

Rachel Hovel
AFUM
LD 1219

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

My name is Rachel Hovel, and I am an associate professor of biology at the University of Maine at Farmington. I live in New Vineyard, Maine. Thank you for considering my comments as you make decisions on the suite of bills before you.

I am writing today to support and share the importance of 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 System

Already, the students and staff of the System are experiencing the effects of underfunding, and this will be greatly exacerbated without urgent action to address deficits in public funding for this public asset. Yesterday, I attended a panel that a colleague organized at UMF, to bring recent alumni to campus to converse with our current students about their experiences of working in environmental fields. These recent graduates now work for non-profits, corporations, K-12 schools, and state agencies in Maine and New England. As these alumni described how they've launched their careers, each of them noted how they took advantage of key opportunities on campus to grow tangible skills sets and gain real experience that translated into successful job searches. They worked with campus programs like the Sustainable Campus Coalition and Mainely Outdoors, or utilized programs like Work Initiative Funding, which employs students on campus to work in positions directly related to their field of study.

Each of these programs has already experienced significant cuts, limiting the opportunities that we can offer students. For example, I offer a research assistant position every year on projects related to lake water quality and fisheries, and this experience has helped past students successfully apply to graduate programs, secure jobs with local land trusts and state agencies such as Maine DEP, and more. The number of these funded positions has declined, and this year it remains unclear if this program will be funded for the next academic year. It is also unclear if the staff position that supports the Sustainable Campus Coalition will be renewed in any capacity. Mainely Outdoors has lost the funding to hire multiple students to run programming. If University of Maine System does not receive the requested funding, it is likely that these programs will no longer exist at capacity next year, and we will no longer have these successful stories of our programs preparing our students for impactful work in our state and beyond. This anecdote of cuts to these programs has analogs across all other programs on our campus, and others across the system.

I want to stress that the proposed modest increase in state appropriates still represents an extremely lean degree of support for the System. Our campus and the System have experienced cuts in programs, staff, and faculty every year for the nearly 8 years that I have worked here. These have already affected student experiences, and now the only programs left to cut will have even more severe implications for student outcomes. Our students deserve education and experiences that will lead to their success after graduation. Our state deserves talented and motivated UMS graduates that will continue to innovate our role into the future. Appropriate funding for the University of Maine system is critical to our continued offering of strong programs that keep young people in the state and draw new talented people to our region.

Thank you for considering my comments, and the impact and importance of the University of Maine System and each of our unique campuses.