



Testimony in Opposition to LD 1118:

“An Act to Establish a Permanent Free Community College Program for Maine”

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and the distinguished members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Harris Van Pate, and I serve as policy analyst for Maine Policy Institute. Maine Policy is a free-market think tank, a nonpartisan, non-profit organization that advocates for individual liberty and economic freedom in Maine. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in opposition to LD 1118, “An Act to Establish a Permanent Free Community College Program for Maine.”

This bill would make the Maine Free Community College Program permanent, establishing a universal, tuition-free model for access to community college. It is funded by an ongoing appropriation of \$12.5 million per year from the General Fund—a \$25 million biennial commitment with no sunset clause or cost-containment mechanisms. While expanding access to postsecondary education is an admirable goal, this approach is fiscally irresponsible, economically inefficient, and structurally flawed.

No Income-Based Targeting: A Misallocation of Taxpayer Resources

LD 1118 establishes a program that is not means-tested. It offers free community college tuition and fees to all Mainers who meet minimal eligibility criteria, regardless of income level. This means that students from wealthy families will receive the same taxpayer-funded benefit as those from working-class backgrounds. By failing to prioritize students with the greatest financial need, the bill undermines both the efficiency and fairness of public spending. Maine’s limited resources should be reserved for policies that effectively combat the state’s public policy problems, not for subsidizing higher education for those who can already afford it.

No Long-Term Commitment to Maine: Incentivizing Transience

The bill only requires that recipients live in Maine while they are enrolled in community college. There are no residency requirements before enrollment and no obligations to remain in the state afterward. This opens the door for non-Mainers to move to Maine temporarily, receive years of publicly funded education, and then leave without ever making a contribution to the state’s economy or workforce. Maine’s taxpayers should not be asked to foot the bill for training workers who may immediately relocate to another state upon graduation.



The Program Is Not “Free” — It Is Taxpayer-Funded

Calling this initiative “free” is misleading. The costs are very real—borne not by institutions or the system itself, but by hardworking Mainers. The fiscal note confirms a \$12.5 million annual draw from the General Fund in perpetuity. That money could otherwise be directed toward infrastructure, public safety, or targeted workforce development efforts. Maine is already facing a revenue shortfall and is considering raising multiple new taxes to fund other programs like MaineCare. Instead of cutting spending, though, LD 1118 commits future legislatures to an open-ended entitlement with no guardrails for performance, accountability, or cost growth. The bill also does not require individuals to graduate from their degree program in order to receive taxpayer-subsidized tuition, showing minimal cost-benefit analysis in its current structuring.

One-Size-Fits-All Model Ignores Market Realities

Not all community college programs align with current labor market demands. A blanket subsidy for all programs, regardless of demand or job placement rates, risks channeling public money into low-return credentials. Policymakers should be encouraging students toward fields where there are apparent workforce shortages and economic opportunities. Some other states tie free community college to high-demand fields, like STEM, or only to those who graduated from an in-state high school.¹ Instead, this bill funds all programs equally, regardless of outcome or relevance to Maine’s economy.

Better Alternatives Exist

Rather than implementing a universal entitlement, Maine could adopt more innovative, targeted policies that leverage federal Pell Grants and existing financial aid. Many states that have implemented “free” college models require students to exhaust these aid sources first, and often limit eligibility based on income or field of study.² Maine should follow these best practices, not buck them.

Conclusion

In closing, LD 1118 is not the responsible path forward. It creates a costly and inequitable entitlement absent meaningful targeting, means testing or accountability.

¹ <https://scholarships360.org/college-admissions/are-community-colleges-free/>

² Id.



Maine deserves a higher education policy that strikes a balance between opportunity and fiscal discipline that maximizes returns for both taxpayers and students.

We urge the Committee to vote “Ought Not to Pass” on LD 1118. Thank you for your time and consideration.