

**Gabriel Despradal, University of Maine at Augusta Student (Auburn)**  
**Testimony in Support of Funding in the FY26-27 Biennial Budget**  
**for the University of Maine System (LD 210, Page A-636)**

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Senators Rotundo and Rafferty, Representatives Gattine and Murphy, and members of the Appropriations and Education Committees. Before I begin my remarks, I would like to sincerely thank you for allowing me to speak at your meeting today to advocate for the proposed budget increase for the University of Maine System.

My name is Gabriel Despradel. I am from Auburn and a first-year architecture student at the University of Maine at Augusta. I have chosen to become an architect because I want to positively impact my community through good design, and hopefully support the development of much-needed community spaces and affordable homes across Maine.

My journey into higher education started my junior year of high school when I decided to take an early college course through UMA. Thanks to the early college program, I graduated with over 20 college credits and then took advantage of the free community college program to finish my associate degree. But I knew I needed to earn a bachelor's degree to get a rewarding, good-paying job and make the most positive impact I could on my community.

When it came time to choose an undergraduate program, I decided to continue my education in architecture at the University of Maine at Augusta. I chose UMA because it was the most cost-efficient option for me. As a student who is getting no outside help with their tuition, the price per semester was a big determinant for me when choosing my undergraduate program. In full transparency, my cost as an in-state architecture student per semester has averaged \$5,000-\$6,000. This is a vast difference from other institutions that I applied to in the Northeast that were averaging between \$10,000 per semester all the way to \$15,000 per semester. Staying in the state has allowed me to keep my loan amounts low and continue working part-time to pay my way through school.

But cost wasn't the only factor that made me choose UMA. UMA is the only public institution north of Boston offering an accredited undergraduate architecture program, and its small, collaborative, hands-on approach has allowed me to make very close connections with my

peers in the program, as well as connect with faculty on a personal level not typically seen at other big institutions. For being a comparatively small program, I have had the privilege to be taught by well-qualified professors who have had decades of work experience in the field, as well as educational experience from some of the top design programs across the country.

As I have stated before, I am here testifying in support of the increase proposed for the University of Maine System in the State budget. Now more than ever, it is imperative that we have an educated workforce. As a student at UMA, I have had the privilege not just to meet peers my age but working adults who are looking to make changes in their lives to have a better career and opportunities for their families and using this highly affordable program as a means to do so.

In my personal opinion, education is a public good, and should always be accessible. This increase in the budget to pay for our incredible faculty and staff, help improve our aging facilities, and keep tuition costs low and fund more financial aid for those who need it most is another step in the right direction to produce more highly skilled and specialized workers and reinvigorate Maine's economy. I hope one day to see Maine **embrace education as a means to keep its young population within the state** and make all the public universities across the state tuition-free, like it has done with the community colleges and like other states such as New Mexico and New York have done with four-year universities.

Thank you all again for giving me the opportunity to speak with you about my experience at UMA and how its affordability has made my higher education journey possible. I hope you can continue funding the public university system so more individuals can pursue their career dreams through accessible higher education and contribute to making Maine a more prosperous state through a stronger workforce and communities.

I would be delighted to answer any questions you may have.