

TESTIMONY OF MICHAEL KEBEDE, ESQ.

Ought to Pass - LD 453

**An Act To Establish a Permanent Appointment of a  
Member of the Wabanaki Tribes to the Board of  
Trustees of the University of Maine System**

Submitted to the

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION  
AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS

March 12, 2021

Senator Daughtry, Representative Brennan, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, greetings. My name is Michael Kebede, and I am the Policy Counsel at the ACLU of Maine, a statewide organization committed to advancing and preserving civil rights and civil liberties in Maine. On behalf of our members, I write to support LD 453. This bill would ensure that our state's public higher educational institutions play an important role in advancing the dignity and prosperity of Wabanaki nations.

Maine is an outlier in its rancor with Indigenous nations. In 2015, a United Nations investigation found that "structural inequalities contribute to Maine tribal members experiencing extreme poverty, high unemployment, short life expectancy, poor health, limited educational opportunities and diminished economic development."<sup>1</sup> The bill before you today will help mend the state's relationship with Wabanaki peoples. It will help Maine be a good neighbor, rather than an imperious one.

If passed, LD 453 would ensure that there is a Wabanaki representative on the University of Maine Board of Trustees. This small reform will help make our state's public higher educational institutions more inclusive of Wabanaki people, which in turn will play some role in reducing Wabanaki impoverishment and marginalization. Our nation's land grant universities have lifted countless people out of poverty. And yet, the federal government established land grant universities in the 1860s partly by taking "land from Indigenous people that it had paid little or

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<sup>1</sup> S. James Anaya, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples on the Situation of Indigenous Peoples in the United States of America*, 32 *Ariz. J. Int'l & Comp. L.* 51, 92 (2015), available at <http://scholar.law.colorado.edu/articles/32>.

nothing for.”<sup>2</sup> Guaranteeing as a matter of law that Maine’s public university system always include Indigenous representation on its Board of Trustees is a small but meaningful step towards the righting of historic wrongs.

We urge you to vote *ought to pass*.

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<sup>2</sup> Tristan Ahtone and Robert Lee, *Ask Who Paid for America’s Universities*, NYTimes, May 7, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/07/opinion/land-grant-universities-native-americans.html>