

Students converge on 25th annual Jobs for Maine's Graduates conference in Waterville

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By Amy Calder Morning Sentinel

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WATERVILLE — Lexi Hawkins' plan as a high school freshman was to move out of Maine after graduation and get a job — though she had no idea doing what.

She didn't know what Maine had to offer or what she might be good at.

That was before she got heavily involved in the Jobs for Maine's Graduates program, which helped her identify her interests; hone her skills in public speaking, leadership and other areas; and learn how to be a good employee.

Now a Waterville Senior High School junior, Hawkins, 17, is certain she wants to study business at Husson University, own her own company afterward, stay in Maine and give back to the state.

"I went from a girl who wanted to run away to a confident student who is vice president of my JMG Career Association, captain of my school's debate team and a cheerleader," Hawkins said Tuesday. "And because of these experiences, this summer I will be interning at a local company using my marketing and communication skills."

Hawkins was at the 25th annual Career Development Conference, reading aloud a two-minute speech to a panel of judges as part of a public speaking competition — and later was awarded second place for public speaking. The conference, which drew 650 students from 65 schools all

over the state, more than 100 volunteers and 45 businesses, organizations and post-secondary institutions, was held at Thomas College. Waterville students took a total of six trophies Tuesday.

Hawkins stood tall and poised, spoke clearly, was articulate and held eye contact with the handful of judges she faced in a room at the Alford Academic Center on campus. She was competing against 10 other students in one of several public speaking events held Tuesday. She said her JMG specialist, Dana Bushee, worked with her and helped her to research colleges.

“When I decided on one, she was happy to hear I’m staying in Maine,” Hawkins said in her speech. “I am, too, after seeing how much this state is growing, especially in my hometown of Waterville. She has pointed out to me what all these colleges have to offer.”

Maine’s JMG program is one of 35 throughout the country, according to Lisa Gardner, JMG’s director of stewardship. The Jobs for America’s Graduates, JMG’s national affiliate, has deemed the Maine program the best school-to-career program in the U.S. for consistently exceeding national standards. Northeastern University tracks and compares student outcomes for the 35 programs nationwide, according to Gardner.

“We are the best in the nation in terms of number of students who graduate from high school,” Gardner said. “Eighty-seven percent of our students who graduate from high school within one year are working full time or are in post-secondary education.”

The independent, 501(c)(3) JMG program partners with public education and private businesses to ensure all students from Maine graduate from high school, attain post-secondary credentials and pursue careers that are meaningful. In Maine, the program serves more than 9,000 students annually through more than 100 programs in the state, according to Gardner.

While the students who attended Tuesday’s conference were mostly high school seniors, many juniors also participated. JMG works with students from sixth grade all the way through high school and beyond.

Bushee, JMG specialist for Waterville Senior High School’s juniors and seniors, maintains contact with her students for at least a year after they graduate from high school to support them and help them to succeed. It is often in that first year after high school that graduates might falter



Lexi Hawkins, of Waterville Senior High School, addresses judges Tuesday during a public speaking competition at the Jobs for Maine Graduates Career Development Conference at Thomas College in Waterville. Hawkins placed second in the competition. *Morning Sentinel* photo by David Leaming

and need extra support.

“Having that JMG specialist there after high school is, I think, why we are as successful as we are today,” Bushee said. “That’s the key. I’m not done with them when they walk across that stage to get their diploma. I’ll meet with them and we’ll job-hunt together, update their résumé. Sometimes they’ll call me.”

JMG classes in public schools are small, so specialist and student get to know each other well. The specialist also gets to know the barriers students face, which can include financial hardship, food insecurity and other problems, according to Gardner.

Hawkins, the Waterville junior, attends Bushee’s class every other day.

“You learn how to write a check. You learn how to apply for colleges and jobs,” Hawkins said Tuesday before taking part in activities. “I’ve taken JMG all my years of high school, so this is my third year. It gives you all of your options and helps you decide which one is best for you.”

Waterville Schools Superintendent Eric Haley, who serves on the JMG board of directors, said there are a lot of great things happening as part of the program. When Waterville, Winslow and Vassalboro schools were part of Alternative Organizational Structure 92, the AOS had the largest number of JMG programs in the state, according to Haley.

“It’s all about being student-centered,” he said. “It’s all about solidifying their aspirations for careers.”

Funding for JMG includes money from the state, businesses and the Harold Alfond Foundation, according to Haley.

Matt Gilley is Waterville’s JMG specialist for ninth- and 10th-graders; Jonathan Hart is the specialist for seventh- and eighth-graders and also works with sixth-graders. Bushee said the specialists work with more than 200 students annually in Waterville.



Madison Area Memorial High School students, from left, Roland Picard, Connor Theriault, Reid Campbell and Cheyenne Steves, get information about careers Tuesday from Karena Cochran, of Northern Light Health, during the Jobs for Maine Graduates Career Development Conference at Thomas College in Waterville. *Morning Sentinel* photo by David Leaming



Messalonskee High School student Pyper Birch speaks with a company representative Tuesday during the Jobs for Maine Graduates Career Development Conference at Thomas College in Waterville. *Morning Sentinel* photo by David Leaming

Bushee's students learn how to create a résumé, a cover letter and references. They do mock interviews; learn about team building, leadership, financial planning and career development; and are mentored in how to dress professionally. Bushee's classroom has a professional clothing rack for use by students, with clothing donated by teachers and community members.

Some of Bushee's students have gone on to colleges and universities or enlisted in the military; some have gone directly to the workplace.

"What I love about JMG is, I teach my students that we all have different paths that we're going to take in life, and not one path is better than another," she said.

Hawkins and fellow Waterville juniors Mickayla Crowley, 16, and Cierra Guarente, 18, took first place in a decision-making event Tuesday in which they were presented with a scenario involving a man named "Alan" who had graduated from college but was having trouble connecting with people associated with graphic design, his chosen profession.

The three students brainstormed solutions to the problem before a panel of judges Tuesday. They discussed the idea that Alan was not using his Facebook page appropriately to draw interest because in addition to posting professional pursuit activity, he also posted about his weekend and party activities, which probably was hindering his efforts.



Waterville Senior High School students, from left, Cierra Guarente, Lexi Hawkins and Mickayla Crowley, deliver their conclusion Tuesday to judges during a decision-making competition at the Jobs for Maine Graduates Career Development Conference at Thomas College in Waterville. The team won first place in the competition. *Morning Sentinel* photo by David Leaming

The students also decided he should expand his efforts to other platforms such as Instagram and Twitter, and do more research.

Crowley and Guarente said they think the JMG conference helps prepare students for life after high school and encourages them to step out of their comfort zone and do things they never would do on their own.

"I think it's good for students who aren't comfortable doing things," Crowley said. Guarente agreed.

"I did JMG in junior high, too, with Mr. Hart, and I really enjoyed it," she said.

All three said Bushee is an excellent JMG specialist.

"She's like a mother, and she listens to us and gives us advice, and she doesn't talk at us. She talks to us and with us," Crowley said.

At the opening ceremony Tuesday morning, Thomas College Provost Tom Edwards welcomed the crowd at the Harold Alfond Athletic Center.

“Thomas and JMG are linked in many important ways. We even have a JMG office and a specialist on our campus, a JMG Club, and 65 students who are pursuing their bachelor’s or master’s degree here at Thomas,” Edwards said.

He said the focus on students and student success is what links the college and JMG together.

“JMG prepares you for your careers, for success in whatever your path might be,” he said. “The program that you have today will be a chance for you to demonstrate the skills and the talents that your JMG program has helped you develop.”

He told a story about a JMG student who met him last year at the conference and told him she would be attending Thomas and had earned a scholarship. Over the summer, that student contacted Edwards to tell him she was enrolled in the college’s three-year bachelor’s program, in which she would graduate in three instead of four years, and she planned to pursue a master’s degree as well.

“I next encountered her at a luncheon at the University of Maine at Orono, with Sen. George Mitchell, since she was also a Mitchell Scholar,” Edwards said. “She participated in the Thomas early college program. She joined our Leadership Academy here at Thomas. She is a student ambassador and has joined the Student Philanthropy Team. And she’s on the dean’s list. That’s what direction looks like. That’s what purpose looks like. That is what pride, and a sense of accomplishment, can look like.”

Craig Larrabee, president and chief executive officer for JMG, gave opening remarks. He presented awards to Bangor Savings Bank and AT&T, which he said have gone above and beyond in understanding and supporting JMG, investing money and being advocates for the program.

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