

Michelle Bourne
Auburn
LD 2212

I have seen firsthand how free college has changed students' lives. In my role at Central Maine Community College as a College Success Specialist for JMG, I work closely with students who often face significant financial barriers. For many of them, this opportunity is the difference between attending college and not going at all.

What stands out most is how deeply these students value the opportunity. They understand the privilege and responsibility that comes with it and, from what I've witnessed, often have a stronger awareness of the long-term financial implications than many of their peers. I have also seen a major impact on families who fall just above Pell eligibility. These are hardworking families who don't qualify for significant aid but still struggle with the cost of higher education. Removing the need for loans changes everything.

When the financial burden is lifted, students are more willing to take that next step — earning an associate degree, entering Maine's workforce, and building a future without starting adulthood in debt. This program is not a handout; it's a hand up.

On a personal level, my own family benefited from free college. As a two-income household — with one income coming from a small business — we would not have been able to afford tuition for both of our daughters. One attended University of Maine, while the other chose CMCC to save money. I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity they were given.

Every day, I see the ripple effect this has on students and their families. I've watched hundreds of Maine students gain confidence, access education, and step into the workforce with less financial stress. The impact is real, and it is lasting.