

Willow Cunningham
Orono
LD 1533

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

I am Willow Cunningham, a graduate research assistant at the University of Maine, Orono, and live on its campus. I am here today to testify in support of LD 1533, An Act to Ensure the Retention of R1 Research Institution Status by the University of Maine.

I have been at the University of Maine for five years now. I love the school dearly, and so when I was made aware of the opportunity to extend my undergraduate degree into a masters program I took it immediately. Since then, I have been working in the high performance computing lab of the electrical and computer engineering department. I have greatly enjoyed my research work at UMO, and plan to continue in academia by pursuing a PHD.

However, with the current state of funding at the University of Maine I am left with little choice but to look elsewhere. With the extremely limited pay I get, I have been biting into savings to cover my daily expenses like food and bicycle maintenance. I am lucky to be able to rely on wealthy grandparents who are willing to cover some expenses, but the vast majority of my colleagues do not share that privilege. This is not reasonable. I work for the school, I should not have to rely on donations to pay for my classes here - I should be paid enough to afford my job.

As I've hinted at here, I am not alone in this situation. Many of my colleagues are also planning to continue their education by pursuing a PHD, but few are seriously considering staying at UMO. How could we under these conditions? It is undignified. It should be obvious that this material reality that grad workers at UMO are struggling to afford to stay is bad for our school's R1 status.

I would love to do a PHD here at UMO. I would love to contribute to my field and my school's community, a community full of strong and intelligent grad workers that I have grown to value greatly. But it just isn't a financially wise decision. Please vote in support of LD 1533, a bill specifically designed to ameliorate this situation.