

**University of Maine System Testimony In Support of
*LD 2099, An Act to Amend Certain Eligibility Requirements for Secondary Students
Receiving State Subsidies for Postsecondary Courses (As Amended)* Presented by
UMS Chief External & Governmental Affairs Officer Sam Warren, January 28, 2026**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and 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).

No State program has had a **greater impact on raising Mainers' postsecondary aspirations and reducing their time to a door-opening degree and the workforce** than free public early college. Also known as the Aspirations program, early college allows high school students to take courses taught by public postsecondary faculty on our campuses or online, or by teachers at their secondary schools who are directly supported by our faculty — for credit and for free. Doing so helps these students develop confidence, study skills, and see postsecondary education as a place where they belong and will be successful.

The result of these **early college opportunities is increased high school and postsecondary degree attainment and lower debt**. Students who participate in UMS early college have higher postsecondary GPAs and are more likely to complete college than their peers who do not. While early college benefits all learners, it most improves outcomes for those who are traditionally underserved. For example, bachelor's degree attainment rates for rural students who participated in early college and then enrolled in UMS were 12 percentage points higher than those of their peers who did not.

To **further student outcomes and the return on the investment in early college by Maine taxpayers**, UMS provides personalized academic support and advising to every early college participant. In 2024, our System expanded its partnership with Let's Get Ready, through which those enrolled in UMS early college are matched with near-peer mentors and supported and held accountable through their door-opening postsecondary degree, mostly through text messaging and entirely for free. Also that year, UMS began directly admitting Maine high school students to its public universities based on their success in early college, an innovation that has improved access to high-quality, high-value UMS degree programs and our undergraduate enrollment.

Additionally, UMS universities have carefully designed course sequences that position students for success in our degree programs and in the Maine economy. These purposeful early college pathways are focused on fields where Maine most needs professionals, such as nursing, education, engineering and computing, and criminal justice, and can lead to industry-recognized credentials. They also guarantee the greatest transferability of credits

toward a college major so Mainers can graduate into the workforce more quickly for less cost.

Unlike in many other states, public early college courses are free for Maine students up to the credit hour cap set by statute and available State appropriation. Using these State funds, the Maine Department of Education reimburses UMS for a portion of the credit hour cost, and our public universities waive the remainder — an investment of more than \$7 million in the future of Maine's students and workforce just in FY25. To further reduce barriers to opportunity, Maine's public universities and community colleges now also waive mandatory fees.

This proven return and open-access commitment, coupled with demand from Maine high schools for early college courses to fill their curricular gaps, has led to explosive growth in early college enrollment. Over the last decade, **UMS early college enrollment has doubled**, from 2,401 students served in Fall 2016 to 4,955 students across 170 high schools, as well as homeschooled, in Fall 2025. Notably, over the past five years, the strongest growth has been in rural regions, including Aroostook County (+48%), Franklin County (+60%), Lincoln County (+100%), Penobscot County (+38%), Piscataquis County (+74%), Somerset County (+42%), and Waldo County (+55%).

As a result of this success, the **current \$5.5 million annual State appropriation for early college falls far short of demand**. More funding is needed to support this wildly successful program.

As a temporary measure and reflective of our commitment to student access, since the Spring 2024 semester, Maine's public universities have accepted reduced reimbursement for some early college courses, though this is not sustainable. In FY25, UMS received \$3 million in reimbursement — far less than the \$5.2 million allowed under the statutory formula.

Additionally, to ensure all eligible students have access to these opportunities and to promote intentional course selection, in February 2025, the Department announced it would impose an 18-credit cap on tuition-free early college credits, starting with the Class of 2027, with an exception for CTE students in designated pathway programs. LD 2099 (as amended) seeks to codify that cap in statute. While our System's preference would be that State appropriation be adjusted annually to meet all demand, we agree this 18-credit cap is a reasonable step to promote the widest access to early college — consistent with the aspiration-raising goals of the program. While this will limit opportunity for some students (see below), on average, students who participate in early college graduate high school with six UMS credits (the equivalent of two courses), and 90% of graduates in the Classes of 2024 and 2025 had 18 total early college credits (through UMS and MCCS).

Cumulative Credits Classes of 2024 & 2025 Graduates (UMS + MCCS)

Credit Tier	1-6	7-12	13-18	19-24	25-36	36+
Headcount	7,089	3,869	1,668	712	407	175
Percentage	51%	28%	12%	5%	3%	1%

Other changes made by the amended version of this bill are generally technical and intended to align Aspiration program access and administration with best practices, current patterns of student participation, the 2023 recommendations of an early college task force established by the Legislature, and a 2022 report developed by national experts and Maine stakeholders. These include:

- Removing the 10% cap on summer enrollment and removing the six-credits-per-semester limit to ensure students have access to courses when their schedules allow, while still upholding a cumulative credit cap.
- Clarifying public postsecondary institutions can determine student enrollment, while maintaining the expectation of prerequisites and both parental and school approval.
- Requiring high schools to include credits earned through early college on a student's transcript to prevent stranded credits and public investment.

We should all be proud that **Maine is a national leader in early college access and outcomes**. The statutory changes proposed by the amended version of LD 2099 ensure this tradition of access and success can continue within existing State budgetary resources. **Thank you for your ongoing support of the University of Maine System** and our statewide efforts to promote upward mobility through high-quality, high-value postsecondary education.