

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF LD 1533

My name is Suzanne Parish Gordon and live in Orono as a retired professor formerly employed at Husson University.

As a University of Maine graduate with a doctoral degree in higher education leadership, I wish to testify in support of LD 1533, An Act to Ensure the Retention of R1 Research Institution Status by the University of Maine.

As a University of Maine graduate with a doctoral degree in higher education leadership, I also wish to testify to the far-reaching benefits of UMaine's graduate education. As a graduate student who was already practicing physical therapy in Maine, I joined other healthcare practitioners who were also seeking research doctorates in order to meet criteria for educating in our respective professions. The time was in the early 2000s when educating more healthcare practitioners in-state was an exciting vision given that limited access to adequate healthcare in rural Maine was, in part, due to a lack of healthcare professionals living and working in rural communities. As future healthcare professors, we were excited to develop new programs that specifically targeted placements in rural Maine. I am proud to say that with my doctoral degree in higher education leadership, I was able to lead the development of a Doctor of Physical Therapy program in Maine during a time when there were few physical therapists practicing outside the Portland, Lewiston, and Bangor areas.

As I earned my doctoral degree, the unmet need for physical therapy, with its emphasis on independent functioning, was acute. Consequently, those who were most impaired, the elderly, children, and those with disabilities, were receiving inadequate physical therapy for learning and relearning functional skills. The program I developed at Husson University has produced over 500 licensed physical therapists with approximately 345 accepting jobs to practice within Maine. Even though not all 345 have remained in Maine, these are remarkable numbers indicating that over a twenty-five-year period, Maine's demand for this healthcare profession was acute enough to hire these graduates. While not a direct causative factor, attaining my degree led to the development of an educational program that then produced a contingent of Maine professionals who have contributed significantly to the well-being of Mainers, especially in our rural communities.

My story is similar to those leaders who developed Maine's other physical therapist and physical therapist assistant programs as well as other healthcare educational programs that have proliferated since the early 2000s. In today's healthcare world, most of us are aware that access to adequate healthcare in Maine is increasingly becoming limited as federal policy and resources are pulled from hospitals, healthcare clinics, schools, and nursing homes. The fact that so many rehabilitation professionals are working in Maine augers well for continued access to rehabilitation services despite these cuts. This is one example of how support for UMaine graduate students later benefits a wider population of Maine's residents. I urge you to continue your support for UMaine graduate students and their graduate programs through funding LD 1533 as well as LD 1219. Such support offers long-term benefits to Maine's workforce as well as its residents.

Submitted by Suzanne P Gordon on 4/24/2025