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Dear Members of the Committee:

My name is Julie Swindler, and I am writing in strong support of continuing funding for the Free College Scholarship program at the Maine Community College System (MCCS) for graduates of Maine high schools.

This program is one of the most forward-thinking investments our state has made in its future. Continuing it is not simply about tuition assistance—it is about workforce development, economic stability, and the long-term prosperity of Maine.

\* Maine faces a well-documented demographic challenge: an aging population and the outmigration of young adults. The free community college program sends a powerful message to Maine students—you can build your future here.

When high school graduates know they can pursue higher education without incurring tuition costs, they are far more likely to remain in Maine. Keeping young people here strengthens our communities, sustains local businesses, supports our tax base, and ensures that the next generation of leaders, families, and entrepreneurs put down roots in our state rather than leaving to find opportunity elsewhere.

\* Maine's economy depends on skilled workers—electricians, plumbers, welders, mechanics, healthcare technicians, early childhood educators, and more. Employers across the state consistently report shortages in these essential trades and technical fields.

The Maine Community College System is uniquely positioned to meet this demand. Its programs are closely aligned with workforce needs and provide practical, hands-on training that prepares students for immediate employment. By continuing to fund free tuition, we remove a major barrier for students considering these high-demand, high-impact careers.

Investing in this program directly strengthens Maine's workforce pipeline and supports industries critical to our state's infrastructure, housing, healthcare system, and economic growth.

\* Student loan debt delays major life milestones—buying a home, starting a business, saving for retirement, or raising a family. When Maine students graduate debt-free or with significantly reduced financial burden, they are able to contribute more quickly and meaningfully to the state's economy.

Instead of sending earnings out of state in loan payments, graduates can:

Purchase homes in Maine communities

Support local businesses

Invest in vehicles, tools, and equipment

Start families and build roots here

Every dollar not spent on student debt is a dollar that circulates within Maine's economy. Continuing this program is not an expense—it is an economic multiplier.

\*Importantly, MCCS's expanded online offerings have made this opportunity accessible to students across our entire state. For many rural and working students, relocating or paying for room and board is simply not feasible.

The availability of high-quality online classes means students can remain in their home communities and transportation and housing costs are minimized.

This also opens the doors to those students with disabilities that would make living independently or in dorms very difficult.

By eliminating both tuition and many of the indirect costs associated with attending college, this program ensures equitable access for students regardless of geography or income.

The Free College Scholarship program is not merely a benefit for individual students—it is a strategic investment in Maine's long-term economic resilience. I respectfully urge you to continue funding this vital program. The return on investment—measured in skilled workers, thriving communities, and a stronger

Maine economy—is clear and compelling.