

**Report of the
Student Life Task Force**

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Charge to the Task Force

The charge to the Student Life Task Force was to define the desirable elements of the co-curricular experience at an honors university and to recommend strategies to involve the total University community in enhancing undergraduate and graduate student life at UMBC. A positive campus environment for living and learning is one mechanism for strengthening student recruitment and retention. A campus environment that fosters a positive student life experience is an important ingredient in insuring a successful educational experience for all students.

An Historical Perspective

The presentation and discussion of recommendations for enhancing campus student life need to be made in an historical context. The Task Force suggests that the answers to several questions provide a context for the recommendations contained in this report. The questions include the following: What constituted student life at UMBC in past years? What historically have been some of the demographic characteristics of the UMBC student body that have influenced the nature and quality of student life? What non-academic programs and services have students traditionally requested?

Undergraduates

Founded in 1966, the University has always been primarily an undergraduate institution. In 1974 (the first year that the University began reporting student data) 98% of the student body were undergraduates. Twenty-five years later that percentage had decreased to 86%.¹

¹ Statistical data have been obtained from the UMBC Institutional Databook, Office of Institutional Research. See Appendix A for a statistical table summarizing these data.

Early in the history of UMBC, students were not very involved in campus life. This was a small college with few places to gather and little reason to stay on campus. Over the years student life has improved significantly.² To quote one long-time faculty member, “There was not a sense of campus (in the 1970s)...(now) there are numerous and diverse student activities....although students will say there is not enough to do on campus....They know it is there and have a choice of whether to participate....They have a place to gather and enjoy their free-hour activities.”

UMBC has been a predominantly commuter campus since the beginning, with most undergraduates living off campus. In 1989 (soon after data on student housing began to be collected) 79% of undergraduate students lived off campus; ten years later the percentage of commuting students had only decreased to 74%.

While the overall percentage of undergraduates living on campus is low, recent additions to student housing have led to an increase in the percentage of first-year students who are residents. In 1999 60% of first-year students lived on campus. That number will continue to grow as additional housing becomes available. At the same time, the demand for on-campus housing continues to increase. A high percentage of new students living on campus provides a very different sense of community or “student life” for these students. It is not unreasonable to expect that, as higher percentages of students start their UMBC experience living on campus, their connection to the community will be stronger and their needs for enhancements to student life will differ from the needs of students living off campus.

² Narrative information on the history of undergraduate student life has been obtained from interviews with several long-time university staff and faculty: Larrabee Strow (Physics), Pat Johnson (Student Affairs), Frank Hanson (Biological Sciences).

Most of the undergraduates through the years have been full-time students, although a sizeable percentage have been part-time. The percentage of full-time undergraduates through the years has declined from 89% in the earliest years to 79% in the present.

This largely undergraduate, commuter student body with a significant minority of part-time students has greatly influenced the past and present perception of student life. The activities, programs, and services that have been designed to address student life have focused on these students whose non-academic lives do not revolve around the campus. They live elsewhere, have part-time or full-time employment, and are slightly older than a “traditional” undergraduate population (the average age has stayed in the 23-25 year range).

Despite the earlier commuter orientation of the campus, a number of activities and traditions that have helped build student life have emerged through the years. Some of the activities and services that have been instituted in the past and continue to the present are as follows: (1) student recognition ceremony; (2) yearly convocation; (3) Family Day; (4) fall welcome week; (5) Fall Frenzy—full month of activities; (6) Student Events Board; (7) Greek organizations; (8) multicultural affairs; (9) expanded student intercollegiate athletics and recreation activities; (10) community policing program; (11) a transit shuttle system; (12) housing opportunities (13) Student Government Association and affiliated student organizations.

Graduate Students

A handful of graduate students was first admitted to UMBC in 1970 into 5 graduate programs. Both the number of graduate students and their percentage of the total enrollment have grown dramatically in the past 25 years. In 1974 there were 121 graduate students (2% of the total), and by 1999 the 1411 graduate students constituted 14% of the total student body.

Graduate students have always lived off campus.³ Until the late eighties or early nineties, the only residential graduate students were those allowed to fill the dorm rooms not needed by undergraduates. In 1989 21 graduate students lived on campus; in 1999 only 3 did.

Except for the very first years of graduate study at UMBC, most graduate students have been part-time, although in recent years the trend seems to be changing slightly, with a growth in more full-time students. In 1979 70% were part-time; in 1999 56% were.

One of the most dramatic changes historically in the graduate student body is found in the domestic/international ratio. In 1975 *no* international graduate students were enrolled. Since then the percentage and numbers of international students have steadily increased, so that in 1999 there were 316 international students, or 22% of the total graduate students enrolled.

As with most universities, the graduate population has neither received nor demanded significant resources that affect student life. With a few exceptions, graduate students have not clamored for non-academic activities, programs, and services. Clearly, throughout the life of this institution the focus of its resources and planning has been the undergraduate population.

Graduate students are typically working adults who are on campus only for academic reasons (attending classes, working in labs, using the library, meeting with faculty, fulfilling their obligations as graduate assistants). They live elsewhere with their own families and have a social life off-campus. The campus is not their primary community. They are focused on their studies, their families, and their careers. What university-based “community” or social life graduate students participate in has traditionally taken place within the department in which they are enrolled and, for science students, the labs in which they work. The larger departments have

³ Narrative data on graduate student life have been obtained from interviews with several long-standing graduate faculty: James Vincent (Chemistry, Associate Dean of the Graduate School), Kevin Eckert (Sociology, former Associate Vice Chancellor for Graduate Studies), Nessly Craig (Biological Sciences), Dale Whalen (Chemistry).

graduate student organizations, sponsor guest speakers, and organize parties for the graduate student population. The student looks to the department, not the wider university community, for the provision of most on-campus extra-curricular activities.

The major exception to this characterization is the foreign graduate student population. Students studying at UMBC on F-1 or J-1 visas tend to depend upon the university as an institution and on the community of other international students for a range of student life experiences and needs. They tend not to have automobiles and so need the campus shuttle system to get them to and from campus. Especially if their English is not excellent, they find the students on campus who speak their native language a major source of friendships. By definition they are full-time students, and they typically do not have families living locally. Their primary community is the university, rather than the off-campus workplace or their own families. They are more dependent than domestic students upon such services as health care, health insurance, and assistance in finding housing.

The student life “needs” or demands that graduate students have historically voiced have been closely related to their academic experience—not extra-curricular or social lives. These needs have included improved library services, increased student stipends, and office and facility hours that are convenient to their “non-traditional” and busy schedules. These issues typically relate to services that enhance academic success and scholarly work.

It has only been within the recent past that graduate students and the Graduate School have begun to raise other concerns regarding issues of student life. This new development has been due to several factors:

1. The combining of the graduate schools at UMBC and UMB into the University of Maryland Graduate School, Baltimore in 1985 provided an opportunity for graduate studies and graduate students to have a greater presence and visibility on campus.
2. An improved economy made it possible for the growth of graduate programs, larger and more student stipends, and more external grants which fund graduate research and support for graduate students. This more affluent environment enabled the University to turn its attention to segments of its diverse student body—e.g., graduate students—which were in leaner times ignored.
3. The Graduate School leadership has provided resources of staff and funding to enhance the quality of graduate student life and to advocate for such issues within the broader university.
4. An increase in the number of international students requires the University to be more sensitive to non-academic needs of this growing segment of its graduate population.
5. The establishment and relative success of the Graduate Student Association (GSA) and the Office of Graduate Student Life are evidence of increased student interest in non-academic campus-based issues. Both entities have provided vehicles for graduate student voices to be heard.

Components of Student Life at UMBC

The Task Force began its work by identifying the important components of Student Life at UMBC.⁴ In order to address appropriately the wide-ranging aspects of student life, it was decided that student life should be defined broadly and comprehensively. The following

⁴ The Members of the Student Life Task Force are listed in Appendix B.

categories of student organizations, activities and services were identified by the Task Force as comprising student life at UMBC. The detailed list appears as Appendix C.

1. Student Organizations – sports and recreation; student governance; social/service/religious; and academic organizations
2. Student Services – the departments and offices that provide direct student services; student organizations that provide services to students
3. Civic Engagement – opportunities for student engagement and service to UMBC and the wider community
4. Academic Life – organizations and programs that support academic success
5. Social Life – opportunities for community-building and entertainment
6. Diversity – opportunities for fostering diversity and interaction among different student groups

This list of organizations, offices, programs, and events that together comprise the mechanisms for student/campus engagement provided a framework for the Task Force’s data-gathering and evaluation of current student life and recommendations for future changes.

Methodology

The focus of this Task Force required extensive and substantive input from students themselves. Therefore most data-gathering involved interviewing and surveying current UMBC students. Four focus groups conducted by Lisa Akchin in the Office of Institutional Advancement were held with undergraduate students in December, January, and February. A total of 50 students participated in open-ended discussions of several questions relating to what

constitutes a positive student life experience and what needs to be done at UMBC to improve student life.

Because graduate students were unavailable for focus group meetings, a preliminary e-mail survey was sent by the Offices of Graduate Admissions and Graduate Student Life to the entire graduate student listserv. Open-ended questions were asked, similar to the ones used in the undergraduate focus groups. Fifty-three students responded. A follow-up e-mail survey was sent again to the entire listserv, asking graduate students to prioritize the top recommendations identified by the first survey. A total of 126 students replied.

An e-mail survey of undergraduate and graduate international students was sent out by the Office of International Education Services regarding student life issues. Approximately 45 international undergraduate and graduate students replied.

An e-mail survey of department and office directors was conducted. Twenty-six directors replied to a series of questions about what they and their staff perceive as ways to improve co-curricular life for UMBC students.

The Task Force discussed the utility of making site visits to other campuses to gain information from peer institutions that had successful student life programs and experiences. According to the student affairs professionals on the Task Force, there are no national “rankings” of campus student life and no generally accepted measures for assessing positive or negative student life environments on campuses. It was decided that, with one exception, it would not be advantageous to visit peer institutions since there was no indication that their experiences were any more positive than UMBC’s. The Vice President of Student Affairs, Charles Fey, did visit the University of Arizona because that institution is generally recognized as providing for its students a positive student life experience. He interviewed the heads of all student affairs

departments, along with the Vice President of Student Affairs and the Dean of Students, regarding their concepts of student life, their challenges, and positive programs that had been instituted.

The Office of Institutional Research conducted a Student Satisfaction Survey in spring 2000. As of mid-May there were very high response rates from both undergraduates (30%) and graduate students (37%). Several survey questions relate to issues of student life, and preliminary analyses of data indicate that students do not feel there is a strong sense of community at UMBC. Only 26% of undergraduate and graduate student respondents reported that there *is* a strong sense of community. An overall conclusion is that many students—and in some cases most students—are unaware of various services and resources available on campus. These findings are confirmed by other Task Force findings, and they are addressed in the recommendations that follow.

Rationale for the Task Force Recommendations

One of UMBC's greatest strengths--the diversity of its student body--posed the greatest challenge to the work of the Student Life Task Force and, more fundamentally, to the vision of what student life should be. Nevertheless, the Task Force concluded that recommendations regarding student life must take this diversity into consideration. This is a student body composed of undergraduate and graduate students, Maryland and non-Maryland residents; domestic and international students; students living on campus and commuters; part-time and full-time students; students of many racial and ethnic groups; and students representing a wide range of ages and socio-economic backgrounds. Student life issues affect all of these students. It is unrealistic--and probably not possible--to propose a student life environment that would

satisfy everyone. Nevertheless, the Task Force decided to focus its energies on the examination of programs and services that make UMBC a stronger environment for learning and living for this diverse range of students.

If the current efforts of both the undergraduate and graduate offices of admission are successful, UMBC's student population in the future will be more, not less diverse, than has historically been the case. Enrollments will increase across student categories, placing more demands generally on university resources. There will be more undergraduate and doctoral students from states outside Maryland, which will mean more full-time students. Larger enrollments in applied master's programs will bring to campus more working professionals with definite expectations of efficiency of services. The domestic graduate population will increase, placing pressure on the university to provide student services more appropriate to graduate student needs that are typically not demanded by undergraduates.

Task Force Recommendations

The general conclusion of the Task Force is that student, faculty, and staff concerns about the current student life at UMBC are relatively basic and uncomplicated. Many of the voiced requests and needs can be met with modest expenditures and effort. We also conclude, however, that once these improvements are made in the programs, services, and campus atmosphere, and as the student body becomes larger and more diverse, the nature of UMBC student life and the needs will change. Therefore, we conclude that addressing student life issues is an ongoing exercise. Once basic needs are successfully met, others will emerge; programming for and being sensitive to student life are evolving and continuing processes.

The Task Force recommendations fall into three basic categories: services that meet students' essential needs; services that directly support academic life; programs that enhance community-building and campus "spirit."

I. Services that Meet Students' Essential Needs – Over and over, our respondents expressed dissatisfaction with what might be termed "basic" services or amenities that make the experience of being on campus enjoyable, comfortable, efficient, and stress-free.

A. Food Services

1. One of the strongest messages from students was the need to have more flexibility in the food services program. Specific requests were as follows:
 - a. Meal card credit options should extend beyond one week.
 - b. Meal cards should be designed for use beyond dining services, possibly extended to a debit card that can be used on and off-campus.
2. Students requested an improvement in the food options, variety, and quality.
3. Undergraduates, graduate students, staff, and faculty strongly and consistently asked for greatly expanded availability of both food and beverages on campus. It is not possible to obtain even light meals, snacks, or coffee in the evenings, on weekends, during breaks or vacations. A snackbar/cafe with a light food menu that would be opened 7 days a week, 24-hours a day, is recommended.

B. Campus Shuttle Service

A more extensive and flexible shuttle service is a major need especially for the many students who live off campus and do not have automobiles. The buses need to run more frequently, and the routes need to be expanded. This especially affects

international students who are dramatically disadvantaged by the inability to get to and from campus at reasonable hours during weekends, evenings, and vacations.

C. Parking

The lack of adequate parking facilities was a recurring theme, and we recommend that attention be paid to addressing the expansion of these facilities. Because of the suburban location of the campus, its isolation from extensive public transportation, and the large number of commuter students, the lack of sufficient parking spaces creates hardships and frustrations for those who must drive and park automobiles if they are to be students at this University.

D. Postal Service

The absence of a campus post office creates significant hardships both for residential and commuter students, as well as staff and faculty. Package-pickup service is needed for off-campus students. The inability to purchase stamps, weigh packages, and mail letters and packages on campus is particularly inconvenient for students who live on this isolated campus and do not have automobiles.

E. Support for Technology

Many offices that provide direct service to students on campus require additional technology staff to enhance the quality and efficiencies of operations, and this need will increase in the future. UMBC should develop a unified support model between divisional staff and University Computing Services (UCS) to eliminate duplicative services and insure that staff support to departments is optimized.

For students, the primary technology support is the UCS Helpdesk. Presently there are no full-time Helpdesk staff available in the evenings or on weekends to

assist students having technology questions. Students must often wait until the next business day to get the help they need. Especially in light of the commitment to assured access for students, the University should add two more positions to the UCS Helpdesk to provide full-time staff coverage until 10 p.m. on weekdays and coverage on the weekend.

F. Commuter Student Services

Because such a large percentage of undergraduates and all graduate students commute to campus, there is a need for focused attention on the needs of commuter students. We recommend that the Office of Commuter Student Affairs be reestablished on campus to address the issues that uniquely impact this segment of the student body.

G. Evening Student Services

As UMBC has reached out to attract working adults in its development of graduate programs, the number of students who are on campus only during evening hours has increased, and will continue to do so. The hours when key services and facilities are open need to be expanded to serve these students: for example, the Registrar's Office, Food Services (for refreshments as well as student ID cards), the Library, and the Bookstore. Several students requested on-campus babysitting services for parents who must attend late afternoon-early evening classes.

H. Student-Oriented Customer Service

UMBC's primary constituency is our students, yet this fact is not always recognized by units on campus most directly interface with students. Deliberate attention needs

to be focused on improving the quality of customer service that is provided to students. Several recommendations address this concern:

1. The Task Force recommends the establishment of acceptable performance standards of providing service to the student population. Every unit on campus that provides direct services to students should be assessed on a regular basis as to the quality of their services. They should be evaluated in terms of areas of strength, needed improvements, and additional resources that are required to better serve students. This assessment should be made by someone external to any of the affected units. Examples of offices that provide direct student service and have been reported as needing improvement are Accounting, Financial Aid, Health Services, and the Registrar.
2. A mechanism should be put into place for the periodic training, support, and reward of staff who provide direct services to students. Most University staff are competent in their specific areas of specialization but have no background in customer service, although they may provide such service as a major component of their job role. Furthermore, supervisors do not necessarily place high value on the student service component of their staff's responsibilities. Staff need to be provided quality training opportunities to help them deliver better services to students.
3. Offices that provide direct services to students should be encouraged to work more collaboratively with each other and should be in close physical proximity to each other, to enhance the services that they offer. The survey of campus

directors indicated that great benefits would be gained from increased communication and planning between and among other units on campus.

4. The campus telephone service is outdated and needs to be replaced by a system that will provide more options for the caller and staff (e.g. voice mail capability when all lines are busy and more sophisticated options for navigating the automated telephone “menus”). In addition, calls coming into the central switchboard should be answered by trained staff who provide accurate information and referrals.

II. Services that Directly Support Academic Life -- Several recommendations concern the improvement of services that directly support the educational enterprise and yet are outside the traditional boundaries of academic departments or curricula.

A. Library Services – As long as this was a small, largely undergraduate institution, the library facilities and services were sufficient. However, with many more graduate students, with a wider range of academic programs offered, and with part-time students who have limited time to spend on campus, UMBC has outgrown the existing library. Evidence suggests that we are far behind peer institutions in terms of library resources.

1. The hours of the library should be significantly expanded. The larger number of graduate students and the enhanced quality of its undergraduate population require the library to be open 24-hours a day, seven days a week, on holidays, during breaks and vacation periods.
2. The library needs to expand the study space available for graduate students and designate areas limited to their use. A recurrent theme among graduate students

was the lack of quiet places in the library to study. Parenthetically, designated study space for graduate students also should be provided in the new University Commons.

3. The library holdings are increasingly inadequate for a University offering graduate degrees. The number and variety of books and print and electronic journals are not sufficient for graduate-level study and research.
4. Support services provided by the library need to be expanded and improved: inter-campus loan service, the book renewal process, photocopy and microfiche machines, and staff to serve students.

B. Financial Support for Graduate Students

1. One of the keys to attracting quality graduate students is the provision of attractive assistantships, fellowships, and other support for graduate research. While UMBC has begun to make progress in this area, the need still exists for additional financial support for this segment of the student body.
2. A major service of the Graduate Student Association is the provision of travel grants to attend professional meetings and research grants to support graduate research. Additional funds need to be made available for this popular and needed service, and the funds need to be provided from sources other than student fees.

C. Faculty/Student Interaction

There needs to be an examination and implementation of ways to increase campus-wide faculty/student interaction. Some suggested ideas are as follows: (1) The Provost could support one event per year for each department to host a faculty/student

get-together. (2) A new annual student convocation could be initiated. (3) The faculty mentor program could be expanded to at least one faculty per unit.

III. Programs that Enhance Community-Building and Campus “Spirit” – A recurring criticism of student life at UMBC is that few all-campus events exist that bring the entire diverse community together and foster a sense of institutional tradition or spirit.

A. Comprehensive Marketing Plan -- The number and variety of activities, organizations, services, and programs that currently exist to enhance student life at UMBC are extensive. However, these programs and services are often not known to students. The mechanisms for advertising and marketing existing events and opportunities are largely ineffective. Students often do not realize that a program is open to campus-wide participation and not simply to members of the sponsoring organization. Athletic events, on most campuses a major community-building vehicle, are sparsely attended on this campus. We recommend that funds be provided to develop and implement a comprehensive marketing plan for all aspects of student life in order to magnify the effectiveness of existing programs and services. Suggested elements are an electronic kiosk, computer kiosks throughout the campus, voice mail for students, and digital message boards.

The University should better utilize technology to connect with students, especially the web, and should expand the myUMBC portal to make this portal much more inclusive of information pertinent to student life. A working group of students and UCS staff should be developed to expand myUMBC to make it easier for students to find relevant information on the programs and services offered on campus.

- B. Weekend Programs and Services** – One of the most recurring needs expressed by most individuals contacted by this Task Force was the need for more events and services to be available on weekends. A Weekend Planning Committee needs to be established with the task of developing a report on appropriate programs and services that would meet the needs of both residential students living on campus and commuter students who might be drawn back to campus on weekends. An example of expanded weekend campus services would be postal services, a small food mart, food services, and shuttle services.
- C. All-Campus Programming** – The University should sponsor one major all-campus event each month throughout the academic year. These events would ideally become campus traditions, well publicized, supported by the entire academic community, and funded by a Major Events Fund. A sample yearly schedule could include the following: (1) two cruises on the Harbor such as the one currently organized by the Recreation Department; (2) Quadmania; (3) Winter Carnival, (4) UMBC student concert featuring on-campus talent, (5) a concert featuring a “name” artist(s), (6) Fall Frenzy, (7) a formal or semi-formal event.
- D. Additional Space for Events and Improvements in Space Scheduling**-- The addition of more campus-wide events will necessitate a larger theater/auditorium, since the size of current performance venues are already very inadequate. In addition, issues related to scheduling campus space for student events and the prioritization of the use of available space needs to be examined. The current system tends to give low priority to requests from student groups for scheduling space.

E. Focal Point for Socializing and Entertainment on Campus -- The campus lacks a place where students can congregate for casual socializing, informal entertainment, eating, and drinking. We recommend the creation of an avant-garde campus coffeehouse, open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to address the lack of late night and weekend food services and weekend entertainment. The facility should have a non-institutional atmosphere and could be largely operated by students. Entertainment—primarily scheduled for weekends—could include “open mike nights” for students, poetry or “spoken word” sessions, games, performances by professional acoustic musicians, student art shows, and “underground” films. Quiet study hours could also be scheduled.

F. Enhanced Undergraduate Orientation – This spring a team was charged by the Provost to examine undergraduate orientation and recommend ways to strengthen the experience of new students. The report of this team proposes programs and strategies that will, in part, help students feel excited about and a part of UMBC, as well as create a stronger sense of campus community (e.g., school spirit, pride, and traditions). The Task Force believes that a stronger experience upon entering UMBC will contribute in significant ways to students’ sense of “belonging” and engagement. We support the consideration of the team’s recommendations related to orientation as a key step in enhancing undergraduate life at UMBC.

G. Opportunities for Community-Building Among Graduate Students – There needs to be a targeted mechanism for *graduate students* to build a campus-based community and to socialize with each other on an ad hoc, informal basis. As UMBC strives to increase the number of graduate students and provide a positive

environment for them, University facilities and services must meet the needs of this group, particularly since there is no “college town” immediately adjacent to the campus that offers satellite services. Because the size of the graduate student population is still relatively small, because many of the students are on campus only in the evenings and weekends, because many departments have too few graduate students to sustain a department-based “community”, we recommend the creation of a graduate student “pub” within the planned graduate student lounge in the new University Commons. This setting would need to be non-institutional in appearance, located in the new University Commons, and open during evenings and weekends when graduate students are on campus.

Middle States Accreditation Reports

The Middle States Accreditation Reports that are produced every ten years provide a glimpse into the recurring themes that relate to student life at UMBC. A list of issues mentioned in past accreditation reports that correspond to the Task Force recommendations are as follows:

- Enhanced weekend and evening events and services for commuter and evening students – 1976, 1996
- Lounges for study, meeting and socializing, especially for commuter students – 1976, 1996
- Information kiosks and other improvements to advertising campus events – 1976
- Expanded opportunities for faculty and staff to meet with students – 1976
- Campus cultural and social events that attract the university community – 1986, 1996
- Library holdings, staff and services inadequate for graduate students – 1986, 1996

- Need for additional campus housing for undergraduate and graduate students to promote a more residential atmosphere –1976, 1986
- Lack of school or community spirit, identify, or “campus life” – 1976, 1986, 1996
- Lack of satellite services surrounding the campus – 1996
- Dissatisfaction with services provided in the areas of food service, parking facilities, financial aid, and programs for residential students – 1996
- Insufficient communication between various units and departments of the University that provide services to students – 1996

Conclusions

The recommendations that are made in this Task Force report are very much grounded in a history of campus culture. Through the years progress has been made in addressing some concerns; others remain to be resolved. We anticipate that in the future new ones will emerge as the composition and demographics of the student population change.

The Task Force recommends that the first issues to be addressed should be those that match similar recommendations contained in the Middle States reports over the past 25 years. Resolving these long expressed concerns will begin to enhance student life at UMBC and will assist in creating a living and learning environment that will strengthen student recruitment and retention.