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Improving Maine's Culture of Innovation

by Jean Maginnis

The Maine Center for Creativity has long held the belief that a healthier, higher-performing economy will occur when imagination, creativity, and innovation are embraced by leaders and policymakers. This means that these three skills need nurturing if Maine is to move from the oldest and one of the poorer states in the country to a thriving, growing place. It also calls for an integrated, specific plan developed by key leaders from the fields of education, business, and government. Improved education in the arts and sciences along with investments in workforce training for adults would establish the importance of innovation in Maine's economy. Not only do we need to invest in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) training, but to include all of our talented citizens, we also need to include investment in the arts. This more integrated approach to education and training creates STEAM, an acronym that when read and understood clearly shows us a meaning that creates a more powerful movement.

Maine's past economy relied on natural resources, the present relies on services, but the future economy will depend on the ability to innovate in each of our chosen fields of expertise. In addition, present and future job creation relies on the intention to collaborate as well as compete for finite resources. Too often, novel ideas are met with skepticism and sometimes hostility, instead of enthusiasm and engagement. Yet, there is a growing population of leaders of for-profit, nonprofit, arts and business organizations who see the necessity of collaboration and connection.

In a state of only 1.3 million people, where less than half the population is part of the workforce and pays income taxes, innovation is one of the few ways to add value to work. In the present, embracing innovation will provide a more solid foundation for Maine's future economy. History and numerous research studies show that deeply connected organizations have more power to innovate and grow. If Maine were to be seen as a large organization, its leaders would follow the experts' advice and work on health, connection, and performance to increase the state's capacity for change.

And since innovation and change are intimately related, the plan would have a better chance at succeeding.

Currently, a group of 14 collaborators who represent a cross-section of people and organizations is working together to create the in-person and digital network called the Maine Network of Innovation and Creativity. Through regular meetings, specific goals and objectives, and a clear intention to collaborate, this unique group is working to increase the rate of innovation in the state of Maine. The role of innovation has been valued, and in fact, the phrase Yankee ingenuity often implies an inventive, hard-working trait. However, the rate of innovation must increase so that Maine is able to provide the kinds of jobs that younger and highly talented people want. The Maine Network of Innovation and Creativity (MaineNIAC) aims to gather and promote Maine stories of innovation and creativity. This capacity to honor stories of innovation and creativity, while also promoting them both locally and nationally, will encourage a culture of innovation—a culture where a new idea is honored instead of ridiculed, promoted instead of dismissed, and supported financially instead of ignored until others with more resources bring it to fruition. This database of stories, which includes both business and arts disciplines, will create an archive where people working on their next idea can learn about the people and companies who bring innovation to life. This will provide inspiration as well as practical skills to a broad base of our population. In time it will also attract talented people from across the country and around the world who value creativity and innovation.

The second important function of MaineNIAC is collaboration. Therefore, the 14 collaborators have honed a method called "request for collaboration" or #RFC. The request for collaboration is a way to bring people and organizations together across the state to complete innovative work. It is a way to ask others for help and to identify the right set of skills and talent. The success of our work often lies in the talent of our skilled workers, and in Maine skilled workers often live in remote areas. The more ways we can find to bring the

work and the skilled workers together, the more our state will see innovation take hold.

While a digital platform is an important part of the Maine Network of Innovation and Creativity, the in-person component of this network is equally important. Relationships between people as well as a clear method for collaboration have proven to bring success to various projects. Therefore, the network's attention to conducting well-designed meetings across the state along with bringing the people together to form additional relationships is the cornerstone of progress for the network. MaineNIAC will be built in an open-source platform so that it will iterate and remain fluid as the people and projects contribute to its functions. By placing an emphasis on ideas and projects in progress, Maine citizens will have a resource at their fingertips that expresses the creative process both literally and figuratively and confirms the cyclical and constant nature of innovation.

If we were to map assets across the state, we would likely find not only find natural resources, but also key people and projects in both the creative fields and business who have innovated in their fields of interest. By making connections to a diverse group of stakeholders more dense, and collaborating with the talents and resources currently in place, Maine's culture of innovation may just pick up STEAM. 🐙



Jean Maginnis is founder and executive director of the Maine Center for Creativity. She has spent the past seven years advocating for the support and stimulation of Maine's creative industries by working collaboratively with

business leaders and the arts community. Her prior experience includes developing brand strategies for financial services; working for WGBH, Boston's public television and radio stations, and development and membership work for the Portland Museum of Art and the Children's Museum of Maine. She and her Board of Directors developed and launched the Creative-Place making project called Art All Around®.