

Anne Marie Wolf
Farmington
LD 1219

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

My name is Anne Marie Wolf. I am a professor of history at the University of Maine – Farmington. I have taught at UMF for 15 years, and I live in Farmington. I am writing to testify in support of LD 1219, An Act to Increase State Funding for Campuses of the University of Maine System and Raise Minimum Wage for Employees of the System.

As you are likely aware, over the years, the state's contribution to the University of Maine's budget has decreased as a percentage of total expenses. This has led to ongoing and intensifying economic strain. I would like you to know how this affects faculty, staff, and students, based on what I have seen on my own campus.

For students, the lower state contribution means higher costs -- more loans to take out, more work hours, lost educational and professional opportunities. Many of my students are working so many hours per week that they cannot spend the amount of time on their studies that they really should in order to learn and develop their skills. Serious research, taking a paper through multiple stages of editing, reading a challenging text ... all of these things take time. Someone who is working full-time seeks shortcuts as a matter of survival so they can at least get some sleep. Even though I strive to keep my assigned books within a reasonable total cost, one that is actually less than I paid per class in college thirty years ago, every semester I have students who just can't afford to buy the books, even used books that they can get for minimal cost. We have a food donation box in our library so people can help students to eat regularly. This is not conducive to a quality education. The fact that so many of them spend their college years being flat-out exhausted due to working so many hours at a job also increases their anxiety levels, which will likely have long-term health consequences (which will cost the state money down the road).

It pains me to see students who could benefit from an unpaid internship opportunity unable to take it because they need to earn as much money as possible instead. In the long run, the internship would get them closer to career goals, but they have to think about next semester's tuition, not their long-term future.

For faculty and staff, the impact of this constant underfunding of the universities is also multi-faceted. Those on the lowest rungs of the pay scale are under strain to make ends meet in the midst of a growing cost of living. All of us, regardless of our roles at the university, are under constant threat of the next round of budget cuts, when we might lose our jobs. Predictably, this situation has led to serious morale problems, with people increasingly wondering whether it makes sense to invest our lives and souls into an institution where our jobs and entire programs might fold at any minute. As a result, people spend less time attending campus events that help build a vibrant community or spearheading new initiatives.

People whose responsibilities are already quite demanding are having to carve out time to learn new job skills on the side, just in case, or applying to other jobs. With a level of exhaustion similar to that of their students, they have less to give to their students and to the university. In recent years, UMF faculty agreed to change our 4-credit class system to a 3-credit one in order to eliminate perceived barriers for transfer students. Numbers of transfer students have indeed increased, but the change meant that we now teach four classes per semester instead of three, often four entirely different classes, which means significantly more class preparation work.

As a result of all this, we are losing extraordinarily dedicated and skilled colleagues as they find opportunities to use their skills elsewhere without the attendant strain of our budget woes and the low morale. Although some might rejoice at the loss of a budget line when these people leave, anyone familiar with what makes a university hum is

distressed at the loss of such people. We are losing great teachers, mentors, leaders, experts.

I know that the state faces economic challenges and the legislature will have difficult decisions about funding priorities. I urge you to support the state's university system, which provides a lifetime of benefits to students it serves, Maine's economy, and the communities surrounding the university campuses. The university system is one where the dollars you spend today will yield benefits for decades. It is time to shore up the finances of Maine's state university system.