

Senator Rotundo, Senator Rafferty, Representative Gattine and Representative Murphy, members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to speak today in support of the Maine Free College program.

My name is Celina Harrison, and I am an adjunct Mechanical engineering professor and a member of the Brunswick school board. I taught at the University of Southern Maine for ten years, and I have been teaching at Southern Maine Community College for the past five and a half years.

Throughout my teaching career at SMCC, I have been continually impressed by my students. They are inquisitive, thoughtful, engaged, and exceptionally capable.

Many of my students come into my classroom already knowing they want to pursue engineering, but they are often unsure what type of engineering they want to study or what distinguishes the different fields. Many have taken CAD or engineering courses in high school. They have competed on robotics teams and participated in other technical and engineering-focused activities. A bunch have 3D printers at home and some of them know more about car engines than I ever will.

They are smart, curious, and deeply interested in how the world works.

What is equally important to understand, however, is why many of these students are at SMCC.

I have found that a significant number of my students choose SMCC precisely because it is free or nearly free. They are not coming from affluent backgrounds. Many worked part-time jobs in high school and continue to work while attending college. They are balancing demanding coursework with the very real need to pay rent, buy food, maintain their vehicles, and support themselves or their families.

These students are not lacking ambition — they are navigating financial realities. Many of my students are able to pursue a college education only because it has been made financially accessible.

Even a modest increase in tuition or per-credit expenses could become a barrier. I fear that many of these talented, hardworking students would no longer be able to attend. I also fear that my students, who are delightful, engaged, intelligent, and genuinely passionate about engineering, may never have the opportunity to pursue engineering.

From my viewpoint in the classroom, I can tell you that these students are worth this small investment. They are motivated, capable, and ready to contribute to Maine's future.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
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