

## Testimony in Support of LD 1406: An Act to Make College More Affordable for Maine Residents

Good afternoon, Senator Langley, Representative Kornfield, and distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. I am Jody Harris, the associate director of the Maine Center for Economic Policy (MECEP) and I am here today to testify in favor of LD 1406. This proposal would set a “roadmap” for increasing the rate of Mainers earning postsecondary degrees by setting a statutory goal for college attainment and completion—and would also provide the tools to reach that goal, through increased and targeted grant aid, college navigators, and work-study.

**Most states have set ambitious college attainment and degree completion goals, and this proposal would help ensure that Maine joins them.<sup>1</sup>**

As the rate of college-educated Americans has slipped behind the rates achieved by other countries, 26 states have responded by setting statutory college attainment and completion goals.<sup>2</sup> State-level policy is a critical tool in improving degree completion and attainment rates, because most students attend a state-funded college or university, which are funded and overseen by state legislators and state-appointed boards of trustees.<sup>3</sup>

**Targeting grant aid to students who need it most through increasing the State of Maine Grant, as LD 1406 would do, is a critical step for boosting college affordability and college completion.**

College has become less affordable for all Maine students, but college remains least affordable for low-income students and working adults. Maine’s public college affordability gap means that the college costs remaining after grant aid is applied still account for 71 percent of a low-income family’s annual earnings.<sup>4</sup> The cost of higher education has increased most for working adults because of reductions in public aid.<sup>5</sup>

Increasing the State of Maine grant program is one of the more effective means of helping Maine students who are struggling with college costs and student loans. Research shows that the most affordable public education systems (those that graduate students with the lowest debt) all offer robust financial aid for low-income students.<sup>6</sup>

**Devoting resources to summer work-study and college navigators at the community college level will help more Mainers—especially first-generation and adult students—graduate into high-demand careers.**

Approximately 206,000 Mainers have some college, but no degree. Maine has the highest rate in New England of adults who have some college credit, but don't have a degree and are stuck in low-paying jobs.<sup>7</sup> Reducing the barriers working-age adults have to completing college will be critical in increasing Maine's degree attainment rate, and focusing on the community college system—where the average student age is 27—is one of them. College navigators can be key in helping adults re-enter college and graduate. Whereas traditional faculty advisors focus on admitted students, navigators also focus on prospective students, helping them through the prerequisites and transferee requirements that can be discouraging to mid-career applicants. Similarly, for adult students in a hurry to get back into the job market, summer work-study can bridge the gap between attending courses year-round or being forced to sit out a summer.

A good education opens the door to a good job for aspiring Maine workers, to future prosperity for them and their families, and to a strong Maine economy that attracts business investment. But the rising education costs, shrinking student aid, and crushing student loan debt are closing that door to far too many Mainers, especially those from low-income families. LD 1207 would provide a roadmap out of our current college crisis and toward a brighter future.

Thank you for your consideration. Thank you for your service to the people of Maine.

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<sup>1</sup> Attainment goal refers to the rate of residents with degrees at present, while a completion goal equals the rate of students enrolled in college who will graduate on time.

<sup>2</sup> Education Commission of the States. [Website](http://www.ecs.org/html/educationIssues/blueprint/Sections/2.4-HE-ACCOUNTABILITY.pdf). "Policy Goals: Accountability." Available at <http://www.ecs.org/html/educationIssues/blueprint/Sections/2.4-HE-ACCOUNTABILITY.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> In Maine, 57% of Maine's college-bound high school seniors enroll in one of our public institutions. Source: David Silvernail, James Sloan, and Amy Johnson. [College participation rates of Maine's high school graduates: examining the claims](#), March 2013. Available at:

<http://usm.maine.edu/sites/default/files/cepare/College%20Participation%20Rates%20for%20Maine.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> National Conference of State Legislatures. [Advancing Higher Education in Maine](#), September 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Colleen Quint, Lisa Plimpton, Mitchell Institute, [Investing in Higher Education is Economic Development](#), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. [Losing Ground: A National Status Report on the Affordability of American Higher Education](#), 2002. Available at:

[http://www.highereducation.org/reports/losing\\_ground/ar.shtml](http://www.highereducation.org/reports/losing_ground/ar.shtml).

<sup>7</sup> Working Poor Families Project. "Education and skills status of adults." 2015. Available at:

<http://www.workingpoorfamilies.org/indicators/>