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# Injecting New Workforce Leaders in Tourism, Hospitality, and Environmental Science:

## A Community-Engaged Learning and Immersion Class

by Tracy S. Michaud and Robert M. Sanford

### Abstract

Tourism, especially nature-based tourism, is a major industry in Maine. Therefore, it is important that colleges and universities graduate leaders into the Maine workforce with specific knowledge of the tourism and hospitality industry and with a connection to the environment in which it flourishes. To graduate potential leaders, schools must do a better job at retaining and graduating students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Community-engaged learning, including immersion classes, are a key strategy to increase student persistence in some programs at the University of Southern Maine (USM). Two academic units at USM, the Program in Tourism and Hospitality and the Department of Environmental Science and Policy, collaborate in delivering a colocated intensive immersion class for all new majors. This engagement early in their college career fosters a sense of community among the students and with the industry in which they will work. We argue that this community engagement is a factor contributing to student retention and success in these programs and will help create the creative, resilient, locally active leaders needed to guide sustainable tourism development in Maine.

Economists and development leaders at places like the University of Maine System, Maine Department of Economic and Community Development, and the Maine Development Foundation have argued that productivity (value added per worker) must increase for Maine's economy to prosper. Maine is typically at the bottom of the nation in productivity. Two major factors that could help drive productivity in Maine's workforce are investment in innovation and increasing skills and higher-education achievement (MDF 2017). The recent Brookings Report on renewing America's economic promise emphasizes the importance of higher education as a way for declining industrial communities to get ahead (Berube and Murray 2018). The University of Maine System (UMS) can take the lead on these issues in Maine. This paper looks at how two degree programs at the University of Southern Maine (USM) are innovatively addressing issues of higher degree

attainment through programs that engage and help retain students. For universities to produce future leaders in Maine's workforce, they have to graduate them first, and they have to graduate them mindful of the connection between education, community, and leadership.

Maine's economy is heavily based on tourism, notably tourism that is environmentally connected (Colgan 2006). Maine's tourism industry is vital to the health of the Maine economy, as tourism is Maine's largest export sector and could provide sustainable economic growth for the state, especially in rural areas (Vail 2010). To address the challenges facing Maine's tourism sector—such as uneven distribution

throughout the state, seasonality, public and private landownership changes, and rural destination development—Maine needs leaders who are creative, innovative problem solvers and have specific knowledge of the challenges of Maine's tourism and hospitality industry as well as the environment in which it flourishes. These challenges represent an excellent opportunity for collaborative education and training between the Tourism and Hospitality Program (TAH) and the Department of Environmental Science and Policy (ESP) at USM as they use community-engaged-learning techniques to help graduate future leaders in this industry. Growing the next generation of leaders in Maine's nature tourism industry starts with education that engages and connects them to Maine, the industry, and each other.

The University of Southern Maine, as do many UMS campuses, serves high percentages of first-generation, nontraditional, and low-income students.

These demographically diverse populations need to be understood and supported because these students tend to have significant challenges to completing a degree, such as working full time or family responsibilities. First-generation students, in particular, are more likely to drop out of college since they are often less familiar with the culture and process of college, tend to come from lower-income backgrounds, and “are frequently exposed to environmental stressors” (Vazquez Jacobus 2016: 9).

Community-engaged learning has been shown to have a positive effect on student retention with traditional-age students (Gallini and Moely 2003); notably though it has the strongest impact on “students on the margins.” In a study of northern New England university students, researchers found that “the connections developed through engagement classes, the mentoring relations nurtured with faculty, the sense of belonging with community, or career aspirations nourished through applied practica, can be the life preservers which buoy a student through to the next semester” (Vasquez Jacobus 2016: 10). Connecting the student with the community is one of the strongest benefits of teaching outside the normal classroom setting, as it nurtures the connection of the heart to the community and forms the basis for democratic leadership (hooks 2003).

## BACKGROUND

Two different academic units at USM, the Tourism and Hospitality Program and the Department of Environmental Science and Policy, collaborate in delivering a colocated intensive immersion class for all new majors. This engagement early in their college career with community partners and each other fosters a sense of community among the students and the industry in which they will work. We believe that this community engagement is a factor contributing to student success, is an important driver of retention in these programs, and contributes to the success of graduates in a community-minded workforce.

With majors in environmental science and environmental planning and policy, ESP takes an interdisciplinary and applied approach to the environment and to its students’ education, providing opportunities for increased civic engagement through real-world laboratories. ESP created the first-year immersion class 17 years ago. For the past 11 years, it has included a Thursday-to-Sunday overnight component; six of these immersions have been held at Camp Cedar

(a long-standing Maine summer camp). ESP has one of the highest retention rates at USM and attributes this in part to the first-year immersion experience. It also has a strong record of alumni involvement in the department and in the community.

Seeing that tourism is one of the largest and fastest-growing industries in Maine, particularly nature-based tourism, USM created the TAH degree program six years ago, a growing program with various management and tourism development concentrations. Faculty and the program itself have received numerous teaching awards from the university and the Maine tourism industry for its community-engaged learning approach. TAH students work every semester with the tourism industry in Maine through class projects and internships. To build community among the students for retention purposes, two years ago TAH, in conjunction with ESP, made mandatory a first-year immersion class for all majors. TAH has an active industry advisory board whose members participate in the immersion class as guest speakers, mentors, and project partners. Their participation primes students for the expectations of experiential learning activities that are embedded in both TAH’s and ESP’s classes.

Community-engaged learning (CEL) is a type of experiential learning that goes beyond the lecture to involve community partners in the classroom and has been shown to enhance student success in higher education (Kolb 1984). CEL engages students in real-world learning (students write tourism development reports for real communities or do sustainable environmental assessments for hotels). This type of work establishes deep connections to their community and program of study, and according to research on TAH students from 2015 to 2017, creates a sense of community among them, which they value. CEL can take the form of internships, field trips, guest speakers, mentor programs, and group research projects involving a reciprocal relationship with the community or individuals.

There is evidence that linking academic disciplines to industries through community-based participatory research and experiential learning projects improves student learning and employment opportunities (Deale 2017; Lee 2008; McCarthy and McCarthy 2006; Sanford 2012). Community-engaged learning, however, has not been as well studied for its contribution toward community building among the students participating in these activities and their completion of college. Retention in college, typically lower for nontraditional

students, is important to consider when judging student success in a diverse university (Tinto 1993; Vazquez Jacobus and Baskett 2010). Losing students who have started college is expensive for the students, who have likely increased their debt load significantly, and for Maine’s workforce, which loses potential leaders.

We believe there is a connection worth exploring between CEL, community building among students, retention, and leadership development, which can come together in a first-year immersion experience. Research by Yeager et al. (2016) and Yeager and Dweck (2012) indicates that, particularly for first-generation, socially disadvantaged, or ethnically diverse students, even simply learning at the beginning of the college experience that the adversities first-year students face are common and improvable will help increase their resilience during the tough transition to college and decrease the achievement gap of these students throughout their college experience. The ESP and TAH field immersion class appears to foster these types of interactions.

### THE FIRST-YEAR IMMERSION CLASS

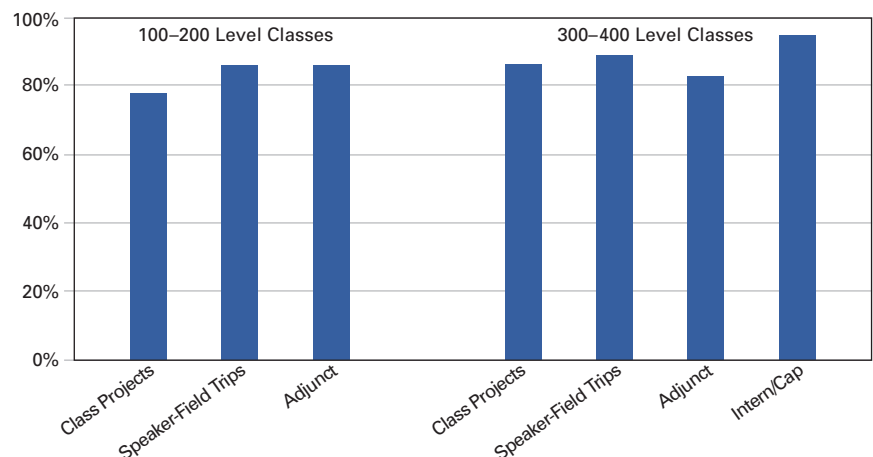
During the ESP and TAH immersion class students are introduced to CEL by living at and exploring a Maine summer camp that is a traditional tourist destination, having guest speakers, meeting industry mentors, and completing group projects, such as figuring out an event management plan for a cookout with camp staff, or navigating the woods with a compass. The field immersion experience is designed to build a culture of learning and adaptive change. First-year students work together on meaningful challenges that build community and nurture basic skills for the academic majors and professional life. They listen to and learn from peer mentors, alumni, and industry experts and share their issues as first-year students. According to Schein (2004), a culture of learning and adaptive change is achieved by creating a common language and conceptual categories, defining group boundaries and criteria for inclusion and exclusion, developing norms

of intimacy and friendship, defining and allocating rewards (and other consequences), and explaining the obscure and difficult (he calls it “the unexplainable”). These five components structure the activities for the immersion weekend and beg for input from the larger community. They underlie the strategy to bring discipline experts into the immersion class.

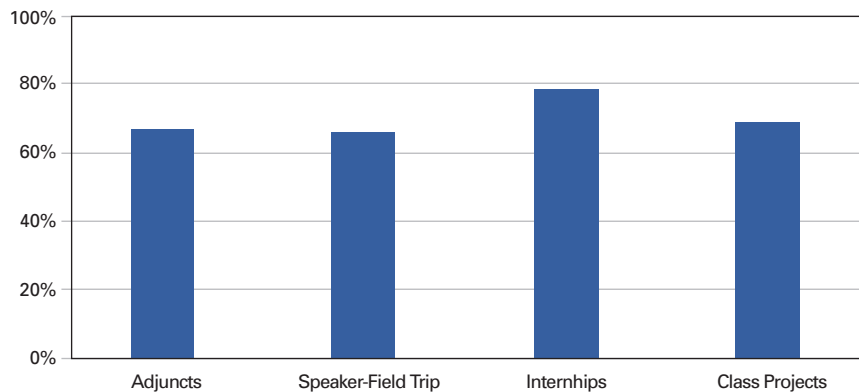
Surveys, interviews, and class evaluation analysis undertaken from 2015 to 2017 on TAH classes indicate the factors that students value in their learning and that make a difference in their retention in the major. The students highly value community-engaged learning activities that allow them to apply global concepts and theories to real-world local projects at all levels of their college experience. Specific types of CEL valued by students go beyond guest speakers and internships to part-time industry instructors teaching classes and group projects/research involving local people and real-world local issues (Figure 1). Further, students not only valued community-based real-world group projects for the learning and job connections they gained, but specifically for the community it built with their fellow students (Michaud-Stutzman 2017). Information from student evaluations in ESP classes indicates this is also true for ESP students.

TAH students most value part-time adjunct faculty (engaging with industry experts) and speaker-field trips for courses at the 100–200 (freshman and sophomore) level, and internships and speaker-field trips at the 300–400 (junior and senior) level. Student quotes on

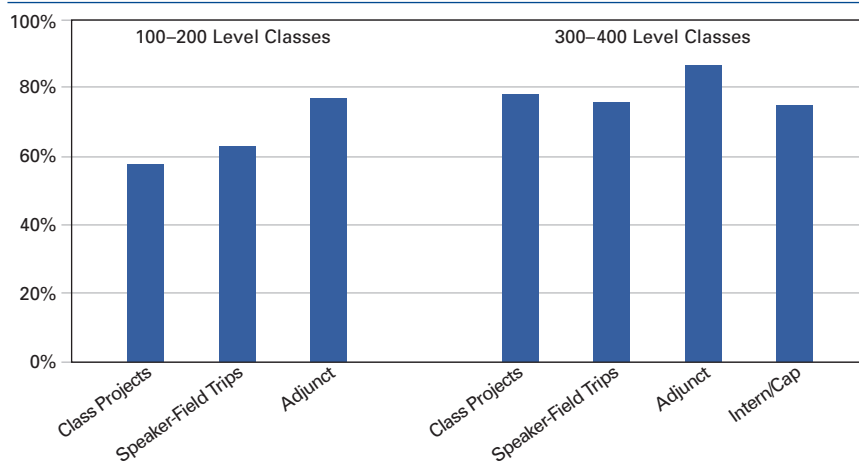
FIGURE 1: **Community-Engaged Learning Strategies That Tourism and Hospitality Students Value in Their Learning, 2015–2017**



**FIGURE 2: Community-Engaged Learning Strategies That Tourism and Hospitality Students Value for Employment (All Class Levels), 2015–2017**



**FIGURE 3: Community-Engaged Learning Strategies That Tourism and Hospitality Students Value for Joining/Retention in Major, 2015–2017**



CEL in classes include, “My skill set has definitely increased over the past few years” and “I like how classes make students jump right in.”

Not surprisingly, when thinking about CEL and employment potential, TAH students most value internships and real-world class projects at all levels (Figure 2). Quotes from students include, “This opened up many job opportunities” and “I made an impact.”

While in 100- and 200-level classes, students valued adjuncts and speaker-field trips for joining/retention in the major, in 300- and 400-level classes, students most valued adjuncts and class projects (Figure 3).

The first-year immersion class supports, connects, and engages students with adjuncts and guest speakers. Spending the weekend at summer camp is the ultimate field trip, and they work on group projects together. It includes all the factors students valued in this research for joining and staying in the major. Student quotes from the immersion class further support this point: “You bond with those in your group and support each other afterward.”

### NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS AND FIRST-YEAR IMMERSION CLASS

TAH and ESP often have a significant percentage of nontraditional students and some students of ethnic diversity. Maine is one of the least ethnically diverse states in the nation; however, ethnic diversity is increasing. According to Massey et al. (2002), graduation is the most basic indicator of success in college, and despite affirmative action, which began in the 1970s, differences in college degree attainment still persists in diverse populations, with African American and Latino students having a much lower graduation (retention) rate than white students.

Other types of nontraditional students at USM include first-generation college students from low-income families and those with life-stage differences. Over the years, many ESP students who are parents and grandparents reported that the period of intensity with their peers during the field immersion class was something they seldom experienced, due to the demands of parenting. The field immersion had particular benefit for them despite the initial challenges in making arrangements so they could attend. It was particularly important for those students to understand the faculty commitment to this course (all faculty spend the weekend at Camp Cedar, too) and the reasons for it. The fee for the class, currently \$200,

### FEATURES OF THE IMMERSION CLASS

- All faculty and new student majors attend offsite long-weekend class.
- Articulate core values of their major, e.g., environmental sustainability and managing human impact on nature.
- Articulate and introduce basic professional skills that will improve success in college and in the workforce.
- Create a sense of place for students during the class. For Mainers, reconstructing the stereotypical and idealized camp experience of our imagined youth is directly pertinent to Maine tourism and environmental science, policy, and planning. For others, it might be creating an experience that represents an important part of the heritage and culture of the city or community in which the college is located.
- Recruit teaching assistants (senior students who act as peer mentors and share their experiences).
- Bring in alumni, community guest speakers, and project partners.
- Start with icebreaker activities once everyone arrives and then incorporate community-building components into the basic content sections of the weekend. Time for networking and unstructured bonding should be included too.
- On-site assessment takes numerous forms during the weekend to test knowledge learned; ESP uses a series of field activities for this; face-to-face reflections are valuable and part of a TAH communication exercise.
- Traditional course evaluation after completing rest of semester activities (online). All students rated the fall 2017 class as good to excellent with the majority giving it the highest rating possible.

covers all food, accommodation, transportation, and class supplies, and is covered by financial aid, making it financially feasible for students to attend.

The first-year immersion class introduces students to CEL in an intensive but supportive environment of

faculty and community partners. This experience of working with peers on projects and completing group bonding activities creates a sense of community among students. The student community is nurtured in the context of the greater community because mentors (often including alumni) arrive at different points in the weekend and participate in various activities. The coming and going of community members represents a conscious attempt to develop a sense of flow and continuity (and it is less taxing on their time).

In both TAH and ESP, faculty notice more extensive and frequent interactions between traditional and nontraditional students, students and faculty, and students and external partners starting immediately after the immersion class. Students are more likely to greet and chat with faculty in the halls, for example. We are in the processes of determining how to more formally quantify and assess interactions and student success based on the immersion class, but one potential indicator of success is that ESP regularly has one of the highest student retention rates of all departments in the university. In fall of 2015, the first-year retention rate for USM was 84.3 percent for the second term, and 61.08 percent for the second year; for ESP, 100 percent stayed for the second term and 75 percent for the second year. ESP holds an annual end-of-semester dinner, honoring graduating seniors but involving the entire department and community guests. Field immersion is frequently mentioned fondly as students reflect on the beginning of their educational paths. The sense of community created through the field immersion class is regularly valued by students in both ESP and TAH class evaluations. Sample comments include:

- “Enjoyed our small community”
- “This weekend gathered everyone into a common place working in teams.”
- “I made friends and learned things. We promoted community. We really got to know each other.”
- “I drove from Michigan to Maine right before class started and did not know anyone, but now I feel like I belong here.”
- “I have been at USM for three years and did not know most of my classmates’ names because I work full time and commute to class. It feels good to know I am part of a team and we know each other’s names.”

## CONCLUSION

A sense of community can be important for student success in college, and this peer interaction can be an important factor in retention and ultimately graduation of nontraditional students in universities (Kowaleski 2016; Walton and Cohen 2011; Vazquez Jacobus and Basket 2010). These students will bring a depth of experience and diversity to leadership in Maine, especially to Maine's tourism industry. Community building, in combination with CEL, fosters the mind-set that they are not alone, they can succeed, and their work makes a real difference. The Maine summer camp is an archetypical Maine experience, which is why it was chosen as the base for USM's TAH and ESP first-year immersion class, but this could just as easily been done in a different setting. The point is the shared values, time commitment, and intensity of the immersive experience.

On-site assessment at the end of the immersion class weekend indicates students most strongly favor "to learn" and "to build community" as their top goals for what they achieve in attending. Because the class is run at the beginning of the semester (always the second weekend, leaving the first week for finding classes and getting organized) for all new students, transfer students, and students who switch majors, it sets an example that can guide the students for the rest of their stay at the university and on a path of resiliency and life-long engaged learning, important leadership traits. The collaboration between two units at different colleges of the university also shows the value of connections and networking within the university as a model for engaging the university in community participation and leadership development. 🌊

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