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Cover Story

UMass Amherst and Chancellor Robert Holub

Robert Holub says that, as what's known as a land-grant institution — one of several dozen colleges and universities created on federally owned land — UMass Amherst has certain responsibilities to meet with regard to this region and its residents.

Originally, they centered on the teaching of agriculture, science, and engineering, Holub, who became chancellor of the university in the summer of 2008, explained, adding that, over the past century and a half or so, these duties have evolved and now extend beyond the realm of pure academia and into the broad area of economic development.



In recent years, and particularly since he arrived, the university has been increasingly focused on going beyond what's been legislated, he continued, and more toward what might be expected (and more) from a school that has 25,000 students and is one of the leading research institutions in the state.

"We consider ourselves a citizen of Western Mass., and with that, we have special obligations to this region, and we've been trying to act on those responsibilities," he continued,

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adding that such efforts involve the entire region, but especially the city of Springfield, the unofficial capital of Western Mass. and a municipality that, like many former manufacturing centers, is trying to reinvent itself.

Efforts to assist Springfield and the region come in a number of forms, and together — coupled with the hope and expectation for more in the future — they have placed the university in the Difference Makers Class of 2010. These initiatives include:

- The Pioneer Valley Life Sciences Institute, or PVLSI, a collaborative effort with Baystate Health to fuel growth in a fledgling biosciences sector;
- A recently announced project to move the university's Design Center into one of the buildings in Springfield's Court Square, a relocation expected to help create more vibrancy in the city's central business district, help existing service businesses, and spur new ones;
- A planned high-performance computing center in Holyoke, a much-heralded undertaking involving a partnership that includes several other colleges and universities, including MIT and Boston University, as well as private industry. The UMass system as a whole is a lead partner in the project, said Holub, but many of those laying the groundwork for the center are based on the Amherst campus;
- The Precision Manufacturing Regional Alliance Project being undertaken with the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County and the local chapter of the National Tooling and Machining Assoc. to transfer technology from two departments at the university (Polymer Science and Mechanical and Industrial Engineering) to area precision manufacturers; and
- Work with the Springfield school system to attract talented students to UMass Amherst with the hope that they will stay in the region and contribute to its growth and prosperity.

"Instead of giving them fish, we want to give them the fishing pole," Holub said of the initiative involving Springfield schools, one based on a pilot program now being developed with the city of Chelsea. "We would like to be able to attract the best and brightest students from Springfield to come to UMass Amherst, get an education here, and then go back to their community and assist with development.

"We are, primarily, an educational institution; that's what we do best," he continued. "And we think that establishing a greater pipeline with the city of Springfield will enable us to help that community more than any one single program."

Since his arrival, a few months after Domenic Sarno was elected mayor in Springfield, there has been more communication between the university and the city, or what Holub called a true dialogue. And from those discussions came the agreement to create a presence in downtown and, specifically, Court Square.

"The mayor has engaged us in conversations since I arrived here about the revitalization of Court Square, and we see that as something that's necessary for the city," he said. "And we've tried to fit in any way we can given the budget

constraints we're facing."

The school is already looking at ways to expand and enhance its presence within the city, he added, noting that administrators are looking to possibly move some backroom operations from Amherst and Hadley — where office lease rates are comparatively higher than in most area communities — to Springfield in moves that would help the city while also saving the university some money.

The importance of efforts to assist Springfield has been underscored by Holub's move to appoint to John Mullin, dean of UMass Amherst's graduate school and a regional planner, as 'point person' for the broad initiative. His role will be to keep the lines of communication open, make needed connections within the city, and continue the current dialogue.

"He knows what needs to be done in terms of urban development," said Holub, adding that Mullin now dedicates a certain amount of time to the Springfield partnership, and his work has helped to move specific projects, ones that provide win-win scenarios, from the drawing board to reality.

"We're not a granting agency — we don't have \$2 million that we can just give to Springfield," he explained. "We have to look for areas in which there's mutual benefit, and we've been able to find quite a few of those."

And while Holub is encouraged, and excited, about current efforts taking place in the realm of economic development, region-wide and especially in Springfield, he fully expects the university to expand and diversify such initiatives when the economy improves sufficiently for it to do so.

"If we didn't have this severe economic downturn, I certainly believe that we could be doing more than we are," he explained. "But we are doing things, and they reflect those responsibilities we feel we have to this region.

"The proof of the pudding is in the eating, as they say," he continued, "and we've tried to do things that are going to bring palpable results for the western part of the state and make some modest investments where we can to back up the talk.

"And those investments are often less in terms of actual dollars — although, with something like PVLSI, it does take an actual cut out of our budget," he continued, "and more in terms of people and ideas, and with our own ability to lobby industries and individual companies to come here, and assist with those efforts."

Those are the things that might be expected from such a prominent citizen of Western Massachusetts.

—George O'Brien

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