Student Success at UMaine and UMM

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Dear Colleagues,

As we near the middle of the semester, I want to thank you for your dedication to ensuring a promising start to this academic year for our students. A commitment to nurturing student success is at the core of our mission. I am certain that our collective work transforms lives and shapes futures for the better. Thanks to your work and the incredible and indispensable efforts of academic advisors and student support staff, we have made considerable strides to improve our student support infrastructure.

For myriad reasons, these are challenging times in higher ed: for students, for faculty, and for staff. I want to acknowledge this reality and at the same time let you know that I truly appreciate the work you do every day to ensure our students succeed. I am confident that we will continue to advance, while recognizing that we face a long road ahead. In fall 2022, our first-year retention rate was 75%. Our six-year graduation rate was 57%. We must continue to build upon our progress and redouble our efforts if we are to improve in these crucial areas. Among the programs in place to advance toward this goal, this coming spring we are also launching the Finish Strong initiative, a program designed to help adults who have some college education but did not complete their studies, earn their credential.

Collectively, our student success initiatives contribute to our students’ academic, personal, and professional achievements. Recent student success best practices, such as the UMS TRANSFORMS Student Success and Retention initiatives and the new Maine Business School’s Living Learning Community, have been designed and employed to increase student agency, identity, sense of purpose, and belonging.

New and renewed initiatives are also being implemented under the leadership of Associate Provost Scott Marzilli. The following are specific examples of exciting new projects underway:

**Black Bear Early Alert**: This initiative focuses on our entire 2023 First-Year cohort. The Office of the Provost asked faculty members to provide feedback, during the 2nd and 8th weeks of the semester, for students facing both academic and non-academic challenges. We received feedback for over 85% of all First-Year students during the 2nd-week alert. Based on these alerts, we identified 9% of First-Year
students requiring additional support beyond what was already available to them. Through the active involvement with their student success teams, 54% of these students were connected with academic and student life resources, 33% were referred to their faculty member(s) for assistance, 12% were offered guidance on course/semester withdrawal, and only 1% of the students were not able to be engaged or supported by their success team. Phase Two of the Black Bear Early Alert, the 8-week early alert, will be activated on October 16, 2023, marking a critical juncture for our success teams to provide comprehensive support to students at risk of academic setbacks. Learn more about the impact of the Black Bear Early Alert here.

Expanded Tutoring: The Office of Student Academic Success, formerly the Tutor Program, has substantially expanded tutoring services through a strategic partnership with Knack. At present, 110 UMaine Peer tutors cover over 500 courses, including those at the 300 and 400 level. Impressively, over 1,163 undergraduate students have already signed up on the Knack App for tutoring assistance. This partnership has resulted in a significant increase in our tutoring capacity, for instance, over the entire 22-23 academic year we had 68 tutors for 36 different 100-200 courses that met with 610 students. Our continuous recruitment efforts aim to bolster our tutor ranks, thereby ensuring that we effectively meet the diverse needs of our students.

Academic Success Coaching: To address historical equity gaps, the Office of Student Academic Success has introduced professional and peer academic coaching tailored exclusively for many of our First-Year students. These dedicated coaches provide proactive support, actively connecting students with vital resources throughout the semester. The academic coaches serve as an additional layer of support, ensuring that our newest members of our Black Bear family know how to ask for help and have every opportunity to flourish.

Virtual Student Success Hub: The Virtual Student Success Hub, which was launched last summer, consolidates existing campus-level interventions and support services. It serves as a comprehensive source of information and seamlessly facilitates referrals from faculty, staff, and administrators alike. Impressively, over 2,000 students, faculty, and staff have already utilized the Virtual Student Success Hub, with the most accessed resources encompassing Academic Support, Academic Advising, Basic Needs, and Money Matters. We encourage you to share this invaluable resource with your students and even embed the Student Success Hub QR Code on your syllabus for ease of access. For fully online students, Resources for Remote Learning has been developed as a similar resource for our Division of Life-Long Learning students.

AI Chatbot: We are excited to introduce Bananas T. Bear, UMaine’s AI Chatbot. The AI Chatbot was designed to engage all new students through monthly communication campaigns delivered directly to their mobile devices. The Chatbot aims to help build a sense of community, provide valuable tips on how to navigate academic and campus life, and steer students toward indispensable resources. Additionally, we are currently piloting an AI Chatbot feature on select UMaine web pages, ensuring round-the-clock, year-round availability to answer questions in more than 100 different languages. Our plan is to progressively integrate the AI Chatbot into additional web pages throughout the academic year. Remarkably, the Chatbot has already conducted over 3,000 conversations with our students and is continuously evolving to provide even more in depth and contextually accurate responses.

Taken together, these initiatives will enrich the lives of our students by enhancing their success, well-being, and sense of belonging. Retention is a critical aspect of our Strategic Enrollment Management Recruitment and Retention Action Plan. Your support and involvement in these efforts are crucial and your dedication to the success of our students is a fundamental component to not only their success, but their overall well-being - thank you for all you do in this regard.
Sincerely,

John

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