

2012

Maine Community College System Rural Initiative Update, 2012

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Recommended Citation

Maine Community College System, "Maine Community College System Rural Initiative Update, 2012" (2012). *Maine Community College System Publications and Reports*. 26.
http://digitalmaine.com/mccs_docs/26

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Maine Community College System

RURAL INITIATIVE

More than a half-million people live in rural Maine, about 42 percent of the state's population. While many enjoy the benefits of living in tight-knit communities and some of the state's most beautiful places, many also live in stark contrast to their more urban neighbors. Their incomes are lower, unemployment is higher, and many fewer have attained a college degree.

As Maine's economy has shifted away from traditional industries, the state's rural areas have faced the challenge of replacing the lost jobs of the old economy with the jobs of the new economy.

Over the course of four months in late 2007, MCCA President John Fitzsimmons travelled some 2,500 miles across rural Maine to meet with nearly 400 community and business leaders from all 16 counties. The conversations focused on how the state's community colleges could support efforts to improve Maine's rural economies.

In January 2008, the MCCA issued a series of recommendations and announced a \$6.6 million investment in programs aimed at addressing the workforce and educational challenges confronting rural parts of the state. Five years later, those investments continue to make a significant difference throughout Maine.

Providing greater financial assistance for rural community college students

- A \$3.5 million challenge grant from the Bernard Osher Foundation, successfully matched by \$1.5 million, enabled the MCCA to establish a \$5 million endowment to fund scholarships for community college students from rural Maine communities.
- \$150,000 is available annually to provide financial assistance to help cover rural students' child care costs.

Bringing higher education to rural areas

- *Bring College to ME* is a program that brings full two-year associate degree programs to rural areas of Maine as-needed and based on regional needs. Originally funded through a combination of public and private dollars, including major gifts from the Betterment Fund and the TDBank Charitable Foundation, the programs are designed to make college more accessible and provide skilled workers for underserved areas of Maine.

Increasing distance learning opportunities

- Each of the seven community colleges has added technology to increase distance learning opportunities for rural Maine residents.

Increasing rural high school students' access to the community colleges

- *On Course for ME* provides opportunities for rural high school students to earn college credits by taking a community college course at no cost. Students take classes on campus at their local community college, through online and distance learning opportunities, and in community college courses offered at their high schools.

Expanding workforce training opportunities for small, rural businesses

- Through its Maine Quality Centers program, MCCA Board of Trustees amended its policies to better serve small rural business by providing easier access to free customized workforce training opportunities for businesses with less than 8 employees.