

The Gorham Task Force  
Report on  
“The Gorham Experience”



Presented to President Selma Botman  
Fall Semester 2011

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## Gorham Task Force

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## **Our Charge from the President:**

The national literature tells us that the more deeply students are connected to their university, the more likely they are to persist and graduate. What do we know that works?

- Offering students the opportunity to be part of learning communities.
- Giving students a predictable, full-year schedule.
- Assigning them an advisor/mentor.
- Scheduling classes near where they live.
- A campus that acts as a magnet for extra- and co-curricular activities.

The Gorham Task Force will define and articulate a compelling “Gorham Experience,” one where learning extends beyond classrooms and laboratories, thereby enriching the academic lives of residential students.

“The Gorham Experience” will serve as the foundation of a report to the president, which will include specific, realistic recommendations on creating the most exciting, rewarding and academically conducive environment possible for our residential students. The Task Force is asked to consider such issues as the class schedule; programmatic focus; campus leadership; the integration of learning communities into the student experience; and how to promote the Gorham campus as a compelling aspect of residential student life within the larger USM experience.

## **Principles to Guide the Task Force Work:**

1. All recommendations must be academically sound, fiscally sustainable, and informed by our data and best practices at comparable universities.
2. Student success must remain at the center of the task force's work.
3. The task force's recommendations must produce results that can be assessed for effectiveness and return on investment.

## **Our Process:**

The Gorham Task Force met six times between September 30 and November 4, 2011. We set these as our goals:

To build on what currently works well for Gorham students;

To draw from other related efforts underway to improve and invest in the University of Southern Maine experience;

To test possibilities against related efforts at other higher education institutions; and

To be realistic in the context of current fiscal situations and demographics.

## **Our Research:**

We considered points from the 2010 UMS Noel-Levitz Study of Markets, Pricing, and Enrollment Management Practices.

We reviewed the University of Southern Maine's enrollment management plan.

We received a presentation on USM's participation in the Foundations of Excellence Project.

We reviewed efforts to develop appropriate course schedules for the Gorham campus.

We received a presentation on implementation of the undergraduate teacher certification program.

We reviewed background information on Learning Communities at USM and at other higher education institutions.

We heard about planning efforts focused on the USM student life and residential hall experiences.

We attended and discussed results from two Gorham-based forums, one for commuter students and one for residential students.

We noted that there are numerous initiatives and planning efforts under way, many of which could have a direct, or at least an indirect, impact on the Gorham campus. These include, but may not be limited to: Academic Schedule Reform; Adult Student Demand Study; Foundations of Excellence (FoE) Initiative; USM Strategic Plan Implementation; the USM Enrollment Plan; Student

and University Life Plan 2011-2015; and Re-Envisioning the USM Resident Student Experience.

All of these represent the work of people who genuinely care about USM and our students. We made a good-faith effort to familiarize ourselves with this work and used it to inform our own deliberations and decisions. Indeed, the recommendations set forth in our report echo the work of several of the reports noted above.

We believe that the Gorham Task Force Report serves a valuable function as a vehicle for integrating the good work of many people into a focused set of recommendations that have broad-based input and support.

More importantly, we believe these recommendations have the potential to help us create a more intimate, caring, and supportive environment in which students can learn and develop.

## **Our Recommendations in the Context of our Charge and Research:**

### Themes

Successful student experiences—academically, socially, culturally, physically, and financially—stem from participation in community. The Gorham campus has many attractive assets on which to build and in which to invest.

Once USM coalesces behind a community identity for the Gorham campus and a plan for supporting it, we must identify the students to whom that Gorham experience will appeal. This cannot simply be a “build-it-and-they-will-come” exercise. Defining and developing the Gorham campus community requires an ongoing dialogue with current and prospective students. A Gorham campus identity must be informed by what our existing and potential students—our customers—want.

Having developed the Gorham campus community in concept and practice and having informed ourselves with a focus on what our student customers find attractive, USM must market the Gorham campus community to the available and interested student audience. Our mission of re-invigorating the Gorham campus will fail if we don’t communicate its strengths to our potential student audience. To ensure continued strength, all those supporting the Gorham campus must continuously communicate with our matriculated students in ongoing community-building efforts.

A sustainable Gorham campus must be grounded in the creation and support for a college community experience unique to it. Sustainable communities, whether located at a university, in a neighborhood, in a town or city, or in some other civic grouping endure because they are attractive places to live, work or study,

and play.

Providing the entirety of that experience on the Gorham campus has been the primary theme of the work of the Gorham Task Force. We want Gorham—and all USM—students to have a university identity, a “home.”

### Recommended Goals and Action Steps

#### **1. Adopt a campus-wide Learning Community experience at Gorham so that the campus becomes identified as a center for Learning Communities and Living-Learning Communities.**

*“If I were to be asked what structural and pedagogical innovation currently being developed in American higher education may hold the greatest promise for improving first-year student academic performance and retention, I can now argue that it may well be the learning community.”*

*-John Gardner, Director, National Resource Center for the First Year Experience, University of South Carolina*

A Learning Community (LC) is a specific group of students for whom an educational schedule has been deliberately designed.

There are different types of LCs:

The academic LC is one in which a curriculum is purposefully restructured to link together courses or course work so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning as well as increased intellectual interaction with faculty and fellow students (see Washington Center for Improving Undergraduate

Education).

The theme-based LC is a group of students for whom a schedule of activities has been designed around a unifying theme, e.g., environment, the arts, athletics, etc.

Some Gorham academic departments, the fine and performing arts for example, are de facto LCs. They already foster community, academic and social support, and provide a sense of space. There are best practices within some majors that could be enhanced and/or replicated and propagated throughout the Gorham campus community.

These tacit LCs currently serve both residential and commuter students. The Athletic Department monitors student athletes' academics and requires that they spend at least four hours a week studying in the Costello Complex where faculty are on hand to assist students with homework and registrations. Music students are closely monitored by the music faculty to ensure that they are meeting university expectations. The Russell Scholars Program (RSP) in the humanities and social sciences, which is open to all students admitted as degree candidates, is nationally recognized as an academic community with co-curricular and social opportunities for engagement.

Yet there remain a large number of residential students at Gorham who are not connected to any group, academic or social, and who do not feel a sense of school spirit and connectedness to the university.

Years of data collected by the Washington Center for Improving Undergraduate Education reveals that LCs yield higher rates of academic success and student retention.

The University of Michigan has a dozen academic LCs that a first-year student may enter ranging from first-year residential, four-year residential honors, women in science and engineering, and first-year and sophomore transfers. Georgia Southern University's "Success-in-U" program is for students in three residence halls who all take College Writing and College Math as a common curriculum.

All of these programs also include a strong co-curricular component to further build community and enhance the students' college experience. LCs model, by design and intention, the concept of lifelong learning. They offer participants the ability to be both learners and teachers, and illustrate how to take advantage of opportunities for learning in our daily lives.

The Key—Connected:

The key is that all students entering USM/Gorham have a group to whom they are connected—a group that fosters friendship, academic support, school spirit, and a space that students can call home. LCs are by definition student centered. Adopting a campus-wide LC experience at Gorham will go a long way towards yielding student satisfaction, academic success, higher retention, and higher graduation rates.

A true Learning Community inserts students into curricular programs with engaged faculty, involves them in co-curricular programs, and provides desirable physical space for all the LCs' activities. More can be gleaned about what makes a successful LC by investigating what academic departments with high retention rates are doing well. From research we know that faculty committed to advising and mentoring students and to engaging students around their needs and desires are key to the LC mindset.

## **Action Steps:**

*(Action steps include the designation "S" for short term, defined as implemented or planning completed by the fall of 2012; "M" for medium term, defined as implemented or planning completed by the fall of 2013; and "L" for long term, defined as implemented by the fall of 2016.)*

- Any student entering his or her first year (as a freshman or sophomore) at USM/Gorham, whether residential or commuter, will have a sustained LC to support them academically and socially. This will establish the Gorham campus as a community which supports the academic/social identity of all students—from those admitted with clear interests and abilities, to those entering with academic challenges, to those who wish to explore or develop new communities of interest and support, to nontraditional students such as returning military. (S. Note—planning completed fall '12.)
- Engage the faculty in discussions on the benefits of LCs in terms of student learning, development, and retention. (S)
- Support and implement existing proposals focused on a STEM LC and a LC bridge for disadvantaged students. (S)
- Establish a Learning Community around the Gorham-centered Undergraduate Teacher Certification. (S)
- Drawing on its strengths as an existing learning community, the Honors Program determines how best to increase its Gorham presence by building on its new living/learning community recently established on that campus. (S)

- Ensure that existing LCs (Russell Scholars, the Community of Arts, Department of Athletics) are appropriately supported and sustainable. (S)
- Establish a student Board of Learning Communities for the Gorham campus. (S)
- Explore a LC centered on students in leadership, whether currently in leadership at USM or coming from leadership experiences prior to matriculation. (M)

**2. Set as a priority Gorham campus physical plant investments in gathering and learning spaces and facilities for students and faculty, which are important to LCs as well as a total student experience.**

Both residential and commuter students need spaces on the Gorham campus, e.g., the ground floor of The Brooks Student Center, that are conducive to fostering community, the college experience, and that tell the student that this university cares about their having both.

**Action Steps:**

*(Action steps include the designation "S" for short term, defined as implemented or planning completed by the fall of 2012; "M" for medium term, defined as implemented or planning completed by the fall of 2013; and "L" for long term, defined as implemented by the fall of 2016.)*

- Design and erect new directional signs that make navigation to and around the Gorham campus easier and project a welcoming pride in the campus. Place clear, appealing building name signs on or near all Gorham facilities. (S)

- Modify former Public Safety space in Upton to provide a “gaming” room for students and a space where students could sign out recreational equipment. (S)
- Establish relatively low-cost, high-use recreational activities, e.g. movable Frisbee (disc golf) course and walking trails. (S)
- Relocate ResNet to the space occupied by Business Services in Anderson Hall. This would provide space for a game room with ping-pong tables, pool tables, foosball tables, etc. (S)
- Review space utilization for the Gorham campus with an eye toward assigning freshmen and entry-level courses into higher quality instructional space in Bailey and the Mitchell Center. (S)
- Renovate the former GTV studios in Anderson Hall and a space in Hastings into “smart” classrooms. These facilities will be used by Russell Scholars, the Honors Program, the First Year Integration (FYI) community, the Students Entering Nursing, Science and Engineering (SENSE) community, and for other academic purposes. (M)
- Move the bookstore to Bailey Hall, making space in the existing Brooks Student Center for student gatherings, clubs, and programming. A bookstore in Bailey would complement the programs now housed there and would add additional, much-needed “social” space that promotes campus community. (M)
- Explore establishment of an Aramark-operated restaurant/pub on the Gorham campus. (M)

- Explore the renovation of the Presidential Dining Room/Faculty Dining Room into a faculty/staff lounge. These rooms originally were designated as faculty and staff space when the Brooks Student Center opened in 1970. It is time to use them in such a way that they help build a sense of community among faculty and staff. (M)
- Create low-cost, enhanced student gathering spaces (“oasis” spaces) in dorms, lobbies, and hallways. (M)
- Continue to modernize and upgrade Gorham campus athletics and recreational facilities, as in the planned replacement of a tennis court with basketball and volleyball courts. (M)
- Expand wireless capacity so that the Gorham campus is wireless in all buildings and throughout the grounds. (M)
- Make Hodgdon Field, adjacent to Bailey Hall, more attractive as an outdoor gathering place—still to be used for an athletics and recreational facility but also to serve as a mini-quad area. (L)
- Build a new campus center for faculty, staff, and students. (L)
- Build a campus recreation center (with a pool) that serves the campus and invites in the community. Perhaps this is a collaborative effort with the Town of Gorham and other external partners. Use this facility as a site for teaching and learning for students in a wide variety of majors. (L)

### **3. Offer a complete residential experience on the Gorham campus.**

Research shows that a complete first-year residential experience will solidify first-year students' commitment to an institution. They must find at hand a full menu of courses, co-curricular and social activities.

#### **Action Steps:**

*(Action steps include the designation "S" for short term, defined as implemented or planning completed by the fall of 2012; "M" for medium term, defined as implemented or planning completed by the fall of 2013; and "L" for long term, defined as implemented by the fall of 2016.)*

- Improve the parking situation by establishing an open-parking system for students—no more lots designated exclusively for commuters or residents—but maintain faculty/staff-designated lots. (S)
- Respond to students' desires for Gorham campus-wide cultural events and socializing, especially weekend programs. (S)
- Tout the physical beauty of the Gorham campus and create or join with enterprises and activities in the Gorham area that engage students with the outdoors and environmental concerns. Work with the Department of Environmental Science to offer a sustainability certificate available to Gorham students based on relevant courses across disciplines offered in Gorham. (S)

- Schedule courses for the Gorham campus so that students can acquire most, if not all, of their needed classes in Gorham. Continue to analyze the class offerings in Gorham with the goal of also making it possible for a second-year Gorham based student to take the majority of their classes in Gorham. (M)
- Explore the possibility of adding one-credit academic tutoring courses to increase academic support and prevent loss of financial aid for challenged students. Upper class students could be assigned as tutors for the one-credit course for which they would also receive academic credit. (M)
- Manage curriculum so that students can complete their degrees in a maximum of four years. (M)
- Expand bus routes to downtown Portland and the Maine Mall for socialization purposes and to explore future internship/employment opportunities. (M)

#### **4. Establish Gorham as an attractive and recognizable center for summer programming.**

##### **Action Steps:**

*(Action steps include the designation "S" for short term, defined as implemented or planning completed by the fall of 2012; "M" for medium term, defined as implemented or planning completed by the fall of 2013; and "L" for long term, defined as implemented by the fall of 2016.)*

- Create STEM and arts-related summer camps for middle school and high school students. (S)
- Examine the feasibility of short-term summer residency programs being held on the Gorham campus in the Upperclass Hall. (M)
- Explore the possibility of other academically focused summer conferences on the Gorham campus—e.g., Leadership Camp, Academic Boot Camp for high school sophomores, etc. (M)

**5. Ensure that leadership is in place on the Gorham campus with the capacity to realistically assess the programs and services needed to improve the campus environment and the authority to oversee their implementation.**

The issue of campus leadership could be inserted as an action step under one of the recommendations, but Task Force members reached a firm consensus around this issue and agreed that it ought to be highlighted in this report. Consequently, it appears as our fifth recommendation.

We fully realize that this will not be an easy, nor popular, recommendation to implement in the current fiscal climate. The leadership could take the form of a stand-alone, campus-based, senior administrator or a current senior administrator who adds this to his or her area of responsibility.

We strongly urge that due consideration be given to this recommendation. In short, somebody has to advocate forcefully

and consistently for changes that will attract and retain more students on the Gorham campus, and have the authority to drive the implementation of those changes.

### General Recommendations

Revitalization of the Gorham campus will not occur based on the efforts of this Task Force or other related endeavors over one academic year. Continued strategic planning and investment are required. Realistic assessment of demographic facts in relation to the Gorham campus is needed: the cohort of 15 to 19 year-olds is on the decline in Maine; finding 1500 resident students for the Gorham campus from the Maine high school graduating classes of the next several years will be difficult.

We recognize that these more general issues have consequences for a successful Gorham campus and must be consistently tended to over time:

- Ensuring that the admissions process is in concert with the Gorham campus identity developed and responsive to its student audience, including non-Maine residents and transfer students.
- Ensuring that Gorham campus residential students' costs and financial aid packages are aligned with the market.
- Tracking, contacting, and planning with students who have interrupted their work toward a degree centered on the Gorham campus to determine what will support them in returning.
- Development of a closer, mutually beneficial relationship among the campus, its alumni, and the town. In terms of

relations with the town of Gorham, continue to expand the sharing of recreational facilities and explore establishment of town-based internship opportunities.

### Funding

In the interest of meeting the deadline of developing a set of recommendations over the course of six meetings, we did not grapple with estimating the costs of the recommendations and action steps.

We did, however, ask Chief Financial Officer Dick Campbell to estimate the financial impact of a healthy Gorham campus on USM as a whole.

He did so, using the following assumptions: Gorham is home to 1500 full-time, residential students; those undergrads reflect the current, in-state to out-of-state ratio of roughly 90 percent and 10 percent; all students subscribe to at least the minimum meal plan; we make better use of instructional space in Gorham so as not to impact negatively on the facilities capacity in Portland.

Based on those assumptions and using a weighted average cost, Residential Life would receive an additional \$4.4 million in room and board revenue. The estimated tuition and fee revenue would total an additional \$4.6 million. A more detailed financial analysis would have to account for any needed increases in the number of class sections and any corresponding need for additional personnel.

Clearly, recommendations and action steps that serve to attract and retain more students will improve USM's financial health.

## **Our Conclusion:**

To prosper, the University of Southern Maine's Gorham campus must have forward-thinking leadership and a forward-looking identity—with the facilities to support this. Each Gorham student—whether residential, commuter, transfer, teenager, or adult—must be placed in a Learning Community/Learning-Living Community, with particular LCs identified with the Gorham campus. The state of Gorham campus facilities will make or break recruitment efforts. All facets of improvement of the Gorham campus must engage additional student input.

In February of 1993, then-President Richard Pattenauode asked Registrar John Keysor for his thoughts on the future of the Gorham campus.

In response, he itemized offices that in the previous decade had been moved to the Portland campus, including the College of Arts and Sciences dean's office; the biology faculty; the English faculty; the foreign languages faculty; and the two-year business faculty. The list concluded with the phasing out of the 700-student undergraduate education program.

Though implemented as part of a focus on development of USM as a "metropolitan university," John offered the opinion that the impact of the moves on Gorham's academic, student, and residential communities was not seriously assessed.

One thing is certain: We still are trying to address the impact of those and other decisions.

We urge that these recommendations and action steps, if accepted, be integrated into the USM Strategic Plan and the annual budgeting process. If they rise to the level of top

institutional priorities, they must be costed out and, depending on those costs and other priorities, implemented.

We also want to stress the importance of the early adoption of a recommendation, one that will clearly signal that USM, as a community, is serious about making changes.

Otherwise, we run the risk of another few years of inaction, disservice to the university and our students, and appointment of another task force to study the problem and develop recommendations on how to address it.