



Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
Senate Bill 455
College Preparatory Programs and College Admissions Applications – Fees –
Prohibition
Wednesday, February 14, 2024
Favorable with Amendment

Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on Senate Bill 455. The bill would make certain college preparatory programs free, and it also prohibits Maryland public institutions of higher education from charging Maryland high school graduates any fees associated with college admission applications. The University System of Maryland (USM) supports the bill's intention to make college applications affordable for everyone; indeed, USM institutions provide a fee waiver process so that low-income students do not have to pay for our college applications. But many tens of thousands of applicants can afford application fees, and the fiscal impact of this bill—in the millions of dollars—is prohibitive for our institutions. The USM suggests an amendment to encourage the promotion of the fee waiver process in place of prohibiting application fees.

The USM is comprised of twelve distinguished institutions, and three regional higher education centers. We award eight out of every ten bachelor's degrees in the State. Each of USM's 12 institutions has a distinct and unique approach to the mission of educating students and promoting the economic, intellectual, and cultural growth of its surrounding community. These institutions are located throughout the state, from Western Maryland to the Eastern Shore, with the flagship campus in the Washington suburbs. The USM includes three Historically Black Institutions, comprehensive and research universities, and the country's largest public online institution.

The USM strategic plan, *Vision 2030*, has a goal to have the students of the USM reflect the full diversity of the state. As this committee has heard described, our institutions engage in considerable outreach to engage young people from under-resourced communities in various ways so that they are encouraged to pursue higher education. Once students are admitted, our institutions work hard to provide need-based aid, and over half of all students leave with no debt. The USM has a genuine commitment to access.

With that in mind, our institutions offer fee waivers to students who are low income. Several USM institutions use the Common Application, and it, too, has a fee waiver option. But our institutions cannot afford to make the application free for every Maryland applicant coming out of high school. The University of Maryland, College Park alone anticipates the cost of such a change to be over \$2 million (it received over 60,000 applications). The cost for the USM as a whole would be considerably more than that. At a time when our institutions are doing their best to keep down costs, this bill would force cuts or an increase in other costs that could impact all students.

We believe a better approach would be to enhance the visibility and transparency of the fee waiver process. The USM can provide high school guidance counselors and families with a web page that would link to each member institution's fee waiver process. The USM office could provide such a page for all of its institutions, unless MHEC would prefer to host such a page for all institutions.

We therefore recommend amending Section 15-101 by striking the current paragraph (c), lines 18-20, and replacing those lines with "A PUBLIC INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION SHALL HAVE AN APPLICATION FEE WAIVER PROCESS FOR STUDENTS WHO ARE LOW-INCOME AS DEFINED BY PELL ELIGIBILITY OR ANOTHER METRIC THE INSTITUTION SHALL DEFINE. THIS PROCESS WILL BE POSTED ON ITS WEBSITE. THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM OF MARYLAND SHALL ALSO HAVE A SINGLE WEB PAGE THAT PROVIDES LINKS TO ITS MEMBER INSTITUTIONS' FEE WAIVER WEB PAGES."

Thank you for allowing the USM to share our position on Senate Bill 455.

