Dear Members of the Landscape and Stewardship Committee

The Interdisciplinary Studies Program would like to express its support for the development of a New Roots Garden at UMBC. We see tremendous opportunities for supporting UMBC’s mission and objectives through this proposed community-campus partnership. The project would provide multiple, rich research opportunities across various disciplines and facilitate collaboration among various departments and programs (including HAPP, INDS, Social Work, Global Studies, among others). This proposed space would also create a rare and valuable opportunity to have a community project and partners directly present on campus, thus making all the rich service-learning, internship, research and academic connections very convenient for students. The benefits that many of our natural science and engineering students have with applied learning opportunities available in campus facilities such as laboratories and similar facilities for applied sciences would now be available to many other students through this living laboratory and experiential learning site. Most obviously, the New Roots Garden would provide an opportunity to learn about the refugee and asylum process, the conditions that have caused these populations to seek refuge in the United States, and food security, food access and health and nutrition they are facing as they resettle and build new lives in this country. However, there are many other issues worthy of academic study and of vital social consequence that can be engaged through a refugee garden. We note that while this would be a new type of endeavor at UMBC, other institutions of higher education around the country have undertaken similar partnerships, evidently to legitimate benefit of multiple parties, and without harm.

While Baltimore City has been recognized as a leader in the area of food policy planning, support for urban agriculture and community gardens, and improving healthy food to vulnerable populations, Baltimore County has not made similar progress. The areas surrounding UMBC include various demographic groups who are vulnerable to food insecurity. By working out an IRC New Roots Garden partnership, UMBC would be taking a small but possibly critical lead on bringing attention to the food insecurity of the approximately 600 refugees living in the Arbutus/Halethorpe/Yale Heights communities. This step could lead to additional opportunities for UMBC students, faculty and staff to enhance UMBC’s voice and involvement on this issue. We definitely commit our current food system courses (INDS 232, Introduction to Food System Studies, and INDS 430, Creating Food System Justice) taught by Jill Wrigley to provide academic and applied learning resources to this initiative as it moves forward.

We understand that this proposal merits thoughtful development and planning and are committed to supporting students as they advocate and respond to institutional interests that are implicated by this initiative.

Best,

Stephen Freeland, PhD, Director, INDS

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