

Sun Journal

Building a bridge to higher education

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Community colleges need investment to fuel Maine's economic growth

The Maine Community College System has been an amazing success since it was created in 2003 - enrollments have increased by 47 percent. At Central Maine Community College, enrollments have doubled since 1998. However, with such rapid growth come several difficult challenges.

The current capacity of the community college system is unable to meet the demands being placed upon it by Maine people seeking to gain skills and training for new jobs. The community college system has actually had to turn away students who applied for certain programs - students who were otherwise very qualified - because it simply could not accommodate them.

The Governor's Community College Advisory Council reported last year that 55 percent of employers who responded to a Maine State Chamber of Commerce survey in 2006 were having a difficult time finding skilled workers. An analysis found that while Maine employers need 6,000 workers annually with the skills earned at the community college level, only 2,000 students graduate from Maine's two-year colleges.

A strong and accessible community college is particularly important to those of us in this area. According to the 2000 Census, only 24 percent of Androscoggin County residents have at least an associate degree (as compared to 33 percent in Maine, and 42 percent in New England). Lower educational attainment in our area correlates with lower per-capita income and lower median household income.

Clearly, if our region is to thrive in a knowledge-based economy, more residents must have higher education.

Since its modest beginning in 1964, Central Maine Community College has been serving, educating and changing lives. With quality programs and exceptional work force preparation, the college is dedicated to serving the community and promoting economic development. For the fall 2006 term, more than 2,100 students registered for courses in 29 different programs.

Approximately 95 percent of CMCC graduates go on to live and work in Central Maine. CMCC is

affordable and offers a viable and convenient option for students to attend college - it is the best education value in the state.

We are now at a point where the community colleges have become victims of their own success. Many programs are at capacity and must turn students away. The nursing program at CMCC receives far more applicants than it can accommodate, and has a waiting list. We must also turn away qualified students who wish to pursue automotive technology and other programs that produce badly needed skilled workers.

Our future economic growth depends largely on the quality of our work force. When Maine employers find an adequate supply of skilled workers, they are able to expand their employment opportunities. Maine's community colleges are helping to fuel that expansion.

We have a responsibility to provide Maine workers with the tools they need to access higher education and to gain work-relevant skills. A healthy economy for our state is dependent on our efforts. The current capacity of the community colleges is insufficient to meet the demands being placed upon it by the people of Maine.

The time has come to build a bigger bridge to our community colleges, to make the necessary, long-term investments that will ensure that our work force is prepared to fuel Maine's economic growth. I hope that you will support us and help spread this important message to all our legislators in Augusta.

Lloyd D. "Bud" Willey Jr. is chairman of the board of the Central Maine Community College Community Foundation.