UNITED ACADEMICS NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release: October 4, 2010

UVM faculty union survey reveals how growing enrollments affect academic quality: Forum on October 7 to discuss “worrisome” trends

Burlington, VT—Growing enrollments and class sizes at the University of Vermont are starting to take a toll on academic quality. That’s the finding of a new survey by United Academics, the union representing UVM faculty.

Of 168 faculty who responded to the survey, nearly half reported giving fewer or shorter writing assignments, and more than a third reported changing their exams and reduced class interaction and discussions because of increasing enrollments.

Faculty, students, and staff will gather for a discussion of the survey results and other indicators of stress on quality and access at UVM this Thursday, October 7, from 4 to 5:30 pm, in the John Dewey Lounge, Old Mill. Part of the national Day to Defend Public Education, “The Cost of Cuts at UVM” discussion will highlight the following trends:

- Enrollments have increased 42 percent since 2001, but the number of full-time faculty positions between 2001 and 2008 grew at less than half that rate. Since 2008, a dozen or more professor positions have been frozen or eliminated and credits offered by part-time faculty have been reduced by 35 percent.

- The result has been a noticeable increase in class sizes. In 2008, before layoffs and position eliminations, UVM had 12,092 spaces for students in large lecture-hall classes of 150 to 300 students. By last fall that number had jumped to 18,827.

- Revenues at UVM are up as the increased numbers of students are paying more in tuition, board, and fees: 86 percent more since 2001 for in-state students and 76 percent more for out-of-state students. Yet the share of the University’s base budget devoted to academics has been shrinking. The percentage of UVM’s base budget allocation for academics decreased from 51.4 percent to 47.8 percent between 2005 and 2010.

- In the same period, the share of the budget claimed by “institutional support” (the cost of administration beyond the University’s academic mission) and “debt service” (including the cost of financing major building projects such as the Davis Center) grew, the cost of debt more than doubling from a 2.8-percent share of the budget to a 7.4-percent share.
“These trends are worrisome,” said David Shiman, Education professor and United Academics president. “Faculty have been working extraordinarily hard to find creative ways to meet the needs of more students. But our survey also found that as faculty face increasing class sizes, they are--with great reluctance and regret--scaling back on what they ask students to do.”

Shiman points out that there is a silver lining that Thursday’s forum will also emphasize.

“We aren’t faced with a fiscal crisis,” he observed. “Instead, there is the danger of UVM losing sight of its core academic mission and our need to invest adequately in the education of our students.”

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