To all members of the campus community:

I write today to invite your participation in an important campus conversation: the first phase of a strategic planning process that will, I hope, guide us through a period of important choices and position us for sustained success in the years ahead. Strategic plans are common, but this one has some uncommon features. So let me begin with some background.

When I arrived on campus last fall, one of my first discoveries was that in less than a year I would be responsible for submitting a fifth-year interim report to our accrediting body, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC). I also learned that, following from recommendations in the comprehensive review in 2009, NEASC wanted that report to address our progress in “developing a strategic plan that sets overall institutional priorities.”

This was a daunting task, but one that also struck me as an important opportunity. Our campus, like so many others, faces fundamental and long-term changes. As a newcomer I brought a fresh perspective, but I also wanted to get a deep sense of the campus’s capacities and aspirations. An authentic strategic planning process — whether externally required or not — seemed well timed.

Because it was a learning experience for me I consulted closely with the faculty leadership and others. I was and remain deeply committed to engaging the campus in an open, participatory and transparent decision-making process. It was therefore encouraging to learn that joint faculty-administrative problem solving was well established on campus. A number of successful joint task forces had been formed in areas ranging from General Education to accountability, and the Faculty Senate Rules Committee and I quickly agreed to approach the strategic planning process in that same spirit.

An earlier Senate group, the Ad Hoc Committee on Strategic Oversight (AHCSO), had provided advice to the administration on planning issues. That group was revitalized as the Joint Task Force on Strategic Oversight (JTFSO) with three co-chairs: Profs. Nancy Cohen and Amilcar Shabazz (who had co-chaired AHCSO) and Associate Provost Bryan Harvey. On September 13, 2012 JTFSO was charged to “make recommendations to the Chancellor with respect to a high-level Strategic Plan which will serve as the institution’s mandated response to NEASC.” The group was quickly formed with fifteen faculty members, thirteen members of the administrative staff, a representative of the Labor Coalition, the Student Trustee and the President of the SGA. So one uncommon feature of this planning process is its collaborative nature from beginning to end.

I worked with JTFSO early on to frame the main planning challenges, and working groups were formed in the areas of Student Learning Experience and Student Success, Research Foci and Funding, Benefit to the Commonwealth and Beyond, and Balanced and Sustainable Resource Strategy, all joint groups with faculty and
administrative co-chairs. Many of these further divided into subcommittees, sometimes merging with existing Senate groups. All told, more than 130 faculty, staff and students contributed to the document now being presented to the campus.

I gave the group a very challenging task: to develop a first phase planning document that would be ready for campus review and comment right after spring break. To me it was essential to give the campus community a chance to review and digest the assumptions and ideas coming out of the process, a “reality check” to be sure we were headed in the right direction. In my experience this is another uncommon feature of planning processes, but it is important. Effectively, this gave JTFSO only about six months to organize its work, frame issues, exchange views, and formulate recommendations. This is an uncommonly short period of time for such a task, but the members rose to the challenge.

What I asked them to develop was not a complete, detailed strategic plan, but rather to set an agenda for the campus that can guide ongoing campus-wide and departmental planning, drive the setting of priorities, and inform resource decisions. What they have produced is a thoughtful, grounded, and forward-looking statement to stimulate campus discussion while the plan is still in formation. That, too, is uncommon.

So today I ask you to join in this conversation by giving us your reactions and suggestions to the draft JTFSO has developed. The objective is to refine and revise it, and present it to the Faculty Senate and other groups by the end of the semester. As you review this draft I ask you to keep in mind a few things about what it is and also what it is not.

It is a draft, to be finalized by JTFSO over the remainder of the semester. It lays out principles and broad goals and objectives, and makes specific recommendations about the directions the campus should be pursuing, but it is not a blueprint for setting priorities or allocating resources. It is rooted in the campus’s mission of teaching, research and outreach, recognizing that clarity about core activities sets the stage for comprehensive planning. For that reason it does not set directions for many academic and non-academic support areas: those will emerge in the next phase of planning as the whole campus is asked to align its activities with the mission-based strategy.

As you read the draft plan at www.umass.edu/etc, I ask that you focus more on the broader issues than on the details (i.e. don’t miss the forest for the trees). In particular, you may want to keep the following overarching questions in mind:

1. Does the document capture the primary challenges facing public higher education institutions in general, and UMass Amherst in particular? Do you agree that accountability to our various stakeholders looms large at this juncture?
2. How well do you think the three broad goals outlined in the document address the above challenges for our flagship campus in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts?

3. Does the document provide sufficient guidance to colleges and departments to align their own plans with those for the campus?

In two places you will also see italicized summary statements, one describing how UMass Amherst graduates should be known and the other how the campus itself should be thought of. These are intended to prompt an ongoing discussion of what makes our campus distinctive, and we welcome your ideas.

The planning website (http://www.umass.edu/provost/strategic-planning) will link you to the draft and other planning documents and information. You can also go directly to the draft at https://blogs.umass.edu/strategicplanning, where you can sign in using your regular UMass net ID. You may share your comments there, and also from within the draft by clicking on the “comment” link at the top of each page. You can also email comments to jtfsoplanning@provost.umass.edu, or contact any member of JTFSO, if you wish. In addition, you may wish to attend one of the open town meetings (see schedule at the website) set up for discussing the plan. Members of JTFSO will set up department faculty meetings on request. The discussion period will remain open until April 26th.

This is far from the last step in the planning process, but it is an important first step. I appreciate your willingness to join in this conversation and help position our campus for continued success at a time of great change. I am especially indebted to the members of JTFSO and the many planning committees whose commitment to the campus brought us to this important moment.

Kumble Subbaswamy
Chancellor