Profile | Heavy decisions weigh on Holub, keep him busy

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Robert C. Holub spent the first five days of spring break in Florida. The weather was mostly sunny with temperatures reaching the high 70s to low 80s each day. But, as has become increasingly common for Holub since coming to the University of Massachusetts and taking on the duties of chancellorship, his focus was anything but recreational.

In fact, he worked.

During a week when much of the University had a chance to relax midway through the semester, he was attending meetings with donors as part of a fundraising trip.

When Holub accepted the job a year ago this May, the budget crisis – what he now calls his biggest challenge – was just unfolding. The economy was souring when he took office on August 1, but as he said, some of the most versed experts in the financial world did not anticipate what has become a reality. Holub said the current economic slowdown surprised him, too.

Beyond keeping Holub busy, the budget crisis and a recently outlined, controversial reorganization plan has different groups of the UMass community wanting and expecting dissimilar things from the chancellor – making it difficult, if not impossible, to please everyone.

The dilemma of considering so many varying opinions is something every chancellor faces, he said, but it becomes more apparent when money is tight.

"The decisions are the same," Holub said. "But the consequences are very different. Reductions to budgets in times of financial crisis may mean putting some people out of work or eliminating programs that are cherished and have been important on the campus."

Holub's decisions affect undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, staff, alumni relations, administration and local residents among others.

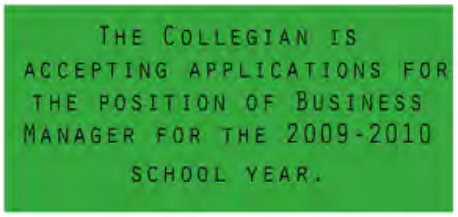
Some of those groups overlap and within the groups there are subgroups. The Massachusetts Society of Professors (MSP), the Student Government Association (SGA), the Graduate Employee Association (GEO), the Graduate Student Senate (GSS), the Faculty Senate, the Professional Staff Union, the Office of African, Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander and Native American (ALANA) Affairs and the deans of the various colleges are just a few of those subgroups. There are also the recently created Budget Task Force and Task Force on Reorganization with ideas of their own which Holub must consider.

"It is difficult to weigh all options," said Holub. "Not all merit equal weight, but it is hard to figure which should carry more weight. I respect very much groups and individuals that try to reason with me rather than simply support their own view or attack me.

"I believe strongly that we are a community, and that what tears a community apart is the dogmatic belief that one perspective is more valuable than another," he said.

Holub attests he does not use a different approach when speaking with the different groups, but does keep his audience in mind.

In a recent testimony to the state legislature asking for stimulus money to help cover the University's deficit, he said his presentation was a bit different than how he has addressed the campus. The testimony focused not only on the budget crisis, but also outlined what benefits the University has to offer the



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So far, Holub feels the campus has been fairly supportive of the decisions he has made. However, he acknowledged that opposition exists.

"It's a large University, it's a complex University," he said. "There are many people who have different experiences, who have different ideas. At a place like this you are not going to be 100 percent in agreement on anything."

Trying to evaluate the University's fiscal future is now the focal point of Holub's schedule.

"I put in a lot of hours," he said describing his typical day-to-day routine. "I think that it has been exacerbated maybe by the budget crisis because then I have to have more meetings to deal with the budget and the reorganization."

Holub's job sends him to dozens of meetings beyond Amherst, the majority of which are held in the Northeast – namely places like Boston, New York City and Washington, D.C.

Both on and off campus, Holub said he's had around 50 meetings on the budget alone since November.

When he's not on the road, odds are he's in his office in the Whitmore Administration Building on the flagship campus.

On a typical day, from around 8 a.m. until around 5 p.m., he's engaged in various meetings. After which, he usually sits at his computer until around 6:30 p.m. or 7 p.m., reading his mail and replying to e-mails, before heading home to Hillside, an on-campus residence reserved for chancellors.

There he usually has dinner with his wife Sabine, his 86-year-old mother Marilyn and three young daughters Madelaine, Shoshanah and Natalie, ages eight, six and two – respectively.

After spending some time with his family, but before calling it a night, he checks his e-mail again or finishes something else he'd been working on earlier that day, while still trying his best to keep his work away from home.

"Then I go to sleep and it starts again the next day," he said.

However, relaxing is sometimes difficult.

"It keeps me up at night, and actually wakes me up early in the morning sometimes," said the 10th chancellor to serve the Amherst campus. "I've had a lot on my mind lately with regard to the budget and the reorganization and things like that."

Weekends tend to be less busy with meetings from time-to-time, and the chancellor frequently attends dinners, fine arts or athletic events.

Trying to stay on top of his schedule has proven difficult, yet as Holub put it: "That makes it interesting, too, that you have so many different things to do in a day. You'll be dealing with donors in one moment and legislators in another and faculty in another and students in another moment and budget issues."

However, when all of the meetings are over and decisions must be made, he said being the person who has the final say can be a less than enjoyable part of what he does.

In October, the Commonwealth's legislators reduced UMass' state aid by $25 million.

In December, UMass issued 31 "notices of nonreappointment" to part- and full-time non-tenure-track faculty. In February, professors agreed to freeze their salaries. Earlier this month, the University issued 60 more nonreappointment notices to non-tenure-track professors bringing the total to 91 professors this year – around 6 percent of the faculty.

Student fees were increased by $1,500, though that is expected to be rebated due to $82 million of federal stimulus money alllocated to UMass by Gov. Deval Patrick last week to help the University recover from a $46 million deficit.

News also came last week that UMass will eliminate one or more of their sports programs – possibly baseball – to help cope with the budget crisis.

Having to raise fees, cut people's budgets, layoff employees, freeze construction projects, cap

administrative spending or tell others that funding is not available for what they would like to do are just some of the examples.

"On the other hand, it wouldn't prevent these things from being done," Holub said. "Someone else would have to do them. And, I like to think that I do them with sensitivity and good judgment, and that's the reason that I'm here."

Prior to working at UMass, Holub taught at the University of California Berkeley for 27 years, achieving the rank of full professor and serving in several administrative posts.

There, Holub said he also dealt with many "strong-minded" groups who each wanted and expected different things from him. That experience has proven helpful for what he faces now at UMass.

"If we start from the common perspective that the institution or the campus is more important than anything relating to the individual or the smaller groups, then once decisions are made, I believe the community is more easily reconciled and can move forward more easily," he said.

In 2006, he left Berkeley for Knoxville, Tenn., to serve as the University of Tennessee's chief academic officer for two years before becoming provost and vice chancellor for academic affairs.

Tennessee was in the early stages of a budget crisis when Holub worked there, which has worsened since. He said his focus then was as it is now, "gathering information and trying to reach the best decision for the campus."

Though, Holub said none of his positions at either university have had as many responsibilities as being chancellor of over 25,000 students and more than 210,000 alumni.

Balancing more than a budget

As much as he said he enjoys the responsibility and challenges of his job, the one thing he said he couldn't live without is his family.

But being chancellor can interfere with how often he can be with them.

"I think if I were a faculty member I'd be able to spend more time with [my family], although as a faculty member I was very busy too," said Holub. "There's always going to be that tradeoff and being so busy does take me away from them. But I do have time with them in the evening and we eat dinner together, and I see them in the morning before I leave, and then on the weekends we do things, and we very often go to sporting events together – at least with the two older girls [Madelaine and Shoshanah] – so there's still time that we spend together."

His eldest daughters' favorite sporting event is hockey and they have been to several of UMass' games this season.

"They ask me sometimes what the students [chanting in the stands] are saying and I say: 'Well, they're wishing our team good luck and the other team bad luck.'"

Other than at some of the football games, Holub's youngest daughter Natalie usually doesn't attend because she's a little too young, he said.

"When she gets to be five or six then I'm sure she'll come along as well. Of course maybe then the older one won't want to come. She'll have other things to do. She'll want to go out with her friends rather than with her father. But, we'll see what happens," Holub said.

Holub's wife Sabine helps with taking care of the kids as well as doing fundraising for the University and work for organizations like the Amherst Survival Center.

The couple met at Ohio State where Sabine, a native of Germany, was a graduate student and Holub was a visiting professor, both involved in German studies.

They dated for about a year before getting married in November 1998.

Holub, a New Jersey native who described his childhood as "fairly normal," originally planned to become a doctor, but changed his mind during his senior year of college after working for a pharmaceutical firm in Philadelphia. He still received his bachelors in natural science from the University of Pennsylvania, but also earned a masters in comparative literature and later a masters and doctorate in German from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Holub's interest lies in 19th and 20th-century German intellectual, cultural, and literary history. Not counting a book still several years in progress, Holub has written 12 books and more than 100 articles and essays on topics ranging from early 19th century German realism to postwar examination of the Holocaust.

The chancellor said such scholarly works are one of the things he is most proud of.

"But, I hope, if you'd ask me the question 10 years from now, I'd be able to point to some things that I've done in administration," he said.

Communicating on the job

Holub said one of the most important things he has learned in his career has been to communicate with others.

"You need to talk to them," he said. "There has to be some endeavor to understand where other people are coming from, what their history is, what the history of the institution has been, what their experiences have been. I think you develop that gradually as you go through various administrative positions."

At UMass, one of the first things the chancellor said he did to establish communication was to arrange appointments with all of the deans, to visit their colleges, talk to the staff and see the facilities in person.

Holub said he's currently setting up a staff council so he can meet with representatives of the staff on a more regular basis.

"I can't claim that I have a perfect understanding of the campus. Certainly I've only been here since August," Holub said. "But I'm trying to learn about the campus more and more, and I have to count on that dialogue with other people to have that understanding."

In fact, one thing Holub said he regrets is not meeting with members of the campus as often as he would've liked. The reason, again, has been his busy schedule do to the University's budget woes.

"I'm under no illusions about the central administration," said Holub. "I don't think we've done as well as we should do with regard to the support of faculty and I hope that I can improve that. That's my goal."

"I think that I regret in this first year that I wasn't able to schedule more meetings with faculty to get to know faculty better and to get to know students better," he continued. "But, that was forced on me by the various budget problems that we've had."

Interacting with students in the classroom is something Holub said he misses since leaving his role as a faculty member at Berkeley. So, next semester he will be one of the professors teaching a class of around 20 incoming freshman in a new course called first-year seminar.

"It's difficult for me to arrange a regular course because my schedule is so demanding. It isn't difficult for me to find three hours a week, but it's difficult for me to find the same three hours week after week," said Holub. "But, a first-year seminar that meets once a week, I think I can probably keep the time open most of the weeks to be able to meet with them. And, I look forward to sitting in a class with students again."

He said he is also considering meeting with students outside the classroom on a more informal basis. He mentioned the idea of going to the dinning commons with his family to have dinner.

"[Students] were important to me as a faculty member, but I guess even more important to me now as a chancellor," he said.

Holub has also kept communication-focused through a website made to address the budget crisis, creating a Budget Task Force and Task Force on Reorganization to give him feedback and keeping the community up-to-date on his decisions through campus-wide e-mails.

In one of his latest e-mails sent out on March 12, the chancellor announced his decision to reorganize the University's colleges for the fall semester in an effort to cut costs.

Holub said he had briefed the deans from each of the colleges the day prior to sending out the e-mail.

"I think in general they were in favor of it," he said, "Some deans felt less comfortable with it than others. But there were some difficult decisions to make, and we're going to try to make everyone comfortable

with the reorganization and the direction we're moving in."

With eight months of chancellorship now under his belt the he said is enjoying the job overall.

"I think that there's enough that's enjoyable in the position, there's enough that's challenging that keeps me intellectually stimulated that I enjoy doing what I'm doing," he said. "I think this is my last job. I mean that's the way I'd like to think about it. But, I don't know. You can never tell what's going to happen. But, I didn't enter into this job as a step to another job."

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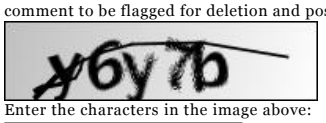

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