Although Massachusetts prides itself on being at the forefront of innovation and education, there is a portion of Massachusetts residents that are excluded from higher education at alarming rates. Students with intellectual and developmental disabilities have low enrollment rates in higher education institutions because of barriers that make attending and enrolling in higher education institutions extremely difficult. Said students are faced with the unfair challenges which include academic and college aptitude tests, minimum GPAs, and course requirements. Those who fall within this category of students are not given access or opportunity to participate in higher education programs. Attending college improves the likelihood of employment, stronger independent living skills, and good quality of life.

The Bill:
S.756/H.1219: An Act creating higher education opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities, Autism and other developmental disabilities

Elevator Speech:
Good morning Senator,

We can all agree that obtaining a higher education makes individuals more likely to become employed and have greater individuality.

Our time at our university has helped us develop skills that are not only personally useful but applicable to our career aspirations. Data from national reports shows that “over 60% of adults with Intellectual Disabilities who attended college were able to find paid employment, compared to an employment rate of 16% for those who did not” (MAFC 2019). Creating opportunities for anyone to obtaining a higher education is why we are here today.

Our focus is on S.756/H.1219 An Act to create opportunities in higher education for students with intellectual disabilities, Autism, and developmental disabilities. This bill will grant students the opportunity to be immersed in a university environment that will have immense benefits on their personal and professional lives. “Special education services for these students are often provided in ineffective and segregated programs, leading to poor employment outcomes, reliance on day habilitation programs, and costly dependence on government subsidies and support for much of their adult lives”.

It encourages people with autism and various intellectual disabilities to choose higher education as a pathway for their life and break down the barriers preventing them from entering a college or university.
It is a must-pass bill. Obtaining a degree from a higher educational institution opens doors economically and academically that we can agree are vital to sustain life financially. The more educated people we have within our society the more productive a nation we can be.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration. We hope that we can work with you to support this bill and its passage. Have a wonderful day!

**Excerpts from Storybook**

“Yes my son is 10 years old, but I want him to start thinking about college and his future and have big aspirations. Just because he has autism my son should not feel like his future is limited in anyway. College is an option, a career is an option, dreaming big is a must. My kids having autism means that they think differently than others, it doesn’t mean that they should be the pride of opportunities that everybody should have” – Mother of son with autism

**Op-Ed**

Sabrina

*There Are No Limits to Breaking Down Limitations*

Watching your children grow up and graduate high school is a moment that is memorable for both the parent and kid. Every year hundreds of thousands of people look forward to this one event, graduation. It is a part of life that we just assume most people participate in. The idea of college after high school is seen as the standard and those who choose not to attend are making a choice outside of the norm. This choice can be for a variety of reasons however, it is important to note that it is a decision. But what about those who do not have a choice to go to college? Not because of financial barriers or lack of desire to, but because the admission criteria is exclusive and hinders certain people from participating. People with disabilities are barred from entering college at significantly high rates because of unfair and discriminatory criteria that makes attending college challenging.

Many people do not realize that a significant portion of the United States population has a disability. The CDC reports that 26% of Americans have a disability of some kind (CDC 2019). That is 1 in 4 Americans, whether it be mobility, hearing, or vision-based, fall within this category across all ages. The most common among them are related to learning at 42% (CDC 2019). Students with disabilities are entering college at a far lesser rate than their counterparts because they are unable to meet the requirements set by public state colleges. Although access to higher education for this group of people has always been a problem, it is essential that we stop to address this issue now in lieu of our rapidly changing workforce. Entry level jobs that typically require a high school diploma have increased their requirements to include some form of higher education. In 2020 35% of job openings will require at least a bachelor’s degree (Georgetown Public Policy Institute 2014).

Currently in Massachusetts, a program called the Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative (ICEI) is active in 13 schools across the state (Mass Department of Higher Education 2019). It is a program that partners with high schools in the state to aid students with disabilities in pursuing higher education courses and degrees. In addition, bill S.756/H.1219 An Act to create opportunities in higher education for students with intellectual disabilities, autism, and developmental disabilities, supports this program and is being discussed by legislators. If passed, this bill will grant students the opportunity to be immersed in a university environment that will have immense benefits on their personal and professional lives. It will not require these students to be evaluated based on GPA, academic requirements, MCAS, and other standardized exams. The purpose is to create more accurate methods of reviewing students since the current methods are not appropriate for measuring a student’s intellectual capabilities.

It is not a secret that the more educated people we have within our society the stronger we are as a nation. I believe that states across the United States should adopt the ICEI and encourage more students with disabilities to attend college if they desire to. More so, the initiative promotes inclusion and diversity among universities. National data from the Board on Children, Youth, and Families reported that “special education services for these students are often provided in ineffective and segregated programs, leading to poor employment outcomes, reliance on day habilitation programs, and costly dependence on government subsidies and support for much of their adult lives” (Breiner & Bonnie 2015). By creating space for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities in higher education we are giving millions of people the opportunity to enter the workforce, participate in the economy, and fully utilize their civic identity. I urge Massachusetts residents to reach out to their legislators advocating for the passage of the bill S.756/H.1219 that will continue to provide for students within their state. Let’s not have another June go by with hundreds of students not having a plan for their future.

Attending college is an opportunity for students with disabilities that impacts their lives outside of the classroom. It is the chance for students to gain knowledge, meet new people, develop viable skills for the workforce, and become employed. This should not just be seen as beneficial for students with disabilities. Non-disabled students and faculty will get to work alongside people who differ from them in an environment that promotes learning and inclusion. It is a valuable experience that everyone should have.
Joelle
You’re a parent who graduated with a college degree from a top tier Massachusetts state university. You dream of handing down your college sweatshirt to your child and helping them move into their dorm freshman year. Your child has autism and they are incredibly smart, but struggle passing the state academic requirements and the university’s minimum requirements. Unfortunately, your child cannot seize the opportunity to advance their education because the idea of attending college is not presented to them and they have no support or people in their corner when coming up with a plan when they graduate high school. You look at your child and see nothing but love and potential. They want to continue their education. They want to be independent and attend college. They want to graduate with a degree in psychology and help people. They want more and you know they work hard and deserve the chance to do more.

And now you must look them in the eyes and tell them, they can’t pursue their dream.

Students with intellectual and developmental disabilities and autism are not presented the opportunity to engage in college experiences with non-disabled students. These students are missing the opportunity to advance their education and find their passion in life. Additionally, they are at a disadvantage for developing the social and independent skills necessary for entering the workforce. We call our nation the “land of opportunity” – how can we say this if not everyone is being presented the same opportunities?

National data shows that 60% of people with intellectual disabilities with college experience are employed versus the 16% who are without the experience. This gap speaks for itself – people with cognitive disabilities who have college experience are far more likely to be employed. As our economy moves forward these next few years, it is becoming more important to receive a college education. It is predicted by 2020 that there will be 55 million job openings. However, 65% of these jobs will require a BA, some college, or an associate degree. If students with intellectual and developmental disabilities and autism are not presented the opportunity to attend college, they are at a disadvantage and will not qualify for over half the available jobs.

Bill S.756/H.1219, An Act creating higher education opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities, autism, and other developmental disabilities will break down the barriers that prevent students with said disabilities from attending college. The bill will allow students with disabilities to apply to state universities and colleges in Massachusetts without passing college entry requirements or state academic minimums. State colleges and universities will be required to promote inclusion among students with and without disabilities both in academic and non-academic settings.

The Department of Higher Education will provide grants to schools that promote more inclusion. In addition, the Department will form relationships between universities and other government agencies and departments who are engaged with students who have intellectual and developmental disabilities and autism.

This bill will open so many doors for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities and autism. Students will be presented with more options following their high school education. They will be included in all college activities and able to learn from the same experiences as everyone else. Students with intellectual and developmental disabilities and autism will qualify for more jobs and have more confidence and be able to find their passion in life.

Show your support for this bill by writing to Senator Anne M. Gobi, the Senator Chair for the Joint Committee on Higher Education, pushing for a hearing for Bill S.756/H.1219 and favoring the bill.

Every child deserves the opportunity to be presented the choice to attend college – it should not be decided for them ahead of time.

House Ways & Means Script
We are Sabrina Howard and Joelle MarkAnthony and we are students of Brandeis University who are passionate about creating equal academic opportunities for students with disabilities. Today, we are urging you to pass S.756/H.1219: An Act creating higher education opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities, autism, and other developmental disabilities. This bill will break down barriers for students with said disabilities to encourage growth in independence and the workforce.

National data has shown an employment rate of 16% for adults with intellectual disabilities who did not attend college. This number skyrockets to 66% for those who did attend college. Creating opportunities for anyone to obtaining a higher education is why we are writing to you today. Every student deserves and has the right to the opportunity to attend college. Attending a college or university not only has academic benefits, but also provides the opportunity to gain independence and social skills necessary for entering the workforce.

Currently, there is no proposed budget for the government on solving this issue. This bill proposes that government agencies and offices will offer grants to state universities and colleges for implementing better inclusion for disabled students. These grants will ensure the inclusion that the government and schools should be providing as their moral and ethical responsibility.

During the 2018 fiscal year $1,485,910 was spent on the Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment
Initiative (MICEI). Public higher education institutions can receive more funding through grants specifically designed to enroll and accommodate students with intellectual and developmental disabilities and autism. The funds will be used to retain employment specialists; assist students in meeting integrated competitive employment and other transition related goals; adopting procedures and funding mechanisms to ensure that new partnerships of public institutions of higher education and school districts providing inclusive concurrent enrollment programs fully utilize the models and expertise developed in existing partnerships; and conduct evaluations and research to further identify student outcomes and best practices; provided further, that the department of higher education shall be stronger and more inclusive to all.

Investing in this bill and providing grants will not only boost the confidence of individuals with disabilities but it will also aid the economy in the long run. With more people attending colleges and universities, the more people who will be qualified to fill jobs. People will be able to be more independent faster and companies will have the support and people they need to grow.

Every student deserves the opportunity to advance his or her learning should they wish to do so. We encourage you to pass this bill and change the future of all students for the greater good.

**Letter to the Legislator**

Dear Michael J. Barrett,

We are Joelle MarkAnthony and Sabrina Howard, student advocates from Brandeis University supporting S.756/H.1219: An Act creating higher education opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities, autism and other developmental disabilities. We are passionate about this bill’s passage since it will break down the barriers that currently make attending a higher education institution inaccessible for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities or autism. Everyone should have equal access to the opportunity to further one’s education. Obtaining a degree from a higher education increases chances for employment and allows a person to have greater independence.

It is paramount that students with said disabilities are given the chance to advance their education should they choose to. Currently, only 14.8% of Massachusetts residents with a cognitive disability aged 21-64 have a BA degree or higher. This number is inexcusably low. So much of the problem stems from the fact that these students are faced with the barriers of academic minimums and university enrollment requirements. This bill will create partnerships and new relationships among education departments and state departments with higher education institutions. Said institutions will be able to receive grants for implementing stronger inclusivity and creating better access for students with developmental and intellectual disabilities and autism.

We can all agree that obtaining a higher education makes individuals more likely to become employed and have greater individuality. Students with intellectual and developmental disabilities or autism will be given the chance to engage with students disabled and non-disabled. It is important for students to take part in academic and non-academic activities to form independence and real world skills. By interacting with people from all walks of life, students build their own identities and form their own opinions. Because of this, it is necessary that students with intellectual and developmental disabilities are presented the opportunity to attend higher education institutions to form the skills necessary for employment. National reports show an employment rate of 16% for adults with intellectual disabilities who did not attend college. This number skyrockets to 60% for those who did attend college. Creating opportunities for anyone to obtaining a higher education is why we are writing to you today.

We hope you encourage and support the passing of this bill to ensure a brighter future for all the students of Massachusetts.

Sincerely,

Sabrina Howard & Joelle MarkAnthony

**Excerpt from Campaign Journals**

Sabrina

*On meeting with Senator Pacheco’s aide, Brandon*

Joelle and I were asked where we were from. I replied New York City and Brandon said he was going to see Harry Potter with his girlfriend in the following weeks. We chatted about the play and the city and plans for post-graduation. It was nice to see Brandon’s guard drop for a bit. We felt that being connected we had a better chance of him actually passing along our message to the Senator who was out of the office at the time. When we went back to Senator Pacheco’s office during our second visit, the office was very busy and we could not even get a foot in the door. A women at the desk asked why we were there and told us to wait outside for someone. Brandon came out to speak with us. It did not seem like he remembered who we were. He asked how he could help and after our 30 second elevator pitch about a clip for our video, Brandon said he would pass the message along and turned for the door. I asked how Harry Potter was. He loved it and said he’d highly recommend it. The conversation about the play lasted longer than the one about the bill/video. I think because we went in with the expectation that we would speak with someone, it was a little abrupt when we were talked to in the hallway for a few minutes.
On call with Sylvia*, mother of child with autism

I know Sylvia from back home in New York City. She is 30 years old and has three children. She is aware that many of my projects involve my interviewing people and was happy to help. We set up a time to speak on the phone. I explained to her first via email what the assignment was and what bill we were working with. When on the phone I spent time going over what the class was like and what I had researched so far.

Sylvia and I spent time thinking about the ICEI and if there were any programs in NY that were similar. Sylvia said that she would vote or advocate for the bill if she could. I had a list of questions to ask in relation to the bill and her role as a mother of a child with disabilities. She seemed much more comfortable with me asking the questions instead of trying to make conversation out of her answers. Because we were using the quotes from this transcript in our story book I tried to make the questions open ended and jot down what she was saying without paraphrasing too much. I had this interview much earlier in the semester so I was not fully aware of all the pieces of the bill or people involved as I am now.

If I were to do it again, I would ask for a skype call and hopefully have multiple people present. I wanted to have a group of students with disabilities speak about their experience at a higher education institution alongside Sylvia’s testimony about her own kids and her dreams for them. If given more time...this is something I would have liked to do for the video.

*name has been changed

Joelle

On meeting Senator Comerford

Senator Comerford was moved by our advocacy efforts. She said what we were doing was exactly what democracy should be – people advocating for the changes they want to see and approaching their representatives. She said she was not aware of all the good this bill could do and assured us that she would support it and share her support with Senator Anne M. Gobi, the Senator Chair for the Joint Committee on Higher Education.

Senator Comerford made us feel heard and comfortable. She was engaged and asked us questions about the bill and ourselves. We shared our personal stories and she said that she agreed with this bill's position. She wrote down information and was genuine in her responses. She asked to take a photo of us, and we happily agreed. We asked if she had a minute for us to take a video of her speaking about the bill. She said she would love to, and we recorded the clip on my phone. When we finished, we exited the conference room and Senator Comerford told her aides the number and to begin researching more information and that she was going to speak to Senator Gobi about the bill. She walked us out and we chatted about the bill as we began to leave the State House. It was one of my favorite meetings. I felt heard and like I had made a difference in only a few minutes. This meeting tied everything together about how the advocacy process works and how important it is in legislation.

Update

A joint hearing was held on June 11th. Massachusetts Advocates for Children, one of the testifying advocacy groups reported, “All the self-advocates underscored the importance of attending college with their nondisabled peers, allowing them to gain the skills necessary to secure paid employment and live more independently, actively participating in the community.”

For more information

View the bill (MA legislature website):
S. 756: https://malegislature.gov/Bills/191/S756
H.1219: https://malegislature.gov/Bills/191/H1219

Organization or Coalition support:
Massachusetts Advocates for Children: https://massadvocates.org