Esther Terry, Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and Campus Life

For the little over a year that I have had the privilege to serve as the Interim Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and Campus Life, I have had occasion to see the University from a very different perspective. It has been wonderful; it has been interesting, and I have learned a lot that I did not know. One of the pleasures that I have had is to work with these three young women who are working with what they call the First-Year Experience. They will tell you about it, and then you will know something new, too. In order as they will appear, I am pleased to introduce: Laura Giles who is the Associate Director of Residence Life here on campus. Laura’s undergraduate degree comes from Mt. Holyoke College; her Master’s from Ohio State University in Higher Education Administration. She has been at UMass for five years.

Anjali Cadena, the Community Development Director, has an undergraduate degree from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. She has a Master’s from Appalachian State in Higher Education Administration, and she has been with us at UMass for nine years. Kelly Gray is the First-Year Experience Specialist. Her undergraduate degree is from Quinnipiac University. Her Master’s degree is from UMass Amherst in higher education. She has been with us for three years.

These wonderful women have been with us for at least a decade if you add it all together. They have learned much about our students and they have worked very hard on what they will now tell you about.

Laura Giles, Associate Director for Residence Life

I am honored to have my staff here today to share an overview of the Residential First-Year Experience in Housing and Residence Life. Throughout the presentation, I believe you will see our commitment in supporting the academic mission of the University. Communities for first-year students assist them in both their academic pursuits and supporting their academic success, and also, more importantly, assist them in their transition to the University.

Anjali Cadena, Community Development Director

We want to talk today about how students experience the Residential First-Year program. We also want to discuss what the students are saying about their experience through the assessment that we have done. We hope to share our strongest initiatives and the types of experiences students have every day that bring them closer to the University and the academic mission of the Institution.

This program was not invented by UMass. We picked up on a national trend. Nationally, there has been this push towards Living Learning Communities which are defined as communities for students who share a common interest. These students live together, and they take courses together that are linked to their living experience. Studies have shown that Living Learning Communities immensely benefit first-year students. It helps increase their GPAs. It helps them to have stronger interactions
with their peers around academic issues. They bring these issues out of the classroom and into residence halls and the rest of campus. These students persist better at the University, and they have a holistic learning experience. We want a student at UMass to walk away saying, “I did not just learn in one classroom. All of my experiences were all blended together, so I felt like I was supported by a university community.”

We were asked by the Vice Chancellor at the time to jump on this national trend and to deliver a program to our first-year students. It was designed to be our special brand of a Living Learning Experience. This program started in 2004 with just two residence halls. In four years, it has grown to 17 residence halls, and 95 percent of our first-year students are in these programs. We have linked with many academic departments. We have worked very closely with many academic departments who give us an academic thrust for these students to feel like they have a very comprehensive learning experience here at UMass. Our strongest collaboration is with our academic partners: Undergraduate Advising, the Center for Service Learning, the Isenberg School of Management and Commonwealth College. We work very closely with some of the staff, but we also have good connections with many other academic departments. Our instructors and staff work very closely day-to-day to offer students a good experience in the residence halls.

We adopted some of the highlights of the national trends and the strongest aspects of Living Learning Communities as our mission. We are looking for our students to have the best possible transition from their high school to UMass and to speak very highly of the program and feel like they had a very successful residential experience. We want them to go beyond the residence halls and feel that together we helped them foster a strong connection to the University. Most importantly, we want them to be academically successful.

We organize the Living Learning Communities around themes. A theme is a broad interest area that can be explored from a variety of academic and experiential lenses. There are things we do on both the academic side and through our staff and programming that lends itself to the theme. From the student end of things, these themes may or may not mean a lot to them. They chose a theme when they picked their residential options. Their housing was chosen based on the theme, but some students may think about this and be highly invested in their theme. For other students, it is not salient in their thinking, and they do not give a lot of attention to it. I think the theme is helpful to the staff and our academic partners. It helps us refine our programming and gives us a sense of purpose.

Each residence hall has professional staff members with Master’s degrees. There are graduate students who support the residence halls as well as undergraduates who are called Resident Assistants (RA). In first-year halls, we have an additional set of staffing. Those staff members are focused entirely on the academic success, mentoring and transition needs of a first-year student. The Peer Mentors (PM) are the undergraduate counterparts to an RA. There are about 3-6 Peer Mentors in every residence hall. They are trained in academic mentoring, but they are not tutors or advisors. They are people who are trained to be referral agents. They focus on study skills and time management. The PMs try to be well-versed about the resources at this University so they can make sure students find the right professional staff in academic advising and the tutoring centers.

At UMass, our academic link is through the Residential Academic Program (RAP). It is run through the Center for Undergraduate Advising. It is a complicated program, but where it interacts with the Residential First-Year Experience is much narrower. The students who live together take one or two small courses together. A handful of seats are also held in a large lecture for these students, so these students may take a large lecture course together. We have now shrunk this huge University to a much smaller experience as students are getting started here. They see the same familiar faces. They get to talk about the classes that they are taking together. They have study groups in their residence halls around those courses. The repetition really helps them build some roots around the University in the residence halls and in academics.

A RAP program can be major-specific or it can be a broad interest area. There are also RAPs that are geared towards undeclared students. The RAP program provides a wide range of options. The
biggest asset of the RAP program is that it brings the learning component to the Living Learning Experience.

Kelly Gray, First-Year Experience Specialist

I have the privilege of doing my work in the halls, working directly with these students. I am going to spend the next couple of slides talking to you about some of the programs that students have put together and run. I have attended a lot of these programs as well, and so I can share the interactions I have seen students have with academics, themes, faculty and instructors.

The Peer Mentor staff use a programming model that we refer to as an in-hall curriculum. Basically, we hope by the end of the year every student who lives in a first-year hall will have the opportunity to engage in all of our learning outcomes. This does not mean that they are all going to attend, but we hope they will know they have the opportunity to participate in these things. At a large university, a first-year student can often feel a little lost in the shuffle. The biggest focus of the Peer Mentor’s job is to make contact with every student in the residence hall on academic topics. Every month, we have an in-staff meeting with the topic of the month. Right now the topic of the month is building your college résumé. This means thinking four years ahead and looking at the experiences you need to have in order to be successful and get the jobs or internships you would like to have. As Anjali noted, the Peer Mentors serve as a resource and referral. When they engage in dialogue and someone asks a question, the Peer Mentors are equipped to talk about, for example, Career Services and the skills that they can gain there.

Within each themed residence hall, we have a Residential Academic Success Center (RASC). It is an office that is usually open Sunday through Thursday evenings. Often during open house, I tell parents and students that offices are open all day, Monday through Friday, all over this campus. But, panic mode often sets in around 9:30 p.m. when nothing is open. We try to have these offices in the residence halls with upper-class students or staffing, so when first-year students are in panic mode, they can seek out Peer Mentors, ask questions and have their nerves calmed. They then know where they need to go the next morning to get their question answered. Each Peer Mentor staffs an office for five hours a week, so within every theme, that office is open anywhere from 15-25 hours, depending on how many Peer Mentors are in that building.

We also have RASC Workshops. A lot of you in this room probably use SPARK, SPIRE and OWLS. These are often very foreign terms to our first-year students. The Peer Mentors will walk these students through the process. The first time they have to register for classes on their own, they have a lot of questions. The Peer Mentors conduct these small workshops with students to help them get adjusted to some of these tools that they need to use in order to be successful here.

The next initiative that we do is called Faculty/Instructor Chats. Over the past three years, I have had the opportunity to work with some of the most wonderful faculty and instructors on this campus. They have volunteered to come in and work with students one-on-one. Every month, we have eleven different Faculty/Instructor Chats. By the end of the year, about 66 faculty and instructors volunteer their time and spend about an hour in the hall with our students. This past Monday, Dr. Wilmore Webley from microbiology came into Crabtree, Mary Lyon and Knowlton and gave a talk on his General Education course called “The Biology of Cancer and AIDS.” He talked to 20 students for about an hour on some of the research he does in his lab and what students can gain from his General Education course. At the end of his talk, he was having a conversation with a group of first-year students, telling them that his door is always open and they shouldn’t be afraid to come to office hours. I cannot tell you how powerful that is for first-year students who are trying to get their foot in the door at this University. A Peer Mentor forwarded me an email yesterday saying that a student had asked for this professor’s contact information. I call that a success.

The other Faculty/Instructor Chat I went to was with Dr. Tomaskovic-Devey. She came to Cance last week to discuss her course, “The Sociology of Love.” That chat ran for about an hour and a half because students had so many questions about her research. Dr. Tomaskovic-Devey covered love
from a biological, sociological and anthropological perspective. Again, this gave students the opportunity to engage with faculty and instructors outside of the classroom and make those connections.

We also do off-campus trips. At the beginning of the year, we go to Six Flags which is meant to be a purely social trip. The purpose is to get first-year students to meet other first-year students across campus. In October, we took a group of students to Salem, Massachusetts. They went on the trolley, ghost tours, and they also went to the Salem Witch Museums. We took about fifty students on that trip. We took fifteen students from Writing Butterfield to see Stephen King and Richard Russo speak at Mt. Holyoke. We also took about 200 students to New York City in December. Half of the group went to the Met. The other half of the group went to the Natural History Museum, and they all ended up in Rockefeller Center.

We try to run programs called Theme-Based Initiatives. Both Webster and John Adams halls did Pizza and Politics in the fall. That was a very popular program, as you can imagine, with the election. In Butterfield, which is our writing building, every semester students produce their own student-run first-year journal. They work with their instructor to do everything from designing the journal to getting submissions from other first-year students. In Van Meter, which is our cultural and arts building, two independent musicians, Steph Taylor and the Nabedi Osorio, came in and spent the night playing music. Steph Taylor graduated from Berkeley College of Music. They spent some time playing and also talked for about forty minutes about what it is like to be an independent musician, to write their own music and lyrics.

Peer Mentors hold study groups in the halls. During certain times of the year, students are often talking about the big exams. Right before midterms, for example, there might be a big macroeconomics exam. The Peer Mentors get students together in those courses, bake cookies, and hope the students work through their study sheets.

We also have Residential First-Year Experience (RFYE) Incentives and Awards. Every semester, we do an academic challenge where the halls compete against each other. Last semester, we did academic trivia. Each hall had their own mini-trivia competition in teams of five. The winning teams from each building went and played in the finals. Each winning team could take on a sixth player if it was a faculty or an instructor. We actually had five faculty and instructors show up and play with teams, and the winning team had an instructor on it. It was a great opportunity for those students to engage with faculty and instructors outside the classroom.

Also, some of you probably received emails about our Academic Achievement Awards for first-year students. We are going through a dual-nomination right now. Students are getting to nominate their favorite faculty and instructors, specifically those teaching in the RAPs, but the nominations have come in across the board. Then, faculty, instructors and staff have been nominating students who have showed academic motivation and determination. It is interesting that the faculty who have been nominated for this award are also the ones who have taken the time to nominate students. That shows that there are some connections happening in the classroom.

Finally, Career Services has designed a presentation geared just towards first-year students. First-year students often do not think they are ready for Career Services yet. Career Services has been going around to every hall and teaching students about how they can utilize Career Services.

Last year was the last time that we could ever compare first-year students in RFYE halls to first-year students not in RFYE halls. We took part in the educational benchmarking inventory through ACUHO-I (American College and University Housing Association-International). It was a population survey so we surveyed all of our students living in housing. We received a 57 percent response rate. This is just the breakdown of who responded from each hall (referring to slides).

There were a few questions that students living in first-year housing did significantly better on, but mostly they just did a little bit better on every question than our other students. You can see in this
slide that our first-year students in RFYE are attending programs a little bit more than our other first-year students. These are all mean scores on a 7.0 scale. You can see that, across the board, our students did a little bit better on every question in terms of their satisfaction with the quality of programs, the variety of programs, athletic and recreational programs and then social and educational programs.

The next slide is about learning outcomes around social concepts. This includes respect to other races and ethnicities, improved interpersonal relationships, resolving conflict, living cooperatively, meeting other people. Basically, students felt that living in the halls helped them do this a little bit better, and again, first-year halls were just slightly higher. In terms of diverse interactions, our students living in first-year halls felt that they had more opportunity to interact with people of other races/ethnicities.

I want to focus on the academic outcomes. These outcomes include improving communication skills, your ability to solve problems, managing your time more effectively. Again, none of these scores are much higher, but it is the pattern that is really important. Finally, this last slide focuses on students’ overall experience. For example, the survey asked: would you recommend this college or university to a friend? The response was a little bit higher for our RFYE students. The next questions ask: did your on-campus housing experience fulfill your expectations? Has living in on-campus housing enhanced your learning experiences? Are you satisfied with your on-campus housing experience? Are you satisfied with your overall academic experience? As you can see, our students are doing just slightly better than other students. Considering that this is still a new program, we are pretty happy with the results.

This is a big assessment year for us. Almost all of our first-year students are now in first-year halls. This year, we are repeating the EBI survey. That is in process right now, so now we will have two years worth of data to look at. In March, we are going to be doing some focus groups to get some qualitative feedback from our students. In April, we are launching our very own survey, sampling the Residential First-Year Experience students. We are working with the Student Affairs Research and Evaluation Office (SAREO). We have designed the survey, and then Dr. Liz Williams is going to launch a web-based survey for us to get the results. We will be doing student staff focus groups to get the perceptions of the RAs and the Peer Mentors who are living with these first-year students. We will ask what they perceive as challenges and successes. Finally, we will do an Exit Evaluation with all the Peer Mentors.