



**Remarks of Gregory W. Powell  
Harold Alfond Foundation**

*Maine State Chamber of Commerce Leadership Summit*

**Thursday, February 4, 2021  
Virtual Meeting**

Good morning. And thank you, Dana, for your kind words and this opportunity to share a few thoughts about the Harold Alfond Foundation and the work we are doing here in Maine.

Of course, like the rest of you, I wish this event could have been held in person, if only so you could experience the sheer visceral thrill of being in the room while I'm delivering a speech. Harold Alfond used to tell me my speeches were so boring they could put a rock to sleep. And, somehow, I get the feeling that if he were with us this morning, in this world of Zoom, he would be hoping that hitting the mute button gets rid of my voice, not yours.

Well, anyway, Harold Alfond was not a big fan of my speeches. But he was a big fan of Maine and its people. In his lifetime, he was also a survivor of four pandemics, including the Spanish Flu, which brought untold misery and death to over 50 million people worldwide. And if he were with us here today, he would tell us about the struggles of his time and how times of challenge bring moments of great opportunity.

And he would want his foundation and the people of our great state to seize this moment, team up to beat the virus, and work together to turn tragedy into triumph and a better future for all Mainers, from birth through career.

In that spirit, we announced last October \$507 million dollars in grant projects for Maine on top of an existing \$100 million in program commitments.

As we surveyed the state of our state, we could see teamwork and partnership emerging between and among so many vital institutions throughout the state. We, like those institutions and so many of you at this gathering, wanted to seize this moment and do all that we could to recover from this challenging time and forge a brighter, better, and more prosperous future for our state. So \$507 million it was.

This morning, I would like to share the foundation's views on this moment of opportunity. Then, I would like to explain how we see education in partnership with employers and our state government as vital contributors to Maine's future, and give you some examples of projects and programs we are funding to help Maine recover and turn this moment of opportunity into a newfound prosperity.

First, our views on where we are and the opportunity we have.

As well described earlier this morning, our state has faced profound economic challenges for many years long preceding the pandemic, with the loss of paper and textile industries, a declining workforce, an ill equipped workforce missing the skills needed by the modern and global economy, an aging and unhealthy population, and low higher education attainment. No doubt, the pandemic has exacerbated those challenges.

That said, the pandemic has also set the stage for opportunity, new growth, and development in our state. Consider this:

Studies done before the pandemic have shown that a few select large cities in our nation have profited greatly from the advances of the modern tech economy, leaving much of our nation behind. Since the pandemic, however, such large cities have become less desirable places to live and work. And, correspondingly, the rural state of Maine and its lower density cities and towns have become more attractive places to live and work.

Consider, also, our state's proximity to the tech and life sciences hub of Boston and the pandemic-driven national security imperative to move overseas pharmaceutical and other life science industries back home to the United States.

And, finally, consider that COVID-19 has shown us that remote work is possible and with that has come signs of much needed in-migration of young workers. According to data collected by the nonprofit initiative 'Live and Work in Maine,' an influx of people between the ages of 24 and 35 have moved to the state since the start of the pandemic.

It is this convergence of factors that we at the Foundation see as heightening the promise and opportunity of this moment. These factors suggest that now, more than ever, is the time to work together to invest deeply and significantly in the future direction of our state. Now is the time to fund and encourage initiatives that increase access to education, incentivize skilled workers to come and stay here, and reshape education for people of all ages to meet workforce needs of the modern global economy—all to position Maine and its people for long-term economic success.

That is a tall order, and especially so at a time when public health needs rise above all others. But as the Governor's economic recovery plan tells us, it is an essential order and one which must be filled strategically to maximize chances for success.

And so, at the Foundation, we are looking to empower our state's education institutions to unify, to build on their strengths, to deploy the power of partnerships with employers, and to modernize the way they do business. And we are looking to employers and our state government to join in.

Investment is especially important in the tech, healthcare, engineering, and computer science fields, where skilled workers are needed and where the U.S. has been a leader and has a decided advantage competing across the world. In so doing, we see a growing and vital role of employers in education delivery and its modernization. In a world of high tech, easily accessible data via the Internet, and artificial intelligence, education must include prominent, relevant experiential learning, which is multidimensional and nurturing of human creativity.

And for relevant experiential, creative learning, there is no place like the workplace.

So, at the Foundation, we are especially interested in funding education which fosters deeper and more synchronized partnerships with employers, where each support the other with effort and money.

The Foundation's grantmaking covers a wide spectrum of state needs. And we have numerous grants with education partners deeply committed to economic development in their business models, each most deserving, each a vital contributor to our state's wellbeing. But let me focus here on just a few of our more recent grants to illustrate, by way of example, the strategic themes we have been discussing.

For decades, the University of Maine has had a world-class engineering program, but one that was unable to graduate enough students to meet the demands of Maine employers. The Orono-based program is at a distance from many of the engineering businesses in Portland with internship and full time job opportunities. Conversely, while the University of Southern Maine is located in Greater Portland, its program has been much smaller, with, as I say, an unmet demand from local employers.

Last October, we announced a grant of up to \$240 million to the University of Maine System—a large portion of which will help create a new unified 'College of Engineering, Computing, and Information Science.' Chancellor Malloy can tell you more, but thanks to his leadership, the System has obtained unified accreditation for all of its universities, and by the end of this year we anticipate this new College will have perfected a shared vision, governance structure, and plan for an integrated, unified engineering and computer science program that spans multiple campuses.

This initiative will combine the synergies of the System's Engineering, Computing, and Information Science programs, preparing students for much-needed jobs in fields like artificial intelligence, data visualization, and human-machine interaction. It will enable students to take integrated coursework at all University of Maine System campuses, increasing access to STEM education

statewide. And, working hand-in-hand with more industries and businesses, it will synchronize education offerings with labor force needs, graduate more students, and bring additional research funding grants to the state.

Our grant to the University of Maine System will also further develop the Maine Graduate and Professional Center, integrating law, business, and public and health policy—a project we helped launch four years ago. The Center, as we call it, merged the MBA programs at the University of Maine in Orono with the University of Southern Maine in Portland. The merged graduate business program then teamed up with the Maine Law School and the Muskie School of Public Service. This is the first University-level graduate program in the country to integrate accredited business, law, and public service education programs under one roof. The roof part is both a metaphor and an aspiration.

The vision is to provide students with the advantage of cross-disciplinary skills and knowledge in business, law, and public policy—to prepare students at the graduate level for success in careers that are increasingly grounded in all three disciplines and are much needed in Maine.

Since its launch, huge progress has been made. Exciting interdisciplinary courses are being cross taught and new ones being rolled out. The merged MBA program is now recognized as among the top 100 business programs in the country and a top value. MBA enrollment has skyrocketed by 386% from 86 to 366 students in just 3 years. And, at the law school, we have a great new Dean in former Chief Justice Leigh Saufley. There, applications are up by 25%, enrollment and LSAT scores are up, and the Bar exam passage rate has increased to 91%. And, finally, the Law School is housed in what experts have recognized to be the ugliest, most inefficient academic building in the free world!

Most importantly, the Maine Center's three graduate programs, working with CEO Terry Sutton, are promoting close working partnerships with Maine's business, legal, and public service employers, ensuring students have a direct pathway to professional opportunities in Maine and that employers can readily access high-quality talent.

Along with major funding support for student success and retention at the undergraduate level, our investments in the University of Maine System and the multi-faceted work underway there represents a strategic, long-term effort to meet the state's most pressing higher education, workforce, and economic needs.

Complementing the work happening at our four-year institutions are the important initiatives underway within our Community College System. Nowhere in our state is there a greater need than to upgrade and modernize the skills of our underemployed and unemployed citizens. And there is no institution in our state better positioned to meet this critically important need.

In that regard, one of the most promising and exciting ways of doing just that is through 'micro credential' course offerings. Simply put, micro credentials are non-credit training programs that are tied directly to workforce needs.

Micro credentials provide opportunities for people to learn focused career-skills in a shorter period and for less money than a traditional two- or four-year degree. They hold enormous promise to provide unskilled or under-skilled adults with in-demand skills that businesses value, need, and will pay for.

When micro credentials work, they are “demand-driven”—with demand from both learners who want opportunities to advance their careers in meaningful ways and from employers who want a better, more relevant way to find talent. And they can counter a multitude of problematic trends in higher-education and the economy that disproportionately affect disadvantaged and low-income adults, including rising college tuitions, low college completion rates, and a mismatch between the skills workers have and the skills employers need.

We recently provided the Maine Community College System with a grant to build out the infrastructure for micro credential offerings and make them available System-wide to underemployed adults and others.

If you read the paper yesterday, you will know that this program is off to a great start, proving its relevance and importance in training employees and meeting employer needs. Working with HospitalityMaine leaders, the Maine Community College System designed a pandemic best practices tutorial training course for hospitality workers. As of last week, over 10,000 people had earned badges in COVID readiness. Beyond COVID readiness, some 70 other microcredentials have been developed and offered to hundreds of Maine workers. This year, students of all stripes will have the ability to earn 13 industry-recognized certifications in health care, IT, and construction—all from courses and programs of the Maine Community College System.

In each case, industry partners help inform the programming to meet their needs for skilled workers and to provide a direct connection to good-paying jobs.

“Good paying jobs” is a great segue to the next Alford grant recipient we should mention. Although not an education institution itself, FocusMaine serves as the connective tissue between Maine’s workforce, employers, and education entities. This organization creates jobs in Maine’s most globally competitive sectors and collaborates with a network of partners statewide to transform Maine’s talent and assets into opportunity and prosperity.

Here’s an example of the power of FocusMaine’s approach. Last year it completed research on how to develop the occupational skills that aquaculture businesses need. This year, FocusMaine is working with the Community College System to operationalize this research and build micro credentials and for-credit programs to support the industry.

Our October announcement included a grant of \$5.18 million to expand FocusMaine’s programs accelerating job growth in three competitive and high-growth fields: biopharma, aquaculture, and

agriculture. Our investment in FocusMaine acknowledges the need to create jobs in Maine's high-potential sectors. It also draws a link between FocusMaine's job growth efforts and Maine's higher education community, as they work together to strengthen our economy.

A final example with extraordinary potential to transform Maine's economy is the recent launch of Northeastern University's Roux Institute. The Roux Institute is a new graduate school and research center—a tech, talent, and innovation hub—with a new state-of-the-art campus in Portland.

In the next ten years, we expect the Institute's annual enrollment to exceed 2,700 students, with hundreds of employer partners across the country and in Maine.

Northeastern launched the Roux Institute with a \$100 million investment from tech entrepreneur and Lewiston Maine native, David Roux, and his wife Barbara. Last October, the Harold Alfond Foundation matched the Rouxs' investment with a \$100 million grant to support student scholarships, graduate education programming, and research capabilities for Maine in the fields of AI, computer and data science, digital engineering, and the advanced life sciences and medicine.

A compelling attribute of the Roux Institute and Northeastern's model of education is its close collaboration with employers and other education institutions in our state. The Institute has already assembled founding partnerships with numerous employers, both here in Maine and beyond. If your business has a problem, the students and faculty at the Roux Institute will work with you to help solve it. Experiential education and real life problem solving is the Institute's forte. Partnership and collaboration is its business model. Already, it has partnered with the University of Maine in securing research grants and it is working with our Community College System to develop micro credential offerings. The Institute is located within WEX's new headquarters in Portland, and several of the Institute's business partners share space with the Institute. In addition, the research component of the Institute—which is built to serve both Maine businesses and other industries nationwide—is expected to support more than 100 jobs and bring in more than \$20 million in revenue annually. This is a bold and exciting project—and one, like those I have also described this morning, that we cannot wait to watch come to fruition.

Well there comes a time in every Zoom speakers talk, when he sees that framed video images of his audience are popping back up on his screen, their live faces exuding unmitigated exhilaration and joy. It's usually after the speaker says the words, "In conclusion."

So, in conclusion, let me leave you with this.

Support of education in Maine and modernizing its delivery through partnerships and collaboration with employers and state government is vital to building the skilled workforce needed to build and grow our economy. Unifying our efforts and working together is likewise essential. And, whether it's working across educational institutions or industries—or working in partnership with state government and employers—teamwork is and will continue to be critical to our success.

Teamwork was a core value of Harold Alfond and is a core value of his foundation today. And so, as we recover from the pandemic, and we will recover, this will be a time like no other in Maine's history to build a future of promise and great prosperity by working together.

The Harold Alfond Foundation is honored and privileged to be a part of this work—a member of the team. And we thank all of you for all you have done and all you will do in the days ahead.

Thank you.