

## **The MCCS Rural Initiative: A One-Year Progress Report**

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 manufacturing and natural resource based industries, the state's rural areas have struggled to adapt, and to attract the kind of high skilled jobs that offer good benefits and job security.

Over the course of four months in 2007, MCCS 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 December of 2007, the MCCS 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. One year later, those investments have begun to make a significant difference across the state.

### **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, has enabled the MCCS to establish a \$5 million endowment that will fund 250 to 300 **scholarships** each year to community college students from rural Maine, beginning in the fall of 2009.
- A pilot program to provide **financial assistance to help cover rural students' child care costs** has provided over \$60,000 in scholarships to 76 community college students this fall.

### **Bringing higher education to rural areas**

- *Bring College to ME* is delivering **six new health care programs** to rural areas of Maine. Over 160 students from more than 60 rural communities are currently enrolled in the programs which include nursing, medical assisting, medical office technology, and emergency medical services. The programs are being offered in rural parts of Aroostook

#### ***Year 1: At a Glance***

**Number of students served: 571**

**Number of communities served: 100**

(NMCC), Hancock (EMCC), Knox (KVCC), Washington (WCCC), Lincoln (CMCC), Penobscot (EMCC), Piscataquis (EMCC), Somerset (KVCC), and York (YCCC) Counties. Funded through a combination of public and private dollars, including major gifts from the Betterment Fund and the TD Banknorth Charitable Foundation, the programs are designed to make college more accessible and provide skilled health care workers for underserved areas of Maine.

### **Increasing distance learning opportunities**

- Each of the seven community colleges has added **new technology** to increase distance learning opportunities for rural Maine residents. The technology is supporting Bring College to ME programming and is also being used to deliver general education courses to new areas of the state. Having secured a \$100,000 federal grant, the MCCS has been able to match investments by each of the seven colleges, resulting in nearly \$250,000 in new technologies and an expansion of distance learning opportunities across Maine.

### **Increasing rural high school students' access to the community colleges**

- During 2008/2009, over 250 rural Maine high school students will have the opportunity to earn college credit by taking a community college course, at no cost. Thanks to an expansion of the MCCS *On Course for College* program, some of these rural students are taking a class at their local community college. Others are taking advantage of on-line and distance learning opportunities, and some are enrolled in community college courses offered at their high school. These **scholarships to rural Maine high school students** represent an MCCS investment of roughly \$60,000.

*For a lot of our students, especially first generation students, college is still a new experience, and we need to convince them that they can do this; they can be successful.*

--Participant in Rural Initiative meeting

### **Expanding workforce training opportunities for small, rural businesses**

- In response to a recommendation in the MCCS Rural Initiative Report, the MCCS Board of Trustees has amended the policies of its Maine Quality Centers (MQC) program to better serve small rural businesses. Previously, the MQC's free customized workforce training was targeted to new or expanding Maine companies adding eight or more employees. With the policy change, the MQC is able to offer **easier access to workforce training for small rural businesses**. Proof of that can be found at Mom's Fudge a small family run business in the St John River Valley. The company recently expanded to a new facility, and MQC and Northern Maine Community College have provided comprehensive training to the company's six new employees.

**To learn more about the MCCS Rural Initiative, go to:**  
<http://www.mccs.me.edu/about/ruralinitiative.html>