

MAINE MARITIME ACADEMY

A College of Engineering, Management, Science, and Transportation

Joint-Standing Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs

Testimony in Support of LD 1558, “Resolve, Establishing the Commission to Update Maine’s Public Policy on Higher Education”

Thursday, April 24, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and distinguished members of the Joint-Standing Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs, my name is Chace Jackson, and I serve as Maine Maritime Academy's Legislative Affairs Coordinator. Today I am expressing our support for LD 1558, “Resolve Establishing the Commission to Update Maine’s Public Policy on Higher Education”. As suggested by its title this bill would establish a Commission with a diverse range of stakeholders to assess challenges in Maine’s higher education environment. We would also like to thank Rep. Sargent for her leadership in fostering this discussion.

Established in 1941 and based in Castine, MMA is Maine's special-purpose college and in fact one of only six State Maritime Academies founded to play a vital role in our nation’s maritime interests and national security. We bridge this state's proud seafaring tradition with its storied role in American maritime history, training Maine students who become the finest mariners operating vessels all around the globe. In addition, we offer degrees in the fields of engineering, marine transportation, marine biology and oceanography, and international business and logistics. Our graduates are commonly recognized by industry employers as the best among all maritime academies. Many of our students are members of our Regiment of Midshipmen which is a rigorous course of military-style training, discipline and leadership. MMA prides itself as "Maine's Leadership College".

Our support of LD 1558 is meant to remain consistent with our enthusiastic support for LD 681, “An Act Regarding Public Higher Education Funding in the State”. Sponsored by Sen. Grohoski with Rep. Foster as lead-cosponsor, LD 681 is our greatest priority for the 132nd Legislature. The only caveat to our support for LD 1558 today is our hope that one bill not detract from the other. The second and lesser portion of LD 681 creates a similar working group to the Commission suggested by LD 1558. We think it is important that work move forward following the 1st Regular Session no matter the vehicle. We are encouraged to see the legislature acting creatively to address a broad spectrum of higher education challenges before the state and believe public higher education funding should loom large among them.

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To recap, LD 681 is about aligning Maine Maritime Academy's public funding with that of other higher education institutions in Maine and, more critically, with the nation's other State Maritime Academies (SMAs). Currently, Maine Maritime Academy is Maine's most expensive public higher education institution—an unfortunate distinction it also holds among SMAs. This funding disparity has made it harder for MMA to attract and retain students, especially when other maritime academies are more cost-competitive for Maine residents. LD 681 would incrementally bring us into funding alignment with other public higher education institutions in Maine, but more importantly closer to the nation's other SMAs. Because tuition alternatives at other SMAs are significantly less, Maine resident students often choose other SMAs over Maine Maritime Academy.

Despite these financial challenges, MMA continues to lead through innovation, collaboration, and investment. And to ensure long term sustainability and competitiveness while we work to increase our operational base, Maine Maritime Academy continues to collaborate with alumni, several industries, and the federal government to aggressively add new educational programs.

As such, we believe it is important that public higher education funding is increased within this legislative session *and* that a Commission like the one prescribed by either of these bills moves forward to discuss sustaining funding for Maine's public higher education institutions.

MMA's only other suggestion would be that a trustee from each of the three public higher education institutions, selected by each board, be added to LD 1558's Commission. These are important voices for helping the collective group understand the challenges faced by their systems, including long-term, sustainable funding.

We would like to once again thank Rep. Sargent and the Committee for their leadership and attention to these issues. We look forward to ongoing discussions with you around public higher education funding. Thank you for your time and consideration.