

March 6, 2024

Dear Committee Members,

I am writing to express my support for LD 2231, Resolve, to Promote Access to Education and Workforce Development by Transferring Ownership of the Hutchinson Center Property in Belfast to the City of Belfast.

I grew up in the Midcoast and live there now. I went away for college but returned to raise my family here. I completed a masters degree in instructional technology at Bridgewater State College in a hybrid modality in 2003 and was an early adopter of educational technology and distance education. This format allowed me to earn a degree while working, even though I lived right across the street from campus. Engaging in discussions online about research literature changed the way I think about learning. I don't think I would have been as successful if I did not meet my professor and peers on campus during the first and last class each semester. I am an advocate for distance education and the access it can provide, but I also recognize the importance of close personal connections in the success of students.

I have been an educator for over 25 years, as a classroom teacher in K-12 public and private schools, as an adult educator and administrator, as an instructor for several campuses in the University of Maine System, and as an instructional designer for distance classes on the seven campuses of the University of Maine System. I still teach at the UMA Rockland Center, although I am now a full-time doctoral candidate at the University of Maine in the higher education leadership program. My dissertation research is on faculty beliefs about adult learner memory. I have conducted research on adult learners and distance education, including a scoping review of the literature where we have examined over 11,000 research articles about adults in distance education, so I consider myself an expert on this topic.

Ed Zarecor, VP of Engineering at Axim, a non-profit formed by Harvard and MIT to bring higher education to a wider audience worldwide, recently said, "access without support is not opportunity". I have written an historical account of the development of distance education in the University of Maine System (Fensie, 2021), documenting Maine's place as an early pioneer of distance education. I used Anderson and Simpson's (2012) generational framework to analyze the role of faculty in distance education. Their framework refers to the

development of distance education as first: (a) providing access to education through correspondence courses, then, (b) economies of scale where broadcast television and the introduction of the internet allowed schools to engage large amount of learners, and finally, (c) interaction and specialization, which seeks to use the power of technology and evidence-based practices to personalize learning opportunities for students. The University of Maine System has excelled at providing access, but remember, “access without support is not opportunity”.

The University of Maine at Augusta took on the role of providing this support, which was later moved to University College before recently returning again to UMA. They have proven that their high-touch model of making frequent contact with distance learners and providing a variety of supports, such as tutoring, places to study with broadband internet access, and connecting students socially, improves outcomes for adult learners in Maine.

I lived here in Belfast when Charlie Cawley made the establishment of the Hutchinson Center possible. I used the facilities several times as a doctoral student in place of making the commute to Orono. I know what a vital resource this is to the Midcoast. Yes, people can drive to Rockland or Ellsworth, or even Augusta, but they don't. When you have limited time to devote to studies, you make use of every minute in your day. I recently conducted a study on academically high-achieving working mothers in distance education where we documented the astounding level of distraction that these students faced when trying to learn from home. One student would go out to her car to find a quiet place to study. I came to the Hutchinson Center to complete my comprehensive exams so that I would have a quiet place to work. One of my students spends all day on Mondays at the Rockland Center to do her schoolwork because she doesn't have adequate internet at home.

I am testifying here at some personal risk as my views here are counter to those of the administration at the University of Maine. This may impact any potential employment with the university after I complete my degree. However, I think it is wrong for them to try to sell this property. It was gifted to the University for the purpose of providing educational, workforce, social, and artistic opportunities for residents of the Midcoast, and I believe that mission should be maintained as it is desperately needed. I understand that there is a significant amount of money that could result from the sale of the property, but not at the expense of the educational needs of this community.

If the Hutchinson Center property is sold to the highest bidder, then residents of the Midcoast may still have access to education through other venues, but remember, “access without support is not opportunity”.

Thank you for your consideration,

Anne Fensie

References

Anderson, B., & Simpson, M. (2012). History and heritage in distance education. *Journal of Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning*, 16(2), 1–10.

Fensie, A. (2021). *The role of faculty in the development of distance education in the University of Maine System*. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.23631.46245>

Fensie, A., Pierre, T. St., Jain, J., & Sezen-Barrie, A. (2023). Engaged learning during distraction: A case study of successful working moms in distance education. *Journal of Computing in Higher Education*, 1–46. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12528-023-09359-0>