



Maine Community College System

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

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TO: Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and the
Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
FROM: David Daigler, President
RE: Statement on LD 512, *An Act to Promote Student Enrollment and Degree Completion in the University of Maine System by Providing Tuition Waivers to Eligible Students*
DATE: March 6, 2023

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. Please accept this statement on LD 512, *An Act to Promote Student Enrollment and Degree Completion in the University of Maine System by Providing Tuition Waivers to Eligible Students* on behalf of the Maine Community College System.

First, I want to be perfectly clear, reducing the cost of going to college is always a good idea.

Since this bill is clearly modeled on the Free College Scholarship at Maine's community colleges, I wanted to provide the committee with some context and data about the Free College Scholarship to assist with your deliberations.

When Governor Mills contacted us last year and asked how we could help inspire the pandemic-affected high school students to come back to higher education, we worked with her administration and the legislature to design a program that could help meet our shared goals. We believe the program we designed together is working.

I have listened to the Chancellor and Vice Chancellor Low discuss the challenges facing the University in recruitment including a crumbling infrastructure, more direct competition from other state's public institutions and the demographic challenges we all face. They, like us, need your support and partnership if we intend to keep our young people in the state and build the skills our residents need to have fulfilling careers.

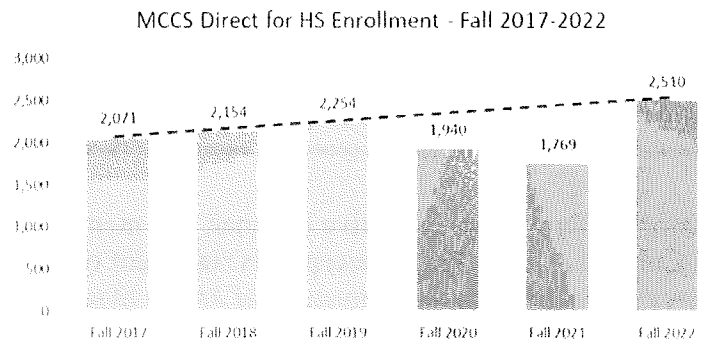
There has been a lot of talk about how Free College has impacted the University's enrollment. I understand why. People see enrollment drops at one institution and increases at another and correlate the impact. As we all learned in school, however, correlation is not causation. We challenge the idea that the Free College Scholarship is responsible for drawing large numbers of students away from their intent to enroll at UMS.

Enrollment data at the two institutions does not support that idea. Comparing data in the recent Press Herald story, overall MCCS Fall 2022 enrollment increased by 129 students when compared to the Fall 2018 (The article cites MCCS fall 2018 enrollment of 16,662 and fall 2022 enrollment of 16,791 students).

However, the story did not include comparative UMS data: The university’s overall undergraduate enrollment over the same period dropped 2,665 students. The Free College Scholarship has had a modest impact on UMS enrollment, at best.

If you drill deeper into the data, you will find that Maine’s community colleges consistently attracted 25 percent of Maine high school graduates between 2018 and 2020, the most recent years available. Over that same period, UMS saw its share of Maine high school graduates drop from 24 percent to 21 percent.

It’s often said in Maine that college enrollment is going down because there are fewer high school graduates in Maine, but the larger issue is that the *percentage* of those graduates going on to higher education. According to data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC), the percentage of Maine high school graduates going to college declined from 63% in 2015 to 54% in 2021.



Nationwide undergraduate enrollment fell 4 percent last fall, according to the NSCRC. Left unchecked, Maine would have seen another 1,200 students opt out of higher education (4% of the collective enrollments of MCCS, UMS and MMA.) That should be alarming to members of the Education Committee. I think we will all agree that the short- and long-term impact of that would have been devastating for Maine’s youngest citizens and for Maine businesses.

Let me share some more detailed data on the Free College scholarship students.

A total of 5,574 Free College students enrolled last fall, with 3,093 students from the Classes of 2020 and 2021, so they weren’t even the most recent class high school graduates. Of those, 750 had never enrolled in any college ever before – meaning they had already passed on going to college and were spurred to return by the scholarship. Those students – whose educational paths were disrupted – were *exactly* the students this scholarship was intended to attract. They weren’t going to UMS, or anywhere. That’s a huge win for our state. As for the remaining students, MCCS enrolled 2,481 students from the Class of 2022, up about 280 students from our pre-pandemic norm of 2,200 direct-from-high-school students. Again, that figure – 280 additional students – isn’t enough to have an impact on the University of Maine Systems undergraduate enrollment of 20,004 students.

Head-to-head comparisons at nearby colleges is another way to gauge the impact of Free College, since it’s reasonable to assume price sensitive high school graduates in the area are most likely to take advantage of a free tuition offer and would choose a local college to save on housing expenses. The comparison of Northern Maine Community College (NMCC) and University of Maine Presque Isle (UMPI) - just 2.5 miles apart – runs counter to the narrative that Free College affected UMS enrollment. Last fall, NMCC had the biggest enrollment increase of any community college – up 31 percent. Down the road, UMPI was the *only* UMS college to have an increase in undergraduate students, by 13 percent. The other UMS colleges saw enrollment declines of between 3 and 18 percent¹.

Students have always regularly applied to multiple colleges, get accepted at multiple colleges, then make a choice about where to go – and how much it costs is a key part of that decision making process for

¹ Student Related Reports - University of Maine System

students and parents. With full-time tuition and fees costing about \$3,800 – or less than half the cost of any of Maine’s public universities, Maine’s community colleges, especially with the valued and important block transfer agreement with the university, has always been a smart, affordable start to a four-year degree.

Still, for many students, starting their college career at one of the University of Maine System’s universities may be their best choice. It is our hope that you will work with the University to assure that cost is not a roadblock to their decision.