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UMass gives itself good grade on reaching goals

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE STAFF MARCH 13, 2014

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The University of Massachusetts issued findings Wednesday of a first-of-its-kind performance report that painted a largely positive picture of the system's progress toward meeting top goals.

The internal assessment found that UMass has made excellent progress in admitting high-quality students, incorporating more experiential learning opportunities such as internships, and serving the state's workforce and development needs.

But the university said it needs to improve connections to alumni, businesses, and government; invest more

heavily in campus facilities; expand its research partnerships; and employ a more diverse faculty and staff with better incentives for professional growth.

The university's president, Robert L. Caret, said he believes the report is fair and honest. The 10-page assessment of the five-campus system aims to be more user friendly than the 100-plus page reports the university traditionally creates.

"We believe we have a clear duty to provide this information to the taxpayers who help to fund UMass; to parents who look to UMass for affordable, high-quality education for their sons and daughters; to our partners in government and business; to our graduates and students, faculty, and staff, in short, to anyone who has a stake and interest in the University of Massachusetts," Caret said in a statement.

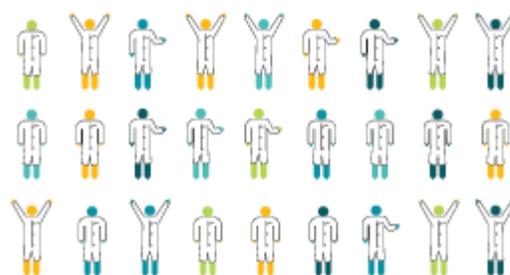
Titled "UMass Performance: Accountable and on the Move," the report, posted online at www.massachusetts.edu, divides the university's goals into six categories: students, workforce, research and development, social well-being, management of funds and resources, and communications. Each of the goals is rated on a four-point scale measuring the past three years of progress as excellent, good, some, or limited.

The university did not give itself any "limited progress" ratings. Four of the goals received a grade of "some progress." Caret said in an interview that some of those goals were on the borderline of being rated "limited progress."

A goal of investing in campus facilities while reducing maintenance costs and acting in an environmentally responsible manner received a rating of "some progress." UMass said that while it has invested some \$2.5 billion on capital improvements in the past decade, about 70 percent of the university's facilities are more than 30 years old.

The report said the university needs to make more progress on working collaboratively around research, including by forming more partnerships like those it has formed through the UMass Innovation Institute, the Massachusetts Green High Performance Computing Center, and the Center for Clinical

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UMass said it has made “good progress” on meeting 14 other goals, including providing affordable, accessible education; boosting graduation and retention rates; managing funding; and increasing operational efficiency and effectiveness.

The rating system used in the report was created by a working group of senior officials from Caret’s office and the five campuses, officials said.

Caret said he hopes the report will be another valuable tool to persuade the state to provide more funding.

Jack Schneider, an assistant professor of education at the College of the Holy Cross who has researched models to evaluate education, called the UMass report a step in the right direction. But he said it has some flaws, including that the university itself conducted the assessment.

“I’d find it hard to believe they’d ever give themselves a quarter of a pizza or a no-pizza rating if this is going to be used in any way to push for funding for higher education,” he said, referring to the report’s use of shaded-in circles to represent the ratings.

Max Page, a professor of architecture and history at UMass Amherst, said he is generally skeptical of such accountability initiatives.

“Buying into the idea that we have to ‘prove’ our worth based on a narrow set of criteria undermines some of the most important things we do at UMass and other public colleges,” Page, a leading member of PHENOM, a lobbying group for public higher education in Massachusetts, said via e-mail. But he said the assessment released Wednesday is better than other accountability reports he has seen.

“It focuses on what we at UMass believe are important values and doesn’t try to make simplistic comparisons with other states,” Page said. “I think this report indicates his emphasis on making UMass outstanding on our own terms.”

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