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Off Campus: USM's Confucius Institute will help build bridges with China

Local community members and students will have the chance to study Chinese language and culture.

By JOSEPH McDONNELL

PORLAND - The University of Southern Maine will launch its Confucius Institute next week -- a joint program with Dongbei University of Finance and Economics, which will give Maine students and community members the opportunity to study Chinese language and culture in Maine.

USM and the Portland area are fortunate to have one of the only 90 Confucius Institutes located at universities across the United States and about 400 throughout the world.

OPEN DOORS TO THE CITY

The USM Confucius Institute will open doors for the city, its teachers, its students and its business community.

Our partner university is in Dalian, a beautiful port city on China's northeast coast that has much in common with Portland, including a robust tourism industry. Dalian city officials have expressed an interest in partnering with Portland in education, commerce and cultural activities. The possibilities for engagement are limited only by our imaginations.

Each Confucius Institute has wide latitude to establish its own program and offerings. At USM, we have decided to begin our Confucius Institute by building on the strong relationship between the university's School of Education and Human Development and local school districts to shape a program that teaches K-12 teachers and students Chinese. This will make a significant contribution to the region by assisting this generation of students to prepare for an increasingly interconnected world.

China has emerged as an important player on the global stage -- and its influence will only increase as this century unfolds.

By becoming fluent in Chinese, Maine's students will be prepared for a world that will require interaction with their counterparts in China. By understanding China's culture, Maine's students will participate in a future destined to be marked by cross-cultural education, international commerce, and multinational agreements on a variety of issues.

This fall, the USM Confucius Institute welcomes three faculty members from Dongbei University who will be teaching Chinese language at USM and in the Portland community.

Our first priority is to teach teachers in the K-12 schools. As part of that program, we will also teach Chinese to students in Portland, Falmouth, Cape Elizabeth, Gorham and Topsham -- a program we will extend to other school districts in the future.

Our Chinese faculty will also be teaching adults in an Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at USM on Thursday evenings as a first step toward broader community involvement.

Our Confucius Institute will be exploring other ways to share Chinese culture in the Portland community. Chinese food, art, literature and music and cultural events are all possibilities.

The Confucius Institute gives USM's program in tourism and hospitality a unique opportunity to expand into international tourism and will be of interest to those in the tourism industry in Maine.

CULTURAL EXCHANGE PLATFORM

The Confucius Institute will serve as a bridge to China, reinforcing friendship and shared interests.

A few years ago, I took a group of MBA students to China for a study tour of businesses. My students examined a business case with MBA students from Nanjing University.

The American students shared their concerns about the loss of manufacturing jobs to China, while the Chinese students expressed concern that, despite becoming the workshop to the world, their country did not benefit from the profits of the overseas parent corporations.

The students came away with a genuine appreciation for the domestic difficulties in both societies.

USM's Confucius Institute will also attract students from our partner university and the 400 Chinese universities participating in this program, especially as the university considers adopting a competitive approach toward out-of-state tuition.

It will also provide opportunities for our students to study in China. The K-12 teachers in our Chinese language and culture program will study next summer at Dongbei University, which has a strong reputation for its Chinese language program for non-native speakers.

Looking forward, we will partner with those Maine organizations that are engaged with China, including the Chinese and American Friendship Association of Maine, the World Affairs Council of Maine and the Maine International Trade Center.

There are also hundreds of high school students from China attending Maine schools, and we hope these students will play a role in furthering the mission of the Confucius Institute.

The Confucius Institute is named after the fifth century B.C. philosopher who taught the advantages of living a virtuous life -- notably, the opportunity to live in a harmonious society. It

is fitting that, through these Confucius Institutes, we hope to achieve greater understanding and cooperation throughout the world.

Dr. Joseph McDonnell is dean of the College of Management and Human Service and director of the Confucius Institute at the University of Southern Maine.