Request for Solution of Student Problem and Policy Change Consideration

Facts:

EHS graduate student Kevin Michael Sullivan initiated his graduate coursework in 2007 while a resident of Arlington, VA, and completed his coursework in Fall 2009 while residing in Atlanta, GA. Because of problems getting a transcript sent from George Washington University to validate two courses that were to be transferred in to meet his final UMBC graduation requirements, he did not apply for final graduation until Spring semester 2010. At that time, he had an outstanding bill, which he obtained 27 January 2010, and paid on 1 February 2010. Mr. Sullivan submitted his graduation application papers on 5 February 2010, and also enrolled in placeholder course EHS 7700 on that same date. He did not know that this course carries a credit hour and is billed for. A Graduate School review of his qualifications for graduation, including any outstanding bills, was conducted during the semester and his graduation was held up pending receipt of the transcripts from GWU. Said transcripts were finally obtained and delivered to the UMBC Graduate School on 17 May 2011. Following this date, the Graduate School mailed Mr. Sullivan’s Diploma first to Enfield, CT, and then on to his updated address in North Carolina.

In July 2011, Mr. Sullivan was reviewing his credit report and found that he had an outstanding bill from UMBC in Maryland State Central Collections. This is the first time Mr. Sullivan had heard of this bill. Upon inquiry, he learned that the bill was generated in the Spring of 2010 and apparently sent to the original Arlington address, now invalid for 5 years. He called the Student Financial Billing Offices at UMBC and was told that he needed to pay Central Collections for the uncollected bill, but that this would not resolve the credit report issue. Upon discussing this with the Central Collections Unit, he was told that the only way to get the report erased would be to have UMBC notify Central Collections that it was in error.

Mr. Sullivan stands ready to pay the original bill and resolve this issue, but requests that UMBC kindly notifies Central Collections that an error was made, thereby clearing his credit record, and potentially saving him many thousands of dollars in future mortgage and car loan interest. This request is based on the following considerations:

- UMBC’s only paper notification of the bill was sent to a long-defunct address.
- UMBC had numerous other mail-based communications with him during this time, sent to his updated addresses, first in CT and later in NC. These mailed communications came from the UMBC Graduate School, the Student Billing Office, and the Alumni Association. His diploma was also sent to updated mail addresses. It was only reasonable for Mr. Sullivan to assume that UMBC had his mailing address and would use it for any important written communication.
- Like many (if not most) UMBC students, once he stopped taking classes, he stopped using his UMBC email address. UMBC had his alternative gmail address.
- UMBC sent his diploma, which is the last thing to go out to a student verifying that he or she has met all academic and bureaucratic requirements for graduation, and is cleared. It was thus reasonable for Mr. Sullivan to assume that all was well. For reasons unknown, the outstanding bill was not found during the extended period of time (January 2010 to May 2011) in which the Graduate School was processing his application for graduation.
• UMBC’s Student Billing Office apparently made no attempt to use his updated address to contact him about the billing problem, although the office did have access to said address.

We fully support Mr. Sullivan’s request that UMBC: 1) formally withdraws from the State Central Collections Unit the case of Mr. Sullivan’s overdue bill for one credit hour, and 2) send Mr. Sullivan a new bill in the original amount, to his currently registered address. He will be happy to pay this.

Furthermore, this case represents three related policy issues which need to be addressed by the Faculty Senate and UMBC’s top levels of student finance and billing:

• UMBC apparently treats graduate students to the same assumption that it applies to undergraduate students, namely that the original address at the time of application is the parent’s address and will therefore be “permanent”. While this may be a reasonable assumption for many (but not all) undergraduate students, it has a high likelihood of failure for emancipated graduate students. At the time that a graduate student applies for graduation review, the application should ask for a current and a “permanent” address for future communications between the university and the student. The Alumni Association seems to be able to do this.

• UMBC’s policy of paperless billing does not meet the needs of students who have graduated, and, in our department alone, has resulted in several recent cases of late (post-graduation) billing that has gone unnoticed by former students who no longer have need to log into MyUMBC, and who logically conclude that receipt of the diploma indicates the completion of all requirements. In several cases among our alumni, this problem has raised such ire that the new alumni have sworn that they will not contribute to any UMBC fundraising campaigns nor recommend UMBC to future potential students. This is extremely damaging to our department, which relies heavily on alumni to recommend us as being the best such department in the United States. Our recommendation: All post-graduation billing must be done on the basis of return-receipt requested mail. The cost of this can be offset by adding the postal charge to the student’s bill. If the mail comes back undelivered, the Billing Office will know that more work is needed to locate the student.

• UMBC’s various offices that contact students should all work off of the same centralized student address information. This clearly was not the case for Mr. Sullivan, in which numerous mailed communications reached him at his updated address, yet the billing went out to a long-defunct address. In the end, the address at which the student is receiving mail should be the address to which his or her mail is sent.

UMBC’s current flawed policies regarding billing and late billing may not affect a huge number of individuals, but for those who are affected, the impact is profound. Damaged credit reports follow individuals for many years and can have profound impact on the availability of loans and the interest rates charged, and, in some cases, can be the deciding point in whether or not a job is offered. We claim to be pro-student, and our mission is to help students better their lives, yet these flawed policies speak rather to a university that seems more interested in convenience to the university’s bureaucratic process than service to students. Change is needed, and would not be expensive.

Note: this proposal has been discussed by the Graduate Program Directors (3 Oct 2012), who unanimously approved the proposal.