July 14, 2020

Dear Members of the UMass Boston Community,

Thank you to everyone who participated in last week’s ACTF listening session and to everyone who has sent us queries and ideas. We summarize the input and feedback we have received thus far from voices throughout our academic community and are providing some initial responses from ACTF. We are working diligently on your behalf and are earnestly using your insights to help guide our work going forward.

Concerns about the Student Exchange Visitor Program

*Community voices:* Undergraduate and graduate students are understandably very anxious about the new SEVP proposed guidance for the fall semester issued by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Many members of the campus community have offered helpful suggestions and advice with the hope of reducing the threat and alleviating the additional pressures on students who are already experiencing great stress.

*ACTF response:* The ACTF values your input and we are synthesizing and contributing it as we receive it. We want to reassure the whole community that this issue has the highest attention of many, many people. We are working diligently to address how best to support, stand with, and provide guidance in a way that will work for the many different situations of international students at the university. The campus leaders, the UMass system, and the Massachusetts government are working around the clock to develop plans to respond.

Support for pedagogy and policies in remote learning

*Community voices:* Students and instructors (including faculty and graduate teaching assistants) described both joys they experienced and challenges they faced during remote learning in the spring. In particular, students expressed appreciation when their instructors demonstrated genuine care for student well-being. Specifically, students were grateful when their instructors made space during class to talk about how they were managing during the pandemic, accommodated them by having more flexible deadlines, and adapted course modalities in response to needs that students identified. Students noted that the continuation of the pass/fail option for the fall semester would provide appropriate support for the challenges they continue to face. Students encouraged their instructors to be open to learning from student experiences in order to develop and use more effective and ethical practices in teaching. As instructors become more open to learning from students, particularly as we traverse this unprecedented experience together, instructors also noted that they were willing to share resources they have been developing. Faculty also expressed a genuine desire to become better at learning from their students.

*ACTF response:* The ACTF has been working on communicating information to students and making resources available to instructors to support teaching and enhance experiences for students. Students emphasized a need to make collaboration among students and instructors a core part of their educational experiences. We appreciate the students for holding the ACTF accountable to disseminating their ideas and suggestions for improving their educational experience, and the ACTF will continue to involve more students as the work proceeds.

Resources for mental and physical health

*Community voices:* The COVID-19 pandemic, the ways in which we are all living and working during it, and the added stresses these entail are contributing to a growing mental health crisis that is particularly
acute for students. The rapid pivot to fully remote learning in the spring semester was understandably jarring. What we have learned about how impactful this crisis has been on students and their communities must inform ways that the university provides more responsive mental health supports and resources in the fall semester. We have also learned from staff and faculty representatives that working from home in environments not set up for these tasks (not everyone has ergonomic chairs and desks, let alone separate office spaces) has had deleterious effects on some people’s physical bodies.

**ACTF response:** Health professionals and leaders on campus have been pulling many stakeholders together to identify all of the resources on campus and make them more transparent and available to students, staff, and faculty. These efforts include many members of the ACTF who, with others on campus, are taking a “promoting health” perspective in working to destigmatize mental health and the seeking of care. Students who are experiencing severe stress should be encouraged to contact the Counseling Center at University Health Services for mental health support services provided online while the campus is closed to most activities. The UHS website provides details on the resources they have available to students.

**Anti-racism and restorative justice efforts are welcomed**

**Community voices:** Students, staff, and faculty expressed enormous appreciation for the principles that are guiding the ACTF’s work in planning for academic continuity in the upcoming academic year. Students voiced both encouragement and pressure to advance these efforts to go beyond rhetoric and training. Students want to contribute to and ensure that faculty, staff, and campus leadership will develop plans and take actions that will lead to transformational change.

**ACTF response:** In solidarity with others in our campus community, we seek to catalyze true and lasting change. The ACTF’s recommendation so far includes the selection of Yaa Gyasi’s novel *Homegoing* as the “one campus, one book” choice that will form the basis for a variety of programming throughout the fall and spring semesters focusing on the theme of restorative justice and healing. The ACTF sees this as the beginning of a multi-year process that will transform the university into a leading anti-racist institution. We fully agree that student and staff representation is necessary in both our decision making and leadership. We will be reaching out to individuals who have offered to contribute in the work of the ACTF.

**Technology matters**

**Community voices:** Many of you expressed appreciation for the university’s care for the health and safety of the campus community in decision making for the fall. Staff communicated that there are limitations in the equipment, technology, and connectivity that they have at home for doing their jobs remotely. They also recommended specific areas of staffing that are important to them for the work they do in supporting the educational experiences of students and the work of faculty, such as Information Technology. Students also shared recommendations for specific supports they valued in the spring and hope to see continued in the fall. They appreciated the technology loan program, and identified ways of expanding support for students, for example by including noise-canceling headsets that could help immensely for many who are trying to learn while in crowded homes.

**ACTF response:** The ACTF values students’ and instructors’ dedication to learning and teaching, and we are actively recommending strategies and centralized ways of accessing technology and support that the university offers. The ACTF is eager to learn more about modalities and technological supports that are critical to effective learning and teaching.
We continue with last week’s theme of inviting you to share your questions, thoughts, and concerns via email to ACTF@umb.edu. We are especially interested in learning what challenges you are facing as we move into a hybrid educational program that involves mostly remote but also on-campus learning in the fall semester, and what resources or great ideas you can share with others in the UMass Boston community to make the experience more satisfying, accessible, and equitable. The core purpose of a university is to educate, and every single one of us is important to that mission.

We are honored to be serving UMass Boston and look forward to keeping you engaged with our work as it progresses. Please be well, safe, strong, and resolute as we navigate these unprecedented times together and strive to be, both in our planning and our practice, a just, equitable, and inclusive community.

Sincerely,

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