

Greetings, Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and the other members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. I am Michael Grillo, a History of Art professor at the University of Maine. I live in the town of Penobscot. I am here today to testify in support for LD 1219: An Act to Increase State Funding for the Campuses of the University of Maine System and to Raise the Minimum Hourly Wage for Employees of the UMSystem.

In a volatile period of federal research funding uncertainty, now is a particularly urgent time for the Legislature to support LD 1219. While I and my colleagues are very hopeful for the proposed four percent increase in the state appropriation to the University of Maine System budget, with persistent inflation coupled with the longer term erosion of Higher Education funding over the last several decades, the seven universities are losing their ability to fully meet the needs of Maine's students. Only through additional funding to the individual University of Maine System campuses can we meet their needs and our responsibilities to the state. Chronic underfunding has undermined our abilities to offer the highest quality education that our students deserve, the research opportunities which will prepare them to lead our state forwards in an increasingly competitive world, and the rich collaborations that we can build with community partners to further revitalize our towns and cities.

Through a long-term commitment to excellence, UMaine has earned its RI Carnegie Classification, identifying it as a national top-tier research institution. Substantial further investment is essential for us to maintain this most prestigious status, which helps draw the best and brightest to so many of our undergraduate and graduate programs. UMaine has embarked on a multi-year Strategic Re-envisioning Initiative as a commitment to using its funding efficiently and ensuring that higher education continues to evolve to meet the advancing needs of Maine.

While optimizing our resources positions us well for serving our students, it cannot compensate for long-term funding erosions, for as the renowned innovator Doug Hall notes, “You can’t cost-cut your way to greatness.” Only through robust support can we be fully competitive in attracting and retaining students, staff, and faculty, for other peer institutions typically offer better financial-aid packages, graduate stipends, and staff and faculty salaries.

The chronic underfunding of the university system campuses is evident in our inability to maintain many of our facilities. While UMaine has constructed several new facilities with welcome support from private funding foundations, other buildings slowly deteriorate, with inefficient and erratic heating, falling tiles and stained walls, mildew problems, etc., all of which undermine student, staff, and faculty recruitment and retention.

With increasing housing costs, several staff members have become homeless, couch-surfing with friends and living out of their cars. Over the past several decades, we have lost numerous essential positions to attrition with no replacements, whether in support positions or in the faculty. As our student enrolments begin to grow in these post-Covid years, we need rebuild our faculty and staff numbers lost through attritions so that we can best meet student needs.

For us to responsibly Fund Maine’s Future, we need additional state financial support that will go directly to each campus specifically to support excellent teaching, innovative research, and committed community development. If we are preparing our students for the current world only, we are failing them, for we need give them the education and experience to create new futures, as innovative leaders in their fields and in new fields unimaginable to us now but vital for the future. Cost-cutting may help temporarily balance budgets, but it makes it impossible for us to teach our students with the full range of knowledge that they will need to lead, that’s right, “dirigo”, to build our state’s future.