

MAINE

THE STATE OF BUSINESS



**MBS seeks economic
transformation with
new location, organization**



As a part of the state’s flagship university, the Maine Business School is poised to be a catalyst for change in Maine’s economy and workforce through a new vision for business education.

Maine and its public universities face several challenges in today’s economic landscape: a declining and aging workforce, rapidly evolving business needs, and increased competition for professionals and graduate-level students.

Thanks to sponsorship from the Harold Alfond Foundation, Maine’s two largest higher education institutions — the University of Maine and University of Southern Maine — have teamed up to combine their faculty expertise and educational resources to solve these workforce challenges.

In July 2018, J. Michael Weber was hired as the dean of the newly formed Graduate School of Business in Portland. Within the first five months of his tenure, Weber held 198 meetings across the state — from Portland and Orono to Presque Isle and Farmington — to discuss the need for business education with business owners, alumni, chambers of commerce, community leaders and university faculty.

“Any time you travel the state and do what we’re trying to do with graduate business, the first thing people want is an update of how it’s going,” says Weber. “You spend some time addressing legends and myths, and then start talking about what they need [from graduate business education].”

“Big change is difficult, but this model is great for Maine,” he says. And he’s right — it’s a unique setup having a college housed more than 100 miles away from its home campus. But it’s necessary for MBS to effectively deliver business education for the entire state.

“In these meetings we discussed to what degree they see their workforce needing graduate education — is the generalization of an MBA desirable, or would a concentration be important?” Weber says. “Then we talk about what it means for their people to get a degree from Maine’s flagship institution. If it’s apples to apples, they’d always prefer to have UMaine because of the value of the brand and the quality of the folks associated with the business program.”

The quality of the Maine Business School isn’t lost on Faye Gilbert, the recently installed dean of the Undergraduate School of Business at UMaine. Gilbert, who provides MBS’s Orono leadership, knows the value and reputation of the program she now helms.

“The Maine Business School provides one of the best experiences a student can find for relevant business education today” she says. “Faculty have long emphasized enriched learning experiences and community connections.”

But even with a tradition of excellence, Gilbert knows that business education, and higher education in general, are changing, and the Maine Business School must be ready to meet those challenges.

“As methods of delivery continue to evolve, students now can choose to complete degrees in person, online and in hybrid formats from several different providers,” she says. “The challenge for educators, including MBS, is to make the connections that will align the information to be learned with structures that make sense for degree completion.”

Some recent changes to MBS program structure include plans for the Graduate School of Business to offer eight-week courses to better accommodate working professionals’ schedules, and the option for undergraduate students to complete a bachelor’s degree in management entirely online.

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At the undergraduate level, MBS is focused on connecting students to their communities, and allowing them to have access to technologies and projects they will be expected to use in the workplace.

"Once they graduate, business students will join companies that use technology to connect with customers and employees throughout the world," says Gilbert. "Thus, we must provide those experiences to students at this stage, and connect classes with other units across the state and in other countries."

Weber agrees that to increase the success of students and elevate the state of Maine, MBS must deliver experiences.

"Whether undergraduate or graduate, we need to get students involved at the practicum level," he says. "The best learning experiences for students involve solving problems for business in real time and connecting students to businesses in ways that should lead to jobs."

As the Graduate School of Business establishes roots in Portland, it plans to offer programs specifically designed for Maine's most immediate economic needs.

"Ideally we'll deliver a portfolio of programs that meet the needs of the state, starting with the MaineMBA and moving to offer unique concentrations students won't see anywhere else," says Weber.

"From M.S. degrees to other forms of the MBA program, we will be in the right place to take Maine further into the future."

MBS now offers dual graduate degrees with the University of Maine School of Policy and International Affairs (MBA/master's degree in global policy), University of Maine College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (MBA/master's degree in information systems), and Maine Law (MBA/JD).

The MaineMBA also has been streamlined for one year; 100 percent online access for students who want to elevate their education without the constraints of a traditional academic calendar.

Expanding beyond the University of Maine System also is a priority. The Graduate School of Business recently completed a cooperating agreement with the University of New England's College of Pharmacy and a memorandum of understanding with American University in Bulgaria.

Graduate programs in the works include MaineMBA concentrations in forestry, analytics and innovation engineering, and Weber is excited about

the statewide collaboration that will be necessary to make these degrees a reality.

"Portland is the economic and cultural focus of the state, and our location here is a great way to compete with Massachusetts and bring people here from Boston for graduate school and to live and work in Maine," he says. "But at the same time, this is a statewide program, and we are working to deliver graduate education for the entire state — programs that are Maine centric and globally relevant."

Gilbert also takes pride in the Maine Business School's connections to the state, and plans to enhance the undergraduate school's focus on local companies.

"Faculty and students have completed over 130 projects for business organizations in this state during the past five years," she notes. "That focus on connecting with firms as students learn the basics of accounting, finance, management, marketing and information systems is a formula for success that can benefit everyone."

Connecting students to the state doesn't stop with the business community, however, so the Undergraduate School of Business is seeking new ways to infuse Maine's beauty and natural resources into the curriculum.

"We are discussing adventures in Maine that we could try to incorporate into the undergraduate experience," says Gilbert. "For example, we hope to offer first-year students the opportunity to kayak on the Penobscot River and then return to campus to study the business aspects of kayak sales as an introduction to business course."

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distinctions between the undergraduate and graduate schools allow the colleges to leverage their resources toward different goals, such as undergraduate academic adventures, and to tailor degree offerings for students and employers.

"Undergraduate students can be more focused on connecting local firms to the global economy and our online cohorts can experience Maine virtually," she says. "With a separate structure, graduate programs can focus on unique applications or experiences, such as connecting graduate students with global partners to solve overarching problems."

Weber agrees, and says the state is ready for specifics.

"Stakeholders are ready for concentrated MBAs and master's degrees in accounting and analytics. They're ready to develop a relationship with the Graduate School of Business to recruit great talent."

"It's a transformative time in higher education, and the separation of the Maine Business School into two distinct colleges positions us to be more nimble and quick in responding to the needs of students and the marketplace," adds Gilbert.

"We already have an impact on economic development and the quality of the workforce," she says. "The challenge now is to intensify those efforts in partnership with others in the state." ■