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Support key to ONWARD success

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• Student Services

Support key to ONWARD success

By Christie Johnston
Special to the *Campus*

The Onward Program, nationally known as the Student Support Services, has striven to help students disadvantaged by a physical, mental or financial obstacle since 1970.

When the program began, the idea was to help minorities earn a college degree, according to Director Jerry Ellis. The purpose was to support the Civil Rights movement. Fifteen African-American men, who became known as the Martin Luther King Scholars, were chosen for the first year of the program.

"After a year most, if not all, left the

**"The support is the key," Cowing said
"It's great."**

program," Ellis said, adding the reason the men left was a lack of comfortable support. There were counselors and tutors to provide help, but none of them were from the same background as these men.

Ellis explained that 27 years of progress has improved the Onward Program so everyone will feel comfortable. Each year the program recruits between 30 and 50 non-traditional students who didn't get a chance to go to college after high school.

Students enrolled in Onward, which is

an acronym for Office of New Ways to Assist and Retain Disadvantaged students, are not the only students who can and do benefit from this program, Ellis said.

Students registered through the regular University of Maine system can have tutoring services in 100- and 200-level classes provided to them at no cost. Ellis said about 700 to 800 students take advantage of this opportunity every year. Onward also helps arrange special treatment for physically, mentally and learning disabled students.

With a full-time staff of 12 members, including Ellis, the Onward Program is able to provide full support to all of its students.

"I'm biased. I think it's very effective," Ellis said, explaining that whenever a "high-risk" student graduates it is considered a success in the program.

Personal reports from students express the importance of the program to their education.

Mike Cowing, a 41-year-old Onward student, said, "I never would've made it if it wasn't for that (the Onward Program). You can't be hidden there."

Cowing said that in the first week of the program the students are forced to interact through a mandatory field trip to Baxter State Park. It helps them become acquainted with the other students and get a feel for the college community. He recalled it as "the foot-in-the-door sort of thing."

Cowing will end this year with a degree in mathematics and a minor in studio art. He plans to get his master's degree in math teaching.

"The support is the key," Cowing said "It's great."