

Ben Greenfield
Scarborough, ME
LD 1219

Dear Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs,
I am writing to respectfully urge the State of Maine to increase appropriations to the individual campuses of the University of Maine System (UMS). In particular, I strongly encourage the committee to support and advance LD 1219 S.P. 508, 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 System. More broadly, I ask the committee to prioritize increased funding for individual campuses of UMS to ensure the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of public higher education across the state.

I make my comments based on personal experience working in UMS. By way of background, I am an associate professor at the University of Southern Maine's Public Health Program. Insufficient funding impacts our students in multiple ways. In this role, I have witnessed firsthand the impact of inadequate funding on our students. I will focus on my own personal experience working with our students, by discussing two specific topics: 1. Student advising and 2. Professional and research opportunities for students.

I begin with student advising. The typical USM faculty member must do a very large amount of administrative work. Prior to working at USM, I was an employee of Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE), a USM peer institution in the Illinois state university system. At SIUE, my academic department had a staff member dedicated to processing administrative tasks, including travel expenses, equipment purchases and maintenance, facilities issues, and planning departmental and program events. Here at USM these and countless other responsibilities fall largely on the shoulders of university faculty. Of course we have dedicated, competent, and hardworking administrative staff who work on many things. But these staff have been cut down to the bone, and as a result are not available for many such tasks. Furthermore, USM departments typically do not have enough faculty – some of my peer departments have had only a single full time faculty member in recent years.

This lack of sufficient staff or support leaves individual faculty responsible for advising large numbers of students, and not having sufficient time to do so. I am currently formally responsible for advising 43 students. This is in addition to all my other responsibilities, such as teaching classes, serving on committees, scholarship, and academic administration. My advising load is typical; for some USM faculty it is much higher. With this number of students, and so many other responsibilities, it is not possible for me to give students nearly as much individual attention and guidance as I would like. I hope that my students know how much I care about them and want to help them. I try to keep an "open door policy." But some of my students struggle with finding the best opportunities, some face mental health challenges, challenges with insufficient educational preparation, or difficulties funding their education. Due to my extreme time demands, I do not have the time to really check in on these students and give them all the resources and time that they need. As a result, students get lost in the academic system, get delayed in their graduation, and in some cases do not complete their degrees.

As a second example, the opportunities for students to find professional and scholarly opportunities have been strongly impacted. A high-profile university like USM has access to great local talent, being in the Portland biotech, industrial, and hospitality hub. However, the university is essentially unable to support research and scholarship opportunities for students at a sufficient level. I will compare my previous work at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) to my current position at USM. At SIUE, faculty were encouraged to develop research and scholarship programs that employed and trained students. This included multiple internal programs to support faculty in generating extramurally funded research and scholarship. There was a

budget for faculty to have “start up” funds to develop their research programs. Indirect funds (the same topic of recent media attention) were all put back into supporting research infrastructure at the university. Importantly, there were also resources for students to travel to academic conferences, learn about current research trends, and present research findings. There were regularly organized internal programs to get students and faculty talking with each other about research. And there was administrative support for staff to assist with the many bureaucratic aspects of academic administration. As a result, most SIUE faculty were both active in research and successful in developing externally funded research programs. These programs provided ample opportunities for both undergraduate and graduate students to conduct practical applied learning by doing research and applied projects. The students were funded to do this, making the opportunities affordable for all kinds of students. There were even funded programs for K – 12 students to have authentic research experiences during summers. All of this became a driver for students from working class families and modest means to have the same economic opportunities across the state.

USM certainly tries to provide scholarly and research opportunities for our students. We have innovative programs like the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program and the annual Thinking Matters conference on campus. But because USM is so woefully underfunded, there are almost no funds to support the research or scholarly activities themselves. Each year we hear about the need to balance the budget, and all the work that administrators have to do to trim funds. The ongoing mismatch of funding with inflation is responsible for this. The outcome is that USM is not able to adequately fund the support for research that USM or the other Maine public universities need. There are not stable programs to support travel to research conferences, to introduce inexperienced students to research. There are no internal funding mechanisms to get faculty to build our laboratories and research programs, to start new studies, to write funding proposals, or to support our students with summer jobs or graduate assistantships. In fact, due to structural budget gaps, the university has been forced to lay off many of the key staff that support existing research infrastructure. Due to all of the above, our students get almost no exposure to the practical real-world experience that comes with developing or working on a research project. Recently I have had to turn away students seeking both research and internship opportunities in our department.

I am also deeply concerned about the broader context of recent decline in support for public education by the US federal government and Maine’s need to remain independent as a state, in line with the federalist principles of our founding fathers. Public education was once one of the drivers of opportunity and national success in the US and Maine. US presidents including Lyndon Johnson and Gerald Ford attended public universities. Other political figures who attended public universities include Mike Pence, Angus King, Tammy Baldwin, Nikki Haley, Bernie Sanders, Greg Abbot, Gretchen Whitmer, Mitch McConnell, and Olympia Snowe.

Over the past few decades, appropriations to UMS have not kept pace with inflation. As a result, the quality of the educational experience and opportunities for Maine’s students and populations has dramatically declined. One of the proud aspects of Maine is the common sense and good reasoning of our population. This can only be fostered by maintaining access to affordable and quality education for all Mainers who want it.

The recent provision of resources for recent high school graduates to enroll in Maine’s community colleges has been a hallmark of Maine’s dedication to supporting Mainers’ education and growth. But community colleges do not meet the needs of all students, and a four-year college degree leads to greater economic opportunities.

In summary, our state’s financial support for the University of Maine System has declined precipitously over decades and in recent years the state appropriation and tuition have not kept pace with inflation. This has left our campuses with horrible options, including underpaying staff, cutting programs, laying off employees, and cuts

through attrition. This needs to change. Please increase funding allocations for UMS, and please make sure this funding goes where it is needed (to directly support the individual campuses and their students). This would be a great and meaningful investment in Maine's future. Thank you for taking the time to read my letter, and please let me know if I can be of any assistance.

Respectfully Yours,
Ben Greenfield, PhD
Scarborough, Maine