Peer power: UMF tutors turn struggle into shared success

By REBECCA RICHARD
Staff Writer



Left to right: Jay Schwartz, business and financial literacy team leader; Misty Beck, Student Learning Commons coordinator; Tessa Tillman, Gateways for Success program leader; Tom Gingras, Academic Allies program leader; Christopher Houdeshell, Course-Based Tutor Program leader; Kenady Marshall, writing tutor and academic coach (panel moderator); and Giada Jellison Wall, math team leader, at the Maine Peer Educators Summit held at Bates College. (COURTESY PHOTO)

FARMINGTON — At the University of Maine at Farmington, peer tutors are redefining academic support through empathy, collaboration and shared experience. Under the guidance of Learning Commons Coordinator Misty Beck, the program has grown exponentially since the COVID-19 pandemic, helping hundreds of students navigate academic challenges and build confidence in a welcoming, student-led environment.

"Peer-to-peer support takes many forms," Beck said. "On a typical day, it may look like groups of two or three students working together at one of the tables, sometimes using a moveable whiteboard to work out a math problem or brainstorm a concept map." She described the Learning Commons as a "multiuse space" where tutors blend in, faculty occasionally hold advising sessions and students "find this a great space for working on group projects or studying together (or alone)."

BUILDING TRUST AND COMMUNITY

For math tutor and team leader Giada Jellison Wall, the essence of peer support lies in shared understanding.

"I am the peer of those I tutor, and I support them as someone who understands their position as a student while also having a solid understanding of the content," she said. "Students seeking tutoring simultaneously can become good support for one another."

Trust, tutors emphasized, develops through openness and connection.

"One of the ways that I build trust with students who may feel nervous or embarrassed about asking for help is sharing my own experiences when I've struggled," said Tessa Tillman, program leader for Gateways to Success. "Breaking down the idea that tutors are 'the perfect student' tends to help."

Writing tutor and academic coach Kenady Marshall agreed: "Establishing rapport is the key. I'll often relate to them by saying that I, too, struggled with a specific assignment or class. This way, they feel safe and I am seen as less of a scary authority figure and more of a peer."

GROWTH AND ADAPTATION

Beck said she joined UMF after the pandemic, when many students were "emerging from disrupted educational backgrounds." The need for connection and academic structure was immediate.

"We began with a small writing and math tutoring service, and quickly found that academic coaching was needed to address basic study skills and the soft skills that lead to academic and professional success," she said.

With collaboration across campus, the program expanded to include academic coaches, course-based tutors and initiatives in science, business and financial literacy.

"Drop-in science tutoring was added to meet a need that many students expressed," Beck said. "Tutors with skills, or aspirations to develop them, have led the way in creating infographics, designing materials, writing blog posts, editing our website."

The Alfond-funded Gateways to Success program has also flourished, growing from four sections in 2023 to 15 across disciplines.

"In this distributed leadership model, we have the flexibility to respond to needs as they emerge," Beck said.

EMPOWERING STUDENTS AND TUTORS

Peer tutoring not only benefits those seeking help but also strengthens the tutors themselves.

"Peer tutoring has grown my confidence immensely," Tillman said. "I dreaded any time I had to present or speak to more than a few people at a time. I've become much more comfortable in these experiences since I started tutoring."

For Marshall, teaching reinforces mastery.

"When handed the task of explaining a complex or challenging idea to a peer who is struggling, I have to break that idea down and establish my own understanding so that I can then teach it," she said. "If I can teach it, I can apply it."

Course-Based Tutor Program Lead Christopher Houdeshell added that tutoring has influenced his career goals.

"Being a peer tutor has made me interested in potentially pursuing a more education or community-based role within the scientific community," he said.

SUSTAINABLE STUDY AND HOLISTIC SUPPORT

The Learning Commons also helps students move from "crisis mode" to sustainable study habits. Tom Gingras, Academic Allies program lead, said academic coaching focuses on "the intangibles of being a college student," including scheduling, accountability and study habits.Beck said tutors lead by example.

"They acknowledge their own challenges and show how to get through, drawing on the help of others or different approaches," she said. Activities such as "Paint, Sip, and Self-Care," peer-led writing workshops, and collaborative study nights help make studying "a normal part of life."

CONNECTING ACROSS CAMPUSES

UMF's peer educators recently shared their approach at the first annual Maine Peer Educators Summit at Bates College.

"I was thrilled for UMF peer educators to have a chance to connect with others who hold similar roles across the state," Beck said. "They saw how impressive their work was in their colleagues' eyes. One said to me, 'They didn't know that we were students, too, but thought we were professional staff!'"

Houdeshell said one takeaway from the summit was an exercise emphasizing time management and empathy.

"It's a great reminder that many students have priorities other than academics, such as work or a social life," he said.

A SECOND HOME

For many, the Learning Commons has become more than just a study space.

"The UMF Learning Commons has come to feel like a second home to me," Jellison Wall said. "It's full of such genuine people who are passionate about what they study and tutor. We all want each other to succeed and are willing to give a hand when it is needed."

The UMF Learning Commons currently employs 47 peer tutors supporting 270 students through study sessions and tutoring appointments. Since 2022, participation has grown from 98 students to nearly 450, reflecting both the growing demand for peer-led support and the powerful sense of community the program fosters.

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