

Flexible Learning at UMass Amherst: Shaping the Future of University Education

Kumble R. Subbaswamy, Chancellor
January, 2021

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented numerous challenges to the UMass Amherst community. The determined response from our faculty and students to the necessity of remote instruction has shown that this modality can deliver good educational outcomes. In Spring 2021, we are expecting to learn more about these new instructional models. This forced large-scale experiment presents a great opportunity for UMass Amherst to more quickly realize its previously announced vision of becoming a true University Without Walls, vastly extending its reach to both traditional and non-traditional students—a vehicle for lifelong learning.

Vision for Flexible Learning

In December 2018 — well before the COVID-19 pandemic — we announced a strategic expansion of our University Without Walls (<https://www.umass.edu/newsoffice/article/umass-amherst-announces-strategic>). At that time, I noted: “[W]e are beginning to see higher education evolving into different, co-existing modalities of acquiring education, skills and credentials. As befits our university’s history of invention and innovation, we intend to embrace this upcoming revolution and become leaders.” The ability of our campus to provide high-quality education to students **anywhere** and **at any time** is key both to extending the mission of the university and to meeting tomorrow’s challenges in the educational marketplace. With this vision, we began taking steps to strengthen our online infrastructure (<https://www.umass.edu/newsoffice/article/umass-opens-new-home-university-without>) and to bridge and integrate our two traditional educational experiences that are the endpoints of the spectrum ranging from the residential program, which is primarily based on face-to-face courses, and the University Without Walls (UWW), which is primarily based on remote courses.

There are significant benefits and opportunities in providing educational experiences that fall between these two endpoints. Students who have work, family commitments or internships might need to take some courses asynchronously; students who want to accelerate their education to join the workforce faster might want to take courses at times other than the current Fall and Spring semesters; students may want to combine the convenience of remote semesters with the residential experience of face-to-face semesters (e.g., for lab courses). Our alumni, most of whom live far from our main campus, can become lifelong UMass Amherst students, “upskilling” to meet the challenges in their fields throughout their careers. Flexible education can provide access to a high-quality UMass Amherst educational experience to students – traditional and non-traditional – who might not otherwise have the chance to do so, thus inclusively expanding the reach and impact of our historic mission as a public institution of higher-education.

Flexible learning as defined here aims to offer any course by default in two formats: face-to-face for students on campus and at the same time remotely to students who are not on campus. Students in such courses can learn together, interact together, discuss together, and collaborate together synchronously (and asynchronously if they cannot make it to class). We expect that the vast majority of courses on campus can be offered in this format, with exceptions being some lab and studio courses. This document is a call to collectively explore and sharpen this vision and to chart a course for achieving it, in collaboration with the campus governance bodies (Faculty Senate, SGA, GSS) and the labor unions. We are not alone in recognizing the necessity of transitioning to flexible learning even after the pandemic has ended. For example, Northeastern University has announced their adoption of flexible instruction under the rubric of “NuFlex.”

Why and Why Now?

The decline in college-age students in the Northeast of the U.S. presents a strategic challenge to universities, such as UMass Amherst, which rely on a large enrollment of in-state, residential students. While the high ranking of our university and the lower cost compared to private institutions has spared us from a decline in enrollment for now, it is important to protect the institution from such challenges urgently by expanding the reach of the university to a national and global market, both at the undergraduate level and for lifelong learning.

The key differentiator for UMass Amherst when competing in the national/international market is the emphasis on the high-quality course offerings provided by the world-class faculty who teach on our campus. Their high-quality teaching, and the quality of the residential UMass Amherst education experience must radiate out and itself be further enhanced by engaging a broader group of students at a distance - providing a high-quality experience for residential and remote students alike (and a seamless transition between the two). This flexibility would allow our campus to compete with top-tier institutions and avoid being forced into an increasingly difficult competitive disadvantage by solely focusing on our residential program. Indeed, there is already some indication that post-pandemic, the demand for residential education may drop significantly.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has presented significant challenges and hardships, has shown that our UMass Amherst faculty, students, and staff can innovate and adapt when it comes to teaching and learning and bringing the campus experience closer to students who are located remotely. By pursuing flexible learning, we can build on this work and move the institution into a strong position where it will be resilient to the challenges of the next decades, while offering our students enhanced educational opportunities and flexibility.

Benefits of Flexible Learning

The proposed approach to flexible learning can provide numerous benefits to the UMass Amherst community and beyond, including students, faculty, the institution, and the Commonwealth.

Benefits to Students

Adaptability to personal life: Flexible learning allows students to choose how they want to engage during their journey through college. Some students will choose the traditional residential experience; some students may need additional flexibility to work to pay for the cost of college; some students have a commitment as caregivers that limit their available time; some students may study at UMass Amherst while remaining in their home state or country. A flexible learning model allows for students to make progress on their degrees, no matter what their situation, and to switch between different modalities seamlessly as needed.

Enhanced educational experiences. Flexible learning can bring non-traditional students into the “classroom”, with perspectives and experiences that enhance and enrich the educational experience. “Anytime, anywhere” access to UMass Amherst courses lowers the barriers for students to participate in remote internships, international experiences, and other field experiences while continuing to make academic progress towards degree completion.

Shorter time to degree: An important concern for students and their parents is the time that students spend in college. Tuition, fees, and room and board contribute to the “cost” of college, but so too does the opportunity cost of delaying entry into the workforce during the time spent in college. Obtaining a college degree pays in the long run, but reducing the financial burden on students and their parents is important. A flexible learning model that allows students to make progress during 3.5 semesters per year (through a modification of summer and winter sessions) can significantly reduce a typical 8-semester bachelor’s degree program to less than 3 calendar years. While the cost of tuition and fees does not substantially change, the opportunity cost of delayed entry into the workforce is significantly lower, and room and board costs are lower if some of the semesters are completed remotely.

Higher qualification possible: Many professions, especially in STEM, require qualifications beyond a bachelor’s degree for practitioners. It has even been suggested that a master’s degree may be a more appropriate degree to start a successful career. With the reduced time to degree through flexible learning, it may be possible for students to complete a traditional 10-semester bachelor’s+master’s 4+1 program in 4 years or less.

Benefits to Faculty

Flexible teaching workload (subject to bargaining): The flexible learning model defines a fixed amount of (teaching) workload that can be distributed over the full year, rather than be limited to two semesters if the academic unit agrees. This flexibility enables faculty to balance their workload better and adjust in different ways: having no teaching assignment in times other than summer, which enables research-intensive time during Fall or Spring, or distributing teaching over three semesters to avoid a “heavy” teaching semester.

Opportunities for additional compensation (subject to bargaining): The flexible learning model provides opportunities for additional compensation for faculty when offering additional courses as overloads in coordination with their academic units. This model is similar to how Continuing and Professional Education (CPE) has been handled in the past at UMass, but could now potentially be expanded to all semesters.

Benefits to the Institution

Stable financial footing: With the steady decline in state appropriation, and the resulting increases in tuition rates over the past decade, the university must depend more and more on new sources of revenue. The flexible learning model allows for expanding enrollment beyond the limitations of the physical campus.

University campus utilization: The use of our classrooms and dormitories during the Summer semester (and possibly a more robust Winter term) would help our campus increase the utilization of its facilities, which would otherwise not be used. Flexible learning additionally allows students to take advantage of off-campus co-curricular opportunities such as internships and international experiences, providing available classroom and dormitory space for additional residential students.

Mount Ida/Springfield Center: The availability of courses taught for both in-person and at-a-distance students could expand the engagement of students and faculty at Mount Ida/Springfield Center. Technology-enabled classrooms can connect campuses to provide classroom-to-classroom experiences.

Increasing capacity: Our on-campus student headcount is capped by the capacity of the residence halls and the local rental market. Students progressing toward graduation faster by completing requirements in 3.5 semesters per year would not only benefit students, but also increase the throughput of students (i.e., number of degrees awarded per year) without exceeding the housing capacity cap.

Benefits to the Commonwealth

Expanded reach of the Commonwealth's Flagship campus: The ability of the university to provide an educational experience to remote students that is similar to the residential experience significantly expands the reach to potential students who might not be able to commit to a fully residential program. This ability would have positive effects on workforce development in the Commonwealth, the nation, and globally.

Better opportunities for students from underrepresented groups: A more flexible offering of degree programs may help with recruiting and retaining more students from underrepresented groups. In particular, the flexibility to seamlessly switch between residential and remote instruction and the lower cost associated with remote semesters may help with both retention and student success.

Improved institutional resilience: The university's ability to attract students from different geographic locations and different walks of life reduces its reliance on a specific demographic of students. A flexible learning model thus increases the university's resilience to demographic trends (e.g., a decline in college-age individuals in Massachusetts) or external events (e.g., a pandemic that reduces on-campus capacity).

Path Forward: A Task Force on Flexible Learning

The transformation envisioned in this Whitepaper cannot be achieved overnight. It will require experimentation and innovation in our pedagogy and in our use of technology. It cannot be accomplished without broad based buy-in from all stakeholders. And it must be based on foundational principles that: (a) place quality and academic integrity at the core; (b) ensure equity in access to all students; (c) leverage the world-class expertise among our faculty; (d) embrace our role as the flagship campus and a national leader; and (e) accept that there will be no "one size fits all" approach towards flexible learning. A high-quality campus experience is uniquely important for student development and success, particularly in the early years of college. Remote students should be able to leverage and amplify, but not diminish, important aspects of the residential educational experience.

Many critically important questions remain to be answered: To what extent can we eliminate our historical distinction between on-campus (i.e., University session) and off-campus (i.e., UWW) offerings? To what extent can we adopt seamlessness as the driving principle behind our educational model (i.e., "a student is a student," "a course is a course," and "a degree is a degree" regardless of the modality)? A uniform handling of students and courses (and tuition) would provide not only the basis for flexibility in instruction, but also clarity in administration. To realize this vision, we must identify and remove the barriers between our residential program and UWW that exist due to historical idiosyncrasies and administrative anachronisms. How can we ensure that the impact of this transformation on the university's research mission is positive? And more generally, what will be the impact on how faculty spend their time

(perhaps the most precious resource of all) and what approaches and support are needed to best use this most basic of resources?

To explore these questions, and to identify barriers and ways to address them, I propose the formation of a “Task Force on Flexible Learning” appointed by the Chancellor with representation from the Faculty Senate and the Massachusetts Society of Professors, appropriate administrators, and student governance bodies. Its charge (with help from any needed specialized subcommittees) will be to develop a plan for how the university can realize this vision, explore the many questions raised, and identify how specific challenges along this path can be addressed. The Task Force should propose both near-term actions (perhaps as soon as Fall 2021), as well as longer-term changes (3 – 5 years), with a final report completed by May, 2021.

As I noted in my September 2020 State of the Campus address to the Faculty Senate:

We are broadening our time-honored mission as an immersive, residential educational campus to now also offering pathways to degrees and credentials, regardless of location or stage of life. Courses and programs will be delivered on- site, online, or via a hybrid of both, any time, any place, with seamless access to the excellence of our on-campus educational experience —a true University Without Walls. We will offer students of any age what they want and need to develop professionally throughout their lives.

... UMass Amherst is at the leading edge of a higher education revolution that is transforming the sector right before our eyes. Today, we sit at the nexus of quality and accessibility, and we have an opportunity, in the face of these trying times, to continue our strong trajectory towards becoming a national model for American research universities in a new era.

This Task Force, with broad representation, experience, and perspectives will help us continue on our path towards this vision.

Acknowledgment: I am grateful to Provost McCarthy, Vice Provosts John Wells and Tilman Wolf, and Associate Chancellor Jim Kurose for their contributions to this Whitepaper.
