



DATE: May 13, 2021
TO: Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs
FROM: Samantha Warren, UMS Director of Government & Community Relations
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RE: **LD 247, An Act To Improve Maine's Education System**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Samantha Warren. I am the Director of Government and Community Relations for the University of Maine System (UMS), testifying today in support of reestablishing the Commission to Study College Affordability and College Completion, as proposed by the amended version of LD 247.

The UMS was honored to participate in the Commission back in 2014. In our experience, it is among the most impactful initiatives undertaken in this state to spur awareness and action on a public policy issue that is central to the success of Maine people and our economy.

The timing is right to reconvene this Commission.

As I have shared recently with you, the efforts of Maine's public universities to ensure college is affordable and accessible for Maine families through minimal tuition increases and record investments in financial aid are paying off, as evidenced by our enrollment stability and the decreasing debt of our graduates. Public early college, never considered by the Commission, now is supporting thousands of Maine students earn free postsecondary credit while still in high school, increasing the likelihood they'll complete their college degree on-time and for less cost. Hundreds of articulation agreements between UMS and Maine's community colleges now exist, allowing students to transfer seamlessly – pathways we hope to pave between our own UMS universities through our new unified accreditation. Just yesterday, Governor Mills released a supplemental budget that includes historic investments in public higher education, including providing our System's first appropriation increase since FY20 and delivering on the Commission's 2014 recommendation to increase the maximum award amount of the Maine State Grant to \$2,500. And in Congress, momentum is building to double Pell, which like our state grant program has failed to maintain its purchasing power and its promise of helping low-income students fully finance their degree.

This is progress we should all be proud of. Now, it is time to look ahead together.

The pandemic has reshaped the future of work, speeding up occupational shifts and making the need for a postsecondary degree or credential more important than ever before to social mobility and economic growth. At the same time, it has disrupted the traditional college application process, resulting in a concerning drop in FAFSA completion rates here in Maine and nationally, especially among low-income and first-generation students. As Chancellor Malloy said in his State of the University address, no one can be left behind if Maine is to move forward.

Reestablishing the Commission will give us a chance outside of the constraints of the legislative process to share what is working, consider these new opportunities and challenges, and collaboratively develop strategic solutions to guide public policy and investment in the years ahead. The UMS looks forward to serving and staffing the Commission, consistent with the amendment before you today, and to working with our educational and legislative partners to ensure the proven power of postsecondary education is within the reach of all Mainers. Additionally, if this bill moves forward, we urge you to reconsider LD 1152 and vote it "ought not to pass."

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.