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Northern Maine benefits under year one of Community College Rural Initiative

Aroostook County - In December of 2007, the Maine Community College System issued a series of recommendations and announced a \$6.6 million investment in programs aimed at addressing the workforce and educational challenges confronting rural parts of the state. A year after launching the Rural Initiative, educational leaders in northern Maine are lauding its early success and positive impact on the region's educational and economic opportunities.

“The Rural Initiative and the programs supported through the initiative have had a significant impact on the NMCC campus and in the communities we serve,” said NMCC President Timothy Crowley. “In these challenging economic times, when greater numbers of Mainers are looking to the community colleges statewide – and that is certainly the case here in Aroostook County – it is critically important that we do all we can to ensure access to the educational and training opportunities that will drive our region's and the state's economy forward in the months and years ahead. The work of Northern Maine Community College, through the MCCS Rural Initiative, over the past year has provided some greatly needed community resources to help achieve this.”

Statewide, the number of students served through the Maine Community College System Rural Initiative over the first year was 571. A progress report issued recently by the MCCS also noted that 100 rural communities were positively impacted.

No additional state funds were requested by the Community College System to launch the program and private contributions to support the initiative included a \$3.5 million gift from the Bernard Osher Foundation, as well as gifts from the TD Banknorth Charitable Foundation (\$200,000) and the Betterment Fund (\$150,000).

The Rural Initiative was created and launched following a four month listening tour of Maine in 2007 by MCCA President John Fitzsimmons, who travelled some 2,500 miles and met with nearly 400 community and business leaders from all 16 counties.

As Fitzsimmons notes: “Rural Maine is facing significant economic and workforce challenges. Through this initiative, the state’s community colleges have made a commitment to be rural Maine’s partner in building a skilled workforce and stronger economy. In the first year, we have made significant progress in our efforts to achieve that goal.

Northern Maine Community College students and Aroostook County communities have benefitted under each of the initiative’s five goals, which include providing greater financial assistance to rural students, bringing higher education to rural areas, increasing distance learning opportunities, increasing rural high school students’ access to the community colleges, and expanding workforce training opportunities for small, rural businesses.

The Rural Maine Child Care Scholarship was established through the initiative and statewide more than \$60,000 in the form of 76 scholarship awards were allocated under the program last fall. Ten NMCC students are receiving just over \$15,800 to help defray childcare expenses during the current academic year.

Additional financial assistance will be provided to students from rural communities enrolled at NMCC and other community colleges across Maine beginning in the fall of 2009. The \$3.5 million challenge grant from the Bernard Osher Foundation, successfully matched by \$1.5 million, has enabled the MCCA to establish a \$5 million endowment that will fund 250 to 300 scholarships statewide each year.

Bring College to ME, the component of the initiative to bring higher education to rural areas of the state, is delivering six new health care programs to over 160 students from more than 60 rural communities. In Aroostook County, NMCC is expanding its associate degree nursing program to the St. John Valley. Thirty residents of the region expressed initial interest in the program and last year began the process for admission. With the clinical component of the program set to begin this coming fall, 16 students are completing pre-requisites and applying for the eight available slots in the first Valley nursing co-hort. The expansion of the nursing program to northernmost Maine was made possible through the TD Banknorth Charitable Foundation gift.

Students in the inaugural NMCC St. John Valley nursing program will complete hands-on clinical learning experiences at health care facilities in the region, but will receive classroom instruction from the Presque Isle campus via videoconferencing technology. Included in the new technology purchased for each of the seven community colleges through the Rural Initiative to increase distance learning opportunities is a high definition videoconferencing bridge, which allows NMCC to broadcast to multiple sites. The \$37,500 piece of equipment, which was put to immediate use to broadcast nursing courses to current sites in Houlton and Calais, will be used next fall to transmit courses to Southern Aroostook and the St. John Valley.

Across Maine, the technology is supporting *Bring College to ME* programming and is also being used to deliver general education courses to new areas of the state. Having secured a \$100,000 federal grant, the M CCS has been able to match investments by each of the seven colleges, resulting in nearly \$250,000 in new technologies and an expansion of distance learning opportunities.

Access to the Community Colleges is also being realized through the expansion of the M CCS *On Course for College* program, which will provide the opportunity for over 250 rural Maine high school students to earn college credit in the 2008-2009 academic year by taking a community college course for no tuition. The 30 Rural Initiative scholarships have enabled NMCC to expand the number of high school students taking courses at the college to 92 this past fall. Classes are taught on the college campus or at the local high school. Statewide, these scholarships to rural Maine high school students represent an M CCS investment of roughly \$60,000.

Northern Maine, and the St. John Valley in particular, also benefitted under the goal to expand workforce training opportunities for small, rural businesses. In April, NMCC and M CCS officials announced that Mom's Fudge of Madawaska would be the first small business under the Rural Initiative to receive training assistance through the Maine Quality Centers Program.

In response to a recommendation in the M CCS Rural Initiative Report, the M CCS Board of Trustees has amended the policies of its MQC program to offer easier access to workforce training for smaller businesses. Previously, the MQC's free customized workforce training was targeted to new or expanding businesses adding eight or more employees.

More than a half-million people live in rural Maine, about 42 percent of the state's population. As the state's economy has shifted away from manufacturing and natural resource based industries, rural Maine has been particularly impacted.

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Julie Tribou (standing) of Houlton and Leisha Murray of Houlton, both Northern Maine Community College students enrolled in the associate degree nursing program at the Houlton Higher Education Center, will graduate from the College this coming May. Tribou was among the first ten NMCC students to receive a Rural Maine Child Care Scholarship that was made possible through the Maine Community College System Rural Initiative.



Barry Ingraham, Northern Maine Community College director of physical plant and information technology, explains the features of the new high definition videoconferencing bridge acquired by the College through the Maine Community College System Rural Initiative.