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Winter 2010 Feature Story: The Leading Job for Maine's Graduates

Craig Larrabee '92, president and CEO of Jobs for Maine's Graduates, identifies with the state's "students of promise."

Story and photo by Marc Glass

Craig Larrabee '92 describes the Maine high school students annually referred to the Jobs for Maine's Graduates program as having barriers to succeeding in school, transitioning into the workforce, or continuing their education. They typically come from economically disadvantaged households, miss a lot of school, don't have support networks, and aren't doing well academically.

But Larrabee, president and CEO of Jobs for Maine's Graduates, insists that JMG students not be labeled "at risk."



"We think of them as students of promise," says Larrabee of the 4,000 Maine teens who annually receive school-to-career services from JMG. And, by any measure, he's right: Ninety-five percent of JMG students graduate from high school (the non-JMG rate in Maine is 86 percent), and, according to the Maine Department of Labor, they earn, on average, 15 percent more than all other 22- to 24-year-olds in Maine, six years after graduating.

The educational recipe for such success, says Larrabee, calls for JMG learning to be "relevant, rigorous, and rooted in strong relationships."

JMG-funded job specialists (many of them UMF graduates: see below), working in 64 Maine schools from Frenchville to Sanford, teach classes focusing on leadership, communication, job-attainment, and career-development skills, as well as lessons in time management, personal finance, team building, and community service. And JMG students have ample opportunity to shape their hands-on learning activities. Each class, for instance, chooses how to invest \$1,000 provided by the Unity Foundation and the Maine Community Foundation to support JMG's requirement that students perform 10 hours of service annually.

"Our students learn how to set up the request-for-proposal process and make decisions on how to give back to their community," he says. And JMG students also learn the synergistic power of challenging other charitable organizations to raise money for matching grants: Last year JMG students raised more than \$20,000 for the Make-A-Wish Foundation in Maine.

"We use those light-bulb moments of success to ask our students, 'If you can do that, why can't you raise your grade in algebra? Why can't you continue your education beyond high school?'" he says.

If Larrabee seems passionate about JMG students (and the 24,000 who have graduated from the program since its founding in 1993) that's probably because he considers himself one of them.

"I grew up on a farm without a lot of money," says the Belfast native. "I didn't really know what I wanted to do, and I wasn't doing very well in school."

Fortunately, says Larrabee, two UMF graduates—Diana Cote Leighton '80, his Belfast Area High School math teacher, and her husband, Dale '80—saw him as a student of promise.

"They said to me, 'You should go to college. You would make an excellent teacher,'" Larrabee recalls. "They took me to visit UMF. That's why I went to college."

Larrabee, who majored in secondary-education with concentrations in social studies and political science, credits UMF with providing him not only pedagogy and practice, but also the networking connections that have been critical to every step in his career.

"UMF helped me with the student teaching placement that turned into my first job," says the former Old Orchard Beach Jr. High School social studies teacher. "Now, being able to go back to that UMF connection with teachers, principals, and superintendents I work with gives people comfort in the relationship. When you have the UMF experience in common, you realize you can do business together."

Having progressed from job specialist to regional manager, director of operations, and executive vice president to president and CEO, Larrabee now focuses on staff-development planning for JMG's employees, providing the organization with strategic planning, and "stewarding important relationships." (Later in the day Larrabee would meet with Kevin Gildardt, vice president of human resources for Bath Iron Works, and, the next day, Governor John Baldacci.)

Established by the Maine Legislature as an independent, statewide 501c3 nonprofit corporation, JMG, explains Larrabee, receives a fraction of its \$4.6-million operating budget through a state appropriation. Nearly \$1 million comes to JMG through corporate and foundation contributions from the likes of Bangor Savings Bank, the Davis Family Foundation, L.L.Bean, and the Unum Foundation—businesses and organizations that have a stake in the future of Maine, where 81 percent of JMG alumni work six years after graduation. (JMG's regional and national contributors include Bank of America, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, and Time Warner.)

"A lot of my job is making sure that 300 private-sector partners, 82 staff members, our partner schools, and key state leaders are all pulling in the same direction," says Larrabee, who has overseen a 100 percent increase in students annually served by JMG with only a 50 percent increase in budget. "If you have a good product, the data, and the success stories, then it's not difficult to make the case for supporting JMG, even in a tough economy."

As JMG for the past 15 years has garnered best-in-the-nation honors among all state programs using the Jobs for America's Graduates curricular model, Larrabee is an increasingly sought after consultant across the country. Job opportunities for this UMF graduate may abound, but the 39-year-old says his "work's not done" at JMG.

"I enjoy consulting on the national level, but I want the focus of my work to be in Maine," Larrabee says. "I have a passion to improve education, and JMG has given me tremendous opportunities to improve public education at home."

Learn more about Jobs for Maine's Graduates at www.img.org