



THOR
INSTITUTE

TOURISM · HOSPITALITY
OUTDOOR RECREATION



ANNUAL REPORT 2026



maine.edu/thor



**MAINE'S PUBLIC
UNIVERSITIES**
UNIVERSITY OF MAINE SYSTEM

UMS Faculty Serving on the THOR Institute Executive Committee, 2025– 2026:

University of Southern Maine: Firooza Pavri, Associate Dean and Professor of Geography.

University of Maine at Presque Isle: Barbara Blackstone, Associate Professor of Exercise Science; Kim Jones, Associate Professor of Business Administration.

University of Maine at Machias: Karen Beefink, Associate Professor of Recreation and Tourism Management.

University of Maine at Farmington: Clyde Mitchell, Professor of Business; Matthew McCourt, Associate Professor of Geography; Meghan Price, Director of Alpine Operations; Austin French, Director of Career Pathways & Employer Engagement, Lecturer in Outdoor Recreation Business.

University of Maine at Augusta: Brenda McAleer, Dean of the College of Professional Studies & Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs.

University of Maine at Fort Kent: Michael Curran, Associate Professor of Business.

University of Maine: John Daigle, Professor of Forest Recreation Management, and Lauren Jacobs, Senior Lecturer in Outdoor Leadership.

Contributing Scholars: Ryan Naylor and Lydia Horne, Postdoctoral Associates at the University of Maine.

Staff: Tracy Michaud, Director; Emily Zider, Program Manager; Kelli Park, Outreach Coordinator; Eileen Moran, UMS Liaison.

FROM THE THOR TEAM

Dear Friends and Partners,

We are excited to share our latest Annual Report with you. It is a summary look at the momentum we have built together under our 2023–2026 THOR Strategic Plan. This plan did exactly what it was supposed to do—it gave us a solid foundation to build on.

Before we take our next steps, we want to look back at the real results that got us here. Over the last three years, our team has worked hard to turn big ideas into actual progress. We brought hands-on, real-world learning to our students and supported them with new fellowship opportunities. We also built deeper partnerships to strengthen Maine's visitor and outdoor economies. Most recently, we reached a major milestone by securing approval for our new THOR Associate and Bachelor of Science degree programs, giving students a clear path to careers in this field.

Now, we are ready for what comes next. We are launching our new 2026–2029 Strategic Plan, which is all about taking these proven successes and expanding them across the state. Under this new plan, we will focus on growing our most successful programs so the University of Maine System can continue to drive our state's higher education impact in the THOR economies.

Thank you so much for your continued partnership and support.

Sincerely,
The THOR Institute Team
University of Maine System



Photos of the THOR Institute team at The 2026 Maine Tourism Conference in Rockport and The 2025 Executive Committee Retreat at the University of Maine at Presque Isle.

COLLABORATION ACROSS THE UNIVERSITY OF MAINE SYSTEM

The Tourism, Hospitality, and Outdoor Recreation (THOR) Institute is living proof of what we can achieve when we work together. By leveraging the power of our collaboration across Maine's public universities, we are turning ideas into action: Creating accessible, industry-responsive learning opportunities to deliver real results for Maine and beyond. We strive to efficiently move the needle for Maine's tourism, hospitality, and outdoor recreation economies, equipping students with high-demand, versatile skill sets that carry immense value not just locally, but anywhere in the global marketplace.

Our collective momentum reached a massive milestone this year. Empowered by the UMS unified system accreditation, our teamwork has allowed us to collectively build toward a jointly-designed THOR AS-to-BS degree pathway in the YourPace program—a testament to what we can accomplish when we align our strengths to create flexible, accessible education.

Moving forward, we aren't slowing down. We are capitalizing on the robust infrastructure we've built together to deepen research, expand hands-on learning, and build new educational pathways, proving that our collaborative partnership is our greatest asset for getting things done. With our newly updated strategic plan guiding the way, we are perfectly positioned to sustain this collaborative drive into the future.

Mission

The THOR Institute serves as a convener and point of contact among all of the universities in the UMS as they provide for Maine's higher education needs in the tourism, hospitality and outdoor recreation economies.

Vision

The THOR Institute strives to be the state of Maine's foremost educational coordinator among the tourism, hospitality and outdoor recreation economies, offering:

- (1) exemplary opportunities and services for all students pursuing THOR education and career pathways;
- (2) acceleration of the THOR workforce in Maine as well as on a national level;
- (3) leadership in research and innovation as it relates to THOR industries.

THOR INSTITUTE GOALS



Reduce THOR employee shortages and undertraining; increase skills for higher paying careers



Enhance Maine's authentic identity, visibility and capacity as a THOR destination, contributing to the economic success of THOR industries



Enrich equity, diversity, cultural exchange, as well as align Maine's THOR economies with environmental sustainability, advocacy, and resource protection



Feed the pipeline of higher education enrollment, student success, and in-state retention



Enhance unified accreditation opportunities in the UMS in a way that best serves students while showcasing the niche strengths of each campus



Expand leadership role in research and innovation as it relates to THOR industries



DISTRIBUTED ACADEMIC PATHWAYS

Building on the success of the multi-campus minor launched in 2024, faculty from every UMS university have continued to collaborate to develop more academic programming designed to meet students where they are:

- **THOR AS-to-BS (YourPace):** In an unprecedented across-the-system collaboration, faculty have finalized an Associate of Science (AS) to Bachelor of Science (BS) pathway within the flexible, competency-based YourPace modality. Scheduled for official launch in the coming months, this degree pathway will allow working professionals and transfer students to accelerate their degree completion on their own schedules.
- **Micro-credentials & Certificates:** To support rapid workforce development and stackable learning, the THOR team is actively developing a specialized micro-credential program alongside targeted professional certificates.
- **YourPace THOR Minor Exploration:** To fully round out the online, competency-based catalog, plans are underway to explore adapting the multi-campus THOR minor into the YourPace format, opening access to non-traditional and distance learners system-wide.

These new offerings are designed to complement in-person offering across the system. The THOR minor currently has 24 students with all of the UMS universities represented. An additional 20 THOR minor scholarships were awarded this fiscal year.

Complementing all of its academic programming, in June THOR was awarded a major grant of over \$300,000 from the Davis Educational Foundation. This generous funding will be used to significantly expand signature in-person, place-based programming. Moving forward, we are opening our doors to collaborate directly with partners and faculty from non-THOR disciplines. The goal of this initiative is twofold: to weave industry perspectives into broader academic fields and to share our specialized, hands-on immersive learning so other disciplines can replicate THOR's successful teaching models across the UMS.

CONNECTING WITH THOR INDUSTRIES

We are grateful for opportunities to connect with our industry and educational partners across the state (and beyond!) in the past year.

CORA Grant

The THOR Institute was awarded a Community Recreation Assistance Recovery (CORA) Grant in the amount of \$70,000 for the Maine Bound's Adventure Center (MBAC) to update their gear library, making outdoor recreation opportunities more accessible to the community at large. This project is in partnership with Maine Office of Outdoor Recreation funded by US EDA, of U.S. Department of Commerce.

Grant funding enabled a significant upgrade of the MBAC's rental fleet, including new canoes, kayaks (youth and adult), skis (youth and adult), snowshoes, sleeping bags, backpacks, camping gear, new wetsuits and cold-water paddling equipment. The project also supported the hiring of additional student and temporary staff to manage gear organization and inventory, ensuring smoother operations and improved service for all users.



CORA grant funds were used to support access to a wider range of outdoor equipment across multiple seasons.



THOR faculty and students at the 2026 Maine Outdoor Economy Summit in Portland, Maine.

The Maine Outdoor Economy Summit

In January, THOR faculty members Dr. John Daigle and Dr. Lauren Jacobs from the University of Maine (Orono) traveled with several University of Maine System students to the 2026 Maine Outdoor Economy Summit at The Holiday Inn by the Bay in Portland, where they were joined by a record number of attendees (400+). The University of Maine System was well represented by four students who participated in a panel - "Emerging Voices: Student Visions for Outdoor Industry Careers in Maine" - as well as by Dr. Daigle, who spoke on a panel called "Land and Access Returned by Penobscot Nation Across Two Important Projects."

The Maine Counseling Association's Annual Conference

Hosted in Rockland in April 2026, this event brings together clinical, professional, and educational counselors throughout the state who support individuals on educational and career pathways. THOR Institute Program Manager Emily Zider was a breakout session presenter.

The Maine Tourism Conference

In April, multiple members of the THOR Institute team were able to travel to Rockport to attend this annual conference, an opportunity to network with industry partners and get a pulse on new trends and opportunities that have evolved in tourism. The THOR Institute was proud to serve as a sponsor for the third year in a row.

The THOR Institute also had the opportunity to share information about career pathways in THOR-related industries at high school events throughout the state.

SYSTEM-WIDE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING INITIATIVES

VACATIONLAND COURSE: UNIVERSITY OF MAINE AT FORT KENT

Winter Recreation & Hospitality Business in Northern Maine



Vacationland students from across the University of Maine System in Fort Kent, January 2026.

Students from across the University of Maine System had the opportunity to immerse themselves in a true winter experience at the University of Maine at Fort Kent in January 2026. Students delved into place-based experiential learning opportunities while learning about the unique character of winter recreation and hospitality in Northern Maine.

Students participated in rich learning experiences that allowed them to not only discover the beauty of the region, but also to develop a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the local industry and the people who call this region home. Students had the opportunity to participate in: ice fishing, skiing, dog sledding, snowshoeing, engaging with local community partners, and sampling the local cuisine – moose stew!

“I learned about how it takes a network of volunteers and local people to invest in supporting these organizations, and about the value of having a place where the community can connect and come together,” said one student participant. “I really enjoyed my experience and I would take this course again, if I could!”

SYSTEM-WIDE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING INITIATIVES

THOR STUDENT FELLOWS

Across the University of Maine System

The THOR Institute hosted a strong cohort of THOR Student Fellows in 2025-2026, with unique and creative community-based projects supporting local efforts in and around Maine.

Some highlights from these collaborative efforts included: Dillon Metcalf, from the University of Maine at Orono, supported Maine Huts & Trails with marketing and outreach; Mia Forcine, as well as Kathryn Gatewood, both from the University of Maine at Orono, collaborated with Wabanaki Public Health & Wellness to support their campground development initiative; Andrew Clifford, from the University of Maine at Orono, developed a programmatic climbing manual for outdoor educators in New England; Bence Rosenberg, as well as Ilana Berkovitz, both from the University of Maine at Orono, supported programming goals at Maine Bound Gear Library; and Brayden Vance, from the University of Maine at Orono, collaborated with the World Affairs Council of Maine to support destination research and itinerary planning for visiting leaders and diplomats.

NORTH ATLANTIC SUSTAINABLE TOURISM FELLOWSHIP: EAST GREENLAND

A Collaboration Between the Arctic Education Alliance and The THOR Institute

A collaboration between the Arctic Education Alliance and The THOR Institute, this student fellowship focused on sustainable tourism in the North Atlantic region. Through unique, place-based learning experiences in East Greenland, the project was hosted in partnership with Visit East Greenland—the local destination management organization—and Campus Kujalleq, Greenland’s tourism college.

Student fellows Jeremy Powers (UMF) and Tyler Lissy (UMaine) participated in intercultural learning experiences with Greenlandic students and faculty focused on supporting local tourism development goals in Tasiilaq, Greenland. This experience was designed to support and deepen students’ understanding of destination management and stewardship in remote Northern communities with an emphasis on the importance of local voice in sustainable tourism development. It proved to be a transformative experience for everyone involved! *Funded in partnership with U.S. Department of State - Arctic Education Alliance.*



Photos of student fellows, Jeremy Powers (UMF) and Tyler Lissy (UMaine) on the AEA/THOR Student Exchange Trip in East Greenland, July 2026.

THOR INSTITUTE IMPACT - BY THE NUMBERS

Cumulative: 2023 - 2026

24

Internships & Fellowships

UMS students enrolled in THOR internships, apprenticeships, or fellowships

168

Direct Support

UMS students directly supported through THOR programming (Vacationland courses, minors, etc.)

316

Career Development

Students and professionals participating in THOR-related career development or job training

2025 - 2026

Internships & Fellowships

UMS students enrolled in THOR internships, apprenticeships, or fellowships

10

Direct Support

UMS students directly supported through THOR programming (Vacationland courses, minors, etc.)

50

Career Development

Students and professionals participating in THOR-related career development or job training

50

THOR MINOR

- The THOR Institute supports 24 THOR minors from all seven universities across the University of Maine System
- Increasingly diverse majors are represented:
 - Outdoor Recreation & Leadership
 - Parks, Recreation & Tourism
 - Education
 - Forestry
 - Sports Management
 - Political Science
 - Environmental Policy & Planning
 - Business

MORE 2025-2026 METRICS, SHAPING THOR'S FUTURE

- The THOR Institute redesigned its website and modernized its marketing in early 2026.
 - During the reporting period, there have been 15,600+ page views on our primary page (maine.edu/thor).
- In the reporting year, the THOR Institute obtained \$370,000 in external funding for THOR activities (CORA and Davis Educational Foundation)
- The THOR Institute projects an initial cohort of 35 students collectively across the AS-to-BS degree in YourPace, approved during this reporting year.

THOR programming thus far has been made possible largely in part by funding from the [Maine Jobs & Recovery Plan](#) put forth by Gov. Janet Mills and supported by the 130th Maine Legislature to invest the State's share of federal American Rescue Plan relief funds, including in University of Maine System workforce development.

THOR also has received generous support from [UMS Transforms](#) to fund its fellowships. UMS Transforms honors Harold Alfond's legacy to build a brighter future for Maine and its people and to go beyond what is to what can be.