Dear UMass Dartmouth Staff and Faculty,

Last Wednesday, the Commonwealth’s budget for the coming year was finalized. You may be aware that, since 2001, the state has fully funded UMass Dartmouth’s presence in the historic Star Store Building in downtown New Bedford, which has come to house many of our studio arts programs, serving roughly 200 students each year. However, that generous support has now come to an end. I am deeply saddened to report that, for this and all the reasons I will outline below, UMass Dartmouth has therefore been advised to transition our programs out of the Star Store ahead of the fall semester.

Since our original lease expired in 2021, UMass Dartmouth has been vigorously engaged in conversations with state officials, the Department of Capital Asset Management & Maintenance (DCAMM), the UMass Building Authority (UMBA) and others, which resulted in continuing state support to fund the extension of our lease for the last two years. However, amid many pressing needs to serve the people of the Commonwealth, next year’s state budget was not able to accommodate the funds to support UMass Dartmouth’s continuing use of the facility.

We explored every avenue to remain in the building. The unfortunate reality is that, given the Star Store’s age, its deferred maintenance needs are very significant, with repairs needed to multiple systems in the near term. Additionally, recent state legislation now prevents the university from maintaining the building in any way, which we understand to extend to our routine cleaning and maintenance contract.

Although UMass Dartmouth is on a strong upward trajectory, we face ongoing budgetary constraints as we begin to grow our way out of a 10-year enrollment decline. Simply put, even were the building gifted to UMBA for our use today, we could not afford to operate it next year without state assistance, much less make the most urgently needed repairs and begin to renovate it to meet the needs of the next generation of students. A substantial portion of our operating budget is funded through tuition revenues, and the university could not take on such a large new financial obligation without burdening all 7,500 of our students—who already face challenges in funding their educational aspirations—with significant additional tuition increases for the next decade.

Our highest priority must always be the safety of our students, staff and faculty. With the expiration of our most recent lease extension, legal counsel has advised me that UMass Dartmouth does not have the basic liability protections of a tenant in good standing. For that and all of the above reasons, with deep gratitude for the strong
sense of community we have built around the arts in New Bedford and with our steadfast determination to continue those partnerships, UMass Dartmouth will begin to transition our academic programs out of the Star Store, effective immediately.

Interim Provost Ram Bala will work with College of Visual & Performing Arts Dean Lawrence Jenkens to ensure that the 24 organized classroom activities involving 116 students scheduled to be held in the Star Store in the fall semester can, to the extent possible, be relocated to appropriate facilities—faculty, staff and students in CVPA will receive more detailed communications soon. We are in the process of securing some temporary classrooms to help mitigate the pressure on our instructional space. We are also in the process of looking for alternative space in which to house the Worker’s Education Program in New Bedford. I appreciate that this transition will be challenging, and I thank all of you for your patience and cooperation over the coming few weeks.

Our two decades in the Star Store have enriched our campus community, as well as the City of New Bedford, immeasurably. It’s heartbreaking to leave this wonderful facility that has formed a vibrant nexus for the arts at the heart of downtown. Despite these unanticipated circumstances, we will continue to have a strong presence in New Bedford through the School of Marine Science and Technology (SMAST), the Law School’s Justice Bridge program and the Worker’s Education Program. I am confident that we will also find myriad ways to partner with the city around the visual and performing arts—including partnering with the Zeiterion Performing Arts Center to host some of their productions on our campus over the next year and new collaborations with Bristol Community College’s theater program.

I remain very optimistic for the future of our arts programs—the College of Visual and Performing Arts is a vibrant and integral part of UMass Dartmouth’s academic programs and campus community, and we are committed to its continuing success. I also remain grateful to the Commonwealth for all its support, which enables us to provide extraordinary educational opportunities to our talented, diverse, and growing student body. I would also like to thank Dean Jenkens and all of our CVPA faculty, staff and students for their cooperation in the coming weeks.

Best,
Mark

Mark A. Fuller, PhD
Chancellor
University of Massachusetts Dartmouth