



OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

323 State Street, Augusta, ME 04330-7131
(207) 629-4000 | Fax (207) 629-4048 | mccs.me.edu

**State of the Maine Community College System
Address to the 132nd Maine Legislature
Delivered by David Daigler
MCCS President
March 11, 2025**

President Daughtry, Speaker Fecteau, honorable members of the 132nd Maine Legislature, Chancellor Malloy, Interim President Johnson, distinguished guest: I am honored to come today to discuss the State of Maine's community colleges.

It is good to be back!

It has been six years – almost exactly – since I last ascended this distinguished rostrum.

A lot has changed in those six years. Working together, Maine's community colleges have overseen significant investments made during the pandemic and in response to the economic upheaval that followed.

These investments supported an economic rebound unlike any other.

The U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis reported that Maine's real GDP has increased 9.2% since the fourth quarter of 2019, the most robust growth in all of New England.

For Maine's community colleges, the shape and scope of our response was focused and immediate.

Allow me to offer just a few examples:

- Facing an acute nursing shortage, we doubled our nursing programs across the state, leveraging the state's \$2.5 million investment with an equal \$2.5 million match split between MaineHealth and Northern Light.
- As a shortage of workers jolted the Maine economy, we worked with our industry partners and — fueled by Maine Jobs and Recovery investments — we launched free, short-term training courses, issuing more than 10,000 badges during the pandemic. Those badges gave confidence to

employees and to the customers in the restaurant, lodging, ski, childcare, and retail industries.

- When our partners in K-12 were on the brink, we heard the call and we launched the Learning Facilitator program, an innovative program that supports classroom teachers, getting our schools the classroom support they need. Because of its success and pioneering methods, this body enshrined the program into law in 2023.

The pandemic presented challenges, and your community colleges — always responsive, always innovative, always efficient — rose to the challenge.

Today, we face new challenges. Automation, artificial intelligence, Maine’s demographics, the effects of climate change, and ever-changing geopolitical dynamics are the leading forces transforming our economy.

And just like during the pandemic, we are not sitting idle. We are here to help turn challenge into opportunity. We are building the talent our State needs to continue to grow and thrive. We are bringing hope to the 40% of Maine’s high school graduates who are NOT pursuing college. We are partnering with employers, solving today’s problems together, and meeting them where they need us most.

During the pandemic, we elected to innovate at a time of uncertainty.

We created a new workforce development model building deep, value-added partnerships with Maine businesses. That model is now a best practice around the country.

The model is responsive to the workforce development needs of our business partners. It seamlessly connects students from entry-level training through certificate and degree programs.

By diversifying our funding to achieve our goals and best serve the state, this model integrates support from philanthropy, the state, the federal government, and our business partners.

While this legislature remains our most crucial partner, you are not alone.

Our bold vision, to adopt a different approach to “doing business,” earned the trust of the Harold Alfond Foundation and a \$15 million grant that was awarded in the fall of 2021. We coupled that with \$35 million in Maine Jobs and Recovery Funding, to vastly expand our short-term training programs, building a targeted, rapid-response capability that delivers newly skilled workers to our employers and helps businesses upskill their existing workforce.

That program was so successful that the Harold Alfond Foundation recently renewed and increased that grant one year ahead of schedule. One year ahead of schedule, HAF is investing \$75.5 million so that the idea could continue to grow, flourish and endure through all of time.

This is one example of how we are committed to building Maine's workforce in effective, innovative, and affordable ways.

We work tirelessly to be good stewards of these investments and deploy them wisely.

Yet, you'll note we have only two significant requests:

1. We ask that you support ongoing funding for the Free College program and,
2. Support increasing our base so we can effectively compensate our employees and meet our obligations under the paid family medical leave law.

These investments in Maine's community colleges have an ever-growing importance in several areas.

In *healthcare*, Maine continues to have a desperate need for skilled healthcare workers ranging from nurses to EMTs and phlebotomists. We work closely with our healthcare partners to tailor programs to meet their needs.

In *construction* the lack of housing dominates today's headlines. In response, we are rethinking how we support that industry. This year we have more than 2,300 students pursuing the trades. That includes more than 1,400 Free College students pursuing degrees and certificates, and more than 800 students in short-term training programs.

But the demand is so great that we are rethinking how we support that industry. We are expanding our Construction Academies — re-doubling our efforts to train and educate the builders, plumbers, and electricians needed to add 80,000 new homes by 2030.

Manufacturing is Maine's fourth largest industry, employing more than 57,000 people and more skilled workers are desperately needed. We are working directly with our manufacturing partners to train and educate their current and prospective employees.

Also, with the support of Senator Collins and as part of a broad partnership supporting Maine's defense industry, York County Community College is using federal funding to expand its Sanford facilities, adding programs in manufacturing and the trades.

We are also preparing the next generation of guardians and champions of Maine's *environment*.

We are proud to partner with Maine's Chief Executive and the legislature in mobilizing Maine's climate plan. We launched waves of heat pump training classes at multiple locations, training 550 technicians who were crucial to meeting and ultimately beating Maine's goal of installing 100,000 heat pumps.

As the state invests in solar powered energy sources, the colleges are training the electricians who install and maintain this new energy infrastructure.

To maintain our clean water sources, we launched a new water treatment technology program at Northern and Southern Maine Community Colleges.

And SMCC has a marine science program that prepares students to work in and protect Maine's vital fisheries.

The truth is, none of this is possible without the people who work at our colleges. The staff, faculty, adjuncts, administrators, and student workers who are the embodiment of our mission and values.

They work tirelessly every day.

Their dedication and caring were particularly evident during the Lewiston shooting and the days that followed.

In an instant, Central Maine Community College was part of the lockdown and needed immediate support. Like so many Mainers that day, colleagues at surrounding colleges jumped in to help, often putting the CMCC community in front of their own well-being.

Because local police and security were maxed out, Kennebec Valley Community College sent their security staff to CMCC, providing round-the-clock security to CMCC students at Mustang Hall.

With the college in lockdown, Southern Maine Community College worked with our colleagues at the University of Southern Maine to deliver food and essentials.

And York County Community College worked with their partners at BetterMynd to ensure that CMCC students and staff had access to online services supporting mental health.

Thank you! We are forever grateful for your support.

These are the kinds of actions I am humbled to see each and every day.

The people of Maine's community colleges, working together, are the key to our success.

They inspire and nurture our students. They create a sense of belonging. They guide students on the path to opportunity. They deserve more than our thanks, they deserve competitive compensation.

That's why increasing our base budget is so important.

Yet, as good as their work has been, there is so much more to do.

I have referred to “investments” made by this legislature, by our federal delegation, by our business partners, and by leading philanthropic foundations.

The funding that fuels these investments has enduring benefits.

It is not spending, where the benefits vanish when the money is gone.

These enduring investments, for me, benefit Maine people – many of whom have lived on the outskirts of opportunity for far too long.

I think of Thomas Bailey; a military veteran who struggled to find a job and housing. He entered a short-term training program at Southern Maine Community College and was hired by Bath Iron Works. As he put it, “A year ago, I was homeless. Now I have an apartment. I have a car. I have a future. I’m over the moon.”

It is stories like these that inspire us to keep going.

Another of those students is Marilou Ranta. Marilou is an energetic powerhouse. She graduated from the culinary program at Eastern Maine Community College when she was 50 years old all while commuting 90 minutes each way. Within just a few years Marilou won a coveted James Beard award for outstanding hospitality at her restaurant, The Quarry in Monson.

We talk often about how our work lifts entire families. Gunner Ranta, Marilou's son, is a firefighter at the Bangor Airport and graduated from EMCC in 2021.

Both Marilou and Gunner are with us today. Lulu, Gunner, it is our honor to welcome you.

When Washington County Community College signed on to serve as an experimental site for the Second Chance Pell Program, Kristen Crowley enrolled while still incarcerated. Kristen graduated from WCCC with a 4.0 GPA and was the college’s Student of the Year.

Please join me in saluting Kristen’s resilience and determination.

Kristen is not alone.

Central Maine Community College runs a welding program in partnership with the Southern Maine Women’s Reentry Center in Windham. The graduates of that program, instead of scrambling to find work after they are released, are finding welding jobs earning between \$27 and \$32 per hour.

Not only are these women getting a strong start with good-paying jobs, the state's investment pays off with skilled workers paying income taxes on a \$60,000 per year job!

Transforming lives – that is what the people in Maine's community colleges do.

The Free College program is transforming lives, at a massive scale. Forty percent of Maine's high school graduates don't go to college. Let me be clear, 40% are not continuing their education after high school.

Yet, today we have a shortage of skilled workers.

And it is clear that the modern workplace requires skills beyond a high school education.

Maine's Free College program is the most valuable proposition we have found to ensure that Maine's high school graduates are trained at home, connected to Maine's vital industries, and employed locally upon graduation.

Many Free College students have told us that they didn't even consider going to college until they heard about the program that would cover 100% of their tuition and fees.

Chloe Harvey of Waldoboro grew up in a family of lobstermen and was, in her own words, "very against going to college." No one in her family had ever gone to college. The idea of going into debt scared the bejeebies out of her. But she really liked the automotive class at her CTE and the Free College scholarship meant she wouldn't go into the debt she so feared.

She enrolled in the Automotive Collision Repair program at Northern Maine Community College, got awards for her stellar work, graduated, and is now working as a custom painter at a shop in Edgecomb.

Chloe couldn't be happier.

There are stories like this from students all over the state.

These are the students who, if given the opportunity, will provide the healthcare, build homes, keep Maine safe, and strengthen our manufacturing base.

We like to say our graduates are the backbone of Maine's workforce. You encounter them every day.

Our graduates become firefighters, veterinary technicians, computer security experts, police officers, chefs, and auto mechanics.

Our Free College students are just as academically successful as their peers.

And trust me, Free College students have “skin in the game.” They are paying for books, tools and supplies. They are investing the time and lost wage potential as they pursue their education.

And, for Maine, 81% have enrolled in career and technical programs. That’s up from 73% before Free College.

More men are now choosing to go to college.

One hundred percent of Free College students live in Maine while they’re enrolled. Ninety six percent are originally from Maine.

Maine’s Free College program is widening the pipeline for more skilled graduates entering the workforce and increasing transfers to our four-year college partners.

This summer we launched a guaranteed transfer agreement with six of Maine’s private colleges.

Even before we signed that agreement, transfers had jumped significantly. In fall 2023 - the latest numbers we have from IPEDS - and only one year after we launched the Free College program the number of community college transfer students was up 39% at Saint Joe’s, 46% at Maine Maritime Academy, and a whopping 96% at Thomas College. That's 196 students who transferred to Thomas College!

And, how about our partners in our public universities?

This past fall, the University of Maine System reported a 31% increase in transfer students from Maine’s community colleges.

After seeing that, Chancellor Malloy and I decided to double down on that progress. We signed a historic, system-to-system transfer agreement called *Transfer ME*. Together, we are guaranteeing enrollment at any public university without the need for an application or the hassle of paperwork.

Our seawolves, hawks, falcons, mustangs, and golden eagles are eager to become black bears, huskies, moose, beavers, owls and tigers.

Many students say they were shying away from college because of some nagging doubt, some reason to be wary of going to college. But the Maine Free College program drew them in.

Kyla Hicks from Wenham, Massachusetts said she’d tried college before but was too stressed out by the debt. She moved to Portland, enrolled in nursing, and said she now plans “to live out her life in Maine.”

Brianna Michaud is a first gen student who felt she didn't belong. College gave her anxiety. She knew she could not afford it. But the Free College program she enrolled in gave her a “newfound confidence” and now she plans to be a pediatric occupational therapist.

Briana sees herself as part of a generation of youth who want to make a difference but need a chance.

Kirsten Lions is a first gen student who graduated from high school in 2020. Now a CMCC graduate, the Maine Free College program allowed her the time she needed to figure out what she wanted to do. She is now a nursing student at UMA.

These students had very personal reasons for choosing Free College. For the state, there are very practical reasons to continue it.

The Maine Free College program is flawlessly aligned with the state’s 10-year Economic Plan:

- We are increasing the state’s skilled workforce.
- We are strengthening the connection between the state’s high schools and the community colleges.
- And we are expanding the link between the community colleges and our public universities.

The Free College promise we have collectively made is changing lives.

It’s helping entire families aspire and doing untold good for the communities where our graduates live and work.

There is no better time to earn a college degree than when you are young.

There is no better time to get the skills you need than before life’s complexities become insurmountable.

There is no better time to dream, than when dreams are within reach.

Like the other investments made the over last six years, Free College is an investment in our future.

An investment that gives people hope.

An investment that gives people a fresh start.

An investment that lets people dream.

And, for those of you in the legislature, there are real financial returns on your investment.

With more college graduates, incomes rise, and balancing future budgets will be just a little bit easier.

To paraphrase Herb Brooks, the U.S. Olympic hockey coach, "Great moments are born from great opportunities," and that's what we have here today.

We have the opportunity to deliver the workers needed to build 80,000 new homes by 2030, opening the doors to new people who want to move to Maine and grow our economy, but cannot find a place to live.

We have the opportunity to grow a workforce that reduces our dependency on foreign fuels and sustain the cleanest lakes and rivers in the northeast.

We have the opportunity to expand the quality childcare our families want and need.

We have the opportunity to provide the healthcare Maine people need and deserve.

Together, we can accomplish so much.

We can give people the tools and opportunity for a better life, staying right here in this great state.

As the president of MCCA, I am grateful for the opportunity to share a small piece of the phenomenal work that I see on our campuses every day.

I would be remiss if I did not thank the Chief Executive and the legislatures that have supported our work.

The Harold Alfond Foundation, for believing in an idea that has transformed workforce development.

The Board of Trustees, for their consistent encouragement.

The college presidents, for their unwavering commitment and amazing resilience in support of our students.

And the 1,595 employees working at the colleges, in the system office, and the Harold Alfond Center for the Advancement of Maine's Workforce, for their agility, reliability, teamwork, and amazing work ethic.

And my wife Karen, for her incredible support. We share a passion for making a difference in someone's life.

As you may have guessed, I am pretty excited about the opportunity that lies before us.

I look forward to our continuing work together.

Thank you.