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State of the Maine Technical College System Address, 2003

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Address to the 121st Maine Legislature

John Fitzsimmons, President, Maine Technical College System
Tuesday, February 25, 2003

President Daggett, Speaker Colwell, distinguished members of the 121st Maine Legislature, it is an honor to be here this morning, with my new colleague Chancellor Westphal, to talk about how we can bring greater economic prosperity to Maine and our citizens.

I come before you today as more than just an advocate for the Maine Technical College System, but also as a person mindful of the very challenging issues before you and respectful of the responsibility you have to balance the budget while you protect Maine's most vulnerable citizens. As you work through the budget process, please be assured that we stand ready to be your partner in helping Maine recover from this economic downturn, and chart a course toward a more prosperous future.

We come to this chamber today from all across Maine. Whether elected or by profession, we are charged with the responsibility and the privilege of setting the public policies that impact the lives of Maine people. And we all share the same vision...*to give this and future generations of Mainers the opportunity to live, work and follow their dreams in our great state.* Report after report has documented the direct link between higher education and higher incomes, business growth, and vibrant economies. Very simply, we cannot stay at 39th in the nation in the percent of adults with college degrees if we want to realize this vision for Maine. And that is what I'm here to talk about today.

This month marks the beginning of my 14th year as president of the Maine Technical College System. I joined this system when the 114th Maine Legislature had just taken historic action, to change our Vocational Technical Institutes into Technical Colleges. They did so because technology and global competition had transformed our workplaces and, likewise, increased the education and skill levels of jobs, with more jobs requiring a full two-year associate degree.

The results of that historic legislation have been significant.

- We have more than doubled our enrollment, adding 4,000 more college students. Today we are serving over 7,500 degree students and another 13,000 continuing education students.
- We have added and diversified our programs. Today we offer 230 programs statewide, ranging from machine tool and nursing to computer fields and liberal studies. Eighty percent of our programs are now two-year associate degrees, and 90 percent of those transfer to four-year programs.
- For the past four years, we have frozen our annual tuition at \$2,040. This freeze helped spur a 43 percent jump in enrollment in just four years, and moved us closer to our goal of having a tuition rate at or below the national average for community colleges.
- And we have delivered on our mission of supporting Maine's economic development efforts with our Maine Quality Centers program, in which we retrained Maine workers for 7,000 new jobs — *all full-time jobs with health benefits.*
- And finally, the most important measure: college placement. During those years we have achieved a 96 percent placement rate — either in jobs or transferring on to four-year colleges and universities. And equally important, of those entering jobs, *96 percent are employed right here in Maine.*

Clearly that important legislation — coupled with the talent and dedication of our faculty, staff, administrators and trustees — has had a significant economic and social impact on Maine.

But today, we are living and working in a fiercely competitive global economy. Intense competition and new technologies have upped the ante, and employees are now expected to do more and know more. The educational bar has been raised even higher, and a college credential has become almost a standard prerequisite for good-paying jobs. The challenge before us today is to provide broad access to college, to engage those who have not traditionally gone to college. And so we find ourselves on the verge of another historic legislative action — transforming our technical colleges into full community colleges.

I know everyone in this room shares the belief that in times of great economic change, our public institutions must be responsive — and if necessary, *willing to change themselves* — to rise to new challenges and better serve our state. Throughout our history — as VTI's and as Technical Colleges —

change has been a part of our culture, and our philosophy. Now, it is time for us to change again, to help our citizens prepare for, and prosper in the new knowledge-based economy.

I would like to thank Governor Baldacci for his leadership, for making the education of our citizens a top priority of his administration through the creation of an accessible, affordable community college system. The Governor has included \$1 million in his budget to complete the transition and launch our plan. While this will be a slower start than we and the Governor had hoped, I am pleased to say that these funds will allow us to start this initiative this year.

I want to say that I recognize how difficult a decision it was for the Governor — and will be for you — to move this initiative forward in these challenging financial times. But I share his belief that Maine people...and Maine businesses...cannot afford for us to wait.

In the past two years, over 16,000 Maine workers have lost their jobs due to foreign competition. The churning economy has hit communities all across Maine....300 workers from Hathaway Shirt....91 from Pratt & Whitney....575 from Dexter Shoe....100 from Forster Wood Products....and possibly 500 or more from Great Northern Paper.

Place yourself in the shoes of those workers. The global economy landed right in the middle of their lives and they didn't ask for it. These tax-paying, hard-working men and women have seen their livelihoods, and in many cases their very way of life, change forever. This year over 860 dislocated workers are enrolled at our Technical Colleges. They fully understand that their best chance for finding a new livelihood is by going to college.

While these plant closings are capturing our attention — as they should — they reflect a much larger, more systemic change taking place in our economy. It is the loss or downsizing of our traditional industries, and the growth of new but different jobs that is triggering the need for higher education.

The magnitude of the task before us is substantial. Maine has 450,000 working age adults who do not hold a college degree. We know from research that 53 percent have at least some interest in pursuing a college degree. Twenty percent — or 90,000 — have a high interest in going to college. We don't have to convince Maine people that college is important....they are living the consequences of low paying jobs or unemployment.

And while our adult workforce struggles to find their place in a changing economy, each spring a new generation enters the workforce. Each year we graduate over 6,000 high school students who leave school and don't pursue higher education. In the next five years, unless we take action, 30,000 young adults will begin their journey with limited options. We must increase the number of high school students who go on to college. It is their best hope... and Maine's best hope.

By now, we all know what the barriers are. Chief among them is cost, and ability to pay for college. Another is academic background; there are many very capable people who need additional academic support to be successful in college. Many are unsure of their career plans, and thus are hesitant to make such a big commitment. And too many question whether they can be successful in college.

The people I have just described are the very people you would meet if you visited a community college.

In at least 45 states and every other state in New England, community colleges are providing a critical open door to college. Nationally, 42 percent of U.S. undergraduates are enrolled in public two-year colleges, compared with 15 percent in Maine. Seventeen percent of high school graduates enroll directly in public two-year colleges, compared with seven percent in Maine.

Clearly, community colleges are the missing link in engaging more Maine citizens in higher education.

So, are the Technical Colleges ready to deliver the community college mission for Maine?

In almost every respect, our Technical Colleges are already functioning as community colleges.

- First, we share the same two-year college mission and educational philosophy
- We offer the same academic credentials
- Our program mix is similar, with both career and transfer programs

- We provide affordable access, with the lowest tuition in Maine
- We offer geographic access; we are located within 25 miles of 92 percent of Maine's population
- We offer the academic support and small classes that help students succeed
- Like community colleges, we enroll students with varying levels of academic preparation, serving them directly in our learning centers or in concert with Adult Education.

So, if we are, in essence, already functioning as community colleges, what do we need to fully deliver that mission for Maine?

The seven-year plan we have developed has four components:

First, taking on the community college mission means we will be engaging students who enter college with more diverse backgrounds, and needs. We must enhance our developmental programs to assist those in need of academic support, and strengthen counseling services — to provide guidance with academic, career and transfer issues. Getting more students in college is only the first step; providing the counseling and support that help students succeed is equally important.

Secondly, at the heart of the community college mission is access. In our plan, we call for adding 4,000 more students over the next seven years, to reach a goal of 11,000 students by the end of the decade. We will be expanding both career and transfer programs. At least 80 percent of our programs will be in career fields directly tied to the Maine economy.

And third, we need a bond to renovate our facilities and upgrade our classroom equipment. I want to thank President Daggett and Speaker Colwell for being the lead sponsors of a \$20 million bond issue for this November. This bond will allow our seven colleges to maximize their current space and ensure a high-quality learning environment as we add more students and diversify our curriculum.

And finally, we need to change the names of our colleges to "community college" to accurately reflect our dual mission of preparing students for careers and transfer opportunities.

Over the last year, I have been out visiting Maine communities to discuss our community college plan, and the response has been overwhelmingly positive. I am pleased to highlight a few of the key business, education and nonprofit groups that have formally endorsed our plan:

Maine State Chamber of Commerce
 Economic Development Council of Maine
 Maine Congress of Parents and Teachers
 Maine Adult Education Association
 Maine School Counselors Association
 Maine Association of Vocational Education colleges.

I also want to express our thanks to Chancellor Westphal for his support of our Technical Colleges becoming Maine's community colleges.

The Governor's initial investment gets us started, and as Maine's revenue picture improves, we will need the State's support to fulfill the promise of Maine's new Community College System.

I want you to know that we are working hard to attract additional resources on our own. We are also strengthening partnerships and reviewing our own priorities to maximize the State's resources and reposition our colleges for the future.

Within the next week we will be announcing two matching gifts totaling over \$800,000 in funds directed at scholarships and expanding high-demand health care programs.

And last month we announced two new partnerships — one with the Maine Adult Education Association and one with the University of Maine System. These partnerships will help assure that Maine people have a convenient, effective and cost-efficient bridge into our community colleges, and on to Maine's universities. Equally important, they will ensure a higher level of communication and collaboration among our respective systems.

We have worked very hard to reach this point. We have revamped our curriculum, enhanced our libraries,

changed accrediting bodies, added the Associate in Arts degree, built new partnerships, and garnered the support of business, non-profit, and education leaders.

We are ready to assume the role as Maine's Community College System and with your support we will be ready this fall to accept the first class of community college students.

* * * *

If I am standing tall today, it is because I am standing on the shoulders of giants...our faculty, staff, presidents, and trustees. The success of this system is due to all of their talents, their dedication, and their hard work. The tie that binds us together as one family is our students. We believe in the innate talent and potential of every student we serve — whatever their background, whatever their barriers, whatever their dreams. Our students are at the heart of every decision we make.

I know at the heart of every decision you make this session will be your commitment to do what is best for Maine people. Let us give more Maine people the opportunity to compete and equally important, let us give them the greatest gift of all...the gift of hope. Hope that they will have a place in the changing economy. Hope that they and their children will be full participants in the American dream. And hope that they can continue to live and work in Maine and enjoy the life that we promote.

With the common belief that education is our guiding light, and with your leadership, and the talents of Maine people, our future will be bright.

Thank you.