



Maine Community
College System

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Aroostook County slated to host one of the first statewide meetings to examine how Community Colleges can help strengthen Maine's rural economy

Aroostook County - Aroostook County will be amongst the first stops for Maine Community College System President John Fitzsimmons, as he travels to over 15 communities across the state this summer and fall to explore with focus groups of local business and community leaders how Maine's community college system can further assist in strengthening Maine's rural economy.

The meetings, which are open to the media, will begin on Thursday, July 19, in Dover-Foxcroft and East Millinocket, and move to Presque Isle on Friday, July 20, where the Aroostook County session will be held on the Northern Maine Community College campus in the Edmunds Conference Center beginning at 7:30 a.m. The goal of the focus groups: to learn from local leaders about the workforce and educational challenges of their region and to identify ways in which the state's seven community colleges can play a greater role in helping to address those challenges.

In announcing the initiative, Fitzsimmons noted that more than a half million people live in rural Maine and that an estimated 12.2 percent of rural households live below the poverty line. Even more disturbing, between 2000 and 2005, Maine saw the largest percentage increase in rural child poverty of any state in the nation. According to 2005 U.S. Census data, 22.4 percent of rural Maine children under 18 live in poverty.

"Steady job losses in traditional manufacturing and natural resource based industries have contributed to poverty and unemployment in many rural areas of the state," Fitzsimmons noted. "The economic and educational gaps between our urban and rural communities are deeply troubling. Without focused intervention they are likely to continue to grow. We need to explore how Maine's community colleges—working in partnership with local businesses and communities—can do more to strengthen and sustain rural areas of Maine."

As Fitzsimmons notes, Maine's community colleges are uniquely situated to help address some of the major workforce challenges confronting rural parts of the state. The seven colleges and their nine off-campus centers are located within 25 miles of 92 percent of Maine's population. Their programs of study are the most affordable in the state. And both their credit and non-credit offerings are focused on creating a skilled labor force that is responsive to the changing needs of the Maine economy.

Over the course of the summer and fall, Fitzsimmons will hold meetings in all 16 Maine counties. By late fall, he intends to issue a report that summarizes findings from the meetings and details recommendations on how to move forward.

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Editor's Note: A press conference for members of the Aroostook County media will be held following the Presque Isle meeting on Friday, July 20 at approximately 9:00 a.m. in the NMCC Library (directly across the hall from the Edmunds Conference Center – where the meeting will be held between 7:30 and 9:00 a.m.)