

INSIDE HIGHER ED

Northeastern Expands Into Maine

Northeastern University plants another flag out of state with a research institute in Maine's largest city. Perhaps surprisingly, Maine's colleges seem to be welcoming the move.

By [Lindsay McKenzie](#)

January 28, 2020



Joseph Aoun, president of Northeastern University (left), walks with Barbara and David Roux in Portland, Me.

A new research institute focused on the application of artificial intelligence and machine learning in the digital and life sciences will open in Portland, Me., this spring.

But the institute will not be led by a Maine-based university.

[Northeastern University](#), a private nonprofit institution with its main campus in Boston, was selected by technology entrepreneur David Roux to lead the institute. Northeastern will offer graduate degrees and certificate programs at the new institute about 100 miles north of its Boston campus.

Roux, a Maine native, told attendees at a launch event yesterday that he and a small team of colleagues selected Northeastern to lead the project after a two-year search because it is an “elite university that’s not elitist.”

The institute’s mission will be to create a tech hub in Portland -- the largest city in Maine, a rural state with an aging population and colleges that are [struggling](#) to attract new students. “There’s no reason we shouldn’t be to Boston what San Jose is to San Francisco,” Roux said yesterday. “We live today in an innovation economy.”

The Roux Institute will be funded with a \$100 million gift from Roux and his wife, Barbara. David Roux is co-founder, former chairman and co-chief executive officer of Silver Lake, the world’s largest technology-focused private equity firm. He has previously made large financial gifts to other institutions in Maine, including \$10 million to [Bowdoin College](#), a private liberal arts college, and \$5 million to the Jackson Laboratory, a nonprofit biomedical research institution where Roux is chairman of the Board of Trustees.

Roux reportedly selected Northeastern after a two-year search process to find the right university to lead the institute. That’s noteworthy in higher education,

according to experts. “Often gifts are given to institutions where there is already a relationship that’s existed for a long time,” said Larry Ladd, senior consultant at AGB Consulting. “Here’s a case where the donor is acting more like a foundation -- they ask for proposals and they have certain objectives.” It would appear that Roux, who was born in Maine and still has a holiday home there, picked the location of the institute. Ladd doesn’t see a problem with Roux saying how he wants his money to be spent. But he notes this is part of a growing trend of donors, particularly with backgrounds in tech, “being much more prescriptive about how their gifts should be used.”

Ladd said the \$100 million gift is a “good start” but will not be sufficient to launch and run a research institute -- Northeastern will need “more resources to achieve what they are trying to do.” The good news is that it is easier to raise money when you start out with a large gift. “It helps donors know they are giving to something that has a high likelihood of succeeding,” Ladd said. Roux might have picked the location and the focus of the institute, but Northeastern would not have agreed to set up shop in Maine if they didn’t think it could work, Ladd said. Northeastern has already established **regional campuses** in Charlotte, N.C.; San Francisco; Seattle; Silicon Valley and Toronto, in addition to its Boston flagship campus. Unlike the Portland location, these satellite campuses are not research focused but do offer graduate degrees in subject areas aligned to the needs of the regional economy.

Linda Durant, vice president of development at the Council for Advancement and Support of Education, agreed that Northeastern likely did a lot of research to ensure the Portland location was viable. “I am sure a great deal of due diligence was done before accepting this gift so that the university was absolutely certain it was the right location and the right way to launch the center,” she said in an email.

Perhaps surprisingly, Maine's public universities welcomed Northeastern's expansion into the state, at least publicly. "The Roux Institute at Northeastern University brings a new vision, critical investment and proven research capacity to the Portland region," said Dannel Malloy, University of Maine system chancellor, in a statement. "It can be a game-changer for Maine's participation in the innovation economy and create new opportunities for Maine's students and entrepreneurs."

The Roux Institute will provide an opportunity for students to pursue advanced degrees in rapidly changing fields, said Joan Ferrini-Mundy, president of the University of Maine. "Pathways programs for UMaine students and faculty fellowships for UMaine and Northeastern faculty are being considered as the first steps in partnering," she said in a statement.

Many of Maine's higher education institutions are focused on undergraduate education and won't be competing directly with Northeastern for students, said Ladd. "They can feed them good students," he said. "If they can offer a five- or six-year program, where students are automatically enrolled in a master's program at Northeastern if they get good enough grades, they could actually boost their own enrollment."

Michael Thomas, president and CEO of the New England Board of Higher Education and an adjunct professor and dissertation adviser at Northeastern, described the announcement as a "big bet and a big investment" by Roux. But it's a bet he thinks he will pay off.

"Portland has the capacity to make something like this happen," said Thomas. He described the city as a "creative and fun" place that makes sense as a tech hub and won't have trouble attracting talented faculty.

Thomas sees some similarity between the Roux Institute and the Jacobs Technion-Cornell Institute on Roosevelt Island in New York City -- a joint academic venture between Cornell University and the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology that aims to produce entrepreneurial engineers who will go on to launch their own job-creating companies. Both institutes are trying to energize the local economy, he said.

The organizers behind the Roux Institute have gained impressive support politically and with local business leaders and companies, said Thomas. They include outdoor retailer L.L. Bean and global software company PTC. "It's one thing to announce an initiative and then try and go out and get that support," he said. "It's another to have it already. They did that work to get people involved."

James Dlugos, president of Saint Joseph's College of Maine, a private liberal arts college located about 20 miles northwest of Portland, said there was a very warm reception to the Roux Institute at a **launch event** yesterday. "We all see this as a tremendous opportunity for cooperation and collaboration," he said. "There is a lot of energy."

Saint Joseph's College is in the process of creating a new data science concentration for its undergraduate students, which could become a funnel for students looking to study with Northeastern in Maine. The team behind the Roux Institute has been very supportive of the efforts, said Dlugos.

"We're all committed to growing the workforce," said Dlugos. "Maine needs more people, and it needs skilled, trained people. This is a great chance for us."

Read more by [Lindsay McKenzie](#)

https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/01/28/northeastern-university-launches-100-million-research-center-maine?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=e7b2076c7e-

[DNU 2019 COPY 02&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-e7b2076c7e-198467257&mc_cid=e7b2076c7e&mc_eid=0c2028f1a2](https://www.dnu.edu/2019/COPY_02&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-e7b2076c7e-198467257&mc_cid=e7b2076c7e&mc_eid=0c2028f1a2)