



The Graduate Advocate

What's Up with the Air Quality at UMass Boston?

by Kay Sweeney

During my office hours as a GEO Organizing Committee member, I've heard quite a bit of talk about air quality issues. Most students with classes in Wheatley are familiar with the unusually bad stench in the bathrooms. Every year, campus unions receive complaints from employees experiencing nausea and headaches in some buildings, most notably, the Science Building. Air quality seems to be an issue at UMass Boston.

The most obvious answer would be to open a window. However, none of the windows in the main buildings on campus open. I decided to investigate this issue of poor air quality and inoperable windows and quickly found myself buried in a complicated history of

how UMass Boston was built on a landfill, our very foundation was constructed with faulty concrete due to state corruption, and how budget cuts have led to a lack of funding for the necessary building maintenance to keep us safe.

Air quality in UMass Boston buildings has been a serious health hazard in the past. In early 1994, the entire campus was shut down for about a week when over 60 students and staff reported sore throats, burning lips, and other breathing problems. Some were hospitalized.¹ Health and safety consultants came in to analyze the air quality. Due to UMass Boston's history, many suspected that methane gas was the culprit.¹ Columbia Point, the now 350-acre peninsula on which UMass

Boston's Harbor Campus sits, is largely man-made; it started as a tiny 14-acre peninsula used by settlers to pump raw sewage into the ocean, and from the 1920s–1960s, the land was used as Boston's garbage dump.² Landfill operations expanded the peninsula to 25 times its original size.² Landfills tend to release dangerous methane gas, so buildings built atop former garbage dumps often require expensive methane-venting systems underneath to dispel gas away from the building.¹ If this system fails, methane gas can seep up into buildings, reducing oxygen levels and affecting human health. With a foundation built using faulty concrete, which led to the closure of the original underground parking garages,³ one wonders how long UMass Boston's venting systems will last.

Despite the fact that methane gas may be a problem for UMass in the future, this was not the culprit behind the 1994 indoor air quality crisis. Instead, a variety of other air quality issues occurred because the

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“Cuts in the maintenance budget during the late 1980s and early 1990s meant that UMass Boston took... steps to save money that led to air quality problems...”

The Best Kind of Loan: The Interlibrary Loan

by Mitch Manning

If you're new to university life, the InterLibrary Loan system (ILL) is one of the best services that student tuition makes available to you. With a database bigger than your imagination, the InterLibrary Loan system is an expansive network of public and university libraries throughout the country and the U.K. whose sole goal is to help track down books, films, and journals that students and faculty need for coursework and research.

The ILL can fill requests for almost any article, book, film, or game. In the past few months the ILL has fulfilled my requests for 10 CD box sets, out-of-print books of poems, and tracked down a book I needed for my thesis research all the way to Halifax, Canada. The ILL is far reaching and its staff are eager and excited to help you find what you need. Natalie Coady, InterLibrary Loan borrowing coordinator for the Healey Library says, "For items you can't find on your own, we can help you out." The ILL staff is proud to be able to find "everything for everybody" no matter how obscure, how out-of-date, or how difficult to find.

The ILL is found at the library entrance page (umb.edu/library). Enter a search in the WorldCat window, "the World's Largest Library Catalog," and it will show you all the relevant items for your search and whether those books or materials are available in the Healey Library, the Boston Library Consortium, (the connected university and public libraries in the Boston area), or outside the local lending area in InterLibrary Loan territory. Books are usually rented for a 7–21 day period but

can often be renewed online through the Healey Library website. Same applies for less academic materials, like movies or graphic novels, which are also available at your request.

The Healey Library already offers a substantial amount of research resources and databases for students, faculty, and researchers to use, such as *JSTOR*, *Lexis Nexis*, and the *Naxos Music Library*. The robust holdings within the Healey Library coupled with the digital database holdings make the library a one-stop for your research needs. But when your research calls for something outside of the library, the ILL is there to assist you.

Coady reiterates a common refrain on college campuses: "a lot of students can't afford books or access to articles." And though the ILL can't always get the newest editions of books, as libraries, like Healey, often have those editions on hold for their patrons, the ILL at UMB "can almost always get the older editions. So that's your next step. Try to get it through InterLibrary Loan." Coady especially recommends that students seek out course syllabi before the semester starts and if books are too expensive to buy, rent them through the ILL.

All libraries are connected through the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), "a nonprofit, membership, computer library service and research organization dedicated to the public purposes of furthering access to the world's information and reducing information costs" and the parent company of the WorldCat system. WorldCat currently has two billion

holdings; yes, that's a 'b.'

As students at UMass Boston, we are privileged to have such incredible access to information through the Boston Consortium and ILL afforded to us by our tuition. And though learning starts in the classroom, there are many other resources available to UMass Boston students through the vast networks of library holdings. Next time you find yourself in desperate need of a book for class, log-in to the WorldCat / ILL system on the Healey Library website using your last name and barcode. As Coady reminds us, "We don't know everything, but we know where to find everything." Let the ILL staff help you track down any book for your class or research needs, at no additional cost to you.

Union News

by Mitch Manning

Thousands stood in solidarity across all University of California campuses on November 20th for a strike coordinated by AFSCME Local 3299, UC's largest union, which represents more than 22,000 Service and Patient Care Technical Workers. According to their press release, "The Strike stems from a coordinated campaign of illegal intimidation, coercion, and threats against UC Patient Care and Service Workers who participated in a two day walkout back in May over unsafe staffing levels at taxpayer supported UC hospitals." The strike had the support of UAW 2865, which represents 13,000 student-workers across the UC system. Read more at <http://www.afscme3299.org/>. (continued on page 6)

What's Up with the Air Quality at UMass Boston?

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maintenance budget was cut after state legislature cut funding to higher education in the 1980s.¹

Seven out of the eleven current UMass Boston buildings were built as part of the original campus in 1974,⁴ and in the 1970s, there was a popular architectural trend of having climate-controlled sealed buildings with windows that don't open. The idea was that completely sealed buildings would save energy by requiring less heat and air conditioning, instead of relying on an HVAC (heating, ventilation and air conditioning) system to intake fresh air, bring it to the correct temperature, and circulate it around the building.⁵ This is why windows at UMass don't open. To function properly, HVAC systems require a certain level of maintenance, such as cleaning and changing air filters.⁵

The UMass indoor air quality crisis is featured in a book about sick building syndrome¹ and the author wrote that UMass had closed the vents in buildings. I interviewed a long-time UMass Boston staff member to get his take on the situation, and he described that cuts in the maintenance budget during the late 1980s and early 1990s meant that UMass Boston took a variety of steps to save money that led to the 1994 air quality problems uncovered by inspectors: the fans in underground parking garages were turned off, which lead to auto exhaust building up in the garages and infiltrating buildings above; air filters weren't cleaned and replaced properly, which lead to a lack of fresh air in the buildings; and water penetrated some buildings, which caused mold to build up in the poorly filtered air. In 1994, steps

were taken to increase funding and staff for maintenance to resolve the crisis, but have these gains been maintained 20 years later? Is maintenance appropriately funded today or will history repeat itself? I contacted the UMass Boston Environmental Health and Safety Office for more info, but am still awaiting a response. Several clues indicate that students and staff need to be more aware of what's going on with air quality on campus.

The Science Building is slated for demolition after the new Integrated Science Complex is completed.⁴ One reason given for demolishing the old is that it's cheaper to build a new building than to actually renovate the Science Center.⁴ This fact in itself is bizarre. Given that UMass Boston is over-enrolled and needs more building space,⁴ wouldn't you keep both? UMass Boston's buildings are only about five decades old; compare this to Harvard's campus where buildings from the 1800s are still in use. Faulty concrete due to past corruption and salt-water erosion may play a role in why renovation would be so expensive, but is poor air quality due to decades of underfunded maintenance an issue as well?

The 1980s budget cuts that led to the 1994 air quality crisis pale in comparison to today's budget cuts. State funding for UMass Boston is lower than ever,⁶ causing belt tightening in every department, which may include maintenance. State cuts to public higher education not only financially burden students through rising tuition, but also endanger student health by pushing the university

to cut essential maintenance. Hopefully this knowledge will spur a more urgent student movement to fight for a society that prioritizes public higher education and safer buildings.

Resources for More Info:

¹May, J. C. (2006). *My office is killing me! The sick building survival guide*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

²Sieniewicz, C. K. (2009, December). *Campus Master Plan for UMass Boston*. Retrieved from <http://cdn.umb.edu/images/university/masterplan/UMass%20Boston%20Master%20Plan%20Dec%202009.pdf>

³Associated Press. (2006, July 21). *UMass-Boston shuts down garage that's been symbol of corruption*. Retrieved from http://www.boston.com/news/education/higher/articles/2006/07/21/umass_boston_shuts_down_garage_thats_been_symbol_of_corruption/?rss_id=Boston.com+%2F+News

⁴University of Massachusetts (2011, September). *Fiscal year 2012 to 2016: Five year capital plan update*. Retrieved from <http://media.umassp.edu/massedu/budgetoffice/University%20of%20Massachusetts%20FY12-16%20Approved%20Capital%20Plan.pdf>

⁵Environmental Protection Agency (2012). *Heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning (HVAC) systems*. Retrieved from <http://www.epa.gov/iaq/schooldesign/hvac.html#Air%20Filtration>

⁶Public Higher Education Network of Massachusetts (2013, July 1). *Largest Cut to Public Higher Education in a Decade*. Retrieved from <http://phenomonline.org/>

UMass Amherst Graduate Employees Protest Late Pay

by Mitch Manning

When September 21st rolled around this year, the third workweek of the Fall semester for graduate employees at UMass Amherst, many graduate workers still hadn't received pay for a single day of work. According to UMass Amherst Graduate Employee Organization (GEO) organizer and English PhD student Anna Waltman, "Every September since 2006, paperwork to get Graduate Assistants on payroll has been delayed." This bureaucratic logjam causes extreme difficulty for graduate employees and leaves many Graduate Assistants (GAs) out in the cold.

Many GAs who weren't paid on time this fall couldn't afford rent or groceries and were forced

delays occurring again this fall, members of the UMass Amherst GEO, which represents Graduate Assistants on campus, realized that enough was enough. The UMA GEO filed their fourth grievance, asking the university for concrete solutions to the problem of graduate employee late pay, not just remedies for non-payment.

But with such little movement from the university administration on the issue, the GEO protested on the steps of the Student Union. The GEO, supporting members, and undergraduate allies gathered "to demand timely pay for ALL graduate student-workers at UMass Amherst," according to the group's Facebook page, which also stated that "GEO-UAW student leadership and staff delivered a

pay weekly or bi-weekly each such employee the wages earned by him to within six days of the termination of the pay period during which the wages were earned if employed for five or six days in a calendar week."

Not paying employees within 21 days is illegal in the state of Massachusetts and the UMA GEO is demanding UMass Amherst find a solution to this problem and pay its graduate workers in a timely manner from this point forward.

Graduate employees are less prominent as a workforce in universities, but are important contributors to their institutions. Assistantships, earned by students with excellent academic records, give students an opportunity to gain meaningful research and employment experience in their relevant field and help remit the costs of their education.

Graduate students live on small stipends that they earn working for the university as Teaching Assistants, Research Assistants, or Administrative Assistants, roles that are central to the productivity and research prestige of their universities. Graduate Assistants provide tremendous energy and commitment to their departments and deserve to be compensated timely and fairly for their work.

As GEO-UMA's slogan reads, "The University Works Because We Do."

You can sign UMass Amherst GEO's late pay petition at <http://www.change.org/petitions/umass-amherst-pay-all-workers-on-time>.

"Graduate Assistants provide tremendous energy and commitment to their departments and deserve to be compensated timely and fairly..."

to take emergency loans from the Graduate Assistantship Office on campus. So many students requested emergency loans that the Graduate Assistantship Office budget was exhausted by October. The emergency loan system was created after a previous grievance was filed over late pay. Currently, the university will lend 70% pay advances to graduate employees whose pay has been delayed

After filing three grievances since 2006 to address and resolve the issue of timely pay for graduate employees and witnessing the same

formal grievance and over two hundred signatures to Dean McCarthy and Associate Dean Chinman of the graduate school." Waltman emphasized that the GEO has "a rock solid contract and the university is afraid of us." And she and her deservedly angry fellow graduate employees have the law on their side too, both in terms of their union contract and Massachusetts State Law.

According to Massachusetts General Law Chapter 149, Section 148, "Every person having employees in his service shall

Paychecks Marked Tardy for Graduate Employees

by Lewis Feuer

Late pay tops a list of bureaucratic impediments that graduate employees face at UMass Boston. This semester many Graduate Assistants (GAs) did not receive paychecks on time, and also did not receive the correct pay for their assistantship. While the exact answer as to why delays and discrepancies occurred remains tangled in a complex—seemingly broken—administrative system, this semester’s processing back-ups reached a critical mass resulting in ire not only from GAs, but also from their Graduate Program Directors (GPDs).

Cash strapped from moving to the Boston area, or the transition between a summer job and school, grad students always tough-out a lean two weeks at the start of the Fall semester. But, due to late pay this fall many GAs were forced to take out emergency loans to cover basic costs, such as food and rent, while other GAs were left waiting for back pay nearly a month after the start of school.

In addition to the tenuous guarantee of timely pay, graduate employees struggle routinely to understand the timeline for the application of fee waivers and the health insurance subsidy to the University Bill. This traditionally opaque process adds undue stress to graduate employees, as they are left to estimate how much they owe the university at the start of a semester. Though late pay, confusion around fee waivers, and discrepancies in assistantship assignments are historically common problems, this semester’s high number of cases has prompted a review of the status quo by the

Graduate Employee Organization (GEO), the Office of Grad Studies, and Graduate Program Directors.

In a recent survey of GEO members conducted by the GEO’s Organizing Committee, nearly half of respondents claim to have had issues with being paid on time, and almost 40% say that they have had an issue with their health insurance subsidy. For GAs, rectifying discrepancies in pay and benefits can be a tiresome process. In many

not only on the financial security of graduate employees, but also taxing on the time that GAs have to perform their own course work and the responsibilities of their assistantship.

An effort to confront and address these issues has begun. On Monday November 25th representatives from Grad Studies, the Bursar’s Office, the Office of Human Resources, the Financial Aid Office, the GEO,

“In a recent survey of GEO members... by the GEO’s Organizing Committee, nearly half of respondents claim to have had issues with being paid on time...”

instances that GAs are tasked with chasing down Grad Studies staff via email and in person, it is not uncommon for GAs to then be sent to the Bursar’s Office to confirm changes to their account and, many times, then return to Grad Studies when their pay issue remains unresolved after many weeks time.

One respondent to the GEO survey described learning about these “routine delays in processing payment” and how these delays resulted in “financial challenges,” such as “not being able to pay bills on time,” because their employment paperwork had not been processed. Another respondent commented that “health insurance is generally a problem at the beginning of the year. The correct amount does not get paid on time and we often have to go around asking how this will be taken care of.” This run-around experienced by GAs is taxing

as well as numerous Graduate Program Directors, met to discuss strategies for improving the hiring and processing of graduate assistantships. While the meeting seemed primarily to facilitate the airing of grievances, many GPDs along with the GEO made the call for transparency and consistency in the management of graduate assistantships. It was also voiced from Grad Studies that timely pay is their primary goal.

Graduate employees are essential to university operations. They work in many capacities around campus, and support the activities, research, and scholarship of their various departments. Like any employee they have a legal right to a timely paycheck. Hopefully this right will be upheld in future semesters, because it is clear that patience for the current system is running thin.

Op Ed: The “Useless” Degree

by Alissa Nicole Butler

“So...what are you going to do with that... teach?” With a bachelor’s degree in History and a nearly finished master’s degree in American Studies, I commonly hear this awkward question. I understand why it is being asked of me, but it annoys me every time. I do not blame the questioner; truthfully I’m usually relieved when I don’t have to explain what American Studies is. But it irks me all the same because it operates under a prejudice that is becoming saturated in the ever-growing “age of technology”—that degrees in the humanities and arts are useless.

A Google search for “useless degree” yields a plethora of articles published by respected news outlets such as *The Huffington Post* and *Forbes* magazine, and at the top of each list are degrees relating to the humanities and the arts. These lists are based on a range of criteria focusing mostly on salary and employment rates, and they all share the same fatal assumption: that you want to/will end up working in the exact field your degree is in, and God help you if you do.

I don’t want to speak for all humanities and arts majors, but most of us are aware of the choice we make in a degree program. I didn’t choose my degrees aiming for fame, glory, and fortune (or job security for that matter). Actually, my professors in both undergraduate and graduate school have warned me regularly against hoping for any of these things. But I did choose my degrees because I have a driving interest and intense passion for what I do, and I’m

willing to guess my humanities and arts colleagues feel the same way.

A second Google search for “jobs that require any four year degree” yields more hopeful results. There are hundreds of lucrative jobs and careers that only require the achievement of a bachelor’s degree—the subject is your choice. In a failing job market with ever increasing competition, a bachelor’s degree in any field can mean the difference between getting hired and unemployment. So if you’re already going to spend four (more likely five or six) years studying one subject, why not pick something you love?

Also, the humanities and arts have a lot to offer, especially to students in different fields. Humanities and arts classes teach valuable skills, such as communication, clear and organized writing, and critical thinking, that are valued by employers, while simultaneously exposing the student to new and different experiences. By taking these classes, students become more cultured and well-rounded citizens, again a valuable trait on the job market. Am I arguing that colleges should flood the market with as many humanities and art students as possible? No. But I am arguing for a reassessment of our views towards these fields, as well as college degrees in general. Why do we go to college? What is the goal of a collegiate institution? Is it solely to produce vocational skills or is it for something more? I don’t have the answers; rather I want to prompt insightful, critical thought and fight against the prejudicial assumptions of “useless.”

So... Am I going to teach? Well, admittedly yes, but that’s because it’s my passion and my choice; not because I have a “useless degree.”

Union News

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Adjunct Action, SEIU’s Adjunct Faculty organizing campaign, is gaining big ground in Boston after victories in Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles. According to their website, “Tufts University’s part-time faculty voted to join the service employees’ union in September, and an October vote at Bentley University failed by two votes. Campaigns are underway at Northeastern and Lesley.” The campaign was recently highlighted by the *New York Times*. Visit <http://adjunctaction.org/> for more info.

After eight years of back and forth, the Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC) at NYU has reached, according to parent organization UAW Local 2110, an “unprecedented agreement with New York University in which the administration will remain neutral and respect the results of an election for more than 1,200 GAs, TAs and RAs to vote on union representation.” The election is scheduled for December 10 and 11. Congratulations to GSOC for their tireless commitment to the rights, wages, and benefits for graduate employees at one of the most expensive private universities in the country! Their struggle and victory has received much media coverage. Check it out at <http://www.makingabetternyu.org/gsocuaw/>.



Twitter:@PWeiskel08

Left:

Fast food workers in Boston and across the country have continued their campaign for increased wages. Boston residents drew attention to the difficulty of living on the \$7.25/hr federal minimum wage on December 5th by demonstrating along with workers in about one hundred US cities. (Photo credit: Paul Weiskel)

Below:

The threat of increased parking fees at UMass Boston continues. The issue will likely be part of contract negotiations for the Graduate Employee Organization (GEO) as well as the Faculty and Staff Union (FSU) and Professional Staff Union (PSU). Contact the GEO at geo@umb.edu for more information or to get involved in advocating for your right to affordable parking fees.



Recap: The Radical Thoughts Film Series

by Lewis Feuer

This semester's Radical Thoughts Film Series presented by the GEO came to a close with a screening of Avi Lewis and Naomi Klein's *The Take*, an inspiring documentary that chronicles the experience of former employees of the Forja auto plant as they work to take back the dormant factory in the wake of Argentina's 2001 economic collapse. Also shown this semester as part of the Radical Thoughts Film Series were the documentaries *Finally Got the News* by Stewart Bird, Peter Gessner, René Lichtman, and John Louis Jr., and *Default: The Student Loan Documentary* by Aurora Meneghello and Serge Bakalian.

The Radical Thoughts Film series was conceived by the GEO as a way to build community

and create a larger discussion of radical thoughts and ideas among undergrads, grad-students, faculty, and staff at UMass Boston. At each monthly screening, in addition to the compelling film and post film discussion, the GEO provided free pizza and refreshments to fuel the community building efforts.

After the September screening of the sobering and provocative documentary *Default*, discussion focused on the dangers of privatized student loans, and ways to call attention to the student loan burden that many UMB students face. Highlighting the conversation were perspectives from undergrads, international students, graduate students, and a representative from the Financial Aid Office.

There was also a healthy

turnout for October's screening of *Finally Got the News*, a powerful documentary revealing the activities of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers as they work to establish a black labor organization independent of the UAW in 1970s Detroit auto factories. Both the screening of *Finally Got the News* and last month's *The Take* led to engaged discussions about the power of organized labor, and the ways collective action, and its various models, can successfully challenge unjust economic and political practices.

The spring program for the Radical Thoughts Film Series can be found at www.geoumb.org.

A Publication for Us!

This first issue of *The Graduate Advocate* marks the beginning of a media space for issues that affect graduate students and graduate student employees at the University of Massachusetts Boston. We hope this publication will promote solidarity on our local campus community as well as among our peer universities. As a compilation of graduate student, union member, and ally voices, *The Graduate Advocate* will serve as a place for you to share campus news, bring attention to higher education and graduate student employment issues, build a strong community of graduate employees and allies on campus, and provoke thoughtful discussion. The contents of this biannual publication will include articles and photos about timely pay and parking challenges at UMass, the graduate student experience, student debt, adjunct faculty unionization, recent campus events, and any other issues that affect our community.

If you or someone you know would like to pitch an article, write an editorial, or submit a photo or interview for a future issue of *The Graduate Advocate*, please email a .doc file to geo@umb.edu that describes your idea to our editorial team in 30-50 words. We look forward to reading your submissions and sharing your thoughts with our community.

GEO/UAW1596 Staff List

Kathy Melish, President
Mitch Manning
Alissa Butler
Lewis Feuer
Kay Sweeney
Alyssa Mazzarella
Joy Winkler

Contact or Visit Us

geo@umb.edu
617.287.3109
geoumb.org

GEO/UAW1596
UMass Boston
100 Morrissey Blvd.
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Boston, MA 02125

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