OFFICE OF THE LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR

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Speech as prepared

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Thank you Jay for that introduction.

I want to recognize and thank Alexi Giannoulias, chair of Illinois Community College Board; Geoffrey Obrzut, CEO of ICCB; Carrie Hightman, chair of the Illinois Board of Higher Education; George Reid, executive director of IBHE; Gery Chico, chairman of the Illinois State Board of Education; and Miguel del Valle, head of the P-20, our preschool-through-graduate school council. I appreciate their teamwork on behalf of the system of education in Illinois.

I also want to single out some other key players on that team, community college presidents and City Colleges Chancellor Cheryl Hyman. I asked them to stand because, if you don't know these folks, I'd like you to introduce yourselves when we're done today. We have presidents from all over the state here, and they are a great collection of people and talents and dedication.

Finally, I want to introduce my husband, Perry, and not just because he's my husband, but because he's my favorite community college teacher.

It's exciting to be here at the City Club of Chicago, which is an institution that my hometown of Carbondale doesn't have. You are quite an influential slice of the city, and if I were to generalize about you, I would guess that when many of you think of college you have an image of old buildings, maybe ivy covered, with dormitories, where you go to school for four years.

But that's not everyone's image of college. For my husband, who started at Rend Lake Community College, and Chancellor Hyman, who started at Olive Harvey College, the image of higher education starts with community college.

Students arrive at community colleges for the same reasons Perry and Cheryl did – the schools are geographically and financially accessible.

Illinois is home to 48 community colleges. They enroll 380,000 undergraduates, more undergraduates than our 12 public universities combined.

You can get an associate degree at any community college for the cost of just one semester at the University of Illinois. And community colleges are open admission – anyone who wants to go to college can go. If you are an immigrant just learning the language, or a first-generation college student, or maybe just a late bloomer, you are welcome in community college classrooms.

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Not only do students and potential students love community colleges, so do Illinois employers. They love them because they are flexible. If Caterpillar is building a new engine, it goes to Illinois Central College in Peoria and works with the faculty to design a class that will prepare students – current and future Caterpillar employees – to build that engine.

Welders are in high demand right now. One college that has creatively and successfully matched students with jobs is Elgin Community College, whose president, Dr. David Sam, is here. Elgin launched a program to connect English as a second language students to jobs in manufacturing. There the English professor takes the welding course alongside the students, and their English class builds on the vocabulary of their work.

And community colleges don't just equip students to be hired, they build entrepreneurial skills too. Ever shopped at Whole Foods? You may have purchased produce grown by students at Black Hawk College in western Illinois, where they help students respond to a growing demand for organic, local food. Dr. Thomas Baynum, the new Black Hawk president is here today.

These school-to-job connections can and should play a vital role in our economy. But community colleges are often overlooked. We need to change that.

Our unemployment rate is higher than we want, and at the same time we know jobs are going unfilled. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports there are more than 142,000 unfilled jobs in the Illinois, but thousands of people are looking for work. Why is there such a mismatch? Too many job seekers lack the right skills – or college credentials – to fill the open positions.

Economists tell us this skills gap will only get wider as jobs become more technical and specialized. They predict that in the next decade, two-thirds of jobs will require a college credential – meaning a certificate of one year or more, an associate degree or higher.

Right now, about 41 percent of working-age adults in Illinois meet those qualifications. That's not enough. As state leaders, we've set a goal to get that up to 60 percent by 2025.

While all institutions of higher education will play a role in meeting that goal, community colleges are in the best position to make huge gains in closing this skills gap. They are affordable, they are flexible and they have the enrollment.

What they have not had historically -- and what the state has overlooked until recently -- is a focus on completion. We count the number of students who walk in the door when we need to count how many walk across the stage at graduation.

When I spoke at Waubonsee College's graduation out in Sugar Grove last year, I met Carla Childs. Carla was a young mother with a high school diploma who had always emphasized the importance of education to her children. When she took her oldest daughter to Waubonsee for a placement test three years ago, Carla took the test too. When I met Carla, she had just become the first person in her family to earn a college degree. And now she's down in my neck of the woods studying criminal justice at Southern Illinois University.

Carla's story is exceptional – and that's the problem. Just one out of five students like Carla – who attend college full-time for the first-time – graduate within three years of enrolling in an Illinois community college.

That means four of five students are either taking longer than three years to complete their education, or maybe are dropping out altogether. While Illinois' community colleges enroll more students than do our public universities, they produce fewer degrees.

Why are we, as a state, missing the opportunity to prepare these students for jobs? How do we turn Carla Childs from an exception into the rule?

I wanted to find out for myself. So, I conducted a fact-finding tour of the state's 48 community colleges. I went to every college here in Chicago and the suburbs, to Highland in the Northwest, to Southwestern Illinois College in the Metro East, to Southeastern in Harrisburg, Illinois, and to Shawnee College in Ullin, more than 300 miles from where we are right now. I learned firsthand about efforts to increase completion and connect students to the workforce.

Today, I'm releasing a report to the Governor and the General Assembly that outlines steps the state can take to help students finish what they start – and – get out into the workforce with a degree or certificate that makes a difference in their job search.

It would be easy to propose solutions that would cost more money. I'd love to see the General Assembly appropriate more money for need-based MAP grants, enough so that anyone in financial need can get assistance. But that's not feasible given our current budget.

So, I'm focused on ways we can change institutional mindsets, and rethink how we spend current resources, to achieve our completion goals. Two areas are critical to our success: transparency and collaboration.

Let's start with transparency, let's look at what is too often ignored.

As consumers, we are used to having access to information. Every food we eat has a label with calories and fat; we have the information to make good decisions. As consumers of education, we expect standardized information as well. We get report cards for our kids. And for more than a decade we have gotten report cards on our elementary and secondary schools as well, explaining who they are serving overall and how well they are doing.

Educators and policymakers use these report cards as a tool to make decisions about where to bridge gaps, focus funding and craft reform. Transparency and accountability go hand in hand.

If community colleges are going to play a leading role in our jobs recovery, the public – and policymakers – need better information. We need to see in black and white how many students, and what proportion of students, complete their degrees.

I'm proposing the General Assembly adopt a standard community college consumer report – published on an annual basis by each school – that shows how many students enroll, persist to the next semester, and complete the courses, certificates, degrees and transfers that brought them to campus in the first place.

These consumer reports will give students a more accurate picture of the challenges they face, and may help them make better choices. They will help institutions make data-driven decisions that improve learning.

So we start by being clear about both challenges and successes. But we also need to increase those successes. One way we can do that is to build a more effective system of education. Think about it this way. We don't expect students to have a rough transition from 4th grade to 5th grade. Our school systems make it smooth. Let's work to make sure students in Illinois can have a smooth transition from high school to community college and from community college to four-year universities. The easiest place to see where we can improve is in the area of math.

If we want our community colleges to produce more graduates, we need to send them more students who are ready for college-level material – particularly college-level math.

Illinois requires high school students to complete three years of math to earn a diploma. Too many high school students take a senior year vacation from math – and it shows.

Across the community college system, more than one in three recent high school grads needed at least one remedial math course, though it's as high as 80 or 90 percent at some schools. And many students require several semesters of these remedial courses.

Students are spending time and money – both their own money and taxpayer money – relearning material in courses that don't count toward a degree. And the longer students must pay for college courses before earning any credit, the more likely they are to drop out or delay their entry into the workforce.

Several colleges that I visited are working on math innovations, changing the way they teach and blurring the lines between college and high school to help students get ahead. Harper College in Palatine, whose president Dr. Kenneth Ender is here, is a perfect example.

Harper is working with its three feeder high school districts to improve college readiness. It offers high school juniors a placement test that shows them whether they are ready for college-level math.

High school juniors get their placement test scores before they register for senior year classes, and their advisors strongly encourage a fourth year of math. If students are not testing at college level, they explain the cost -- in time and dollars -- of taking remedial education at college. For those who do test college-ready, the advisors stress that if you don't use it, you lose it. Students who are college-ready as juniors can, and sometimes do, see their skills atrophy by freshman year of college.

The message is getting through. Each year there has been an increase in senior year math enrollment, and this year more than 90 percent of all high school seniors in the Harper feeder districts enrolled in math. The percentage of students starting in college-level math at Harper has increased, and the number of remedial courses that students need has decreased. This helps to position more students to graduate on time and on budget -- and to get into the workforce.

As a result of my fact-finding tour, I'm also proposing today that the Illinois State Board of Education re-evaluate our high school graduation requirements. We need to know if it's time to join other states in the nation that require a fourth level of math, just as we require a fourth year of English.

And students who are college ready don't need to wait until high school graduation. At every community college there are opportunities to take college level courses while still in high school. These courses are often free or at reduced cost, and they can help students get a jump on earning college credit. These dual credit courses can be taught at the high school or at the college. Often the smallest high schools recognize this option first. It has the impact of expanding their high school curriculum. I got a peek at some promising research by Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville that asserts this makes the biggest difference for low-income students who want to attend universities.

For students who aren't college ready, for whatever reason, when they arrive at community colleges, we need better remediation. As part of the Reinvention effort lead by Chancellor Hyman at City Colleges of Chicago, Wilbur Wright College, whose president Jim Palos is here, is one of several colleges making gains in math, using a self-paced online course that allows students to focus time on what they don't know. It's online, but physically at school in a classroom with a teacher to work with students as they have challenges.

And when students have earned their community college credits, let's make sure they get credit for it. Illinois has a cooperative system where community colleges and four-year institutions agree on what class credits transfer to four-year schools. It's a system that is better than what most other states have, but it needs some teeth. Students need to know that when they enroll in a course at a community college that will – or will not be – accepted for course credit at the four year school they plan to attend. Retaking a course that was supposed to transfer is not a good use of anyone's education dollars.

As you can tell, the reforms I have proposed today are not meant to fix a broken system, but rather to strengthen an already successful one. The Illinois community college system has 48 schools, with dozens more satellite locations that educate hundreds of thousands of students each year.

As a state, we need to broaden our focus and bring our community colleges into the spotlight as we work to rebuild our economy.

Our high schools need to send students to community college ready to learn. Our community colleges must shift their focus from access to completion. And community college graduates must have the skills necessary to enter the workforce, or transfer to a university.

Working together across these systems is not always easy, but it is imperative. Because while everything I've talked about here is about education, it is also about jobs.

We must help more students finish what they start. Let's stay focused on the finish. Let's build a state that draws in employers, that promotes entrepreneurs, and that has a base for a strong and flexible economy not just right now, but for generations to come.

I want to work with you to get us there.