

March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Regarding 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”

Testimony by Kevin Ritchie, Citizen of the Town of Lee

Good morning, members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Kevin Ritchie. I am speaking in favor of LD 453 as a citizen of the town of Lee and as a long-time Maine educator who has taught Native students, in various settings, for 43 years.

As a staff member of the Upward Bound program at UMaine-Orono from 1976 to '79, I began to understand and appreciate some aspects of Penobscot people and culture. From 1980 to '81 at the Bangor Job Corps Center, further experiences increased my understanding, through relationships with Passamaquoddy and Penobscot youth. From 1981 to 2016, as an educator at Lee Academy, my professional and personal life was enriched by teaching Passamaquoddy and Penobscot students. From 2017 to 2019, I gained additional knowledge and awareness through working with staff at the three K8 schools of the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy Tribes, as a grant administrator with Maine Indian Education.

To my great good fortune, I had opportunities over many years to visit the reservations, to meet with elders, to participate in ceremonies of celebration and loss, and to build relationships that helped me better understand the tensions and contextual differences between races. Cultural differences are real and profound, yet often incompletely seen and acknowledged and understood.

Through trial and error, I figured out that if I wanted to help my Native students learn more effectively, I needed to make positive use of the different ways of seeing that I was being shown by them. I needed additional ways to understand and teach about culture, history, storytelling, and nature. I also needed additional ways to be in relationship and different ways to listen. My inclinations, as a white person, to focus my teaching solely on content learning goals and achievement of concrete skills and knowledge would have had no other context, if not for my good fortune. And all my students benefited – native, non-native, international, all of them.

My point is this – Far more Maine people do NOT have access to experiences such as mine, than DO have access to them. LD 453 can bring a unique, long-term depth of experience and perspective to the University Board which could change this fact. A more diverse University Board could better support racial awareness and understanding in our young teachers, young business leaders, young professional people and others who graduate from the University.

LD 453 could provide an opportunity to further evolve what is already a good-faith effort to shift perceptions, to right wrongs, to build more truthful and beneficial relationships between our state government and institutions and the governments of the Tribes of Maine. In addition, I believe that this Board member could be a natural conduit for the views of people of other races and cultures in Maine, to the University system.

In this time of addressing global environmental crises, a Native trustee voice could be a helpful part of the systemic planning and visioning around such matters that I'm guessing the University system is already pursuing. This person could also provide insight regarding tuition-related matters with Native students in Maine. An ongoing Tribal voice on the Trustees could help the University see and pursue its role in helping to fulfill the vision of LD 291. You may recall that LD 291, passed in 2001, was designed to formalize teaching of Native History and Culture to all Maine youth. Unfortunately, the law was never adequately supported, its potential perhaps not fully understood. I see the re-examination of LD 291 as a crucial way to develop greater racial awareness and understanding among students training to be Maine teachers – a gift waiting to happen – and a permanent member on the Board could provide perspective and leadership toward this effort.

LD 453 is an opportunity to, over time, assist us in better knowing each other – Native Americans, Caucasian Americans, and the increasing number of African Americans and Asian Americans who are Mainers.

What little I really understand about racial and cultural difference came to me through opportunities to experience the generous spirit of many Maine Native people. Passage of LD 453 would help to open a door which, through policy and programs, broader discussions and perspective, could have a similar effect – directly and indirectly – for many more Maine people.

I urge you to vote in favor of LD 453 and I very much appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today. Thank you.