



**University of Maine System Testimony in Support
of LD 1533, *An Act to Ensure the Retention of R1 Research Institution
Status by the University of Maine* — Presented by UMS Chief External &
Governmental Affairs Officer Samantha Warren — April 24, 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 a former University of Maine graduate student teaching assistant.

Our System supports investments that advance our ability to serve our students and the state, including through the world-class, learner-centered research enterprise at UMaine.

From its founding as Maine's land-grant institution in 1865, our flagship has had a unique statewide responsibility to advance practical education, research, and extension that is accessible and benefits the people of Maine. Despite being underfunded compared to peer research institutions nationwide, **UMaine is delivering for Maine**, leveraging State support for its research and development (R&D) activities (through the Maine Economic Improvement Fund) at a rate of nearly 8:1 in FY24 and securing a record \$225.3 million in external grants and contracts. In 2022, **UMaine ascended to the highest tier of America's research universities, sending a strong message to the world about Maine's excellence and catalyzing a 52% increase in annual research investment to our state.** Thanks in part to ongoing appropriations from the Legislature and the dedication and discoveries of our innovative Black Bear researchers, this past February, that prestigious R1 designation was reaffirmed by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education — a point of pride for all Mainers.

The graduate teaching and research assistants who are the focus of the bill are central to that cutting-edge R&D enterprise. Indeed, many of them choose UMaine specifically to participate in the distinctive research enterprise here. You may be aware that these student workers recently unionized and we are currently negotiating an initial contract that is responsive to their important requests and the operational needs and resource realities of our public institutions. This current academic year, UMaine enrolled 3,261 graduate students — 806 of whom were appointed to paid assistantships, which provide stipends, tuition waivers, and healthcare benefits in exchange for teaching undergraduate students and participating in research.

Paid student researchers work together with faculty and staff to solve problems and create opportunities to better the lives and livelihoods of people in Maine and beyond. Their activities directly drive the growth and competitiveness of every economic sector in the state, bringing innovative technologies and processes to our iconic heritage industries that increase farming, fishing, and forestry productivity and profits, and helping the state

accelerate the development of emerging sectors of strength, including in life sciences and advanced manufacturing. By engaging in hands-on research learning experiences and then applying their research for real-world solutions, graduate students (as well as undergraduates) increase the statewide impact of UMaine R&D today and develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities to inquire, innovate, and lead in the Maine workforce of tomorrow. **Given that Ph.D. production is a determinant of Carnegie Classification, a strong pipeline of master's and doctoral students is also essential for UMaine to maintain R1 status and the far-reaching benefits that designation is bringing to our entire System and state.**

Yet our ability to sustain and strengthen these mission-critical work opportunities is increasingly uncertain. **Paid graduate teaching and research assistantships are subsidized through UMaine's share of the System's State appropriation, which was recently held flat by the Legislature in the FY26-27 continuing services budget, and by federal grants and contracts, tens of millions of dollars of which have been paused or even terminated** in the past three months. For this reason, UMaine recently paused making new graduate student financial offers, including assistantships, for the 2025-26 academic year, though we are cautiously making additional offers on a rolling basis as resources are identified.

Targeted State appropriations, as proposed by LD 1533, to stabilize graduate assistantship opportunities are welcomed, provided they are supplemental to our System's primary funding priorities this legislative session, both of which are essential to UMaine R&D enterprise and the wages and working conditions of graduate assistants. **Sustaining the 4% operational increases proposed for UMS in the Governor's biennial budget and endorsed by a bipartisan majority of this Committee is critically necessary to our System's ability to maintain tuition affordability and meet compensation obligations to our valued employees, including student workers.** Similarly, investing to improve our statewide infrastructure, as proposed by the bipartisan bond LD 1014 (sponsored by Sen. Teresa Pierce), is essential to addressing \$1.8 billion in Systemwide deferred maintenance and imminent need, including to modernize mechanical systems and building envelopes at UMaine — the current condition of which limits research productivity and student progress toward their degrees and solutions for our state.

We appreciate the opportunity to recognize the incredible contributions of our graduate students in today's hearing. Thank you for your commitment to ensuring our flagship maintains its important R1 status and can best serve students, the state, and science. I welcome your questions.