



DATE: April 27, 2021
TO: Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs
FROM: Samantha Warren, UMS Director of Government & Community Relations
RE: **LD 1412, An Act To Require the Department of Education To Provide Information To Students Allowing Them To Make Informed Choices Regarding Their Education and Professional Futures**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs: I am writing on behalf of the University of Maine System (UMS) to inform the Committee's consideration of LD 1412, *An Act To Require the Department of Education To Provide Information To Students Allowing Them To Make Informed Choices Regarding Their Education and Professional Futures*.

Maine's public universities fully support the intent of this bill. All Maine students and their families should have access to understandable information that educates and empowers them to make smart choices about their future.

They should know that the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects post-pandemic job growth will be greatest for those with graduate and bachelor's degrees and that earning levels typically rise with level of educational attainment. For example, working-age University of Maine alumni earn more than double the state's overall median income. It is also important for families to know that despite an important national conversation on the student debt crisis, there are affordable – and even zero out-of-pocket cost – pathways to postsecondary degrees including through UMS universities.

Much of the information the Maine Department of Education would be called to compile if LD 1412 was enacted is already publicly available, including via the U.S. Department of Education's College Scorecard and via the Maine Education and Attainment Research Navigation System, known as Maine EARNs. Hosted by the Maine Department of Labor, Maine EARNs links data from our university system and Maine's community colleges (MCCS) with State employment/wage records. While there is a considerable lag, this tool has the potential to be further developed for use by Maine families and in alignment with the goals of LD 1412.

Maine EARNs was prompted in part by the State Education and Employment Outcomes Task Force (SEEO). While inactive for some time due to lack of membership, recent appointments by legislative leadership including of Education & Cultural Affairs Committee ranking member Rep. Paul Stearns position the SEEO well to get back to work. Additionally, there is a similar postsecondary employment outcomes data system known as PSEO being piloted by the U.S. Census Bureau (currently in an experimental testing phase) and a comprehensive statewide longitudinal data system already under development by Maine DOE and partners, including UMS. So as not to duplicate these efforts, the UMS wonders if this bill should be amended into a resolve or a request from this Committee to SEEO to explore how existing and evolving data systems could be improved upon to include some elements additionally proposed by LD 1412.

However, if this bill moves forward as presented, we have a number of concerns, including, but not limited, to the following:

1. Why would the database developed largely focus on just the four largest public universities in Maine (UMaine, University of Southern Maine, University of Maine at Augusta and University of Maine at Farmington), defined in the bill as "major colleges," rather than also require comparable data be presented for other public and private institutions where Maine students

most commonly matriculate? Why would the database not also include New England and national data, so as to allow Maine families to see the value and outcomes of in-state vs. out-of-state institutions?

2. Some of the data listed in the bill would be difficult, if not impossible, to obtain, especially that relating to post-graduation. For example, Maine EARNs relies on in-state payroll data. While more UMS graduates stay in Maine to live and work after college than started here, there are still some who leave the state and we are unsure how their earnings data would be collected by the State. Similarly, we are not aware of public data that demonstrates the percentage of graduates working in fields for which their college degree is not required, though Burning Glass Technologies does analyze job postings to provide real-time data on job growth, skills in demand and labor market trends.
3. If average college cost is required to be reported, so too should average financial aid award. As the Committee knows for its recent hearings on legislation related to affordability and debt reduction, most students do not actually pay a college's listed price. Additionally, there may be benefit in also listing the amount of State appropriation supporting the institution, given that is the greatest driver of what students pay at public universities and colleges. Similarly, if salaries are reported, so too should the median income in the state or region to put those earnings into context.
4. The UMS already reports the average federal loan amounts taken out by its students. However, we often are not aware of the amount of personal loans students and families take out, and the decisions that lead to them doing so, e.g. to allow a student to attend college without working, live in off-campus housing, etc.

Most importantly, we question how this abundance of data would be presented in a way that is accessible and actionable for Maine families. Much has been written in recent months in Maine and nationally about the negative impact of the pandemic on the college admissions process, especially on low-income students and those who would be the first in their families to pursue postsecondary education. For this reason, in January the UMS joined the Finance Authority of Maine (FAME) and Maine DOE to hold a dozen online events where students could connect with admissions and financial aid experts as well as current college students and recent graduates. Still, according to April 8 data from FAME, Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completions among Maine high school seniors were down this year by 4.8%, and dropped 6.1% among students with an estimated family contribution (EFC) below \$10,000. That has concerning consequences for the future of those students, and Maine's economy.

Given this, we recommend that any effort to make education and employment outcomes data more available and transparent for Maine families be coupled with increased investment in the high school-based personnel and programs necessary to help that information be understood and usable, including financial literacy education and outreach.

Thank you for your consideration and please let me know what additional information the UMS can provide prior to the work session.