



Maine Community College System

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

323 State Street, Augusta, ME 04330-7131

(207) 629-4000 | Fax (207) 629-4048 | mccs.me.edu

**TO: Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine
Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs**

**Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy
Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs**

FROM: David Daigler, President, Maine Community College System

RE: Statement in support of the Maine Community College System's portion of LD 2212, *An Act Making Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2026 and June 30, 2027.*

Part A, pages 17, 31, 116 and Language QQQ, pages 84-85

DATE: February 20, 2026

Senator Rotundo, Senator Rafferty, Representative Gattine and Representative Murphy, members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, thank you for inviting me to present on the portions of LD 2212 that relate to the Maine Community College System (MCCS). I am David Daigler, President of the Maine Community College System.

Your committees have heard from me a number of times over the past four years about the promise the Maine Free College Scholarship offers to Maine's graduating high school students, the positive impact on Maine's families, our entire education system and the State's economy. I am pleased to be before you again.

In the interest of time, I will not repeat the points from testimony over the past 4 years. You have had a long week and you know about the success of this program. I have attached a fact sheet to this testimony that hits the highlights.

I speak for the entire Maine Community College System when I say that we were all grateful and excited for the future when the Governor not only included the continuation of the Maine Free College Scholarship in her Supplemental Budget, but as a cornerstone of her State of the State. In addition, our

staff, faculty, and students' hard work was validated, and our entire community feels recognized, supported, and inspired. Said another way, they feel hopeful. Hopeful that your committees will recommend the continuation of the program to the full legislature.

At the end of the last session, you asked us for an analysis of the Maine Free College Program. That analysis remains valid today, and the questions you raised then were the basis for our conversations with the Governor as she and her staff developed the current proposed iteration of the Maine Free College Scholarship.

Last year, Governor Mills proposed funding the Maine Free College scholarship at a level of \$12,500,000 in FY 2026 and \$12,500,000 in FY2027 and to continue this funding as part of the MCCS baseline budget so we could assure Maine's parents that their children will have access to tuition and fee-free community college — a total value of \$4,156 for a one-year certificate and \$8,312 for a two-year degree. Your committee recommended, and the full legislature funded, 80% of this need for FY 26 and FY 27, but did not include the language that allows the program to continue.

Now, in LD 2212, the recommendation is to fully fund the FY 2026 program—since the high school graduates from 2023-2025 have already been promised the previously designed Maine Free College program—and then tighten the eligibility requirements for FY 2027 and future years (high school classes of 2026 and beyond) so that the program works with a \$10 m appropriation.

There are 4 major changes to the program:

The proposal for the Class of 2026 and beyond would require that:

- **Qualifying students must be from Maine, with a primary residence in Maine for at least 12 consecutive months immediately prior to the date of admission.** *(Previously, students had to be living in Maine while enrolled, which allowed people from out of state to move to Maine and qualify for the scholarship. About 4% of Maine Free College Scholarship students moved to Maine at time of enrollment.)*
- **The scholarship will only cover 100% of tuition costs, rather than both tuition and fees.** (Full-time tuition is \$2,880 per year, and fees are \$1,276 per year.). The program continues to require students to accept all federal and other state aid prior to qualifying for Maine Free College funds and many, but not all, students' federal aid will cover their fees.
- **Qualifying students would have 150% of time, rather than the current 200% of time, to access the scholarship.** *(Previously, a student pursuing an associate degree part time had up to four years of scholarship support. For the Class of 2026 and beyond, that student would only have up to three years of scholarship support.)*
- **The Maine Community College System has the authority to limit or end the program if the legislature does not appropriate funds to cover the costs of the program.** It is not lost on us that the inclusion of language that allows us to end or limit the program if you and your successors do not fund the program in the next and future budgets, puts the onus on us to continue the program, and if adequate funding is not included, regrettably, we may have to end the program.

Other requirements from the initial Free Community College Scholarship are continued in the new proposal, including the “last-dollar scholarship” structure that requires students to accept all federal and state aid before Maine Free College Scholarship funds are applied; that students pursue an associate degree or certificate; and that students enroll no later than two years after high school completion.

We didn’t seek out these changes, but if the language in QQQ is accepted, they are a reasonable and viable way forward to ensure that Maine high school graduates can continue to have this incredible opportunity, and that Maine can remain one of the 30-plus states with a free college program. In the absence of this legislation the program would have to end and Maine would be the only state in the country to start a free college program and then allow the program to lapse. It’s a matter of staying competitive, of supporting hard-working young people looking to get ahead, and investing in the development of our state’s skilled workforce.

The Maine Free College scholarship has been amazingly successful, and it is an incredible investment in Maine’s economy because today’s community college students are tomorrow’s skilled workers that we all rely on for a productive, growing state economy. Maine’s recent high school graduates deserve the opportunity to put in the work, study hard, and get a strong start without struggling to pay tuition as they get the technical skills they need for good-paying jobs or the academic skills they need to transfer to a 4-year college or university.

Before I end, I want to offer strong support for our education colleagues across Maine. The Maine Community College System supports maintaining the 55% funding level for our partners in the PreK-12 sector (A-31) as well as dedicated research dollars to our friends at the University System (A-116).

I would also be remiss if I did not draw your attention to the reams of written testimony provided by not only our students, faculty, adjunct faculty and staff, but high school counselors, community partners and businesses. This program is immensely popular. High school staff see it open the eyes of their students, and the doors that provide them the opportunity they need, while business leaders see a reprieve as they struggle to find the skilled workers they need. Our faculty and adjunct faculty are teaching in energized and engaged classrooms, and our sports teams and clubs are vibrant. I am so proud of what we do. Let’s keep it going.

Please know that I am always available to answer questions and we would love to have any and all of you on our campuses to show off our staff and have you meet our amazing students.

Maine Free Community College Scholarship

FACT SHEET

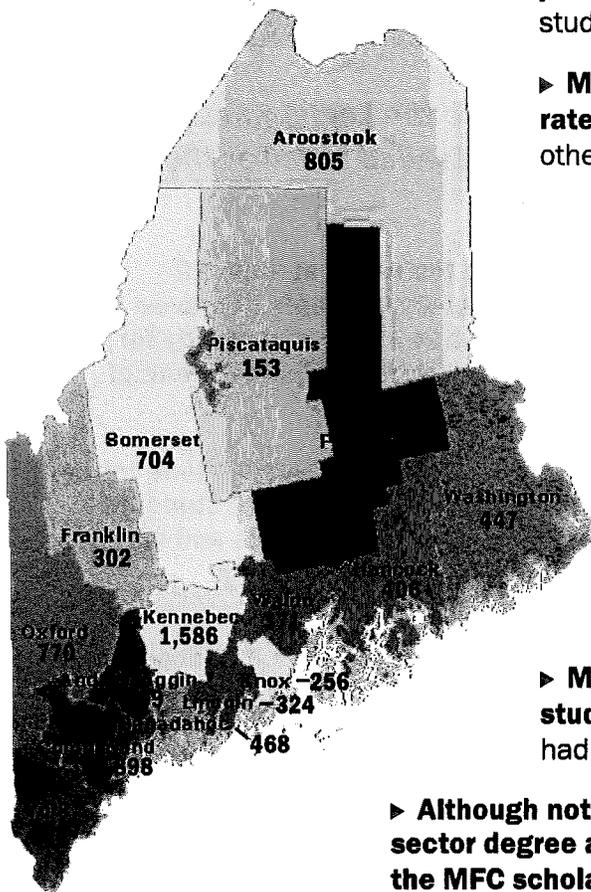
The Maine Free College Scholarship has a proven track record

Since it began in fall 2022:

► **22,327 MFC Scholarship-eligible students have enrolled.**

- Of those, more than a third are still enrolled, more than 3,600 graduated, and almost 1,800 have transferred to a University of Maine System (UMS) university or other four-year college to continue their education.

Where they are from



► **The MFC scholarship is attracting more young men.** MCCS students have been about 40%-60% male to female ratio in recent years, reflecting nationwide trends. The ratio for MFC scholarship students is consistently about 48%-52% male-female.

► **MFC scholarship students succeed academically at the same rate as their peers.** Retention rates for scholarship students and other degree-seeking students is statistically equivalent.

► **Transfers to the University of Maine System (UMS) are up 32% – and MCCS students excel there.** The latest UMS transfer report said “MCCS transfers show the strongest outcomes” passing “88.5% of attempted credits, the highest among transfer groups and higher than first-time students ... MCCS transfers also post the highest return rate (75.8%) than other transfer groups and first-time students.”

► **Having a last-dollar scholarship structure protects the state investment.** Full-time tuition and fees for a Maine resident is \$4,156 a year. After FAFSA-related state and federal aid, the average MFC scholarship award is \$1,600 per student.

► **Maine’s community colleges educate 44% of all undergraduate students enrolled at public colleges in Maine.** In Fall 2025, MCCS had 15,829 undergraduate students; UMS had 20,407.

► **Although not directly tied to the scholarship, enrollment in key industry sector degree and certificate programs has increased dramatically since the MFC scholarship began. (Fall 2019 to Fall 2025 comparison)**

- Up 46% in industrial trade programs - (1,644 to 2,408)
- Up 66% in healthcare programs - (2,208 to 3,677)
- Up 47% in business programs - (1,638 to 2,418)



Maine Free Community College Scholarship

FACT SHEET

The Maine Free College Scholarship is a last-dollar scholarship that pays 100% of tuition and fees for recent high school graduates in qualifying years. Currently, graduates (or equivalent) from 2023, 2024, and 2025 qualify for the scholarship. Qualifying students must pursue a degree or certificate, fill out the FAFSA, and accept any state or federal aid before Maine Free College Scholarship funds are applied.

NOW GOVERNOR MILLS IS PROPOSING MAKING THE SCHOLARSHIP PERMANENT!

What's different this time? The new proposal, currently before the Legislature in the supplemental budget (LD 2212), makes three key changes intended to lower the cost of the program by \$2.5 million, to \$10 million per year:

- ▶ **Qualifying students must be from Maine, with a primary residence in Maine for at least 12 consecutive months immediately prior to the date of admission. (Previously, students had to be living in Maine while enrolled, which allowed people from out of state to move to Maine and qualify for the scholarship. About 4% of Maine Free College Scholarship students moved to Maine at time of enrollment.)**
- ▶ **The scholarship will cover 100% of tuition costs, rather than both tuition and fees. (Full-time tuition is \$2,880 per year, and fees are \$1,276 per year). The program continues to require that students accept all federal and other state grant aid prior to accessing Maine Free College funds and many, but not all, students' other financial aid will still cover their fees.**
- ▶ **Qualifying students would have 150% of time, rather than the current 200% of time, to access the scholarship. (Previously, a student pursuing an associate degree part time had up to four years of scholarship support. For the Class of 2026 and beyond, that student would only have up to three years of scholarship support.) (Source: <https://www.maine.gov/budget/home>. See QQQ language)**

Other requirements from the initial Free Community College Scholarship are continued in the new proposal, including the "last-dollar scholarship" structure that requires students to accept all federal and state aid before Maine Free College Scholarship funds are applied; that students pursue an associate degree or certificate; and that students enroll no later than two years after high school completion.