



**Testimony of Behalf of the University of Maine System
In Support of 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*
Presented by Bonnie Newsom, University of Maine Assistant Professor of Anthropology
and Former Trustee for the University of Maine System
March 12, 2021**

Senator Daughtry, Representative Brennan and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs: My name is Bonnie Newsom, and I am an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Maine and a proud citizen of the Penobscot Nation. The University of Maine is located on Marsh Island in the ancestral homeland of the Penobscot people, where issues of water and territorial rights and encroachment upon sacred sites are ongoing. If you visit campus, you will notice bilingual signs that identify campus spaces in both Penobscot and English. This is an important reminder of the Penobscot people's deep connections to this land – a connection that extends back in time for at least 10,000 years. The university recognizes these deep ties between the Penobscot Nation and this place and also recognizes that the Wabanaki Tribes are distinct, sovereign, legal and political entities with their own powers of self-governance and self-determination.

In 2007, Passamaquoddy elder and scholar Wayne Newell became the first Wabanaki person appointed to serve on the University of Maine System Board of Trustees (UMS BOT), something he considered as “very meaningful.” When his term ended, I became the second. I was honored to serve from 2011-2016, and I am equally honored to be asked by the University System to speak on its behalf today in support of establishing a permanent seat on the BOT for a Wabanaki Tribal member, as LD 453 proposes.

There were numerous times during my tenure as a Trustee that my experiences as a Wabanaki woman informed my perspective on the issues and investments before the Board. For example, I remained a steadfast advocate for UMS universities like those in Machias and Presque Isle that serve Wabanaki communities because I've experienced how access to higher education can empower us to confront the unique social, political and economic challenges Indigenous peoples face in this country.

As a Wabanaki person, I also provided the Board a unique lens through which to view our oversight and operational duties. For example, during my tenure, the BOT shifted its meeting seating arrangements to include university presidents at the Board table. I supported this but also expressed that the same courtesy should be extended to the faculty representatives to the Board. This comes from my experiences with Wabanaki leadership approaches, which tend to be very inclusive. While this may seem minor, I share it because I believe that sitting together and working together go hand-in-hand and as Board members, we each bring our individual knowledge and best practices – including those I've seen as an Indigenous person – to achieve sound recommendations for the benefit of all.

This example also speaks to one of the great benefits in having a Wabanaki Tribal member on the governing board of Maine's largest educational and economic development enterprise – which goes well beyond the understanding of Indigenous issues that a Wabanaki tribal citizen will bring. At a time when so much is being done to strengthen Tribal-State relations, the deliberate

inclusion of Wabanaki voice would foster further opportunity for us to work together on matters of shared interest and importance, thus improving overall relations and providing a model for productive collaboration.

Passage of LD 453 would also signal the State's commitment to indigenous students, and thus our Tribal futures. Wabanaki students have been well-served by the UMS, which waives tuition and mandatory fees for Indigenous students. Maine's public universities have also added several Indigenous faculty and supports numerous Wabanaki community engagement and cross-cultural learning initiatives that span PK-20. Elevating Wabanaki voices to the Board builds on that progress for the benefit not just of Tribal members but of all students, faculty and staff, and Maine citizens.

Finally, representation matters. To see a Wabanaki person like themselves, serving on the UMS BOT sends a powerful message to Native students that our voices are valued and that they can and should aspire to leadership positions that have the potential to effect positive change for our communities. This validates their identity while creating new opportunities for them to serve.

As the UMS accelerates institutional action to advance diversity, equity and inclusion in both admissions and hiring, it welcomes a governing board that reflects the people of Maine and its own student population. Requiring Wabanaki representation on the BOT is an appropriate step that recognizes how Tribal lands, culture, people, and resources have uniquely contributed to the success of UMS universities. Wabanaki Tribal citizens bring important philosophies of education, inclusivity, and resource management that will strengthen stewardship of the System and enrich classroom, campus, and community activities. We hope you will support this overdue and deeply meaningful proposal.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify today and look forward to answering your questions.