Appendix B. Report of the JTFSO Subcommittee on “What Defines a UMass Amherst Education?”
April 30, 2014

Background: Phase I Planning

The Phase I plan calls for “establishing UMass Amherst as a destination of choice” for undergraduate students, and lays out a central challenge for the planning process:

A great institution has a character that helps define its community and guide its actions. Our undergraduate experience should contribute to and reflect that character. In planning our institutional strategy we should give special attention to what defines a UMass Amherst education. It need not, and given our diversity probably cannot, have a single or narrow focus of distinctiveness. We can, though, come together and identify the values, traditions, and aspirations that guide the expectations we set for students and ourselves. We can, and should, be more intentional in establishing campus-wide learning objectives that permeate the educational program. We can reflect and act on why choosing UMass Amherst matters. (p.8)

In short, what do we want prospective students, families, employers, policy makers and the public in general to have in mind when they think about a UMass Amherst graduate? As noted, there is no single answer. But the more clear we can be about the nature and value of a UMass education, the more success we will have in attracting and enrolling the talented and motivated students we seek. And the better we can express this campus’s long tradition of social responsibility, reflection and critical analysis, the more likely we will strengthen the intellectual community we have built. JTFSO therefore organized a special subcommittee to address the questions emerging from that challenge.

From a diverse set of inputs and perspectives1 the subcommittee developed several main themes that are now offered to the campus for discussion and feedback:

**Community.** UMass Amherst is a community of students and scholars working together to create a holistic, immersive educational experience. We draw from and support students’ diverse experiences and perspectives as an essential strength of this learning community, and challenge them to demonstrate inclusiveness and mutual respect.

**Agency.** As a research university, UMass Amherst supports students to be curious, creative, and reflective. We challenge them to become more self-aware and further develop their initiative and resilience, and thus to be adept at discovering and integrating opportunities to create a successful path in a changing world..

**Responsibility.** UMass Amherst embraces responsibility for the sustainability of the planet, for the progress of society, and for the development of each individual. We challenge students to act and advocate on the basis of critical analysis and reflection, to explore their capacity for leadership, and to contribute to the common good.
Proficiency. UMass Amherst promotes and demonstrates the knowledge, habits of mind, and tools necessary for a rewarding, responsible and productive life. We challenge students to work together productively, to develop their cultural competence, to master the promise of technology, and to apply their ideas to the challenges of the world.

Implications

These themes are not mutually exclusive, nor do they seek to account for all the ideas and activities of a vibrant intellectual community. They are intended to reflect some concepts that tend to be present in many aspects of the institution’s life, and to signal to prospective students and scholars the kind of environment to which they might be attracted.

To the extent that these themes resonate, however, they have implications in a number of areas:

• **Formal curricula:** How are these ideas reflected in our formal educational offerings? What role should they play in General Education, and in degree programs, certificates, and other credentials? How can our strength in graduate education and research be integrated into the undergraduate experience? What specific learning outcomes do our goals imply, and how well are we doing in achieving those outcomes? What implications are there for how we organize teaching and learning?

• **Life outside the classroom:** How can we ensure that every student has the ability to participate in high-impact practices including undergraduate research opportunities, study abroad, community service, and internships? How can formal education and co-curricular opportunities be knit into a coherent whole? What does an effective, immersive residential experience look like? How can a UMass education in all its dimensions create and foster community?

• **Student success:** What is necessary to support a community of the kind described? How can we encourage initiative and self-reliance and still provide appropriate guidance and direction? What are the skills needed to make the most of our educational opportunities, but also to build a life? What intellectual tools will be the hallmark of an educated person over the course of the next decades?

Answering these and related questions will be at the core of the next phase of planning for both the campus and individual colleges, departments and administrative units. Engaging the campus in the question of what should define a UMass Amherst education is the critical first step.

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1The subcommittee launched a process that also tapped into several ongoing conversations on the campus. JTFSO itself devoted considerable time and attention to these questions. The JTFSO and subcommittee leadership followed up with additional brainstorming on how to structure the conversation. Perspectives from faculty and student groups convened to consider the impact and potential of the new classroom building were shared, as were perspectives from student focus groups providing feedback on the new Integrative Experience courses. Relevant insights from recent student and alumni surveys were considered.