**To:** Dr. Robert Hasson, Commissioner of Education

**From:** Emma-Marie Banks, Public Policy Scholar, University of Maine at Augusta

**Date:** April 18th, 2017

**Subject:** Recommendations for Online Learning, Computer Literacy, and Support for Adult Education

## Background

In Maine, "almost half of all private industry workers are over 44 years old [as well as] ... almost 62 percent of government workers" (Maine Department of Labor, 2013). As society shifts to technology based systems and workplaces, it is important to make sure that people are technology literate for educational and professional opportunities. A survey conducted by the Maine Department of Labor found that more than 97% of the time, employers were unable to fill computer related jobs due to a lack of qualified candidates (Feinberg, 2015). In 2013, there were "more than 50% of ...jobs [that] require some degree of technology skills, and experts say that percentage will increase to 77% in the next decade" (Microsoft, 2013, p.1).

### Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act

Under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014, federal funding is offered to all adult education programs that "develop plans for educators, businesses and workforce development groups to work together to get workers back into jobs" (Feinberg, 2016). Gail Senese, the Director of Maine Adult Education, stated that "most people [who come to adult education] want to learn for a job. And they need to work to support themselves and their families" (Feinberg, 2016). The staff members of the adult education programs have had to work to shift their approach with students and to reevaluate the types of resources that they offer and expand the connections that they have with both employers and higher education institutions.

### Obstacles

Maine adult education focuses on connecting students with the resources that they need to follow their chosen path (e.g., high school diploma, literacy, college transitions, higher education, etc.); this often includes workforce training and one-on-one tutoring to meet students where they're at. Adult education is an overlooked and underfunded part of a school district's budget; these programs often go without many of the resources that their students need. As a result, many of these centers are not equipped with enough resources to tutor and counsel each of their students individually (Figure 1, Figure 2); this lack of resources, budgets, and time are all

barriers for centers who offer services.

The adult education population is diverse and there are students from all sectors of life; from a high school dropout to someone who is looking for a new job because their industry collapsed, these students often have other primary commitments, such as family, work, and community responsibilities, causing them to be unable to take full advantage of the services offered by their local center. There are many of these students who lack basic computer skills, which creates an additional barrier for them on their path to success. Considering that by 2020, more than 70% of jobs will require computer skills, it's important to bridge the gap between adult learners and technology (Microsoft, 2013).

## Methodology

The methods of this research included a review of secondary data, interviews, a survey, and attendance at the Adult Education Directors' meeting. The survey was administered in the Spring of 2017 and the data was collected and synthesized for relevance and trends. These results were discussed with Gail Senese before the culmination of the policy recommendations contained within this memo.

## Results

The following is a summary of the most relevant results of the data collection process.

▪ **Instructor Unfamiliarity with Technology**

At the directors' meeting, some of the directors expressed hesitation with the technology themselves, and were uncomfortable with leading their staff and students in online learning and computer mediated communication; this was re-confirmed in the survey that was administered in the Spring of 2017.

▪ **Universities Want to Help**

Adult education has been partnering with secondary education; nearly all survey respondents have at least one partnership with a local university or community college (Figure 4). Some offer a free college course to adult education students and some offer physical space on-campus for adult education courses (Senese, personal communication, March 24, 2017).

▪ **Career Centers Need Computer Literacy**

If a business is unable to find skilled workers to fill their openings, they will be forced to relocate. In Maine, "enhancing worker productivity through increasing skills and education will help a slowly growing labor force meet the employer needs that arise in the next twenty years"

(Maine Department of Labor, 2013, p. 11). Career centers cannot help people find jobs if the people are not qualified for any of the job openings.

<div align="center">**Recommendations**</div>

The following are recommendations for policy change regarding the current structure of adult education and higher education services in the state of Maine with the overall goal of creating a stronger workforce.

▪ **Incorporate a seminar about online learning and technology skills for both education and the workplace into the annual adult education directors' meeting.**

Annually, the directors of adult education all gather in Augusta to discuss important and relevant matters in their field. During this session, there are different presentations that are all designed to inform adult education directors about services available to them and their students. After my experience at the directors meeting in the Fall of 2016, it was clear that many adult education directors and staff members are unfamiliar with the technology themselves and hesitant to see the usefulness of incorporating technology into their programs. To help encourage the incorporation of technology, I recommend that this annual meeting include a presentation on the prevalence of technology skills in education and the workplace. This presentation could be brief, but should include statistical information that helps the directors see how the culture of the workforce and education are both shifting to rely more heavily on technology skills. After the presentation, it would be helpful to remind the directors about relevant trainings that the Department of Education is offering to help facilitate adult education's immersion into online learning.

▪ **Co-locate adult education within University College locations, the UMS, and at community colleges across the state.**

By locating adult education programs within the college atmosphere and physical space, we will foster familiarity and create a sense of community and collaboration. Sharing resources between the two communities will increase versatility. If an adult education student encounters a challenge with technology, they will have more support and the issue will not fall solely on the adult education center itself. This sense of collaboration and community would help to fill the gap between adult education instructors' technology knowledge and the needs of the adult education students. In addition, co-locating would be beneficial to both the location and the adult education program itself because the overhead costs would be lower for both parties if the

expenses are shared at an appropriate ratio.

- **Create a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that extends college and university tutoring, tech, library, advising, and career services to adult education community members.**

    Extending university and college tutoring and career services to adult education community members who are enrolled in ABE, MCT, Workforce, and HiSET programs would allow them to have access to more resources that support the successful completion of the program they are enrolled in.  In the Spring 2017 survey, more than half of the adult education directors indicated that their students would benefit from more one-one tutoring.  In addition, there are more than fifteen teachers on average per adult education center, but only four tutors, two advisors, and less than two counselors (Figure 2); these are all indications that adult education programs would benefit from a partnership with the universities and colleges to extend resources where they are most necessary.

## Costs/Challenges of Implementation

As with most changes, the greatest challenges are financially and logistically based.  The greatest expenditures would be in extending tutoring, tech, counseling, and advising services to adult education students.  The MoU would specify the incorporation of adult education and pre-college students in the population served; this includes co-locations when possible, and access to services for all community members pursuing ABE, HiSET, College Transitions, and Workforce Prep.  Universities, UC centers, and community colleges all offer differentiating services, so each system would have to interpret and implement the recommendations in a tailored manner to ensure that they are making the best decisions for the students in their specific location.

## Conclusion

It is important to make sure that all sectors of our educational institutions are equipped to help all students learn the skills that they need to become or stay employed in a job that will keep them secure and satisfied.  Maine was "the first state to seize the potential of technology to transform teaching and learning in classrooms statewide" (Maine Department of Education, 2015), with the use of the Maine Learning Technology Initiative (MLTI) beginning in 2000. Maine can lead the nation again by ensuring that *all* its students have access to the resources that they need to become college and/or career ready.

**Appendix**

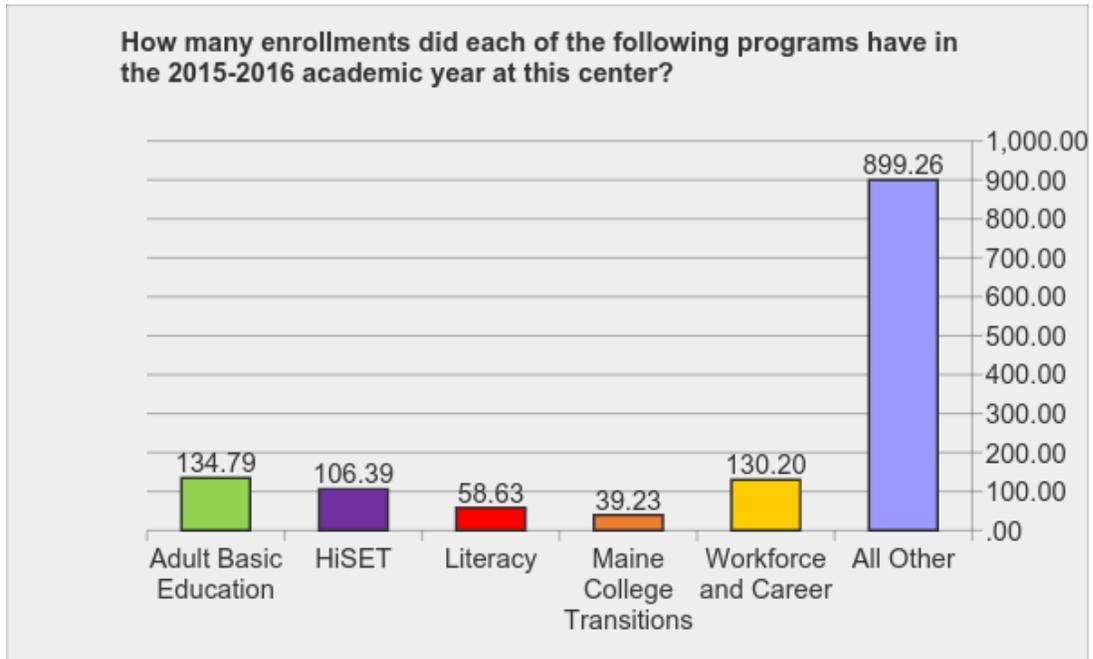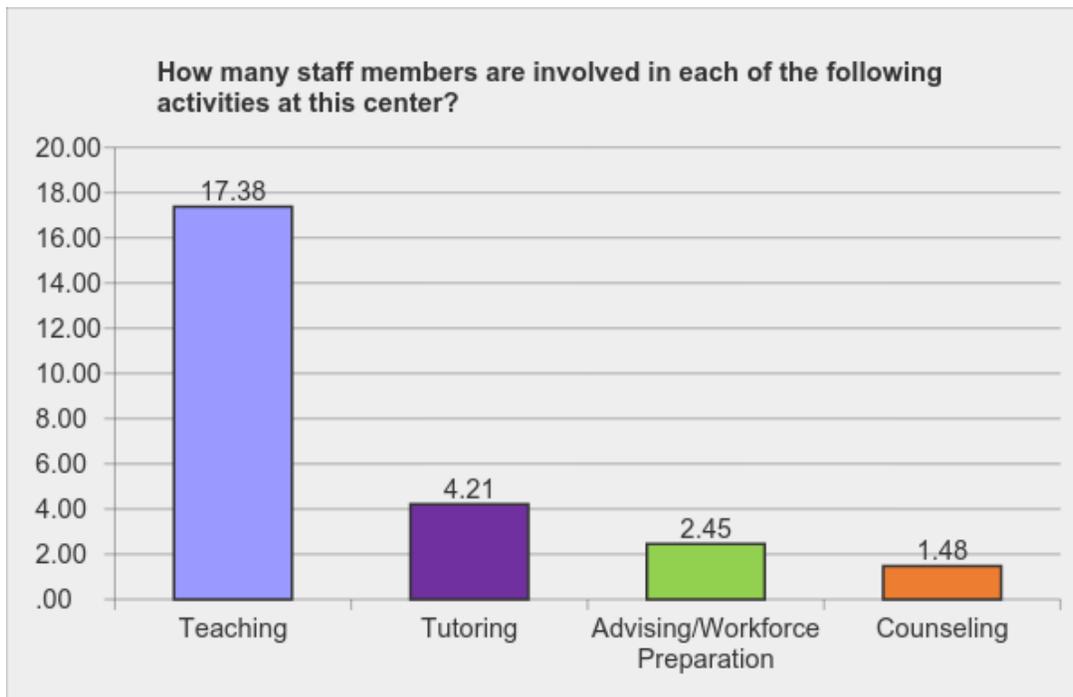**Figure 1**

How many enrollments did each of the following programs have in the 2015-2016 academic year at this center?



**Figure 2**

How many staff members are involved in each of the following activities at this center?
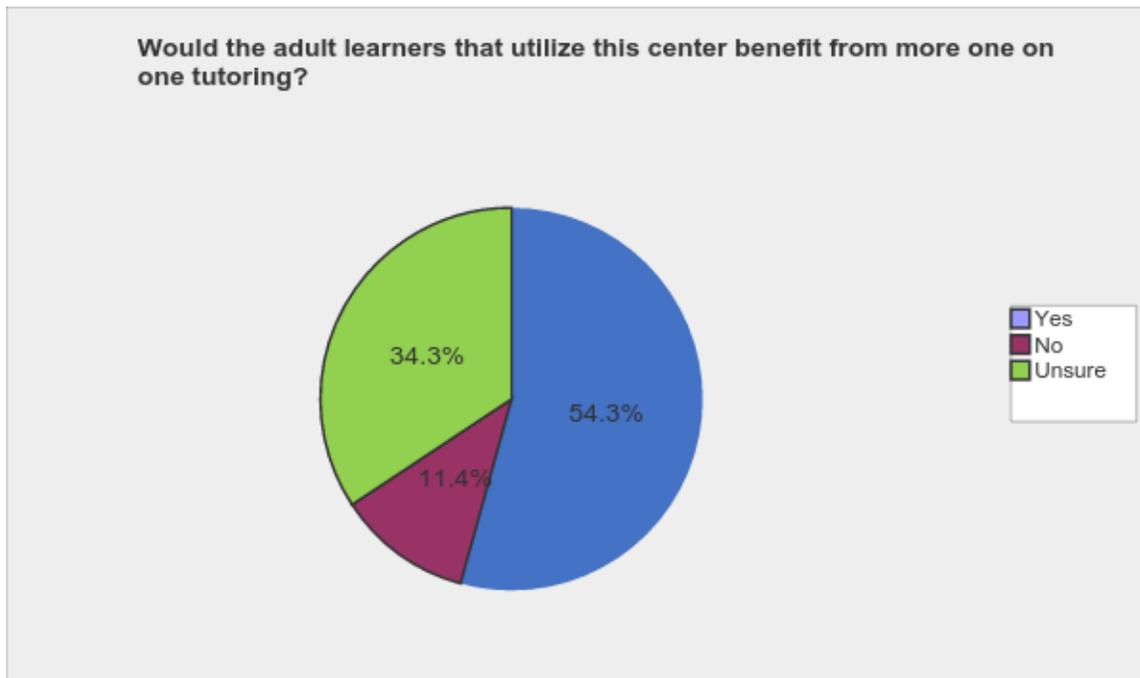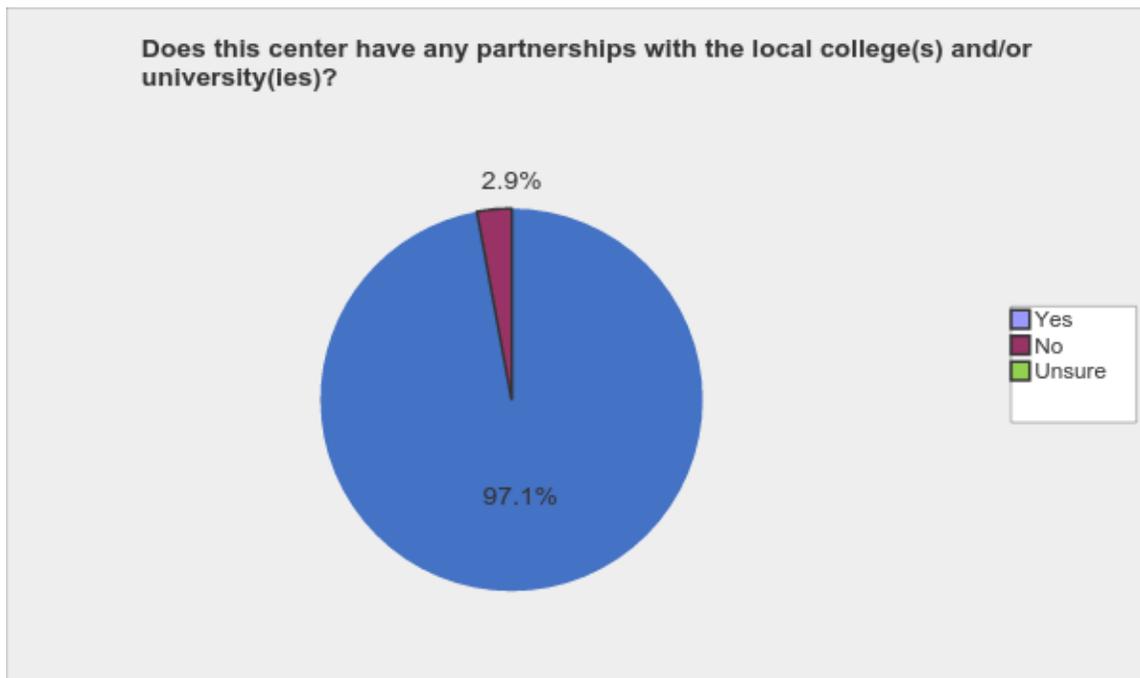
**Figure 3**



**Figure 4**

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