Time has come for USM to become UMaine Portland

Maine’s status as one of the oldest states in the nation is not news. We have become the punchline for many late-night TV puns while also offering plenty of content for social media memes. As hearty Mainers, we can be good sports, but the impact of our declining population is no laughing matter for our businesses or economy.

We are in a workforce crisis. Mainers are leaving the state faster than families and individuals are deciding to make Maine their home, causing negative net migration. To compound the issue, the pool of high school graduates is shrinking, and those who graduate are increasingly choosing to pursue their college education out of state. All of this contributes to a declining workforce and without a robust workforce we cannot achieve our potential, individually or collectively.

Just as many Maine businesses have implemented aggressive out-of-state recruiting strategies to meet hiring needs, the University of Southern Maine must attract out-of-state students to fill classrooms and help satisfy the economic needs of our state. I am proud to see my alma mater taking bold steps to address these issues by changing its name to the University of Maine – Portland.

As a native Mainer, business leader, and University of Southern Maine alumnus, I have a firsthand appreciation of the significance of the University’s name. Even beyond my education there, my mother was a professor in the mathematics department for many years. I know the impact the University has on local business, and I can see the benefits an increased student population would have for all of Maine.

The research suggests changing the name is a necessary and meaningful step. According to a recent study commissioned by USM, Portland is attractive to prospective students, 73 percent of whom have a favorable opinion of Portland and 55 percent of whom are more likely to consider attending the University knowing it is located in Portland. Unfortunately, only 27 percent of out-of-state students know the UMaine System has a campus in Portland.

Moreover, influencers such as parents (62 percent) and guidance counselors (81 percent) were more likely to encourage a prospective student to consider attending the University knowing it was in Portland. However, only 30 percent of out-of-state parents and 45 percent of out-of-state-guidance counselors know the University of Southern Maine is located in Portland. The study also found that the most favorable association for the University of Southern Maine is the University of Maine System. However, the current name does not make that association clear and even suggests a distinction. Changing the name to the University of Maine – Portland clarifies the connection and communicates to all potential students they will be part of the larger University of Maine System.

The overriding conclusion of the study is that changing the University’s name to the University of Maine – Portland would make it significantly more attractive to out-of-state students. It is incumbent on the Maine business community and the entire education system to show all potential students that Maine has tremendous opportunity for a fantastic education, a great career, a perfect place to raise a family, and achieve a highly desirable quality of life. As a University of Southern Maine alumnus and business leader who stayed in Maine, I can attest all of this is possible. The education I received there allowed me to raise my son in Maine, build a fulfilling career, and grow to become managing principal of Baker Newman Noyes, a top-100 accounting firm. I want this opportunity for all young people in Maine, and that means being a good steward of USM’s future and the future of our economy.

I fully and enthusiastically support USM changing its name to the University of Maine – Portland.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dayton Benway, managing principal at Baker Newman Noyes, has more than 21 years of experience in healthcare advisory services.