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S5E6: How can research lead to student success?

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Improving student retention and success is a key priority at the University of Maine and University of Maine System. To support this goal, the Harold Alfond Foundation earmarked $20 million of its transformative $240 million gift to the System for new efforts to keep students enrolled and support their academic growth.

One of these new initiatives involves getting students involved in discovery and knowledge creation early in their studies through new research learning experience (RLE) courses launched this year at UMaine and its regional campus, the University of Maine at Machias. These tuition-free, one-credit courses offer a variety of experiential learning opportunities for first year and second-year students. In this episode of "The Maine Question," we speak with John Volin, UMaine provost and executive vice president for academic affairs, and Issac Cardello, a computer science student from Rhode Island who participated in one of the RLEs, about the courses and their potential to increase student retention and success.

Transcript

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John Volin: I think that's what makes our research learning experience unique. Eventually, we want to get to scale so that all entering first-year students will have this opportunity.

Ron Lisnet: That's John Volin, Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost at UMaine, talking about the research learning experience and the very ambitious goals that have been set for every UMaine student through a major gift from the Harold Alfond Foundation. I'm Ron Lisnet, and this is "The Maine Question" podcast.

The word "transformative" gets used a lot to describe financial gifts that are given to colleges and universities. The $240 million gift from the Harold Alfond Foundation given to the University of Maine system in 2020 is most definitely defined by that word.

It will make a transformative difference at all seven system campuses in engineering and computer science, business graduate and professional studies, division one athletics at UMaine, and the focus of our episode, student success and retention.

$20 million dollars of that gift is earmarked for that effort. One key piece of that is to provide a meaningful research experience for every student at every system campus across the state, no matter what their major is.

That may sound like something that already exists, but the new wrinkle here is that the plan provides an opportunity for every student to dig into research right at the start of their college careers. That has the potential to help students focus and become more interested and invested in their academic careers right out of the gate.

The research learning experience, or RLE, kicked off this fall with a bridge week. First-year students spent the week before classes beginning the process, learning how to do research, how to formulate a question, to which the answer is unknown, and creatively solve that problem or answer that question.

The Alfond Foundation gift has the potential to take this effort to an entirely new level. TO better prepare students to finish college and find meaningful careers, which helps them individually, and makes the communities they live in better as well.

We talked about all of this with Provost Volin and with Isaac Cardello, a first-year student from Rhode Island, who took part in the program.

Thank you so much for joining us. Such an interesting, groundbreaking topic that we have to talk about today. Let's, first of all, have both of you introduce yourself and give us your title, or in Isaac's case, where he's from and what he's studying. John, let's start with you.

John: Thank you, Ron. It's great to be here. My name's John Volin. I'm the Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs and the provost here at the University of Maine.

Ron: Isaac?

Isaac Cardello: I'm a freshman. I'm from Little Compton, Rhode Island. I'm studying computer science.

Ron: John, obviously, the ultimate goal for any higher education institution would be to have every student come, have a great four years, move into a meaningful career, and make a difference in the world. I'm sure if you could have waved your magic wand and made that happen, we wouldn't be having this conversation.

John: [laughs]

Ron: Obviously, for many, there are some challenges and some roadblocks to achieving that goal. Can you talk a little bit about some of the hurdles that get in the way of that ideal situation?

John: That's a great question, Ron. For many students, it is actually their first time away from home. Time management can be a challenge. Students may spread themselves too thinly. There are complex social interactions. We know for a long time now, anxiety and social anxiety among college students has been going up. There's financial stressors, among many more.

Let's not forget, there are very real impacts of the pandemic, which exasperate all of these things. I think students often may not also have that sense of belonging at their institution. Together, really, all these challenges can negatively impact a student's success and their retention.

Ron: Isaac, you started your college career and ended your high school career in the middle of a pandemic. Talk about the roadblocks and issues that you face. You're here and you're making it work right now. You had some hurdles to get over, didn't you?

Isaac: Most definitely. It would be a lot easier to focus on the end of high school, seeing as that was when the pandemic began. In the beginning of the pandemic, trying to shift into distance learning, I think, was one of the toughest challenges.

I'm very much a student where the work environment influences my productivity. When I need to suddenly work in the same environment where I'm playing games, it throws off my productivity. Something doesn't quite click. That was definitely a major hurdle.

Having the same environment for different tasks. Then when going to the University of Maine, the pandemic on the way of me being able to go on campus to actually see the University of Maine. That was another little hurdle.

In general, the pandemic also just negatively affected socialization when trying to…In a way, it helped detract it from getting more social. Suddenly, when the pandemic hit, everyone's online, everyone's using discord. Suddenly, the UMaine discord booms in popularity. It helped that way.

Also, actually seeing people had negatively impacted that. I hope I answered that question.

Ron: You certainly did. Kudos to you for making it through all that. That was a rough road, I'm sure. John, maybe can you talk about the Harold Alfond Foundation grant that is kicking into gear right now?

The large topic we have on the plate here is student success and retention. Why was that an important area to focus on? Why is that a part of this huge gift that was given?

John: Part of your previous question and this question is to have every student eventually undertake a meaningful career that makes a difference. That is what makes our student

success and retention initiatives from this very generous gift from the Herald Alfond Foundation unique.

We're focusing our efforts in three major areas. We'll talk about them a little bit later. We're calling them the research learning experiences, the gateways to success, and pathways to careers. What makes this unique is we're scaling these initiatives to make these opportunities available to all students.

Linking these three initiatives across all four years of the student experience. It'll be across all seven universities in the University of Maine system. The idea is that it will help students find purpose, identity, agency, and that real sense of belonging that I was talking about earlier.

So that they will receive, essentially, a life transformative education that hopefully will then translate into continued success after graduation, and throughout their professional and personal lives.

Ron: Now, none of these goals are certainly new or unique in higher education. The unique thing is that you want every student to take part, every campus. It's a much bigger effort. You talked about gateways to success. That's talking about some of those hard courses that certain majors have.

Pathways to careers. You want them to have a great experience as they move into the work world. Then RLE. Research learning experience, which we're going to get into with Isaac here in a second. Those are the three, for student success and retention, three things that you'd like to see happen.

John: That's exactly right. We took a big jump with a pilot program here at the University of Maine and the University of Maine at Machias with the research learning experiences. It wasn't even a year ago that we got that funding or the announcement of the gift from the Harold Alfond Foundation.

Right now, as an example, we have representatives of faculty and staff across all seven universities that make up working groups for those three areas that we've just discussed. Over 60 people are already involved in planning. As I mentioned, with research and learning experiences, we were able to do a pilot starting this fall. It was pretty exciting.

Ron: Isaac, you were part of that. Let's talk about RLE, as it's come to be known. Research learning experience. It kicked off with a bridge week, which was the week before the semester began. An orientation and starting to dig into research. Then it continues in the fall with a course.

Isaac, talk about your experience with RLE. What did you think about it? What do you think it's done for you?

Isaac: The RLE was probably my best decision coming into UMaine, putting it bluntly. It set me on the right foot immediately. Going to university, it's a new environment. I didn't know what I was expecting. I had never even toured the campus. I didn't even know how to get from my dorm to the dining hall.

The RLE did so much. With the research, it helped immensely. It helped me perform better in a team, communicating among peers and friends. It quelled a lot of non-academic anxieties as well. Things like getting to know others, getting to know the campus.

The RLE was honestly probably one of the great things because of the size of it. When you break off into those classrooms and you're put into groups of four or five kids, it's a lot easier to make friends than when the 9,000 other kids come in. Suddenly, you're not part of this little community. Suddenly, you're in an ocean.

Ron: That's a great metaphor right there. John, that must be music to your ears to hear that. The intent of the RLE is…Maybe you can talk about this. Does being involved in research bring more meaning, more context to whatever a student might be studying? Is that the idea here?

John: There's no doubt about it. That was music to my ears. Isaac, thank you for that. Across the US at liberal arts colleges and research universities, etc, often, by the junior and senior years, students start to get into a research learning experience. An internship, independent study. Something like that.

It takes time. It takes time for those students to be able to meet professors, have an understanding of where they might want to go. I think that's what makes our research learning experience unique, is that we eventually want to get to scale, so that all entering first-year students will have this opportunity.

I'll talk a little bit about that in a second. Getting back to your specific question. Research is…It's a mindset. Training those creative and analytical skills early is very beneficial to students in the long run.

We want our students to be able to explore what interests them or upsets the potential to interest them as early as possible. To give them that exposure. Honestly, the more trial and error of opportunities they have to find topics and fields they're passionate about, the better.

Tackling problems with no clear answers better prepare students for those later internships, later careers, and their lives overall. I do want to talk about the RLE. A little bit about how that got developed. I want to put it in context.

Here we are, a year into the pandemic. Last April. We sent out a request for proposals to our faculty and staff saying, "We would like to try to pilot these research learning experiences for our first and second-year students."

We decided to do the second-year students because those current first-year students last year were deep in this pandemic. We wanted to see if we could develop some of these courses. Our goal was to get upwards of 10 percent of our first-year students and second-year students.

The faculty and staff really responded. We ended up having over 30 courses that the students are currently in right now. These are one-credit experiences that are running this fall. They're free for all students. There's one course in [inaudible 12:38] . Around 30 courses here at the University of Maine.

Over 300. Over 10 percent of our first-year students signed up for one of these RLE experiences. What was interesting is it was a real…That bridge week that Isaac was talking about was a real coming together between the academic affairs side of the house and the student life. Hopefully, it was also a fun week.

Six faculty members from various disciplines. We're talking from the biophysical sciences, the social sciences, the engineering, humanities, and business all came together during the summer, these six faculties, to help develop a foundation for students.

That's why a lot of students don't take these research experiences still at junior or senior year. They actually don't have those foundation and they don't have the connections to the faculty that teach these courses.

That was the idea behind all this. Because of this extraordinary Parthian staff here, we were able to pull it off. It'll be very interesting. We will be studying and assessing this. It will be interesting to see how it continues, not only for this semester, but as we begin to scale it across all universities in the system.

Ron: Isaac, you talked about how it benefited you. A lot of it was not academic. It's the social part of it. Maybe talk about the research you did. What was your project? What was your goal? Has it helped focus your direction in any way?

Isaac: When our group got assigned, we had decided upon…We were all maybe a bit filled with anxiety. We wanted to focus on mental health within college. That was the general theme. Then we did the how do we specify that to the University of Maine?

Basically, we scoured the Internet for any sources on how anxiety, ADHD, or ADD affect your performance within college, especially as a freshman. UMaine has a bunch of mental health resources. UMaine is a huge website. There are sublinks, of sublinks, of sublinks. It's sublinks all the way down. [laughs]

What we decided was let's not only make a visually appealing poster with some neat information on how to help relieve anxiety or how you're feeling right now is affecting you, let's also put it in an easy to see format online. That was where the website part came in.

Ron: Has that experience given you a direction of something you'd like to explore in your academic career?

Isaac: Most definitely. The topic was interesting in general. It made me realize things I hadn't even realized. I won't focus on it too much, but also gave me a lot of connections to other…I think that each teacher has some students that are helpers of that teacher. One of them works as an assistant to a professor in the bio college.

I got connected to the bio college professor. Now I'm going to be working on a project with the bio college, which I never even thought I would be doing. It's suddenly a new interest.

Ron: Those are those connections that you never know how they're going to work, but can be such great experiences. John, we talked about, briefly, the other parts of the student success and retention. That's gateways to success and pathways to careers.

Now, gateways to success. A lot of that hinges around these very core courses for an engineer. It might be statistics or I'm not sure what. The courses that you have to have and be successful at or you're not going to make it further into that particular major. That.

Then from there, segueing into a meaningful career. Those are the other two legs of the stool here, basically.

John: That's exactly right, Ron. As you mentioned, those gateway courses, sometimes they're called killer courses. There's lots of names for them. Often, those are those large introductory courses that some students will actually have a tough time. Some are coming from smaller high schools, etc. They're in this classroom with maybe two or three hundred students.

There are a lot of successful practices found across the whole University of Maine system. The gateways to success working group. We'll be looking at best practices. Seeing how we can scale those across. It's to help make these courses more a source of inclusive learning and student success.

So that students actually are going in there and enjoying them. Not viewing them as a gateway, if you will, to their further success over the next four years of their college career.

As I mentioned, the research learning experiences we're scaling to first-year students and second-year students. You've heard it a little bit in Isaac's response. He's already making

those connections that might not have happened had he had those experiences in his junior or senior year.

Those, hopefully, experiences will connect early. It will connect directly with our Pathways to Careers. That's where we are trying to maximize career placement and satisfaction and performance, where we increase linkages between educational experiences and career success.

We will see, probably, an expansion to access to internships and co-ops, and more experiential learning opportunities with employer partners. That's the overall goal.

Ron: I won't say how many years ago, but I really could have used that for a statistics class way back when.

John: [laughs]

Ron: I wish that was around, that's for sure.

John: I hear you. [laughs]

Ron: Isaac, talk about, big picture, what this has done for you. Has this giving you more ease, less anxiety? More confidence that you are on the right path and you can handle what's going to come down the road?

Isaac: All of the above. I would say, I think big picture, it's given me the ability to go into a situation that I quite honestly don't know the full extent of, breathe, and deal with it in a better manner than I could have before doing the RLE.

Ron: That's huge. You must feel like, "I got this," in a way.

Isaac: Most definitely. I did not feel that before doing the RLE program. Everything, and I mean everything, feels overwhelming. It helps. I can't understate how much. Even going to my COS 140 class where there's upwards of 100, 150 students. Then being like, "You did the RLE. You know what the academic setting's like. You're fine."

Ron: That's great. That's a great goal. If this was a video podcast, we would have seen two thumbs up there from John. John, can you talk about the potential for this? Does this have the potential to be repeated elsewhere and become a national model for how higher education does these kinds of things?

John: I absolutely think so. You're right. It was definitely a two-thumbs up for me. Part of what Isaac was saying there is, he's getting the agency here, getting that sooner is, in this [laughs] case, his voice, and hopefully, often a choice in how he will end up learning over these next few years.

Yes, there are similar efforts that have this focus, if you will, on helping students find identity agency in purpose. The University of Maine, for instance, has recently joined the Coalition for Life-Transformative Education. It's a coalition. It's fairly new, a few years old.

A coalition, but of really diverse colleges and universities, includes some amazing large public universities like the University of Virginia, Arizona State University, and University of Connecticut, and smaller liberal arts colleges, like Wellesley, Bates, and Wake Forest.

Again, even that diversity there is unique, but all of these institutions are committed to providing emotionally supportive mentoring and opportunities for students to connect our curriculum and classroom experiences to real-world problem-solving like you're seeing with the RLEs. The coalition partners, we're committed to sharing best practices because there's not going to be a model.

It's this foundation, if you will, that we are all committed to. Together, the work we do here at UMaine and across the entire University of Maine System will be amplified. I'd be a member of this coalition. In the end, I believe the focus on student life transformative education will become a national model.

Ron: Finally, we love to end our episodes by looking at what is the potential, where can this go kind of thing. Maybe I'll ask each of you, starting with you, Isaac. As you look out and you project where your college career's going to go and where you hope it leads you, what does that look like? What do you hope the end goal is here for you?

Isaac: It's a bit specific, but within the field of computer science, I've always loved making…I probably would have been an engineer if I got blocks instead of a keyboard, and my second passion is, of course, I play way too many video games.

I want to do is not only go into the video game industry, but I want to revolutionize that. I want to make it more open. I want to make it more diverse, culturally inclusive. I want to overhaul it, [laughs] essentially. I know that's in progress, but man, if I could be a powerhouse in that, I'd love it.

Ron: That's great. John, as this rolls out, grows, and evolves, what do you think you see? What do you hope you'll see?

John: I really think are the Alfond UMS Transforms Student Success and Retention initiative will truly help students be successful across this really diverse group of universities we have here in the system.

My hope is that the students will graduate on time, as I mentioned earlier, with this greater identity, agency, and sense of purpose. There's lots of research that shows that folks that have these experiences in college will be happier in their future life.

Positive feedback will make our endeavors truly transformative. Not just for our campus. Hopefully, people are willing to get back and it makes it easier and easier to give these sorts of experiences to our students by pairing them with our alumni and those they touch.

[background music]

John: Very excited to see how this grows. It'll actually make a big difference for our students, and actually, for the state of Maine.

Ron: We're all excited to see where this goes. We appreciate you both sharing your thoughts with us.

John: Thanks, Ron.

Ron: Thanks for checking us out. You can find "The Maine Question" on Google and Apple podcast, Spotify, Stitcher, and SoundCloud, as well as UMaine's YouTube channel and Facebook page. Send us a note with your questions or comments at mainequestion@main.edu I'm Ron Lisnet. We'll catch you next time on The Maine Question.

The University of Maine in Orono is the flagship campus of the University of Maine System, where efforts toward racial equity are ongoing, as is the commitment to facing a complicated and not always just institutional history. The University recognizes that it is located on Marsh Island in the homeland of the Penobscot nation, where issues of water and its territorial rights, and encroachment upon sacred sites, are ongoing. Penobscot homeland is connected to the other Wabanaki Tribal Nations — the Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and Micmac — through kinship, alliances, and diplomacy. The university also recognizes that the Penobscot Nation and the other Wabanaki Tribal Nations are distinct, sovereign, legal and political entities with their own powers of self-governance and self-determination.