

2-18-2026

Senators Rotundo and Ingwersen, Representatives Gattine and Meyer and members of the Appropriations and Health and Human Services Committees,

My name is Michelle Hathaway and I am here to express support for allocation of funding to what has been referred to as “free college.”

I greatly appreciate the opportunity to speak in support of the continuation of free college within the Community College System. I would like to offer my perspective as a faculty member, as an employer, and as a parent of two children who have benefitted from accessing “free college” at Central Maine Community College.

First, as a faculty member of the Community College System, I see firsthand the students who are enrolling in our system. For some, they are financially responsible for any and all debt incurred in order to access higher education. This independence and responsibility has left them with little opportunity and tuition would be prohibitive on their very income. Free college allows them the chance to pursue their education, while working and paying the “typical” bills of a young adult- to include rent, car payments, phone bills, etc. Tuition would not be in the cards for many of these students.

Another group of students I encounter are the ones who have been accepted to a host of very expensive private colleges- and who are unable to or unwilling to take on tuition costs that may exceed 50-60,000 a year. These students are making the very wise choice to complete their associates degree at CM and then transferring to a school to complete their Bachelor’s degree, while saving a tremendous amount of money which they invest in their Bachelor’s degree, and for some, their graduate degrees. As we continue to arrange for and strengthen transfer agreements, a number of my students are choosing to stay within Maine to finish their Bachelor’s degrees- and then will be more likely to stay in-state and begin their careers post-graduation. This benefits us tremendously.

A third group I encounter are the children of first generation college students- who carry tremendous debt from their own college educations. Students willingly share that their own parents acquired over a \$100,000 of debt to pursue their own degrees- and continue to pay these loans off. This prohibits many of them from helping their own children, and to counsel them to avoid making the same financial decisions and mistakes they made. They are of the generation that was told a Bachelor’s degree is your ticket to financial independence- and that has not proven true for so many.

I would like to speak to you as an employer. In addition to my faculty work, I oversee about 550 clinical and educational staff throughout Maine. I cannot tell you the many employees I employ who have staggering student loan debt. I have staff entering entry level education jobs unable to purchase a home or even finance a new car, because

their debt to income ratio for students is too high. "Free" college was not an option for them- and because of this, many of them, also first-generation college students, took on far more debt than they should have in order to achieve their dreams of a diploma. While many remain in education, some leave the field to pursue employment in other sectors, purely for a higher paycheck. This factor is not unique to our schools, and has been a factor in declining enrollments in education and teacher prep programs across the country. We anticipate a shortage in the field as we face looming retirements are far fewer educators entering the field.

I am now the very proud employer of several dozen Community College graduates- and more than a handful of "free college" graduates. Many work full time with us and are pursuing their Bachelor's degree in a part time capacity. They fill very important roles in the education and human services sector- of which we currently have hundreds and hundreds of openings in across the State. We need these graduates in order to fill important vacancies in our systems.

Finally, I voice my support as a parent. As a first generation college student with parents who believed education was my path to financial stability, I was encouraged to take on significant student debt in order to complete my own degrees. Along with my husband, a public high school teacher, we chiseled away at student loans, finishing shortly after our oldest son completed his second year of college. Ironically, at that time, none of our student debt was factored into the FAFSA. Our high achieving, athletic student was offered scholarships- and still faced the cost of 30-40,000 a year to attend several private colleges in the State. A State University would have cost about 16,000 but would not have offered the smaller experience he would be more comfortable and successful in. CMCC was a perfect match for him- and he was a very successful student-athlete who graduated and will now complete his Bachelor's degree at a State University- as a more mature and confident student. Our second son experienced significant medical issues on his path to college- and CMCC became the only viable option for him as he lived at home, learning to manage a chronic and life threatening medical diagnosis. This too proved to be just what he needed in order to stabilize his medical challenges and to thrive in higher education. A very bumpy and tenuous road ended with his anticipated graduation in May. He too will go on to finish his Bachelor's degree in May. Both are debt free as they transfer into programs as Juniors/third year students.

Yes, financially, we could have afforded to pay for tuition at CMCC. Ironically, we paid off our own student loans as our oldest entered his final year at CMCC. Instead of "having to pay for CMCC", we began saving these former loan payments into an account for him to be put towards his Bachelor's degree, and then to my next son's and then to the third. We do not want our children to delay buying a home, as we had to, or to contemplate leaving education, as we had to. We want our children to pursue careers

they are passionate and skilled at, while also being able to afford to live independently and to remain in Maine where we have made our lifelong home. "Free college" is an investment into our future. Community Colleges like CMCC provide a wealth of programs that allow students to graduate and enter immediately into the work force, or to transfer into Bachelor's degrees programs, only then to have to take on necessary debt. The savings of two years in their quest for this diploma is significant, and for many, makes the difference in their ability to set such a goal.

As a faculty member, an employer, a parent and as a resident who believes in the importance of preparing for Maine's future, I am very much in support of the continuation of "free college" for Maine's students!

Thank you for considering this testimony, and for the work you have committed to do for our State.

Sincerely,

Michelle Hathaway, PsyD

CMCC Faculty/Senior Director of the Margaret Murphy Centers for Children

Invested Resident of Maine