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Sidney
LD 512

I wish to strongly express my support for LD 512 - An Act to Promote Student Enrollment and Degree Completion in the University of Maine System by Providing Tuition Waivers to Eligible Students.

I am an Assistant Professor of Economics at the University of Southern Maine. As both an economist and an educator within UMS, I believe that I can speak to the benefits of this bill from multiple different perspectives.

As an economist, I am well aware of the considerable amount of evidence showing the benefits of higher education. 4-year college degrees are increasingly essential, both for individuals to succeed and for societies as a whole to flourish. Those with a bachelor's degree earn nearly 40% more than those with an associate's degree, and roughly 65% more than those with no college education. They are also less likely to be unemployed (3.5% vs. 4.6% and 6.2%, respectively). Societies with better-educated workers experience faster economic growth, lower rates of crime, and enjoy better health. My own research, for example, suggests that a primary reason life expectancy has been improving at a slower rate and even beginning to decline is that higher education is increasingly unaffordable. Economic theory tells us that an essential role for the government is to provide services like higher education that benefit society as a whole but will be under-consumed if the costs must be paid for by individuals.

Maine needs a skilled workforce to attract and retain businesses, especially those that provide high-quality jobs with decent pay. Yet fewer than 36% of Mainers above the age of 25 have a bachelor's degree. This is the lowest in New England. For example over 40% have a bachelor's degree in our neighboring New Hampshire, and nearly 47% in Massachusetts. While our education lags behind, our economy will as well.

Although I believe reducing the cost of community college is a step in the right direction, these efforts do not go far enough. They are also creating some unintended side effects. Community colleges are overburdened, while Maine's public universities are facing declining enrollment and budgetary crises. This bill would help restore balance to our higher education system. Although it would cost slightly more on a per-student basis, we can expect that these costs will be at least partially offset by the growing tax base that will come with a more skilled workforce, and reduced need for state funds to support our public universities if enrollments continue to decline.

It will also benefit students by helping them get on the path to a beneficial four-year degree. Although it is true that students can enroll in one of our public universities after completing a two-year community college degree, this can make it more difficult for students to succeed. In my experience, students learn most effectively when they are in a comfortable environment. This is harder to achieve when students have to adjust to a completely new school after two years. It also makes it more difficult for students to form connections with fellow students and faculty members, and these connections are essential for student success.

For all of these reasons, I strongly support this bill.