

Testimony of: Prof. Ragini Malhotra

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine and other members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee, and

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and other esteemed members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

My name is Ragini Malhotra and I am a faculty member in the Criminology Department at the University of Southern Maine.

I am testifying neither for nor against the Governor's proposed budget. Although we recognize that the Governor's proposal increases the state appropriation to the UMaine System by 4% we are hoping that the Legislature will do more to address the needs of the UMaine System.

We are experiencing very serious budgetary challenges at USM that make it difficult to meet the needs of our students. This is true in my own department, and in other departments and programs across our college. Scarcity is perpetual; severe staffing and funding issues leave us unable to hire the faculty we need to run our programs. At the moment, much of our work is happening because of the willingness of faculty and staff to take on additional unpaid labor. It has become routine for faculty to step in to provide additional service support to colleagues in other departments. The same goes for opening our classes to other departments, and taking on additional teaching work.

In our own department, we have responded to individual student requests for changes in course scheduling. For instance, I have changed my course schedules in two consecutive semesters in order to meet student needs and ensure that students are able to graduate. We made this decision as a department after receiving a letter from students which emphasized how impactful our program had been for those pursuing a wide range of careers. This includes folks pursuing careers within the criminal legal system, in public policy and non-profit spaces, and those going to graduate and law school.

Our students, in their letter, emphasized how critical our program has been for them, and stressed the lack of institutional support that we as faculty were receiving as we struggled to meet program needs. For instance, our decision to offer more required courses to meet the needs of graduating students had a positive impact for many students. But this also meant that students who had completed their core requirements, were in some instances signed up for an elective course that we could no longer offer in a given semester. Those students were then left having to wait another semester, or look for other electives that they may have been less interested in.

Operating in this manner is not sustainable. We therefore urge this Committee and the Legislature to demonstrate their commitment to higher education in the state of Maine. After years of chronic under-funding this is essential for us as educators, and for our students.

Thank you

Ragini Malhotra

Assistant Professor, Department of Criminology

