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STATE OF THE MAINE COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM

Address to a Joint Convention of the 123rd Maine State Legislature
Dr. John Fitzsimmons, President
February 15, 2007

President Edmonds, Speaker Cummings, Honorable Members of the 123rd Maine Legislature, Trustees, Presidents, and colleagues: it is my honor to speak to you this morning on behalf of the 13,000 students enrolled in our seven community colleges.

Before I begin my remarks, I would like to recognize Chancellor MacTaggart. As your tenure as Chancellor comes to a close this June and Rich Pattenaude takes command, you know you have left the system in very capable hands. I also hope you know how appreciative we are for your leadership in helping to advance higher education in Maine. Thank you for your service to our university system and our state.

I also want to recognize and thank Governor Baldacci for supporting an increase to our base budget in his biennial budget request. That increase is critical to protecting our current operations.

This year marks the beginning of my 18th year as the president of the Maine Community College System. To put that into perspective, when I started in 1990, Representative Kaenrath of South Portland was 7 years old. Of course, on the other hand, Senator Martin was starting his 25th year in the Legislature.

It has been quite a journey.

One thing that has not changed over those years is the pride I take every day in our seven colleges and in the students we serve. While our enrollment has grown every year for the past seventeen years, our success is still measured one student at a time.

Since our beginning in 1946, our mission has held true:

- to provide Maine people with an affordable, high quality education that enables them to qualify for good paying careers;
- to provide programs that are responsive to the labor demands of Maine's employers; and
- to promote local, regional, and statewide economic development.

In 2003, we undertook the transformational challenge of transitioning our technical colleges into community colleges. This initiative was led by Governor Baldacci and received the overwhelming endorsement of the 121st Maine Legislature, including many of you who are in this chamber today.

Our employees embraced the challenge because they believed it was right for Maine and because it promised to help address these disturbing facts. In 2003:

- Median household income in Maine was 42nd in the nation.
- Jobs requiring an associate degree or higher were increasing by nearly twice the rate of jobs requiring only a high school diploma.
- Only 35% of Mainers held a college credential as compared to the New England average of 44%.
- And while Maine's high school graduation rate was—and remains—among the best in the nation, we were in the bottom third of states when it came to sending our graduates on to higher education.

Four years ago, Maine was deep in the midst of one of the greatest economic shifts in its history, a shift away from natural resource based industries and traditional manufacturing and towards a knowledge based economy. For many of Maine's hardworking citizens whose knowledge and skills had been gained in the woods, at sea, or in our mills, it was—and continues to be—a wrenching experience.

Many of us had believed for years that Maine needed to create a true community college system. In 2003, we were one of only three states in the nation that did not have community colleges. Nationally, 17% of high school graduates were enrolled in two-year colleges, as compared to 7% in Maine. Forty-four percent of the nation's undergraduates were enrolled in two-year colleges, but in Maine that figure was only 17%.

If Maine was to begin to address the significant educational gaps that existed between us and the rest of the nation, we needed a low-cost, affordable entry point into higher education, one that would provide students with two critically important options. The first: a high quality occupational education that would give a student the skills needed for immediate entry into the workforce. The second: an affordable and convenient way to complete the first two years of college and then transfer on to the university for a four-year degree.

In the fall of 2003, we enrolled our first community college students. Four years later, here are the results:

- Enrollment has soared 47%.
- The number of students enrolling directly from high school has increased by 57%.
- The number of students transferring on to the University of Maine System has increased by 40%.
- Enrollment in our occupational programs, which represents about 65% of our student body, has increased by 16%.
- 95% of our graduates are placed in jobs or continue their education, and of those who are placed in jobs, 95% are placed right here in Maine.

We built it, and they came.

I hope you share my pride in those accomplishments. The source of that success can be directly attributed to the faculty, staff, administrators, and Presidents of our seven colleges. They embraced our expanded mission, and they were willing to do everything they could, individually and collectively, to help our students achieve their dream of a college credential.

These results were achieved with modest state support. Over the last four years, while our enrollment has grown by 47%, our state budget has increased by 10.4%. In 2002, state appropriations represented 53% of our total budget. Four years later, it had dropped to 46%.

How did we pull this off? My employees have worked harder, smarter and longer. They have been innovative. They have built partnerships with the private sector, and wrote and won grants. We have expanded online education and collaborated with our education partners to share programs and services. We have done this in order to serve as many students as possible, and we have stretched our system thin. We have added 3,560 more students in the past four years while the number of full-time staff we employ has remained virtually unchanged.

After all we have achieved, after all we have done to make the best use of limited resources, we still have only scratched the surface of student demand.

For nine months last year, the Governor's Community College Advisory Council researched employer need for our graduates, student demand for our programs, and the System's ability to respond. The Council included prominent Maine leaders like Leon Gorman, Chairman of the Board of L.L. Bean; Dana Connors, President of the Maine State Chamber; Ed Gorham, President of the Maine AFL-CIO; and other distinguished business, labor, and economic development leaders.

A few months ago, the Council issued its report. It found on the employment side that:

- 55% of employers who responded to a Maine State Chamber of Commerce survey in 2006 were having a difficult time finding skilled workers.
- In fact, an analysis conducted on behalf of the Council found that annually Maine employers need 6,000 workers with the skills earned at the community college level, while only 2,000 students graduate from Maine's two-year colleges.

As for the student side, the Council found that demand is only going to grow.

- Adults are coming to us in order to upgrade their skills or retrain for new careers. There are 455,000 working age adults in Maine who do not have a college degree, and over a quarter of a million of them have expressed interest in going to college.
- Each spring, 14,000 Maine students graduate from high school, and yet only 50% go on to higher education. Maine has an ambitious and absolutely necessary goal of increasing the state's college going rate to 70% by 2010. That alone would mean an additional 3,000 college students each year.

On the community college capacity side, the Advisory Council found that:

- For many of our programs, demand exceeds capacity. At KVCC there are waiting lists for respiratory therapy, lineworker technology, and a number of other programs. At EMCC more than half of the programs are maxed out and people are waiting to get in: to building construction, medical radiography, and others. At CMCC, nursing, automotive, and culinary arts are bursting at the seams; and at NMCC seven programs are at capacity. This year alone, Southern Maine Community College had to turn away 1,100 applicants for the college's health sciences programs and another 450 for its technical programs. And at York County Community College this fall 140 people showed up for an information session about the college's new nursing program. The problem is that there were only 16 slots available. One hundred twenty-four people left realizing that their dream of becoming a nurse would be a dream deferred.

In summary, the Governor's Community College Advisory Council's findings were clear and simple: The influx of Mainers seeking admission to our community colleges *will continue to grow*. The need for our graduates to support our economy *will continue to grow*. But without additional investment our colleges *will not be able to grow*.

Those findings led the Council to recommend more than doubling the capacity of our community colleges over the next decade. The immediate goal? Enable 4,000 more students to enroll over the next two years at a cost of \$4 million for every 1,000 students. The Council also recommended that our tuition stay affordable; that we reach out to under-served regions of the state; expand our economic development efforts, especially our Maine Quality Centers program; and expand our Early College for ME program to every public high school in the state.

I want to thank the members of the Advisory Council for their thoughtful review of Maine's economy and workforce needs. Their recommendations were unanimous and reflected their deep concern about Maine's ability to compete—and their belief in the power of our community colleges to enhance economic opportunity in our state.

Early in this legislative session, some of you heard a presentation by Laurie Lachance, President of the Maine Development Foundation. Laurie was asked by the Brookings Institute, as part of its examination of the Maine economy, to assess the success and challenges of the state's economic development initiatives over the past 30 years. It was an impressive list of initiatives. She then surveyed opinion leaders across the state. And she asked them all the same question: What policies or programs have served Maine best and hold the greatest promise for Maine's future?

I'm proud to say that leading the list of the top five initiatives was the creation of Maine's Community College System.

But Laurie said something else that was just as important. She noted that Maine has created some very effective and promising economic development initiatives. But those efforts have fallen short because we have failed to properly fund and support them over time. Consequently,

the initiatives never achieved their full potential and the people of Maine never reaped the full benefits.

Four years ago, the creation of the Maine Community College System set in motion a transformational change in this state. Today, our system is already at a crossroads, and the choice before us is clear. We can keep our community colleges at their current size, serving those fortunate enough to find a seat in one of our classrooms. Or we can make the commitment to expand the pipeline, which is—in all honesty—a lifeline for hard working Maine people who need access to higher education in order to compete for good jobs at good wages.

This morning I have shared with you a great deal of data from policy reports and labor market trend analyses. On their own and taken together, they make a clear and convincing case for why Maine must invest in its workforce.

But the numbers don't capture the human struggle or the desire of Maine people to improve themselves. Let me tell you about three students, who—because of the challenges they have faced—are representative of thousands of Mainers and of their hopes for the future.

First, is Travis Clark. Travis is a young man from Parsonsfield, who says he was a mediocre student with no interest in attending college when he graduated from Sacopee Valley High School in 2003. He spent two years working as a laborer on construction jobs until some high school friends persuaded him to try a welding class at SMCC. Turns out Travis loves welding and has a real affinity for it. He'll graduate this May with honors from SMCC. He plans to open his own welding business. Since Travis graduated from high school, about 30,000 other young people have finished high school and entered the workforce. In our current economy, many of them have found their options to be few and the chances for advancement limited.

Then there is Eric Adams. Eric grew up in Denmark, Maine, and graduated from Fryeburg Academy in 1993. For 13 years he worked as a lift operator and crew chief at a ski area. He woke up one day, found himself in his thirties with responsibilities for a small child, and he knew he had to take a different path. Eric enrolled at SMCC in Liberal Studies with a Communications Concentration. Eric discovered his love for writing. He will graduate from SMCC this May with a 3.9 GPA, and next fall he plans to enroll at the University of Maine to get his bachelor's degree in journalism. For every Eric, there are thousands of Maine people who are struggling to make ends meet. An estimated 52,000 people in Maine are holding down two jobs in order to survive; and another 140,000 live in poverty. They don't have the skills or credentials to compete for something more.

Finally, there is Laura Manson of Skowhegan who was laid off in 1999 from Dexter Shoe after 14 years. She enrolled at EMCC in the Business Management program. By the time she graduated in 2001, she was a member of the All Maine Academic Team and was selected as EMCC's Student of the Year. At the time, she hoped to enroll at Husson College and become a teacher. I'm proud to tell you that she followed that dream. Today, she is a teacher in the Bingham school system and is enrolled in a Master's degree program at the University of Maine. Laura is not alone. In the years since she lost her job at Dexter Shoe, another 25,000 Maine people have seen their jobs disappear to mass layoffs.

At the end of the day, supporting the expansion of the community colleges is not about statistics. It's about Travis and Eric and Laura. It's about Maine people: our neighbors, our friends, our family members, who find themselves standing on the wrong side of the educational divide, a divide that is growing wider and deeper by the day. It's about their hopes, their dreams, and their desire to achieve economic security in this great state, the place they and their families call home.

As you begin your deliberations on the critical investments needed to position Maine for the future, you will hear the voices of lobbyists and advocates and interest groups.

But I'll tell you who you won't hear from: the people we have been talking about this morning.

You won't hear from them because they will be too busy holding things together.

You must be their voice. You must be their advocates. When you fight for them, you fight for the best of Maine, the bedrock of Maine, and for Maine's best hope for the future.

Thank you.