

**Testimony from Mercedes Pour, EdD, Director of College Access & Secondary Partnerships,  
Maine Community College System**

**To the Joint Standing Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs  
and Education and Cultural Affairs**

**In Support of L.D. 210**

**An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other  
Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the  
Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending  
June 30, 2025, June 30, 2026 and June 30, 2027 (A-132 through A-134 and language EEEE)**

**February 7, 2025**

Senator Rotundo, Senator Rafferty, Representative Gattine, Representative Murphy, and Members of the Joint Standing Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Mercedes Pour of Pownal, Maine. I am here to testify in support of the portion of LD210 that funds the Maine Free College Program and general operating costs at the Maine Community College System.

For the past ten years, I've been honored to serve Maine's Community Colleges as our Director of College Access & Secondary Partnerships, which means that I often work in the space between our colleges and our potential students. With that perspective, I must say that the past four years of Free College have changed the college conversation in Maine. Unfortunately, that conversation can still have an aura of privilege to it, and young people today are bombarded by conflicting messages about the danger of college debt, the lure of high wages in entry-level jobs, or the dubious ROI of a college education. Free College has allowed our staff, our high school and CTE colleagues, and other partners to remove all that noise from the conversation and instead focus on individual students – whose career aspirations may range from welding to nursing to law enforcement and beyond. College is not a necessary path for everyone, but Free College has made those aspirations a tangible reality for more Maine students. For the impact of program goes far beyond the number of students who actually receive Free College funding from the state.

Indeed, our colleges have seen a return of young men. There is renewed interest in our skilled and technical trades. And we have more transfer-bound students who now have an affordable path to a four-year degree.

Free college has given these students an option that had not previously – for a wide variety of reasons – been on the table. Schools and CTE's repeatedly ask me about the future of free college because they have seen - and hopefully you'll hear such testimony today - how this opportunity has changed individual lives in the state of Maine. The individual stories are powerful and moving, but, at the same time, we have to be able to see the statewide, structural

impact of this program. Over 30 states now offer some version of a free college program, and what I love about that list of states is that there is no red or blue pattern to it. States do this because the outcomes are good not just for individuals but for entire states.

We are community colleges. Our faculty and staff live and work here. Our programs align to the needs of Maine's economy and people. And our students leave us prepared to work, serve, and contribute in their local communities. Fully supporting Free College and the Maine Community College System is investing not just in our individual citizens but in the future of our state. Thank you for your consideration and your public service.