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State of the Maine Technical College System Address, 2000

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Address
delivered by John Fitzsimmons, President
before a Joint Session of the 119th Maine Legislature
Tuesday, February 22, 2000

Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, distinguished members of the 119th Maine Legislature, it is a pleasure to be here this morning to speak about the Maine Technical College System. On behalf of our students, employees, and trustees, I want to tell you how honored we are to have this opportunity.

I want to begin with a 'thank you'. The investments you made in our Technical Colleges during the last legislative session were important steps in improving access to higher education.

- First, your overwhelming bipartisan support for a \$26.4 million bond issue will provide funds to upgrade and expand our facilities. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to go before Maine people. As you know, they endorsed it by a resounding 70 percent, with every county reporting over 62 percent support.
- Second, by providing the operational funds to add and expand high-demand programs, we are able to add 750 new students over the biennium-in all regions of the state.
- And third, by supporting a three percent increase in our base budget, we were able to freeze tuition at \$68 per credit hour-or about \$2,000 a year.

This month marks my tenth anniversary with the Technical College System. It has been an honor and a pleasure to be part of this dynamic organization.

After ten years, I couldn't be prouder of what we have accomplished:

- Fifty-two percent growth in enrollment in the past decade
- A 95 percent placement rate-in jobs or transferring to four-year colleges
- We have developed transfer agreements with all of Maine's four-year public institutions, and most of the private colleges-so that today, nearly 25 percent of our students go directly on to baccalaureate programs.
- We have implemented a new economic development program the Maine Quality Centers which is helping companies grow in Maine...companies like ATX Forms in Caribou; Log-On America in Lubec, Kennebunk and Portland; EnvisioNet in Augusta and Brunswick; and Hussey Seating in North Berwick. To date, the Quality Centers has helped over 4,800 Maine people gain the skills to qualify for those new jobs-all full-time jobs with benefits.
- We have strengthened our connection to Maine high schools with our national award-winning Maine Career Advantage program and Tech Prep. Together,

these programs are helping over 25,000 high school students, each year, prepare for college and careers.

- And just recently, we initiated the Community College Partnership with the University of Maine System, and opened a new door to higher education with the Associate in Arts transfer program-now available at all seven Technical Colleges.

I want to thank our employees for all they have accomplished, and most importantly, for their unwavering commitment to their students. They share a common belief that if our students are successful, Maine will be successful.

I also want to thank them for their willingness to embrace change. As we enter a new century that promises unprecedented change, that quality should give all of us confidence that the Technical Colleges will serve Maine well in a new era.

This is an organization ready...and excited...about the 21st century.

* * * *

There is not a day that passes that we don't hear or read about the technological revolution and its impact on our society.

- In the home....where 45 million American households now have personal computers and 80 million have access to the Internet.
- In commerce....where sales over the Internet are projected to grow from \$150 billion in 1999 to \$1.1 trillion in 2002.
- And at the workplace....where whole industries are being transformed-from paper making to boat building, from metals manufacturing to health care. Today, nearly two-thirds of all jobs require workers to use technology in the performance of their jobs.

The undeniable fact is technology is permeating every aspect of our lives and will only further transform the way we work and live in the future.

In the 1990's, we reached a universal consensus that in America there is a growing divide between the educational 'haves' and 'have-nots.' Never in our history has there been such a direct relationship between educational attainment and economic prosperity. Now, as we enter the new century, there is a second factor that will only widen that gap: those who are proficient with technology, and those who are not.

As our economy continues to evolve, thousands of Mainers will be turning to the Technical Colleges as a place to earn a college credential and the skills they need to find their place in the new Maine economy.

If we look across the nation, state after state is turning to their two-year college systems to play a key role in preparing citizens for the information age. States like California, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and New Hampshire-all have made substantial investments in their two-year colleges to expand access and retrain workers caught up in the economic transition. In fact, the New Hampshire Technical & Community College System has set a goal to double their enrollment from 9,000 to 18,000 students by the end of this decade.

If the Technical Colleges are to assist Maine people more fully in this new era, there are three major commitments that I believe we will have to make.

First, we have to continue to increase the capacity of the Technical Colleges. At 5,500 students, our colleges are too small for Maine. And Maine people and businesses are feeling the impact.

In the last few months, Maine newspapers have reported skilled worker shortages in industry after industry. From the sawmills of Aroostook County that are now requiring associate degrees...to health care providers in Kennebec County...to computer firms in Cumberland and York Counties. These stories only illustrate the recent findings of the Economic Growth Council: that 61 percent of Maine businesses are struggling to find the skilled workers they need to compete.

The investment you made last year was a good start. We urge you to continue that progress, by supporting LD 2519. This initiative, put forth by Senate President Mark Lawrence and House Speaker Stephen Rowe-with bipartisan cosponsors-would add another 250 students. Along with the 750 already funded, this would return us to our original goal last year of 1,000 new students over this biennium.

Equally important, this bill includes a resolution by this Legislature calling on future legislatures to commit to a growth plan for the Technical Colleges-to reach 10,000 students by 2006. I urge your support for this initiative.

Our second priority-also addressed in LD 2519-is a one-time \$2 million investment in high-speed Internet access.

We're heading to a day when getting online is an integral part of every student's day-from registering for courses, communicating with faculty, checking grades, doing research, and submitting assignments. All of these will be done over the Internet.

The good news is, our students and faculty are embracing this technology. The challenge is that the demands are exceeding the capacity of our network much sooner than we projected. And our students are now feeling the effects-with delays and slower service online.

Our needs are twofold: first, to expand our network's bandwidth capacity to provide greater and faster access to the Internet. This investment will allow us to migrate to ATM technology, which would increase our bandwidth capacity by 175 times our current technology. This increased bandwidth will ensure that every Technical College student will have the resources of the Internet at their fingertips.

These funds would also support faculty development of online courses.

Let me tell you why I believe online courses are going to be a part of the Technical Colleges' future.

In the past, distance education has been a small part of higher education. But, thanks to the introduction of the personal computer and the Internet-and a whole new generation growing up on computers-web-based instruction is about to revolutionize higher education.

Between 1995 and 1998, online courses grew by 72 percent nationally. In 1998, 1.6 million American students were taking courses online. Today, over 70 percent of public higher education institutions are offering distance courses as part of their offerings.

Along with this explosion of online courses, the Internet is also breaking down the traditional geographic boundaries that have insulated us from competition. You know those boundaries are dissolving when eight community colleges from six states come together to form a consortium to market and deliver online courses. And when the governors of five states unite to create the Western Governors University-a virtual university offering full programs online to people around the world. And when Great Britain (just one week ago) announces a major investment to create an electronic university, to compete with American institutions.

While these new online consortia will open up a world of options for students, they are also redefining higher education. The consortia are marketing general education and business courses, which are the least expensive to deliver...and they are leaving the expensive programs...such as machine tool and nursing...to be delivered by the home institutions.

In an article released just last week in The Futurist magazine, the Association of Governing Boards predicts that one-third of existing independent colleges and universities in the United States will close in the next 10 years because of the digital revolution.

I know for some of us e-commerce...e-trade...e-toys...and now e-ducation...is all moving far too fast. And even within the education community there are those faculty who embrace the new technology and see it as a complement to their teaching. And there are those who question its quality and a disconnect from students.

There will be...and there should be...a healthy debate within the education community regarding the emergence of electronic education.

But with 52 percent of Maine households currently having access to the Internet...I believe the market is speaking.

At the Technical Colleges, we know Maine students and businesses need online courses to be a part of our offerings....

....because we're serving more and more adults-who are balancing work and family-and they will need the convenience of online courses to attain a college degree.

....and because our younger students will demand it. The new generation will see taking courses online or doing research over the Internet as natural as our generation saw sitting in a classroom or going to the library.

....and because our mission is to serve Maine businesses, who face a constant need to upgrade the skills of their employees to stay competitive. They will demand it-on site, and on their schedules.

While electronic education has its challenges and opportunities, the real question is not if we participate, but when.

Our third priority is the Community College Partnership, which we've initiated with the University of Maine System.

I want to thank Chancellor MacTaggart for working with us to bring our two systems closer for the benefit of Maine people. And I'd like to thank Governor King for offering his support and commitment to this initiative.

As you know, this partnership is designed to address Maine's low college participation rate by reaching out to those students who are undecided about their career goals,

unsure of their academic skills, or face financial constraints-a population traditionally served by community colleges.

Now, under the Community College Partnership, the Technical Colleges are offering an Associate in Arts degree. This program is designed to give people the foundation courses which are the core academic courses needed for baccalaureate programs, as well as for our associate degree programs in occupational fields.

This new program began last fall, and we had hoped for 150 students in the inaugural class. It has far exceeded our expectations. As of this spring, 434 students have enrolled at the technical colleges in this program.

These high enrollment numbers are exciting news, and only reinforce the need for community college services in Maine.

And now, thanks to a generous challenge grant from the Bernard Osher Foundation, Maine has a wonderful opportunity to entice more people into college by lowering the cost to attend.

The Osher Foundation has offered Maine \$2 million-\$1 million for the Technical Colleges and \$1 million for the Universities-to be matched by the State, to create endowed scholarships for students enrolled under the Community College Partnership.

Students enrolled in our Associate in Arts program will be eligible for a \$500 scholarship, which represents a 25 percent reduction in their tuition.

We'd like to thank Governor King for including the challenge match in his budget, and urge your support for it.

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Maine needs to make a long-term commitment to build a strong two-year college system. And we can take important steps forward this session, by expanding access, investing in technology and online courses, and supporting a new scholarship program for the Community College Partnership.

Maine people are facing a great divide....between those that have higher education and technical skills...and those who do not. There are thousands of Mainers who have lost their jobs due to technology and foreign competition who now find their skills obsolete for the new economy. And there are thousands more who are holding down two jobs to support themselves and their families. We must build a bridge across this

educational and technological divide that will give every Maine citizen an opportunity to be a full participant in the 21st century.

Some day, someone else will be standing behind this podium. And some day, others will be sitting where you are today.

We are the temporary guardians of Maine's promise. The decisions we make today will shape and influence the future of Maine. The measure of our leadership will NOT be in celebrating the successes of the few...but rather, in our ability to bring along the many... to reap the benefits of this new era.

Let that be our legacy. It must be our resolve. Thank you.