

The University of Maine: Playing All Positions in the Policy Game

by Joan Ferrini-Mundy

“The solution starts with talent.”
(Maine DECD [2010](#))

The 2020–2029 *Maine Economic Development Strategy*, released on behalf of Governor Janet Mills by the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development in November 2019, outlines significant growth opportunities for the state of Maine. It challenges the people, organizations, and institutions of the state to play their roles in ensuring the future of Maine through economic development. The central strategies focused on talent and innovation (grow local talent, attract new talent, promote innovation) align well with our mission at the University of Maine and our regional campus, the University of Maine at Machias. In fact, they could be mottos and slogans that describe what we already do well and continue to improve. And the report offers us new challenges and opportunities across the full public policy spectrum for fostering learner success, discovering and innovating, and growing and advancing partnerships.¹

The University of Maine, through its research, development, and education activities, can be viewed as the state’s most valuable asset for economic and talent development. *The Maine Economic Development Strategy* is a state public policy document that provides goals and implementation actions. The creation and success of policy documents require careful policy definition and formulation, often informed by research, data, and trends. Good public policy lays out pathways to implementation, including clarity about priorities, needed resources and their

sources, changes in law, and new practices. For instance, the “ubiquitous connectivity” strategy calls for specific, concrete actions to improve broadband access statewide, which can be supported with resources that could come from state, local, or private sources.

The success of the implementation should be monitored and should allow for midcourse and ongoing correction. And, ideally, there should be methods for tracking the effects of the policy. Experts at the University of Maine have been and can continue to be deeply engaged in all aspects of this process, and we assume a leading role in implementing the strategies related to talent and innovation (strategies A, B, and C), which are so central to our mission.

I have spent much of my career interested in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education policy and its impact (see Ferrini-Mundy and Floden [2007](#)). I have also been engaged in the development of public policy at the federal level (see Committee on STEM Education [2013](#)). Getting from good public policy documents to impactful implementation is the hardest part of public policy. However, with what I have learned about the capacity and commitment of people across the University of Maine to our land-sea-space grant mission, I am confident that we will play a part in the successful implementation of the state’s plan. Indeed, we are vital to that success. Moreover, we can and do provide policy analysis, assessment techniques, and development of indicators and outcome measures. The success of the University of Maine and its regional campus in

Machias is deeply connected to the success of the Maine economy, so this is a perfect role.

University of Maine representatives were engaged in shaping the policy definition and formulation that guided this report, as well as in developing the research base that informed it. This policy framework is based on data and evidence. Indeed, University of Maine economist Andrew Crawley and his colleague Angela Hallowell, a University of Maine alumna, now with the Maine Department of Administrative and Financial Services, undertook special analyses of Maine economic data as part of the report development. They drew conclusions that are discussed in the report about thematic areas where Maine has strength and potential for economic growth: food/marine, forest products, technical services, and making/manufacturing. Their work, done on relatively short notice and requiring new analyses of state data, provided important guidance to the working team (of which I was a member) in the definition of the policy. Many other University of Maine faculty and staff also provided significant input to the plan. The Crawley and Hallowell contribution is but one of many examples of research conducted by University of Maine faculty and students informing state policy, something that is key to the relationships between a public research university and the state. We have outstanding examples of University of Maine-based research shaping policy definitions and analyses in Maine in fields ranging from aquaculture to marine fisheries,

climate change, renewable energy, and transportation infrastructure. With this report, we have a wonderful, timely example of UMaine-based research informing economic policy.

Now, as the state moves to implementation, there is a continuing role for our universities across all of the report's seven strategies. Especially good bets for us are in the talent and innovation strategies. There is a place for our universities in growing local talent and attracting new talent. We can be part of policy implementation with special programs to engage more students graduating from Maine high schools in our offerings. We can grow the portfolio of available credential programs to be highly relevant as part of the professional education, upskilling, and reskilling of Maine's workforce. We can sharpen our clarity about pathways programs that help guide students as directly as possible toward career options they wish to pursue—that includes the Mathematics Pathways program that is already in place for those interested in careers that may have varied mathematics requirements. In addition, I continue to work with colleagues across the university to give definition and shape to the concept of *research learning* so that all UMaine students have an early opportunity to explore careers and potential interest areas. All these approaches will enable us to attract new talent and grow local talent, drawing on the rich expertise and programmatic variety we have across the university statewide.

The Maine Economic Development Strategy also urges the state to promote innovation, with a recommended action to increase investment statewide in research and development. We learned in the development of *The University of Maine System Research and Development Plan* (Ferrini-Mundy and Charland 2019) that the University

of Maine is fully engaged in outstanding research and development activity that is promoting all of the thematic areas outlined in the state's economic development plan. So, we can watch for some convergence of implementation in these two plans going forward, as the University of Maine continues, and I hope expands, its impactful work in R&D and strives for Carnegie R1 status, the highest research categorization a university can achieve.

It is an exciting time in public higher education in Maine, as the University of Maine System moves toward unified accreditation with the New England Commission on Higher Education, and as partnerships, relevance, and the importance of building talent in Maine are central in our work across the system, with the Maine Legislature, and more broadly. And, we have the full range of expertise to formulate, implement, and study policy. What a wonderful set of opportunities! 🐟

NOTES

1. UMaine's strategic vision and values framework is available on this website: <https://umaine.edu/visionandvalues/>.

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