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**THE MAINE SENATE**  
132nd Legislature

*Testimony of Senator Nicole Grohoski regarding*  
**LD 2098, An Act to Update Certain Higher Education Statutes**  
*Before the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs*  
February 18, 2026

Good morning Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and distinguished members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. My name is Nicole Grohoski, and I am honored to represent the 22 communities of Senate District 7. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on LD 2098, "An Act to Update Certain Higher Education Statutes."

I'm here on behalf of the College of the Atlantic (COA), which is located in my district in Bar Harbor, to discuss an amendment to its governing higher education law. COA's degree-granting authority derives from Private and Special Law 1973, Chapter 29<sup>1</sup>, seen here:

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**CHAPTER 29**

**AN ACT** Relating to Conferring Degrees by the College of Atlantic.

*Be it enacted by the People of the State of Maine, as follows:*

**Sec. 1. Degrees.** The College of Atlantic, located in Bar Harbor, shall have the power to confer the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Human Ecology as is usually conferred by like institutions of higher learning.

**Sec. 2. Program review.** The State Board of Education shall prepare a reevaluation of the adequacy of the facilities, programs, financing and other relevant information pertaining to the college, which was originally required by the Revised Statutes, Title 20, section 2202, subsection 1 and report its findings to the 107th Legislature.

Effective October 3, 1973

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You'll note that the law limits COA to conferring B.A. degrees "in Human Ecology." COA will soon be accepting Environmental Studies students transferring from Sterling College, which is closing. In order to grant these students' degrees, as approved by COA's accrediting body, this law needs to be

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<sup>1</sup> [https://ldc.mainelegislature.org/Open/Laws/1973/1973\\_PS\\_c029.pdf](https://ldc.mainelegislature.org/Open/Laws/1973/1973_PS_c029.pdf)

amended to strike the words “in Human Ecology.” With my testimony, I have included info from COA, which provides more context for the requested change.

It is my understanding that this change would be consistent with other, newer state law that authorizes institutions to confer degrees at a specific credential level, rather than by subject matter. Furthermore, the Maine Department of Education is familiar with this issue and has recommended that COA seek a law change via the Legislature to broaden COA’s degree-granting authority.

**Thus, I am here today to request that your committee consider amending COA’s Private and Special Law to strike the words “in Human Ecology.”** LD 2098 is the most subject-matter-appropriate existing legislative vehicle that I have found for making this change. I have communicated with both your analyst, Elena Roig, and the Revisor of Statutes, Ed Charbonneau, to confirm that it is possible to amend a Private and Special Law in a bill that also amends the Maine Revised Statutes. While it is atypical, there is nothing that prevents this committee from doing so.

I am also pursuing the possibility of introducing an after-deadline bill, but your committee may find it more expedient to make this change – which is supported by both of the entities implicated in it, COA and the DoE – in this bill.

Thank you for your time and consideration of my request. I would be happy to answer any questions.



To: Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

From: Heather Albert-Knopp, Chief Operating Officer, College of the Atlantic,  
[halbert-knopp@coa.edu](mailto:halbert-knopp@coa.edu), 207-801-5603

Re: LD 2098, An Act to Update Certain Higher Education Statutes

Date: February 18, 2026

Since its founding more than fifty years ago, College of the Atlantic (COA) has offered a distinctive interdisciplinary, experiential liberal arts education. The college's pedagogy is grounded in the concept of "human ecology," an approach that examines how we as humans interact with the environments around us – whether those environments are social, ecological, or built/technological. Under the umbrella of our one B.A. degree in Human Ecology, COA students study a range of disciplines from marine science and conservation biology to law, policy, entrepreneurship, and the arts.

In 1973, when the Maine State Legislature originally authorized College of the Atlantic as a degree-conferring institution (Private and Special Law 1973, Chapter 29), that authorization was limited to granting a Bachelor of Arts degree in Human Ecology. As our institution has grown and evolved over time, we remain committed to human ecology as our pedagogical approach and a central part of our institutional mission, but we now seek to expand our authorization to be able to confer other degrees at the Bachelor's level.

Specifically, COA has recently been asked to serve as the primary teach-out partner for Vermont's Sterling College, which will be closing its doors after the current semester. Sterling offers a sole B.A. degree in Environmental Studies. We have drafted a teach-out agreement that was accepted by our accreditors at the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE), which would allow COA to teach-out the B.A. in Environmental Studies for upper-class Sterling College students. However, in order to do so, we must broaden our authorization to grant additional degrees, beyond Human Ecology, at the Bachelor's level.

It is our understanding that Maine state law regarding degree-granting authorization has changed since our initial 1973 authorization, and now institutions

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are authorized at the credential/degree level, rather than at the individual program level. It is our intention to better align our degree conferring authorization with current state law. **Thus, we respectfully request that your committee amend our Private and Special Law to broaden our degree granting authority, in this bill or via another legislative vehicle.**

In the immediate future, this change will allow us to best serve the Sterling College students who seek to complete their B.A. in Environmental Studies at COA after their home institution closes. Moving forward, it also allows us, where accreditation permits, to better respond and tailor our offerings to changing educational and workforce needs.

While College of the Atlantic is a relatively small institution serving approximately 350 students each year, we draw our student body from 40 U.S. states and more than 45 countries across the globe. Our alumni go on to pursue careers as scientists, physicians, veterinarians, lawyers, educators, researchers, nonprofit leaders, farmers, entrepreneurs, and more. While we do not seek to become a larger institution, we do look forward to growing our impact and continuing to contribute to Maine's educational, economic, and cultural resources.

Thank you for your consideration. We are happy to provide additional information as needed.