Graduate education is an essential part of the University of Southern Maine. As one of only two universities within the University of Maine System with a graduate mission, USM’s particular strengths in graduate professional education and capabilities in the humanities and sciences could be expanded to play a key role in addressing Maine’s educational needs. Maine lags behind other states in the creation of a college educated workforce. The situation is even more acute in the case of the population with advanced degrees. In 2007, Maine was last among New England and Northeastern states in the proportion of its population with an advanced degree.\(^1\) Maine ranks 23\(^{rd}\) among the states in the proportion with a bachelor’s degree, but 26\(^{th}\) in the proportion with a graduate degree at a time when the master’s degree is the most rapidly growing earned degree in the U.S. Maine’s lag in graduate science and engineering is even more significant; only 6\% of degrees in the STEM fields are at the master’s level in Maine compared with 28\% in the U.S.\(^2\)

The core mission of USM's graduate programs is to both educate and create new knowledge within fields that are critical to the economic, social and cultural vitality of Maine and northern New England. Programs that address the core values of democracy, civility, equity, diversity, social justice and ethical practice yield field specialists prepared to fill vital roles within our communities.

**Engaged Learning**

While USM is still searching for a working definition of “engaged education”, graduate education by its nature seeks to move students from “learning about” a field of study to “engagement in the work” of a field. As such, all graduate programs at USM already engage students in learning activities that prepare them for active participation in specialized fields. It is important to acknowledge that “engaged learning” takes many forms in graduate education; the essence of the graduate experience is engagement.

**Strategic action:**

- Create and maintain partnerships and linkages that allow for the design and implementation of discipline specific engaged learning activities in all graduate programs and, where appropriate, between undergraduate and graduate programs.

**Interdisciplinary Education**

Although graduate education is by nature an interdisciplinary enterprise, its interdisciplinarity differs from the broad study that is a necessary component of undergraduate education. Interdisciplinary interactions at the graduate level most commonly seek to discover or establish connections between subfields. While broader connections may also be established, both subfield and multidisciplinary studies may occur both within and across programmatic offerings.

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1. Population 25 and older. Source: Bureau of the Census American Community Survey  
   Nine of the top ten states in the U.S. in the proportion of graduate degrees in their workforce are Northeastern states. Only Maine among the Northeastern states is outside the top 10 states.

2. Colgan et. al. 2008 *Maine’s Technology Clusters: Status and Strategy* Maine Center for Business and Economic Research. The proportion of STEM degrees in Maine at the doctoral level is 1% compared with 8% in the U.S.
Strategic actions:

- Recognize that interdisciplinary study may be found within one program, one course, or even in the classroom or laboratory experiences structured by one faculty member.
- Encourage and foster flexible approaches to program design and innovation that allow interdisciplinary study to reflect the unique nature of each field of study and inquiry.

Community Connections
The faculty and graduate students of USM interact significantly with the surrounding community in activities that address healthcare, education, business, industry, the arts, technology and other areas. Students are deeply engaged in community work through partnerships, internships, co-curricular activities, employment and volunteerism. The connections established by the faculty and the opportunities made available to students serve to provide the community with access to specialized services, information and engagements that USM is uniquely positioned to supply.

Capitalizing on the opportunities geographically present within southern Maine, USM’s graduate programs connect and contribute to the surrounding communities through the development of human capital. USM’s graduate students and faculty connect scholarly research to communities of practice in ways that are mutually advantageous. Such partnerships benefit Maine’s unique social and economic climate. Whether developing leaders for specialized fields or for the highly skilled and motivated workforce that will move Maine’s economy forward, connections between USM and its larger community are a critical component of graduate study the University.

Strategic actions:

- Support the establishment of community-program partnerships where appropriate.
- Promote the fact that community-program interactions are a critical part of the University’s work in southern Maine and beyond through distance learning and other specialized programs.

Research, Scholarship & Creative Activity
Research is as essential to the sustainability and growth of the University as is classroom and other modes of instruction, and this is particularly the case in graduate studies where the teaching of research skills is an integral element in many programs. Research, scholarship and creative activity contribute to the generation of new knowledge and the process of educating students. These efforts are central to the mission of any University, and have been a particular focus of USM as part of the State of Maine’s efforts to expand economic development through research and development over the past decade. In order to offer programs capitalizing on engaged and interdisciplinary education at the graduate level, students and faculty must be immersed in scholarly activities authentic to their disciplines. Universities must foster an active intersection between student- and research-focused visions as they serve a dual function as repositories for and creators of knowledge. This intersection is rightfully placed within graduate education as research and creative scholarship provide a foundation for the teaching and learning process. Also important is maintenance of effective support for research at USM, including facilities and support staff. The university’s significant investments in expanding and maintaining this essential infrastructure for research, which is also critical to ongoing graduate education, need to be maintained and, when financial stress has been reduced, should be expanded.
Strategic action:

- Provide meaningful support for research, scholarship and creative activities, including publication, presentation and professional development, as these are essential components in maintaining the quality of engaged and interdisciplinary education at USM.

**Graduate Degrees and Other Post-Baccalaureate Learning**

Graduate education at USM has grown through a combination of entrepreneurial strategies for acquiring resources that extend well beyond the “pyramid” model of graduate education supported entirely by undergraduate classes. These strategies have included securing significant external support for research and public service as has been the case with the Muskie School\(^3\), or the provision of supplementary funds by State Government through the Maine Economic Improvement Fund in support of the University research and development initiatives. Graduate programs have made use of summer session and other non-semester schedules to assure availability of courses for students to complete programs in a timely manner. They have also developed approaches to extending educational opportunities beyond traditional degree programs through professional non-degree education in the form of certificates and certificates of advanced study to provide supplemental revenues. Where appropriate, graduate programs also welcome and recruit non-degree students to courses in order to expand or re-tool skills.

Many of USM’s graduate programs exist in partnership with its undergraduate programs. Through the use of shared courses, accelerated degree programs, and other programs and linkages, USM’s graduate offerings can strengthen the undergraduate curricula. Indeed, professional degrees in education and nursing, using 3+2 structures, are excellent models of blending undergraduate and graduate education. The presence and interaction of graduate and undergraduate students is critical as graduates serve as models for lifelong learning.

Distance learning as an instrument for the delivery of educational programs and services is an important component of several current programs and may serve as a potential model for future programs or program development where pedagogically appropriate. As the University seeks to reach a broader community and address focused community needs, distance learning may provide access to students who are geographically bound.

The entrepreneurial spirit that has supported the growth of graduate education at USM has been one of University’s most important assets over the past decade. This entrepreneurial effort must now be coupled with a strategic planning process designed to guide and maintain the breadth of USM’s graduate portfolio. Such efforts will help the University secure and grow in its appeal to both undergraduate and graduate students as a competitive and serious institution of higher learning.

**Strategic actions:**

- Recognize and promote the complex range of graduate education offering at USM
- Explore further linkages between undergraduate and graduate education

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3 See the report by Dean of the School of Business James Shaffer to Interim President Joseph Wood, March, 2008.
• Capitalize on a combination of entrepreneurial and other strategies to support and develop programs attractive to potential undergraduate and graduate students
• Explore USM’s ability to offer doctoral programs, particularly those in the clinical sciences

Data Driven Strategies
While decisions must be based on a thorough understandings of the internal and external environments of an organization, which are in turn derived from rigorous collection and analysis of relevant and accurate data, current discussions about “data driven” strategies risk distorting understanding of the university’s outputs and outcomes. Strict adherence to “data driven” evaluation strategies places undue emphasis on the quantitative measure of education – a field often best served when a variety of measures are used in compliment. Student surveys, formal program evaluations, focus groups, and other methods of data gathering are critical in evaluating the efficacy of graduate offerings at USM.

Strategic action:
• Employ a variety of assessment tools using both qualitative and quantitative measures to determine the effectiveness of graduate programs
• Maintain transparency in data sources and systems
• Seek multiple interpretations as results of data analysis are viewed to insure contextual accuracy

Marketing
As graduate students comprise over 20% of the current student body, marketing strategies should be developed to continue to draw this population to USM. For the immediate future, it is important to recognize that the impact of recession often increases the number of students return to school to retool and reinvent professional identities. It is important that potential students understand the resources that USM can offer as they consider these life changes. The “Education Pays” 2007 College Board report, based on 2005 data, indicates that median earning and expected lifetime income are 20-25% higher for those earning a master’s degree than for those with only a bachelor’s degree. The connection between graduate education and its economic impact on Maine and New England must be made explicit.

The specialized nature of graduate education requires marketing strategies tailored to potential graduate students. These strategies differ from the “college experience” theme currently being used to attract undergraduates. Graduate marketing needs to feature programs and the career opportunities that will result as being part of these programs. Such programs will provide a foundation for the “brand recognition” that the University desires to establish.

Strategic action:
• Develop promotional materials that address graduate education at USM and reach businesses, public schools, health care institutions and other locations where potential graduate students work and live.
• Expeditiously and aggressively market graduate programs as an effective means of attracting students.
Highlight connections between undergraduate and graduate study, as students report that these connections are influential as they choose where to invest their educational dollars.

**Infrastructure in Support of Graduate Education**

The Office of Graduate Studies and the Dean of Graduate Education are critical to the success of graduate education at USM. The administrative functions handled by the Office of Graduate Studies are critical as individual departments and programs do not have the capacity to address these needs themselves. Central administration of these functions insures equity in policy and process across graduate programs.

The high quality of service provided to students by the OGS is a critical component in both student recruitment and retention. Providing student services is a constant challenge at USM with its 3 campuses and its high non-resident student population. These problems are magnified at the graduate level where there are no campus resident students and few extra-curricular activities to engage graduate students in the life of the university. Moreover, as budget constraints reduce the resources at the school and program level to support graduate students, there must be some central support for graduate students and applicants.

The Dean of Graduate Education serves as the point person for graduate programs as well as their faculty and students. In absence of a Graduate School, the Dean of Graduate programs is the solitary link joining disparate graduate programs into a fledgling graduate community and assures focused attention on the specific needs of graduate students and programs through leadership of the Office of Graduate Studies. The Dean also provides a university-wide perspective on graduate education issues through participation in the Deans’ Council and the University Council and assures coordination and communication among the graduate programs through the leadership of the Graduate Council. However USM is organized, the need for these functions will not be reduced.

**Strategic actions:**

- Provide administrative and support services that are accessible to graduate students and recognize the unique demographics and circumstances of this specific student population.
- Seek ways to broadly engage graduate students and faculty in university life by supporting activities and programs that contribute to the “graduate community” at USM.
- Insure the connectivity of graduate programs and offerings through the maintenance of a leadership position devoted to graduate education.
MOVING FORWARD:
DEVELOPING A STRATEGIC PLAN FOR
GRADUATE EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

In addition to the aforementioned strategic actions, it is imperative that USM develop an integrated and systematic approach to graduate education focusing on the unique inter-dependency between instruction and scholarship, research and creative activity.

The Graduate Council recommends that USM’s develop a Strategic Plan for Graduate Education and Research that would:

Represent the interests of graduate education and research in all aspects and functions of the University by:

- Making graduate education a significant component of all strategic planning processes at university, college and unit levels.
- Reviewing and revising strategic plans of all colleges and units, both academic and administrative, to ensure that graduate programs and students are appropriately addressed. Regularly assessing progress toward meeting these goals.
- Developing effective means of communicating the institution's vision and plan for graduate education across all of USM’s campuses.
- Appointing a task force comprised of a broad range of stakeholders to review and recommend the best organizational structure for graduate study (e.g., Graduate School or current model)

Require the systematic assessment of progress toward meeting established goals for graduate education and research. This would include:

- Seeking input from the Graduate Council and the Research Council on all factors impacting graduate education at USM.
- Regularly surveying graduate students to determine satisfaction with their programs, and with administrative and support services.
- Devoting at least one Deans’ Council meeting annually to an in-depth discussion of graduate education and research, including strategic planning processes and progress in meeting goals.

Provide necessary resources to ensure the quality of current and future graduate programs by:

- Providing and maintaining adequate facilities for graduate students. This includes study, laboratory, computing and student-faculty interaction spaces for those who serve as graduate assistants as well as community spaces for all students.
- Ensuring sufficient financial support for graduate students through a combination of financial aid, fellowships and scholarships, teaching and graduate assistantships.
- Seeking fellowship and scholarship support for graduate students through University advancement activities.
Pursue opportunities and partnerships that ensure the growth and enhancement of graduate education and research at USM in selected areas consistent with our mission to engage and enhance Maine’s economic, social and cultural capacities by:

- Continuing to develop the technologies, policies, and procedures that will facilitate the use of distance/distributed learning.
- Launching and maturing programs in areas of distinctive competency and demand as outlined through the strategic planning process.
- Designing new programs and revising existent programs to be efficient, flexible, and entrepreneurial in meeting the unique needs of both traditional and non-traditional students, in content, delivery mode and accessibility.