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Ron Lisnet

Alice Pips Veazey

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S6E2: How will the Portland Gateway help Maine prosper?

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Maine faces many complex entrepreneurial, economic, environmental and educational challenges. To help tackle them, the University of Maine created the Portland Gateway, a one-stop connection to UMaine's vast resources. True to its name, the gateway provides companies and municipalities across Maine access to the university research, resources and personnel to help solve problems and support initiatives for growth.

In this episode of "The Maine Question," Alice Pips Veazey, the director of the Portland Gateway, discusses the birth of this initiative and the difference she sees it making in southern Maine and the entire state.

Transcript

[background music]

Alice Pips Veazey: We've learned a lot about what it takes to bring deep disciplinarians together, who have deep knowledge and are professionals at working in a particular field. It doesn't always work just to throw people in a room together and say, "Create this new thing."

We've learned a lot about what it takes to work in teams. Many times that results in a very different way of seeing the solutions. That's where the exciting work really happens.

Ron Lisnet: Whether we like it or not, we live in a world where the issues and challenges we face are complex. Solving a problem or creating something new often can't be done by one person going at it from one angle.

What Alice Pips Veazey is talking about there is collaborating, bringing people together from different fields to tackle an issue. She's Director of UMaine's Portland Gateway, a new initiative from UMaine.

Its mission is to make connections for businesses, towns, entrepreneurs, and others to the vast array of research and expertise at the University in everything from engineering and the environment, to business, politics, and the social sciences. I'm Ron Lisnet, and this is "The Maine Question" podcast.

Here's an example. Say you're running a small manufacturing company making a new innovative product. You want to ramp things up and grow your enterprise, but there's a problem. Rising energy costs are preventing the growth you're looking for. How to solve that issue?

Is it an engineering issue? You need a more efficient source of energy, perhaps. Is it economic? Which system do you want to invest in? Do you need to worry about using renewable energy or environmental concerns? What are the public policies that affect those decisions?

For a business facing this issue in Southern Maine, or anywhere in the state, the Portland Gateway is set up to connect that company to the expertise at the University of Maine in all of those areas and more.

As the state's public research university, its mission is to do research on all manner of issues, new technologies, and innovations and to get those ideas to the people that can benefit from them. It's also about workforce training and the next generation of employees, business leaders, and entrepreneurs, who will run the companies and the towns and help Maine into the future.

Multidisciplinary, it's a term we hear a lot these days. It's an approach that is needed to solve many of the challenges we face. Portland Gateway was created to use that approach and to make connections that improve the economy and quality of life for people in Maine.

Pips, thanks so much for taking the time to join us. I know this is a bit of a new venture so there's a lot to be determined, but maybe talk a little bit about how did the Portland Gateway come to be? What is the vision for what it's going to be trying to contribute?

Alice: That's a question that a lot of us are thinking about right now. There's some huge opportunities for the University of Maine, but really for the state of Maine in my mind.

I think the leaders at the University of Maine saw an opportunity to bring some of the resources in terms of research and education and outreach to Southern Maine in a way that maybe that connection hasn't happened in the past, and vice versa to bring interest and innovation and partnerships from Southern Maine to the university.

We see the portal as this two-way conversation between the University of Maine and really Maine in general. It's not just focused on southern Maine. We get requests from people all over the state who want to access and understand the resources at the University of Maine and where we can partner and help each other.

Really focused on the challenges that the state of Maine is facing right now.

Ron: It's business and economic development, but it's more than that, right?

Alice: It's really been about relationship building. Listening carefully to what our partners in this area are asking for. What employers are asking for. What the skillsets are that they want to see in their future employers. The various sectors of Maine, some of which are quite understaffed at the moment.

Are looking around to say where are our next employees coming from and how does the University of Maine help drive that? We've been critical to the state for over 150 years now and many UMaine graduates are scattered across the state in businesses and hiring younger people.

They want to see strong applicants for jobs and they want to worth the work that we're doing. It's thinking about what the future of employment is going to be and where those skillsets are really being curated.

Ron: What is your background and how did you come to this position?

Alice: I've been a researcher, I think a researcher and an innovator of my life. I have a degree in oceanography. I spent some time in both Antarctica and Greenland looking at the changing climate through ice cores. I have a degree in psychology. Those two degrees of being very science-related and more people oriented.

It came together in wanting to understand how people are doing science and working together doing science. My research is based on looking at how leadership in science impacts the results that we're getting and the ways that people work together.

Researching this idea called team science. I feel like my background has positioned me well for this exciting new initiative in bringing people together, understanding how to develop partnerships. I would like to think that some of my skillset is focused on bringing people together and finding those common goals where a team can see the future and work together.

Ron: A lot of this is of course still to be determined, but can you talk about some initiatives or potential initiatives? What kinds of problems and issues are you set up to address? We touched on some of them, but any examples or any areas that you think, "Well, we can really make a difference here?"

Alice: I ask myself that every single day. Where can the Gateway make a difference? As I've been in this position for the last six months, had wonderful conversations with leaders and students and business owners across the state. There's a lot of themes that one would suspect are emerging.

Things like health care, things like our aging population, homelessness, social problems that we're facing right now. Then also climate change and how our climate is changing, how the world is changing around us, and what's happening in Maine right now?

There's lots of different themes around energy, and aquaculture, and our forest products, and timber that you would expect would be the themes that are emerging in these conversations. What we've done is, we've started running a program called the CONVERGE seed grants.

This was an opportunity for some of our best researchers to put forth their ideas about how to solve these challenges in Maine. We ask people to be intradisciplinary, to work with people that they might not have worked with otherwise. To connect with communities and really focus on Maine's challenges and bring students into those opportunities.

We have started this program. We're just reviewing the proposals that we got. We hope to launch them in January, so there'll be year-long program where people from across Maine are looking at challenges, at Maine's challenges in maybe a slightly different way or an innovative way and bringing new ideas together.

That's one of the things that we're focused on right now directly in response to the conversations that we've been having here at the Gateway with people across Maine.

Ron: In a way, you're a matchmaker that if there was a company that had an issue with high energy costs or ways to be more efficient with their energy, you might connect them with researchers at the university that are working on that that might have some solutions for them. Is that an example of the connection you could potentially make?

Alice: Absolutely. Recently, we've been having conversations about modelling Castlebay and the resources that the university has to do that. That impacts things like shipping and security and fishing and safety. There's all sorts of different ways that people could get involved in some of these topics.

Ron: There are certainly other entities around the state and in Southern Maine that do some of this kind of work. How much you all interact and work in a complementary fashion with other entities around the state?

Alice: I think that's maybe a core mission of the Gateway's, trying to figure out how we do add value to what's happening in Maine. Certainly, there are other institutions of higher education in the area, some that have been here for a long time and others that are new. University of Southern Maine and Maine Community College system, University of New England.

These are all colleges right in the Portland area and the Roux Institute is a brand new neighbor that we have the fortune to work with. I think the best we can do for the state of

Maine is find those places where together we bring our talents to solve the challenges that we're facing in Maine today.

None of those institutions have the resources to solve all the problems. There's lots of very, very talented students and faculty at all of our institutions. I think one of the things that I really like spending time doing, and I think is worthwhile for the Gateway, is to deeply listen to what each of the institutions, what the strengths are that we all bring and how we might match those and marry those together.

Those conversations evolve over time and need to be based on some level of trust to understand where we might be able to work together and complement each other's strengths. That has to work overtime too. How do we develop those long-standing partnerships where there's transparent communication and there's trust and we are moving in the same direction.

At times we'll be competing with each other because we all serve students, we all work with lots of different organizations around the state. Some of those moments there will be more of a competitive stance because we want to do the best we can and there is limited resources.

There are other money more opportunities to work together and create something that works for the state of Maine.

Ron: Does the creation of the UMaine Portland Gateway mirror or follow any national trends that are out there?

Alice: As higher education is changing, people are trying to be more and more creative and innovative about what that looks like and meet the needs of students. We're two years into a pandemic right now where students needed to find different ways of interacting with higher education. Whether it was being online or reinventing themselves for a new career.

There's lots of pressures on students right now. I think higher education is trying to adapt to that. The Gateway is one example of trying to bring resources to an area in a different way that really benefits the people who want to access the University of Maine.

Being in a place that is dynamic and growing and changing and being able to support ongoing relationships and develop new and different collaborative ways of doing research and offering education and providing the outreach that people expect from a statewide university.

There are lots of universities that are located in the center of the state, maybe away from the population center or from the economic development center. Universities are getting

creative in how to best connect and support those kinds of geographic realities. Some universities are going around the world.

Some universities are spreading out across their states in different ways. I think everybody is offering online opportunities in a different way than they did even just a few years ago.

Ron: I know you're moving eventually into a new home. Where will you be located? If folks want to access the services and the assistance that the Portland Gateway offers, how do they go about doing that?

Alice: The best way is to Google UMaine Portland Gateway and you'll come up with our website. You can call or email me. My contact information is on that website. We are really excited to be moving into a building at 304 street with the Maine School of Law and the Graduate Business School, as well as a number of other entities.

Those will be the cornerstone organizations that will be in there. That will really be this exciting, interdisciplinary, forward-looking place to be. I can't wait till that happens. We're in the process of renovating right now. That can't happen soon enough for everybody who's looking forward to getting into that building.

I think it's going to be a really exciting place where we can bring people together and think about new ways of doing things. It's going to be exciting to have the law school, and the business school, and the engineering, and the Gateway all together in one space to extend the idea of statewide interdisciplinary research and education.

In a way, that hasn't been done before. I think all leaders of those organizations are really excited about what's going to be in the future.

Ron: These words get used a lot these days, collaboration, interdisciplinary. So many problems today are so dense and complex they require that approach, multiple disciplines and expertise to figure out what's going on.

Is that one of the reasons and one of the things that Portland Gateway can do, is make those vertical connections and try to bring three experts from three different fields to work on a particular problem?

Alice: You're exactly right. That's what my career has been all about for the last 15 years. I've been doing this work in Alaska for a long time and really happy to be here in Maine for the last couple of years now.

We've learnt a lot about what it takes to bring deep disciplinarians together who have deep knowledge and are professionals at working in a particular field with particular methodologies and particular vocabularies. It doesn't always work just to throw people in a room together and say, "Create this new thing."

We've learnt a lot about what it takes to work in teams and to really converge on solutions that you can't quite see when you all get together because you need, like you said, there are these complex problems that we're facing and it requires lots of people with different skillsets.

It requires time for those people to be together, to develop a shared understanding of what they're doing, and how they're talking about their work. Many times that results in a very different way of seeing the solutions. That's where the exciting work really happens. There are lots of things to do to setup healthy and productive collaborations.

Those are the things that we're paying attention to at 304 Street. Trying to be very deliberate about bringing people together to help make them more successful.

Ron: This creates, I guess, a win-win type situation or a virtuous circle because a business might get a problem solved or come up with a solution to something they're working on, but that cycles back to UMaine in that the students and the faculty get to work in a real-world situation. Can you just talk about that virtuous circle that's going to be created?

Alice: This is a way of amplifying that. We have close to a hundred faculty and staff in the Portland area already. We have something like 350 partnerships with organizations, businesses in the area. Those are long standing. They've been around for a long time.

I see the Gateway as helping to amplify that, to focus internships on the places where maybe we haven't explored quite as deeply. I get calls regularly saying, "We need a University of Maine student to help us end this problem. What could we be doing?" Or a UMaine Grad says, "I want to hire somebody.

How do I find that right student who's ready for the job?" We've been bringing people, bringing organizations up to where I want to say, "This is what's happening in Orono right now. These are the kinds of things that we're teaching. These are the skillsets that we're expanding with students at the University of Maine. Tell us about the people that you're hiring.

Where do we need to be in partnership together to bring the best skills and the most useful skills for students into the future?" We've had lots of conversations about that recently and are building some wonderful partnerships. Many of which are extending long-term partnerships that we've had for decades.

Ron: We always try to look out and imagine or project where all this might go. Maybe take us out whatever timeframe you'd like to look at, five or 10 years. What will the Portland gateway look like? What do you think we'll see? What kinds of things will be going on? What do you hope is accomplished as you look out into the future?

Alice: It is extending the work that we're doing right now in bringing people together from lots of different walks of life, from ways of knowing, from different cultural backgrounds, to help think about what's happening in the world today.

A new way of looking at things, a new way of bringing people in who have not always had the resources or the support to be engaged in the decision-making of Maine and beyond. I can see a deep collaboration with our sister universities and our sister organizations.

I can see extending the relationships that we have with our corporate partners who are incredibly important to both the state of Maine and the University of Maine, and deeply understanding what each other can offer in order to partner.

It's really important that we have disciplinarians and people who are deeply knowledgeable about specific areas because we need that in order to be deemed disciplinarian. We're learning so much about what it takes to work in teams and how to bring the best of Mainers together to solve problems.

Thinking creatively, using design thinking and other methods to help people think out-of-the-box and think about different ways to solve our challenges. This is what the Gateway I hope is known for and I hope becomes, and all of the service of the state of Maine to make this a great place to work and live and learn and be a wonderful place for our children and grandchildren to be.

There's a lot of challenges in the world right now. We need everybody thinking about that and not just people at the university, not just people in successful organizations. We need people from all walks of life helping to think about how we're going to manage this together.

[background music]

Ron: Exciting times. We wish you the best of luck as you get this off the ground. Thanks for joining us.

Alice: Thank you very much.

Ron: You can find the Maine question in a whole bunch of places, Apple and Google podcast, Spotify, Stitcher, and SoundCloud, UMaine's Facebook and YouTube pages, as well as Amazon and Audible. Questions or comments? Send them along to mainequestion@maine.edu. This is 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.