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The Program That Changed the University of Maine System's Fate

An online program has helped one small campus nearly double its enrollment over the past four years, a boon for a system long struggling to keep head count up.

By [Johanna Alonso](#)



University of Maine at Presque Isle president Raymond Rice (right) has spearheaded efforts to build up YourPace, an online, competency-based program based at the university.

Photo illustration by Justin Morrison/Inside Higher Ed | The University of Maine System

Undergraduate enrollment at the University of Maine system had been shrinking for decades when the COVID-19 pandemic arrived, compounding the decline. Most campuses in the system failed to stanch their losses until this year. But one actually doubled its head count from 2020 to 2024: the University of Maine at Presque Isle, a small campus with just under 2,000 students located in northern Aroostook County.

At the core of that growth is an online, competency-based program called YourPace, which UMPI developed in 2017. The model is similar to comparable programs offered by institutions like Western Governors University and Purdue University Global: Students can progress through their classes as soon as they prove competency in the material, allowing them to take as many classes as they like during each eight-week session.

The program quickly gained traction, jumping from 100 students in its first session to about 1,300 today.

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The growth has been "just explosive ... particularly after COVID," said Raymond Rice, UMPI's president. "Just remarkable growth over time."

Across the country, universities with declining enrollment are betting on online programs to boost their numbers, as more and more students—adult learners in particular—express interest in flexible, remote education that they can more easily fit around existing family or job responsibilities.

Critics of online courses and competency-based education argue that they provide a lower quality of education and often lack the interaction with professors and peers that many believe is critical to the higher education experience. But proponents view them as important tools for creating access to education for nontraditional learners, who often have neither the time nor the desire for a traditional classroom experience.

"Institutions like UMPI have been on a path of reinventing how they're offering education, in terms of formats, modality, [being] competency based, self-paced—sometimes—and online, because that's how somebody who is juggling so many balls in their life can fit an education program around it," said Becky Klein-Collins, vice president of research and impact at the Council for Adult and Experimental Learning.

For struggling institutions, nontraditional students—particularly the population that has completed some college but not earned a degree—also offer a massive opportunity to boost enrollment, said Wilson Finch, CAEL's vice president of initiatives.

"If you do a spreadsheet and the calculations, you just need a fraction of those people to go back [to college] to increase enrollment substantially," he said.

That's especially true in Maine, which has the oldest population in the nation; the average age of a resident is just over 45 years old. Across the state, 280,000 people, or 20.2 percent of the population, have completed some college, according to the university system.

"We are developing programs to help them take whatever credits they have ... and turn them into a baccalaureate degree or a master's or both," said Dannel Malloy, the system's chancellor. "We're a small system. We're 25,000 students, in the oldest state in the nation, demographically, in the oldest region in the nation, so for us to pull off what we've done is quite a feat."

Though YourPace enrolls only a small portion of the system's students, it's made a big impact on the Maine system as a whole, which is projecting enrollment growth this semester for the first time in decades.

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"It's not a big, big program at this point, but it's a significant number. It's particularly attractive to stop-outs or people who got an associate's degree years ago," Malloy said.

Appealing to those populations through YourPace and other targeted programs has been central to the system's recovery, he said. System officials have also updated marketing and communications to ensure they're not trying to appeal to adult students the same way they reach the parents of high schoolers.

"What I say to everybody is, it's our obligation to meet the market, not the market to meet us," he said.

Global Success

The program dates to the rise of competency-based education in the mid-2010s, when UMPI [joined the Competency-Based Education Network](#), a non-profit that works with colleges, employers and policymakers seeking to develop such models and practices, and began its own [shift to a proficiency-based model](#). That work, combined with the then-declining number of adult students, inspired the university to establish YourPace, Rice said. The program launched with one major, business administration, led by the university's existing business faculty.

Promotion for the program came mainly in the form of "targeted digital marketing over very specific platforms," Rice said, and free word-of-mouth advertising from students, who discussed the program on social media sites like Reddit. Through those channels, word of the program spread far beyond the borders of Maine—and even outside the U.S.

"They started discussing the program on student chat boards in Beijing, China, for instance. There's a whole group of students that enrolled," the president said, noting that 87 percent of students are from outside Maine. "We still have great in-state Maine numbers, but those have stayed pretty kind of consistent semester over semester. That growth is coming from out of state and all the way across the country and even internationally."

University officials expect the program's enrollment will only go up from here. Rice is predicting it may jump as high as 2,500 by the spring, which would make up about 10 percent of the system's total enrollment.

Now, the university is looking to expand YourPace with a marketing push focused on specific areas and regions, including the Canadian provinces that border Maine.

The university system also has big dreams for the program. In the next few semesters, Malloy wants faculty at other University of Maine system campuses to begin teaching YourPace courses to help accommodate the growth.

"You're going to see a lot of faculty from other universities join that effort...should they want to participate," he said. "The program is going to continue to grow in our state and in our nation and internationally. We are prepared to make the investments necessary to bring that about."

Other Initiatives

YourPace's success doesn't exist in a vacuum. It's one of several new efforts across the University of Maine system designed to chip away at the high number of college stop-outs in the state and appeal to older Mainers. (Aside from adult learners, the system also saw a high number of transfers from the Maine Community College System this year, possibly due to the state's [free community college program](#) for students who graduated from high school during the pandemic.)

Other programs include the [Finish Strong program](#), now in its second semester, which offers special scholarships—as well as a buy-one-get-one-free deal on the first two courses—to students who have completed some college but not earned their degrees. The program is being offered at the system's flagship campus in Orono and its branch campus in Machias, as well as the University of Maine at Fort Kent.

Campuses across the state are also launching new fully online programs; within the past year, University of Maine at Fort Kent has started an online master's program in nursing and the University of Southern Maine launched a bachelor's degree in special education.

Systemwide, distance education made up 37 percent of all credit hours delivered in fall 2023, compared to 23 percent in fall 2019; 40 percent of the system's student body in fall 2023 was over the age of 25, versus 34 percent in fall 2019.

The system's flagship university offers more than 60 fully online programs, whose students are on average 33 years old. In some programs, as many as 90 percent of students work while they earn their degree, according to Richard Roberts, executive director of academic program support and online learning.

The number of students enrolled across all 60 programs soared from just under 1,000 in 2020 to nearly 1,500 now, he said. But he's worried about the programs growing too fast; for students to continue choosing UMaine over other online learning options, he noted, the university must retain its character and appeal.

"There are so many fully online schools that have been doing this for a while, and there's a lot of pressure to grow and meet your budgets, but we've found our students have such unique needs," he said. "There's really no one-size-fits-all model."

(This story has been updated to correct the description of the Competency-Based Education Network.)

Written By

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Course-Building for Competency-Based Education (CBE)

The Center for Teaching & Learning (CTL) provides a comprehensive guide for creating Competency-Based Education (CBE) courses within the YourPace program using the Brightspace LMS. The guide emphasizes consistent design to streamline navigation for students, align with Academic Commitments, and meet Quality Matters standards. Below is a breakdown of the course-building process:

Preparation for Course Development

- **Checklist for Development:** Consistency is key to minimizing navigation barriers and aligning with institutional goals.
- **Focus on Learning Outcomes:** Strong Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs) and General Learning Outcomes (GLOs) are integrated into the course to ensure alignment with rubrics and assessments.

Key Steps:

1. Add the syllabus and final assessment to course files.
 2. Include learning outcomes in the competency structure.
 3. Update course resources and disable unused tools.
 4. Add rubrics for milestone and final assessments, aligning them with learning outcomes.
 5. Publish rubrics to ensure visibility.
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Building Assessments and Learning Activities

- **Milestone and Final Assessments:**
 - Create assignments using templates for consistency.
 - Use Turnitin for plagiarism detection.
 - Attach rubrics and set submission rules.
 - Avoid grade items for milestones; include them only for the final assessment.
- **Quizzes:**

- Build quizzes using templates to maintain consistency in settings.
 - Attach learning outcomes as needed.
 - Avoid grade items for adaptive or formative quizzes.
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Module Structure and Learning Activities

- **Organizing Modules:**
 - Create one top-level module for each learning outcome.
 - Use module descriptions to link learning outcomes and explain connections.
 - Add submodules for concepts/topics and include a "Knowledge Check" for milestones or quizzes.
 - **Adding Content:**
 - Include resources from Google Drive, OneDrive, or Kaltura via the "Existing Activities" option.
 - Ensure content meets digital accessibility standards.
 - Use accessible HTML templates for text-based content.
 - Import OER content as needed.
 - **Final Assessment Module:**
 - Include a pre-final draft (for undergraduates) and link to the final assessment guide.
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Finishing Up and Reviewing the Course

Ensure all elements are properly aligned and functioning before finalizing the course. Use the YourPace Certified Instructor Training and other CTL resources for additional support.

This structured approach simplifies course development while ensuring high-quality, student-centered design in the YourPace program.

The YourPace program at the University of Maine at Presque Isle (UMPI) and the MyPath program at UMass Global both offer competency-based education (CBE), but they have some key differences in their approach and structure. Here is a comparison of the two programs:

Key Differences Between YourPace and MyPath

Feature	YourPace (UMPI)	MyPath (UMass Global)
Flexibility	Self-paced with multiple start dates per year	Completely self-paced, allowing students to set their own schedules
Tuition Model	Flat-rate tuition per 8-week session	Flat annual tuition billed every six months, with all learning materials included
Program Focus	Offers a variety of undergraduate and graduate programs, including business administration	Offers degrees primarily in business and IT fields
Learning Management System	Utilizes Brightspace LMS for course delivery, emphasizing consistency in design	Incorporates advanced learning technologies like simulations and game-based learning
Support System	Provides academic success coaches and faculty support throughout the program	Offers robust student support with enrollment coaches and academic advisors
Assessment Methodology	Students progress by demonstrating mastery of competencies through assignments and assessments	Competency is assessed through authentic work-related projects graded by faculty
Target Audience	Appeals to adult learners, particularly those with prior college credits or work experience	Designed for self-motivated individuals who prefer independent study without deadlines

Both programs aim to provide flexible, affordable education tailored to the needs of adult learners. However, YourPace is more structured with its session-based tuition model, while MyPath offers greater flexibility in pacing and scheduling.

Comparison of Program Costs: YourPace vs. MyPath

Program	Cost per Term	Term Duration	Cost per Week
UMPI YourPace	\$1,400 - \$2,000	8 weeks	\$175 - \$250
UMass Global MyPath	\$3,200	24 weeks	\$133

UMPI YourPace:

- Cost: \$1,400 to \$2,000 per 8-week term, equating to a weekly cost of \$175 to \$250.
- Distinct Features: Designed for affordability and flexibility, enabling students to take multiple classes within a term.

UMass Global MyPath:

- Cost: \$3,200 per 24-week term, translating to approximately \$133 per week.
- Distinct Features: A competency-based model that allows students to progress as they demonstrate knowledge, offering potential for quicker degree completion.

Summary:

- **UMPI YourPace:** Higher weekly cost but shorter term durations, appealing to students aiming for faster progress.
- **UMass Global MyPath:** Lower weekly cost over extended terms, better suited for students needing a more gradual pace.

