

State of the Maine Community College System

Address to the 127th Maine Legislature

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President Thibodeau, Speaker Eves, honorable members of the 127th Maine Legislature, Chancellor Page, President Brennan, distinguished guests: thank you and good morning. I am pleased to be here this morning to tell you about the 31,000 individuals, and the hundreds of Maine businesses, that the community colleges served this past year.

I appreciate the trust that our Board of Trustees has placed in me to help lead our organization in the coming months. As the in-house lawyer for the colleges for many years, I have been responsible for the System's legal compliance and defense. Today is my eleventh working day as President, and I look forward to working with you in the months ahead.

As you know, I follow Dr. John Fitzsimmons who served as the System's President for 25 years. It was his vision and energy that transformed our seven technical colleges into comprehensive community colleges, growing from 3,300 to over 18,000 students in just over two decades. The 45,000 students who graduated during John's tenure -- who improved their careers, their lives, and the lives of their families -- are his legacy. Our Trustees, presidents, faculty, administrators, and staff remain committed to our important work, and to doing it with the same focus, efficiency and commitment to affordability that have become our hallmark.

Community colleges have a unique dual mission. First, we prepare students for direct employment in the Maine economy -- through trade, technical and occupational programming. And second, we provide affordable access to higher education, leading to transfer to four-year programs of study.

Maine was one of the last states in the nation to offer community college education. But when the switch to community college came, people flocked to us. In just over ten years, enrollment has grown nearly 80%. That's 8,000 more college students for Maine, and 4,000 more students studying trade, technical, and occupational programs than just a decade ago.

Nearly 70% of our students and 85% of our instructional budget is focused on employment-centered education. Every year we prepare hundreds of nurses, police officers, precision machinists, computer experts, and trades people to enter the Maine workforce and fuel our economy. It's not a stretch to say that our graduates are the bedrock of the Maine economy.

At just \$3,400 per year, our community colleges offer the lowest tuition and fees in all of New England. And, for our students, price matters. They come to us with few advantages.

- Most of our students are low- to moderate-income. Even with our uniquely low tuition, 82% of our full-time students receive some form of financial aid.

- Nearly one-third of our students work more than 30 hours a week on top of going to school, and nearly one-third have children at home.
- College is often new to our students and to their families. For half of our students, neither of their parents has earned even a 2-year degree.
- And many of our students have been out of school for some time, trying to piece together a living. Not an easy thing to do in Maine anymore if all you have is a high school education.

Although the average age of our students is 27, we continue to see an increase in the number of students enrolling directly from high school and career and technical education centers. About 40% of our students now come to us right out of high school. Many of them are students who, in the absence of a community college system, would likely not go to college. As one high school administrator recently said, our community colleges have created aspirations that previously did not exist. More often than not, those aspirations are focused on getting a good job and starting a career. And our colleges deliver: 92% of our graduates land jobs or go on to continue their education.

The growth of our colleges has occurred during challenging economic times. State appropriations as a percent of our total budget have decreased from 46% to 32%. This economic reality has meant that we have had to find efficiencies, forge strong ties with key partners, and be as entrepreneurial as possible. A few examples:

- First, I am proud to tell you the System is fiscally sound with over two decades of balanced budgets.
- Second, the System's administrative offices have shrunk dramatically. When our colleges served 3,300 students, there were 27 staff at the System level. Today, we serve over 18,000, and there are 20 employees in the System Office.
- Third, we have aggressively sought external sources of support. In the past few years, we have won \$48 million in grants, including \$13 million from the U.S. Department of Labor to build new educational pathways in information technology.
- And finally, we have created The Foundation for Maine's Community Colleges. The Foundation's leadership includes senior officials from over 20 of Maine's largest companies: L.L.Bean, Maine Medical Center, TD and Key Banks, Cianbro, Dead River and UNUM, just to name a few. In five years, the Foundation has raised \$26 million to support the vital work of our colleges. The willingness of these business and civic leaders to invest in our colleges and students underscores our central importance to Maine business and industry.

In addition to the Foundation, other key players have played a critical role in our ability to keep our colleges affordable and equipped over this challenging decade.

Our first partner is the K-12 system. 2,200 Maine high school students will take 2,700 community college courses for credit this year through a partnership with the Maine Department of Education. 1,000 of those students are taking these dual enrollment courses through their career and technical education center. These courses carry enormous value; they prepare students for college and help reduce the overall cost of a college education. We are by far the largest provider of dual enrollment in the state. By earning community college credit while they are still in high school, Maine students are saving an estimated \$750,000 each year in college costs.

Likewise, our Early College for ME program, which was established over a decade ago, works with 1,500 high school students and 74 schools each year. The program makes it possible for many of these students to begin earning college credit while still in high school and to be eligible for a \$2,000 community college scholarship.

We like to say our students can start with us and then go anywhere. And this means that our second partner is the other higher eds. Over 42% of our graduates pursue further education. In one recent three-year period, our students transferred to over 223 different colleges and universities. By far the greatest number of those students -- over 1,100 -- transferred to the University of Maine System. Indeed, our colleges and public universities have forged more than 150 program-to-program transfer agreements, and we are close to completing a block-transfer agreement that will further strengthen and streamline paths from a community college to a four-year degree. I want to thank the academic officers from both our System and the University, as well as Chancellor Page, for their commitment to making a four-year degree more attainable for Maine people.

And we are working with Maine Maritime Academy to help students attain a four-year degree at the Academy. Some students need additional academic preparation before they can meet the Academy's rigorous requirements. So our community colleges now offer courses specifically designed to help these students succeed at the Academy. Sixteen students enrolled in MMA Prep at one of our colleges last year. Eleven of them are enrolled at the Academy this year. Thank you, President Brennan, for coming to us with this great idea.

Our third key partner is, of course, Maine businesses. 85% of the programs we offer are the only post-secondary programs of their kind in the state. This means that our colleges are the primary provider of a wide array of skilled trades-people, such as precision machinists, electrical line-workers, and medical technologists. Because the list goes on and on, it is imperative that our colleges work closely with business and industry on two fronts. First, we need to make sure that our graduates leave our colleges with the skills that employers require. And second, we need to provide -- through our training divisions -- the customized workforce training that businesses across the state need to remain competitive.

Last year, our colleges provided direct workforce training to 99 businesses and nearly 2,000 workers. Our training partners range from a small business in Aroostook County to our largest employers such as Jackson Labs, IDEXX, Backyard Farms, CMP, and Pratt & Whitney. When

employers have expanded in recent years, they have turned to us to make sure new hires get the training they need to be successful. And we have delivered.

Now, I want to turn to the future, and to the topic that is of greatest concern to Maine citizens and to all of you in this chamber: jobs. Researchers project that in the coming years, 63% of job openings in the U.S. will require training and education beyond high school. In other words, the surest path to prosperity leads through higher education.

And so, as our colleges look forward, our priority focus will be on student success, on greater retention and graduation. Later this month, our Trustees will be approving our new 5-year strategic plan that we have been developing for the past year and a half. The centerpiece of that plan contains three key strategies.

First, we need to strengthen the general support services that our students receive. Because our colleges grew so quickly, and on such a shoestring, we have been unable to invest adequately in the supports that many students need to achieve their academic goals. Through a number of successful pilot programs, we have seen the value of student navigators -- specially trained staff who provide students with academic and personal supports. More than any other strategy, we believe that increasing the number of student navigators throughout the System will lead to greater success for many more students.

Second, we will focus more intently than ever on remediation. Nearly 50% of students who matriculate with us enroll in a remedial course in their first semester. This fall we had over 2,700 students enrolled in these courses. This does not mean these students are incapable of succeeding in college. But it does mean that we, as a state, need to continue to focus on core competencies at the elementary and secondary levels, and that we must continue to test and develop strategies that reduce the time and cost spent on remediation at the post-secondary level.

As I know is true of everyone in this room, we want our high school students to graduate college- and career-ready, and to come to our colleges with the skills they need to be successful. That is a goal we share with you and our K-12 system. We have spent decades providing remediation, and have developed expertise in helping our students be successful. In fact, this past summer, our colleges offered a number of intensive prep programs for incoming students needing some remediation. The results were impressive, and we plan to continue to build on the lessons learned through these and other promising initiatives.

Our third major student success strategy will be to expand campus employment for students. Our students often build their academic schedules around their work. For rural students who work far from campus, their jobs can take priority over their course work. We need to expand work/study opportunities on campus so that our students can gain valuable job skills tied to their programs of study, and can have a chance to form stronger ties to their college. This is another strategy that we believe will have a significant impact on student retention and success.

To help make these three initiatives successful, we will need your help.

First, we will need you to fund our base budget request. As you know, we have been underfunded over the last five or six years and, and are proposed to be flat-funded for the next two years. Without additional support from the state, we will be forced to consider program and service reductions throughout the state.

Second, if the legislature is going to consider a bond for higher education, we have over \$100 million in needed repairs and important upgrades. We have prepared two more modest lists of these needs: one at \$24 million and one at \$15 million containing our highest priorities for renovations and critical equipment across the seven colleges.

Finally, we will need you to support two of the unanimous recommendations of the Commission on College Affordability and Completion. The first is to fund 27 student navigators to serve students at all of our colleges. The second is to make more work/study opportunities available to our students. Together, these strategies will have a real and lasting impact on the number of Maine citizens with a college degree.

For the past ten or so minutes, I have focused on facts and data. I have talked about what we do; the content of our work. Let me close now with the more important observation. Let me talk about the meaning of our work.

For the hundreds of Maine businesses that rely on our community colleges to provide timely and cost-efficient training? Those critical businesses -- small and large, north and south -- they need us to help them grow and compete in an increasingly complex economy.

For the 18,000 students who seek a low-cost college degree? These are the hard-working people who need us to access immediate employment, or to reach for an additional degree that opens the door to a more prosperous future.

For the thousands of additional Maine people who rely on our colleges for the affordable chance to upgrade their job skills and access valuable non-credit courses? These are the hard-working people who need us to help them build their own career path, at their own pace.

And the State of Maine? Clearly, our economy needs more businesses thriving and more people working at higher wages.

From these observations, I am reminded of the dignity in work; of the dignity in having a meaningful opportunity to strive and achieve. All of the people who I reference here this morning -- all of the people who our community colleges serve -- these are our striving neighbors and friends. They want and need access to the community colleges' low-cost, high quality education and training because it both promises, and delivers a direct return.

They ask for nothing more, and they deserve nothing less. I look forward to working with you on their behalf.

Thank you.