eye of a protracted national recession, we have suffered over the past four years a disproportionate share of budget cuts that have necessitated a combination of stringent fiscal countermeasures. There is little doubt that the crippled economy has forced us to "hunker down" and to undergo some serious belt tightening. Nonetheless, we have not lost much momentum and continue to move in positive directions. Despite recent tuition and fee increases, we are still the best educational bargain in town.

Metropolitan universities are a fairly recent phenomenon on the American scene. By definition, they are public-urban institutions that build on the historical strengths of a university dedicated to teaching and research. At the same time, they make their knowledge and resources available to their diverse student bodies and to the localities from which these students come. Their presence in the community calls them to missions of public service, which are essentially those of a good neighbor. This has been particularly important in Boston, where construction of an entirely new campus in the early 1970s caused fears and strains. From the very beginning, we worked hard to alleviate those fears and to build a constructive relationship with our Dorchester and South Boston neighbors.

Simply put, UMass/Boston is the only public four-year institution of higher learning in the greater metropolitan area. Surrounded by a host of private schools, including some of the most renowned and prestigious in the world, we have consistently reached out to disadvantaged inner-city students who simply cannot afford to attend such expensive places. It should be noted that those private institutions, especially the most prestigious among them, depend upon national and even international constituencies. Their student bodies are drawn from across the country and abroad. Their faculties address national and international audiences.

In sharp contrast, UMass/Boston was intentionally created to serve a local student population whose needs were clearly not being met by the existing private institutions. Once our students graduate, they usually remain in the state and are employed locally. For the most part, when it comes to doing applied public policy research, our faculty tends to address local and regional concerns. For example, we have provided technical assistance for the clean up of Boston harbor and are presently working with the community of Chelsea and its receiver, James Carlin, on ways to bring financial and political stability to that distressed city. Desperate to find feasible solutions, these local governments are seeking our help. At the Boston campus, it is clear that the university's commitment to public service also enhances its educational mission.

There are, however, some very real limits to the university's service capacity. In the words of former UMass president Robert Wood, "It cannot replace other institutions whose functions are different from ours; it cannot uplift a political process which falters; it cannot make up for lack of performance in private business. Explicitly, at our new Boston campus, we can serve as a catalyst for cooperative development, but we cannot take the place of city service agencies." In short, the university's role of outside assistance is one to be employed judiciously and with a clear sense of the appropriate moment and requisite skill.

Much of our character and purpose is defined by those we educate. Our campus can boast of one of the most diverse student populations in New England. Most of our twelve thousand students are older than those you might normally find at other college campuses. Their median age is 27. Roughly one-half are the first in their families to attend college. More than 90 percent of them hold part-time jobs to finance their education. Many are parents. They juggle a number of obligations to attend classes, and about 60 percent of them receive financial aid.

Nineteen percent of our students are people of color—blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans. That is more than double the rate at public colleges and universities in New England as a whole. Many are recent immigrants for whom English is a second language. About 30 percent of all minority students entering public four-year colleges in this state attend UMass/Boston. We also have the highest percentage of military veterans in the region, both from the Vietnam and Persian Gulf era.

Our faculty and administration recognize the fact that the work force of the future will be vastly different from what it is today. From all indications, it will be increasingly older, female, and nonwhite. By the

year 2000, the average age of the work force will rise and the pool of young workers will shrink. Hispanics will be the fastest-growing minority population in the United States. By 2010, there will be almost forty million Hispanics in the nation compared to about twenty-two million today. In the next nine years, almost two-thirds of the new entrants into the work force will be women. People of color will compose almost 30 percent of these new workers.

These demographic changes will require both educators and employers to concentrate on the academic and economic needs of these underserved groups. They must be given a chance at a college education. These changes will also require a greater emphasis on developing skills for managing diversity. One of the places we learn to do so is on a college campus. UMass/Boston is ideally suited for providing such a learning environment.

Amid all the fiscal gloom and doom that we hear these days, there are indeed some bright spots. UMass/Boston has long maintained a beneficial partnership with the Boston public schools. This arrangement dates back to the late 1960s when our Institute for Learning and Teaching initiated various innovative programs. And that tradition still continues. Funded by private grants, a recent project involved several faculty members taking a small group of seventh-grade students and teachers from three Boston middle schools on a trip to Costa Rica to study that nation's rain forests. The goal of this project was to encourage minority youngsters who possess curiosity and talent to pursue science studies and science-related careers.

Many illustrations of faculty productivity beyond the classroom could be cited, but three will suffice. A year ago, Paul Tucker of our art department put together a highly successful exhibit of Monet's paintings at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Faculty members associated with our John W. McCormack Institute of Public Affairs have undertaken many projects for the city of Boston and for the state. Currently three of them, Murray Frank, Sandy Matava, and Joseph Slavet, are working with the Massachusetts Executive Office of Administration and Finance to bring about more efficient management of federal entitlement programs in state agencies. Carole Upshur of the College of Public and Community Service is the coauthor of a report that addresses the question, "What do Latino children need to succeed in school?"

Alarms are being sounded these days from various quarters warning educators of the dangers inherent in the increases in tuitions and fees. If such a trend continues unchecked, we run the risk of pricing our product out of the market. Chancellor Sherry Penney constantly reminds us that with the decline of revenue, we must be more productive and more accountable. Her biggest task is to oversee increasingly austere budgets and to keep costs under control. Achieving quality under these circumstances has required institutional self-discipline and self-restraint, a keen sense of selectivity, and a commitment to rational planning. In all these respects, the faculty, student body, and administration have performed impressively in a period of great financial strain and budget austerity.

As Henry Adams once wrote, "The years teach much that the days never know." Little did we realize what was in store for us back in 1964 when we launched a bold new experiment in public urban higher education. In retrospect, the ensuing twenty-eight years have taught us a great deal about who we are and what we hope to be. The overall picture has now come into much sharper focus. Here in Boston it is obvious that the public land-grant tradition that links the application of knowledge to societal goals has proved its value to the city and to the citizens of the commonwealth.

Note

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