"Building Community with Ties That Bind Us Together"

Preamble

We are looking for people who share our values, who want to become Mainers. They may not look and sound like us, or have the same kind of family structures. They may not be what we are used to. This is kind of a word of warning to our fellow Mainers. We cannot stay the same, but we can preserve our culture and values. Any system that does not have new energy, new skills, and new ideas is not long for the earth. We will shrivel up and die. We may love our Yankee pride and want the world to leave us alone, but we cannot have a global world within our own borders. Regardless of what people look like and where they come from, they are welcome in Maine. They don't have to look like the people who are from Maine, but they have to share our values, and tolerate our Maine eccentricities. We love our independent, but tolerant nature, our politeness, etc. There are people who have built up similar value systems, let's make them Mainers, too. That is what has made Maine unique and special. From the Tories to Massachusettsans, many have tried to change us. Therefore, we have come by our desire for insularity naturally. We have fought those who wanted us to be different or like them. We are our own and have an independent spirit. We have our own history and own future. We need to embrace it.

~USM Staff Member
Executive Summary

The University of Southern Maine should be lauded for its current efforts with diversity. The University's commitment is clear. Faculty and staff are earnest, conscientious, and almost without peer with regard to professionals who believe in and support diversity-related matters. The University is truly a great place to study and work.

However, considerable evidence indicates that diversity efforts within the University are unfocused and they are operating without a rudder. There is considerable investment in resources of all types on diversity-related matters, but they are not coordinated in any way, they are not complimentary, they often confuse practitioners and customers, and they are at times working at cross purposes. This report suggests binding together the various ‘communities of interest’ into one community focused on common University goals.

For diversity efforts to be successful, they must be woven into the fabric of the University—the academic mission. Three strategic goals are suggested to support this notion and reinforce the principle ideas outlined in the Preparing USM for the Future strategic plan. The strategic goals would require the University to take deliberate steps to i) create a university education that is experientially diverse, ii) build a welcoming, inclusive, and supportive community of learners, and iii) recruit and retain a cohort of people from diverse backgrounds and experiences. These three goals of curriculum, community, and cohort compliment and reinforce one another.

One of the major observations of this report is the lack of unity around a common identity, common directions, and universal goals at the University for a variety of historical reasons. Attention and efforts are spread—if not splintered—and divided into many different directions and activities. Diversity matters reflect this pattern as well. This historical modus operandi, though seemingly unintentional, risks diluting already limited resources and it undermines the success that many desire, commit to, and work so hard to achieve.

This is why it is essential that existing resources be realigned, reprioritized, reallocated, and refocused on compelling and mission-essential activities bound together by a common vision. If properly employed, the diversity effort could serve as a model for building community at the University writ large and could well serve as a potential hallmark of the University. The city of Portland and the culture of Maine are great assets that can be leveraged for this purpose.

The University of Southern Maine could improve upon its strengths and build a more secure future by embracing and leveraging its commitment to diversity. This will require it to take a series of deliberate actions to identify key objectives, focus the community on the agreed upon direction, and work collaboratively toward common goals. The first step the university should take is to identify the common threads that will serve to bind the community together, and diversity appears to be a thread that resonates well within the University community.
Overview

This report is less about diversity, than it is about the University—though diversity is its main theme. Despite considerable time, effort, and energy invested in diversity-related matters, a culture of politeness inhibits conversation around difficult issues such as diversity. This report is designed to surface major issues and to create a platform for dealing with the challenges, creating positive next steps, and most of all taking advantage of the desire and commitment of those who serve the University so well.

Many stakeholders have a troubled conscience regarding the incongruence between the institution's will, desire, and intent to have a diverse community and the feeling that things are not working as well as they should be working. This is ironic given the earnest and honest people of upstanding character who are involved in these matters. The major observation of this report is that diversity seems to be symptomatic of larger institutional issues. Despite the good intent, there is a lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities in many University affairs. Everyone is working hard and doing good work, but is unsure of whether it is the right work, the right way, and for the right purpose.

There is a clear need for a guiding force, a clear plan, or a compelling vision that harnesses the considerable passion and energy of the dedicated and committed people working on diversity-related matters. Thus the major recommendation of this assessment is the need to build community by pulling everyone together for a common purpose for the common good. Diversity is one of the common threads identified in the University’s strategic plan and could serve as a leverage point to bind the community together. It should also be integrated into the core mission of the institution—academics.

The opening graphics of this report present various Celtic Knots. They are metaphorical representations of multiple ideas. First, one colleague indicated that the University has wound itself into a Celtic Knot in diversity-related matters. There are many functions, activities, people, and programs, but no one knows what is going on, why, or how. The rainbow colored Celtic Knot represents the idea of the larger community of people and campuses coming together. The third Celtic Knot, that is earth tone in color, is intended to represent the ideal of a community that is bound together for a common purpose, with each part of the community having individually distinctive characteristics.

Methodology

The approach taken to conduct this assessment involved a mix of inquiry-based methods. Focus groups and interviews were guided by a series of questions developed in advance. An action research orientation was used and allowed hypotheses to be developed and tested in each subsequent interview. Additional research and comparisons with other universities on organizational structures, functions, committees, and ad hoc working groups were completed.

Data was gathered from 40 participants in up to 25 separate interviews onsite or telephonically, a few e-mail exchanges, an extensive review of the USM website, a review of
dozens of collected documents, and a limited review of literature. There was an attempt to capture all interviewees’ voices as authentically as possible while preserving each participant’s anonymity. Therefore, fourteen pages of raw data was been retained as the consultant's notes, yet each major idea is represented in aggregate in the section titled Observations.

A major limiting factor of the process was the absence of guiding frameworks. Almost all interviewees were asked either in person or via e-mail for references, guiding theories, frameworks, or models that the University has used or should use. There was a dearth of responses. This is itself an observation. That while well-intended, many of the approaches to diversity-related matters at the University are heartfelt, but are not deliberate in design or intent.

The Question

*We learn more by looking for the answer to a question and not finding it than we do from learning the answer itself.* ~Lloyd Alexander

“What does the university mean when it says the word, diversity?” Does it imply diversity with regard to faculty and staff, students, or the university community as a whole (including its service area)? Does it imply race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and other protected classes, or is it inclusive of veterans, immigrants, underrepresented, underserved and under-supported populations, those with French-Canadian heritage, and working class students from Caribou?

Even if this answer was clear—and it is not—and even if it was universally known and accepted by members of the community—and it is not—what are the University's goals and aspirations related to diversity? Said another way, in what areas is the University interested in acting—spending time, effort, and resources?

The lack of clarity presented the opportunity to ask the overarching question for the engagement. It was, "What is the issue that brought about the need for this diversity assessment?" The answers varied considerably and were remarkable in what they revealed. They provided great fodder for conversations and an inquiry into the real issues that people believed they were facing.

Many of the challenges related to diversity are symptomatic of larger issues at the University. These challenges seem to be byproducts of the culture of the University and the culture of Maine. Therefore, this assessment is as much an organizational assessment as it is a diversity assessment. This report would be a disservice to the University if it attempted to carve out interconnected issues and reported only on the narrow questions of diversity. Just as Maine is the whitest state in the union (as told by interviewees on over a dozen separate, unsolicited occasions), it would be impossible to ignore this larger context when speaking of the particular questions of the University and how it operates.
Therefore, the report may appear to overstep its charge by commenting on organizational matters. It attempts to address all questions and causes, not just symptoms that impact the core question of diversity. This approach yielded a final question to ask of the university—that is, "What are the compelling ideas that resonate so deeply within the University that they create common threads that bind the community together?" Is diversity one of these threads? This report creates a starting point for discussion and action.

**OBSERVATIONS**

These observations are based upon the collection of voices from interviewees as well as from independent research of the University and its operations.

- **Politeness**: Everyone is overly polite which keeps deep conversations from occurring as necessary. Therefore, people only deal with surface matters and symptoms and not real core issues, so even small problems fester and emerge as larger issues later. Many well-meaning people do not ask questions in a fear of being labeled racist, sexist, or intolerant.

- **Definition of Diversity**: There are many different interpretations of what diversity means at the University—race and ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity, socioeconomic status due to the working class nature of many of our students, commuter and resident students, first generation students, disabled, international (China, Africa, etc.), Maine (Caribou, Aroostook County, etc.), Native Americans, Franco-Americans, immigrants, veterans, wounded warriors, Title IX, interfaith matters, ombudsperson.

- **Business Case for Diversity and Change**: Even students think and expect the University to be more diverse. The number of students graduating from Maine High Schools is drying-up, yet, the business case for wider recruiting and more diversity has not been articulated.

- **Imperative?**: Diversity is sometimes perceived to be an add-on, not as an operational or academic imperative.

- **Expertise**: Most of the diversity-related work is not guided by established national models, theories, frameworks or best practices. More University staff should have an expert level of knowledge on diversity-related matters.

- **Tough Choices**: The University should be more decisive, "take a stand" and "hold the course" on a variety of issues. Too much politeness has inhibited progress.

- **Fragmentation**: A plethora of diversity efforts, activities, offices, and committees have come about over time, resulting in considerable confusion about who is doing what, when, where, and why. Diversity issues are symptomatic of larger university issues. Functions of all types are disaggregated, fragmented, or diluted across campuses, departments reinforcing the perception the University does not take hard stands and make hard choices.

- **Resources**: Few offices think that they are adequately staffed. Though there are many offices performing related functions. There is a perceived competition for scarce resources ($, space, staff) amongst diversity populations. It is described as both tribalism and protectionism. The disparity in the size and the space of the centers as well as silos between people and centers garners considerable attention because it’s perceived to be symbolic.

- **Goals**: No one is quite sure what the University aims to do or accomplish with regard to diversity.
• **Identity**: There is a perceived lack of University identity (e.g. teaching or research university, urban or comprehensive; teacher education, associate's degrees, etc.).

• **Portland**: USM is an earnest community in the whitest state in the nation. Yet, it has the very diverse city of Portland at its doorstep of which it is not taking full advantage.

• **Outreach & Bridge Building**: A considerable amount of programming appears to be minorities or diversity groups preaching to their own constituency. The non-members who participate have a previous relationship or interest in the group. Little outreach engages the larger community.

• **Reporting Structures**: There is tremendous hypersensitivity about who reports to whom, and who reports to the president. There is disappointment that no diversity position reports directly to the president.

• **Authority to Act**: Everyone has access to the president, including students. The historic precedent suggests that the only way to make things happen at the University is to contact the president.

• **Response to Incidents**: Incidents of bias should be dealt with swiftly and unequivocally and then used as teachable moments. Instead, they are reported and repeated and used as examples or excuses for why things are bad. The opportunity is not taken to clarify and reaffirm the University's values.

• **Morale and Perceptions**: There are perceptions of feeling undervalued, invisible, excluded, powerless or not accepted by some staff and students, even among diversity warriors.

• **Management Systems**: There do not appear to be robust management systems in place that are designed to deal with routine organizational matters (e.g. complaints, problems, requests, services, workflow, etc.). Neither customers, nor colleagues know what happens, who does it, and what is to be expected when it is completed.

• **Service Offerings**: Expectations are not managed. People get good service, an answer, and individualized attention and still expect and demand more. Many perceived concerns and complaints are repeated without a sense of closure.

• **Advocacy vs. Services**: Many diversity offices see themselves as advocacy offices. They represent their constituents against the University. They do not present themselves as functions that offer services to a target group, instead as offices that advance the concerns of the group. There does not appear to be a sense of responsibility for solving problems or removing roadblocks. They expect someone else to fix problems. That someone is often the president, not necessarily the institution itself, or their office in particular.

• **Faculty Involvement**: Faculty as a whole are perceived to be not aware of what is going on and are not engaged in the diversity effort. The voice of the deans and faculty are not heard on diversity-related matters (other than the Dean of LAC).

• **Lewiston-Auburn College**: LAC is modeling on a small scale the way that USM needs to evolve in a larger way regarding diversity. It could not wait for the university as a whole.

• **All Things**: There should be a caution to the University that it cannot be everything to everybody all the time. However, it is expected that for any and every actual or perceived sub-group the University will develop a program, function, office, or service. Presently there are questions about whether there should be a veterans, disabled, or immigrant center.

• **Administration**: There appears to be a large number of administrative offices for a relatively small university, particularly in the perceived overlap or duplication of traditional functions. This is not restricted to diversity matters.
• **Equity or Compliance?**: Anything that sounds minority related is placed into the Office of Equity and Compliance, therefore the office is responsible for a collection of duties from multiple professions.

• **Sexual Orientation vs. Diversity**: There is a perception that diversity is all about gender and sexual orientation at USM.

• **Results Orientation**: There should be a theory-to-practice perspective that focuses on results, not activities or programs.

• **Population**: There have to be more diverse people at USM to create a true diverse experience.

• **Retention**: There is no organized effort to better support and retain diverse faculty and staff.

• **Responsibility of Officials**: Chairs, department heads, directors, and supervisors do not handle conflicts or resolve problems—they refer them to others (specific offices).

• **Need for Education or Support**: There aren’t any training programs for students, faculty, or staff on how to live, work, or study in a diverse world. Therefore, faculty (and others) say and do inappropriate things unintentionally.

• **Perceived Lack of Commitment**: Some question the University's commitment to diversity since there are so few minority faculty and the observation that the chief diversity officer position was eliminated.

• **Complaint Procedures, etc.**: There are no commonly known paths to get issues resolved. Everyone is confused, faculty and staff and students.

**SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

"Diversity of experience and viewpoint is one of the essential components of a university education."

~*Preparing USM for the Future*

**Solutions**

Since the business of a University is education, diversity matters should center upon this core mission. The Jeffersonian notion of a broad liberal education is predicated upon the idea of exposure to variety, diversity, complexity, discovery, and change. No education would be complete without diversity in its fullest expression. Therefore, three strategic goals are proposed and are summarized as the following:

Curriculum: A diverse educational experience  
Community: A welcoming and supportive community of learners  
Cohort: Diversity in numbers and representation

These three solutions are complementary, reinforce one another, and are derivatives of the basic notion of a quality liberal education. They also incorporate the University's diversity values as described in its strategic plan of a) equal access, b) examination and exchange of diverse ideas, c) respecting, encouraging and fostering cultural and ethnic difference, d) institutionalization of diversity, and e) creating a diverse community.
The first solution is that all diversity-related activities and enterprises within the college should have a defined curricular connection. They must either educate students or support their success. It would follow that diversity programming, services, activities, and efforts should be focused only on helping students succeed. Faculty should be encouraged to support diversity efforts by incorporating or highlighting its tenets in the curriculum. Faculty must learn about and support the success of all students—regardless of their background. Cultural competence is as much about retention as it is about education. Students should be exposed to diversity in curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular areas.

The second solution is the creation and maintenance of a diverse community. The University must champion the idea of diversity, support it, nurture it, and model it. A diverse community is first a meeting place of different perspectives. It must be a welcoming place—welcoming of different people, ideas, perspectives, values, traditions, and cultures. With this in mind, the community must prepare itself to talk about and deal with the inherent conflicts that come about when ideas are discussed, debated, dissected, and deliberated upon. It must communicate its values, beliefs, aspirations and goals in a productive manner, allow for differences of opinion, and argue for tolerance and understanding. The opportunity is present to celebrate diversity from away and from here (i.e. Native American traditions, French-Canadian heritage). Yet, the entire community must support the goals of one University?

Third, within the University community, there must be sufficient representation of people who naturally bring different perspectives due to their background and experiences. Otherwise, the notion of diversity will be an academic exercise that is not grounded in a true university experience. As it is noted in the University's strategic plan, "experiential involvement must be seen widely as a hallmark of USM's approach to higher education." To take full advantage of the value of a university education, USM should take proactive steps to recruit and retain students and faculty and staff from diverse backgrounds. This will contribute to the quality of education, serve as a leverage point in building a diverse community, and provide the final essential ingredient in helping prepare students to "live well in a diverse world."

"It (the University) will also further diversify in all aspects of its campus life and academic work."

~Preparing USM for the Future

Recommendations

While the strategic plan outlines several actions that should be taken, the University must develop annual action plans that are designed to achieve specific outcomes. Establish strategic goals to unify campus groups and focus time, effort, and attention on the larger University’s priorities. Once the strategic goals (or other goals) are agreed upon, appropriate strategic, operational, and tactical actions can be undertaken. Goals must come first.

Assuming that the three strategic goals suggested earlier resonate with the community, the following are a potpourri of suggested activities that could support those goals. These
suggestions, or others, are only as good as the degree to which they support the strategic goals. The University community must agree upon whichever goals it deems important and take action on them accordingly—and deliberately. These actions must be widely communicated and understood.

**Strategies (suggested)**

I. Require all diversity groups to directly and deliberately tie their actions, activities, programs and services to achieving one or more of the three aforementioned goals: Curriculum, Community, or Cohort.

II. Community Building – The University’s identity could be bound together by its celebration of diversity. It has a diversity of locations, peoples, curricula, etc.—there is some synergy in its differences already. These differences could serve as a metaphor for a larger effort—Many cultures, one community; many campuses, one university.

**Operations (suggested)**

A. Renewed Focus: Require each diversity-related office to redevelop their mission statement, purpose, and programs to align with the strategic goals outlined. They must a) provide services that help students succeed academically (curriculum), b) help students to live, work, learn, and thrive in the larger community by celebrating and valuing the differences that everyone brings (community), and c) assist in recruiting and retaining diverse populations (cohort), only.

B. Dismantle silo-based approach to delivering administrative services: Technology allows communications and operations regardless of time and space. Professionals should be responsible for activities on more than one campus. Reduce duplication of efforts.

C. Centers: There should be fewer centers with multiple foci. Thus every group should retain many of their own activities, functions, and services, but should operate from one core area. The multi-faith prayer room is a good model. There could be one community center on each campus, Gorham, Portland, and LAC. Their primary role should be academic success, their secondary role should be building bridges between communities, and their tertiary role should be to assist with recruitment and retention.

D. Build Bridges: The Portland community should be engaged in a deep and rich way. Bring the community onto campus; take the University into the community.

E. Community Building: Create opportunities for the entire University community to gather, communicate, and collaborate (e.g. one-University picnic—that rotates campuses, interdisciplinary research, diversity newsletter, community fora on important topics, etc.).

F. Student Recruitment: Renew focus on diverse (widest definition) recruiting.

G. Faculty and Staff Recruitment: Renew efforts to affect positive changes in this area.

H. Academic Connection: Franco-American Collection and the Sampson Center for Diversity are great models to exploit. Centers should have a faculty sponsor or faculty scholar such as the Women's Center being connected to Women and Gender Studies. Ask Faculty for other suggestions.

I. Retention: Form Employee Resource Groups (ERG) and student focus groups for ideas. This is in addition to diversity centers and staffs having responsibility for supporting recruiting through outreach (coordinated through the Admissions Office).
Tactics (suggested)

Weave Threads: Require 50% of all programming to involve outreach to other communities, on and off-campus.

Dialogues on Diversity: Establish fora that will allow the community and all of its stakeholders to have open discussions about diversity (race, gender, class, national origin, disability, etc.)

Shared Responsibilities: Create opportunities for people, groups, campuses to work together (e.g. events, talks, cross-campus/cross functional taskforces and offices, meetings, shared work, etc.).

Cultural Competency: A comprehensive training program for faculty and staff should be undertaken to teach about "difference" in general and the cultures of the most populous diverse communities on campus. A diverse community must know how to talk to and interact with one another. Build Community. The University could start with Franco-Americans which would be a politically savvy entrée into a wider discussion. When celebrating diversity, it is important to not leave any group out of the discussion.

Structure

McKinsey and Company, one of the world's most notable consulting firms, pioneered the use of the 7 S model. They argue that structure follows strategy. Therefore, assuming that the University adopts strategic goals that focus on curriculum, community, and cohorts, resources and structures should follow this pattern. Some functions and departments should be eliminated, others created, and some realigned— all to support the strategic goals. Supporting departments based upon the number of actual or perceived minority groups would not be imprudent. Instead, the shift should be toward functions that help the maximum number of students succeed.

"(Circumstances require the University) to target its resources strategically on those programs and initiatives that are central to its mission (and strategy)."

~Preparing USM for the Future

No organization operates with unlimited resources. Difficult financial times force organizations to do what they should have otherwise done—prioritize. It is an outdated model to create functions based upon representation alone. What is funded and supported should be that which best helps the organization meet its strategic priorities.

Ad hoc organizational structures should also be established—but only to support the strategic goals outlined. Three separate sub-committees or separate bodies should be created with the singular purpose of supporting the accomplishment of one of the three strategic goals. Their
membership should obviously be composed of professionals who have a role in achieving these goals. Their role would then shift from advocacy to action. With this in mind, academic deans who are responsible for faculty and faculty hiring must be a part of these groups. The HR officer and the admissions officer are obvious participants in support of recruitment and retention.

The current President's Council on Diversity should be recast as the President's Coordinating Council on Diversity. Its role should also be strategic. Its role would be to ensure that strategic goals are achieved through the facilitation and monitoring of identified action plans, and bridge building that is necessary to keep diverse groups working together in a productive manner.

**Leadership**

Many have argued that the University should appoint a chief diversity officer to serve as the lead administrator and diversity champion. While this is prudent and wise, difficult budget times may preclude the University from taking this step in a reasonable time period. Even without this office holder, great gains can be achieved if a strategic focus is articulated and followed.

The Provost should serve as the executive sponsor and Chair of the President’s Council on Diversity. The Provost is, after all, responsible for the curriculum (along with the faculty of course), shepherds the academic community, touches students through faculty, is responsible for the make-up of the faculty (cohort), and sets the tone for the culture of the University (community). Therefore, this position has a disproportionate role and responsibility for ensuring the success of diversity efforts. The Provost's role also ensures that diversity is integrated into the fabric of the University.

Additionally, leadership occurs at many levels. The university has two capable professionals who should share some responsibility in making a difference. Their professional backgrounds, expertise, and positions make them uniquely qualified to take a leadership role. Dahlia Lynn and Martha Freeman are great resources for the University and can serve as chairs of one of the three strategic goal sub-groups. In their roles as sub-committee chairs, they should report to the University's Provost.

**Summary**

Finally, this report should be considered an interim report—part one of a two-part assessment. These initial observations are based upon a snapshot in time, limited access to people and resources, and without the advantage of verification of facts and data. Therefore, additional efforts must be undertaken to refine questions, conduct additional benchmarking, complete the assessment, and make more definitive determinations and recommendations. The prerequisite for completing the assessment is the University establishing some priorities for effort and directions for action. Some suggestions are offered here within.

Submitted by,
Christopher D. Lee, Ph.D., SPHR