MAINE COMPASS: Public administration program at UMaine vital, should be kept

The University of Maine is scheduled to eliminate its public administration program at the Orono campus.

Many of the state’s town managers and other public officials have been trained since 1945 through this program’s bachelor of arts degree in public management. The University of Maine master’s degree program in public administration, based in Augusta, is also part of the budget-cutting proposal.

Cutting public administration affects the central Maine area particularly because the public administration master’s is the only graduate degree available within the Augusta area.

The presence of the master’s degree in public administration program in our capital city is not irrelevant. The Legislature established the master’s program in Orono and Augusta in 1968 to meet the needs for trained managers in state government and local communities.

Within the greater Augusta area, 11 public administration graduates serve in positions from town managers to police officers. Eighty-seven work in state government, from executives in commissioner’s offices to nonpartisan support positions in the Legislature to professionals in areas as diverse as environmental protection, engineering, technology, transportation, finance and planning.

The former commissioner of Administration and Finance, who has a master’s degree in public administration, is now the vice president of finance for the University of Maine System.

Eighteen Augusta-area alumni work in professional associations, such as the Maine Municipal Association and the Maine State Chamber of Commerce, and in direct-service nonprofits such as Uplift Inc. and local hospitals.

In a state hard-pressed to fund its services even in good times, a public administration degree is cost-efficient. It is far cheaper for state employees, area town managers or nonprofit managers to take a course in Augusta leading to a master’s degree in public administration than to attend short seminars, travel to Boston or some other city, and lose a day or two of work.

The flagship university’s courses are specific to the needs of the state for public servants who are knowledgeable about finance, personnel, planning, organizational development, ethics and other relevant subjects.

In addition, the University of Maine’s master’s degree in public administration is accredited, which means it is a value-added degree recognized nationally as having the rigor and course work identified as relevant to meet today’s needs for public servants.
Public administrators need to respond to the public to reduce the size of government, while maintaining its effectiveness.

We believe it is time to merge the public administration programs of the University of Maine with those of the University of Southern Maine and University of Maine at Augusta.

All have small faculties, with many instructors nearing retirement. UMA offers both bachelor’s and associate degrees in public administration, with two instructors; the University of Maine, bachelor’s in public management and master’s in public administration, four instructors; University of Southern Maine, master’s degree in public policy and management, six instructors.

Merging these programs would save money by reducing course duplication and administration while continuing to provide courses in Orono, Augusta and Portland.

Merging also could improve placement of interns and graduating students, increase service and research productivity and create fiscal efficiencies the higher education system desperately needs.

Administrators at the University of Maine, University of Southern Maine and the system office (and to a much lesser extent UMA) have chosen not to implement this type of consolidation.

This solution even has a name, the Academy of Public Service, previously agreed upon and signed by the presidents of the University of Maine and the University of Southern Maine.

To make this happen beyond a paper agreement, however, leaders must emerge from the universities, students, alumni, elected officials and citizens. Building on existing program excellence is the sensible way to keep the university system lean while fostering long-term, high-quality public service throughout Maine’s government and nonprofit endeavors. We are willing to be part of the solution team.

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