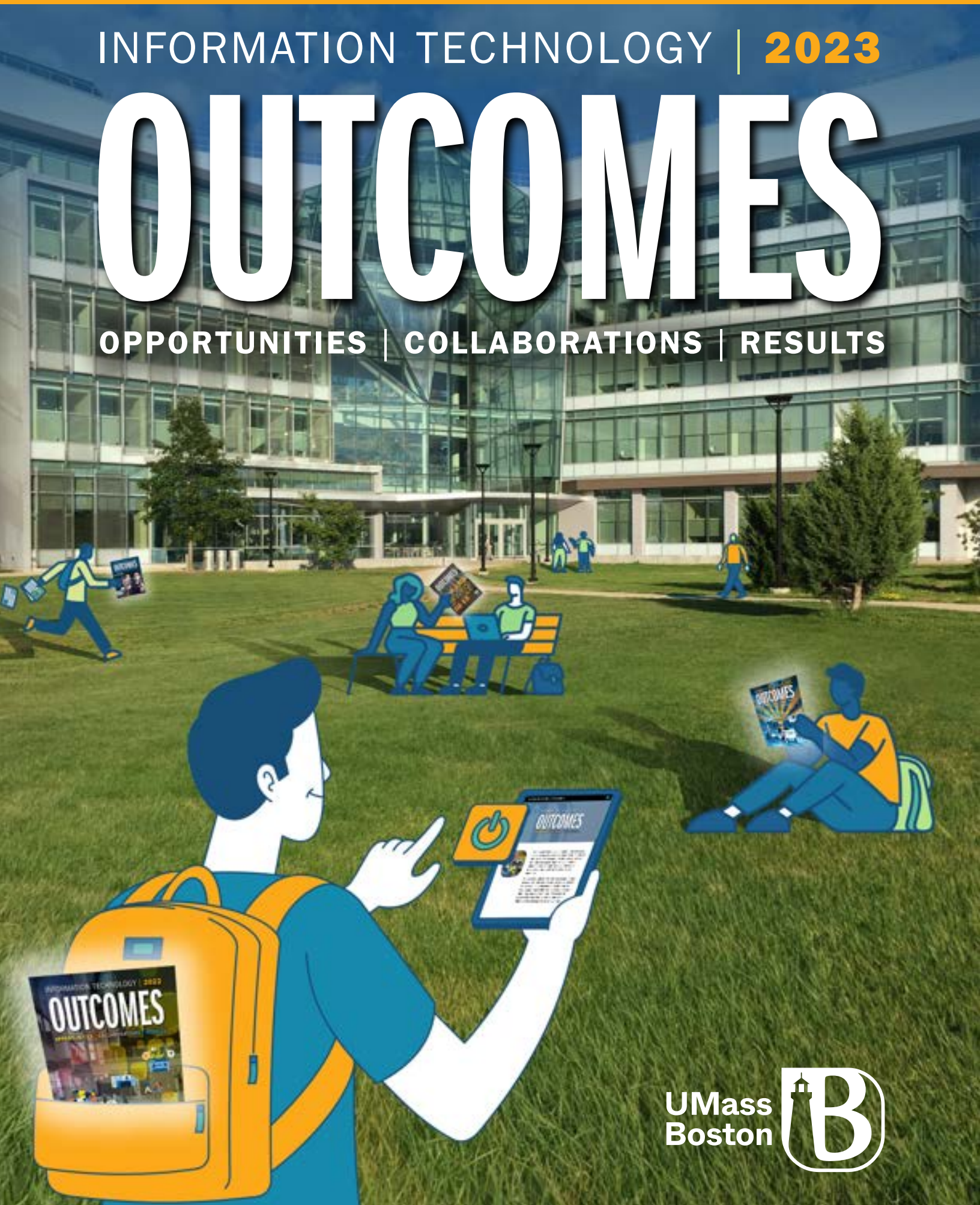
5 Year Retrospective

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY | 2023

OUTCOMES

OPPORTUNITIES | COLLABORATIONS | RESULTS



UMass Boston

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INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY OUTCOMES | 2023

Information Technology Outcomes (IT Outcomes) is a magazine highlighting the many collaborations between IT and members of the UMass Boston community.

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Welcome!

"AI will not replace you. A person using AI will." —Santiago Valdarrama

Reflecting on the five enriching years chronicled in IT Outcomes, it becomes abundantly clear that UMass Boston's IT Department has always been more than just a responsive unit addressing immediate challenges. Its vision extends far beyond the problems of today. The stories featured in this edition not only reminisce about past endeavors but illuminate how those initiatives continue to yield positive results, shaping the present and future of UMass Boston.

This unique capability—to not just address but to anticipate, innovate, and create lasting impact—can be described as the IT department's specialty in shepherding new services into the future. It is akin to a gardener who does not just plant a seed but nurtures it, ensuring it grows into a robust tree that provides shade and fruit for generations to come.

For instance, consider the IT Department's response to the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID pandemic, described further on pages 12 and 16. While the immediate reaction was to ensure continuity and address emergent needs, their strategy was not just about survival; it was about thriving in an unfamiliar environment. The evolution and growth in online and hybrid learning, as well as technological enhancements to the teaching experience, were not just solutions for a pandemic-era problem. They are lasting innovations that have enhanced the educational journey at UMass Boston and will continue to do so.

Similarly, the Cyber Resilience initiative described on page 9 highlights how the department does not merely react to threats. It takes a proactive stance, seeking out potential vulnerabilities and addressing them before they can become issues. This forward-looking approach ensures that UMass Boston's cyber-infrastructure is not just robust for today but is poised to tackle the challenges of tomorrow.

Moreover, the focus on IT staff well-being, as evidenced by the introduction of the Wellbeats platform on page 23, underscores a recognition that the future of the IT Department—and indeed, UMass Boston as a whole—rests on the well-being of its people. Such initiatives are a testament to the department's understanding that sustainable success requires a holistic approach.

In essence, stories from the past are not just tales of bygone days. They are living testimonies to the IT Department's forward-looking ethos. As we celebrate these past successes, it is clear the real triumph is in how these efforts continue to resonate, benefiting UMass Boston today and promising even brighter outcomes in the future.

The UMass Boston IT Department does not just solve problems; it crafts enduring legacies. And in this 5-year retrospective edition, we are reminded that the best legacies are those that continue to flourish, inspire, and serve long after their inception.

Raymond Lefebvre
Vice Chancellor and CIO

The quote above about Artificial Intelligence describes a fact revealed by the past year of rapid and unexpected developments that are sure to greatly impact our working lives in the near future. To illustrate the truth in that quote, we would like to reveal that the welcome letter above was not written by Ray Lefebvre, and was in fact written completely by ChatGPT 4.0 with only a few minor edits! We fed in all the articles of this publication and asked it to "create" an inspiring welcome letter to introduce the theme of this year's magazine. Did you suspect anything when reading it? Rest assured, the rest of this magazine was written by a real person, Managing Editor Peter Stilla.

TECHNOVATION

Still Successfully "Failing" Forward

It would be impossible to name the single most impressive service that UMass Boston IT has introduced the past few years, but Zack Ronald's Technovation office must be among the top contenders. "We've sort of established ourselves as a way that students, faculty, staff, and researchers can come to us for innovative tools for teaching/learning, and the thing that Ray (Chief Information Officer Raymond Lefebvre) likes to emphasize about Technovation is low cost, scalable and fail forward," Ronald said in commenting on the impact Technovation has had in its brief history at the university. Technovation, launched at UMass Boston in 2019 by Lefebvre, has grown significantly with the Technovator lab/office space in the Wheatley building coming online in September 2021.

Previous IT Outcomes' editions have described some of Zack's earlier technovations, including the stupendous Old North Church virtual reality project Virtual 360 Tour | The Old North Church, but the hits have continued coming this past year. As always, the focus has been on educational technology, or Ed Tech. Zack's main passion is finding innovative ways to use technology to enhance how faculty teach and students learn at UMass Boston, and he always wants to make sure that the university is at the forefront of where Ed Tech is heading. As he puts it, "Wherever higher Ed is going, that is where we want to go too. We are trying to stay with the curve." And where is the curve these days? "Design thinking, 3D printing, virtual reality, augmented reality, artificial intelligence, that's where the world is going," he said, before describing the ways in which his office has kept up with, if not gotten ahead of, these trends over the past year.

"Wherever higher Ed is going, that is where we want to go too. We are trying to stay with the curve."

Zack Ronald, Senior Classroom and Instructional Technologist & IT Technovation Lead

First is 3D printing, which seems incongruous to many people just because of what it is called. It is a good thing that part of Zack's genius is his ability to explain what is extremely complex in a way that even the non-technical among us can understand. "The way 3D printing is used here is to take a design of an object, either something that's already available online or is designed from scratch, you put it into something called a slicer, which designs how many layers and pieces that it has, and then you send it to the 3D printer and print it out." The key is in knowing that the word "printer" is a misnomer. What that machine actually does is produce plastic parts designed with precise specifications so that when assembled useful tools for classroom learning are created. A recent example was the creation of reusable intravenous tubes for the nursing school to replace ones that were only used once and then had to be disposed.

Zack dispelled the notion that this technology is only useful for aiding STEM education at UMass Boston, and he described ways it has been used for instruction in art, history, and other liberal arts disciplines. He acknowledged though that Technovation has worked more closely with the nursing school than any other academic department, mostly because there are so many ways to apply innovative technologies that have been discovered in nursing education. In particular, virtual reality (also known as immersive or augmented reality) has transformed the way nursing is now taught at the university.

"The nursing program is always on the forefront of innovative education. They are always trying to find the next best thing because they see that their students need innovative approaches as well. The big thing that we have done this year was virtual reality," Zack explained. The nursing profession being what it is, students benefit tremendously if they can experience being in settings such as emergency rooms, surgical rooms, or even handling certain equipment. "We piloted two different virtual reality tools for simulation with (Nursing Clinical Lecturer) Rosemary Samia and her group. We trained the nursing faculty on it and were there for support, getting things up and running," Zack said before adding that the nursing team was so happy with the result, "they went out and they bought an additional 12 virtual reality headsets for the department."

Technovation has proven itself to be an invaluable asset to UMass Boston, and it is great to know the university will be leading the way through Technovation under Zack Ronald's leadership for many years to come.

Disruptive Technologies

Artificial Intelligence Coming to Higher Ed

Usually, when IT is doing its typical creating and innovating for UMass Boston, what's being worked on isn't something that's received national media attention or is well known among the general population. However, what we're calling Disruptive Technologies is entirely different, as we'll let Associate Chief Information Officer Apurva Mehta explain.

"When we came back in early January 2023 for the Spring semester what was hitting the market at that time was something called ChatGPT. You may have heard of that term," he said somewhat facetiously. Of course, everyone has now heard of this Artificial Intelligence (AI) product that is not only turning higher education upside down, but also providing ominous hints at how AI could potentially transform our entire society. Apurva described it as the next stage of AI natural language processing. "So Microsoft has taken it to a whole new level with ChatGPT where you can tell it to write a paper for you," Apurva said, with the words "write a paper" providing all that's needed to consider the profound impact this technology is having on higher education.

The first people Apurva heard from at UMass Boston concerning ChatGPT was, not surprisingly, the faculty, who were suddenly dealing with the prospect that their students may be using the new technology to complete their class assignments. Recognizing the situation demanded immediate attention, Apurva quickly met with the Provost's office and Learning Design Services Director Paula Thorsland to devise a strategy to address the issue.

The discussion first focused on how many universities have banned the use of ChatGPT by their students, but that option was rejected for several reasons, one of which is how difficult it would be to enforce. Apurva said that it isn't easy for faculty to tell when a student has used ChatGPT on an assignment, especially if they're not familiar with the student's natural writing style. So instead, it was suggested to faculty that they include in their syllabi a request that students do not use ChatGPT in that class, but that innocuous sounding idea was only the first part of a multi-step plan Apurva, Paula, and their team devised to cope with ChatGPT.

The first thing the team did was hold frequent meetings, dubbed TEACH sessions, where faculty could consult with Learning Design Services support staff and learn various strategies to help neutralize ChatGPT or even turn it into a faculty-friendly tool. Faculty were first advised to allow Learning Design Services staff to review their assignments and show them how they could be slightly tweaked, for example by adding a critical thinking component, that makes using ChatGPT less effective. Faculty were also told about a plagiarism detection tool available to them called Turnitin, and that they can alert students in advance that their work may be reviewed by it.

But the most creative and ingenious strategy imparted to the faculty was to incorporate ChatGPT in their classes and use it to their advantage, or, as Apurva put it, instead of trying to mitigate ChatGPT, "Let's embrace it." For example, if coursework on a given day requires students to interpret a set of statistical data, have ChatGPT do the data analysis first and have the students analyze its findings. Then the new technology is being used to enhance education, not undermine it.

It's not going to be easy, but if the rest of society can follow the example of UMass Boston, maybe artificial intelligence can truly benefit humanity in untold ways and not be as disruptive as it appears.

The image above was generated using artificial intelligence at NightCafe.com. Numerous similar platforms exist, enabling users to input prompts and have the software produce corresponding images. In this instance, the prompt given for this particular artwork was to "Generate an image featuring a figure that is half human and half robot, dressed in a graduation robe."

Splashtop

A Deep Dive into Remote Learning

IT is always seeking new ways to enhance the learning and teaching experience at UMass Boston, and when the Fall 2022 semester began both students and faculty discovered that IT had done it yet again. Making a big splash on this occasion was a new remote learning service called Remote Labs from Splashtop, which allows students to use software programs they may need in some of their classes but don't have access to on their personal devices. Splashtop also allows faculty to teach remotely in a computer lab by giving them the access they need to that lab.

Managed Services Supervisor Ananta Sinha describes it this way. "Remote Labs is basically a bunch of physical computers that are set up somewhere secure. They are not accessed physically by students, but they are accessible remotely, so they can remote into these computers using their own personal devices." But what makes this service more valuable than the already existing Cloud PC remote access service is that Remote Labs, via Splashtop, gives students access to highly specialized software programs that certain classes require. Students simply install the Splashtop app on their personal computers and then they can see a list of computers that Remote Labs offers. They find the one which has the software needed for their class and can start using it right away.

These aren't typical academic software programs either, as Sinha explains, "These are programs like SPSS, Stata, Microsoft Visio, Microsoft Project, that students would have to buy the license for, and they are expensive." So, by using Remote Labs students are saving money, taking classes they may not otherwise be able to, and can remotely access the software that they need to be successful. How's that for a big splash?

Bridging the Digital Divide

Connecting Minority Communities Grant

UMass Boston has always been strongly committed to serving and supporting a student body that's as diverse as the community surrounding it, so Ray Lefebvre, Chief Information Officer, was elated when he learned that UMass Boston had been awarded a Connecting Minority Communities Grant from the US Department of Commerce in the amount of $2.97 million dollars over two years. The grant, part of a larger federal initiative called Internet for All, is designed to give universities in mostly urban areas the means to provide or broaden digital access to historically underserved communities.

The university learned firsthand the problems our community had with internet access during the pandemic, when classes could only be held remotely. It soon became obvious that some UMass Boston students couldn't access their remote classes nearly as well as students from more suburban universities or those with smaller minority populations. The university responded quickly by establishing the Chromebook loaner program that is still active today, but while it was helpful it couldn't help address the overall problem of digital accessibility. However, as VP for Research Bala Sundaram describes, the two-year, $2.97 million federal grant has become what is now colloquially known as a game-changer.

Bala said that while students are being provided with new devices as a part of this grant, it is just a very small piece of how the funding is being allocated. A far more holistic program has been conceived that engages several community partners, with creative solutions being applied in several areas. For example, Verizon was enlisted to help with bandwidth and connectivity issues the local community was having, even for people with standard quality computers. Verizon donated what they call "jet packs" that allow users to create internet hotspots in their homes, and the grant pays the $15 a month subscription cost that allows unlimited access to the internet, with the 1st 25 gigabits at 4G speeds and the remainder at 3G speeds. This, as Bala put it, "is not Tesla speed, but still pretty good."

Yet when elaborating on the grant Bala points out that it has two main purposes. Yes, the communications piece, or "bridging the digital divide" is important, but another goal is to "create career awareness in the IT space." In other words, minorities have typically been underrepresented in the IT career field, and the grant funding in part will be directed toward increasing minority participation in the IT workforce. "There are projections of skills and workforce gaps, so there's a workforce diversity component to this as well," Bala said.

For Bala and Apurva though, the best way they can get the most from this grant can be summed up with the word "sustainability." This means that when they report back to the Commerce Department that they can show that the funding did not go towards quick, short-term fixes. Instead, the goal is to implement large scale improvements to the entire digital infrastructure of the community.

Apurva pointed out that the initial phase of the grant "is a pilot program," aiming to work with 150 members spread across four minority communities: African American (Dorchester), Asian American (Chinatown), Latino (Chelsea), Native American (Canton), and another 100 Pell Grant eligible minority students from UMass Boston. The opportunity exists to apply for more funding after two years if they can show what's being implemented now can be expanded and improved upon down the road. Given the stewardship Bala and Apurva have demonstrated with this funding thus far, there can be little doubt that UMass Boston's long-term prospects with this grant will be successful, and our minority communities can truly become more connected in our digital world.

IT Briefs

AV Upgrades: Newer, Better, More

Classroom Technology and AV Services Director John Jessoe has been at UMass Boston long enough to know that it is not a matter of if the university will commit to upgrading AV systems each year, it is just a question of where the state-of-the-art upgrades will be. In 2023, the focus was on five Campus Center meeting rooms and three University Hall classrooms. All eight rooms were significantly upgraded, but most of the work was done in the three larger Campus Center rooms so that they could host hybrid meetings that can be attended both in-person and remotely at the same time. It is only when John describes what was included that one gets the sense of how spectacular these upgrades are.

The two larger meeting rooms and the Alumni Room were those outfitted for hybrid meeting capabilities. "100-inch displays in the front and 75-inch displays in the back in the first two rooms, and the Alumni Room received two new 85-inch displays in the front, with the two existing 75-inch displays being repurposed in the back of the room and the adjoining overflow space. Additionally, all three rooms also now have front and back cameras, ceiling microphones and new wireless microphone systems to support hybrid meetings and events," John said, before adding more detail than there's room to include here. The main point to know is that at UMass Boston, AV upgrades are continual, not occasional, and with John Jessoe at the helm along with his team of seasoned AV professionals, their quality will be unsurpassed by any other university.

Network Upgrade Nearing Completion

In last year's IT Outcomes, Director of Network Services Jamie Soule described the planning and initial stages of the Campus Network Upgrade project that began near the end of 2021. In 2023, Soule was pleased to report that the project is progressing on schedule and nearing completion.

"The ISC, Healey, McCormack, University Hall, and Campus Center buildings have all been upgraded and are using the new Aruba hardwired network infrastructure. The Wheatley building has all new Aruba hardwired equipment installed, and the only remaining buildings to migrate over to the new Aruba equipment are Service and Supply, Clarke, and the Quinn administration building. These buildings will be upgraded, and users migrated starting in late September 2023 and we expect them to be fully cut over by November 2023."

"We have also installed all new data center network equipment in our critical server room facilities on campus, and we'll also be upgrading the entire Wi-Fi network in all buildings. All core back-end Wi-Fi equipment has been installed and is awaiting the data center portion of the upgrade and we're also installing over 1,000 new local area Wi-Fi antennas that provide the Wi-Fi signal everyone relies on across campus. The installation of these Wi-Fi antennas is underway and anticipated to extend into the fall semester with a completion in November 2023 and activation targeted for January 2024."

Upgrading a campus network requires careful planning and a fastidious approach, which has been the case at UMass Boston, and thanks to Jamie Soule and the Network Services team soon students, faculty, and staff will be able to enjoy the benefits of their collective efforts.

Self Service Password Reset

The IT department works to improve the IT experience for everyone at UMass Boston, and sometimes it is the simpler things IT does that help our community the most. For example, everyone needs to change their password at some point, but when that is more difficult than it should be it creates a problem for more people. So, when Chief Information Officer Raymond Lefebvre saw that our system for resetting passwords was inefficient and complex, he knew it had to change.

As Ray describes, "When I joined UMass Boston in 2019, I inherited a custom written password reset utility, but it was hard to use and was considered a cybersecurity risk." This led to the IT service desk receiving a steady deluge of calls from people asking for help in what should have been a fairly simple task. The good news is that Ray realized there was an easy solution to the problem already available to the university. "I put forward a formal project called Microsoft Self Service password reset," Ray said, knowing that because UMass Boston had a licensing agreement with Microsoft and used Microsoft Outlook email (umb.edu), it would be simple enough for the university to transition to Microsoft's password resetting system. "The commercial Microsoft password reset is easy to use and it's not going to be hacked anytime soon," Ray added, pointing out some of the advantages Microsoft's system offered.

The system only became operational in July and there's already been a 15% decrease in people contacting the help desk for password reset assistance. That number is expected to grow very quickly "as people become familiar with the Microsoft way of resetting passwords," Ray said, and with that added familiarity self-service will be exactly what it should be. Fewer help desk calls also means a much smoother and efficiently running IT department as a whole. So, while this may be considered a simple solution to a simple problem, the university benefits in ways far greater than it seems.

INCREASING EFFICIENCIES

Tech Recycling Days

When it comes to making the most efficient use of our resources, UMass Boston IT doesn't just talk the talk. IT walks the walk. So, when UMass Boston's IT Services Division assumed responsibility for "Computer Lifecycle Management" of university-owned computers on July 1, 2023, it had to create an entirely new and much more efficient computer lifecycle process. "The university as a whole was changing how we manage our inventory of computers, all the way from planning and purchasing through to end of usefulness," Assistant Vice Chancellor of Client Services John Mazzarella explained. "So, we had to write up a computer lifecycle policy describing how the process would be handled."

Additionally, the IT Services Division had to develop a university-wide system for recycling and replacing computers for every office and department at UMass Boston, and it was far from easy. Creating a centralized, streamlined method for the acquisition of new computers at the university may have been the simpler part of this project, however, the other half of the equation still needed to be figured out, and this was getting employees to turn in their outdated computers. John Mazzarella and his team assessed the issue and quickly went to work.

To start, John researched the issue in-depth and wrote a Computer Lifecycle Update Report. He determined that many university-issued computers on campus were nearing the end of their viable lifespan and needed to be placed in surplus, or, in other words, recycled. But as you can imagine, recycling laptops and other computer equipment is not as easy as recycling bottles and cans. The most obvious problem the team faced is the very large number of computers to be managed, especially coming from every department in the university. John realized that eventually the employees with these older computers would need to be directly contacted to turn them in, but that was too big a project to accomplish in the short term. A plan to allow old computers to be quickly and voluntarily turned in to IT was needed, and that's when Tech Recycling Days was born.

Starting around Earth Day (which lent an environmental theme to the proceedings), an eight-week schedule was devised in which every Wednesday IT staff would man a table and collect outdated computers from employees. Each week the event would be held in one of the eight main university buildings to give it as much coverage as possible. The IT staff didn't know what to expect but were surprised by the result. "It was just like all day, people coming by and dropping off laptops or coming up with a big cart full of stuff. Some departments that had about 30 computers that had been sitting around for ten years came by and we would just scan (their barcodes to process returning) and that would be it," John said. At the end of the eight weeks, a total of 792 computers were returned to IT. As expected, 701 of them were old and non-viable computers, which was 11% of the total number of non-viable computers in IT's inventory, including several computers over 20 years old!

There was another pleasant surprise in store for IT staff. "We were pleased to find that a significant number of turned-in computers were still viable. These are computers that are new enough to be compatible with currently supported operating systems and are still very usable by employees. We received a total of 91 viable computers and IT staff are hard at work refurbishing them to make them ready for redeployment to those in need," John said.

Tech Recycling Days proved to be a smashing success for John Mazzarella and his team and is another example of IT going the extra mile to ensure efficient use of UMass Boston resources.

Cyber Resilience

New Motto, Same Outstanding Results

Given the UMass Boston Information Security Office (ISO) track record of outstanding performance, it would be understandable if one year it just decided to relax a bit and rest on its laurels. If someone else oversaw the ISO besides Wil Khouri, Chief Information Security Officer, perhaps they would think that UMass Boston's information security infrastructure has already proven itself invulnerable to hacks or breaches, so there doesn't need to be an unrelenting effort to strengthen our cybersecurity posture every year.

Well, Wil Khouri isn't someone else, and to him it's ridiculous to even think about not improving the UMass Boston cybersecurity infrastructure on a continual basis. Wil knows that new cyberthreats are emerging all the time, and if UMass Boston's cybersecurity isn't constantly improving it won't stay one step ahead of the bad guys. He is also aware that universities are especially vulnerable to cybercrime, because "Institutions like ours, in higher education, have a unique mix of challenges because we try to strike a balance between easy access to resources and security."

So, over the years Khouri has utilized a consistent strategy that has kept UMass Boston as safe from cybercrime as any university in the country. First, there is a comprehensive annual review of the UMass Boston cybersecurity program and infrastructure conducted by Elliott-Davis, a cybersecurity consultancy. The UMass Boston test score jumped from B- to A- this year, but the score is not as important to Wil as are the areas the report shows where the university's cyber-defenses can be improved. Armed with that knowledge the ISO formulates their cybersecurity strategy for the coming year.

The ISO traditionally identifies their plan with a thematic label, and this year Cyber Resilience was chosen. Cyber Resilience is "the ability to anticipate, withstand, recover from, and adapt to adverse conditions, stresses, attacks, or compromises on systems that use or are enabled by cyber resources," according to the National Institute of Standards and Technology. That sounds good, but what does it mean, or as Wil put it, "How do we translate cyber resilience from a buzzword to an actionable strategy?"

Fortunately for UMass Boston, doing what this question asks is precisely the type of thing that Wil and the ISO do best. For Khouri, "You can't be resilient if you don't know what you are protecting. Our strategy was to build a toolset to augment our visibility. Cyber resilience starts with adopting a risk-based information security strategy. This strategy enables us to act with a proactive mindset."

Examining the university's cybersecurity profile from this perspective enabled Khouri to identify key questions needing to be asked and issues that had to be resolved. Specifically, Wil saw that a ransomware attack could be problematic. "Can we identify a ransomware attack in a timely manner? Can we recover from a ransomware attack? What if the ransomware made it into our backup files?" and most importantly, "What platforms are out there that can mitigate such a threat?"

When investigating this final question, the ISO came to a clear conclusion. The Rubrik Ransomware Investigation platform could provide all the security features the ISO was seeking. "Rubrik is a cyber resiliency platform (backup/recovery) that embraces the zero-trust model, especially for ransomware resiliency. It detects anomalies and malware within the backup data and provides efficient blocking and recovery features," Wil stated.

Rubrik, of course, is just one piece of the ISO's cybersecurity strategy this year, but UMass Boston can rest assured that the ISO will remain focused on continually improving the university's cybersecurity posture every year. Wil Khouri, Chief Information Security Officer, and the entire UMass Boston ISO staff will not rest until the university's data and information are safe, secure, and resilient.

UMass Boston IT Outcomes

5 Years &Counting

Information Technology at UMass Boston has grown and evolved over the past five years, and IT Outcomes has been with it every step of the way to chronicle its journey. As this is the fifth annual edition of IT Outcomes, we thought we would celebrate this milestone by looking back at some of the people, places, and events that have made the recent history of IT at UMass Boston so remarkable.

Certainly, a lot has changed in IT at the university since Raymond Lefebvre began his tenure as Chief Information Officer in 2019. The IT division has always played an essential role in making UMass Boston a great university, even back to its earliest days when it was known as the Computing Services department in the 1980s. But as the role and importance of IT has grown significantly in every facet of American life in the 21st century, IT at UMass Boston has grown right along with it, keeping pace with every new trend and innovation, and making sure that the university's information services perform as well as any in the nation.

Of course, with the COVID pandemic as probably the biggest story worldwide since 2019, it was just as significant at UMass Boston, and in this section we will look at how IT responded to the pandemic. But there is so much else to look back on too. There has been enormous growth in online and hybrid learning, and in how technology has continued to improve the teaching and learning experience at the university. Additionally, the Technovation and Makerspace programs have accelerated technological innovation to serve our students and faculty. And, in this section we will be checking in with some of our former student employee Star Performers from the past few years to see how their experience at UMass Boston has led them to successful careers after graduation.

We will also take a look at some of the changes in the IT division itself and how they have not just served the university but also enhanced the careers and well-being of everyone on the IT team.

Let the reminiscing begin!

Our Star Performers

Student employees have always played a vital role in helping UMass Boston IT perform to the level of excellence it always has, and the skills and experience these students gain while working for IT have helped many of them launch successful careers after graduation. In our 2023 IT Outcomes we'd like to highlight three of our more recent Star Performers and share their remarkable success stories with you. While there are far too many stories of student employees who have gone on to bigger things for us to include here, we hope that these three can represent the pride UMass Boston IT has in all of them and thank them for all they've meant and done for us over the years.

LING ZHU While "remarkable" can be used to describe so many of our student employees, there are things about Ling Zhu that make her story stand out even more. For starters, she had lived her entire life in China and never set foot in the US before coming to UMass Boston for her MBA in 2014. She researched graduate schools all over the US before deciding UMass Boston was the best school in the best location for her to live in the US and pursue her degree.

She started her studies and began her student employee career as a computer labs consultant in September 2014. After completing year one of her graduate program, she decided she wanted her campus job to be more relevant to her career focus, and after meeting with now Assistant Vice Chancellor of Client Services John Mazzarella, she began a job as a marketing assistant in his department. Here she developed skills she said really helped her after graduating in 2016, especially her work in social media marketing.

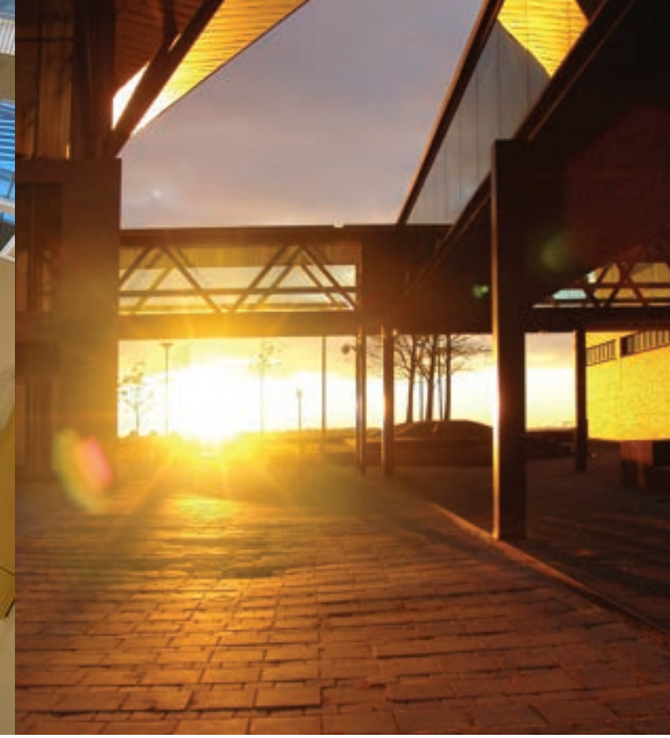
Ling said she didn't expect to stay in the US long-term after completing her MBA degree, but shortly after graduation she got a job as a marketing associate at MIT (another fine local university) for MIT Press, where she's still happily employed in 2023. Oh, and in case Ling Zhu's journey at UMass Boston didn't sound magical enough, she and another student employee she met here ended up getting married in 2016! Talk about a student success story!

SHAWN REARDON Shawn Reardon's student employee career began auspiciously in the Fall of 2019 when he started with a management position. OK, maybe he wasn't officially in management, but when he started the night shift in the McCormick AV office, he worked alone and unsupervised and was basically tasked with running the office after the rest of the staff left for the day at 4:00. Talk about starting a job, student or otherwise, with a lot of responsibility! "I was basically running the office alone at night and doing it without anyone overseeing what I was doing," Shawn recalled. This phase of his career ended when the pandemic shut down the campus in Spring 2020, but when he resumed his position in Fall 2021 Shawn found out that the office supervisor was on leave (and ultimately wouldn't return to the position) and he was the only returning student who had worked in the office before. Eventually the permanent position was posted, Shawn applied for it, and the next thing anyone knew history was being made. Shawn was named the new McCormick AV office manager and classroom technology supervisor while he was still working on his degree program at UMass Boston. He is now a part-time student and full-time employee, and greatly appreciates that he no longer has to pay tuition to finish his degree. Congratulations, Shawn, for giving us a very different UMass Boston student employee success story!

ALLISON GROSS Was Allison Gross a Star Performer? For those of us at IT Outcomes and anyone who has seen our 2021 and 2022 editions, that call is an easy one. While a student employee at UMass Boston part of her job was handling the graphic design for those two most recent editions, and the skill and artistry she displayed doing so proved that a graphic artist on staff or from the outside wouldn't be needed to fill that role. And her talent was on display in much more than IT Outcomes. Allison was asked to do her thing on pamphlets, fliers, and on many other occasions when IT wanted graphic art attached to its communications, both in print and online.

Why else would we call Allison a Star Performer? Well, not everyone gets hired at Harvard Business School (at another fine local university) so soon after completing her undergraduate degree, but the folks in Cambridge were clearly impressed with everything Allison did at UMass Boston, both academically and as a student employee. She began her job as a faculty support specialist this past July and is quick to credit her experience working at UMass Boston in helping her get hired at HBS.

We really missed Allison as we put together the IT Outcomes you're reading right now, but we couldn't be prouder of her for the work she did with us and for the fabulous career she's begun just a few miles away. Thanks, Allison!



From Out of the Shutdown

Undoubtedly, the pandemic of 2020 was the greatest public health challenge the nation and entire world has faced in the 21st century. It disrupted the normal course of American life in every way imaginable, and higher education was especially impacted. Universities were forced to adapt in ways they couldn't have foreseen or prepared for, and not all of them endured the crisis in the same way.

Yet throughout the entire ordeal UMass Boston not only managed to persevere, but it emerged from it in some ways stronger than when it began. Part of the reason may be due to the university not cancelling the Spring 2020 semester and the innovative technologies introduced by the IT department that allowed classes to continue despite the campus closure. Staff, students, and faculty had to work, learn, and teach from their homes, and they could because of IT's immediate response, which resulted in many educational enhancements still in use today.

Associate Chief Information Officer Apurva Mehta reflected back on the role IT played in those dark days, and noted how some of the technologies brought to bear with the pandemic are now fully integrated into the university. People are most familiar with the hybrid learning system that was quickly implemented and allowed students and faculty to access their classes remotely, with very little class time being lost. This system, now known as BeaconFlex, is in greater use now than it was during the pandemic and is the focus of another IT Outcomes article (p. 16). But Apurva described some other, lesser known IT innovations that were instrumental in helping UMass Boston get through the closure.

Apurva said that one significant issue IT had to address regarding the remote learning modality was academic integrity. Unfortunately, when exams were taken in classes being held remotely, there was no way for faculty to monitor students to ensure they weren't cheating by looking up answers on other websites. So, IT invested in a program called Honorlock. "Basically what it does is let the faculty member using a webcam to keep it looking at the students. But the real intelligence piece is that it would record every student session and would determine based upon some algorithm and recommend that we look at a certain student's recording," Apurva explained. Previously, the university had a system called Respondus, which blocked students from opening up any other tabs on their computers besides the one they were taking the exam on. But while this worked for in-person classes it didn't for remote learning because students could just use their phones or some other device. Respondus eventually improved its technology so that it used the same algorithm as Honorlock, so the university still uses it today.

However, academic integrity was just one problem IT needed to address in regard to remote learning, as it was far from the only problem faculty had teaching in the new modality. Understandably, faculty who for their entire careers were used to teaching in-person, had to have a different skill set for the hybrid environment but had no time to develop those skills. It was up to IT to provide on-the-job training as well as new technology to enhance the remote teaching experience. Learning Design Services helped with training with expanded office hours, when they would consult with faculty and answer their questions on operating equipment or hybrid teaching in general.

Technologically, one nifty addition that IT made to the remote classroom was a device known as a document camera. Faculty could write something for the class under it and it would appear to students attending remotely as if it were written on a whiteboard. The larger story from this is that IT didn't stop after adding hybrid learning technology and Zoom licenses just so remote classes could be held as soon as possible. They continually fine-tuned the experience with faculty training and technological upgrades and improved the quality of learning that could be had remotely. And these refinements have become integrated into the BeaconFlex system that is still in use today.

One article isn't sufficient to capture the bigger picture of how IT's response to the pandemic and resulting campus closure planted the seeds of the more dynamic UMass Boston of today, so continue reading to learn more.

The Story of MakerSpace

Any IT Outcomes retrospective must include the story of UMass Boston's MakerSpace. Its arrival in 2016 and how it became as essential as it still is today is yet another example of IT turning inspiration and ingenuity into reality. Even more impressively, it did not come from an IT administrative directive or with any funding initially. It was born as an idea of Associate Chief Information Officer Apurva Mehta, who was looking into ways "to advance higher education through the use of information technology," just as a small committee was seeking a space that could be dedicated to 3D printing and design. The rest, as they say, makes for a very interesting story.

Apurva and Assistant Vice Chancellor of Client Services John Mazzarella realized the first order of business was finding out what type of equipment they would need, and then a clearly serendipitous chain of events began to occur. They found out the Engineering department had a room it was using for makerspace-like research, but it was small and inadequate. Engineering professor Filip Cuckov told Apurva and John he would move some equipment into a larger room if his students could have access to it. That helped a lot. Then the Computer Science department received a grant to buy virtual reality equipment but had nowhere to put it. That helped too. So, very quickly, the equipment question was answered, but a larger question remained. Where oh where would this new MakerSpace facility be?

Enter one more stroke of good fortune. Helenmary Holtz, director of the Environmental School's Academic Lab, had some extra space in her building, and MakerSpace suddenly had a room of its own and all the equipment it needed to get started. Word quickly got around campus and people could not wait to get in. "I've not seen so much excitement among so many people in a while," Apurva recalled. "The time and energy devoted to building the lab was tremendous."

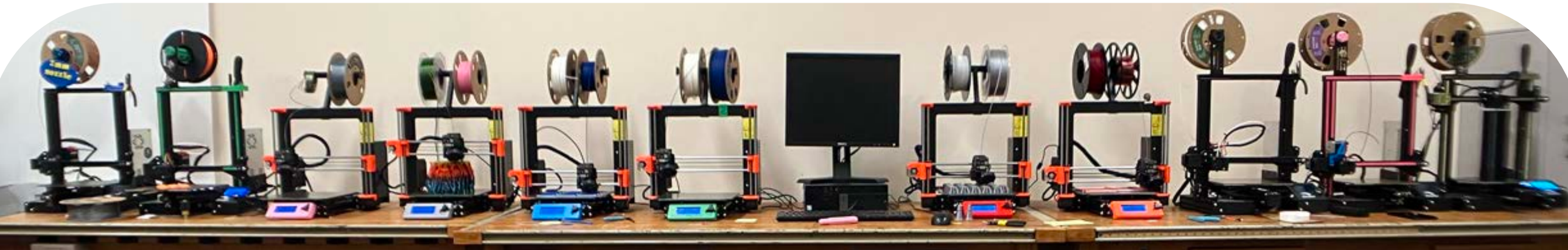
Sure enough, this excitement and energy led to the MakerSpace being constructed and opened in near record time. The MakerSpace was opened to everyone free of charge, and students, faculty, and staff quickly flocked to the sparkling new facility. There was only one problem. The building it was in was scheduled to be torn down.

John Mazzarella quickly realized he had a dilemma on his hands. He knew that the MakerSpace really needed to prove its value to UMass Boston for there to be a chance that administrators would assign it a new space in a different building once the one it was in met the wrecking ball. "Our goal was to become so central to student learning that we would gain a vote of confidence from the university and be given a permanent home," John said.

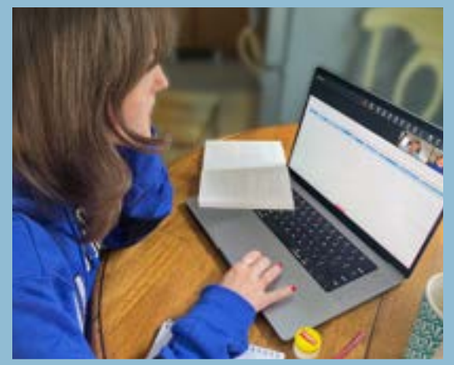
But really, that question was never in doubt. The MakerSpace was a huge success pretty much from day one, and that success was acknowledged by administrators and faculty alike when it was announced it would be given a new home in McCormick Hall following construction.

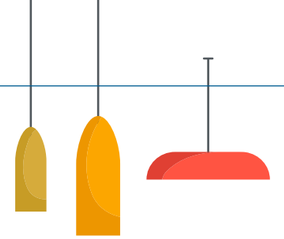
Today, the MakerSpace is a state-of-the-art self-service lab same as it has always been, open to students and faculty from every discipline and subject at the university. While the lab's focus is still on 3D design and printing (with six different types of 3D printers) and mostly utilized by students in STEM disciplines, other students have also taken advantage of its resources. "We have worked with biology students, doing a lot of 3D printing of cell parts, parts of the cell as teaching aids. We worked with anatomy and physiology where the students modeled, and 3D printed a bone for coursework. We even worked with a poetry class where they wrote poetry and then 3D printed the words in different shapes," John said, pointing out how the MakerSpace can be adapted to the full spectrum of higher education and enhance the learning experience in every academic discipline.

Born from an idea with a passion for innovation and student success, the MakerSpace has created lasting value and an enduring legacy at UMass Boston thanks to Apurva Mehta, John Mazzarella, and all those who have provided their support along the way.



How UMass Boston Got So REMOTE





Looking back on Spring 2020 over three years later, it is not easy to recall the severity of the crisis UMass Boston experienced as the pandemic first began taking its toll. But one thing we do know is that the university and the entire nation suddenly found itself in an unprecedented situation. Fortunately, it is not an overstatement to say that the response of Learning Design Services, Classroom AV/Tech, and the entire IT team was nothing short of heroic.

The first decision UMass Boston administrators made was that despite having to close the campus, the Spring 2020 semester would not be cancelled. Somehow, someway, the academic class schedule had to continue, and it was up to the Learning Design team to figure out how, and as quickly as possible.

So, what gave UMass Boston the ability to pivot with such incredible speed? Associate Chief Information Officer Apurva Mehta and Learning Design Services Director Paula Thorsland were both quick to say it was preplanning for unexpected closures of the university. For several years prior to 2020, Learning Design Services had been working on something it called an "instructional continuity plan," which meant a system that would allow class instruction to continue even if a snowstorm or some other natural disaster forced the campus to close for a day or more. Part of this plan included making the Blackboard learning management system modality available in every class, university wide. "We went from only giving Blackboard courses to faculty who requested them to giving courses to all faculty. If everybody had a Blackboard course from day one, they could put all of their materials online. What we developed was a face-to-face environment that was able to move online for any unforeseen reason, and when the pandemic raged on, we called this new modality "remote learning," Paula said.

While the university was at least partially prepared for a brief emergency shutdown, it's something else dealing with an unprecedented health crisis which is closing campus for the foreseeable future. So, in zoomed Zoom. "We just needed to get Zoom up and running and start making sure that people knew how to use Zoom," Paula said. That Zoom was already in use by staff at UMass Boston was helpful but making it available for all students and faculty wasn't that simple. Licenses for everyone to use Zoom had to be acquired, and a system of tech support had to be put in place so faculty could learn how to use it in a classroom setting.

At this point, the absolute disaster that cancelling the Spring 2020 semester would have been was averted, and the academic calendar and schedule was stabilized with amazingly little class time being missed. However, Learning Design Services knew that its work was not done. Attention soon shifted to the quality of the remote learning experience. There was the sense that remote classes could not be taught the way in-person classes were. Students could not be expected to learn as well or be as engaged in a three-hour class taught remotely as they would in the classroom, so Learning Design Services began researching and developing ways to make remote education as effective as traditional classroom education.

Finally, it was not long into 2021, and certainly by the 2021-22 school year, when there was the realization that remote learning was here to stay, even as the impact of the pandemic was at last dissipating. The fact is that remote (now often called "hybrid") learning was proving itself to be so useful and popular among students and faculty alike, its use has grown substantially from 2020 to today. Central to this development has been the adoption of the BeaconFlex hybrid learning system, which has been installed in classrooms across campus. Remote learning is now considered essential throughout higher education and Learning Design Services and Classroom AV/Tech has continued to make sure that UMass Boston has the highest quality, both technically and pedagogically, remote learning in the country.

Chromebook Loaner Program

Still Going Strong

In this fifth annual edition of IT Outcomes we are celebrating a program that is almost as old as IT Outcomes itself. It was Spring 2020, during the darkest days of the pandemic, when IT launched the Chromebook loaner program for UMass Boston students in need. The program was created as part of IT's pandemic response when the campus shut down unexpectedly and classes could only be held remotely. UMass Boston administrators quickly realized that many students lacked the technology to access their remote classes, and IT quickly sprang into action.

First, IT determined that providing students Chromebooks would be the most cost-effective way to meet the program's objectives. At the time Chromebooks cost about $185 and provided substantial value in meeting UMass Boston students' technology needs. A fundraising initiative was coordinated with UMass Boston's Institutional Advancement Office, and a goal was set to raise enough money to purchase 200 Chromebooks. Generous contributions came from faculty and staff, and the Beacon Student Aid Fund was formed which attracted donations from the public and student body itself. Finally, a donation of $8,500 from the City of Boston's GRAD Last Mile Fund put UMass Boston's Chromebook drive over the top of its goal of securing 200 laptops for students, and in fact, enabled a total acquisition of 223 Chromebooks. The campaign was a smashing success, and the program is still going strong three years later, even with the pandemic now becoming a distant memory.

Today, accessing a Chromebook at UMass Boston is easier than ever. Students can fill out an online form on the university website and can pick up their Chromebook at the Library the same day. Demand has grown over the years as well, and the program has responded by acquiring new Chromebooks with 15-inch screens, making them easier for students to use.

While the history of IT's Chromebook program is brief, it is still another shining example of how the IT response to the COVID crisis led to an innovation that has served UMass Boston long after the pandemic brought it into being.

Rescue Teams

Microsoft Teams Comes Through

One staff work tool that has been a part of UMass Boston IT about as long as IT Outcomes itself is Microsoft Teams. As a part of the Microsoft Office suite of productivity tools Microsoft Teams has been available for university staff to use for many years, but in 2020 when the pandemic shut down campus Microsoft Teams came into greater use, especially among IT staff. In fact, it could be said that Teams provided a crucial lifeline to the IT department. At a time when meeting in person on campus was not possible, Teams allowed IT staff to communicate and collaborate from home and work on group projects that otherwise may have had to be postponed or cancelled.

UMass Boston has had full access to Microsoft Office 365 tools for a long time, but it's fair to say that Teams was one feature available to it that was highly underutilized, if not outright ignored. It was only when IT staff recognized how inefficient and unorganized things got when a project requiring group participation came up that they realized they had a problem. Email worked poorly as a group communications tool when planning, and when hosting face-to-face meetings on campus was no longer an option, IT knew they had to find a better way. Little did they know a better way had been at their fingertips all along.

Assistant Vice Chancellor of Client Services John Mazzarella has become a strong advocate of Microsoft Teams. "You can message people almost like text messaging on your phone; you can do group texts," he said, just starting to describe the many features' Teams has that make work on group projects so much easier. "If you have a certain group, your department or a project that you're working on, or a class with students and a teacher, any group, any defined group, can form a team," he continued, indicating how usage of Teams has spread throughout the university and become a teaching tool as well.

Of course, the feature that could be called the star of Teams is its video conferencing capability. Group leaders can schedule meetings involving everyone in that group easily in Outlook, and the meeting can hold an unlimited number of team members. And while obviously this function is what Zoom was created for, Teams provides many other work tools that can be used outside of, and even during, video conferences that Zoom does not. Members can share files with one another and work together on them while meeting on video, and chat messages can be sent either to the entire group or specific members and work much like a text chain. Teams even allows groups to create different "channels" on their Teams site. For example, the IT staff "One IT" Teams site has a channel specific to general working issues, but it also has one where people can post pictures of their pets, and another in which healthy lifestyle activities are discussed.

Teams is an excellent example of a technology service that was necessitated and first adopted at UMass Boston because of the pandemic but was determined to be so helpful that its usage continued to grow long after the pandemic ended. As things turned out, even though university staff are now free to meet in person to work on group projects, the ease and convenience of video conferencing has rendered the in-person meeting almost obsolete. And as the era of video conferencing has been moving full speed ahead, almost every UMass Boston department wanted to jump on the Teams bandwagon. Enter Teams Training and Support, with Technology Training Specialist Katherine Ananis. In addition to the Teams webinars that individual staff members can register for, Katherine began to offer Teams training workshops to work groups throughout the university and scheduled at their chosen time. If there is one person most responsible for the almost university-wide use of Microsoft Teams at UMass Boston, Katherine Ananis is that person.

It is not hyperbole to say that Microsoft Teams has transformed collaboration and teamwork at UMass Boston. Not only are staff saying that working on group projects is much easier because of Teams, but the work groups themselves are much more productive. Now that's Teamswork in Action!

Our One IT Story

Since Raymond Lefebvre began his tenure at UMass Boston as Chief Information Officer, he has identified an annual theme or goal that IT will aspire to in the upcoming calendar year. In 2021, IT pursued "unITy" by bringing the UMass Boston community together again on campus after the disruptions caused by the 2020 pandemic. In 2022, the focus was on "simplicITy," as the department sought to streamline and simplify the ways in which the university uses IT, and so benefit from IT even more. In 2023, IT strengthened and unified how IT is used throughout the university by bringing all IT professionals at UMass Boston together under the banner of "One IT."

However, when "One IT" was initially introduced in an email on January 3, 2023 there was not a full understanding of what its objectives were. The message said that in 2023, IT will be "focused on aligning with and embracing our IT partners with the goal of becoming as effective and efficient as possible at delivering and supporting IT services at UMass Boston," but some people didn't know who the "partners" they were supposed to be "aligning with and embracing" were. What everyone in IT who did not already know soon learned is that there are dozens of UMass Boston employees across campus who support information technology but are not in the IT department. As Ray describes, "There are other IT professionals amongst us that don't work for IT." He estimated there are about forty+ of what he called "embedded IT personnel" employed in other departments and colleges throughout the university.

Yet while that explains who the IT partners are, it did not say why that was an issue that needed addressing. To answer that, Ray pointed to the effect it has had on IT's institutional culture. Over the years, probably so gradually and subtlety those involved were not even aware it was happening, the relationship between the IT department and IT workers outside the department was withering. "Adversarial" is not the right word to describe it, but neither is "cooperative." At best, an indifference developed. Neither side felt supported by the other nor thought their work was relevant to the other. There definitely was not the sense they were working together to make information technology as large an asset to UMass Boston as possible, and as that is one of CIO Lefebvre's chief objectives, he knew action needed to be taken.

Ray said that under some types of leadership the approach would be to get all those supporting IT outside the IT department to work in IT, but he thought in this case that would be counterproductive. He believes that these employees are "well positioned where they are. Where their boots are on the ground is right where they need to be, and they provide IT value." So instead, under the "One IT" banner, the "IT Partners" program was launched. Ray added, "I have met with forty plus UMass Boston IT professionals within their own business units to establish working relationships, and now I meet with them quarterly to understand who they are. I ask them what do they do in support of technology at UMass Boston? How can we help them? How can we be one?"

Other measures have been taken as part of this initiative. Not only are the "IT Partners" invited to the IT department's quarterly meetings they are also invited to the seasonal social events, such as the summer barbeque that takes place out on the lawn. Anything that Ray could think of to make the partners feel more connected and important was put in place, and the results have been extraordinary.

One measure that was recently taken may be more symbolic than substantive, but it has been very validating to the partners and really makes them feel that they are a part of IT. In September, the new IT organizational chart was released, and included in it for the first time, under the heading of IT Partners, are the names of the many IT professionals embedded in colleges/departments along with their job titles and departments they work in. As you can imagine, seeing your name and professional identity on an organizational flow chart under the heading "Information Technology Services" will do a lot to make you feel like you are a member of the team.

Thanks to "One IT" and the "IT Partners" program, IT has strengthened its presence and importance to UMass Boston making IT an even greater asset to the university in the future.

Campus Safety

Always Safe, Now Even Safer

A series of individual initiatives undertaken at UMass Boston over the past couple of years have collectively resulted in a significantly upgraded campus safety infrastructure and a much safer campus. The IT Project Management Office and Division of Network Services, in partnership with Campus Safety, have worked tirelessly during this time to implement police communications improvements and new emergency management systems to create a state-of-the-art public safety system rivalling that of any university in the nation.

This effort, at least in part, originated with a mandate that police communications at the university adhere to new state and federal regulations governing their functionality, starting with how emergency 911 calls were being transmitted and traced. To facilitate compliance with some of the new regulations, the Next Generation 911 (NG911) system was integrated into the campus phone system and activated with our campus police partners.

NG911 is a cloud-based software solution that provides 911 accurate location information (ALI) for our campus hardwired phones," Director of Network Services Jamie Soule explained, which basically means that the system can ascertain the physical location 911 calls originate from based on where they are located on the UMass Boston network. NG911 also allows for compliance with another new state regulation, that campus 911 calls had to transmit directly to the Boston Police Department while simultaneously going to UMass Boston Campus Police, and the ALI capability means the police know where to go or can call back the person in case of a hangup.

Part of the project included new electronics equipment and their installation in precise locations across campus needed for regulatory compliance. We needed to "deliver our police station what's called a P25 compliant radio system, which includes more powerful and state of the art digital radios; and a new digital high available antenna system on our campus," as Jamie described it. "In the back end there are antennas that these radios connect to that enhance radio coverage on campus. Right now, we have an antenna on the roof of the Healey library," he added as an example. But it was not as simple as sticking one antenna here and another over there. "We identified the West Parking Garage and University Hall as the new fault tolerant high availability antenna locations, so that if one antenna goes down, they hit a button and the other one comes online."

Jamie made a point of emphasizing how much collaboration was needed from entities and departments on and off campus to successfully bring this project to completion, with special kudos given to the UMass Boston IT Project Management Office and Director Terry Phalen. "There was so much involvement by various departments, we could not have done it without our Unified Procurement Services Team (UPST) and partners like Campus Safety, Student Affairs, and IT services. But first and foremost, the IT PMO office drove this bus with all of us sitting in the seats behind it." For his part, Terry was quick to pass on any credit to principal project manager Sheri Ryder. "Sheri's facilitation of the project was to make sure she's got the right people at the right place at the right time and executing tasks with follow up, just as with any project management responsibility," Phalen said, in affirming she performed all these duties perfectly.

The bottom line for the entire UMass Boston community is that thanks to the incredible effort and commitment of everyone involved in this venture, the UMass Boston campus has become a much safer place to work and pursue an education.

IT CARES

When you go to the IT page on the new UMass Boston website, you'll see a phrase under the banner that states "Addressing the IT Needs of the UMass Boston Community." But thanks to a program called IT CARES, IT staff are now addressing needs beyond IT and even beyond UMass Boston itself. Through IT CARES, IT employees are encouraged to volunteer their time to the charity or community group of their choice, and of course there has been an enthusiastic response.

Chief Information Officer Raymond Lefebvre first created IT CARES at Bridgewater State University but the COVID pandemic prevented its launch at UMass Boston until 2022. That's when it was introduced through a department e-mail and the creation of an IT CARES channel on the IT Teams site. The staff were invited to post news and pictures of their volunteer activities on the Teams channel, and a scroll through it reveals just how much IT CARES. Many IT staff members have given themselves and their time to causes most meaningful to them, and their communities have benefitted greatly as a result. Much more good can be expected to come to these and other communities in the future just because UMass Boston IT CARES.

U-ACCESS *For Students in Need*

Student Affairs has seen the various non-academic challenges our students encounter daily, which led to the establishment of the Office of Urban and Off-Campus Support Services, otherwise known as U-ACCESS. The U-ACCESS program envisions a campus where students are empowered to effectively engage in the fight against the systems of poverty, pursue economic security, and successfully achieve their academic goals at UMass Boston. And this is where IT comes in.

IT Managed Services Director Trieu Ly's involvement with U-ACCESS began with providing used computers to the U-ACCESS program for students in need. "We have a lot of very, very nice condition surplus laptops and iPads, so instead of throwing this surplus away we can donate it to U-ACCESS students, right?" Trieu asked rhetorically. He also solicited Chromebook donations from City of Boston agencies and used laptops from the Social Security Administration on behalf of our students. But that wasn't enough for Trieu. He also became aware that the needs of many UMass Boston students are far greater. "Some of our students are homeless and they only eat once a day," Trieu said, pointing out how dire conditions can be. So, Trieu became more involved in U-ACCESS, and described how it works and what it offers.

Basically, students interested in receiving U-ACCESS services are asked to fill out a CARE Management Referral form. Eligible students can then receive food pantry access, meal plan cards, SNAP application assistance, financial counseling, legal consultations, and of course access to computers thanks to Trieu Ly and the IT Managed Services team. U-ACCESS is partially funded by the university and public donations, while UMass Boston students staff the program and make contributions. To learn more about U-ACCESS and how you can help our students in need, go to https://www.umb.edu/campus-life/current-students/u-access.

A priority for IT Chief Information Officer Raymond Lefebvre since joining UMass Boston has always been the wellbeing of IT staff. In the spring of 2022 Lefebvre introduced a fitness, nutrition, and mindfulness platform called Wellbeats to all IT employees geared towards improving everyone's wellbeing. The platform contains numerous instructional and informational videos for IT staff to enhance their physical and mental wellbeing both at home and at work. However, this past spring, IT decided to take its Wellbeing program another step forward (pun intended) with the first annual Step into Spring challenge. At the IT Spring Social in March 2023, pedometers were handed out to everyone who wanted to participate in the fitness challenge and starting March 27th, 2023, the race (or more accurately, step counting) was underway.

Step Into Spring prizes for the top "steppers."

What perhaps made the two-week competition most fun for the participants was being able to follow their progress on a new Wellbeing channel that was added to the "One IT" Microsoft Teams site. At the end of each day our Spring Steppers would use the "Tracker" option in the Wellbeing channel to post their numbers, and the Tracker would add the day's totals into a leaderboard which was updated daily. Assistant Vice Chancellor of Client Services John Mazzarella moderated the leaderboard, and his daily reports upped the fun factor for everyone involved. He even kept a running total of everyone's steps each day and described the distance covered, such as after day one 64 miles had been travelled, the distance from UMass Boston to Barnstable on Cape Cod!

The enthusiasm for the Step into Spring event was obvious when viewing each day's leaderboard, as participants and even nonparticipants offered lively commentary and cheered themselves or others on. There was even some suspense as positions on the leaderboard shuffled around each day, especially as the April 9th finish drew near. In the end no one could catch the indomitable Rocky Haggard, though 2nd and 3rd place finishers Yueqing Chen and Eric Berry came close and pushed Rocky to go as hard as he could. Most importantly, 33 people participated in the two-week event, walking the equivalent of 4.7 million steps or 2,225 miles, which is the distance from Boston to Albuquerque, New Mexico!

Prizes were awarded to the top three finishers, but really every participant was rewarded by knowing that they had made themselves more physically fit and had fun doing so. And, in the end, the IT Wellbeing program advanced its goal of creating a happier and healthier IT team.

Life in UMass Boston IT

This past August 2023 UMass Boston IT held its annual Summer Social, an event that gives IT staff a break from their usual work schedules to enjoy some time outside in the summer sun. This year the event included a barbeque, lawn games, and cold beverages as it always has, but there was also special recognition of every IT staff member based on their years of service to the university. New staff members, plus those who have worked in IT for at least a year, five years, ten years, 20 years, and 30+ years were honored for all they've done to make IT perform to the exceptionally high standard it has throughout their careers. Collectively, the staff has worked over 1,550 years at UMass Boston!

Of course, anyone who has worked as long as many people have at UMass Boston deserves to be recognized, especially those who have served for more than two or three decades. But even among that group of long timers, there are two people that stand out the most for their length of service. Peter Tofuri Jr., Learning Management Systems Administrator, and Ruth Tremblay, Network Services Clerk, have each worked at UMass Boston for about 40 years!

Ruth Tremblay said she began in groundskeeping in 1983 (now known as the Facilities department) and worked there for five years before moving to the Materials department, where she worked in the university warehouse. She was there another 15 years until her boss retired and the department was dissolved. At the time she did not know what would happen next, but when a job opened up in IT, she decided to apply for it despite her lack of experience. And as it turned out her career took a big step forward, even if she describes it as simply and humbly as anyone could. "A job opened up, so I just got in it," she said without a hint of hubris. "So, for the last 20 years, I've just been in Telecom, strictly just telecommunications for IT."

When given the chance to look back on her four decades at UMass Boston, she said, "Well, 40 years ago I started in the grounds, but I have been in IT for 20 years, so I would rather think about my IT years instead of the grounds. It was fun and everything, but it was hard work!" She quickly added though, "Not that this (IT) is not hard work. It is a different kind of hard work. I was younger, so it was fine, but now I do not want to be pushing a mower around now to tell you the truth." She is very happy in the position she is in, even in a shift that starts at 4:30 AM!

The 40-year journey of Peter Tofuri also had its share of dramatic twists and turns. He was just 19 years old and a student at UMass Boston when he got a job in what was then the Dean's office for enrollment services. He laughed when recalling, "So I remember back in 1983, there were no computers in the office back then. The big technology was an electric typewriter. I think the first paycheck I received from UMass was for $67 in cash." He rotated through the different enrollment services offices for a while, working a few years each in admissions, financial aid, and the Registrar's office. But his first decade at UMass Boston was before the advent of the Internet, PCs, and even email. "Everything was like hard copies of your transcripts and just stacks of papers and files."

Eventually a job came up in the development office for a data manager, and here an amazing turn of events led him to IT for the first time. "My boss left, and she was a programmer, so they had no one to take over, so I started taking over and I did not even have any programming experience! I basically self-taught myself how to do it." He stayed in development until 2008, when he was offered a job in what is now known as Learning Design Services and where he still works today.

Retirement is on the radar for both Ruth and Peter, and neither one has any regrets that they have spent their entire professional life at UMass Boston. Of course, the same can be said about the entire IT staff, as the collective 1,550 years of experience would seem to suggest.

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IT SERVICES DIVISION—MISSION, VISION, VALUES

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SERVICES MISSION STATEMENT

Information Technology Services (ITS) provides a diverse population of students, faculty, and staff with reliable and secure technology, services, and solutions to continuously improve scholarship; teaching and learning; research; and business processes to enhance student success and support the mission of the university.

VISION STATEMENT

To be a trusted partner in providing secure, transformative, and innovative Information Technology services to advance teaching, learning, research, and administrative practices through dynamic and adaptive customer service.

STATEMENT OF VALUES

Information Technology is committed to the values of:

- **Caring** – We interact with students, faculty, and staff with respect, empathy, and professionalism.
- **Inclusion** – We embrace our differences to provide the best service to a diverse UMass Boston community.
- **Innovation** – We value creativity and critical thinking, focusing on developing efficient, effective technology services and solutions.
- **Collaboration** – We work together to implement new services and technologies to solve problems and improve the quality of life for all.
- **Dedication** – We are committed to the mission of the university and the people we serve, and we work hard to ensure successful outcomes.
- **Excellence** – We strive to provide high-quality service and support to our community of students, faculty, and staff.

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