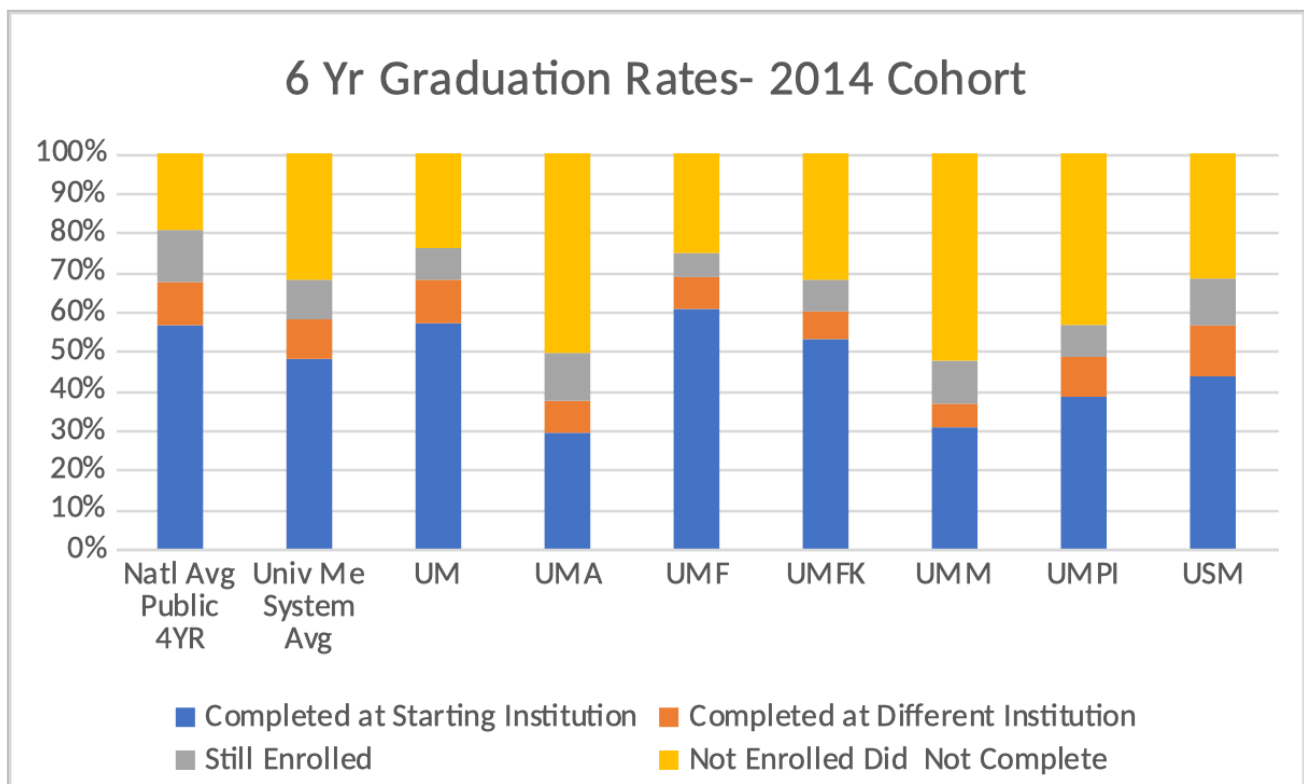


Introduction:

Who I am:

A 1985 graduate of the University of Maine at Farmington, where I also taught philosophy for 25 years. I was also the director of advising at UMF for fifteen years. As a director of advising and faculty member I became strongly invested in student success both at UMF and throughout the system, which is why I am offering this testimony.

What the University of Maine System (UMS) is not doing well enough-- graduating students:



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¹ <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/ums.academic.affairs/viz/YearlySuccessProgress/YearlySuccessProgressRates>

<https://nscresearchcenter.org/completing-college/>

<https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/SignatureReport16.pdf>

https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/Completions_Report_2021.pdf

https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/Completions_Report_2020.pdf

(The 2019 national report does not seem to include the national average for dropouts, which is why I did not include it.)

² There are many reasons for the great disparity in graduation rates across the system, including differences in the amount of state funding and tuition income at different universities, and also differences in student demographics and program type. It is generally more difficult to provide the supports needed to graduate part-time students in distance education programs than full-time, on-campus students for example.

The UMS has low six year graduation rates, and high dropout rates. The dropout rates are the most concerning. If students transfer out of the UMS and graduate elsewhere or are still enrolled after six years, they are still on a reasonably good path, but dropouts have spent time and money and received no marketable credential.

The six year drop-out rate for the UMS in recent years is 31-33%. The national average for public four year universities has been around 19-23%. What this means is that if you start your college education at one of the UMS universities, you have on average about a one in three chance of being out of college six years later with no degree, whereas the national average would give you about a one in five chance of dropping out with no degree in six years. Of course there is a lot of variation across campuses in the UMS but even the best ones in their best years (UMF and UM) are just about equal to the national average, while at the worst ones your chances of becoming a dropout are about fifty fifty.

Those high dropout rates are not good for the students, many of whom leave college with debt, nor is it good for their families, or for the state. About 4000 students start their college education at the UMS each year, and at present rates over 1200 of them will have dropped out within six years. The direct financial losses alone amount to millions of dollars; indirect losses are of course much higher.

Why UMS dropout rates are so high:

- Students drop out because they are not engaged enough, or else they are unable to overcome obstacles like financial troubles, bad time management habits, family troubles, mental health issues, and so on. Usually it is a combination of things. Or sometimes there is just something else that they really want to do more, such as go to beauty school or start a business.

- To reduce dropouts and increase graduates, a university can take steps to increase student engagement and reduce obstacles. Engagement can be enhanced by improving course designs, adding opportunities for internships, field trips, and other student activities. To help students overcome obstacles one can add success advisors, tutors, counselors, and emergency funds, but all of those initiatives take resources.

- The UMS has lacked adequate resources for such things for fifteen years due to lower state appropriations since 2008, combined with low tuition and declining high school graduate classes. (The E&G state appropriation for FY08 was \$183.2M, which would translate to \$257.6M in 2022 dollars according to the US Bureau of Labor and Statistics CPI calculator.)

- But lack of resources has not been the only problem. In addition, the UMS Board of Trustees (BOT) and chancellor have other priorities, such as centralizing administrative services, developing collaborative programs, and increasing enrollment, which have sometimes in the past taken precedence over improving graduation rates. (For example UMS IT is currently blocking acquisition of a degree planning system, a project initiated by advisors and approved by the system provosts to help students find and follow their best path to graduation.)

Sometimes actions under those other priorities may tend to actually reduce graduation rates, for example replacing in-person courses with online versions, or reducing admissions standards to boost enrollment. Graduation rates will only improve if the effect on graduation rates for all

system initiatives is understood and prioritized by system leadership. In addition, what works well will vary from one program to another depending on student needs and resources, so some decision making will need to be local. System leadership needs to understand higher ed well enough to realize that top down, "one size fits all" decision-making will often not work very well.

What the legislature could do:

- Provide more resources directly, through significantly increased appropriations targeted specifically for improving graduation rates, or through establishing a major grant fund for improving graduation rates.

- Revise the system charter to insure that there are some people on the UMS Board of Trustees (BOT) with significant higher ed experience, preferably experience in the UMS. Also modify the charter to clarify authority and responsibilities of system presidents. With the current setup, just giving additional funds to the system will not guarantee that it would be used effectively to improve graduation rates, since neither the chancellor nor the BOT have significant higher ed experience, and with system centralization and unified accreditation the system presidents have much less control than they used to have. For example at present, if one of the centralized services such as HR or IT isn't working well for one of the campuses, there is nothing a president can do except complain.

- At this point the system universities all either have unacceptably low graduation rates, or else they are running deficits and gradually cutting services and positions while they try to maintain decent graduation rates. My suggestion to the legislature at this time would be to send as much money as you can to the system specifically tagged for improving graduation rates, and to set up a commission to propose some revisions to the system charter. Please do those things for the students. With better support and better governance at the system level a lot more students could be graduating, thus fulfilling their own goals and becoming stronger assets for their families and the future of the state.

George Miller
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