Report from the *Benefit to the Commonwealth and Beyond* Planning Group

**Preamble**
The University of Massachusetts Amherst provides numerous benefits to the Commonwealth through its teaching, outreach, and research missions. We already have many successes in each of these areas but can also do more to clarify and enhance those contributions. While we affirm the essential role that the University’s research mission can and does play in supporting the innovation economy of the state, the *Research Foci and Funding* planning group was charged with focusing on how research benefits the Commonwealth and beyond and we cede the specifics of that discussion to the *Research* planning group.

The *Benefits to the Commonwealth* committee is focused on how the University can enhance and demonstrate the value and quality of the UMass Amherst enterprise. We considered the perspectives of our various stakeholders and reviewed the current evidence available about the University’s responsiveness to these stakeholder needs. Our recommendations identify actions that will enhance and improve our relationships with our varied constituencies (be they current students who become alumni, our partners in outreach, the parents of UMass Amherst students, those who hire our graduates or accept them into their graduate programs, or state and federal leaders).

It is important to point out that a major theme that ran through our discussions and is evidenced in the recommendations is the importance of “alignment”: setting clear priorities (or goals) and purposefully committing resources and institutional activity to attain those goals. As a general principle, we believe the campus needs to move away from our tendency to attempt to implement a number of varied initiatives without adequately funding any of them (therefore minimizing the chances of true success for any of the initiatives). And instead, identify a small set of key priorities and invest in them for success.

**Recommendations**

1. **Foster students’ engagement with the University and enhance students’ capacity to contribute to the Commonwealth.** UMass Amherst’s students are perhaps our most important ambassadors. The quality of their experience at UMass can affect whether or not they recommend the University to other students from their high schools, whether their parents recommend UMass to other parents, and whether those students as alumni/ae stay connected to the University or send their children to UMass. In addition, the quality of our students’ skill development and performance as demonstrated outside the University walls (through internships or volunteer work, or as UMass Amherst graduates participating in the workplace and in civic life) provides our other stakeholders with important indicators of the University’s effectiveness. For these reasons, the quality of the student experience emerged as an important component of our discussions.

   a. **Align the undergraduate curriculum and other student experiences to prepare students for their careers and life beyond college.** This includes providing them with the knowledge, skills and habits of mind developed through their academic majors and through a broad liberal arts education. The University has always been committed to helping prepare students for success after college (for employment, for graduate school, for civic engagement). For many of our stakeholders, preparation for employment has become particularly central. In increasing numbers, students entering college identify “getting a good job” as a major reason for enrolling.
At the same time, employers express dissatisfaction with the preparation of recent college graduates and state and national leaders call on colleges and universities to pay greater attention to student employment opportunities.

A focus on preparing students for employment is not in conflict with our liberal arts educational goals. Indeed, recent national surveys of employers show that employers are looking for employees who have the skills and habits of mind associated with a liberal arts education, including written and oral communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills, working effectively in teams, etc., (see for example http://chronicle.com/article/A-College-Degree-Sorts-Job/137625/#id=overview). These are the very learning objectives represented in the University’s General Education curriculum.

We recommend a realignment of the undergraduate curriculum to emphasize these skills as essential for preparation for success after college. For example, design an undergraduate curriculum that emphasizes a set of learning objectives essential for future success (e.g., critical thinking, communication, working with diverse groups) and ensures that students have multiple opportunities for students to practice and develop their abilities throughout their college career. This focus on reinforcing skills for future success will resonate with students, parents, and our other external stakeholders.

b. **Commitment of resources to provide students with more guidance, direction, as well as encouragement to participate in campus opportunities.** We would like to hear alumni say ”I made it because of UMass (or with UMass' help)” instead of ”I made it despite UMass.” Central to this recommendation is identifying ways to help students make the linkages between their educational experiences and their preparation for future success.

c. **Pursue the possibility of instituting student portfolios as a method for students to collect and reflect upon their work throughout their college career.** Departments could use this information as a way to help students prepare to present themselves to future employers and graduate schools. This information also becomes a rich source of evidence for demonstrating UMass Amherst learning outcomes. This initiative will require more intense advising of students within their majors.

2. **Revisit the structure and coordination of outreach.** The quality of the relationships the University builds through its educational, consultative, and applied research engagement can have a significant impact on how our contributions to the Commonwealth are viewed. Positive and helpful outreach relationships lead those in the community to tell others about how the University contributes to the good of the Commonwealth – providing particularly credible testimonials. Fostering these productive and positive relationships should be a central goal.

a. **Identify and better align the priorities for outreach and commit the necessary resources and support to engage in these activities effectively.** This is an important component of building good relationships that will maintain over time even as the specific components of the activity may adapt.

b. **Create better organization and coordination of outreach activities.** The current structure is quite decentralized and makes it difficult to identify priorities, align those priorities with appropriate resources, or effectively monitor or track the kinds of outreach activities with which the campus is involved (see further discussion of the need for better outreach evidence in item 3 below). Better coordination would also facilitate visibility for outreach activities (both internally and to external audiences).
c. **Review the reward structure and the sources of support for faculty outreach activities.**
   Currently, junior faculty members are encouraged to stay away from engagement in outreach and other faculty who could be valuable contributors avoid participation because the activity is not valued by their departments. In addition, faculty who do participate would benefit from opportunities to engage in faculty development activities that would enhance their involvement.

d. **Increase the commitment to involving students in outreach-related activities in areas where there is value added for all parties (e.g., internships, co-ops, service learning, and applied research).** Providing students with these kinds of “real world” opportunities further enhances their preparation for career and other forms of success after college (and these kinds of real world experiences are particularly valued by employers). They also further enhance the building of relationships between the University and our stakeholders.

3. **Support and Enhance a “Culture of Evidence” to provide systematic evidence of our benefit to the Commonwealth and guide institutional improvement.**

   The University had made great strides in collecting and using evidence to understand our performance in relationship to institutional peers, in gathering information on how the University is perceived by some of our stakeholders, and in understanding the experiences and perceptions of undergraduate and graduate students. However, there are still substantial gaps in our ability to: draw upon systematic evidence to demonstrate our contributions to the Commonwealth, effectively use evidence to communicate our contributions, and draw upon and use evidence to inform and improve institutional practices.

   a. **Collect better evidence of alumni/ae educational, civic, and employment outcomes and the impacts of our outreach engagement activities.** To varying degrees our ability to tell the story of our contributions in the areas of alumni employment and civic involvement, graduates’ preparation to contribute, and the impact of our outreach engagement relies on sporadic data collection and anecdotal evidence. More systematic and direct evidence in these key areas would help the University demonstrate the extent and quality of our contributions and provide evidence useful in determining priorities for making institutional improvements.

   b. **Implement a student learning outcomes assessment program that will provide evidence of our students’ preparation to succeed in life after college.** Imbedded in the Academic Quality Assessment and Development (AQAD) program review process, academic program-level outcomes assessment would focus on the learning objectives the department identifies for its majors and a small set of university-wide outcomes (e.g., critical thinking and written communication, for example). It is important that the program assessment process be ongoing (not simply something departments pull together quickly every seven years when their AQAD or other disciplinary accreditation reports are due). To complement the program-based assessment evidence, further develop university-wide assessment activities that provide evidence of the effectiveness of the campus-wide General Education program as well as other educational components not specifically housed in academic departments. The recently approved Joint Faculty Senate/Administrative Task Force on Student Learning Outcomes should be charged with designing and implementing the outcomes assessment program.

   c. **Provide the resources and support necessary to fully engage faculty members in these assessment priorities.** Faculty involvement in student learning outcomes assessment is essential; they are the individuals most qualified to judge student performance and set performance standards and with their responsibility for the curriculum, they are the ones who will be central to using the evidence of student performance to make any necessary changes to
improve that performance. It is also important that the value of departmental assessment activity be acknowledged by the administration. (We note a conundrum here, an inherent tension in how to structure the use of departmentally-based assessment evidence to support institutional planning: do departments with less than optimal results receive additional support to help them improve or are departments penalized if results are negative?)

d. **Better distribution/sharing of evidence to relevant internal and external stakeholders.** An essential element in developing a culture of evidence is to make that evidence readily available in formats that relevant parties can easily understand and use. While the campus has made much headway in this area in recent years, there is more that can be done to make information accessible to departments (for example, sharing the instructional benchmarks with departments through secure web access) and to external stakeholders.

e. **Maintain the University’s commitment to accountability efforts that are methodologically sound and appropriate for our institutional context and mission.** As these recommendations suggest, our planning group affirms the University’s responsibility for using evidence to demonstrate its effectiveness and its accountability to the Commonwealth. However, we strongly believe that the evidence we collect and share, and the methods used to compare our performance to others, must be methodologically sound and offer appropriate comparisons. We recommend the Joint Task Force on Accountability continue to monitor the state and national efforts to develop these accountability systems and participate in ways that meet our standards for sound accountability practice. The use of convenient but methodologically questionable assessment methods serves as a disservice to our mission.