

Building an Activist Union: The Massachusetts Society of Professors

by Max Page and Dan Clawson

It began with a crisis, of course. In 2002, during yet another budget crisis produced in large measure by the state's tax-cutting mania, Massachusetts proposed a massive cut in the university's budget. Through an early retirement incentive, the state wanted to reduce the faculty by 10 percent. No one was prepared to fight back.

Despite UMass Amherst's long history of activism, and the existence of a faculty senate and a faculty union, there was no real leadership when the budget crisis began. The senate had long been a dormant group, heavy on Roberts' Rules of Order and light on action. Our faculty union, the Massachusetts Society of Professors (MSP), an affiliate of the Massachusetts Teachers Association and the National Education Association, had become focused almost exclusively on handling grievances, securing decent pay increases, and heading off offensive proposals by the administration in Amherst and Boston.

In the wake of the budget cut proposal, a small group of faculty—most from Labor Studies and Sociology, with long activist resumes—got together with student leaders and began to strategize a campus-wide response. The campaign, which called itself Save UMass, brought together faculty, students, and staff.

Initially, Save UMass worked outside official union channels, and the group raised money from individual faculty and students to pay expenses. At one point, a core group of faculty went to the union to seek support—public and financial—for the fight against the cuts and the planned shrinking of the faculty by early retirement incentives. We met with the 20-member board of the MSP, but the union leadership was unsure about how to deal with the demands of this renegade

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group and didn't believe anything could be done to stop the cuts. We left the meeting with a sense that the union leaders were relieved that someone else was taking on this fight, which we believed was their job to lead.

So we were largely on our own (though in time, the campus unions did come around to cooperate with the campaign and pick up some of the bills). We conducted an extensive letter-writing campaign. About 40 percent of the instructors on campus took at least half-an-hour of class time to talk about the university's budget and the legislature's threatened cuts, and to offer students the opportunity, if they chose, to write individual letters to their legislators urging them not to cut

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the university's budget. Many faculty also sent letters to students' parents. The effort generated 10,000 individual hand-written letters. Our Amherst group also helped spread the effort to other University of Massachusetts campuses, as well as state and community colleges, and the groups held a large rally at the Statehouse. Nonetheless, despite an impressive campaign, the university's budget was still cut substantially, though not as much as had been feared.

That was 2002. Within two years, the faculty members who showed up at the MSP board meeting that morning to ask for support became the leaders of the union. Over the past seven years, the MSP has been almost completely transformed. The Save UMass campaign did three things that began the transformation of the faculty union. First, it brought a new cadre of activist (young and old) faculty into the union. Second, it reoriented the union to become more responsive to the wishes and needs of all faculty, including those who cared deeply about issues frequently ignored, such as the needs of women and parents and non-tenure-system faculty. Finally, it inspired the union to take on a new mission, that of a major statewide advocate for public higher education.

Each of these three elements was essential to the union's transformation. The changes have been mutually reinforcing: the union has attracted more faculty to its board and committees and events as it became more responsive to its members. The union was able to become a major statewide advocate for public higher education because it had the backing of its 1,400 members.

This article, then, is a reflection piece, written from a rest stop along the long road of the union toward our goals. It is not comprehensive, but looks at several key efforts and campaigns in order to describe the ways the MSP has been transformed, in hopes that our experiences will help other unions thinking about ways

to be more effective. We are a long way from having the strength we want and need to have, but if every union could make the same transformation we'd be on the way to shaping the national agenda, building a higher education system as if students and faculty mattered.

As part of the group of a new set of MSP leaders, we confronted the age-old problem of leadership versus democracy. As we worked to transform the union, it was also clear that Margaret Mead's well-worn quote applied: "Never believe that a few caring people can't change the world. For, indeed, that's all who ever have." This is not the story of a single charismatic leader, but rather a core of activists that

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has steadily grown and changed. We were part of that group and became consecutive presidents of the union. But absolutely essential were activists who sat on the board, on the negotiating team, and took on key initiatives. One of the things that core group activists shared was respect from the rest of the campus—by activists and rank-and-file members alike—for their teaching and research. It is hard to underestimate the importance of this respect in the growing influence of the MSP. Each of us took the presidency of the union knowing that we would have backing—in terms of ideas, passion and, not least of all, commitment of time—from five to 10 key people. Neither of us would have taken on the task had we not believed we would have this core group along with us.

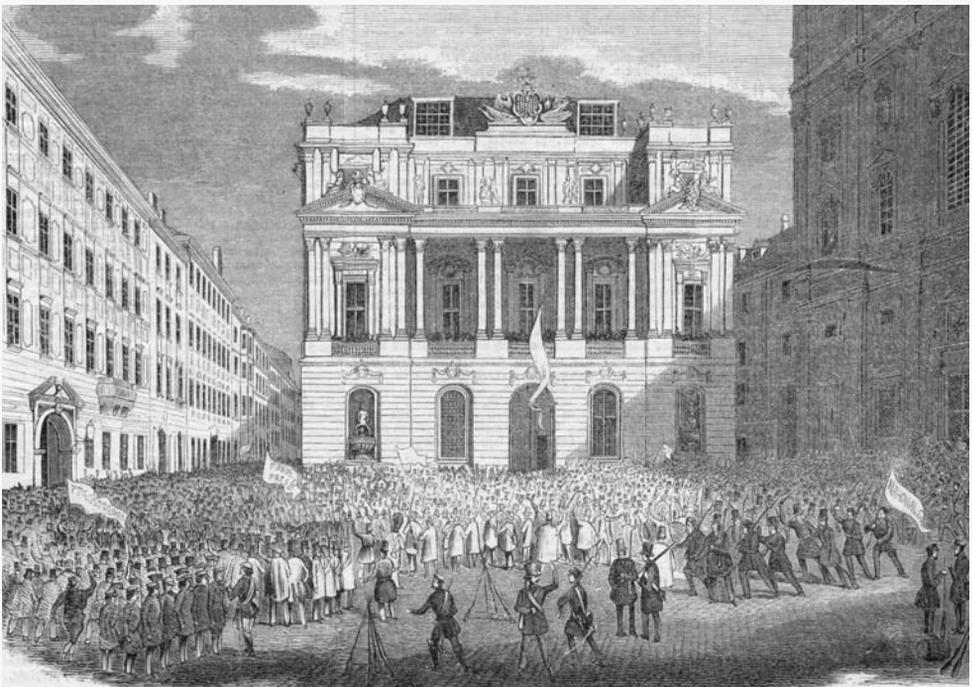
Through the work of this core group and the union's successes over the past seven years, we have built a reservoir of good will with rank-and-file faculty members. Nearly 90 percent of the faculty and librarians are members of the union, an increase of 10 percent since 2002. The rest pay agency fees, and most of those people are positive about the union. It's not clear what standard should be used to assess active involvement: of our 1,400 members perhaps half have participated in some union activity in the course of the last three years, and approximately 200 can be counted on regularly (and without one-to-one outreach) to respond to petition requests.

In 2003, when Dan Clawson took over as co-president of the union with Jenny Spencer, they were handed a peculiarly Massachusetts problem: a good three-year contract had been negotiated and signed, calling for 5 percent annual pay increases, but the legislature balked at paying for it. Although our contracts are with the quasi-independent board of trustees, the board has no authority to compel either the governor or the legislature to fund the contracts. As the contract

entered its third year, with no one having received any pay increase for the previous two years, most people believed the contract would never be funded. The highly respected state senator representing the campus told a meeting of the Faculty Senate that the contract was dead; despite his best efforts, state legislators showed no willingness to fund the contract.

Instead of using MSP board meetings to grumble at the way the state treated us, we mounted a major mobilization of our own members and pressured our parent union, the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) to make funding the contracts its top priority. Our argument was that if the state could negotiate a contract, but never pay the money owed, then the union became meaningless; and if the state did it, soon every city and town could do the same.

As part of the mobilization on campus, we asked for permission to have union activists attend department meetings to explain the situation and our strategy. We went to where our members were, rather than asking them to attend our meetings. The response was positive. People in departments that had reputations as hostile to the union became militant and talked about strikes; more faculty than ever before took a day off to go to Boston to make our case to the legislature. It's worth noting that many of those who became involved had a different orientation from the Save UMass people. Save UMass involved activists and organizers with a vision of a better university; the contract campaign tended to involve more pragmatic calculations: "a trip to Boston might get me a 15 percent pay increase." There were more people willing to take some action, but few people willing to become leaders and organizers.



After about three months, the campaign won and the legislature raised our pay by 15 percent. Substantial numbers of faculty members continued the fight for the next two years and finally won the retroactive pay that faculty were owed. This victory was crucial, not so much for activists, but for the rank-and-file who saw that the union could mobilize the support of the state-wide MTA as well as legislators to achieve what everyone had written off as impossible. Victory in a more traditional contract funding gave the union the credibility and appreciation among members that allowed us to move the union toward more innovative and far-reaching campaigns.

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By the time the 2002–05 contract was fully funded, we were negotiating a successor agreement. The most important victory that came out of those contract negotiations is not printed in the final contract. What we proposed at the table—an increase in the tenure-system faculty ranks by 50 positions per year—never made it to paper. But what happened outside of bargaining led to the chancellor embracing this as policy for the campus and resulted in the first sustained increase in the number of tenure-track faculty in a generation.

The MSP, with the carefully cultivated support and involvement of the students, launched a campaign to increase the number of tenure-system faculty on campus. We raised the issue at the bargaining table, but we also called a public hearing. More than a dozen students and faculty testified to a hearing board, and public comments were invited. The hearing board issued a 50-page report, including both an overview of facts and statistics and personal accounts of the meanings and consequences of the faculty shortage². The report showed the campus had almost 250 fewer tenure-system faculty than had been on campus 15 years earlier, even though the number of students had increased slightly. MSP took the report to the board of trustees and challenged them to address the problem.

Faculty and students hand-delivered the report to more than three-quarters of the state's legislators, and then conducted filmed interviews to produce an eight-minute DVD, sponsored by MSP and the student government association. We assembled teams of faculty, students, and staff who took laptops to the Statehouse, asking legislators to give us eight minutes so that we could present a DVD with testimony from 21 campus members. This campaign gained enough traction that an early version of the legislature's budget specified that increased funds had to go to address the faculty shortage. Along the way the chancellor decided that his top

priority was to add 250 more faculty, and he testified to the legislature to that effect. Using the union's exact numbers and justifications, he wrote up a plan he called "The Amherst 250 Plan" and disseminated it to the entire campus, making one of our top priorities one of his. For a year, this led to a substantial number of new hires. The number of tenure-system faculty rose until the economic crisis hit, although much more slowly than we sought or than the chancellor projected. The faculty continue to add pressure on this front and the new chancellor, Robert Holub, reaffirmed the commitment to increase the size of the faculty by 250.

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the growing ranks of our non-tenure track and adjunct faculty did. Universities, and their faculty senates and unions, have been wrestling with the rise of non-tenure system faculty for decades. Indeed, now more than half of all faculty at American colleges and universities are non-tenure system.³ This crisis too often pits the haves (tenure-system faculty) against the have-nots (the contingent, or non-tenure-system faculty). While the University of Massachusetts still has a relatively high tenure-system to non-tenure system ratio, the change has been rapid: over the course of the past two decades, as the number of tenure-system faculty declined by 16 percent, the ranks of the non-tenure track faculty at our university grew by 66 percent. Non-tenure-system faculty now make up about a quarter of all faculty.

The MSP developed an approach that can be seen as a model of how this problem can be an opportunity to build a faculty union's capacity, as opposed to dividing it. The MSP's new leaders—some of whom were themselves contingent faculty—embraced non-tenure-system faculty. We held the first ever meeting for non-tenure track faculty, and brought people together to bring out their issues. It was important for those faculty members to meet and hear from each other, because the issues for people teaching writing in the school of management are not the same as for people teaching introductory Spanish or for lab scientists in physics. A group of non-tenure-system faculty, working with union leaders, conducted a survey and developed a set of bargaining issues. A non-tenure-system faculty member joined the bargaining team, and became its chair.

The demands of non-tenure track faculty included increased job security, higher pay, more recognition, and opportunities to advance. The negotiating committee created an advisory committee of non-tenure-system faculty with whom to

consult on proposals, administration counter-offers, and strategies to move forward. At each key turning point in negotiations, we called meetings and actively recruited all non-tenure-system faculty. In the end we won many improvements:

- higher minimum salaries for lecturers, giving even faculty who teach one course a several hundred dollar pay increase;
- multi-year contracts so that after three years of service, members earn a commitment for continued employment;
- “just cause” for dismissal for any faculty member who is renewed past the initial two years; and

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- promotions (with a \$5,000 pay increase) to senior lecturer for non-tenure-system faculty who have been on campus for 10 years or more. In later negotiations, this was revised to a two-step promotion that mirrors promotions for associate and full professor, with a \$5,000 increase at each of two promotion stages.

As we moved forward with this campaign we recognized that the fight for more tenure-system faculty, which the MSP considers crucial to the future of the university, was strengthened, not undermined, by the struggle for better conditions for our non-tenure track members. By improving non-tenure track pay and job security, we undermined one of the main reasons universities have been moving toward contingent labor: cost.

Over the past seven years, we worried regularly about the possibility of intra-union battles between tenure and non-tenure system faculty. A few lecturers voiced their displeasure with the MSP’s focus on increasing the number of tenure-track faculty, and a few tenure-track faculty objected to improving conditions for non-tenure track faculty. But the vast majority were thrilled with the seriousness with which the leadership sought to learn about the frustrations and needs of contingent faculty and our substantial victories on their behalf.

Another significant victory was developing a policy for family leave where no effective policy had existed previously. In practice, what happened was that when a member was pregnant she cut an individual deal with her department chair, who usually would work out some kind of accommodation. Some members received no accommodation (or were afraid to ask for anything), some were granted a course release or even a semester off. Always these deals were arranged, one at a time, in a painful process of negotiation between a department chair and an

individual member. Fathers rarely asked for or received any accommodation.

When the contract came up for renewal, the union made family leave a priority. This necessitated a new way of negotiating a contract. Until that point, the ground rules had kept bargaining closed, with only members of the two bargaining teams (employer and union) allowed to attend. At the beginning of this round of bargaining, MSP insisted on a new arrangement: we wanted to bring in other members to join the process. We had to push to win this, and implicitly we agreed to do so on a limited basis, but eventually the employer did agree.

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young children, we prepared for a day-long bargaining session on the issue. We lined up two dozen people to testify, telling them that each would have only three to five minutes to testify, reviewing with them what sort of testimony they would offer, discussing possible employer questions and comments and potential pitfalls to avoid, and scheduling their testimony. People testified about very different accommodations made for people in almost the same situations. One person explained that her department gave her an entire semester off at full pay, and that had enabled her to both take care of her newborn and win a prestigious grant for more than a million dollars. Two department chairs (not in the bargaining unit) testified that, in the words of one:

I cannot tell you how painful and awkward it is, as a 55-year-old male department chair, to be approached by a pregnant untenured woman scared about the implications for her career. Every circumstance is different, it's always complicated to arrange, and it would make my life so much simpler if we had a clear and generous policy. I can tell you as well that when we are hiring new faculty, this is a question that often comes up, and I am embarrassed to have to say we have no formal policy.

That day of testimony had a major impact on the administration. Even more important, it developed a sense of unity, power, and outrage among those who testified, who had not previously come together to hear each other's stories. Still, the employer side resisted for several months. When the employer made a clearly inadequate proposal, we publicized it to our members and encouraged them to let the employer know their views, leading to more than 100 messages to the leader of the administration's bargaining team. The people who had testified and a network of their friends took the lead. When bargaining was almost over, the employer proposed

offering generous parental leave benefits to mothers, but nothing at all to fathers. The bargaining team held up the contract for another month to win identical benefits for fathers, which we eventually did. The policy we won is one of the most generous in the nation; it applies to adoptions as well as births, to domestic partners as well as married couples, to fathers as well as mothers, and provides for a full semester off at full pay, as well as a year's delay in the tenure clock. Winning parental leave was a first step. Since then the union has continued to push for family-friendly policies, and our joint union-administration Family Issues Committee (now renamed the Work-Life Committee) has negotiated more benefits.

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All of these victories—won at the table or beyond—were important. And they continue to be, as each new lecturer gains a measure of job security, as each faculty parent gains a semester to truly focus on bringing a new child into their family, as departments welcome new tenure-system faculty members who will spend their careers here making contributions to scholarship and teaching, and as our members enjoy the compounding effect of pay increases we were able to negotiate and then get funded. Both of us, and many other union activists, look back with satisfaction to the efforts that led to these victories.

But no matter how valuable the union victories, overall, the support for public higher education was stuck in reverse. The economy would go into recession and higher education would be hit the worst – faculty hiring would freeze, student fees would skyrocket. As the economy rebounded, funding for public higher education rebounded weakly, so that over the last two decades the portion of our budget coming from the state has continually declined. Once the state budget funded nearly 80 percent of the campus' operating budget; today it funds about 25 percent, and the percentage is dropping. The source of funding that has dramatically increased are student fees, which account for 70 percent of the growth of our budget over the past fifteen years. Indeed, for the first time in the university's history, student fees now represent a larger portion of our budget than the state's contribution.⁴ To the MSP, this was bad for our members and bad for the mission of a public research university.

Beginning in 2005, we began discussing—first with the MSP board, then with students and labor coalition allies, the leadership of the MTA, and supportive state legislators—the creation of an advocacy group to unify the public higher educa-

tion community. Indeed, State Senator Stan Rosenberg had a dream of such an advocacy group during his entire career in the state legislature. We were, to our credit and as evidence of our delusion, the first to take the bait and we began to build momentum for the most far-reaching organizing drive yet, an attempt to fundamentally restructure public higher education in Massachusetts.

In October 2006, Max Page, as the new president of the MSP, called for a Higher Education Summit, to be sponsored by a broad coalition and to include the state's key players in public higher education, from the governor on down. The coalition would produce a report setting out a vision for public higher education

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that would be discussed at a summit involving a small-group meeting of the state's heavy-hitters and at a large public event. The summit would take place immediately, in late 2006, to take advantage of the (anticipated) victory of Deval Patrick, who went on to become the first Democratic governor in 16 years.

The coalition—which included MSP, undergraduate student government leaders, some graduate student leaders, and other UMass staff unions—began meeting in the fall of 2006 and agreed on a vision of the future of public higher education that would: 1) restore adequate funding, 2) make higher education affordable, 3) make higher education accessible to all, 4) hire more teachers and researchers, and 5) democratize public higher education. But organizing the summit did not go well, so with no state leaders accepting invitations to the meeting, work not completed, and participation at weekly meetings declining, on November 16, the handful of us attending that week's meeting decided to cancel the event (scheduled for December 1, just two weeks away) unless a miracle happened. The next day a miracle happened: Governor-elect Deval Patrick called to accept our invitation to the summit.

That began a frantic two-week period. The promised report on the future of higher education did not exist; no other key figure had yet accepted our invitation. But with the governor on board, all the other key figures quickly accepted. The coalition members made a mad scramble to pull together a report, with people exchanging emails and making phone calls throughout that week, including Thanksgiving day. As promised, the report was ready 72 hours before the event, and Governor-elect Patrick read the report before the meeting.⁵

At the small-group private meeting, students presented four of our five points

and a faculty member presented the fifth. Our presenters knew their stuff and did a great job; others at the meeting had an opportunity to chime in. After an hour of hearing from and questioning students and faculty, Governor Patrick asked the president of the university and chair of the board of trustees what they thought of the report, and (to our amazement) they said that they agreed with almost all of the report and thought that it set the agenda of what should happen to public higher education.

Overlapping the small group private meeting was a large public meeting called for and chaired by the governor's Higher Education Transition Task Force.

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Although we didn't get to run that meeting, we turned out an audience of 800, and made sure that members of our coalition were carefully prepared and dominated the list of those who spoke at the event. When the private meeting was over, Governor Patrick came and addressed the large public hearing, pledging to be a champion for public higher education.

After the summit, the coalition began the hard work of organizing to build a true coalition of students, faculty, staff, parents, alumni, and community members, not just at the Amherst campus, not just at the University of Massachusetts, but at state colleges and community colleges as well.

The Public Higher Education Network of Massachusetts (PHENOM) has worked diligently to expand its base of support, developing campus councils on many of the 29 public college and university campuses across the state⁶. The organization has developed a lobbying agenda for each legislative session, while also continuing to lay the groundwork for more fundamental change. This past year is a case in point. The organization endorsed a number of bills—including one to secure in-state tuition for undocumented students—and pushed hard on an amendment that would add millions to the state's financial-aid program. Due in large measure to PHENOM's advocacy, the state added \$3 million to its financial-aid program for lower-income students, allowing 3,000 more college-bound students to receive aid. At the same time, PHENOM-allied faculty and students were developing rigorous reports on the financial-aid crisis along with a detailed proposal for achieving one of our long-term aims: making at least two years of college free. The organization promoted its favored bills and its own research in the press and held a series of public forums on campuses around the state, highlight-

ing the cost crisis in public higher education.

While PHENOM is steadily becoming a true statewide organization, with financial and human investments from students, faculty, staff, unions and other non-profits across the state, it began with the MSP, and the union remains its largest supporter. What had never crossed our minds in 2002 became a reality in a few short years because of the momentum of change within the organization. Once we transformed ourselves internally, it made sense to build connections with like-minded student, faculty, and staff leaders across the state. PHENOM has been the logical step for a union that has as its mission achieving an outstanding public higher education system both by securing an equitable workplace and by working to make the system affordable and accessible.

In the labor movement, much of the time we are engaged in defensive battles. The following story, originally applied to modern medicine, captures the dilemma we face:

You know, he said, sometimes it feels like this. There I am standing by the shore of a swiftly flowing river and I hear the cry of a drowning man. So I jump into the river, put my arms around him, pull him to shore and apply artificial respiration. Just when he begins to breathe, there is another cry for help. So I jump into the river, reach him, pull him to shore, apply artificial respiration, and then just as he begins to breathe, another cry for help. So back in the river again, reaching, pulling, applying, without end, goes the sequence. You know, I am so busy jumping in, pulling them to shore, applying artificial respiration, that I have no time to see who the hell is upstream pushing them all in.”⁷

In most of our unions, leaders and staff spend so much time saving the drowning and applying artificial respiration that we can't find the time to get upstream to find out who is pushing them in and do something about it. We do well at fighting off the latest assault from our employers or our state legislature. Thanks to us, things aren't nearly as bad as they would otherwise be. But as soon as we finish one battle we are faced with a new attack, and we have to figure out how to stop that one, or at least minimize its impact. All too often our “victory”—and it is a real victory—is getting back to where we started, stopping an unfair discipline or avoiding layoffs or increases in health insurance premiums. We live in a world where more and more people are being pushed into the river. Some of them have been led to believe that if we get near them we will push them under, and people are taking pot shots at us as we apply artificial respiration, and we get the blame if we can't save them all. Unless we find another way, in the long run we too will go under.

The MSP has been working, in its small way, in our part of the world, to find that other way. The gains from the union's transformation have been many. In its traditional role as a negotiator of contracts, the union has become far more successful, winning a range of improvements to the contract, by good negotiating at the table, and by public actions beyond the table. Taking the lead with our parent union, the

Massachusetts Teachers Association, and by deciding to create a statewide advocacy group, PHENOM, we transformed MSP into an organization dedicated to fundamental change in the support for public higher education.

Of course, the challenges remain huge. Indeed, the successes we have had at UMass are meager if placed in context of the overall assault on, and decline of, public higher education in the past generation: disinvestment by the federal and state governments, a transfer of the costs of this common good to individuals and their parents; and a decline in the diversity of public universities, thereby undermining the power of our institutions to play a leveling and integrating role in American economic and social life.

But this is the point: where just a few years ago MSP accepted those assaults as we do bad weather—nothing you can do about it but ride it out—now we see them coming, understand their causes, and believe we can have a role in turning them back. The MSP's transformation has ultimately been about realigning the work of the union and its members in a manner that makes us a part of the movement to improve public higher education, rather than quiet accomplices in its decline. 

ENDNOTES

1. The 250 Plan to rebuild the ranks of tenured faculty, and the parental leave policies would never have happened without the head of the Labor Center, Eve Weinbaum, insisting that public campaigns on these key issues could work outside the bargaining table. We would never have dramatically improved the working conditions of non-tenure-system faculty without the persistent advocacy of economist Mark Brenner and school of management lecturer Holly Lawrence. Without Stephanie Luce, we would never have achieved key victories around providing health insurance for new hires. We wouldn't be a leader in developing policies supportive of female faculty members were it not for Joya Misra and dedicated members of the union's Family Issues committee.
2. The report is available at www.umass.edu/msp.
3. See Dan Clawson, "Tenure and the Future of the University," *Science* May 29, 2009.
4. Figures derived from a presentation by Vice Chancellor John Dubach, "Campus Update," delivered to the Chancellor Search Committee on October 22, 2007.
5. The report is available at www.umass.edu/msp.
6. Learn more about PHENOM at <http://phenomonline.org>.
7. Originally by Irving K. Zola in 1970; cited by John B. McKinlay, "A Case for Refocusing Upstream: The Political Economy of Illness," p. 551 in Peter Conrad, editor, *The Sociology of Health and Illness: Critical Perspectives, Seventh Edition*, 2005, New York: Worth Publishers.