

University system reaching out to 'stranded adult learners'

Municipalities can be key partners in the higher education process, U-Maine System Chancellor James Page says. The Town of Mount Desert provides one example.

By Janine Pineo

"I've never been to Fort Kent in my life," said Jim Willis, police chief for Mount Desert and Bar Harbor.

Yet in 2013, Willis graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in rural public safety administration from the University of Maine at Fort Kent, while working full-time more than 200 miles away.

"A long-term goal was to get a bachelor's degree," said Willis, who had an Associate's Degree from back in the mid-1980s. He started working for the Town of Mount Desert in 2003. "I guess I wasn't sure what I was going to do for the rest of my career."

It was his sister who found the degree program, after Willis mentioned that he was thinking about finishing his degree, more than 20 years after he got his two-year diploma. He applied in 2010 and was accepted. Willis, whose job expanded to include Bar Harbor during the end of his push to complete his degree, said he was encouraged during the admittance process to submit documentation about his training during his employment.

"They were willing to give me experiential credits. I wanted to be able to apply that," he said.

After that, he signed up for one or two classes per semester. "It's a commitment," he said. "It was every weekend for three years."

And Willis did all of his classes via the internet. "For me, it was the online stuff that was so attractive," he said.

Willis was the poster child for a presentation on Maine adult learners made by Dr. James H. Page, chancellor of the University of Maine Sys-

tem, during the Maine Municipal Association's Annual Convention in Bangor in October 2016.

Invested but 'stranded'

Maine has 200,000 "stranded adult learners," like Chief Willis, who have time and money invested in a college education but have not achieved a bachelor's degree. These potential students often cite family or work obligations for not completing their four-year degrees.

The Adult Degree Completion program is the UMS answer to help meet the state's need for more individuals with bachelor degrees. "About 60 percent to two-thirds (of Maine's future work force) will require a degree," Page said. "How do we get them? Maine has a great high school graduation rate. We never had to sell that to Mainers."

"Now a majority of jobs require post-secondary education," Page said. "We don't have the work force."

With changes in technology and the ability to telecommute for classes, a new world of possibilities is available for non-traditional students. In 2014, the Maine Legislature earmarked funds for UMS to establish the Adult Degree Completion Scholarship Program to provide up to \$4,000 annually to adults who need financial assistance to resume their course work and earn their bachelor's degrees.

As of the 2016 fall semester, 167 students from across the state were in the program. In two years, the



Dr. James H. Page

program has served 94 Maine communities, with 34 degrees attained.

"It's not a lot by some standards," Page said. "Boy, you've got to start somewhere."

Page sees this program as an opportunity to engage with municipalities. "We have to be active working partners with you," he said. "We can do this together, if we partner in it."

Controlling costs

Page stated he felt UMS lost sight of that municipal partnership, describing how that is changing now. He said the system's structural deficit has been reduced to \$20 million, and he expects that debt to be gone by 2019. UMS needs to "engage more deeply and more responsively" with the communities it serves. Part of that is maintaining control over tuition prices, which he said have been flat for "an historic six years."

"We're a good partner. We're a good investment," Page said. "What do we do going forward? The best thing we can do going forward... is fully realize our partnership with you."

Page offered several key components. First, he said, "we have to be accessible to every population group in the state." The number of traditional students going to UMS needs to increase as does the number of non-traditional adult learners if the state is to reach the two-thirds projection for the work force within the next few years.

Next, he said, is affordability, followed by quality programs, which

Janine Pineo is a freelance writer from Hudson and regular contributor to the *Maine Townsman*, jepineo@gmail.com.



Entrance sign at USM's Gorham campus. (Photo by Ben Thomas)

leads to a final component: relative training in fields where there are needs.

“We have readily identifiable skill needs,” Page said, pointing to nursing and teaching shortages as examples.

This action plan feeds into a five-

year plan, Page said. The focus for UMS will be to:

- Increase enrollments.
- Improve student success.
- Support Maine through research and economic development.
- Enhance the fiscal positioning

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

For more information about Adult Degree Completion Scholarship Aid, visit the website learn.maine.edu and click on “scholarships” for application and eligibility information. Or call 1-800-868-7000 to get started.

of UMS.

This is where the Adult Degree Completion Scholarship enters the picture, along with UMS partnering with Maine Municipal Association to find what communities need. Page said UMS is working with MMA to increase access to apprentice programs.

“We hope it makes our graduates more relevant,” he said. “We have vibrant communities in Maine. Towns only work if they have good government.”

The numbers for the program’s first couple of years are small, Page acknowledged. “These are concrete steps. But this is Maine. We’ve always bootstrapped it and that’s why we’re going to be successful.”

Who is eligible for a scholarship to Adult Degree Completion?

- Must be a Maine resident.
- Must be a matriculated student at a UMS institution seeking a first baccalaureate degree.
- Must be a returning undergraduate student who has experienced an education gap of at least three years and is enrolling at a UMS institution no more than one semester prior to

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A Friday scene at USM-Gorham. (Photo by Ben Thomas)

applying for this scholarship.

- Must have a minimum of 30 credits earned from any institution toward a degree.
- Must demonstrate financial need as determined by a completed Free

Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

- Must be registered at least part-time (six to eight credits per semester minimum).

“We’re seeing an increasing number of nontraditional students,” said Lori Wingo, coordinator at the Lifelong Learning Advising Center at the University of Maine and a nontraditional student adviser on that campus. She pointed to the financial crisis of 2008-2009, and said that is part of what has fueled a change on campuses. For example, paper mill closings occurred, she said, displacing workers

who had not needed a degree for their employment.

“One option is to come back to school,” she said. “I think in large part this initiative is part of that need.”

Easy application process

That initiative, Adult Degree Completion, has a “very painless” application process, she said, with relatively quick turnaround to decide on eligibility. A new short application is offered for adult learners, two pages vs. the traditional six pages. Wingo said the new application lacks questions on extracurricular activities and the like, making it relevant to nontraditional students.

Up to \$4,000 in aid can be awarded annually, which applies to a full course load of 12 credits per semester. The scholarship is pared down proportionally with fewer credits per semester, Wingo said.

Wingo’s job is to help nontraditional students get started. “I tag along with them until they are assimilated and comfortable,” she said. “It’s a very gratifying experience. They’ve got the motivation.”

She estimated that 40 percent of the students she assists she never meets in person, although advisers to nontraditional students will travel to the student if asked. “We will meet them where they are,” she said.

While the Adult Degree Comple-

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tion Scholarship requires 30 credits for eligibility, a degree program exists to help along those who have even fewer credits, Wingo said.

The Bachelor of University Studies requires 18 completed credits for qualification and may be the bridge to reach the scholarship eligibility by taking a full semester of 12 credits within this program.

Barbara Howard, director of Bachelor of University Studies, said the program started back in the 1970s. "This is really great for students with a family and work responsibilities," she said.

There are three tracks with set courses: labor studies, leadership studies and Maine studies. A self-designed track is available, she said, which takes a multidisciplinary approach. Some classes are online, although some may not be. But all of it is designed for students who can't attend during traditional hours.

"The adult learners I work with are absolutely inspirational," Howard said. "They serve as great role models."

Town manager support

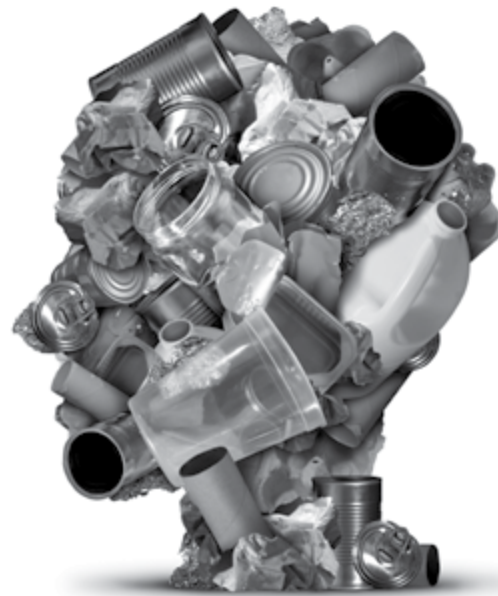
Police Chief Willis discussed his intention to go back to school with his town manager, Durlin Lunt. "He sort of challenged me to get it done," he said.

Willis was a student before the Adult Degree Completion Scholarship was created and part of his conversation with Lunt was about educational compensation.

"We... pretty much paid for that degree," Lunt said. "We felt it would be an important part of his development." The terms were that Willis had to achieve at least a "B" average, Lunt said. Willis graduated with a perfect 4.0 grade-point average.

Lunt said that while municipalities post job descriptions that list ideal candidates, the reality is that the person who gets the job may not have every qualification. That is where targeted education comes in.

"I think we get an employee whose training is honed in to the job they're doing," Lunt said. "A motivated and happy work force is going to be reflected in their interactions with the public." ■



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