



June 7, 2021

Dr. Marcelo Suárez-Orozco
Chancellor
University of Massachusetts Boston
100 Morrissey Boulevard
Boston, MA 02125-3393

Dear Chancellor Orozco:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on April 23, 2021, the New England Commission of Higher Education considered the interim (fifth-year) report submitted by the University of Massachusetts Boston and voted to take the following action:

that the interim (fifth-year) report submitted by the University of Massachusetts Boston be accepted;

that the comprehensive evaluation scheduled for Spring 2025 be confirmed;

that, in addition to the information included in all self-studies, the self-study prepared in advance of the Spring 2025 evaluation give emphasis to the institution's success in:

- 1) implementing a new mission statement;
- 2) updating the Commission on its leadership transition, internal reorganization, and campus climate;
- 3) addressing achievement gaps in its at-risk populations;
- 4) developing a comprehensive assessment strategy and using the results to foster continuous improvement.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

The interim (fifth-year) report submitted by the University of Massachusetts Boston (UMass Boston) was accepted because it responded to the concerns raised by the Commission in its letter of January 20, 2016 and addressed each of the nine standards, including a reflective essay for Standard 8: *Educational Effectiveness* on student learning and success.

The Commission commends UMass Boston for its thorough and candid interim report. We note with favor the considerable progress the institution has made in the five areas of emphasis identified following the 2015 comprehensive evaluation. Through a process that included restructuring institutional financial

operations, a reorganization of the Office of Budget and Financial Planning, and “updating its capital planning to allow only the most critical projects to move forward,” the University has moved from a “structurally imbalanced budget” which led to an operating deficit of \$5.4 million in FY2016 to positive margins of \$3.9 million in FY2019 and \$5 million in FY2020. To address concerns that departmental service responsibilities “might not be equitably shared, with the burden of service falling especially heavily on female and minority faculty,” UMass Boston has, since 2018, funded the participation of 20 faculty in the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity mentoring program designed to teach faculty the “skills they need to increase both their research and writing productivity while maintaining a healthy work-life balance.” We are pleased to learn that all of those who participated in the program report increases in their writing and research productivity. We further note with approval that the University has a dedicated page on its transfer admissions site that includes information regarding the transfer credit approval process, materials pertaining to associate-to-bachelor’s pathway programs, and links and descriptions of articulation agreements with the 15 Massachusetts community colleges. The Commission appreciates the multiple ways UMass Boston has enhanced support for graduate students, including increasing the amount of the average graduate assistantship by 10.4% since 2015; creating the “Graduate Student Resources” webpage that centralized resources available for graduate students; and, since 2015, providing nearly 4% more tutorials per year at the Graduate Writing Center. Finally, we take favorable note that the Healey Library has a “publicly accessible ‘data dashboard’ to support effective comparisons year to year and inform library decision making, resource-allocation budgeting, and strategic planning.” We understand that two major projects (transforming the 4th floor and updating the Archives Department) will become part of the strategic planning process and the campus master plan.

UMass Boston’s reflective essay demonstrated “purposeful efforts to make academic and institutional decision making better informed by relevant and accessible data at multiple levels.” The process for program review was updated in AY2019 (previously last updated in 1999) and now focuses on “continuous department improvement” and is “forward looking” rather than “backward-looking on program definition.” Retention and graduation rates have been stable over the past several years, with first-year student retention between 75-78% and four- and six-year graduation rates of 27% and 49% respectively. The Commission takes favorable note of the multiple initiatives UMass Boston is undertaking to remove barriers to academic progression, including increasing access to gateway courses, providing micro-grants to students facing financial crisis, reducing DFW rates, and enhancing the effectiveness of undergraduate advising. Finally, the University is planning to re-launch its University Assessment Council which is charged “to provide recommendations and guidance regarding how to best implement and utilize learning outcomes assessment for all graduate and undergraduate academic programs.”

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Spring 2025 is consistent with Commission policy requiring each accredited institution to undergo a comprehensive evaluation at least once every ten years. The four items the Commission asks to be given emphasis within the self-study prepared for the comprehensive evaluation are matters related to our standards on *Mission and Purposes; Organization and Governance; Students; Planning and Evaluation; and Educational Effectiveness*.

The Commission is pleased to learn from the report that University of Massachusetts Boston has embarked on a process to revise its mission and vision statements now that permanent leadership is in place. We appreciate that the institution’s comprehensive strategic and capital planning process, framed within the context of “a range of societal events in early 2020 [that] have highlighted systemic racism and laid bare the structural inequities,” will guide this work as the University seeks to become a “leading antiracist and health-promoting university.” We look forward to learning, in the Spring 2025 comprehensive self-study, of UMass Boston’s success in revising its vision and mission statements. We are guided here by our standard on *Mission and*

Purposes:

The mission of the institution defines its distinctive character, addresses the needs of society, identifies the students the institution seeks to serve, and reflects both the institution's traditions and its vision for the future. The institution's mission provides the basis upon which the institution identifies its priorities, plans its future, and evaluates its endeavors; it provides a basis for the evaluation of the institution against the Commission's Standards (1.1).

The mission and purposes of the institution are accepted and widely understood by its governing board, administration, faculty, staff, students, and sponsoring entity (if any). They provide direction to the curricula and other activities and form the basis on which expectations for student learning are developed. Specific objectives, reflective of the institution's overall mission and purposes, are developed by the institution's individual units (1.4).

The Commission acknowledges that UMass Boston has undergone "significant leadership transition" over the past several years. A new chancellor was appointed in August 2020; an interim provost was installed in 2017; and several other senior leaders are also new to the university since 2017. Additionally, there has been "significant reorganization" of the University's college structure since 2015 as well as multiple changes in the University's administrative structure. The interim report indicates that "further internal organizational shifts" may be made as the University seeks to align its "form" with its goals and to enhance the effectiveness of its functioning. We welcome an update, in the Spring 2025 self-study, on the institution's success in assuring that its "organizational structure, decision-making processes, and policies are clear and consistent with its mission and support institutional effectiveness" (3.2). Our standard on *Organization and Governance* provides this additional guidance:

The institution's internal governance provides for the appropriate participation of its constituencies, promotes communications, and effectively advances the quality of the institution (3.13).

The effectiveness of the institution's organizational structure and system of governance is improved through regular and systematic review (3.19).

The Commission notes with approval the progress University of Massachusetts Boston has made in assessing student learning outcomes at the course and program level, and the interim report provided significant evidence that results of assessment projects are used to improve student learning. We also appreciate the institution's candid acknowledgment that, as "the most diverse public university in New England," it "must increase [its] focus on supporting at-risk students." Through the Spring 2025 self-study, we seek further evidence of the University's success in implementing its "data-informed strategies" to address achievement gaps for at-risk populations. We remind you of our standard on *Students*:

The institution demonstrates its ability to admit students who can be successful in the institution's academic program, including specifically recruited populations. The institution's goals for retention and graduation reflect institutional purposes, and the results are used to inform recruitment and the review of programs and services (5.6).

Through a program of regular and systematic evaluation, the institution assesses the effectiveness of its efforts to achieve an equitable educational experience for all of its students and the appropriateness and effectiveness of its student services to advance

institutional purposes. Information obtained through this evaluation is used to revise these efforts and services and improve their achievement (5.20).

Finally, we are gratified to learn of the University's commitment to develop a "clear and comprehensive assessment strategy that informs coordinated quality improvement efforts" and its intention to establish metrics to evaluate the "essential components" of students' educational experience and to "respond and act" on the findings of its assessments. The Spring 2025 self-study will provide UMass Boston an opportunity to update the Commission on its success in these matters. Our standard on *Educational Effectiveness* provides guidance here:

Assessment of learning is based on verifiable statements of what students are expected to gain, achieve, demonstrate, or know by the time they complete their academic program. The process of understanding what and how students are learning focuses on the course, competency, program, and institutional level. Assessment has the support of the institution's academic and institutional leadership and the systematic involvement of faculty and appropriate staff (8.3).

The institution uses a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods and direct and indirect measures to understand the experiences and learning outcomes of its students, employing external perspectives including, as appropriate, benchmarks and peer comparisons (8.5). The results of assessment and quantitative measures of student success are a demonstrable factor in the institution's efforts to improve the curriculum and learning opportunities and results for students (8.8).

The Commission expressed appreciation for the report submitted by University of Massachusetts Boston and hopes its preparation has contributed to institutional improvement. It appreciates your cooperation in the effort to provide public assurance of the quality of higher education.

You are encouraged to share this letter with all of the institution's constituencies. It is Commission policy to inform the chairperson of the institution's governing board and the head of the system of action on its accreditation status. In a few days we will be sending a copy of this letter to Robert Manning and Martin Meehan. The institution is free to release information about the evaluation and the Commission's action to others, in accordance with the enclosed policy on Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions.

If you have any questions about the Commission's action, please contact Lawrence M. Schall, President of the Commission.

Sincerely,



Russell Carey

RC/sjp

Enclosure- Policy on Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions

cc: Robert Manning
Martin Meehan