



To: Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, 131st Maine Legislature

From: Elizabeth Daigle, Coordinator of Accessibility Services at Eastern Maine Community College;
resident of Bangor, ME

Re: Statement of support in favor of funding ***LD 447: An Act to support Higher Education in Maine
by Providing Funds to Maine's Community Colleges***

Date: March, 6, 2023

Students entering college for the first time encounter a variety of challenges, and learning how to identify and solve these diverse challenges is an ongoing process. Some students enter college with more of the skills necessary for the navigating the academic demands of independent learning and personal responsibility, and some students enter with significant gaps in skills, which can contribute to their academic experience becoming overwhelming and unsuccessful.

Some people who enroll in community college have a strong foundation of high school preparation, a robust toolbox of academic and psychosocial skills, and are able to engage the challenge of post-secondary coursework with curiosity and enthusiasm. These students maximize their learning opportunities in small class sizes and personal relationships with their instructors. In Student Success, we try to identify these capable, independent learners and bring them on board as peer tutors and mentors, through Federal Work Study employment opportunities in our Student Success Center. Unfortunately, unlike four-year institutions, these successful peers quickly transfer out of our community college to complete their bachelors' degrees: This continual graduation and transfer of students with demonstrated college achievement means that we rely heavily on professional staff to provide continuous student support.

There are tremendous demands for executive functioning in order to decode the complexities of college course registration, class meetings, purchasing textbooks, and navigating multiple online platforms for difference purposes. And then they need to keep track of assignments and deadlines in courses without daily reminders. They need to read multiple chapters prior to attending a lecture and prepare to take meaningful notes. They need to know how to review and study effectively for tests. Even for students who can figure out some parts, it is extremely difficult to decode all of this for every different course, and each course demands different types of independent learning, notetaking, and testing. Even for students who matriculate with robust developmental assets for problem-solving, perseverance, and proactive communication, transition to college is a step where anyone can stumble.

I had countless students begin college this past fall expecting it to be, effectively, 13th grade: did not obtain textbooks for first month or more; attended every class meeting and turned in zero homework; emailed the teacher after final grades were posted in December and ask for extra credit. My colleagues on the Student Success team and faculty were surprised by the number of students who asked for "motivation" as a learning support when we asked why they weren't submitting homework assignments. These students survived a few years of pandemic schooling, and for many young people, survival during lockdown was the primary goal. But they have now entered college without having

experienced academic challenge and support in high school, through no fault of their own, and these young people are significantly behind in their academic, cognitive, and psychosocial development. One faculty member told me last week that he has been consulting with his wife, a middle school teacher, for instructional and behavioral strategies to use with his EMCC students. Our faculty are subject experts teaching college courses, and many of them have not trained in adolescent development. Our Student Success team has had many more faculty asking for support in appropriately responding to and communicating students who are not meeting expectations.

My primary role at EMCC is working with students with disabilities to access the educational opportunities available. All students who had an IEP or 504 in high school *should* get connected with Accessibility Services, but the process for accommodations in post-secondary settings is very different from K12, and many students do not establish accommodations in college. There are many reasons for this: they want to try on their own; they don't want the stigma associated with academic support; they assumed their IEP was transferred and implemented directly in the same way it was for years. Research literature suggests that, of the college-attending population that *did* have support services in high school, only 25% request accommodations in college. At EMCC, approximately 13% of our student population is registered with Accessibility Services. Following the research finding, that would suggest that perhaps 52% of our students could be among those students with high school learning support. And that is only the students with diagnosed disabilities.

On par with national trends, EMCC is experiencing continued growth in numbers of enrolled students who are on the autism spectrum. I believe that our programs offer a variety of opportunities for individuals to build skills in areas of strength and interest, and most people with autism can become financially independent in the right type of work. However, transition to learning new places and procedures can be very challenging, and it would be extremely beneficial to have a Success Coach with expertise in autism spectrum to support this population. I receive many IEPs and personal requests from parents to provide structured social and communication support to the student; or needs for an aide to remind them to focus on the class; or ensure that every day they have identified the correct assignment and understand how to complete it. Students who benefitted from comprehensive special education support services in high school find themselves lost when they show up to campus and have to figure it out themselves.

We also have a large population of adult learners who did not experience an educational system in their youth that prioritized identifying and remediating learning problems. I work with many adult learners who are enrolling in college for the first time since leaving high school, and we need to figure out where the snags are in their brains as they process new information, commit it to memory, and retrieve it for demonstration. Comprehensive cognitive testing to diagnose learning disabilities in adults can cost well over \$1000, if a person is even able to find a psychologist available to schedule the testing. So I need to work with adults to use a range of strategies that can help them regardless of whether there are any diagnosed learning disabilities.

In addition to learning disabilities, I also provide support to students with mental health challenges like anxiety and depression. While not a counselor, I serve as a direct support for students who may be having a hard time on any given day and help them work through moments of distress. I provide workshops and one-on-one training on managing test anxiety, which is extremely common among our current population due to the lack of high stakes testing experiences they had in high school. Without

repeated exposure to challenges, many of our new students lack necessary resilience to navigate many parts of college.

Among these many academic and cognitive skills of reading for information, memorizing, synthesizing, and applying new concepts, there are some core social competencies that many students also lack. My colleagues presented a workshop last month on How to Email Your Instructors. We provided multiple scenarios (missed class, clarification on the homework, question about a grade) and provided bad examples, good examples, and templates for how to send a professional, two sentence email.

I absolutely love my work. I love the opportunity to solve problems with students and help them achieve their goals. I would have much more confidence in my capacity to meet our students' needs if I had additional colleagues who could provide essential, individualized support to them.