

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, Members of the Educational and Cultural Affairs Committee

RE: LD 2166 An Act to Establish a Grant Program to Increase Postsecondary Educational Opportunities for Students with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities or Autism Spectrum Disorder

Good Afternoon. My name is Jen Greslick, and I live in Windham. I am the mother of 3 children, the eldest of whom is 25 and has Down syndrome. I am the President of the Maine Down Syndrome Network, a support group for Mainers with Down syndrome, their families and communities. And last but not least, I am the Program Manager for the newly formed Integrated Studies Program at St. Joseph's College of Maine. Integrated Studies is Maine's first fully inclusive, college-based, postsecondary program for students with intellectual disability who have finished their K-12 education with a certificate or diploma and wish to continue their education in a college setting. . Integrated Studies is modeled after several successful programs, including one at our sister Mercy institution, Gwynedd Mercy University in Pennsylvania. Our Integrated Studies Program is currently in it's pilot year, with one student. We have opened applications for a larger cohort of up to 5 students for next fall. Integrated Studies is a two-year certificate program. Students who are accepted design, with the help of their team, their own personalized, Student Centered Plan, setting goals for academics, independent living, self-advocacy, and employment. Data gathered by Think College, the National Coordination, Technical Assistance and Resource Center for Postsecondary Education for People with Intellectual Disabilities tells us that in the US, approximately 17% of Adults with Intellectual Disability are employed. After attending a program like Integrated Studies, this figure goes up to 48%. These programs work. St. Joseph's is excited to be the first to offer this type of program in the state of Maine, but we don't want to be the only one. Startup costs for these programs are not astronomical, but any costs, added to the risk of starting a new program, can be a barrier. Colleges need support.

As I've talked with people about our program - and these are students, parents, teachers, case managers, administrators - I hear from virtually every one - "Oh thank goodness! We need more opportunities for this population." It doesn't seem extreme to say that nearly all are in complete agreement. I hear interest and excitement. I also hear that cost is an issue. St. Joe's is a Comprehensive Postsecondary & Transition Program, approved by the Department of Education. This means that students can fill out a FAFSA form and are eligible for Federal Grants as well as Federal Work Study. They are NOT however eligible for loans, as they are not in a degree seeking program. Consequently, while this aid helps, it is not enough. Parents are looking everywhere for help, and while scholarships are growing, they are still limited, especially in a state where these programs are new. Students and Families need support.

I strongly urge the committee to support our institutes of higher education and our students with intellectual disability by supporting LD 2166.

Thank you for your time and your consideration.

Jen Greslick