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Addressing retention

Looking for new solutions to an old problem

Sarah Trent
Executive Editor

In 2004, 862 freshmen enrolled at USM. Now four years later, it can be estimated that only between 80 and 130 of those students will graduate this May.

By May '09, it's likely that only between 215 and 240 of the original 2004 cohort will have graduated.

What happened to the other 600 students? About half of them, roughly 290 students, left USM before they could enter their sophomore year.

One of the greatest challenges facing USM, according to Interim President Joe Wood, is retention — or “persistence,” the more pc term — which is defined as the percentage of full-time first-year regularly admitted degree candidates who finish their freshman year at this university and come back for their second.

According to an October “Moving Forward” letter to the university community, he says that while the national average of retention for our peer institutions is 75 percent, USM's is 68.

And while improving retention has been a concern for more than 20 years, the current climate of financial crisis — which relates in part to decreasing enrollment — has drawn even more attention to the effort.

The new Entry Year Experience (EYE) courses and general education curriculum; the new Office for Early Student Success; and the development of an advising handbook are all recent attempts to stem an old problem.

In 1985, USM's retention rate was closer to 60 percent.

This rate remained steady until 1994, when a series of efforts were made to improve the academic experience of students with a focus on community building, early intervention, and expanded advising.

For the past ten years our retention rate has been hovering around the current 68 percent, meaning each class loses about a third of its students between their freshman and sophomore years.

Last week, Syracuse University's Dr. Vincent Tinto, a nationally renowned expert on issues of retention and student success, was invited to speak at USM in several forums, including at the meeting of the Board of Trustees and for a workshop titled “Creating Conditions for Student Success,” which was televised across the University of Maine System.

One of the major ideas addressed during these presentations was the creation of “learning communities,” which would involve first-year students co-enrolling in a series of courses, meaning that the same group of students would progress together through a sequence of related, interdisciplinary classes.

This is an idea not unlike the recently accepted gen-ed curriculum, which will take effect in September 2009.

In a luncheon held between his presentations, Tinto spoke casually with a handful of representatives across campus, including professors, staff, and several students.

Concerns about how to build community at USM were brought up by the students, who included senior Student Senator Sri Dyhana and junior Senator Katherine Letourneau.

Likewise, the professors present brought up concerns from their end of the situation.

Gary Johnson, professor of history, reminded Tinto and the others present that no matter how much data is gathered by administrative offices, including the Office

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Student Government Elections '08

Matt Dodge
News Editor

For a full listing of
senate candidates
on page 5

Choose your future student body president

Student government elections are here, with a three-way contest for the position of Student Body President. All are young, all have at least a semester of experience on the Student Senate, and all have ideas of the direction this university needs to head. Facing a new university President, a worsening financial situation, decreasing enrollment, the creation of a new core curriculum and the possible suspension of academic programs, next year's student leader will have a lot to think about. Who do you think can handle it best? Check out our voting guide and cast your vote online before Friday. <http://www.usm.maine.edu/studentlife/vote08>



Benjamin Taylor

If there is one thing Ben Taylor brings to the SGA presidential race, it's experience. The sophomore economics major is an active member of the USM Student Senate, and current vice chair of the organization.

Taylor's experience in the student senate has taught him how to help groups achieve their potential; a skill he feels would be useful as president. This familiarity with USM politics will also come in handy, according to Taylor, who says it will let him “work in a system without doubting my actions, with a clear understanding of what the Constitution allows is valuable.”

Taylor cites a lack of student involvement as one of USM's greatest concerns, but he is optimistic. “There's a lot of potential (to build community), especially around Gorham where there are more traditional students.”

Outside of the political world, Taylor enjoys classic movies, with “On the Waterfront” topping his list.



Adam Royer

Adam Royer is used to running in races, but usually ones that are judged in seconds, not votes.

The sophomore cross country and track runner says his confidence lies in his people skills. He cites his experience with legislation and a personable manner as valuable assets he brings to the SGA presidential race.

Concerned about student involvement, Royer thinks that campus activities need to be better funded and more attractive to students.

“Dances, Husky Fest, Speed-Dating; these all help build community through fun events,” he says.

Royer's experience with the Juvenile Justice Advisory Group, an organization that helps troubled youth, has given him insight into how legislation can be written and applied.

Royer was appointed as a “youth member” to the group, where he votes on funding and helps create legislation.



Ben Skillings

Ben Skillings is comfortable leading organizations, and his record of involvement says as much.

The freshman communications major has helped to create and expand groups focusing on social issues from worker education to disability advocacy.

His focus within these groups is to help them reach their goals, a skill he thinks will translate to SGA president. “Typically agencies don't work together as well as they could,” he says.

As part of the New Maine's Workforce Alliance, Skillings has been involved in helping immigrants and refugees learn job skills that will make them valuable members of the Portland community.

Calling USM a “failing” university, Skillings sees potential in the community. “When people are invested in something, they start to care about it.”

On his own time, Skillings enjoys watching the Celtics, and says that meditation helps him keep his life in balance.

YOU'RE GOING ON VACATION . . .

. . . and so are we. Look for the next regular issue of the Free Press in the stands on April 7.

And coming soon - our first ever Free Press housing guide. On April 2 pick up tips on renting your first apartment, neighborhood guides, dorm ratings, and more!