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Remarks of Peter S. Hoff on the State of the University of Maine

Peter S. Hoff

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State of the University Address - 2002 [Streaming audio version](#)

Touching the Earth: Imperatives for the Future Of The University of Maine

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The State of the University
October 8, 2002

Peter S. Hoff
President

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It has been my pleasure and privilege each year to report to you on the state of our university and to articulate a vision for our future. I can report one thing for certain: time flies when you are having fun. Even though this is the sixth year that I have presented this report, I am still introduced from time to time as UMaine's "new president," and I still have an occasional person walk up and ask me for directions to President Hutchinson's office. We still get mail addressed to President Lick. The very gratifying (to me) yet sobering reality is that in the last half century since Arthur Hauck retired, only two presidents have served The University of Maine for a longer period than I. In fact, the Good Lord and the Board of Trustees willing, this year I will pass Howard Neville in longevity, and the following year, I will eclipse the longest-serving president since Arthur Hauck: Lloyd Elliott.

Of course longevity is a nice thing. But it is hardly what counts. The real question is what has happened at Maine during my time here, and where are we headed. I am happy to report that a great deal has happened-and much of that has been good. Good for the university and good for Maine. Speeches of this kind generally contain plenty of bragging and plenty of complaining-bragging about the university's achievements, and complaints that we could use more help from our friends and the government. I will try to get the bragging and complaining out of the way quickly so we can focus on what is more important: our vision for the future.

We often begin, as we will today, by looking at our enrollment. After all, serving students is a large part of what we are about. And, quite seriously, when I took office in 1997 there were deep worries about our enrollments, which had been in decline since 1990. It had reached the point where many observers felt that The University of Maine did not have much of a future, and the most pessimistic were using phrases like "a dying university."

Like Mark Twain, I am happy to tell you that "reports of our death were greatly exaggerated." Not only have UMaine enrollments bounced back vigorously, but our gains have accounted for the lion's share of the net enrollment gain reported by our University System since 1997. Moreover, our overall enrollment has grown more than 20% since 1997 without sacrificing academic quality. Our students are better than ever, and the record shows it.

The size of the entering class has grown from 1,160 to 1,775 students in five years. Overall headcount enrollment has grown steadily from about 9,200 to about 11,300. 23% of our entering students this year were in the top 10% of their high school class. At 1087, the average SAT score is 82 points above the state average and 67 points above the national average—far and away the best of any public university in the state and a match for any flagship in New England. This year 81 students in our entering class finished either number one or number two in their high school class—and that's more of Maine's valedictorians and salutatorians entering UMaine than entered Bowdoin, Bates, and Colby combined.

We are proud of our student body not only because of their academic records, but because they are outstanding people who have people in need and posted extraordinary records for community involvement. Hundreds of them participated in organized service learning projects; attended Boys' or Girls' State; served as class officers and elected leaders; were elected to the National Honor Society; and a remarkable number have achieved the rank of Eagle Scout. Even more than ever, our students have shown themselves to be a friendly and generous bunch. From the greetings I have received on the Mall this fall, I can assure you that the great tradition of the "Maine Hello" is alive and well.

If you had not been on campus since 1997 and walked around today, you would be impressed not only by the new construction that has taken place, but by the significant renovation that has occurred. Some of you may recall my Inaugural speech, where I called for us to recognize the treasure we had in our beautiful and traditional New England Campus—which many have called the most beautiful public flagship in New England—and to recognize the need to attend to these historic treasures and turn them into highly functional 21st-century facilities that retained their original charm. In spite of the fact that the state has no comprehensive capital construction or deferred maintenance strategy, we have somehow managed to do about \$100 million worth of construction and renovation—even though we had to approach each project on an ad hoc basis. The result is truly more progress than one might have thought possible. Of course we have some beautiful new facilities: Alford Stadium, the new wing of Memorial Union, the new wing of Hitchner Hall, the Advanced Engineered Wood Composites Building, the Public Safety Building, and of course the fabulous new Buchanan Alumni House. In a few months a new 200-bed residence hall will open, easing the pressures of our increased enrollments and setting a new standard for comfort and community. A brand new wing for Barrows Hall and an Advanced Manufacturing Center soon will help modernize the College of Engineering.

We have also reached into some classic campus buildings and prepared them to serve the next century. Stevens Hall and Fogler Library have received very tasteful improvements to their interiors. Oak Hall was literally brought out of mothballs and renovated as 82 single rooms that are the first to be chosen by returning students each year. The barn next to the Union is now a state of the art home for Maine Bound, including a very popular climbing wall. Renovations to Bennett Hall have done wonders for that traditional physics building. The old portions of Memorial Union are being transformed into a modern social center of the campus. Aubert Hall is well on its way to becoming a cutting edge science building for the new millennium. And the long awaited home for the art department will arrive with a beautiful transformation of Lord Hall. It is truly hard to imagine how much the campus has been—and soon will be—transformed. One project at a time.

These facilities, however, would be worth nothing without the people who make use of them. I have already reported to you on the growing quality of our student body.

The same impressive growth in quality is taking place on the faculty and staff side. We have assembled a truly fine leadership team. Our Student Affairs staff has done remarkable work literally transforming the overall student experience at Maine. And while we could have a wonderful time debating exactly which professors are our very finest (that's why we give awards each year), the fact is that we have dozens of professors-both old and new-who do the particular things they do as well or better than anyone in the world! My hat goes off to these great faculty members who literally put the university on the map. And while we have so many that I am reluctant to name names, one in particular sets the pace for all. I'm sure you know by now that Professor George Denton is now a member of both the Royal Swedish Academy and the National Academy of Science. George is regarded as an international leader in the study of sudden climate change-a phenomenon as important as any the world faces. If anyone has truly been the pacesetter for Maine's world-class faculty, it is George. I salute him for his entire career of stellar achievement.

If, as Napoleon said, "an army marches on its stomach," a university certainly marches on its wallet. Our faculty has done a truly remarkable job of getting more mileage out of our budget than anyone could reasonably have expected. The good news is that state appropriations grew-albeit modestly-during the past five years. Much credit goes to former chancellor Terrence MacTaggart for helping turn the attitude of the public and the legislature in a positive direction toward the university. I am proud to have helped with this effort. A great deal of my time has been spent in Augusta during the legislative sessions, working the halls and testifying before various committees, especially the Education Committee, the Research and Development Committee, the Economic Development Committee, and most importantly the Appropriations Committee. It has been time well spent, and I am pleased that we have been able to turn a downward funding spiral into an upward slope. I am now looking forward to working with Chancellor Joseph Westphal, who will be presenting a very ambitious budget proposal and challenging the people of Maine to make good on their sentiment that education is-and should be-the state's top priority.

In spite of progress on funding, we have much remaining to achieve. Over the past few years, if you adjust the state appropriation for inflation and parcel it out on a per-student basis, we are barely staying even. State appropriation per FTE student is almost exactly what it was in 1997 in inflation-adjusted dollars. We must do better. Moreover, there was a time not long ago when Maine's appropriations to higher education represented more than 15% of the state's total budget. That appropriation has dropped to only 7% of the state budget. It hardly suggests that higher education is being treated as the priority it needs to be. People across the state recognize that education has to form the heart of any strategy to lift Maine's economy by its bootstraps. Like the Irish, who used investment in education over the last couple of decades to turn their economy into the "Celtic Tiger" of Europe, and like the most enlightened states in America, Maine must look to education as the key investment for the future.

The brightest story at UMaine lately has been funding for research and development. Thanks to the persuasive efforts of the "Faculty Five," the Maine Economic Improvement Fund (MEIF) was created in 1998, and thanks to everyone who helped me advocate for this fund in Augusta, our share of that fund has grown from \$400,000 in 1998 to more than \$8 million per year today. We have used the MEIF well, leveraging about five federal dollars each year for each matching dollar provided by the MEIF. It has therefore produced a tremendous return on investment, which, if sustained and increased, could well take us to the Faculty Five's dream of \$100 million per year in externally funded research within a few years. We are over halfway there, having tripled our funded research in about six years, and we must sustain that growth. The effort is already paying off in new technological concepts, new patents, new spin-offs of intellectual property into start-up firms, new successes, and new jobs for Maine. We need to remember that the effort is still in its infancy, and we have decades of work ahead of us before we begin to catch the leaders across the country.

Along with the MEIF, we should remember and be grateful for about \$50 million in capital construction funds the state has provided through a variety of means to help construct and renovate the labs and facilities where research is carried out. These capital investments have made possible the Advanced Engineered Wood Composites building, the Biotechnology and Food Science addition to Hitchner Hall, renovation of Aubert Hall, Lord Hall, and Fogler Library, the Engineering and Science project, and the Advanced Manufacturing Center.

While we are congratulating ourselves on this progress, we need to remember that our competition is setting a very fast pace. Just to cite one example, the University of Connecticut during the same period has competed over half a billion dollars worth of construction and renovation as part of a \$2.3 billion commitment from the state of Connecticut. Maine needs to keep pace with states like Connecticut that are making the investments necessary for higher education's future.

As you know, the current budget year is a very difficult one. It was hard to absorb about a seven million dollar increase in health insurance premiums this year, and we had to do so while the state was taking back from us more than half of the promised allocation increase and rescinding all of the increase to the MEIF. Those cuts made it very hard for us to think about new initiatives while we tightened our belts yet another time to address state budget cuts. And it is entirely possible we will not get through the year without giving more money back to the state. So hang on, and please do everything you can to support Governor King's proposal to the legislature, which balances the current year's budget without further cuts to education.

While we do this, let us not think in terms of standing still. So enough bragging and enough complaining. I invited you here today so that we could take stock and be proud of how far we have come in five years. However, I am not one to spend much time looking backward. I hope you will join me in focusing on where we need to go. We must continue to look for ways to improve our university and make it even more responsive to the needs of our students and our state. Under the circumstances it goes without saying that we should be looking for opportunities that do not cost us more money-but in fact represent ways of working better and more efficiently and with our priorities in mind. To that end, let me suggest a few themes that I believe should be at the top of our list. These are the imperatives that we must accomplish in order to fulfill our mission.

A FOCUS ON EXCELLENCE

I mentioned our good record over the past several years when it comes to attracting top students and world-class professors. We need to sustain that effort. We have reached the point in our enrollment rebound where we can focus our admissions process on assembling a highly qualified entering class each year. As Maine's Land-Grant university, we will not deny admission to students who have demonstrated the ability and preparation to succeed here. However, we will work harder than ever to convince the very best prospective students to enroll at Maine.

As specified in our current strategic plan, the transformation of our venerable Honors Program into a full-fledged Honors College this year represents a cornerstone of our focus on quality. Along with the strong academic programs in each of our colleges, the Honors College sends a message to prospective students that they can have as challenging and productive an academic experience here as at any college or university in the country-and at a fraction of the cost. Just as I chose the honors program at my home state university over attending Cornell and Stanford, I hope many of Maine's best students will choose to come here for our Honors College and all the great majors we offer.

ACADEMIC PROGRAMS FOR A STRONGER MAINE

Although we will not forget that UMaine has one of the state's four great liberal arts colleges, as evidenced by our prestigious membership in Phi Beta Kappa, we will also remember our serious responsibility to attend to the requirements of Maine's economy by preparing highly educated professionals in areas of critical need. One such strategic priority is Information Science, where we have announced a "university-wide initiative." This means we will emphasize majors that specifically prepare needed professionals—majors such as computer science, computer engineering, spatial information engineering, management information systems, educational technology, and new media. The initiative also means making sure that no students graduate without the information science and information technology skills necessary to take advantage of new technology in whatever field they enter, and to be effective professionals in today's knowledge-based economy.

A second overall area targeted for strengthening is Graduate Education. As the state's only university to hold the top Carnegie classification of "Doctoral Research-Extensive," UMaine needs to focus as much of its effort and attention as possible on strengthening the masters and doctoral programs that produce well educated scholars and support the overall research effort of the university. We have recently named Dr. Deirdre Mageean to the new position of Associate Vice President for Research and Dean of the Graduate School. Deirdre will help lead our initiative in this regard. It is our intention to work to improve stipends and benefits for graduate assistants as part of our effort to attract the best and brightest graduate students to our advanced degree programs. We intend to emphasize and strengthen both research and professionally based graduate programs in order to provide the state with a strong professional workforce.

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT TO SERVE SOCIETY AND BOOST MAINE'S ECONOMY

As I said earlier, funding for research and development has been the brightest picture at UMaine in the past five years. It is a vital part of any Land-Grant university, and it is essential to the state's economic and social future. We will stay the course as we push for the \$100 million mark in annual research funding. At that level, we will have much more visible levels of intellectual property development that reach the economy through patents, spinoff companies, new products, and jobs for Mainers.

A crucial next step is the restoration of the \$2 million cut by state government from the Maine Economic Improvement Fund. This restoration is vital to our next great venture—the founding of a Biophysics Research Institute in partnership with The Jackson Laboratory and Maine Medical Center Research Institute. That partnership makes a real and visible beginning for the "virtual research university" envisaged by state leaders. It gives substance to Maine's own "research triangle" by uniting world-renowned laboratories in Orono, Bar Harbor, and the Portland area in a common effort. The benefits that would flow from this modest investment are overwhelmingly significant: the efficiency and synergy of uniting some of the state's best scientists and attracting more of them to the effort, the external funding that would flow to Maine for additional research, the jobs and economic benefits to Maine's economy, the intrinsic value of biomedical research, and the lives that would be improved and even saved by the medical advances sure to follow.

Efforts like this are too important to put on the side track. And we must also remember that we have embarked on a course that must continue for decades. It is not a quick fix. It is a permanent and continuing investment in the highest aspirations of our civilization.

PARTNERSHIP WITH K-12 EDUCATION

As all of us have said at one time or another, nothing is more important to society than education. Education at all levels and for all ages. And it is true that UMaine prepares more of the state's teachers than any other college or university. But how

many of us get up and go to work each morning with the thought that we are going to prepare a teacher? We should! The education of teachers is something virtually all professors at the university engage in through the courses they teach, the students they advise, and the examples they set. Although our College of Education and Human Development has done a great job over the years in its role of preparing teachers and administrators and supporting schools, we need to affirm that the job is an all-university responsibility and take on that responsibility more purposefully. To that end, and with the encouragement of our Board of Visitors, we commissioned a report from a blue-ribbon commission headed by Professor Steve Norton of Geological Sciences. On that commission were professors from all colleges, teachers, administrators, and citizens. I hope you will review the report, which can be found on the university web site.

Based on the recommendations, we have appointed Dr. Sue Huseman, former President of UM Farmington and former UMS Vice Chancellor, to head our Center for Teaching Excellence and be the point person at the university level for our campus-wide efforts to recruit and prepare teachers and support schools. As part of Chancellor Westphal's P-16 initiative, we are especially going to concentrate on the things we can do best from Orono. That means going all out to reverse the statewide shortage of mathematics and science teachers. Our schools have far too few qualified teachers in these areas, and what they do is vital to getting more Maine high school students to college and to preparing a citizenry and a workforce for the 21st century. All of us need to aid in the effort to identify undergraduates who might make outstanding math and science teachers, urge them to consider teaching as a profession, educate them in ways that will help them get ready to teach these subjects, and persuade the powers that be to increase the pay for teachers to the point where these talented young people will find the profession attractive.

Another thing we do uniquely is offer master's programs that teachers want and need. Our commission discovered through their survey that an overwhelming number of practicing teachers in Maine (especially at the middle school and high school level) would prefer to earn their master's degree in a subject that they teach (English, biology, history, etc.) Although the five regional campuses of the UM system are not authorized to offer master's programs, they have well qualified professors who could help us teach as part of programs emanating out of Orono but offered to cohort groups in other parts of the state. We could use a combination of face-to-face instruction and technology-mediated distance learning to offer these degrees. I have asked Dr. Huseman to put together one or two such model programs to begin in the Fall of 2003. I hope you will embrace opportunities to make these programs happen.

THE POST-911 UNIVERSITY

It has become a cliché that on September 11, 2001 "the world changed completely." And while we all still mourn those who suffered from that tragedy, while we recognize the impact it has had on our personal lives, and while we have also in some ways returned to everyday realities, we definitely need to explore and act on the changes that September 11 brought to the university. We have both an obligation and a responsibility to make UMaine truly a "Post-911 University."

This means many things. It means recognizing that our country was not the only entity to come under attack. Citizens of more than 80 nations perished in the World Trade towers. Every civilized nation, and in fact the very essence of civilization and its humane values, came under attack. Since universities are the world's best repositories and transmitters of those values, universities must fight back by doing what they do best: educating citizens of the world to think rationally and live with the highest ethical and social values. We should re-evaluate our curriculum and the ways we teach it, making sure that we emphasize critical thinking and the formation of values, the study of foreign languages and the diverse cultures of the world, and subjects that will help us understand the changes that have taken place: subjects like "the psychology of patriotism," "worldwide challenges to health and economic well being," and "the nature of religious fundamentalism." Furthermore we have a

responsibility to contribute to public understanding of national policy issues, not the least of which is the ongoing debate over engaging in war with nations that abet terrorism.

And while we seek a better understanding of our world, there are things we can do to make our country safer. UMaine's research prowess already extends to areas like chemical and biological sensors, which can be used to detect terrorist threats, and like emergency preparedness, which can help make our population more ready for whatever form the next threat takes. UMaine should convene its research faculty to meet and consider a systematic plan to turn research attention to areas where we have top-level expertise in homeland defense. We have it in our power to engage in a "Manhattan Project" aimed at making all Americans safer.

ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP AND SAFE PRACTICES

Being the state's flagship university brings with it a number of responsibilities. And high on that list of responsibilities is the imperative that we operate a safe learning and working environment that truly respects and takes care of the natural environment. We need to do this for the sake of our students and employees. We need to do this because it is our job to lead by example, showing the rest of society what responsible environmental behavior looks like. This responsibility comes from the understanding we get from the discipline of ecology—everything is connected to everything else. So it matters in ways that we do not yet fully understand how we live, work, and learn in this small but beautiful part of the global environment.

This ecological understanding means that all we do starts with the fundamental imperative of safety. We will implement this year an aggressive new program in safety and environmental management. Doing so will cost us valuable resources as we designate new campus positions to environmental health and safety and reallocate resources to the training and mitigation steps that are necessary. But these investments will ensure that every student and employee will be better prepared to work safely and every program will contribute to reducing the environmental impacts of this enterprise. The commitment is to meet our legal and regulatory obligations and then move beyond compliance to become leaders in stewardship of the environmental resources we all rely upon.

This renewed commitment to safety and environmental management will only enhance the initiatives in sustainability begun last year. We appointed Scott Wilkerson to the position of Sustainability Officer and charged him with mobilizing the university community for a stronger environmental commitment. This commitment begins with activities such as significantly increasing the amount of recycling we do, and educating students and employees about environmentally sound practices in everything they do. With the help of an ongoing committee and the support of the administration, Scott will be expanding the university's efforts more each year.

INCREASE AND CELEBRATE OUR DIVERSITY

As the state's leading educational institution, our responsibilities in areas such as equal opportunity and diversity are even more important than elsewhere in Maine. We need to model the best practices and inspire the rest of our state to follow them. We need to create and maintain the kind of educational environment that prepares our graduates to enter adult life in a world that is culturally, ethnically, and socially very different from Maine—and of course a great deal more diverse in every respect.

Even though the university community is at least twice as diverse as the rest of the state by almost any measure that could be applied, that's not nearly good enough in one of the least diverse states in the nation. We have taken extraordinary steps and invested significant funds to promote diversity in recent years: task forces, incentive grants, opportunity hire funds, new programs in ethnic and cultural studies, new institutes and offices on campus. And we have attracted a number of really good

employees and students of color. But the results have not nearly been good enough. I am calling on all campus leaders to redouble their efforts to recruit and retain persons who add diversity to the campus, and to help sustain a campus culture and environment that welcomes and supports them.

Moreover, I am especially concerned that we need to do more to attract, promote, and retain women in positions of campus leadership. Recent gains have been encouraging, with the appointment and promotion of women to positions such as Dean of Extension, Dean of the Graduate School, and Executive Assistant to the President. But they represent small steps toward a goal of including more women at the highest levels and making sure the campus environment contributes to their success.

To that end, this month I will be appointing a task force to study the campus environment for women leaders—the processes by which they are selected, the opportunities for advancement, the professional support and professional development available to them, and the campus culture's ability to sustain them. What we have in mind is not unlike the study recently completed by MIT on these subjects. We will appoint the most able task force we can find, and we will support their work with outside expertise. I look forward to the work of this group and to real progress as a result.

REMEMBER WHAT WE ARE HERE FOR

All in all, this vision represents a tall order for everyone who is part of the UMaine community. And remember, this is a list of priorities that we face whether or not we can garner new resources. They represent inescapable imperatives for the campus. And at the same time they are achievable imperatives because they call for an effort of our will more than they call for new dollars. I trust that you agree with me that we owe it to our students and the people of Maine to make solid progress in all the areas I have cited:

- Focus on Excellence
- Academic Programs for a Stronger Maine
- Research and Development to Serve Society and Boost Maine's Economy
- Partnership with K-12 Education
- Building the Post 9-11 University
- Promoting Safety and Environmental Stewardship
- Increasing and Celebrating Diversity

Those are the inescapable imperatives, and there are probably a few more you could suggest that I have somehow failed to mention. Why are they inescapable? Because in the 1860's Justin Morrill, Abraham Lincoln, and the people of Maine gave us a job to do, and we intend to do it right. Over the past 137 years, the job has grown and the challenges have become more formidable. But so have our abilities to meet those challenges. We are up to the task because we have the brainpower and the resolve.

You may recall the Greek mythological figure, Anteus, who struggled mightily to win his battles with other superhuman beings. When he was in danger, Anteus drew his strength from touching the earth, which gave him renewed power to continue his battle and renewed resolve to win. We at the University are like Anteus because we have constant access to the roots that give us eternal strength and resolve: our students and our disciplines. My favorite two days of the year are Move-In Day ("The Maine Hello") and Commencement Day. When Dianne and I help the new students

carry their belongings into their residence halls, full of excitement, anxiety, and anticipation, we are charged up by the emotions and expectations of the new students. It gives us the strength to face a new year with enthusiasm, energy, and resolve. And when our graduates cross the stage at commencement, I feel an overwhelming sense that the whole effort has been worth it a thousand times over. I not only draw great satisfaction from commencement, but also great strength. I never doubt the value and importance of what we do.

And in between those two days it is you-the faculty, staff, and student body-who are on the stage, playing out a momentous drama in which lives, futures, and destinies are at stake. Never doubt the stakes and significance of what you do here at the university. Draw strength from the students. Draw strength from the thousands of years of human progress in learning that has preceded you. Touch the earth and do great things.

In a recent book, President Emeritus Frank Rhodes of Cornell described the role of universities as, insofar as it lies within their power, "the creation of the future." We are all at work creating the future, through educating our students; discovering and perfecting new ideas, concepts, creative works, technologies, and knowledge; and transferring those discoveries to the world at large through public engagement. When I reflect on this, I feel incredibly fortunate to be a part of this enterprise. I am certain all of you must feel the same.

Thank you for helping to make The University of Maine a truly astonishing place. Your enthusiastic support during the past five years has helped make my job as pleasant and stimulating as I could possibly hope. I am full of enthusiasm for the challenging but welcome tasks we face. Please join me in the work that lies ahead.

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