



## Maine Education Association

Jesse Hargrove President | Beth French Vice President | Jaye Rich Treasurer  
Rebecca Cole NEA Director | Rachelle Bristol Executive Director

### Testimony

#### In Support Of

**LD 700: An Act to Promote Student Enrollment and Degree Completion in the University of Maine System by Awarding Waivers of Tuition and Fees and Eligible Students**

**Jan Kosinski, Government Relations Director, Maine Education Association**

**Before the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee**

**March 17th, 2025**

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

My name is Jan Kosinski, and I am the Director of Government Relations for the Maine Education Association (MEA). The MEA represents nearly 24,000 educators, including teachers and other educators in nearly every public school in the state, as well as full-time faculty and other professional and support staff in both the University of Maine and Community College systems. Thousands of retired educators continue their connection and advocacy work through the MEA- Retired program.

I offer this testimony today on behalf of the MEA in SUPPORT of LD 700, *An Act to Promote Student Enrollment and Degree Completion in the University of Maine System by Awarding Waivers of Tuition and Fees to Eligible Students*.

This bill is similar if not identical to a bill that was passed by this Committee last session – LD 512, *An Act to Promote Student Enrollment and Degree Completion in the University of Maine System by Providing Tuition Waivers to Eligible Students*. This bill was passed by this Committee but failed to receive the funding necessary and the bill died on the Special Appropriations Table.

Let me be clear – the MEA is supportive of the “free community college program.” We appreciate the Governor and the Legislature continuously authorizing and funding this important program. We know the best ticket to the middle class is a college degree and we are confident our entire state will benefit by expanding affordable access to higher education for more people. Certainly, the businesses in our state will reap the rewards of a better educated population, now and into the future.

The research is clear. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, students with a bachelor’s degree earn 84% more than someone with no degree and 60% more than someone with a two-year associate’s degree. The unemployment rates are 50% lower for those with a bachelor’s degree compared to peers with no degree, and 33% lower than those with an associate’s degree. According to the Brookings Institute, the rate of return on government spending for public universities is conservatively estimated to be above 10%.<sup>1</sup> Despite this evidence, our state continues to prioritize investments in our community college with a specific focus on addressing workforce demands, but we would argue we are not paying enough attention to the needs of our four-year institutions and the valuable educational and economic role they play in our state. This bill attempts to address

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<sup>1</sup> Please see, [Public colleges are the workhorses of Middle-Class Mobility](#), Brookings Institute, July 22, 2020.



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that concern by providing a new, comparable, means-tested program to encourage students to enroll in our four-year public universities in Maine.

We remain concerned the free community college program will have a downstream, unintended impact on our state's four-year public higher education institutions. Put simply, the campuses of the University of Maine System will struggle to compete with free. For some students, one of the seven campuses of the University of Maine System may provide a better option for their interests and learning, but we know students are forgoing the option of attending one of these campuses purely for financial reasons. The free community college program raises important questions. Are we stifling the educational opportunities for undergraduate students by offering a free two-year program rather than supporting and subsidizing their enrollment in a four-year program for all four years? By curtailing the attendance within the University of Maine system for some students from four to two years through transfer, what are the economic impacts to these institutions, and will this curtailment degrade or further erode the offerings and quality of education at the seven public four-universities?

The University of Maine has done an admirable job of managing and addressing declining student enrollments. Due to population decline, we have experienced a slight decline in students graduating from our state's high schools. According to the Kids Count Data Book prepared by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, in 2024, 12,188 students graduated from a Maine high school which is slightly less than 12,523 who graduated in 2019, but still better than the low of 11,895 who graduated in 2021.<sup>2</sup> Students graduating from a Maine high school remain the most likely students to enroll in a program at one of the seven UMaine System campuses.

**Table 1: Number of Students Graduating from Maine High School**

Year	# of Students Graduating from High School in 4 Years
2024	12,188
2023	12,167
2022	11,961
2021	11,895
2020	12,090
2019	12,523
2018	12,370
2017	12,123
2016	12,426
2015	12,368
2014	12,362

Source: KidsCount Data Book, 2024

With a slightly declining student population, the University System is competing for a diminished pool of undergraduate students. Now with the free community college program, that competition has gotten more intense. Below is a chart showing the undergraduate enrollment by campus and this chart is pulled directly from the 2024-2025 Academic Enrollment Report prepared by the UMaine System:

<sup>2</sup> Please see, Kids Count Data Book 2024, prepared by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and found here: [High School graduation rates by county | KIDS COUNT Data Center](#)



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**Table 2: Total Undergraduate Unduplicated Headcount by Campus (Excludes Early College)<sup>3</sup>**

Campus	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	% of Total	1-year Change	5-year Change
UM/UMM	--	--	--	--	9,614	39.1%	N/A	N/A
UM	10,029	10,026	9,432	9,094	--	N/A	N/A	N/A
UMA	4,427	4,231	4,210	3,940	3,903	15.9%	-0.9%	-11.8%
UMF	1,722	1,586	1,427	1,350	1,406	5.7%	4.1%	-18.4%
UMFK	1,166	1,061	896	915	887	3.6%	-3.1%	-23.9%
UMM	649	717	710	588	--	N/A	N/A	N/A
UMPI	1,298	1,490	1,673	2,392	3,425	13.9%	43.2%	163.9%
USM	6,673	6,058	5,616	5,407	5,363	21.8%	-0.8%	-19.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>25,964</b>	<b>25,169</b>	<b>23,964</b>	<b>23,686</b>	<b>24,598</b>	<b>60.9%</b>	<b>3.9%</b>	<b>-5.3%</b>

As you can see, total enrollment is up compared to 22-23 and 23-24 yet still trails the enrollment we saw in 20-21 and 21-22. Much of the growth overall is due to the University of Maine at Presque Isle's online competency-based YourPace program.

Just for comparison, I also pulled the UMS Academic Enrollment Report from 2020-2021 and as you can see, the overall student decline has been consistent since 2016-2017. It is this consistent decline that causes us concern about the free community college program, especially if the program contributes to further or steeper declines now or in the future.

**Table 3: Total Undergraduate Unduplicated Headcount by Campus (Excludes Early College)<sup>4</sup>**

Campus	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	% of Total	1-year Change	5-year Change
UM	10,007	10,034	10,061	10,064	10,029	38.6%	-0.3%	0.2%
UMA	5,318	4,872	4,833	4,779	4,427	17.1%	-7.4%	-16.8%
UMF	1,946	1,941	1,853	1,764	1,722	6.6%	-2.4%	-11.5%
UMFK	1,462	1,375	1,303	1,172	1,166	4.5%	-0.5%	-20.2%
UMM	869	832	787	715	649	2.5%	-9.2%	-25.3%
UMPI	1,229	1,246	1,186	1,172	1,298	5.0%	10.8%	5.6%
USM	7,149	7,103	7,227	6,999	6,673	25.7%	-4.7%	-6.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>27,980</b>	<b>27,403</b>	<b>27,250</b>	<b>26,665</b>	<b>25,964</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>-2.6%</b>	<b>-7.2%</b>

This bill can fix that. This bill can put the University of Maine campuses on an equal footing in the competition for students. And it targets the funding by prioritizing students eligible for federal Pell Grants. These grants are

<sup>3</sup> Please see: [Student Related Reports - University of Maine System](#)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*



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provided by the United States Department of Education and are based on size of family and income.<sup>5</sup> For example to qualify for a Pell Grant, a student in a family of four with two parents would need to make less than \$75,000 per year to qualify.

I would be remiss if I did not lift up the important role the University of Maine system plays in our public preK-12 public education system. We rely on the UMaine System to produce the lion's share of new teachers through the undergraduate educator preparation programs provided at UMaine-Farmington, the University of Southern Maine, and other campuses. These programs are invaluable especially in a time of workforce shortages. In addition, the UMaine System overall provides graduate programs and professional development opportunities to help current teachers improve their practice and earn graduate degrees. This graduate level work can help current teachers become leaders among their peers and bring new concepts and innovations to the public schools where they work. Institutions like the Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI) are invaluable to this Committee and the broader community of educators dedicated to successful public schools. Investing in the UMaine System is an investment in our public education system in more ways than one.

As the Brookings Institute declared in their study, public colleges and universities are the “workhorses of middle-class mobility.” We agree. And we can bring much needed economic development and growth to our state with a focus and emphasis on our four-year universities. This bill before you does just that. Through education, our state can grow and thrive.

Thank you for your attention and your service to the people of Maine. I will do my best to answer any questions you may have.

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<sup>5</sup> For a full accounting of Pell Grant eligibility, please see the FAFAS partners website on the US Dept of Education website found here: [2024-25 DRAFT SAI Guide - Eligibility for Max-or-Min Pell Grant Resource](#)