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Provost Langley’s Charge to the Committee:
No one has to remind us that the primary reason for our being here, or for being at any university, is to minister to the needs of students. This does not mean faculty and staff are not important—they are, and the faculty represent the “permanent” constitutive expression of the university. It should not be surprising, therefore—especially at a university that prides itself on being student-centered—that students should be a major focus of any strategic plan.

The term “student life” is often misunderstood to mean part of what constitutes “extra-curricular activities.” Extra is a term, taken from Greek, which refers to what is outside or external to that which is prefixed. For example, extracellular refers to matter found outside of the cells of an organism. So extra-curricular refers to that which is outside the curricular areas of university life. We see student life as encompassing the opposite: that which is part of the curriculum.

The charge of this committee is to think of the university (and the University of Massachusetts Boston in particular) in terms of an institution that is concerned with the development of students, and to see the work of student life as something that is co-curricular, something that is part of and an intimate complement to what is generally regarded as the curricular focus of universities. Our experience of the digital revolution, which offers few privileged sites for teaching and learning, reinforces earlier historical counsels that urge us to be particularly partial to and vigilant about integrative learning. Please attend to the work of this committee within the spirit of that revolution.

Approach:
The Student Life Subcommittee reviewed the 2007 report from the previous strategic planning subcommittee to identify which recommendations have been implemented and which are still in progress. Following this review, the committee determined that the focus of their work should be to create a more explicit and consistent definition of two key principles – “Student-Centered” and “Integrative Learning.” The group was then charged with the task of looking for evidence of ways in which each principle is demonstrated in current programs and operations across the university. This information shaped the underlying premise of our recommendations, which was to establish an improved understanding across
the institution about the importance of anchoring all programs and policies in a “student-centered” ethic which can be directly linked to students’ real needs as well as institutional outcomes. Themes from our discussions emerged, and the following domains of inquiry were identified to frame the committee’s recommendations. These included:

I. Student Life Space and Services on Campus
   - Inventory existing options that support a range of student-development needs; assess areas for improvement; recommend short-term and long-term solutions for improving the quality and quantity of student life space on campus.
   - Assess campus operations in relation to current student needs and identify recommendations to expand or enhance services/facilities to increase student engagement and participation in campus programs/activities.
   - Consider the increased service needs of commuter students and the new services that will be required to support residential students on our campus.

II. Creating Learning Communities and Curricular/Co-Curricular Collaborations to Improve Retention, Persistence, and Graduation
   - Formalize avenues to connect classroom learning with out-of-classroom experiences; create an assessment plan that enables students to demonstrate this learning in relation to their career goals.
   - Examine the challenge of balancing high academic standards with sufficient supports tailored to a diverse range of students’ needs; recommend strategies for “creating connections” across the student experience.
   - Assess the effectiveness and compatibility of student life at DEEP Institutions/Involving Colleges.
   - Recommend best types of learning communities for UMass Boston.
   - Identify signature collaborations between student affairs and academic affairs.

III. Communication
   - Consider manner, message, and timeliness of all communications with students including regular and emergency communications.
   - Create consistent messaging across campus that demonstrate our shared, student-centered ethic

Research for the work of the committee included a review of relevant literature, a list of which is included in the resource section within each of the areas of recommendation. Information on students’ experiences and preferences was taken from a variety of sources, which included an analysis of the results of the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) and a review of the changes in key indicators over the past ten years. The committee also reviewed the outcomes of a survey conducted by the Undergraduate Student Government Association in May of 2009, titled Campus Connect. Additional information was provided by a series of surveys conducted by the Office of the Dean of Students in the fall of 2009. The reports from these surveys were titled The Beacon Pulse.

The committee also analyzed differing paradigms in the organization and administration of institutions of higher learning and their effect on student learning and success. Progressive models in place at several colleges across the nation were examined and are cited in the list of resources for each category.
Summary of Findings:

As universities become increasingly complex and diverse, establishing and sustaining a strong sense of community and connection to the institution becomes a greater challenge. Attributes of many of the successful institutions identified in the Documenting Effective Educational Practice (DEEP) research project include a sense of shared culture, with symbols and ceremonies to reinforce and celebrate that culture; structured opportunities to create personal connections between students, faculty, and administrators; and a campus-wide emphasis on internal communication that promotes an atmosphere of caring, trust, and mutual support.

The outcomes of the work of the Student Life Subcommittee include recommendations and action steps in areas consistent with DEEP indicators.

Recommendations:

I. Student Life Space and Services on Campus

As we move into the various early active phases of our long-range overall campus re-design and enhancement plan, we propose a re-examination of the effectiveness of certain functions and services with a view to enhancing our ability to better serve our students by promoting student access, comfort, ambiance, and flexibility, while also enhancing the staff's ability to provide better services.

Students require certain basic support in order to effectively utilize the services we can provide. Staff also require some basic workplace elements in order to provide the best possible level of service for our constituents.

According to recent student input, the following points are included among things students feel are still lacking:

- A sense of privacy and confidentiality (both real and perceived), especially in the Campus Center, when dealing with personal issues like financial aid, judicial affairs, student record information, and various personal issues that may come up, particularly in connection with the offices of the dean of students, enrollment services, and admissions (both undergraduate and graduate).
- Comfortable, quiet places to study and access online services between classes.
- Places to make noise and participate in public social and recreational activities, events, and performances.
- Private meeting spaces available on an ad hoc basis.
- Prominent, well-signed, easy-to-find and easy-to-access basic student service locations that address the needs of both incoming and continuing students.
- Access to normal student services (food vendors, student advisors and academic offices, and various administrative offices) during weekend and evening hours when the campus is open and classes are in session.
- A sense of student-appropriate, lively, enhanced ambience.

The following is a list of brief, yet concrete and positive, suggestions regarding how these perceived deficiencies may be addressed by making both small and larger changes in the ways in which the Campus Center and various other campus spaces are used, identified, reconfigured, or even constructed.

Student Privacy/ Communications/ FERPA Compliance

Students and their families frequently need (or are required) to discuss: sensitive family matters that may affect academic performance or qualification, with counselors, mentors, and advisors; confidential disciplinary or legal matters, with the judicial affairs officer(s); private family and individual financial matters, with financial aid advisors; personal and individual benefits issues, with Veterans' Affairs advisors; any number of personal and private things, with international
mentors and advisors; and, with a range of university personnel, various deeply personal issues that may include physical and/or learning disabilities, personal health, and family or legal issues.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to conduct private, confidential, or sensitive conversations in an office without doors, open to easy and frequent interruption, unwelcome and undue scrutiny, and the (intended or not) open ears and attention of uninvolved parties who may or may not be considered qualified or appropriate to receive confidential information. This confidentiality is necessary for the university to remain FERPA-compliant.

Further, conference rooms in the Campus Center are insufficiently numerous; and many of those that are available can hardly be deemed suitable for private interaction, either because they are decidedly not sound-proof or because they are so visually exposed to unwanted observation – or both.

**Action Step:** Offices that handle critical and/or sensitive information in the Campus Center should be reconfigured to include more private space; and more significant and generally available private meeting spaces, suitable for both scheduled and *ad hoc* interactions requiring the element of simple privacy, should also be provided. This reconfiguration could be accomplished at minimal cost to the university.

**Student Services**

Students have difficulty finding the Office of the Dean of Students, which is currently located on the 4th floor of the Campus Center, and therefore utilizing its services. In addition, the current offices are completely open and have no reception area, doors, or administrative support staff.

The best solution is to find a space that students pass every day on their way to and from the campus so they can be well aware of its location in advance of needing its services. The office would ideally be located on the Upper Level of the Campus Center, adjacent to the “front door to the campus,” to allow for high visibility and early identification by students, prospects, and their families, reinforcing the notion that the university is student-centered. This would also underscore the idea that the dean of students is an important on-campus resource for students.

Another key issue is that our student demographics indicate that many work while attending classes, commute to campus, and use the campus as a resource in the evening and on weekends.

Food, too, should be considered an important service enhancement. Maintaining, as Sodexho does, a standard range of food options in various designated spaces around the campus is logical, practical, and desirable. Providing the same basic comestible options in each location, though, while a sound, standard low-cost food-delivery-service practice, is ultimately self-limiting.

**Action Step:** Relocate the office of the dean of students to a space far more accessible to the main stream of ongoing student life on the campus.

**Action Step:** Extend service hours for direct, person-to-person services for informational offices like the admissions office, the One Stop, and food services, making them similar to the hours of operation offered by our library services. This will help us prepare for the essentially 24/7 service timeframe that will be required once the campus incorporates dormitories as it moves forward through its long-term expansion plans.

**Action Step:** Provide students with “virtual” helpdesk services via the informational kiosks already in place in many areas throughout the campus. A full array of online departmental Frequently-Asked-Question services should be developed and updated regularly by every office on campus to maintain and ensure current, accurate, and well-coordinated information.
**Action Step:** Encourage key administrators to establish posted office hours for the purpose of accommodating walk-in appointments. This effort will serve to emphasize the availability of administrative support for individual student and other constituent concerns.

**Action Step:** Open some public spaces to a limited number of external food vendors (food carts and temporary stands) to enhance campus ambience, expand cultural awareness and variety, and provide food options to weekend users at a reasonable cost.

**Quiet Space / Noisy Space – Work Place / Play Space**

Events and meetings generate noise, whether held in club spaces or other rooms throughout the campus. However, due to the open plan of the Campus Center and the nature of its almost exclusively hard surfaces, noise travels, echoes, and intensifies within its open spaces, frequently disturbing administrators at work on university business in their offices on different floors and especially in places that are open to atrium areas common to student activities. This is a problem that is being exacerbated as students are encouraged to take on ever more active roles in organizing, planning, and completing events. Student spaces should not have negative effects on the work of administration, and vice versa. We need a balance between the concerns of students and those of university administrators, as the activities of each affect the other.

**Action Step:** Each office should be evaluated to see if its placement in the Campus Center is optimally efficient for that office, its function, its constituency, and the building itself. Based on this evaluation, a judgment must be made as to whether even to keep some offices within the Campus Center. Some offices may prove better suited to other areas of the campus. For example, moving the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs into the Quinn building would bring the vice chancellor into closer working proximity to peer administrators, and would also serve to underscore the difference between that office and the Office of the Dean of Students, which is and should be more closely concerned with direct student services.

**Action Step:** Develop and/or designate appropriate spaces for students to gather quietly, meet, and study between classes, as well as to hold ad hoc meetings for both academic and social purposes. A space could be as simple as an alcove with chairs (a la Campus Center third floor), or as sophisticated as a designated room with computers like the glass-enclosed Campus Center room for honors students. Other corridor and passageway spaces can be identified in the various campus buildings, as well. Whatever the locations for student study or student interactions, wireless Internet connection is requisite; and upholstered chairs are preferable to yet more sound-reflective hard surfaces, despite any maintenance issues.

**Action Step:** Designate spaces for “playing” and making joyful noise. A so-named “free enterprise” location (or a number of them), appropriately shielded to prevent interference with ongoing and necessary university work or services in other areas of the campus, would segregate necessary social activities and allow more frequent public performances during times when classes are in session – and students are available to attend. This will only become more desirable as residence halls and nearby living communities are expanded in the coming years during the development of the university’s long-term plans.

**Action Step:** Students maintain that the current configuration of the Game Room on the Upper Level is insufficient to accommodate and serve the greatest number of students, and point out that students can be turned away if the room is “full.” Enhancements could include a small performance platform, additional tables with comfortable, upholstered chairs, couches, and more coffee/end tables. As this room shares a wall with administrative and student service offices (Undergraduate Admissions) care must be taken to support more low-key recreational activities in this room, however.
Enhanced Ambience

Though suggestions presented in committee incorporated ideas ranging from regular public concerts to juried student art exhibits, and focused on the addition of plants and art work in general, it may be said that they generally reflected a desire for more color and activity in the various public campus spaces. As one former student opined during a relatively recent first-floor-Campus-Center visiting exhibition of sculpture, painting, ceramics, etc., “this looks like a real university now!” Campus ambience does play an important role in setting a tone, providing inspiration, and establishing an appropriate frame of mind for intellectual discourse. Blank white walls and ceilings, which tend to focus attention strictly on architectural form, do provide a good base, but are not necessarily in and of themselves sufficiently inspiring to enhance higher learning and intellectual stimulation.

**Action Step:** Plans for regular and various low-key musical performances in various designated public spaces around the campus would also do much to enhance the ambiance of campus life and present a sophisticated face to visiting public, dignitaries, academics, et al. Obviously, care must be taken that such performances do not actually interfere with the conduct of university business.

**Action Step:** Re-instating a free period into each academic day could also enhance the options for available audiences, increasing appreciation for these events. It need not always be about face painting and vendor tables, though seasonal festivities are always welcome.

**Resources**

- American College Personnel Association (ACPA) Commission on Commuter Students and Adult Learners
  http://www.myacpa.org/comm/commuter/
- Commuter, Graduate and Transfer Student Programs and Services, Drexel University
  http://www.drexel.edu/oca/c/

II. Creating Learning Communities and Curricular/Co-Curricular Collaborations to Improve Retention, Persistence, and Graduation

According to benchmark data provided in the 2008 National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE), UMass Boston students differ from their colleagues in a number of characteristics. Many of these—including need to care for dependents and working more than 20 hours per week, among others, seem to involve stresses that may impose time constraints on UMass Boston students that may limit their participation in academic activities outside of class time, may impact their ability to participate in co-curricular activities or other enriching educational experiences, and may hinder their ability to form close relationships with classmates. This may adversely impact their ability to become academically and socially integrated into the life of the university, and therefore may adversely affect retention and persistence.

Shared learning contributes to the strength of the culture at DEEP institutions. By providing common experiences for students in and out of the classroom, these institutions demonstrate the success of programs that provide students with opportunities to create personal connections with peers, faculty, or other key individuals on campus. Learning communities bring together small groups of college students who take two or more linked courses together, usually as a cohort. These programs often utilize a variety of integrated supports such as peer mentoring/tutoring, leadership development and service-learning activities, and career development workshops.

**Action Step:** Expand support to increase the availability of learning communities connected to student housing on campus. Successful programs on campus include Directions for Student Potential, Beacon Beginnings, and the Freshmen Success Communities in the College of
Science and Math.

**Action Step:** Develop an explicit expression of commuter student services in the form of an administrative operation and infusion across existing departments.

**Action Step:** Create a Learning Collaborative to combine co-curricular planning with academic planning.

**Resources**
- Washington Center for Improving Undergraduate Education National Learning Communities Directory [http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/project.asp?pid=73](http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/project.asp?pid=73)
- National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) Student Affairs Partnering with Academic Affairs Knowledge Community [http://www.naspa.org/kc/sapaa/default.cfm](http://www.naspa.org/kc/sapaa/default.cfm)

**iii. Communication**

Institutions of higher education that excel at engaging and supporting students share a few key characteristics related to the nature, manner, and means of their communications with students and other constituents. The first, and most important, characteristic is consistency in messages received by students across their enrollment experience and congruence with the institution’s espoused mission. Expectations for students are explicit and concise at these institutions and are readily accessible to all members of their community. Colors and symbols support the connection between message and place. Another characteristic is a campus-wide emphasis on internal communication that promotes an atmosphere of caring, trust, and mutual support. Technology provides additional opportunities and challenges to provide a forum for an open, dynamic exchange of information and ideas.

Survey data provided important information about students’ experiences and expectations regarding university communications:
- The most widely used social networking site used by students is Facebook.
- Students view specific UMass Boston websites infrequently.
- When asked to rate the likelihood of accessing specific types of information on their mobile devices, students responded that the top five that they were most likely to access would be academics/course information, weather on campus, events on campus, financial aid/scholarships, and tuition/fees.
- 62% of respondents to a recent student survey said that they could browse the internet through their mobile device; of these 48% do so one or more times a day
- “Administrators and all other departments should learn their system. They give inaccurate information and students keep having to run around from department to department for courses and admission issues.”
- “There are a lot of rude office personnel who treat students like they are bothering them. For every 1 nice person, there are 4 rude ones.”
- “The office staff lack communications between each other. Some of them need to change the tones when they talk to students who need help from them.”

**Campus Civility**

Faculty, staff, and students report behavior and interactions that are frequently uncivil, unproductive, and unprofessional. These behaviors are often counterproductive, do not enhance the student experience, and contradict the mission of UMass Boston.
**Action Step:** Implement a university-wide customer-service initiative to address the lack of civility in communications. Develop strategies that encourage and promote civility, support, and service as core values at UMass Boston.

**Action Step:** Establish standards for all signage and communications with students and other members of the university community (e.g., no tolerance for signs that say “This entrance is only for staff who work in this area”).

**Way-Finding**

Current signage across campus, both interior and exterior, is unclear and inconsistent from building to building, and does not adequately assist students and community members in finding their way.

**Action Step:** Improve upon and/or develop new way-finding signage that is clear, consistent, and functional. Include digital signage and directories that will provide location/directional information complemented by interactive information about such things as events, weather, date, time, etc.

**Internet and Social Media Presence**

The current UMass Boston Internet and social media pages appear to be more oriented to external guests and university partners. They are not student-oriented or student-friendly. Social media applications in particular do not involve students in the design and implementation and are therefore not as compelling to college students as they could be.

**Action Step:** Involve students in the redesign of the university web presence and include them in the development and on-going management of social media applications (e.g., through a Student Media Advisory Board). Student involvement will insure that they are relevant and attractive to the student population.

**Action Step:** Develop a wider range of applications for mobile web devices with real-time information about important daily functions. Improve access to wireless phone/data service across campus.

**Resources**

- Connecting to the Net Generation

- Association for Social Media & Higher Education (ASMH)

- The Use of Social Media in Higher Education for Marketing and Communications: A Guide for Professionals in Higher Education
  [http://www.sacredheart.edu/download/2735_social_media_in_higher_education_1_.pdf](http://www.sacredheart.edu/download/2735_social_media_in_higher_education_1_.pdf)

**Appendices:**

- **National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) 2008:** Key Findings, UMass Boston Office of Institutional Research and Policy Studies, October 2008

- **National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) 2008:** Student Characteristics and Factors Affecting Retention & Persistence, UMass Boston Office of Institutional Research and Policy Studies, April 201

- **Campus Connect:** Undergraduate Student Government Association Survey, May 2009