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HIGHER EDUCATION IN TRANSITION:
CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR MAINE 2021

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic changes everything. So people say. So how does COVID-19 impact higher education? Consider the responses of two private Maine colleges, with campuses twenty miles apart.



Colby College in Waterville provided the opportunity for all 2,000 of its students to return to campus this fall. The return was supported by a thorough and intensive virus control program that included routine testing, daily health assessments, reconfiguration of common spaces, and

restricted programming, from athletics to the arts. The plan, overall, required over 85,000 tests and \$10 million. ¹



Meanwhile, just down the road, Unity College completely revamped its teaching approach. ² Unity adopted a hybrid model, which combined online learning and hands-on learning at off-site locations and implemented a shorter, more intensive course

schedule than the traditional semester format. The new approach aims to reach more students and makes the traditional campus experience less important; as a result, the College is exploring the sale of its main campus and has laid off 15% of its staff. College President Melik Peter Khoury said that while this transformation had long been in the plans, the “financial impact of COVID-19 certainly expedited our plans.”

Two colleges. One responding with radical health measures to keep a traditional learning model. The other responding with radical changes to its traditional learning model. Every college in Maine and the nation is facing the challenge of COVID-19 differently. This policy brief explores the implications of the coronavirus pandemic for higher education in Maine, both in the short- and long term.

Higher education is a significant economic engine for Maine. Maine has 38 colleges and universities that educate 72,605 students, employ roughly 15,000 people, and generate about \$2.2 billion in annual revenue. ³ Higher education will only become more important as our economy withstands layoffs, automation, and transformation across a number of industries. It is also a pathway to higher wages for individuals from all backgrounds, especially key for marginalized students. 2020 has forced us to confront not only massive public health challenges and economic upheaval, but also the legacy of racial injustice for which better access to and participation in higher education needs to be a part of our collective recovery. We face a long road to getting back to “normal,” and we also know that the old “normal” is not an option when it comes to supporting the full participation of every racial/ethnic group meaningfully in societal institutions. We will make progress, but we need to adapt.

As enrollments in higher education shift and funding is stretched, the need for a highly educated workforce in Maine increases. The strength of our economic recovery will lie in whether Maine can continue to adapt and invest in its people, ensuring that we reach the MaineSpark goal enshrined in state statute: 60% of adults will have a degree or credential of value by 2025. This brief examines who we need to reach, why it's important, and how higher education can move forward in light of present challenges.

This is one of a series of research reports published by Educate Maine. *Education Indicators for Maine* is an annual report; it provides a snapshot of the performance of Maine's education system through indicators measuring access, participation, and attainment. Our policy briefs, published on an occasional basis, explore specific issues in depth, such as the opportunity for higher education institutions to adapt in light of several co-occurring crises.

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- **Anthony Carnevale**, Director, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce
- **Ed Cervone**, Executive Director, Center for Innovation in Education and VP of External Partnerships, Thomas College
- **Scott Knapp**, President (Retired), Central Maine Community College
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Cover photo: University of Maine

ECONOMIC CONTEXT

Maine has likely lost tens of thousands of jobs in 2020. ⁴ As of mid-September, 38% of all Maine households reported a reduction in income as a result of the coronavirus. The income loss was particularly severe among younger households age 18 to 24—nearly half reported a loss of income. ⁵ Jobs in Maine are not forecast to return to their 2019 level until after 2025.

The households that are hardest hit by COVID-19 nationally are low-income and people of color. The Pew Foundation found in September 2020 that already a third to half of low-income households nationwide were having trouble paying rent and bills and were getting food from a food bank. ⁶ The brunt of the job and income losses have been unequal, with Americans who hold postsecondary degrees being more likely to have a job where they can work from home. Service-sector jobs, which have been subject to greater layoffs, are disproportionately held by people of color. Women in particular have also left the workforce in droves.

In Maine, data show that low-wage jobs were especially hard-hit by the pandemic, while high-wage jobs that typically require some level of postsecondary education grew.

About half of Maine workers (50.5%) have a “work credential”—either an associate degree or higher, or a short-term credential such as a trade or professional license. Maine is slightly behind the rest of the nation on this measure (51.3%). ⁷ The MaineSpark coalition has adopted a goal of achieving 60% of working-age adults in Maine with a degree or credential by 2025.

The jobs that remain increasingly require digital skills. According to a recent analysis from LinkedIn, the 10 occupations that are most in-demand and projected to remain so include project managers, sales representatives, customer service specialists, and graphic designers. These jobs are not necessarily considered

“tech” jobs but have been transformed by technology. Researchers at the Markle Foundation found the “fastest rates of digitization were in jobs in retail, warehouses, and health care.” ⁸

FINANCIAL PAIN POINTS DURING THE CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK DIFFER WIDELY BY RACE, ETHNICITY AND INCOME (Since the outbreak started in February 2020, Nationally)

Level of hardship	Level of hardship			
	most			least
	Used money from savings/retirement to pay bills	Had trouble paying bills	Gotten food from a food bank/organization	Had problems paying rent/mortgage
All Adults	33%	25%	17%	16%
White	29%	18%	11%	11%
Black	40%	43%	33%	28%
Hispanic	43%	37%	30%	26%
Asian*	33%	23%	14%	15%
Upper Income	16%	5%	1%	3%
Middle Income	33%	19%	12%	11%
Lower Income	44%	46%	35%	32%

*Asian adults were interviewed in English only.
 Note: White, Black and Asian adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race. Family income tiers are based on adjusted 2019 earnings.
 Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 3-16, 2020. *Economic fallout from COVID-19 continues to hit lower-income Americans the hardest.”

Last year, Governor Mills’ administration released a 10-Year Economic Plan focusing on talent and innovation. ⁹ Higher education has an important role in several of the recommendations:

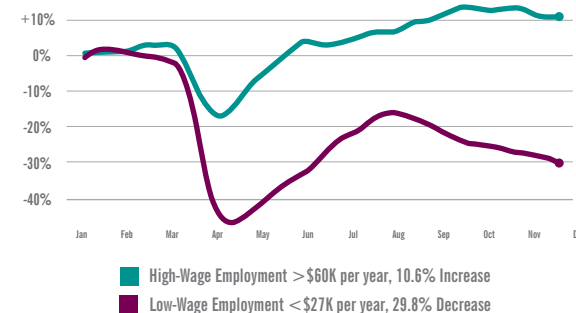
- Develop a system of stackable micro-credentials that enable students to quickly and affordably obtain a credential of value, which can be used to build toward other credentials and degrees and can be fluidly transferred among Maine educational institutions.
- Increase the availability of online learning and other flexible programs.

- Provide more co-op, internship, research, and apprenticeship experiences – for both younger and adult learners – through partnerships between employers and institutions of higher education.

Investments in education also play a leading role among the recommendations of the Governor’s Economic Recovery Committee, which examined how Maine can respond in light of the impacts of the pandemic. ¹⁰

COVID-19 is speeding up changes in the national economy that have been a long time coming. Retail buying has shifted more heavily away from malls and towards online shopping, the trend to work-from-home has accelerated, the need for digital skills is increasing at a faster rate. Likewise, job training and educational recommendations made before the pandemic are even more urgent today.

EMPLOYMENT IN MAINE DURING COVID GREW 11% FOR HIGH-WAGE WORKERS AND FELL 30% FOR LOW-WAGE WORKERS



Source: Opportunity Insights Economic Tracker: tracktherecovery.org.

THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

Students and their families have adjusted rapidly to the new realities, facing questions over the summer such as: Will my selected college or program be open? Will it be safe? Will it be affordable—or worth the cost?

High school guidance counselors in Maine see what is happening up close. Hillary Bush, the Guidance Director at Poland Regional High School, reports:

We had 118 graduates in the 2020 class, and a lot of them switched their plans. For continuing students, we struggled with kids fading out at the end of the semester. It's especially troubling with juniors. We're trying to figure out how to make sure they're going to graduate.

Fall enrollments across Maine's colleges and universities reinforce this observation. Maine's community colleges experienced an 8 percent decline in enrollment in Fall 2020, while the University of Maine system saw a 2.4 percent drop in undergraduate enrollment. These rates were lower than the national average.

On the bright side, the University of Maine System was successful in minimizing overall enrollment losses in the fall of 2020. Total enrollment is only down 0.6% due to gains in graduate and out-of-state student enrollment.

On the other hand, decreases in enrollment numbers were especially severe for graduates of the 2020 high school class. Nationally, immediate college enrollment declined by 21.7 percent compared to 2019. The impact was disproportionately higher for students from low-income backgrounds.¹¹

The National Student Clearinghouse's *Stay Informed* Report also reveals significant enrollment declines for students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds across the nation.

The large declines in community college freshmen are concentrated among Native American, Black, and Hispanic students (-29.3%, -28.4% and -27.5%, respectively). Notably, Hispanic freshman enrollment plummeted this fall after having grown 1.3 percent nationally and 3.2 percent in community colleges in the previous year.¹²

Adult students face additional challenges that may force them to put educational plans on hold. The average age of students at the University of Maine at Augusta is 32. UMA has two campuses (Augusta and Bangor) and eight centers, allowing students to learn both online and in classrooms. This year UMA is increasing its proportion of online classes from 50% to 60%. UMA President Rebecca Wyke describes the challenges for adult students:

Our biggest challenge is that adult students got hit hard by the pandemic. Many lost their jobs, while others were called in for extra hours. Meanwhile their kids were suddenly at home full-time.

She describes numerous barriers including lack of childcare, shifting employment, and a lack of access to broadband internet, especially when students can't access UMA learning centers to complete coursework due to virus restrictions. Pursuing higher education was difficult enough before the pandemic came to Maine.

Strada Education Network conducted a nationally representative survey of 13,000 Americans to gauge the impact of the pandemic on educational plans.¹³ Among the findings:

1. Two out of every three young adults report they have changed or canceled their education plans:

The 18- to-24-year-old age group is the traditional lifeblood of universities, but 65 percent of this demographic is either changing or canceling their education plans.

2. Adults' fears about their ability to succeed are a significant barrier to enrolling:

Nearly half (49 percent) of adults said fears about their ability to succeed, or that they have been out of school too long, are extremely or very challenging issues for them personally.

3. Nondegree programs have the strongest interest:

Regardless of their current education level, a majority of Americans looking to pursue more education strongly prefer shorter certificate and skills-training programs over degree programs.

4. Americans prefer online programs over in-person:

If you had \$5,000 to spend on education, how would you use it? When we posed that question, 46 percent said they would pursue online programs. Less than one-third preferred in-person programs.

5. People of color are most likely to experience disruption:

The pandemic has affected communities of color disproportionately, with Latinos (25 percent) and Black Americans (24 percent) more likely to have been laid off than White Americans (15 percent). They're also more likely to have altered their education plans.

In short, there is interest in continuing education, people see the opportunity and the value in improving their credentials, but economic uncertainty, lack of confidence, and lack of time are barriers.



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EFFECTS ON COLLEGE FINANCES

Fewer students means less money for institutions of higher education. More virus protection activities mean more costs. Colleges are facing a precarious year. According to Dick Startz of the Brookings Institution:

*Nearly every school is at least at some risk of significant financial losses. Second, the risks are incredibly different at different schools. Many schools face difficulties. If things turn out really bad, some schools face closures.*¹⁴

As in other economic sectors, some of the issues are long-term and are simply accelerated by COVID-19. Ross Douthat of the New York Times highlights the demographic challenge:

*Colleges were expecting a grim landscape in the later 2020s, because 2010s birthrates were so low, but now a decline in foreign enrollment and an acceleration of online learning will threaten marginal state schools and possibly close small liberal-arts colleges much sooner. (The coronavirus experience is also likely to push birthrates still lower, delaying any higher education recovery by years or decades more.)*¹⁵

The issues play out in different ways in private and public colleges. Maine's private colleges are small. Traditionally, their competitive advantage has been personal attention for the student. Ed Cervone of Thomas College says,

At Maine's small private colleges, the business model is face-to-face instruction in a residential setting. Our experience going to hybrid models in the pandemic has reinforced the value of the in-person model. That's where most students thrive. It's important to note that our experience doing in-person residential education during the pandemic is: that's what students want and need. Some students thrive in remote learning, but the vast majority are looking for an in-person experience. All the revenues associated with our models are dependent on people being there in person.

In the state's public higher education sector, General Fund dollars support 42% of the costs of the University and Community College Systems.

SOURCES OF PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING IN MAINE (MILLIONS), FY 2020

Tuition and Fees	\$269.1	42%
State Appropriation	\$265.7	42%
Miscellaneous	\$100.8	16%
Total	\$635.6	100%

While initial state revenue forecasts in the summer of 2020 were dire, a robust stimulus response and better-than-expected tax revenues reduced budget cuts from original projections. Initially Maine's higher education institutions were expected to make about a 10% cut, but the Mills Administration held this area of the budget to a 1% reduction, reflecting the significant role Maine's higher education institutions play in a robust recovery.

This is consistent with findings on budget cuts following the Great Recession: research shows that austerity measures ultimately hurt students and the economy. "States that cut funding and programs ultimately fared much worse than states that increased investment. Those with higher spending cuts saw higher unemployment rates, sustained and created fewer private sector jobs, and experienced overall slower economic growth."¹⁶

Even so, there is little room to cover budget shortfalls with tuition increases. Students and their families are experiencing income reductions this year and Mainers already pay more for college as a proportion of income than their counterparts in New England.¹⁷

Economist Susan Dynarski of the University of Michigan looks at the cumulative effects of COVID-19, financial difficulties, and a reduced college cohort, and fears that it might "take decades for public higher education to recover from such losses and disruption."¹⁸

Anthony Carnevale of Georgetown's Center on Education and the Workforce highlights concern about falling budgets and their impact on equity: "Efficiency can drive out generosity and fairness. Institutions will be chasing kids who can pay. How much state/federal governments contribute will be key."

A bright spot in 2020 was the considerable collaboration among Maine's higher education institutions to ensure a safe and effective reopening. In June, higher education leaders statewide published "Sustaining High Education and Sustaining Maine: A Framework for Reopening Maine's Colleges and Universities in Fall 2020."¹⁹ Maine's colleges and universities collectively managed among the most successful returns to campus in the nation, supported by considerable investments in testing infrastructure and planning. As Ed Cervone notes, "the whole sector stepped up. We saved a generation from being out of work or a year delayed in their postsecondary educations."

While Federal relief funds have proved enormously helpful in the past year, it will continue to take tremendous commitment and adaptation across federal and state governing bodies and higher education institutions to continue to provide accessible education at reasonable cost for all students.



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ONLINE LEARNING

In the pandemic, everyone is becoming an online learner. Online learning has been around for decades now, though its widespread use happened virtually overnight in March 2020.

In *The Promises and Pitfalls of Online Education*, authors at the Brookings Institution highlight the promises of online learning:

*Online courses offer the promise of access regardless of where students live or what time they can participate, potentially redefining educational opportunities for those least well-served in traditional classrooms. Moreover, online platforms offer the promise, through artificial intelligence, of providing the optimal course pacing and content to fit each student's needs and thereby improve educational quality and learning. The latest "intelligent" tutoring systems, for example, not only assess students' current weaknesses, but also diagnose why students make the specific errors. These systems then adjust instructional materials to meet students' needs.*²⁰

The authors also call attention to the realities of online learning to date:

Yet today these promises are far from fully realized. The vast majority of online courses mirror face-to-face classrooms with professors rather than using technology to better differentiate instruction across students...Online courses can improve access, yet they are also challenging, especially for the least-prepared students. These students consistently perform worse in an online setting than they do in face-to-face classrooms; taking online courses increases their likelihood of dropping out and otherwise impedes progress through college.

When Maine schools transitioned to remote instruction in the Spring of 2020, students were thrust into a 100% online learning environment, what some call "emergency learning." Instructors did not necessarily have the preparation nor the technology to teach effectively in an online environment, while many students struggled to get access to devices and broadband access. Even when these conditions were met, the loss of in-person relationships posed a risk for retention in school.

Katelin Urgese describes what happened at Lewiston High School:

One of the biggest challenges has been in communication. Families that don't have a device at home or internet access, it's challenging to get and stay connected with them. We don't always have the right phone number, and they may not respond to email.

Ed Cervone echoes this experience at colleges:

Around the state, lower-income students face unstable living situations and other hurdles—having to go back to work, connectivity/technology issues, and households more negatively affected in this economy. Sometimes it's impossible for schools to keep students connected to education. That's still playing itself out, regardless of your institution.

Rosa Redonnet at the University of Maine System elaborates:

When you think of low-income households, first-generation students, there may be many families who may not understand or be supportive of college, and on top of it, they may have a situation at home with multiple learners and workers utilizing broadband. Or there may be no broadband at all, in which case you can't access coursework or anything else. No computer? No library access? Usual hotspots closed? It's not a great situation.

Scott Knapp says that Central Maine Community College has been able to take its art, sciences and business programs online, but hands-on courses are different. Mechanics have to work on cars, nurses must work in hospitals. The college is redesigning programs to reduce personal contact.

But no matter how creative and adaptive Maine's institutions of higher education are, there will be learning losses in 2020—more for low-income and students of color than for others. A McKinsey study published in December demonstrated that "students of color were about three to five months behind in learning, while white students were about one to three months behind."²¹ Students from low-income households and students of color are consistently more likely to face remote learning challenges, such as inadequate access to devices or internet, living in crowded conditions, lack of access to mentors or educational resources, or language barriers.²² These are challenges in normal times that have only been compounded by the pandemic.

OPPORTUNITIES — “NEVER WASTE A CRISIS”

Many educators pointed out that a benefit of the sudden shutdown was that people got educated quickly about online technology.

Scott Knapp of Central Maine Community College points out:

If there's a silver lining, it's getting us all more acquainted with remote technologies. Some instructors who had not ever used distance education are doing it, and many of them even like it. Once we go back to more on campus and in-person learning, the way we've embraced remote technologies will benefit us all.

Rebecca Wyke at the University of Maine at Augusta reports the same:

Faculty who once thought “I can't teach this discipline online” are now getting creative. Everyone is becoming an expert at Zoom. We will figure out how to apply that in the post pandemic world. It's valuable to have a different way to engage.

Katelin Urgese of Lewiston High School says:

It's forced us to look at preserving the most important things, and to rethink practices that we've continued that maybe didn't work as well or weren't as central to what we're trying to accomplish. Think more creatively about how we connect with students and families. It's forcing us to be creative, work with more community organizations to partner.

Ed Cervone from Thomas College reports:

We've started doing a lot that we should have been doing all along. Integrating more remote technology into our days will continue. It's been a big eye opener to admissions, advancement, student success staff. Why haven't we been using these tools more? We're already seeing some advancements. It's given us an opportunity to understand how to better use technology to deliver education more efficiently and to better connect with the world outside.

I always think—never waste a crisis. It forces us to step back and look at ourselves with very different eyes. The traditional higher education approach has been to meet students where WE are. COVID enables us to meet them where THEY are, and is a very healthy outcome. COVID is forcing us to think holistically about what we offer and how we provide it.

—Rosa Redonnett, University of Maine System

Higher education thought leader Scott Galloway of New York University's Stern School of Business sees this as a time for universities to address longstanding problems.²³ For example, for the last several decades, higher education costs—like health care costs—have risen at a faster rate than inflation. It's becoming a social good only available to the well-off, or to exceptional students from poorer families who can win a scholarship. It's also a point of pride among schools to brag about how many students are rejected. In his mind, this should be a point of shame. It's time, he thinks, to make higher education affordable to the “unexceptional” student — i.e., most of us.

The answer for Galloway is technology. If universities could partner with employers to offer real-world curriculum in an online format, the number of students who could attend a university could double, at little added expense to the school. It would break the cycle of unit costs rising more than inflation for colleges. Technology has reduced delivery costs in retail services, banking, and entertainment. It could do so in higher education. The coronavirus pandemic may be the kickstart that is needed to get the process going.

Another opportunity presents itself in the form of in-migration. Since the pandemic began, there has been a national movement out of cities and into the countryside. Maine has benefited from this in the real estate market.²⁴ At the University of Maine System, out-of-state enrollment increased in the fall of 2020. This is an ongoing market opportunity for all Maine institutions of higher education.



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GOALS FOR CHANGE

Maine government and schools are doing all they can as fast as they can to deal with the immediate future. The Maine Community College System is offering free courses tied to skills and occupations currently in demand as a result of COVID-19 such as pharmacy technician, medical records technician, and Microsoft office specialist. An Alford Foundation grant is expanding free training options to phlebotomy, industrial electrical repair, facilities maintenance, software development, and heavy equipment operation.²⁵ The University of Southern Maine (USM) is offering a new Welcome Home Scholarship of up to \$2,000 to Maine students attending out-of-state colleges and universities who decided to transfer to USM to be closer to home during the pandemic.²⁶ The Governor's Economic Recovery Committee recommended investing \$93 million in Maine's postsecondary education system to create educational and training pathways to high-demand career fields for Maine people of all backgrounds and experience levels.²⁷

The MaineSpark coalition is continuing to press forward toward the statewide attainment goal: 60% of adults will hold a degree or credential of value by 2025. The economic recovery is expected to take 4-5 years. Families, students, institutions of higher education, and state government must look beyond the immediate impacts in 2020 to address what will happen in 2021 and beyond.

Michael Collins, Vice President at *Jobs for the Future*, argues that public institutions of higher education must achieve three major goals:²⁸

1. Make high-quality online learning the new normal.

There is an unprecedented opportunity to see what works for students who have historically been underserved by online learning modalities—and to make improvements.

2. Create new ways for colleges and employers to work together.

College leaders will need to collaborate with employers in creating new ways to increase student access to paid, work-based learning opportunities, including apprenticeships, co-ops, and internships... College leaders will need to be flexible by adding entry and exit points into credential pathways that will allow learners who are working to pause, stop, or restart their educations as they toggle between education and skills acquisition and work.

In other words, colleges will need to provide more **flexible credential pathways** that align with the skills most in-demand by Maine employers. Employers will need to adapt to provide more support for ongoing upskilling efforts.

3. Find more creative ways to pay for college.

There is a critical need to develop new ways of financing postsecondary education and training. Innovative use of the Pell Grant, including short-term Pell Grants pegged to quality standards, income share agreements, paid work-based learning opportunities, and lifelong learning accounts are all viable methods of financing to explore.

This report uses these goals as a jumping off point for the following recommendations for Maine. While Collins addresses racial equity throughout his framework, this report expands on that by adding a fourth recommendation:

4. Keep equity at the forefront.

Reaching the goal of increasing degree attainment and supporting a strong economic recovery will require inclusion of ALL people in postsecondary education pathways, especially those who have been historically excluded.

The next four sections identify what needs to be done for Maine to achieve these goals.

RECOMMENDATION 1: MAKE ONLINE LEARNING HIGH QUALITY & ACCESSIBLE TO ALL

1a. Build a framework for quality.

“Quality” online learning is more than just transferring existing course materials to a new format. There’s a great need for training.

The National Standards for Quality Online Learning includes three sets of standards across online teaching, programs, and courses.²⁹

High-quality online learning is facilitated by instructors who are trained in digital pedagogy, including how to build relationships virtually and facilitate productive and engaged communication among all learners. Instruction should be personalized based on learners’ unique academic, social, and emotional needs and accommodations must be made for students with identified disabilities or those who represent historically underserved groups.

Online courses must feature measurable objectives with learning activities that promote achievement and learner ownership over their progress. The standards highlight best practices across a number of domains, from assessment to professional development and program leadership. Maine schools are at different points along the road to online teaching effectiveness—but all have a lot of work remaining to do.

1b. Provide wraparound supports to students.

Maine schools will need to do much more than improve their use of online learning technology. High schools and colleges alike will have to do more outreach to students and provide more academic, financial, technical, and mental health supports. The Economic Recovery Committee’s report emphasizes the need for navigators who can help students remove barriers and provide wraparound services such as emergency funds and connections to resources like childcare and health care.

Rosa Redonnett extends the need for support to everyone in the community:

How do you support learners and faculty? We’re going to have more mental health issues with both. Working in isolation is not easy. If you already need support, that’s magnified. We need creative ways to deliver additional support.

She also raises the issue of childcare:

For any learner with children, child care is a huge issue. And it’s the same with so many of our employees. The balance of work with their own children’s care and education, to try to figure that out on their own, without infrastructure and support in place, it’s a challenge.

1c. Expand high-speed broadband access and affordability.

When education goes online, those without internet access and computers are left behind. This was clearly observed in the spring of 2020. Rebecca Wyke of UMA observes:

Just look at broadband. Those students without access at home were at a significant disadvantage. Many students live beyond the “last mile” of building out the broadband. Students who are home with a spouse and kids, if everyone’s online with plenty of bandwidth and devices, studying and learning is possible. But if you don’t have bandwidth, and you have to drive to the library and park in the parking lot to do schoolwork, that’s not sustainable.

At least 83,000 locations in Maine do not have broadband service that the State defines as essential. Even in those areas where high speed broadband service, many households in Maine do not subscribe because the cost is prohibitive.³⁰ In 2018, only 55% of Maine households had a broadband internet subscription, and 50% had high-speed broadband.³¹ All Mainers need access to online education and work opportunities.

The lack of broadband connections at home disproportionately affects low-income students, rural students, and adult students. With multiple generations studying and working at home in a pandemic, the importance of broadband access has come into stark relief.

Rosa Redonnett says:

Broadband - we need something really big. Maine’s recent bond issue of \$15 million is just a drop in the bucket. Too many areas, especially in Maine, can’t compete economically if they don’t have good broadband service available.

RECOMMENDATION 2: ENCOURAGE INNOVATIVE CREDENTIAL PATHWAYS AND PARTNERSHIPS THAT ALIGN HIGHER EDUCATION AND BUSINESS

2a. Develop more occupational credential and digital badging programs. Unbundle degree programs so students can gain credentials more quickly.

The goal of achieving 60% of the Maine workforce with credentials is even more important in the post-pandemic world.

Prior reports from Educate Maine have pointed out the need to diversify the pathways available to students to get workplace credentials. Ed Cervone of Thomas College sees this crisis as an opportunity for educational institutions to move aggressively in this direction:

The rigid higher education structure of sitting in a seat, earning a lot of credits to get a degree is the right choice for fewer and fewer people. We need to be creating new programs that are more flexible, with things like stackable learning experiences and credentials. The bigger institutions are doing it now, and we need to move to that.

Adults are the biggest market for higher education in Maine. Colleges need to figure out how to serve both traditional and non-traditional learners. If you're not looking at readjusting your model, you're not going to be around long. This emergency offers a window to make big changes. Faculty, board structure, alumni relations, everything is on the table. If you want to run some big changes, decision makers are more open to that right now. Now is the time.

Pockets of this are happening already. The University of Maine at Augusta has created routes to credentialing in computer sciences. Diana Kokoska, the Coordinator of Computer Information Systems Department, describes how it works:

University of Maine at Augusta—in partnership with the nonprofits Goodwill Northern New England, Project Login, and Workforce Solutions—has developed “laser certificate” programs in Computer Information Systems. In one year of study, students can earn a certificate in one of six areas: data science, database design, networking, programming, security, and web design & development. Each certificate requires two classes apiece in the fall and spring, and one class plus an internship in the summer. All of the classes are offered online.

The program is targeted to youth experiencing barriers to employment. The partner nonprofit organizations help recruit the students and support them in issues that arise during the course of the program.

The certificates are “stackable” in that they carry college credit. The class and internship credits are transferable toward an associate’s or a bachelor’s degree. So besides obtaining work experience, and a credential, the students also earn credit towards a traditional college degree.

The Economic Recovery Committee report underscores the importance of flexible credentialing pathways as a component of preparing Maine’s workers for innovative sectors such as the expanding clean energy economy.

2b. Collaborate across institutions and sectors.

Anthony Carnevale of Georgetown points out that some problems which existed before COVID-19 aren’t going away:

An emerging problem is that the youth labor market (LM) has been in decline since the 1980s. Young people don’t get valuable work experience, and their education doesn’t provide the skills needed for their first career job. To counteract that, we need more exposure to workplaces in middle school, internships in high school, and stronger work-related programs in college. Employers can make a difference by providing work experience, internships, summer jobs, and other exposure for students.

Here again there are good examples in Maine. Educate Maine’s *Maine Career Compass* is in its fifth year of offering professional development, social opportunities, and networking for summer interns. Since 2017, the program has engaged more than 1,500 students at more than 80 employers across the state. The program is designed to support both businesses and students by creating an affinity for Maine and a pathway to career opportunities with Maine employers.³²

In 2020, Northeastern University established the *Roux Institute* in Portland. The institute offers online graduate degree and certificate programs in fields ranging from analytics, bioinformatics, and computer science to project management. The programs are “*designed with companies at the table from day one.*”³³

RECOMMENDATION 3: CONSIDER HIGHER EDUCATION A STRATEGIC ASSET

3a. Change the way we think about investing in higher education.

At the most basic level, if we get more workers with credentials to be employed, our economy will be stronger. Retired Central Maine Community College President Scott Knapp says it plainly:

A large role the state has is in how we encourage more people to go on to higher education. Both students coming out of high school, and adults in mid-career, I'd like to see us make it financially easier for those people to return to school, that would be helpful. We have a lot of Mainers with some college but no degree. If we could get them all back, on track to get credentials or degrees, that would make us economically a lot more competitive as a state.

Rebecca Wyke, former Commissioner of Finance for the State of Maine, prior to her current job as President of the University of Maine at Augusta, has sympathy for the budget-cutters, but also wants legislators to think about the future:

I wish people understood that, particularly in a state like Maine, higher education is the path to our economic future. If we don't raise our education levels, if we don't help our citizens to upskill, we won't have the economy we want. Higher education is an economic engine to help people transform their lives. Then they pay back into the system in taxes. Higher education is a public benefit.

State investment in higher education does matter, it has to be part of what we hope for. Rural campuses like Fort Kent and Machias have taken a big financial hit. Those institutions are the stalwarts in their communities. Do people in those counties have access to higher education without them? It's an equity issue for people in rural Maine. If we want to preserve those communities, those institutions are essential.

Continued investments are critical to meet ongoing needs, such as reengaging learners, increasing degree attainment, and preparing workers for Maine's innovative and high-demand sectors. Maine employers need workers with up-to-date skills and Maine people need help affording education and training that will lead to good-paying jobs during and after the pandemic.

Look at higher education not as a cost, but as an essential service and a critical investment.
—Ed Cervone, Thomas College

3b. Expand postsecondary education pathways for Maine students.

There are many pathways to postsecondary education in Maine that can support learners toward enrolling in and completing college. Rebecca Wyke highlights the momentum toward expanding early college statewide:

There is an agreement that a high school education isn't sufficient. Early college is happening now and should expand, so that more students can earn dual high school and college credits.

Early college offers the opportunity for high school students to gain college experience, earn credits, and save money. Students who have taken early college courses are more likely to enroll in and ultimately earn a college degree.³⁴

Additionally, the New America Foundation emphasizes the particular value of community colleges for adult learners:

Community colleges are particularly well-positioned to help local job seekers and employers get back on their feet by providing high-quality training programs. These public colleges generally have strong ties to local businesses, experience serving adult learners, and deep roots in their communities.³⁵

Scott Knapp of CMCC puts it in simpler language:

I wish more people understood how economical community colleges are. You can get a good education at a pretty low price. I always hear about people who went in to so much debt, and I think, "I bet they didn't start at a community college."

The New America Foundation calls attention to the need to "design investments in community colleges that leverage their full potential as economic development institutions."

3c. Enhance marketing efforts to out-of-state students.

The *Maine Economic Development Strategy*, written before COVID-19 hit the scene, recommended steps to attract students and recent graduates to come to Maine.³⁶ The University of Maine System reported an uptick in out-of-state enrollment in the fall of 2020. Now is the time to incorporate this marketing into the broader effort to attract people to live, work, and learn in Maine.

Ed Cervone points out:

I'd like to see more of a unified front for higher education in Maine. Promote Maine as a higher education destination. We have the full range of higher education institutions in Maine. We should market to students from other states and regions together. We shouldn't be trying to compete with each other. It could be a talent attraction policy for the state. It was proposed as a recommendation for the Governor's Economic Recovery Committee: Market higher education as another reason to move to Maine. Promote our vibrant, high-quality higher education system.

RECOMMENDATION 4: KEEP EQUITY AT THE FOREFRONT

The coronavirus pandemic has had disproportionate impacts on students from low-income households and students of color. These students already faced barriers to enrolling in and completing higher education before COVID-19. Their full inclusion in postsecondary education is required if we are to see a full economic recovery in Maine.

Pursuing many of the recommendations listed above will help Maine make progress. The following are targeted recommendations to promote more equitable access to higher education across the state.

4a. Conduct equity audits to identify policies and procedures that higher education institutions need to address.

*As the Center for American Progress has proposed in the past, an equity audit would provide a top-to-bottom review of colleges' policies, procedures, and supports, ranging from admissions and recruitment to career services and graduation. The goal here is to identify missing supports as well as practices that may have unintended negative effects on certain groups of students. This includes looking at the demographics of high schools where colleges recruit, whether there are disparate impacts from the way colleges determine who needs remedial education, and whether certain types of students are less likely to use supports such as advising or tutoring. Colleges can then use these audits to figure out how to better serve Black and Latinx students, as well as other underserved students.*³⁷

4b. Be creative in increasing financial aid.

Both government and higher education leaders must find new and innovative ways to help students pay for postsecondary education. There are many opportunities, such as increasing the maximum award for the Pell Grant, providing more paid work-based learning opportunities, pursuing income share agreements, and incentivizing employers to pursue upskilling initiatives in partnership with postsecondary institutions.

Here in Maine, several interviewees recommended increasing the number and size of awards from the Maine State Grant Program. Currently, the program is funded at \$16 million per year, and provides up to \$1,500 per year to students enrolled in any Maine college, public or private.

Rosa Redonnett of the University of Maine echoes the call for more creativity:

I'd really like to see a more creative approach to federal financial aid. Make it so learners can get support to stack credentials. If you're starting small and building through to a degree, have a financial aid policy that can support that. Right now, if I'm starting at a credential or certificate program, nine times out of ten I don't qualify for any federal financial aid. But that's the on-ramp to a degree for so many learners.

The more flexible financial aid can be—as institutions learned through distributing emergency grants to help students with rent and access to food in the pandemic, for example—the more effective it will be at addressing the many non-academic barriers students face in completing degree and credential programs.

4c. Prioritize funding for institutions that can best serve Black, Hispanic, Native American, and low-income students and those institutions that provide timely opportunities for unemployed or underemployed individuals to reskill.³⁸

Targeted investments are the most effective way to provide upward economic mobility for the most vulnerable populations. Resources are limited and therefore Maine needs to invest dollars where they can provide the most return. Community colleges have faced some of the steepest enrollment declines and yet they are one of the most significant training providers of the skills required for in-demand jobs. As the Lumina Foundation states:

*An effort to stabilize funding for community, technical, and regional colleges and minority-serving institutions— typically the point of entry for the recently unemployed— will protect essential postsecondary paths to meaningful lives and thriving, resilient economies.*³⁹

ENDNOTES

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