Senate 756, based on the success of the Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative (MAICEI), strives to implement inclusive higher education programs across public institutions and therefore bridge the inequitable education gap that currently exists within Massachusetts. Students with disabilities would experience college with their neuro-typical peers as they audit or take credit-bearing courses; attending postsecondary classes while joining extracurricular activities would ultimately lead to an increase in their independence.

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

Elevator Speech
Hello, my name is Jessica Rosner and my name is Angie Hwang. We are students from Brandeis University passionately advocating for our fellow students with disabilities. We all know that higher education leads to more opportunities beyond academia, including better employment and more independence. The Commonwealth has been a leader in innovative and inclusive education before and has the chance to create monumental change once more by pioneering efforts to bridge the inequitable education gap. As college students, we are extremely concerned that in this day and age, students with disabilities are still being excluded from educational conversations. This lack of education decreases the likelihood of employment - 80% unemployment rate for students with disabilities who did not attend college - which leads to limited independence. They are being deprived of the college experience, but luckily, Senator Lovely and S.756 are working towards more inclusive opportunities by mainstreaming more Massachusetts public universities. This bill would integrate students with disabilities into classrooms with neuro-typical students and eventually lead to a more integrated education and workforce.

As we advocate for this bill with Senator Lovely, we ask you to encourage Senator Gobi, as the Chair of the Committee on Higher Education, to vote favorably for S.756. Thank you for meeting with us. We look forward to seeing the progression of this bill.

Excerpt from Storybook
“The problem isn’t to be found in the nature of these students. The problem is to be found in a hierarchical and so-called ‘meritocratic’ system of higher education that systematically
excludes an entire class of our fellow citizens. This bill may cause those of us in college settings some difficulties, from admissions to curriculum design. And it should. Disabled, not disabled, professor or student, we all have much more to gain by embracing this bill and struggling with its implications than we do by maintaining the status quo.” – Stephen Gulley, Ph.D. MSW of Brandeis University

**House Ways & Means Script:**

To Senator Michael J. Rodrigues and members of Ways and Means Committee:

We all know higher education leads to more opportunities beyond academia, including better employment and more independence. As college students ourselves, we are extremely concerned by the fact that students with disabilities have been excluded from the college experience. This lack of educational opportunities leads to fewer employment opportunities which then leads to even less independence for these students.

Fortunately, S.756/H.1219 aims to create more opportunities for students with disabilities in higher education, which would help to bridge the equitable education gap. This bill works towards mainstreaming more Massachusetts public universities by way of integrating students with disabilities into classrooms with neuro-typical students. This would eventually lead to a more integrated education and workforce. In order to implement this bill, a grant program would need to be funded in order to give financial aid to the state universities accepting these students. This grant program would assist in meeting the transitional needs of eligible students and support partnerships that provide the participation of students with disabilities in credit-bearing and non-credit courses. This program may seem financially daunting; however, the funds from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) would be purposed towards funding this initiative. The IDEA mandates the federal government to provide 40% of funding for special education but has yet to uphold this empty promise. That is a matter of federal accountability, not state responsibility.

In addition to federal funds being allocated for S.756/H.1219, a similar program, the Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative (MAICEI), already exists and has been successfully mainstreaming students with disabilities since 2007. MAICEI offers grants to school districts that send their eligible students (aged 18 to 21) with intellectual disabilities to attend postsecondary. The success of MAICEI has already demonstrated that such efforts to bridge the inequitable education gap can be implemented in Massachusetts and monumentally change the lives of students with disabilities. S.756/H.1219 would go even further than the objectives of MAICEI by allowing these students to become more independent by attending public universities with the intentions of gaining experience and later joining the workforce, which would be seen as a return for the economy. These students would have more options in terms of employment, increasing the likelihood of them being actively involved within their community and independently earning their own incomes.

Transitional programs, such as MAICEI and similar programs set up by organizations like Massachusetts Advocates for Children, assists students with disabilities in integrating into mainstream life after secondary schooling. Although such initiatives help these individuals beyond academia, they are only baby steps towards achieving a more inclusive workforce and society; the passing of S.756 would serve as an essential stepping stone. In addition to creating more equitable education opportunities for all, integrating students with disabilities into higher education would be a benefit for the public good because it would lead to lower unemployment rates as 80% of people with disabilities who did not attend college are currently unemployed. With a higher education, these students would have more options for employment, and therefore, more independence. As illustrated by research conducted on programs similar to MAICEI and S.756/H.1219, we have learned that integrating students with disabilities into higher education is more financially feasible than programs for students in Kindergarten through 12th grade. The House ways and means budget for earlier services in Massachusetts is $30,825,436 while the budget for the MAICEI program is $2,002,977. As an extension of the MAICEI program, S.756 would not require any additional funds as it would be covered by the funding allocated from the federal government for IDEA.

Opponents may argue that utilizing funding from IDEA for S.756 may negatively impact the funding for other district programs. Tom Sannicandro, the director of the Massachusetts Association of Community Colleges, explained how superintendents of school districts may not want to support S.756/H.1219 because of the time and money needed to support such programs. However, the program does not take away resources from neuro-typical students but creates more opportunities for students with disabilities, a community that has been underserved for far too long. With MAICEI already existing in 16 Massachusetts schools with two universities being self-sufficient, consistent funding is all that is necessary to maintain this initiative.

The Commonwealth has been a leader in innovative and inclusive education before and has the chance to create monumental change once more. Numerous early intervention and secondary services exist for younger individuals with disabilities while minimal resources are available for those after high school. As we advocate for this bill along with Senator Lovely, we ask you to consider maintaining consistent funding for this program as it will benefit not only students
with disabilities but all of society. Thank you for meeting with us. We look forward to seeing the progression of this bill.

Letter to the Legislator

Dear Senator Michael Barrett,

As students who attend Brandeis University, we are pleased to see that within your successful career in the House of Representatives and now in the Massachusetts Senate, you have been a champion of civil rights for marginalized communities. When you began as a legislator, one of the most underserved populations were those with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and even to this day, they still remain deprived of certain opportunities, such as education. We are advocating for a bill (S.756, H.1218, and H.1219) to help these students and are now asking for you your help as we continue this journey.

As the youth of Massachusetts, students, regardless of the presence or absence of disabilities, deserve the chance to pursue their educations. We can all agree that higher education leads to more opportunities beyond academia, including more employment and more independence. However, the majority of students with disabilities (SWDs), specifically intellectual disabilities, autism, and other developmental disabilities, currently do not have the option to attend college. Only 66.5% of SWDs graduate high school with an even smaller percentage pursuing postsecondary education.

As a state, we have the opportunity to advocate for these students with S.756/H.1219. An Act creating higher education opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities, autism and other developmental disabilities. Through mainstreaming, the integration of students with disabilities with neurotypical students into one environment, S.756/H.1219 would enable these students to attend public universities in the state and receive certificates after completing credit bearing courses, which leads to more employment choices and more independence.

Opposition to this bill may include the administration of universities/colleges and neurotypical students along with their parents. First, donors and alumni may argue the prestigious reputations of these universities would shift after accepting SWDs who are “unqualified” because they did not pass the MCAS or receive their high school diplomas, however this claim cannot be substantiated.

Second, administration may be hesitant to support this bill because the financial aspects behind providing specialized resources for these new students being integrated into their schools. In addition, neurotypical students and their parents may oppose because they may assume mainstreaming would take away opportunities from them. However, an initiative similar to the objective of S.756 known as the Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative (MAICEI) already exists and has been successfully mainstreaming SWDs into colleges since 2007. As a matter of fact, MAICEI has been so successful that S.756 is an extension of this program and creates more equitable opportunities for all youth in Massachusetts rather than taking away from one student to empower another.

As the former chair of the Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities and the Disabilities Caucus, you have protected those with disabilities before and have the opportunity to do so once again. We encourage you, as the Senator of our district, to bolster this bill as it moves through committees, especially in the Ways and Means Committee. Thank you for being such a powerful advocate for minority groups, including individuals with disabilities. We look forward to seeing the progression of S.756/H.1219.

Sincerely,

Angelina Hwang and Jessica Rosner

Excerpts from Campaign Journals:

Angie

On meeting with Senator Lovely and Legislative Director, Mark Sternman

Before making our way downtown to the State House, I prepared questions for Senator Lovely and her legislative director, Mark Sternman. They were both caring and passionate.... She shared her personal story but could not tell me the definition of a “severe disability”, in regards to the bill. Mark admitted that the guidelines that would be established have yet to be addressed and would not be determined until after the bill passes. According to Mark, a symbiotic relationship exists between legislators and the various departments that have in the past and will continue to collaborate to create the best possible Commonwealth, so they will work together to consider which guidelines would best serve the most students. Senator Lovely expressed that she is more than willing to be flexible in revising the bill as long as changes would make S.756/H.1219 stronger, better, and more inclusive; learning about her openness to evolve the bill as the conversation shifts was reassuring to me as a student in higher education and as an advocate of educational equity for students with disabilities. Although she could not answer all of my burning questions, our meeting was a success. I learned her personal story and her motivation behind her passionate advocacy for this marginalized community. We connected today not only as players in the legislative process but also as individuals who dream of and strive towards equity for those with disabilities. Our first meeting went really well, and I remember feeling even more excited to advocate with Senator Lovely and Mark, who provided his business card and offered to speak to me about the bill whenever.

Angelina Hwang and Jessica Rosner
On meeting Julia Landau, Massachusetts Advocates for Children

Angie and I had a meeting with Julia Landau, a representative from Massachusetts Advocates for Children on April 10, 2019 in her office at MAC in Boston. This meeting was extremely informative and also a bit overwhelming. Julia is an intense and impressive person and was every bit as knowledgeable as I imagined her to be (both Tom and Johanne told Angie and I we should speak with her because of how much she has done for the bill’s progress). During our meeting, we discussed all of the meetings that Angie and I previously had and all we had learned from the Senators. She asked what we were telling senators when we met with them so I began to tell her our elevator pitch. I was not quite prepared to do the speech yet again as it had almost been a month since I had said it. As I began to give the speech, I said “Massachusetts has fallen behind in education” and she got very offended by this statement. Luckily, Angie saved me as I stammered and tried to find the words to continue.

The rest of the meeting went very well as we discussed the budget process (as one of the budgets for 2020 had just come out) and she explained how S.756 would require no additional money as it would be an extension of the line item of MAICEI. Something I learned from the meeting with Julia is that it is okay to be intimidated by someone as impressive as Julia but to remember that she is just like me, a passionate person trying to help others. If I ever encounter someone like Julia again, I think I will definitely be better equipped and will know how to respond if I am asked difficult questions.

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.”