

Symposium on Valuing Engagement

Thursday, September 12, 2013

9 am – 1 pm • Amherst Room, Campus Center

Good morning. I'm pleased to be part of the conversation today about engagement and its importance to the University of Massachusetts Amherst. It's a particularly appropriate discussion during this sesquicentennial year. For, while this is a year of celebration, it is also a time of examination, to look back at the progress we have made and to plan for the challenges that lie ahead.

For one hundred and fifty years, UMass Amherst has worked to fulfill a mission dedicated to the principles of engagement, though the term "engagement" has only been applied in recent years.

As all of you know, UMass Amherst was made possible by the Morrill Act, founded as a land-grant university to extend the opportunity of education to all who wished to pursue it, regardless of their means. This promise was predicated upon the belief that knowledge and learning were productive pursuits that would deliver advantages to those who applied themselves - and that the fruits of those efforts would in turn benefit the larger community.

They were right.

From founding professor Levi Stockbridge's revolutionary patented fertilizer that multiplied the yields farmers could coax from their fields to advances in polymer science, computer science, food science, radar technology and alternative energy, UMass Amherst has been a wellspring of innovation that has improved the well-being of populations far beyond our campus.

With discoveries such as bacteria that eat hazardous waste to a super adhesive that was named one of the top five science breakthroughs of 2012 by CNN Money, UMass researchers in many disciplines – frequently collaborating across disciplines – are delivering solutions to current-day challenges. That is engaged scholarship in practice.

To further this goal, we work to encourage and channel faculty and student innovation to address contemporary objectives from energy efficiency to sustainability. The UMass Innovation Institute facilitates partnerships with business and industry to translate academic research into economic development and broader community benefit.

It hasn't happened by accident.

Since its founding, the university has evolved to meet changing educational beliefs and community needs. Expanded to accommodate the flood of returning veterans after World War II, UMass Amherst continued to grow and diversify to explore emerging fields of study. We continue investing in progress today, building research facilities designed to promote interdisciplinary research and discovery.

Our role is to prepare students to succeed in the current economy, and to prepare them for active and engaged citizenship – to contribute to the world in which we all live.

Our graduates are an army of innovators, the ranks of a new knowledge economy that will propel Massachusetts into the future. We know we can count on them. A greater percentage of UMass alumni stay in Massachusetts than alumni of any other college in the commonwealth.

We have proven that financial support is a wise investment on the part of the commonwealth, and we are working to obtain more of it. So it is critical that we align our programs and priorities to the needs of the commonwealth – and to the needs of society as a whole.

Expanding and enhancing opportunities for students to participate in active and applied learning enables them to make contributions now through internships and service learning. Community engaged programs for students include research and outreach to community organizations and schools, tutoring and mentoring programs, as well as community-based service activities. These programs can help them put the concepts of social justice into practice, and reinforce the challenges and rewards of civic engagement.

Supporting community engagement and engaged scholarship helps us to attract more high-achieving applicants and exceptional faculty and motivate donors. Ultimately, this enables us to be more successful in obtaining funding of programs and research. Since

the cause of science is to improve life, the ability to connect research and scientific exploration to human benefit has never been more relevant – or important. At many of our peer institutions, donors have made substantial gifts to support engaged teaching and research. Proposals submitted to the US National Science Foundation for funding must now include a demonstration of broader impacts on science or society.

In 2008, UMass was designated an “Engaged University” by the Carnegie Foundation in recognition of our commitment to share knowledge and resources with our larger communities – from local to regional to global – in their words, to “enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good.” We are in the process of reapplying for this classification.

Engagement is important to UMass Amherst. It delivers key benefits to us, enhancing our reputation and bolstering our fundraising prospects. It paves the way for productive collaboration that expands scholarship and learning, while enriching the lives of the students and the larger community we serve.

As the largest university in New England, and the flagship campus of the University of Massachusetts, we have tremendous potential – and responsibility – to engage with and improve the world around us. Let’s see that we do. Thank you.