

About UMass Boston's Faculty

Achieving Against the Odds

Excerpted (pp. 8-14) from Introduction: [*Achieving Against the Odds: How Academics Become Teachers of Diverse Students*](#)

Esther Kingston-Mann and Tim Sieber, Eds.
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UMass Boston's faculty

UMass Boston's faculty is relatively diverse, though far less so than the student body. From the outset, many were graduates of major research universities. (Local newspapers occasionally remark with surprise that UMB – at the bottom of the local academic totem pole as the only accessible, public university in town -- possesses the highest percentage of Harvard Ph.D.s of any university in the United States). A number of senior faculty deliberately chose UMB because they wanted to teach diverse students in an urban setting. In 1990, a national survey of faculty members at 328 four-year institutions revealed that 88% of the UMB faculty approved of programmatic efforts to focus on cultural diversity, and ranked the hiring of more minority faculty as a priority second only to the goal of promoting intellectual development. In contrast, faculty members at all four-year institutions ranked minority recruitment as their twelfth priority. As of late 1998, university recruitment efforts have resulted in a faculty that includes 21.5% people of color and 53% who are female (the total number of full-time faculty is 448).

A UMB model of faculty development

In the 1980s and 1990s, UMB was unusual in the level of institutional support it offered for pedagogical innovation, and for a successful effort by a diverse student/faculty/staff coalition to win widespread acceptance for a university-wide diversity curriculum requirement. One of the nation's first university-level teaching centers was created by UMB faculty in 1983, with funding support from the Ford Foundation. From the outset, UMB's Center for the Improvement of Teaching (CIT) sought to provide organizational support for colleagues attempting to bridge the gulf between their specialized graduate training and the pedagogical challenges they faced as new and inexperienced college teachers. Relying on a grass-roots strategy for faculty development, CIT drew on the hard-won wisdom of discipline-trained faculty colleagues instead of depending on faculty or outside experts with advanced degrees in "education." With support from UMB's Chancellor, and from Provosts who came to value CIT as a key component of the university's commitment to an urban mission, the Center invited faculty from a wide range of disciplines 1) to improve their pedagogical skills, 2) to claim ownership of campus efforts at teaching transformation, and 3) to become active participants in an expanding constituency for change.

In semester-long faculty development seminars which met regularly throughout the 1980s and 1990s, faculty participated in what many described as their first ever conversation about teaching and their first experiences of collaboration with colleagues from other departments and colleges. Seminar discussions were kept confidential (under rules prohibiting their use in any personnel process), and participants were free to share problems, to implement innovations, and to reflect – together with colleagues – on student responses to the changes they attempted. According to one seminar participant:

I used to avoid students in my class by lecturing the entire class and lecturing above their heads. I knew they were bored and disconnected from the class and their exams showed that. Maybe I was afraid of my students because I didn't know who they were. I went to the seminar looking for help and support. I came away being able to take risks, to know students in my class, to let go of my Ivy League notion of higher education -- and feel that it was okay to teach differently.¹

For faculty from departments whose evaluation and reward systems focused on scholarship rather than teaching, CIT seminars were sometimes an occasion for the poignant discovery by a faculty member that despite the indifference of her department, she had long been a gifted teacher (and that this was a valuable achievement)!

Seminar participants played a leading role in the passage of the university-wide diversity curriculum initiative adopted in 1991. The product of a Diversity Working Group of students, faculty, and staff coordinated by CIT, the requirement defined diversity broadly, to include race, class, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation and culture. The success of this initiative meant that henceforward, the university's curriculum --the most powerful statement of the university's academic priorities -- would communicate the message that an educated person needed to study issues of diversity. Faculty previously challenged by students demanding to know why they had to learn about gays, working class people or members of non-majority racial and ethnic backgrounds, could now respond that the university as an institution mandated the study of diversity as a prerequisite for graduation, because an understanding of diversity was indispensable to life in the modern world. Currently, more than 100 diversity courses are offered at UMB; they are taught at every level, in many disciplines, and in every college in the university.

A faculty community dedicated to student learning

Although the CIT seminars were created to improve teaching, one of their most significant consequences was to foster the emergence of a community of sophisticated and action-oriented faculty. In the words of English composition specialist Ellie Kutz:

Providing faculty with the opportunity to engage in shared and extended inquiry into their work as teachers in an urban university helps to strengthen our institution, not only by helping us to improve the teaching that is the central focus of our work, but by enabling us to identify and strengthen other aspects of our work that contribute to the university's mission ... I've found myself returning to the very questions and issues raised by my colleagues in the Ford seminar. The seminar allowed me to see more clearly a fundamental coherence to the many elements of our common enterprise.

By 2000, almost 45% of the full-time faculty (206) had participated in semester-long faculty development seminars; 300 had attended one or more teaching-related workshops or an annual campus conference on Teaching and Transformation.

For junior faculty, and for all faculty who belong to historically marginalized social groups, CIT seminars became a particular source of support and encouragement, and an entrée into a network of supportive colleagues. In the anguished words of one junior faculty member: "How in the world did my scientific research prepare me to teach any students, let alone those that differ so much in levels of skill and academic preparation?"

Kathleen Sands refers to the encouragement from seminar colleagues that sustained her effort to initiate more open classroom discussions of sexual orientation. Other veterans of the seminar experience have written about it as "the first time I came to believe in the

good will of my white colleagues," and as a "reason for hope that UMB is changing, becoming more inclusive."

As teachers, we are aware that we understand our intellectual work better as we teach about it. When the issue is teaching itself, as distinct from the subject matter of our disciplines, we have found that mentoring/ teaching relationships with colleagues and with teachers at other levels of education – have been indispensable for gaining a critical perspective on our own pedagogical practices. All of our contributors have been participants and/or coordinators of the CIT faculty development seminars mentioned above. Those of us who have taught in teacher preparation programs for elementary, secondary, and adult education teachers credit our dialogues with our teacher-students as an important source of critical reflections on effective teaching. From this perspective, a commitment to public education by university-level faculty is not simply an altruistic endeavor, but also a contribution to the pedagogical renewal of those who engage in it.

In the course of our collaborations, many of the contributors to this volume have emerged as campus-level "experts" who present workshops to colleagues on such topics as "Anguish as a Second Language: ESL Student Challenges," (Vivian Zamel), "Teaching Students with Disabilities" (Estelle Disch), "Managing Classroom Diversity" (Castellano Turner and Tim Sieber) and "Redefining Academic Disciplines" (Esther Kingston-Mann and Winston Langley). As faculty members trained to be specialists in our fields, we now share questions, methods and strategies related to teaching and learning with a widening circle of colleagues from other disciplines and institutions at the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education, at AACU/Ford Foundation conferences on Diversity, Democracy and Liberal Learning, and as participants in the Ford National Campus Diversity Network.

In this process, we began to view both our struggles and our innovations in the context of similar efforts by colleagues across the country at other colleges and universities. Although our efforts are not unique, initiatives like ours are rarely discussed in national debates on innovation in higher education. In general, faculty efforts at non-elite academic institutions like UMass/Boston are documented almost as rarely as are the experiences of our non-elite students. We hope that our collection of essays will invite a broader exploration of the possibility that at all kinds of institutions, faculty trained as scholars can engage with today's students, grow as teachers and as human beings, and transform their teaching practices in more effective directions.

Institutional transformation, academic standards and good teaching

At UMB, the mutual support and encouragement we have given one another as colleagues and our emergent sense of community has provided critical support for what each of us as individuals has been able to accomplish –and reinforces our efforts to build community in our own classrooms. The familiar story of the individual faculty member struggling alone against a hostile environment can be a tragic tale ending in defeat (which may to some extent be avoidable). Our experience suggests that faculty cannot hope to enjoy support, or even to gain much critical purchase on their efforts unless they share, compare, and interweave their stories with others, as we ourselves have done in this volume. We strongly encourage other faculty to join local colleagues -- in supportive, non-hierarchical settings -- in collaborative dialogues on teaching.

In many respects, UMB exemplifies a widespread current shift in higher education away from an exclusive allegiance to the "research university" ideal, and toward what Rubén Martínez has called "the responsive university" -- a place where the teaching and mentoring of increasingly diverse student populations achieves greater parity with

traditional research as an institutional priority.² Our volume documents this important, but rarely noted shift at the grass roots of today's academic culture. It may be that so-called "non-traditional" institutions like UMass/Boston should be considered mainstream American universities, because they welcome a true cross-section of young adults studying in today's United States, and require a more thoughtful, multi-faceted model of achievement and success in higher education.

It should be emphasized that the commitment to student learning reflected in the work of our contributors does not mean that classrooms become encounter groups, or that academic course content is devalued. It is precisely our fidelity to the material we teach - - with its multiple human valences in the experiences of everyone in the classroom -- that complicates our task. As Tim Sieber observes, most of us began our professional journeys confident that our job was to present significant information with intelligence, enthusiasm and good will. Gradually, we came to discover that in order to teach challenging curriculum material, it was necessary to:

1. reflect on how to handle its affective, personal and political implications,
2. consider the kinds of dialogue we are willing to encourage, and
3. review the traditional methods by which we assess and measure learning.

In today's higher education, the pursuit of excellence must be extended to include high standards for pedagogy as well as content, and regular critical examination of our pedagogical performance. With such an approach to excellence, we need no longer aspire to be "bouncers at the gates of knowledge." Instead, we can begin to consider how to link media and political demands for "accountability" in higher education with the implementation of practices that genuinely expand student opportunities for learning.

In contrast to conventional stereotypes that pit "energetic and open" junior faculty against their "stodgy" elders, the experience of our contributors demonstrates that mid-career faculty can continue to learn and develop (and that junior faculty may be burdened by inexperience and by fears about tenure that place constraints on risk-taking). Our experience suggests that the challenges of higher education today - however stressful - do not inevitably lead to defeatism, retreat, burnout, indifference, or to the introduction of impersonal, assembly-line modes of instruction frequently emphasized in media accounts of today's professoriate. Our contributors demonstrate that faculty can benefit from collaboration with colleagues, and can learn to construct classroom environments which encourage students to share ideas and insights, and to take responsibility for their own learning. As Peter Kiang has suggested, it is through "sharing voices, crossing boundaries and building communities" that we and our students move forward.

At the same time, it is important to recall that our pedagogical powers and our expertise are real, but not infinite. We can never be sure that we will understand, predict or deal effectively with every problem that arises. This is not as depressing an admission as it might seem. As in other areas of learning, pedagogical advances are seldom linear. If faculty -- like students -- recognize that difficulties are not a sign of incompetence, it may become easier for them to learn. Faculty socialized to see themselves as all-purpose authorities frequently find the challenge of learning through mistakes and misjudgments more difficult than our students, who are inescapably aware that they are supposed to be learners. It is ironic that an academy whose *raison d'être* is education has traditionally defined teaching as something either mysterious (with some individuals gifted, and others incurably mediocre) or mechanical (with a set of cut-and-dried techniques that apply to every classroom) -- rather than as an enterprise that benefits from careful reflection, collaboration with others, creativity, and the investment of time and energy.

Our narratives suggest that dedicated teachers would do well to abandon fantasies of omniscience and omnipotence, i.e., the notion that they should be able to foresee all difficulties and resolve them quickly and happily. Becoming more realistic, faculty see more clearly, and find themselves more attuned to the potentials for change in unexpected situations. What are referred to in the literature as "teachable moments" teach us (the faculty) as much as they do our students. It is in this complex and realistic spirit that we acknowledge, honor, and encourage colleagues at UMass Boston and elsewhere who are committed to changing the existing distributions of knowledge in US society.

¹Suzanne Benally, External Assessment: The University of Massachusetts at Boston: A Public, Urban, Non-Residential Campus Responds to the Challenge of Diversity, A Report to the Ford Foundation, March 11, 1997, p. 5.

²Rubén Martínez, "Foreword," in Raymond V. Padilla and Miguel Montiel, *Debatable Diversity: Critical Dialogues on Change in American Universities* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998)