April 27, 2020

To the UMass Boston community:

The past several weeks have seen changes in society that are unprecedented in scope and pace. They are rippling through the higher education system and our own campus. I write to update you on the impact COVID-19 is having on UMass Boston and what we are doing to address the challenges it poses.

First and foremost, to those of you who suffered from the virus itself, the thoughts of the entire campus community are with you. In addition to the grave public health issues associated with the pandemic, many of our students and their families are facing real economic and financial hardship. And all of us are reckoning with the loss of opportunities to interact in classrooms, on the catwalk, in clubs and offices, on athletic fields and libraries. What we wouldn’t give to line up at Dunkin’ Donuts right now!

At the same time, I am impressed with, proud of and grateful for how our entire community — students, faculty, staff, and alumni — has come together to execute a complex migration to this unexpected educational environment in a remarkably short period of time. The grit that characterizes UMass Boston has been on full display. The Integrated Sciences Complex was illuminated in blue last week in honor of all of the first responders – and our own staff that continue to work on site – who are working so hard in the midst of the pandemic.

Of course, the transition has not been without growing pains and difficult choices, but everyone involved in the discussion about our future has come from a place of good faith.

With those values in mind, let me turn to some concrete information about our
transition and resources that we are working hard to make available, including federal stimulus funds.

**Continuity of Academic and Student Services**

In addition to the health and safety of our community, our most immediate priority has been to ensure continuity of academic instruction and programming, and I am glad to report that students are now receiving remote versions of the full range of our academic offerings, services and tools, which will enable them to complete their spring semester courses, receive credits, and continue on the path to their degrees. For example:

- Lectures and seminars are being offered synchronously and/or asynchronously.
- Instructors are providing virtual office hours or equivalent forms of contact, including email exchanges.
- Course materials are being provided via Blackboard or remote library access.
- Assignments are being evaluated and feedback provided.
- Students have been provided with greater flexibility than usual in electing pass/fail or graded classes.

By migrating to a remote platform, we have also replicated, and in some cases enhanced, the support services we are able to provide students. These include:

- A new system that leverages advanced analytics to identify students at risk of falling through the financial, academic, or behavioral health cracks and referring them to offices that can help.
- Library services and free electronic textbooks.
- Health, wellness, and counseling services.
- Advising and tutoring.
- Meditation, yoga, and recovery support meetings via Zoom.
- Social activities (e.g., student clubs and gaming sessions).
- Writing and notetaking workshops via Blackboard Collaborate.
- Robust career services focused on remote-working opportunities.
- Weekly newsletters that gather into one place, information for students.

**Student Reimbursements**

The temporary closing of campus has rendered certain student services unnecessary in the spring semester, including on-campus dining and parking, and students will be reimbursed for those services on a pro-rated basis. Staff have also been reimbursed for parking and other services that are no longer accessible.
These reimbursements will cut into the university’s 2020 budget since much of the expense involved remains our responsibility, but we decided out of a basic sense of fairness that students should not have to pay for services that are no longer applicable or available. In addition, the owner of the campus’ residence halls, Provident Commonwealth Educational Resources, Inc., worked with us to adopt an identical approach to student housing costs, and will be reimbursing students who are no longer living in the residence halls on the same pro-rated basis.

Some students have inquired about the possibility of tuition refunds. Consistent with the practices of campuses throughout the U.S., including our sister campuses in the UMass system, we will not be able to adjust tuition. The shift to distance learning has not eliminated the cost of instruction and student support or the cost and maintenance of the university’s physical campus. In some areas, such as the need for enhanced technology, the costs are greater. We must cover these expenses with our existing budget, which is now constrained by the refunds we have given.

Fortunately, by utilizing a remote platform, we have been able to retain the most important benefits of a UMass Boston education: instruction from a world-class faculty, full course credits, and the opportunity to continue along the path to an all-important degree.

Discounted Summer Sessions
As in the past, UMass Boston will offer two sessions of classes this summer through Continuing and Professional Studies that will help students along the path to a degree. Due to the unpredictability of the pandemic and our need to plan ahead, we have made the decision to continue with distance learning through both summer sessions. To help students take advantage of the additional opportunities provided by summer classes, we will provide a one-time discount of $200 per 3-credit course to those who take at least one summer course. The university will also offer summer scholarships of up to $500 to qualified students facing financial hardships, on top of any existing financial aid.

Budget and Finances
COVID-19 will have a significant impact on our operating budget.

For fiscal 2020, which ends June 30, the financial costs associated with COVID-19 will total $2.5 million. The major drivers of these costs including the return of pro-rated parking fees, dining reimbursements to residential students, and the
technological enhancements associated with the move to distance learning. We have developed a plan that will allow us to finish the fiscal year in balance through savings that include a reduction in utility costs associated with the temporary closing of the campus, curbing non-personnel spending such as travel and business meetings, and restrictions on faculty and staff hiring.

We face an unanticipated budget problem involving the (understandable) decline in vacation time utilization, which nonetheless creates a budget liability as it accrues. Because we are required to maintain a balanced budget, we are considering various options for addressing this issue and discussing it with our partners in the campus unions.

For fiscal 2021, which begins July 1, the budget outlook is less clear and will depend on a number of variables, including the state’s appropriation to the UMass system, enrollment levels (the largest driver of campus revenue) and the application of federal CARES Act stimulus funds. It is clear, however, that significant budgetary adjustments will need to be made and that nothing can be ruled out. We continue to make prudent budget decisions today in an effort to ensure the financial viability of the campus and forestall more dramatic action in the future.

We will review our progress with the FY ‘20 budget and the concerns we are taking into account in planning for FY ‘21 at the final (virtual) Town Hall gathering of this academic year in mid-May.

Federal Stimulus
UMass expects to receive $12 million from the CARES Act federal stimulus fund and has one year to deploy these funds. We are awaiting the disbursement from the federal government and expect it to arrive in the next couple of weeks. Fifty percent of those funds must be used to provide emergency financial grants to students for expenses related to COVID-19. I have convened a committee co-chaired by Director of Financial Aid Katherine Lynch and Director of Student Success Initiatives Kristin Bergeson to make recommendations about how to allocate these funds. UMass Boston may receive additional funds as a Minority Serving Institution.

Fall Semester Planning
With so much unpredictability around COVID-19, we are also busy with scenario planning for the fall semester. We estimate that it will be at least the end of June before we can make a final decision on modality of instruction. Nonetheless, whether via in-person or on-line learning (or something in between), we will
continue to provide a first class education using all of the strengths of our faculty and staff and the ingenuity of our students.

2020 Commencement

I’m glad to end on a bright note. As you may already know, the vast majority of our students have voted to postpone 2020 commencement until it is deemed safe to conduct in-person. In the meantime, all 2020 graduates will receive their diplomas in the mail this summer as a “down payment” on the celebration of this tremendous achievement. Coming after the public health authorities have determined that it is safe to gather in large numbers, the ceremony will be an especially festive event -- a tribute to both the 2020 class and the resiliency of the UMass Boston community. I can’t wait.

I close by noting that we are entering the first week of Ramadan and hence want to convey my best wishes for the holiday to our Muslim students, faculty and staff. The City of Boston is providing halal foods through the generosity of the Boston Resiliency Fund. I encourage anyone in need to contact kmaruf@lcnareleif.org or TEXT 347-754-1067.

Thank you once again for standing with UMB. It is an institution to be proud of, especially under these difficult circumstances.

Cordially,

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