

Dear Members of the Appropriations & Financial Affairs Committee,

Today, in my office, an entire box of tissues was used.

Not because of winter illness, but because several students sat across from me and realized, in real time, that their plans for life after high school were no longer financially possible. As we reviewed their aid packages, calculated costs, and explored options, the same conclusion kept surfacing: without additional support, furthering their education was out of reach.

This reality stands in stark contrast to what I witnessed when the Maine Free College Scholarship was in place.

Since its implementation in 2022, the Maine Free College Scholarship has covered 100% of tuition and mandatory fees at our community colleges for Maine high school graduates. The impact across the Maine Community College System was immediate and measurable. Enrollment surged to record levels. More importantly, thousands of students, many of whom would not have otherwise enrolled, were able to take the next step in their education.

In my role as a school counselor working closely with students enrolled in Career and Technical Education programs, I see exactly who those students are.

They are not only students pursuing traditional academic majors and four-year colleges. They are highly motivated, skilled individuals pursuing credentials in nursing, emergency medical services, welding, electrical work, early childhood education, medical assisting, and advanced manufacturing.

For many of them, community college is not a stepping stone, it is the destination that leads directly to employment, certification, and economic stability. These are students choosing pathways that align directly with Maine's most urgent workforce needs.

The Free College Scholarship made those pathways viable.

Allowing this program to lapse for the Class of 2026 has created an immediate and visible impact. I am seeing it firsthand in my office, in the form of students reconsidering their futures, delaying their plans, or abandoning them altogether.

This is not a theoretical policy discussion. It is a present and personal reality for the students I serve.

From an appropriations perspective, this program represents a relatively modest investment within the context of the overall state budget. However, the return on that investment is substantial—not only in economic terms, but in human terms. When we fund

this program, we are not simply covering tuition; we are removing a barrier that prevents capable, motivated students from contributing to our state.

When we do not fund it, the cost is borne elsewhere, in workforce shortages, in reduced economic mobility, and in lost potential.

Maine took a bold and effective step in creating a tuition-free community college pathway. Choosing not to sustain it places us in the position of having proven what works, and then walking away from it.

I urge you, as you make critical appropriations decisions, to fully fund and reinstate the Maine Free College Scholarship.

Because no student should have to sit across from a counselor and grieve a future they worked hard to build, and no state can afford to push away the very people it is depending on to build its future.

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