

Dr. Carol Thornber: New Dean of the School for the Environment

Dr. Carol Thornber has recently joined UMass Boston as the Dean of the School for the Environment (SFE), bringing with her a rich tapestry of experiences and a deep passion for the natural world. Her journey into environmental science was sparked during a transformative semester spent off-campus as an undergraduate, where she engaged in hands-on research and honed her scuba diving skills along the picturesque West Coast of California. This immersion in nature not only fueled her lifelong love for the outdoors but also solidified her desire to pursue a career dedicated to environmental stewardship.

Having worn many hats in her previous institution, Dr. Thornber balances her dual roles as a professor and an administrator with ease. She recognizes the importance of gaining different perspectives and believes that embracing new cultures and environments is essential for personal and professional growth. "This position is a perfect fit for me as a scientist," she shares, highlighting the broad scope of the School for the Environment. Dr. Thornber is particularly drawn to UMass Boston's mission to support and elevate students, emphasizing the university's student-focused approach, which she finds inspiring. She appreciates the leadership of the university's provost and chancellor, describing them as forward-thinking and incredibly supportive.

As the Dean, Dr. Thornber is committed to ensuring that the SFE meets its academic mission while fostering student success and research engagement. She envisions a collaborative framework where these elements intertwine seamlessly. Under her leadership, the SFE encompasses a wide array of institutions and initiatives, including the Stone Living Lab, which funds cutting-edge research on nature-based solutions. The school is also proud to maintain a field station on Nantucket Island and provides an institutional home for the Urban Harbors Institute and Living on Earth partners, among others.

Dr. Thornber's research program, which informs her knowledge of environmental issues, focuses on climate change and marine communities, particularly harmful algal blooms. She examines how these blooms affect economic activities and the environment, particularly in relation to changing water temperatures and weather patterns. Her collaboration with oyster fishermen, for example, demonstrated that sugar kelp could be a viable winter crop in southern New England waters, providing additional income. This research underscores her belief in the importance of maintaining a research perspective as a dean, fostering collaborations with faculty like Jarrett Byrnes to explore new ideas and initiatives.

Excited about partnerships with the Stone Foundation on various coastal resilience projects, Dr. Thornber also emphasizes the global reach of UMass Boston's research. "Many of our faculty are conducting research around the world," she notes, with research projects in Puerto Rico, Greece, and Italy, among other locations. This global perspective enriches the research landscape at UMass Boston, allowing for deep and diverse investigations into environmental challenges.

For students aspiring to major in environmental sciences, Dr. Thornber advises, "Have a passion for what you do." She encourages them to remain focused on the impact of their work, emphasizing that the drive to make a difference is what sustains a meaningful career in this field.