



**Trustee Mark Gardner**

**Testimony in Support of LD 681, "An Act Regarding Public Higher Education Funding in the State"**

Good afternoon, Chairman Murphy and distinguished members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. It is my honor to submit this written testimony in support of LD 681, addressing public higher education funding in our state. I am proud to be a current Trustee of Maine Maritime Academy, having been appointed by Governor Mills in early 2024.

Prior to my appointment, I served for ten years as a trustee at the University of Maine System, most recently as its Chair. In my professional life, I had the honor of a nearly four-decade career at Sappi North America with my final twelve years as CEO. I offer this experience to you, as a Mainer and someone dedicated to industry and education in the State. I have been fortunate to witness firsthand what an academic foundation will offer the young people of our state, and how our state industries and companies benefit from higher education in Maine.

Much national conversation has been dedicated to the state, and expense of higher education. In Maine, we are proud to boast a strong system of public education offering a plethora of opportunity from medicine, to engineering, teaching to law. And, within that offering and unique to Maine, is our maritime presence.

As you have heard from others, Maine Maritime Academy is a unique engine in the state of Maine offering students the ability to truly impact their family's future with education, certification and high-paying job placement directly following graduation with Coast Guard license in-hand. For students who chose a field of study outside of the regimental program – International Business and Logistics or Marine Sciences – opportunities are equally as robust with required co-ops and research buoying their marketability.

The current discussion around the maritime industry on the national stage is robust. Our Academy is one of a small handful of institutions offering the life altering academic programs that result in the hands-on training, discipline and leadership of this kind. Nestled on the Blue Hill Peninsula, our students have better access to the water for both recreation and course study than

any other State Maritime Academy. Our sailing team routinely ranks among the top national teams.

However, with all of this success, Maine Maritime Academy faces real and significant funding challenges. Having sat in the Chairman's seat at another state system, I can tell you, I was astounded to learn what the state funding disparities are at Maine Maritime. For a program that contributes so significantly to our state both in upward mobility for young people, national notoriety for Maine and contribution to the maritime industry that has significant human capital needs, my hope is that we can do better.

During my tenure at Sappi, I was pleased to employ countless Academy alumni. To a person they were disciplined workers, knowledgeable and dedicated. They cared about staying in Maine, and contributing to the economy. The majority of the power and high pressure boiler operators in Sappi are MMA graduates as is the case in most Maine power station operators. This is a crucial resource for us to maintain in a state that struggles to maintain a trained workforce.

Maine Maritime Academy's graduates leave making impressive salaries, however, our students very rarely come from affluent families. Therefore, the cost of education is a true burden for our students and their families. MMA cannot be in a place where they must balance their budget on the backs of their students.

By no means am I suggesting a reduction of funding for any other state system in Maine. However, what I am hopeful for is a path of collaboration with the state to acknowledge and address the incredible disparity that exists between Maine Maritime Academy's state support of just more than 23% of their annual budget and the two other state systems where the minimum is currently at 39%. This highly specified and unique academic experience cannot be replicated for less, and it deserves our attention before it truly becomes unattainable for our students and their families to attend, and not possible for the Academy to support.

Thank you, Senator Grohoski and Representative Foster, for your diligent care and attention to this crucial academic issue. I would be happy to answer any questions.

Sincerely,  
Mark Gardner  
*Trustee, Maine Maritime Academy*  
*Former CEO Sappi International;*  
*Former Chairman of the Board, University of Maine System*