

January 18, 2024

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Culture Affairs:

My name is Dr. Sarah Bushey, from Ashland/Presque Isle, and I am writing in support of L.D. 2131, An Act to Support Extended Learning Opportunities. My current occupation is serving as the extended learning opportunity (“ELO”) Coordinator at the University of Maine at Presque Isle. Through a 2-year, 250K grant awarded by the Maine Department of Education, we have had the opportunity to work collaboratively with the areas two largest high schools (Caribou and Presque Isle High School) to offer these hands-on, community-based work experiences to our students. This is the first partnership between a postsecondary institute and area high schools of its kind in the state of Maine.

In just over one year, between all three of our schools we have served over 180 students with ELOs. While I could write a book on how these opportunities have benefited students and given them the confidence to see themselves in the workforce, my goal is to keep this letter brief while still impressing upon you the significant positive impact of the ELO program. In my experience, ELOs have helped students from a variety of different age groups including high school students right up to seniors in college. I have had two senior students complete ELOs, one who realized through a job shadow at a hospital that there were many skills she had not acquired in her college experience that she would need to have in order to attend medical school. That job shadow led to her being offered a full-time internship at the hospital in the summer after she graduated. The other senior, who was a business student, was able to work with a local life insurance practice and network with a variety of businesses locally. After he graduated, the skills he gained from that work experience led him to being hired at a local financial institution.

I currently have a Computer Science student working with one of our faculty members to create software to assist in the spectral analysis of ice cores. They are working in tandem with the Climate Change Institute, and this student is actually creating software that scientists are using in their research. I have two freshmen sisters that are both gifted visual artists and are working at a local art nonprofit to offer classes for community children. Another freshmen student of mine is an Environmental Science major, and he is working at the local Atlantic salmon hatchery and learning about how vital these fish are to the natural ecology of Maine. From working on ELOs, I have seen students blossom and grow in confidence and in their ability to discern what it really is that they want to contribute to the community. Many soft skills that we took for granted in the workforce were negatively affected by the pandemic, and these experiences are giving students the opportunity to practice those skills in a real-world setting. In an age where communication and interaction has largely become digital, our students are craving in-person learning opportunities and the chance to network and create meaningful social

connections. For these and many other reasons, offering ELOs to students is vital to the development and retention of the young workforce. I urge you to consider making extended learning opportunities a recognized educational learning pathway in Maine and to continue to support this important work.

Warmly,

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