

Taking Things Seriously

By Arnold T. Blumberg, English '93

There's no such thing as an average day in **Karen R. Johnson's** line of work, but this is perhaps a quieter day than most. "You've caught me at the end of the 90-day legislative session," she says. Johnson, political science '85 and the recipient of this year's UMBC Outstanding Alumna Award, now serves as the Secretary of Higher Education for the Maryland Higher Education Commission, advocating on behalf of post-secondary education institutions throughout the state. But looking back on her success, she doubts her 18-year-old self would be too impressed. "It's hard to tell a 17- or 18-year-old to take things seriously," she says.

Nevertheless, as a member of Governor **Parris Glendening's** cabinet and a key figure in ongoing efforts to preserve the quality of higher education in Maryland, Johnson takes her role very seriously indeed. "My job is to be an advocate for all higher education in Maryland," says Johnson. "The legislature and the governor have many other cabinet secretaries advocating for their particular constituents. I provide information about how each college and university is performing and make them want to fund higher education."

Fortunately, Johnson's job is made easier by universities such as UMBC. She is awed by the growth of the UMBC campus in recent years and thinks the strength of the university lies in its perfect size. "It's not too big and not too small," says Johnson. "The faculty here are very connected to the students and really take an interest in their development." According to Johnson, the responsibility for forging that bond also lies with the students themselves. "Students should take advantage of the faculty and what the campus has to offer and try to build relationships for the future," she says. "When I was at UMBC, I learned from other students as much as I did from sitting in a lecture hall."

The legislative session may be over for this year, but there will always be plenty of work ahead. "With the increase in high school graduates, we're anticipating a jump in college enrollment in the next few years," says Johnson. Although she must balance her personal interest in UMBC with her responsibility to represent the interests of all Maryland universities, there is no doubt that the UMBC of today is an institution in which Johnson takes considerable pride.

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