



67<sup>th</sup> annual Human Services Institute: March 13, 2009  
Excerpts from the W. T. McCullough Lecture  
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Economic growth comes down to three things: people, technology, and capital...when you're talking about people and technology, you're talking about higher education.

Here's the good news for today:

First—it may not seem like good news, but it is: We once again face a period of economic challenge...unlike before, it's everywhere. This downturn has affected everybody...The reason that's good news is that anyone can emerge from this moment of crisis as the leader in the global economy. Whoever has their head on straight and seizes the moment will be the leader in the future. There's no reason why Ohio, and particularly Northeast Ohio, can't be in the dominant position coming out of this economic downturn...there's no advantage that anyone else has over what we have at this moment in time. So let's check the inferiority complexes at the door. Let's realize that there's absolutely no reason that the jobs of the future can't grow here as much as any other place in the world. It is entirely within our capability and our actions to determine whether we will be the next great growth area, the next great industrial cluster, in the world...

Second: Ohio has the greatest asset that you could possibly have going into this period of upheaval and growth and opportunity, and that is that we have a world-class system of higher education—one that nations and states all over the country and the world would kill to have. They would take what we have any day off our hands if we decided that this was something that we didn't want or didn't value. The other part of this good news is that the leaders of this state understand what we have, and they're committed to investing and promoting and building a world-class system of higher education. This is not a new development in Ohio...Our university system is older than the very state of Ohio itself...

To take the infrastructure of our system to the next level, we must understand that we are a system...No single institution can do everything that this state needs to drive economic prosperity, but all of us working together can. We have to work together in building the University System of Ohio...We have 14 public universities, 23 community colleges, 24 regional campuses providing services ranging from GED to Ph.D. to 650,000 adults in Ohio on any given day...

For low-income Ohioans, going to community college in Ohio is free. Between state aid, state subsidy, and the Pell grant in the stimulus bill, for tuition fees, books, and transportation for low-income citizens of this state it costs nothing, and there's some additional money to help cover some living expenses on top of that...

Right now we all understand that this system does not work as a system. Adults who need jobs and training don't know where to go. It's confusing, disjointed, and it doesn't work for the people who need it to work for them...There aren't many places in the country where it does work the way it should...We have an opportunity to actually do something about it. One of the pieces of work we are undertaking is how to re-envision the pathway for adults who are losing jobs or those in jobs not supporting their needs...We received a Shifting Gears grant from the Joyce Foundation and have a statewide advisory committee helping re-envision the future of adult education so we can meet the workforce needs of businesses and make sure our citizens are filling those jobs.

Jobs require increasing levels of skill and talent and experience, and we're going to have to fill them. If the social services community isn't engaged in this conversation about getting our workers and our citizens prepared for these jobs that are coming, that are growing, that are building, then we will miss this opportunity to be the leader when this state and this nation emerges from this recession. But if we use this moment to think creatively—to act in the greatest tradition of the The Center for Community Solutions and act collaboratively—if we use this moment to take this heritage...to build on our assets but envision the future new, we will be the leaders.

Within a few years the notion of a “traditional college student” will be gone. There's no such thing as a traditional college student in Ohio. In fact, less than 18 percent of all the students in the University System of Ohio are the traditional residential undergraduate students. The fastest growing enrollment by far is at community colleges and regional campuses, and that reflects the number of adults that are participating in higher education today because...everybody needs to be skilled.

This is our challenge. Higher education traditionally has not done well for and with adult learners. Our financial aid programs were not established to support adult learners. We are moving as fast as we can into this new world of adjusting our programs and services. We have the 30-mile promise which is that within 30 miles of every Ohioan...you'll be able to get both an associate's degree and bachelor's degree in the programs you need at the time that you need it at an affordable price. Then we've got to link you to jobs. We're just at the beginning...but focused on the problem.

So I close by challenging you to join with me in envisioning and in imagining a system that makes sure that all the adults in this state and this region have the education and training they need to fill the growing jobs that are every day being created in this region.