

## **Kris Doody and Leon Gorman: Community colleges need investment**

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Cary Medical Center in Caribou and L.L. Bean Inc. would seem to have little in common with one another. Yet as representatives of those two institutions and participants in the 2006 Governor's Community College Advisory Council, we found ourselves in frequent agreement about the need for Maine to focus on and invest in the skills of our work force.

Our state's changing economy and changing demographics mean that Maine must dramatically increase the educational attainment levels of our residents. This is true in business, in health care, and in nearly every sector of our economy. And Maine's community colleges provide an affordable, accessible way for hardworking Maine people to acquire the skills they need to prosper.

The creation of Maine's community colleges in 2003 was absolutely the right decision for Maine. We have watched with great admiration as the community college concept has become a reality and blossomed in Maine. In just four years enrollment has increased by nearly 50 percent, the number of students enrolling in the community colleges directly from high school has increased 57 percent, and the number of Maine community college students transferring to the University of Maine System has grown by 40 percent.

But the growth of our colleges has not been matched by increased state spending to support that growth. In fact, state funding for the community colleges has grown by only 10 percent over the past four years. The result is that, after years of significant, sustained growth, Maine's community colleges are stretched thin.

For many of the trade and technical programs offered by the colleges, demand exceeds capacity. Kennebec Valley Community College has waiting lists for respiratory therapy, lineworker technology, and a number of other programs. More than half of the programs at Eastern Maine Community College are maxed out and people are waiting to get in: to building construction, medical radiography, and others. 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.

Without additional funding to support continued growth, the waiting lists that already

exist for many of the colleges' most popular programs will grow ever longer. And our state's ability to attract good jobs will be diminished.

The impact of this capacity crunch will be felt across Maine. In fact, it already is being felt.

At both L.L. Bean and Cary Medical Center, our success depends on an educated work force. And we are not alone. Maine employers in every corner of the state are in need of highly skilled workers. A recent survey conducted by the Maine Chamber of Commerce found that nearly 50 percent of its members were having a difficult time finding skilled workers. And the Governor's Community College Advisory Council reported that, each year for the foreseeable future, the state's economy will be short about 4,200 workers with the skills acquired at the community college level.

For Maine businesses, this shortage of skilled workers means lost business opportunities, higher operating costs, and stalled economic growth. For our workers and our state, it means the lost wages and tax revenue associated with good-paying jobs.

Maine faces significant challenges as we seek to compete in a knowledge-based global economy. Our best hope for the future lies in having an educated citizenry prepared to learn, and to relearn, as our society and economy undergo dramatic change. Maine's seven community colleges are at the heart of that solution. The time has come to make long-term investments in them so they are able to serve many more of our residents.

If we do that, we are confident that we will see a stronger economy, our businesses will be more competitive, and our people will have a brighter future for themselves and their families.

*Kris Doody, RN, is chief executive officer of Cary Medical Center in Caribou. Leon Gorman is chairman of the board of L.L. Bean Inc. Both served on the 2006 Governor's Community College Advisory Council.*

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