

TESTIMONY OF MICHAEL KEBEDE

LD 1640 – Ought To Pass

An Act To Enact the Campus Free Speech and Free Press Act

Joint Standing Committee on Education
May 13, 2021

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education, greetings. My name is Michael Kebede, and I am Policy Counsel of the American Civil Liberties Union of Maine, a statewide organization committed to advancing and preserving civil liberties guaranteed by the Maine and U.S. Constitutions. On behalf of our members, I urge you to vote “Ought to Pass” on LD 1640.

College and universities have been the sites of some of the most important protests of the past 50 years—the antiwar movement, civil rights, racial justice, divestment from apartheid South Africa, fair treatment for workers, and the need to respond to climate change. Today, students and faculty members across the country are participating in the demand for reform of our criminal legal justice system and the recognition that Black lives matter.

This bill, if enacted, will ensure that these debates and others can continue, and that students will not be discriminated against in the exercise of their freedom of expression because their views are controversial or unpopular. Nobody needs legal protection in order to express popular views—it is only when speech runs up against the views and opinions of the dominant political culture that free speech protection is necessary. LD 1640 also ensures that controversial or unpopular speakers will not be shunted off to a “free speech zone”—a pernicious euphemism for a practice designed to insulate people from diverse viewpoints.

Because LD 1640 will improve the ability of people on college and university campuses to continue to engage in debates about the most important topics of our time, the ACLU of Maine urges you to support it.