



University of Maine System Testimony In Support of LD 700, An Act to Promote Student Enrollment and Degree Completion in the University of Maine System by Awarding Waivers of Tuition and Fees to Eligible Students — Presented by UMS Chief External & Governmental Affairs Officer Samantha Warren — March 17, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs: My name is Sam Warren and I am the Chief External & Governmental Affairs Officer for the University of Maine System (UMS) and an alumna of the University of Maine at Farmington and the University of Maine.

Our System supports State investments that expand postsecondary education access and affordability.

We are proud that **Maine's public universities are the most affordable in New England**, with the University of Maine's credit hour cost 38.5% less than the average of other flagships in the region. We know our affordability is essential to students enrolling, staying on track to timely degree completion, and living and working in Maine after graduation, including in rural regions of the state and in fields like teaching and social work where higher levels of debt would be difficult to discharge.

As you heard from Chancellor Malloy during his State of UMS address last week, in 2017, the University of Maine at Presque Isle launched the state's first "free college" program. Today, all of our universities offer some form of tuition promise that is focused on Maine students with financial need and not directly subsidized by the State. As a result, last year, **30% of all Maine undergraduates — more than 4,100 students — paid nothing out-of-pocket to attend Maine's public universities.**

Because they are self-funded, eligibility requirements for these programs are set by each UMS university and vary across our System. At all UMS undergraduate universities, these so-called promise programs are last-dollar, meaning our public institutions waive the balance of tuition and mandatory fees costs that remain after all other need-based financial aid for which the student is eligible is applied, including scholarships, grants, and waivers.

At most, but not all, UMS universities, the tuition/fee guarantee is extended to students eligible for need-based federal Pell grants, which now more than half of our System's undergraduate students qualify for — a record. For example, the University of Maine at Augusta's *Pine Tree Pledge* is for Pell-eligible, full-time Maine undergraduate students who enroll in at least 24 credits per year and maintain a 2.5 grade point average (GPA), including those who are pursuing postsecondary education for the first time or those who are transferring into our System with at least 30 credits. Because of its affordability and the expansiveness of the pledge's eligibility requirements, more than 40% of Maine undergraduate students pay zero tuition and mandatory fees to attend UMA.

Meanwhile, the University of Southern Maine's *Promise Scholarship* is for just 100 Maine full-time undergraduate students with financial need (though not necessarily demonstrated by Pell eligibility). Recipients must have a commitment to civic engagement and/or community service and have been nominated by a youth-serving organization, community program, or school counselor. Largely funded by philanthropy, the scholarship covers tuition, mandatory fees, and room and board with preference given to those who are the first in their families to attend higher education. 88% of Promise Scholars graduate with no student debt.

LD 700 would provide State support to sustain our existing Pell promise programs and expand eligibility consistently across all undergraduate UMS universities. This would enable our System to better collectively market this commitment to first-time Maine students with financial need and to repurpose the internal funds previously supporting these scholarships to benefit other learners.

Based on FY25 enrollment and tuition rates, the amount of State appropriation needed to serve the Pell-eligible, first-time, full-time Maine undergraduate students included in the bill would be approximately \$2.8 million. If LD 700 was expanded to also assist transfer students, including Maine adults who are returning to complete their door-opening degree, it would require approximately \$4.2 million annually, and if part-time students were additionally eligible, the cost would be approximately \$4.8 million.

Maine's most proven path to upward mobility is a four-year degree from our public universities. Our alumni earn more than double the state's average median income, consistent with national data that show bachelor's degree holders have higher earnings and higher rates of employment than those with an associate degree or less. They also meet Maine's growing need for a more educated and skilled workforce. For example, our System is the state's largest producer of nurses and there is a growing body of evidence that demonstrates patients in hospitals with a higher proportion of nurses with a bachelor of science in nursing (BSN) have better outcomes, including lower odds of mortality and better care and patient safety.

State appropriation for our public universities to sustain our operations and support scholarships for those with the greatest financial need like LD 700 proposes is the surest way to promote student access and achievement, strong communities, and a competitive Maine workforce and economy.

Thank you for your ongoing support of the University of Maine System and I welcome your questions.