

Maine Adult Education Association White Paper – September, 2002

Access With Success:

*Promoting increased participation in post-secondary education in Maine through the
Maine Adult Education College Connection Program*

The Issue

Maine residents need access to high quality technical and professional education in order to obtain the type of employment that will provide real economic security for themselves and their families.

A strong consensus has emerged that Maine needs to increase its level of post-secondary educational attainment. According to the draft of the Blue Ribbon Commission on Higher Education “comparing the per cent of adults (25 and older) with four year college degrees, U.S. Census data ranks Maine at 24%, below the national average of 25.6% and last in New England, well below the 34.2% for the region.”

The Maine Economic Growth Council Report, January 2002, states: “*because the Growth Council deems this measure critical to Maine’s quality of life, it has been given a red flag. It will require further investments in education and in generating employment opportunities that will attract and support highly educated workers.*”

The 2002 Governor’s Conference on Economic Development was devoted exclusively to the issue of improving Maine’s post-secondary educational achievement.

The Institute for a Strong Maine Economy in the 2002 publication No Place to Hide; Confronting Maine’s Economic Future, presents compelling data regarding Maine’s workforce and includes the following as one of 5 key recommendations: “*Promote a culture of lifelong learning through a seamless educational system.*”

Maine has one of the highest high school completion rates in the nation, resulting from the hard work of the state’s high schools and adult education programs, and our K-12 assessment ranks Maine at the top in educational performance. Yet we have one of the nation’s lowest rates of student entry into and completion of post-secondary educational programs.

The challenge of improving post-secondary opportunities for Maine’s adults is a complex issue. Traditional barriers include chronic low aspirations and lack of self-confidence in seeking out college opportunities; lack of transportation; lack of funding; and limited local access to college-level coursework. Many adults would like to attend college but have difficulty finding a way to enroll.

The Role of Maine Adult Education

The Maine Adult Education System is currently working with the population of Maine's citizens who have not accessed post-secondary education. Over 100,000 adults participate in adult education programming each year in the 132 local programs across the state. In 2001, 10,628 students enrolled in high school completion programs and 6,388 in GED preparation classes; a total of 3,488 students earned their high school diploma or GED in 2001. Of the students enrolled in adult high school completion programs, more than half indicated that their motivation was to "go on to college". In addition, over 1,500 adults participate in college connection programs through the Maine Adult Education system each year, and many more make use of high school diploma courses for college preparation.

Even when adults prepare for, and enroll in, college courses, the battle is not won. These students need help in staying in college. More than half of the students enrolling in the University of Maine system leave before earning a degree, according to the Maine Center for Economic Policy. By creating an articulated pathway of support, the Adult Education system can impact this statistic in a positive manner.

What should be done?

For many years, Maine's Adult Education programs have served as a "feeder system" for the University and Technical College system. But until now, this role has not been visible on a broad scale.

According to the Blue Ribbon Commission on Higher Education, *"The Department of Economic and Community Development and the State Planning Office project that 77% of Maine's 2010 workforce is already in the workforce and that the population growth of Maine's citizens in the age group likely to enter the workforce for the first time between now and 2010 will be minimal. Therefore, enhancing the educational level of current workers is essential to raising the overall educational attainment of the workforce."*

The Commission's Recommendation #4 is that ***"The council shall develop a plan of action to expand the capacity of adult education programs to serve as a bridge between high school and higher education and to improve the ability of adult learners to access higher education."***

The Maine Adult Education system can provide that bridge to higher education in cooperation and collaboration with the Technical College and University system. Maine Adult Education is a vital component of the emerging Community College system.

- Maine Adult Education is the "open admissions" policy for the higher education system in Maine.
- Maine Adult Education is a cost-effective and a familiar and trusted community-based system with 132 programs state-wide.
- Maine Adult Education has the flexibility to help adults prepare for current requirements for college admission, e.g. computer literacy, study skills, and a higher level of academic skills.

Recommendations

- Strengthen the college pathway for adults through comprehensive programming at local adult education programs including college counseling, mentoring, campus visits, and preparatory coursework.
- Work in partnership with the post-secondary institutions to establish a College Connection program in every area served by adult education. Programs would support adults to prepare academically for college-level courses, improve study skills, and make the transition to post-secondary education.
- Increase articulation agreements between Adult Education programs and Technical Colleges and the emerging Community College system.
- Create an “open admissions” policy in the Community College system with Adult Education programs as the foundation. Maine Adult Education programs would develop a Memorandum of Understanding with post-secondary institutions to provide developmental studies.
- Ensure funding and regulatory provisions within federal programs (Workforce Investment Act / Carl Perkins / PRWORA / Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) to adequately support access, placement and retention of clients in Adult Education and post-secondary education.
- Elevate funding for Maine’s Adult Education system to provide for a core level of services in all school districts across the state.

Conclusion

The future economic health of our state depends in large part upon the continued development of, and financial support for, the Maine Adult Education system. This support will enable the Maine Adult Education system to provide open access to adult learners who need to improve their academic skills, and to assure the success of these adult learners by providing a continuum of support in their pathway from adult education to post-secondary study.

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