



Expansion of State Broadband Technology Can Benefit College Learners, Economy

By Allyson Handley

A few years ago I began asking at University of Maine at Augusta (UMA) commencements for a show of hands of graduates who were setting foot on our UMA campus for the very first time. You would be surprised by the number of hands that go up, and each year that number grows still more.

That's right: students who may have taken upwards of 40 courses at UMA and up until graduation day had never set foot on campus.

As much as I love to show off UMA's beautiful Augusta campus, for more and more of our UMA students, their campus is their living room and laptop – and that is just fine with me.

UMA has always been ahead of the curve on delivering distance education; indeed we were a pioneer, launching a statewide interactive television (ITV) network back in the 1980s to make a college education available in every corner of the state. More recently, that distance education is being delivered increasingly online, courtesy of broadband; that is, a high speed Internet connection that is always on.

Like our UMA distance students, broadband may be out of sight, but it is integral to our state's growth and our future

Because I see firsthand and understand the importance of making a college education accessible to Maine people who live too far away to take classes on an actual campus, I was honored to recently serve on Maine's Broadband Capacity Building Task Force.

Recently, that task force released a report with several recommendations to the Governor, some dealing with the delivery of higher education through broadband, and others dealing with business growth, health care delivery, and improving our K-12 schools.

For all these sectors, broadband wipes out the barrier of physical distance and offers a vital connection to the rest of the state and the world. This can significantly benefit Maine businesses that can access world markets through broadband, facilitate online sales with customers anywhere, and employ people who may not live anywhere near their place of business.

Broadband can also support Maine citizens of every age: from our youngest learners who through laptop initiatives can explore cultures across the world, all the way to our oldest residents who through simple broadband technologies can now safely stay longer in their homes.

Portland planning and research firm Planning Decisions has estimated that if Maine adopts the report recommendations the cumulative impact on our economy in 10 years would be the addition of 11,000 jobs, \$500 million in new income, and \$70 million in new state and local tax revenue.

As for higher education, broadband makes it possible for those hands to shoot up at UMA graduations. Those hands belong to the Business major from York County who could take all her UMA classes at or near her home and now has a terrific finance job at a major nonprofit agency in Sanford.

Those hands belong to the Medical Lab Tech major from Maine's midcoast, who took online courses while receiving support and help at the University College Center in Rockland, one of nine such centers strategically located across the state to support distance learners. He is now gainfully employed at MaineGeneral Medical Center.

And those hands belong to a Mental Health and Human Services major who took classes online and at the South Paris University College Center and later went on to receive her law degree. She is now practicing family law in Turner.

All told, UMA now offers eight programs that one can complete entirely online and several others that offer a combination of online and other learning modalities, including live courses, ITV and more. We have found that these "blended" programs and courses are highly popular with students, and achieve terrific learning results.

A recommendation of the Broadband Task Force is to make the University of Maine System a model for blended learning, taking advantage of our seven campuses, eight university college centers and the state's broadband connectivity. The recommended goal is for 25 percent of all University of Maine System offerings to be delivered blended or online by 2015.

This cannot only be achieved, it must be achieved. Every Mainer should have access to that college degree, which is so necessary in these times to secure the best jobs.

Further, it is estimated that more than 200,000 Maine adults have some college credit but no degree. Many are very close to completing their degree, but not physically close enough to an actual college campus to finish up.

For these Maine residents, broadband makes college close – and connects them to the future they desire. Learn more about the full recommendations of the state Broadband Task Force online at Maine.gov/connectme.

Allyson Handley is president of the University of Maine at Augusta, and a member of the Maine Broadband Capacity Building Task Force.