UMD, Nat'g Dropout Prevention Center team

By Will Richmond
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Dartmouth — The University of Massachusetts Dartmouth announced Thursday it is teaming with the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network to open the organization’s first satellite affiliate center.

UMass Dartmouth Chancellor Jean F. MacCormack made the announcement at a noon luncheon at Rachel’s Lakesider that the school and the Clemson University-based group have reached the agreement and that the partnership will be facilitated locally through UMass Dartmouth’s Urban Initiative, which is directed by former Fall River Mayor Edward M. Lambert Jr.

Located at Clemson University in South Carolina, the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network was described by speakers at the luncheon as the nation’s foremost research organization on issues related to dropout prevention.

The organization has developed 15 best practice strategies for dropout prevention that have achieved national renown and are recognized by academics, practitioners and policy makers as one of the most comprehensive approaches to confronting high dropout rates, officials said.

The establishment of the satellite affiliate comes as Bristol County’s two largest cities, Fall River and New Bedford, are home to the state’s fifth- and sixth-lowest graduation rates in 2008, respectively.

According to numbers from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, only 56 percent of Fall River students entering high school in 2004 graduated within four years, with 31.8 percent of those students failing to earn a diploma because they dropped out. In New Bedford just 56.1 percent of students met graduation standards, with 26.8 percent of students leaving school early. During the same period, the state as a whole experienced an 81 percent graduation rate.

Along with formalizing the partnership, the event also included the release of a new report addressing the effect dropouts have on the SouthCoast region. Entitled “ Dropout Prevention in the SouthCoast: Choosing a New Path to Economic Prosperity,” the report was commissioned by the SouthCoast Development Partnership in 2008 and addresses how the low educational attainment level in the region is having a negative effect on the getting companies or industries to locate or expand here.

The report is the culmination of several months of research on the effects of educational attainment and dropout in the SouthCoast and offers the region and SouthCoast Development Partnership recommended strategies for immediate and future advocacy and action.

The report also offers strategies, which are in line with the center’s practices, to lower the dropout rate.

MacCormack said that the dropout rate is a problem the region must face head on to make substantive change.

“We can’t accept this is going to continue, because the danger to us in the future is too great,” MacCormack told crowd that included an array of educational, political, business and workforce leaders.

The partnership was aided by the involvement of state Rep. Stephen Canessa, D-New Bedford, who serves on the Dropout Prevention Center’s board of directors.

Canessa said the partnership speaks to the quality of people and programs that address such issues at the university. He said the partnership came out of yearlong discussions, with MacCormack quickly jumping on board. He said he hopes that bringing the two parties together will not only help the region’s dropout prevention efforts, but also expand the reach and recognition of the center.

“I truly envision this as a win-win for both parties and (by) the UMass Dartmouth and the Urban Institute working with the Center in the region they will learn the best practices to address the dropout issue,” Canessa said. “This is a wonderful opportunity for both sides to really try and combat the issues of dropouts locally and across the country.”

While unable to attend Thursday’s event, the National Dropout Prevention Center’s Executive Director Jay Smink said in a telephone interview that UMass Dartmouth’s involvement made sense due to the school’s several policy centers that strive to address issues beyond the traditional university reach.
He said UMass Dartmouth will be involved in the center’s publications while also promoting a focus on dropout prevention in the Northeast. The partnership will also aid in promoting the center’s strategies for improving graduation rates.

“We’re going to work jointly on this issue,” Smink said. “UMass Dartmouth is going to benefit from our expertise and we’ll benefit from their public policy centers and concerns about education. ... We’re excited about it.”

With Thursday’s partnership announcement and the release of the dropout report, Fall River Superintendent Meg Mayo-Brown said people in the city should begin to grasp how important education is in the city’s future.

“I think people in Fall River are just beginning to understand the connection between education and economic development, and this will help bring that into focus,” Mayo-Brown said.

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