

UMUC's OTHER TEACHING FRONTIER

Julie Porosky Hamlin
September 2020

In the OMA context, we most often associate UMUC's innovativeness and its daring with the feat of putting faculty in classrooms in post-war Europe and later in Asia. It was a bold idea to do such a thing, and an achievement of considerable logistical ingenuity to make these programs happen and then thrive for more than 70 years. No other university can lay claim to a transcontinental higher education experiment of such scope and longevity. And the frontier didn't stop there. The overseas military programs also led indirectly to non-military international ventures for UMUC, such as programs in Russia, a business and management institute in Japan, a residential campus in Germany.

Not as well known, and easily overlooked, are UMUC innovations in other arenas, and one in particular that was international: the annual International Conference on Improving University Teaching (IUT). The IUT Conference has its roots in the passion of its founder, Ben Massey, to, well, improve university teaching. For Massey, the IUT project built on a background of pushing boundaries and being restless with the status quo.

Shared by all three of UMUC's earliest chancellors—Ehrensberger, Drazek, and Massey—was a dedication to serving the adult, non-traditional student. That student today is nearly completely assimilated in American higher education; in fact, is considered the “new majority.” But in the mid-20th century, he or she was part of a cohort largely neglected by mainstream colleges and universities. UMUC's achievement was not only getting live education into classrooms around the national capital region and around the world but also that of reaching an adult population, both military and civilian, that without UMUC would not have had access to college.

Massey participated in this pioneering but also set his goals beyond access alone. At a time when it was not as fashionable as now, he put on our radar the Q word—quality. Teaching and learning quality. He believed no student should have to suffer through mediocre teaching. In the 1970s, while director of UMUC's European Division, he took the unprecedented step of adding to the division's very small operations staff a senior-level administrator in charge of faculty development, to head up activities throughout the division.

Ensuring good teaching was an uphill proposition at the time, given that in the long history of higher education worldwide, the ruling assumption had been that faculty need not be trained in the art of teaching. It was sufficient that they be competent in their disciplines, and their role was to expose the student to the content of the discipline. If the student didn't "get it," it was the student's problem. K-12 teachers required training and must prove their effectiveness in the classroom. No such expectation was widely held at the university level.

The flaw in this notion—the notion that university faculty didn't need to demonstrate teaching effectiveness in order to be promoted or to be considered successful in their work—had come under increasing scrutiny by path-breaking educators around the world. By the 1970s, a faculty development movement was underway in a few developed countries. Massey, recognizing that the United States was not in the vanguard of this movement and could benefit from the greater energy and accomplishments of other countries, had begun to explore an international initiative focused on teaching excellence.

In the mid-1970s, while director in Europe, Massey teamed up with Wilbert McKeachie, a nationally known figure at the University of Michigan, who as early as 1951 had published *Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*. He was a high-profile and respected voice in promoting awareness of quality in university teaching. Massey and McKeachie hatched the idea of an international conference. It would be separate from UMUC's military programs and financially self-supporting.

The first International Conference on Improving University Teaching, organized by Massey with the help of McKeachie and others in his worldwide network, was hosted by Universität Heidelberg in 1975. The University again hosted in 1976. It's not clear whether, at the beginning, IUT's creators imagined an annual conference would recur even once or twice. But it is likely they did not imagine IUT would continue under UMUC's aegis for 27 years, and then as an independent organization be carried forward by mentees another 18 years, to the present day. The 45th Annual Conference on Improving University Teaching took place in July 2020. The conference was virtual because of the coronavirus pandemic. Initially it was scheduled to be held live in Padua, Italy.

Between 1975 and 2002, the Massey years, IUT traveled the globe, from Germany to the UK to Switzerland to Japan to Israel to Sweden to Indonesia to Hong Kong to Brazil to Australia to South Africa, to name a few. It revisited some countries over the years, and was hosted twice at home in College Park, Maryland. A year-by-year list of the locations of the 45 conferences is found [here](#). During this period the conferences were keynoted by several big names in higher education.

A genius element in IUT was enlisting universities around the world to host the conference. There was prestige conferred by hosting, and in a few instances more than one institution vied for the honor. Each host institution was encouraged to plan a conference extracurriculum that might include a menu of cultural sites of interest, a walking tour, an opening night reception at city hall, and in one case even an overnight mountain climb. The three-day conference schedule incorporated one free afternoon to allow participants time to enjoy their host setting, and to cut down on absences from conference sessions.

The IUT Conference was designed to be small and to emphasize interaction among participants. During the Massey years, the ideal size was 200 to 250 participants. In keeping with his campaign against ineffective teaching, Massey also had a low tolerance for faculty pontification and elitist trappings of traditional academia. Accordingly, the conference agenda included a keynoter and perhaps only one or two other plenary presenters. The majority of conference time was devoted to “concurrent sessions” that aligned with the year’s chosen themes, grouped submitted papers by topic, and were formatted to promote discussion. Concurrent sessions themselves were grouped by topic into sets that were headlined by “theme sessions.” Intercultural sharing among participants was especially encouraged. At most IUTs, up to a dozen countries were represented.

Each concurrent session was chaired by a moderator who had done her or his homework on how to make connections among the papers, and to intervene if anyone spoke too long. At the outset of the session, the three to five authors in the panel were allowed five to seven minutes each to share highlights of their papers. The largest part of the time in the concurrent session was reserved for discussion among the authors and with the audience. From conference to conference, the concurrent session rules elicited the occasional gasp from presenters new to IUT. They were not used to being limited to such a short speaking time in an academic conference.

“It’s not an academic conference,” Massey would point out, his impatience barely concealed by a grin and a Carolina drawl. “It’s a conference about teaching.” Over the years we heard some version of this comment on multiple occasions.

A few times it was difficult to keep a host institution at arm’s length when it came to planning the IUT conference program. That role was performed by a small UMUC team I had the pleasure of serving on for 18 years. Massey himself led the planning of most of the 27 annual IUT conferences under his stewardship, with the gifted assistance of Vida Bandis, his second-in-command in Europe and later in College Park. By the time he became chancellor of UMUC in the late 70s, however, the demands of his job meant he could use some help with the IUT program content and speakers. I got the assignment, one of the best ever in my professional career.

After a couple of years, the IUT cadre of Massey-Bandis-Porosky became like the proverbial well-oiled machine. Massey made key program content and speaker decisions as Porosky scurried around getting various pieces in place. As time went on, I had more independence, but Massey’s hand never left the wheel. Bandis was the empress of logistics, including all financial matters, and also weighed in on speaker choices and other program decisions.

The directors of UMUC’s two overseas divisions, Europe and Asia, also had a role. Both attended most IUTs and joined in the planning when the conference was in one of their regions. Their networks were helpful in recruiting participants and their local connections at times invaluable. Equally valuable was their help facilitating the participation of Maryland faculty and staff in their regions. Marylanders, as we then called overseas faculty and staff, made up a good-sized contingent at every IUT conference.

The annual IUT planning and execution process started with the mailing of a Call for Papers nearly a year in advance and then receiving “contributed papers,” as we called them (as distinct from the very few “invited papers”). My office in College Park (later “Adelphi”) became the production shop for the processing of the contributed papers, made possible by the efficiency and work ethic of the incomparable Helen Long, a member of our office staff.

As papers arrived, they were screened by Long for conformance with the prescribed format, and sometimes worked over by her. The truly hopeless ones, if their content seemed redeemable, were

returned with instructions to resubmit, FOLLOWING THE RULES THIS TIME, PLEASE! Next the papers needed to be sent out to reviewers, a minimum of two per paper, or more if the paper was on the borderline. Most of the reviewers were members of the IUT Program Advisory Council. This body was a band of Massey's kindred spirits, educators of some accomplishment from around the world who shared a passion for elevating teaching at the collegiate level.

The organizing of contributed papers into concurrent sessions—"sessioning," I came to call it—took place as close to the last minute as possible to accommodate late-arriving papers. Each year a few papers were difficult to group. Then came the daunting task of organizing the many contributed papers into volumes to be printed and mailed to registrants in advance. It was emphasized that an interaction-intensive gathering like IUT relied on participants reading the papers ahead of time and coming to the conference ready to discuss. Long also did the heavy lifting on preparing the volumes for printing. She and I, at the end of some days in that final, frenzied period before shipping to the printer, were almost too tired to speak. We just shared an eye-roll.

While the IUT papers were being organized and a program prepared on one front, Bandis on another front arrayed her considerable resources in diplomacy to field an onslaught of queries about financial arrangements and conference logistics. She was in regular contact with the host institution about meals, accommodations, amenities, scheduling. Few exceptions were made to the rule that conference registration required payment of the conference fee upfront. And "No, we do not have a discount for presenters." Some of her greatest challenges were encountered on-site at the conference, as registrants accosted her with emergencies or special requests—in various languages. We borrowed from UMUC's overseas military programs the pet term "logistical nightmare" to refer to some of the most difficult cases.

From the vantage point of today, when even small conferences are scarcely tackled without the help of a professional event planner, I marvel at our in-house, bare-bones approach to pulling off the IUT conference for all those years. It was done without benefit of a website, and in the early years even before email. We all had other jobs, and yet somehow we found time to fit in IUT.

It's fair to ask what has been the impact of 45 years of an annual conference devoted to raising awareness about university teaching and setting a higher bar. We know from IUT contributions and

exchanges among participants that experimentation with best practices in teaching and learning spread exponentially in the first two decades of the conference. Stratagems such as microteaching, video recording, peer feedback, and others that had been showcased at IUT conferences were adopted in several countries.

Something was afoot. The notion of faculty development (“staff development” in some parts of the world) had begun to be embraced, to move toward the center of the institution. The 1980s advent of instructional design as an area of professional expertise in higher education boosted awareness of teaching effectiveness, and the 1990 U.S. publication of Ernest Boyer’s *Scholarship Reconsidered* sparked a national conversation. The book proposed a reset of the faculty reward system, giving overdue recognition to demonstrated excellence in teaching.

Accountability for teaching and learning results, through the measurement of student learning outcomes, had begun to be emphasized around the world; in the U.S. especially by the regional accrediting commissions. It answered the question “How do we know teaching is effective?” Some IUT Advisory Council members and other frequent attendees pressed to rename the conference “Improving University Teaching and Learning,” and for a time that name was used.

Within a few years, UMUC itself had fully integrated excellence in teaching as an institutional value and had added operational support for effective teaching practices. When Massey transitioned from Europe to College Park in 1976, he brought the faculty development seedling with him, and it took root. The UMUC faculty development office led a year-round series of workshops and other activities, not all voluntary. By the 1980s, a free-standing instructional design unit also was in place at the College Park world headquarters, two decades ahead of most other institutions’ use of ID. This unit supported UMUC’s development, for the first time in its history, of its own undergraduate academic concentrations.

Along with the overseas military programs, IUT was among the visible examples of the spirit of innovation and outreach that defined UMUC and of the worldwideness of its ambit. By “worldwide” I mean not global expansion in the territorial sense but rather that the institution saw itself situated within a certain frame, and that frame had no national borders. Norm breaking, boundary crossing, experimentation . . . they have been encoded in UMUC since its beginning as a separate university. A

detailed history of the several innovations of UMUC's first 60 years is captured in Sharon Hudgins' *Beyond the Ivory Tower*. In the years since that 2007 publication, the tradition has continued.

Under a new name, University of Maryland Global Campus is now best known as an online education behemoth. A glimpse into the engine room that powers UMGC's reach and its success would reveal recent examples of the same striving for excellence that IUT was about: the year-round, non-stop academic calendar, the reorganization of the academic structure, the implementation of competency-based education, the institution-wide conversion to open educational resources in place of traditional textbooks, the launch of an initiative devoted to academic integrity, the creation of public-private partnerships.

Are there ways educational content and access can be made better? Constantly improving, not resting on its laurels has been a UMUC/GC institutional character trait for a university that from the start has had to support itself. (In fact, TQM, Total Quality Management, and CQI, Continuous Quality Improvement, were institution-wide initiatives Massey launched during his years as chancellor.)

In July I attended the 45th Annual Conference on Improving University Teaching (online), now capably led by James Wilkinson of Harvard University, who had joined the IUT following during the Massey years. The IUT logo is nearly the same as the original one, and it was gratifying to see that some of the program elements endure and even some phrases from early IUT brochures are familiar. The emphasis on dialogue and sharing continues. The IUT flame of teaching excellence still burns.

What is my most vivid memory from 18 years of helping to organize IUTs? It would be impossible to do justice to all the lessons learned, inspiration received, and friends made over those years. It would be hard to forget, too, the IUT Conference of 1988, when I arrived in Umeå, Sweden two days before my luggage. Vida Bandis, seemingly as a matter of routine, had an extra toothbrush and extras of other toiletries, which she cheerfully handed over to get me through. Anyone who's had the pleasure of working with Vida would say "Of course she did!"

Vida Bandis: If you read this memoir and detect any inaccuracies in these IUT recollections, please drop a note in the Message Center at the OMA website and set us straight.