LeVar Burton Tells Record Class of 3,716 to ‘Be Bold, Be Fearless’

Presiding over Commencement for the eighth and final time as UMass Lowell Chancellor, Marty Meehan ’78 congratulated a record number of graduates—3,716—on their achievement, challenging them to make the world a better place while forever maintaining their connection to the university.

“By completing the education we are celebrating today, you’re in a far better position not only to support yourselves, but to contribute to the solutions that we need in today’s world,” said Meehan, who will become president of the UMass system on July 1. “Every single day I have been motivated by you, the men and women who come to this university looking to work hard and get the tools that you need to achieve.”

Actor, entrepreneur and education advocate LeVar Burton delivered the Commencement address during both the morning and afternoon ceremonies at the Tsongas Center. Best known to graduates as host of the long-running PBS children’s series “Reading Rainbow” and for his role as Lt. Commander Geordi La Forge in “Star Trek: The Next Generation,” Burton told graduates to “be bold, be fearless in the pursuit of your dreams because your dreams matter.”

Burton, also known for his role as Kunta Kinte in the 1977 award-winning miniseries “Roots,” received an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters. Also receiving honorary degrees were Donato Tramuto, founder, CEO and chairman of Reading-based Physicians Interactive; Carole Cowan, former president of Middlesex Community College; John Sampas, literary executor of beat generation icon Jack Kerouac’s estate; and Barry Perry ’68, former chairman and CEO of Engelhard Inc.

The university presented its Distinguished Alumni Award to Lorenzo Cabrera ’94, founder and chairman of the board of Cabrera Services Inc., an award-winning company that specializes in radiological and environmental remediation and radioactive and mixed waste management.

Meehan was presented with the University Distinguished Service Medal.

“Chancellor Meehan’s refusal to accept mediocrity, his willingness to make bold decisions, and his unparalleled pride for the institution from which he graduated have forever altered the course of this university’s history,” Student Trustee Phil Geoffroy said in presenting Meehan with the award.

This marked the eighth consecutive year that the university has graduated a record number of students. In addition to thanking the faculty for their outstanding work, Meehan noted the university’s ever-increasing diversity (with students from 42 states and 85 countries), its commitment to community service and its move to Division I athletics as key achievements.
North Quad Ready for Big Makeover

‘Pod’ Project Improves Accessibility, Amenities and Green Space

Improved accessibility, 22 new bathrooms and a communal green space are the most noticeable ways students, faculty and staff will benefit from the North Quad infrastructure renewal project, breaking ground in June.

Targeted for completion in August 2016, the project involves the construction of two permanent “pod” structures—Pod 1 inside the quad at the corner of Southwick and Pasteur halls, and Pod 2 outside the quad, behind Falmouth Hall.

Pod 1 will be a four-story structure that includes an accessible ground-floor entrance located just inside the quad. It will include an elevator servicing floors one through four.

Pod 2 will be an elevated, two-story structure that starts on the second floor of Falmouth Hall, adjacent to the newly constructed Dry Labs above the North Maintenance Garage. The pod will also include accessible staff and faculty bathrooms and network and electrical closets.

Once completed, the landscaped quad will provide students, faculty and staff with a new and inviting space that will allow them to sit outside and enjoy their lunch, sip a coffee or read a book. While the final landscape design has yet to be finalized, the enclosed green space is sure to become a popular spot on North Campus.

Memorizing Facts and Figures is Failing Society

Nehring Delivers Fulbright Research in Belfast

Assoc. Prof. James Nehring recently spent three months at four high-poverty schools in Northern Ireland to study how educators are handling the challenges of teaching curricula designed for standardized tests.

The Graduate School of Education faculty member conducted the study as a Fulbright Scholar.

“Having students memorize facts and figures to pass standardized tests leaves little time to teach students real-world skills such as problem-solving, collaboration, leadership, initiative, self-direction, intellectual openness and reflection,” said Nehring at the Parliament Building in Belfast, where he presented his research.

Pressure for test performance is especially strong in schools serving communities with high poverty levels, suggesting that the learning gap is widening even further on important skills that go unmeasured, he added.

“In courses where traditional external exams were used, the intellectual demand for students was very low,” says Nehring. “In courses that were assessed using portfolio, projects and performances, the intellectual demand for students tended to be quite high.”

Nehring found that in subjects assessed by an external exam, such as math, science and history, instruction focused on memorization. In subjects such as drama, music, engineering and home economics that are assessed by portfolio, projects or performance, students learned deeper level skills not measured by the government.

University Earns Silver for Sustainability

First-ever STARS Evaluation Provides Framework for Future

In its first-ever submission to the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS), UMass Lowell received a “Silver” rating, joining the ranks of Princeton University, Boston University and Carnegie Mellon University.

Managed by the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education, STARS is a self-reporting framework that measures the sustainability performance of more than 700 colleges and universities in 21 countries around the world.

The university earned a STARS score of 53.97, which is based on the percentage of applicable points it earned across four categories: academics, engagement, operations, and planning and administration. A minimum score of 45 is required for Silver status, 65 for Gold and 85 for Platinum.

There are currently 124 Silver-level institutions and 77 Gold, the latter group including UMass Amherst and the University of Vermont.

The university’s best score came in Campus Engagement, where it earned 18.91 of a possible 20 points. Other high marks came in Waste (7.28 of 10); Coordination, Planning and Governance (6.67 of 8); Diversity and Affordability (7.50 of 10); Air and Climate (6.81 of 11); Health, Well-being and Work (5.70 of 7) and Public Engagement (13.73 of 16).

“This achievement is affirmation that UMass Lowell is a sustainability leader in higher education and focused on achieving excellence as outlined in our 2020 Strategic Plan and our commitment toward carbon neutrality,” says Richard Lemoine, director of environmental and emergency management.
Economics Prof. William Lazonick recently earned top honors from Harvard Business Review for an article that looks at the long-term impact of stock buybacks on the nation’s economy. Lazonick’s article, “Profits without Prosperity” was recognized with the McKinsey Award as the top article published in the Harvard Business Review in 2014. Lazonick concludes that the practice is damaging job growth and wages and undermining the country’s economic health.

Lazonick analyzed years of data from publicly traded companies. According to his analysis, the 449 companies in the Standard & Poor’s 500 that were publicly traded from 2003 to 2012 used 54 percent of their earnings, or a total of $2.4 trillion, to repurchase their own stock. This, he says, cut deep into resources that could have instead been invested in innovation, production capabilities or higher wages for workers.

According to Lazonick, pressure from Wall Street and stock-based incentives that are now common in executive compensation are the key factors. There are a number of steps that would limit the practice of massive stock buybacks, including having taxpayers and workers on corporate boards, tax law changes and creating stronger Securities and Exchange Commission regulations, Lazonick says.

By taking advantage of networking opportunities such as career fairs, two-thirds of the Class of 2014 have landed jobs, according to a new report from Career Services. An additional 28 percent of those surveyed were attending grad school.

Fear, misinformation and lack of resources are some of the factors that put drug-addicted pregnant women and new mothers in increasingly precarious positions when it comes to finding treatment, according to newly published research by Rebecca Stone, a lecturer in the School of Criminology and Justice Studies.

“Women in general face gendered barriers to accessing treatment for substance abuse, but it’s especially difficult for pregnant women,” says Stone, who interviewed 30 women in Michigan who used alcohol or other drugs while pregnant for her study, which was published in Health & Justice Journal.

Thorough prenatal care can help offset some of the issues associated with substance abuse during pregnancy, yet many women don’t seek help due to fears of criminal charges and the possibility of having their children taken away.

Stone’s interviews also underscored the lack of addiction treatment services for pregnant women. Several women reported there was just one treatment facility that was known to care for pregnant women in their region but it was located more than 100 miles away.

Stone recommends increasing drug treatment services for women, including those not currently pregnant, in locations close to population centers. Other steps she suggests include providing childcare close to treatment centers, scheduling appointments around work hours, helping with transportation and prioritizing empathy over stigma.

Drug-addicted pregnant women and new mothers may avoid vital medical treatment, according to Rebecca Stone’s research.

Economics Prof. William Lazonick was honored by Harvard Business Review for his research on stock buybacks and their impact on the U.S. economy.
Scholarships Help Students, Honor Faculty Leaders

Scientists estimate the Earth is roughly 4.54 billion years old. UMass Lowell’s Department of Environmental, Earth and Atmospheric Sciences (EEAS) is considerably younger, yet it has recently entered a new epoch of sorts.

Over the past two years, with support from faculty, alumni, family and friends, EEAS has established three new endowed scholarships—the first in the department’s history.

The endowed scholarship funds honor three faculty members who were instrumental in departmental history: Robert C. Curtis (1918–2012), a decorated World War II fighter pilot who went on to found Lowell Technological Institute’s meteorology program in 1966; Dan Golomb (1928–2013), a Holocaust survivor who worked at the EPA and MIT before joining the University of Lowell in 1989, where he focused on air pollution, climate change and carbon sequestration; and Arnold L. O’Brien, the longtime department chair who co-founded the environmental science program in 1973 and specialized in hydrogeology, glacial and Pleistocene geology and geomorphology.

When he succeeded O’Brien as department chair in 2011, Nelson Eby was determined to create endowed scholarships—not only to honor his former colleagues, but also to help attract new students to the department. Such scholarships, he explains, are an increasingly essential tool for public universities. “Parents ask about scholarship and internship opportunities all the time,” Eby says. “If you want to be taken seriously, this is something you have to do.”

EEAS is already being taken very seriously through the work of its faculty and students on environmental issues. Atmospheric Science students investigate the dynamics and consequences of climate change and provide daily weather forecasts for the Merrimack Valley. Environmental Geoscience students are examining the geological record of climate change in Antarctica, working with local companies in assessing and proposing remediation techniques for contaminated sites, and documenting the record of environmental pollution contained in tree rings and sediments.

Eby has also made staffing up the EEAS Advisory Board a priority, and put together an impressive roster of researchers, scientists, National Weather Service directors and industry leaders. In addition to providing input on industry trends and serving as contacts for student internships, every member of the 14-person board has committed to supporting the new endowed scholarships.

Creating endowed scholarships is also a priority for Our Legacy, Our Place: The Campaign for UMass Lowell. The $125 million comprehensive fundraising campaign, the first in the university’s history, will have its official launch in late October. Close to 150 new endowed scholarship funds have been created since 2011, bringing the total number to 417.