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Achievement at every level: Thousands benefit from Student Success and Retention Initiative

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Thousands of University of Maine students are gaining earlier access to research, stronger support in key courses and clearer pathways to careers. These expanded opportunities are improving outcomes and helping prepare graduates for the workforce.

“At UMaine, we are intentionally building a coordinated system of support and opportunity that reaches students early and continues throughout their academic journey,” said Scott Marzilli, senior associate provost for student success and innovation. “This work is not about isolated initiatives, but about creating a consistent, high-impact experience that prepares students for success in their studies and their careers from day one.”

The student experience is being transformed from beginning to end at UMaine through the Student Success and Retention Initiative, a hallmark of UMS TRANSFORMS. Thanks to the historic investment from the Harold Alfond Foundation, over half of all first-year students at UMaine engage in research and inquiry-based creative work early in their college careers.

As a result, more students have been able to succeed in challenging, core courses, and build essential skills that support participation in high-impact internships along the way.

The initiative is organized around three interconnected efforts: Research Learning Experiences (RLEs), Gateways to Success (Gateways) and Pathways to Careers (Pathways). Together, they ensure that students are engaged early in their college careers, have the academic support they need to succeed and are connected to opportunities that prepare them to enter the workforce after graduation.

RLEs were first piloted at UMaine and UMaine Machias in fall 2021 with more than 30 course sections enrolling 250 students. Following the pilot, courses expanded across Maine’s public

universities, and participation increased by 800%. In 2025, 2,374 students enrolled in 207 sections across 103 unique courses systemwide. More than 5,500 students have benefited.

Maeve Littlefield, a sophomore majoring in biology, didn't always imagine a career for herself in STEM. She didn't develop a passion for the scientific process until late in her high school career.

Last fall, she enrolled in "Creative Expression of Science," a Research Learning Experience (RLE) that combined creativity and science by exploring new ways to understand and communicate research and science. In examining prints, paintings, drawings and examples of digital storytelling, she began to see ways in which she could combine her creativity and interest in science to promote a broader understanding of changes in our natural world.

"Sometimes we get caught up in seeing statistics about the environment and human impact," Littlefield said. "But we also forget that adaptation and evolution make really resilient communities and populations, and that it's not hopeless. It makes you want to fight more for these things that are important – that if we do lose them, they aren't coming back."

Experiences like Littlefield's are foundational to the initiative's broader effort to engage students in meaningful, hands-on learning early in their academic careers. They are designed to build skills and confidence, and to promote a sense of belonging through creative learning opportunities and research.

Following the success of the RLEs, Maine's public universities began offering Advanced RLEs (ARLEs). They provide students who have completed one semester with more in-depth knowledge and experience, enhancing their critical thinking and building specialized skills.

Recent ARLEs have tasked students with identifying methods to treat human polyomavirus-induced diseases, pitching business strategies to Maine businesses such as Aroma Joe's and Bath Iron Works, and conducting group research on tidal marshes, forests, seaweed and historical artifacts along the Schoodic Peninsula.

While RLEs are designed to engage and empower, Gateways to Success aims to eliminate barriers to ongoing success for students in entry-level courses by implementing strategies such as mentorship, early alerts and curriculum updates.

"Students struggling in certain courses isn't new. What is new is that now because of the generosity of the Harold Alfond Foundation, we've been able to implement a number of interventions to address the issue," said Gateways coordinator Mark Brewer, also professor and chair of UMaine's Department of Political Science.

Since Gateways' launch, the vast majority of students who were enrolled in historically challenging "gateway" courses have participated in pilot interventions to support their course experience. The program is currently in the third year of studying impacts from the pilot process to select and expand the strongest interventions.

"I've seen an incredible amount of energy and enthusiasm from faculty across the colleges and at Machias in designing interventions to improve student success," Brewer said.

In the Maine Business School, a Gateways coordinator sent students notices about exams and other assignments, connected them with tutoring and review sessions, coached them on time management and facilitated weekly tutoring and academic support sessions. These efforts correlated with a 7% improvement in course success for MBS students.

The College of Education and Human Development launched similar interventions through its Academic Support and Advising Program. By fall 2025, 92% of Gateway course enrollments led to successful course completion, compared to an average of just 79% from fall 2018-2022.

For the course “Algebra for College Mathematics,” faculty updated the course to support students who would not historically qualify for it. Their efforts paid off, with 62% of students earning a C grade or higher.

In fall 2025, over 5,000 students across UMS were supported by one or more of 24 Gateways-funded projects, including 67% of Gateways-eligible students at UMaine.

As students progress through their academic journeys at UMaine, Pathways to Careers bridges classroom experiences and real-world opportunities, making it easier for students to gain relevant experience and prepare to enter the workforce. High-impact practices such as early-stage career exploration, pre-internship training, networking support and mentorship are the cornerstone of gold-standard internship programs.

Internships are a hallmark of the UMaine experience, and graduates report high rates of participation. For the Class of 2025, 62% reported participating in at least one internship, totaling over 477,000 hours of experience. Furthermore, preliminary data from the first year of tracking graduates who participated in RLEs reveals that students who enrolled in them were more likely to complete an internship than students who did not participate.

For many, these opportunities are transformative.

Pathways connected student Nathaniel Walker to an internship as a marketing and communications assistant at UMaine’s Advanced Manufacturing Center. This summer, he will intern with the company Intuit.

“A year ago, I was unsure how to even find a job and honestly felt pretty overwhelmed and lost, but the Pathways to Careers coordinator went above and beyond to help me find a role,” Walker said. “That chance has opened the doors for completely new opportunities and directions for me to pursue, and I am beyond grateful.”

Student Holly Zschetzsche said Pathways’ networking support allowed her to secure an engineering internship with manufacturer Corning.

“Pathways to Careers doesn’t just prepare students,” she said, “it actively connects them to opportunities where they are seen and considered.”

Systemwide, 51% of students surveyed in 2025 report undertaking at least one internship, resulting in 695,000 hours of workforce participation.

Taken together, Research Learning Experiences, Gateways to Success and Pathways to Careers reflect the university’s commitment to ensuring that every student is engaged in their academic studies and community from the start, and that they receive the support and opportunities they need to succeed at UMaine and beyond.

Contact: Marcus Wolf, 207.581.3721; marcus.wolf@maine.edu

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