



# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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**Rep. Steven D. Foster**  
**Testimony to the Education & Cultural Affairs Committee**  
**In Support of LD 681, "An Act Regarding Public Higher Education Funding in the State"**

**Thursday, April 3, 2025**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and members of the Education & Cultural Affairs Committee. I'm Steve Foster, Representative for House District 32, serving Charleston, Dexter, Exeter, Garland, Stetson, and a part of Bradford, and am here in support of LD 681, "An Act Regarding Public Higher Education Funding in the State". As a graduate of Maine Maritime Academy, Class of 1978, I am proud to be this bill's lead cosponsor. This legislation is based on the consensus agreement that had near unanimity last year during committee discussions of LD 2092, a similar bill Senator Grohoski and I worked together on.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today about why I believe the Legislature must do more to make Maine Maritime Academy (MMA) an accessible and competitive option for our students—particularly those considering careers in maritime industries or engineering. Too often, we see talented young Mainers drawn away by out-of-state institutions. We must take action to ensure that MMA remains an attractive and well-supported option.

I can personally attest that Maine Maritime Academy (MMA) fully prepared me for a fulfilling and rewarding career, equipping me and my classmates with the leadership skills, ingenuity, integrity, and work ethic that was cultivated during our time in Castine. Upon graduating from MMA, I had the opportunity to choose from six job offers and embarked on a 19 year career as a Merchant Marine engineering officer. This career allowed my wife and me to remain in Maine, raising our children near our hometowns and families, while earning a living that many Maine students can often only achieve by relocating out of state. Notably, job placement for the Class of '78 exceeded 100% within 60 days of graduation. Similar success rates continue to this day.

My second career began when I transitioned my skillset to Sappi's Skowhegan Pulp and Paper Mill, where I took on a role in Maintenance Management. As the first MMA graduate to be assigned to the paper machine area directly from a seafaring background, my MMA education and leadership experiences allowed me to advance during my 19-years at Sappi, serving my last 12 as Paper Mill Maintenance Manager, reporting to the Head of Engineering and Maintenance.

This journey, which began in August of 1974, enabled me to see the world, return home to raise my family, and give back to my community. This is the kind of future I want to ensure for as many Maine students as possible, providing them with the opportunity to develop leadership, secure well-paying careers, and contribute meaningfully to their communities across our state.

MMA has consistently demonstrated its value, providing one of the highest returns on investment among small colleges nationwide. According to the most recent U.S. Department of Education data, MMA graduates who received federal student aid earn a median annual salary of over \$85,000 just ten years after beginning their studies—more than double the statewide average and significantly higher than any other public college or university in Maine. This is a testament to the academy's effectiveness in preparing students for high-paying, in-demand careers.

Despite these undeniable benefits, Maine continues to underfund MMA, failing to adequately invest in an institution that provides such a strong return on investment for both students and the state. Massachusetts Maritime Academy aggressively recruits Maine students, offering competitive funding and incentives that we simply cannot match under the current funding model. This is opposite of how things were not many years ago, when MMA classes always included several out of state students, many of whom ended up as Maine residents. We must take action to level the playing field and reverse this trend.

Currently, Maine Maritime Academy receives 23% of its operational budget from state support, while Maine's other public higher education systems average much higher. Meanwhile, its competitor state maritime academies can count on their host state's providing sometimes upwards of 50% of their operating costs. This disparity is unacceptably wide. For instance, Mass Maritime receives 40% of its operational funding from the state of Massachusetts, putting MMA at a distinct disadvantage in attracting and retaining students. We cannot allow this imbalance to persist.

The reasonable, measured, incremental gains for operational costs realized by MMA in LD 681 are a smart way to close the funding disparity and create equity between

our three important systems of public higher education. Once we right the ship, I know MMA will out compete any other maritime academy in the nation.

This legislation has broad, bipartisan support because the benefits of MMA's success extend across industries and communities. Leaders from Maine's construction, shipyard, and engineering sectors, as well as representatives from the state's largest public-employee union, all recognize the economic and workforce development value MMA provides. Republican and Democrat cosponsors alike support this initiative, and I hope you will as well. Addressing the funding disparity among our state's higher education institutions is a necessary step to ensuring MMA continues to serve as a cornerstone of Maine's workforce development strategy.

I would be happy to answer any questions and to work alongside the Committee to make meaningful progress toward funding parity for MMA. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted,  
Steve Foster  
State Representative