

Dr. Bob Chen: Building Bridges Through Grand Scholarly Challenges

In his role as Director of Grand Scholarly Initiatives (GSI) at UMass Boston, Dr. Bob Chen is creating something transformative: a culture of research that cuts across disciplines, amplifies student and faculty voices, and tackles some of the world's most pressing challenges. Whether it's in the lab, on a Zoom call, or out in the field in Puerto Rico, Dr. Chen's work is a living example of what happens when academic inquiry meets real-world impact.

"All our students already have the tools to succeed," he says with conviction. "My job is to think about how we can provide opportunities—across departments and colleges—for them to enhance their research, their learning, and their ability to think bigger."

That mindset powers the Grand Scholarly Challenges (GSC), a set of cross-cutting themes developed with broad input from faculty and departments across campus. These themes act as scaffolding for collaborative research and community-engaged work. As Dr. Chen puts it, "We're practicing what we preach. Our projects are transdisciplinary. We work with the Sustainable Solutions Lab, we partner with communities in Puerto Rico—it's education, its research, its service, all rolled into one."

A self-described "professor who does a little bit of everything," Dr. Chen balances his administrative responsibilities with active grant-funded research and a lab that includes both undergraduate and graduate students. "Each project feeds into the next," he explains. "We're not bound by departments or traditional publishing norms. We're catalyzing new conversations."

This holistic, integrated approach also influences how he thinks about the university's research future. He's excited by the idea of increasing UMass Boston's research reputation—one peer-reviewed paper, one student success story, one interdisciplinary team at a time. "Growing research dollars is important," he says. "But so is retaining scholars who are doing the work they're passionate about. That's the kind of culture we want to build."

Dr. Chen envisions a future where UMass Boston is nationally recognized for tackling societally significant grand scholarly challenges—from climate equity to reimagining education. "In five to ten years, if someone wants to work on urban coastal issues or innovative teaching models, they'll know UMass Boston is the place to go," he says.

And while much of his day may consist of connecting through "lots of Zoom calls," Dr. Chen is energized by the possibilities ahead. "Next year, we'll be engaging more directly with students—especially around the Just Society theme—giving them space to express, connect, and drive change."

Ultimately, for Dr. Chen, research isn't just about papers or grants. It's about people. "We integrate research, service, and teaching to make the most of our limited time and resources. That's what makes it all work."