SouthCoast business, education, and civic leaders gathered today in Dartmouth for the announcement of a new partnership between UMass Dartmouth's Urban Initiative and the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network at Clemson University.

The partnership, with UMass Dartmouth becoming the first satellite campus of the NDPC/N, was announced at a gathering 100 education, business and civic leaders who met for a briefing on a new study on the dropout challenge, sponsored by the SouthCoast Development Partnership and written by the Urban Initiative. The study highlights the impact of high dropout rates on the regional economy.

"Our community is renowned for its ability to address challenges and seize opportunities through a combination of innovation and sheer hard work," UMass Dartmouth Chancellor Jean F. MacCormack said. "This new partnership will help us all -- businesses, schools, government, and families -- meet the dropout challenge head on."

U.S. Rep. Barney Frank, whose district includes New Bedford and part of Fall River, also delivered remarks at the announcement.

State Rep. Steven Canessa, a member of the 22-member National Dropout Prevention Center Board of Directors, and a key architect of the partnership agreement, said, "Our region, state and country are all faced with the challenging issue of dropout prevention. It is vital to the success of our region to keep our kids engaged in their education. I am very pleased that the Center is teaming up with UMass Dartmouth's Urban Initiative. Together, they will be able to reach more kids in at-risk situations, using national models to address this issue. It is our job as parents, educators, community members, and leaders to give our students the tools they need to meet today's challenges and the confidence they need to succeed throughout their lives."

Sam Drew, Associate Director of the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, said, "This partnership is the result of many discussions and much hard work over the past year between the National Dropout Prevention Center Board and the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth to forge a relationship that was beneficial to both parties and to the nation. The commitment of Chancellor Jean MacCormack throughout the process has been extremely helpful. The addition of UMD as an active and equal partner will no doubt have far-reaching impact on the dropout problem locally and in each of our regions and nationwide."

Attendees were briefed on the results of the study by Urban Initiative Director Edward Lambert, who concluded, "The causes of dropout are many and complex. It will take a massive commitment and effort on the part of many groups and stakeholders to bring change significant enough to alter the climate and produce real results."

The study suggests that the dropout issue is a regional challenge, affecting every city and town of the SouthCoast due to its impact on industry location decisions; that reducing dropout rates is not just a school problem but a community problem; and given that the educational attainment level of parents is a significant factor in whether a child drops out of school, there needs to be a strategy to raise educational attainment levels of adults.
The study recommends several strategies, including:

* Creation of a Dropout Early Warning System to identify at-risk students and focus energy and resources on keeping them in school,

* Expansion of mentoring and tutoring efforts throughout the region to create 3,000 mentor-student matches,

* Expansion of quality early childhood programming,

* Greater family engagement in student learning,

* Greater focus on career and technology education, and

* More school-community partnerships that are scrutinized to assure meaningful intern opportunities for students.

A full copy of the report and a summary presentation, will be posted at umassd.edu/urbaninitiative later today.