



April 25, 2023

Senator Omar Fateh
95 University Avenue W.
Minnesota Senate Bldg., Room 3219
St. Paul, MN 55155

Representative Gene Pelowski, Jr.
591 State Office Building
100 Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr Blvd
St. Paul, MN 55155

Chair Fateh and Chair Pelowski,

After decades of disinvestment, we want to thank Chair Fateh, Chair Pelowski, Majority Leader Dziedzic, Speaker Hortman and Governor Walz for making a historic investment in higher education this legislative session. The \$650 million budget target allows the conference committee to make investments in our students to address the challenges they face around college affordability and meeting their basic needs.

This bold investment comes at a critical time when our economy demands more skilled workers from plumbers to nurses to teachers; yet the public is questioning the value of higher education because of rapidly rising tuition rates. Now is a perfect opportunity for the conference committee to make strategic investments in our students by making college affordable to low-income students who no longer believe that they can afford to obtain a higher education.

We are asking the conference committee to be hyper-focused on the needs of our students because higher education is nothing without the students. Students are not just an enrollment or budget number; we are the future of our communities and our state.

As the statewide student association representing 100,000 Minnesota community and technical college students, we are acutely aware of the needs of students because we are students. We want to thank the Senate for intentionally elevating the voice of student throughout the legislative session to ensure that the proposals being considered are not written by lobbyists, but benefit those for which our higher education exists to serve – the students.

We ask the conference committee to focus on these top priorities:

1. **Minnesota Commitment to Higher Education**

The more Minnesota puts into its people, the more it gets back. We came together to make K-12 free to all, to build community colleges, and to provide soldiers with a college education after WWII. These decisions helped us build the greatest middle class ever.

But today, right when a college degree is more important than ever, our leaders have backtracked on commitments for public colleges. It is time to recommit, so that everyone can get a college degree without the burden of student loan debt. We need to ensure Minnesota is a land where all can dream big, develop the potential of our people, and realize our greatest aspirations, and that means making our public colleges and universities affordable to all of us.

The Senate's free college provision will make college finally affordable to low-income students because it provides support beyond just tuition, with the Pell grant matching provisions. Research from Free College programs around the country shows the positive impacts of free college programs, from enrollment, to addressing racial inequities in college completion, to boosting the workforce. In fact, Minnesota has a number of successful free college programs, like the one at Pine Technical College that has boosted enrollment at a time when every college in the state has seen significant declines. And Governor Walz's Free Nursing Assistant Training Initiative which has trained over 1000 nurses to meet a critical workforce need across the state. These programs work because the message is clear: you can afford to go to



college. It is that simple message that can be used to bring more people into higher education and place them on a path toward the American Dream. **Nothing in this omnibus higher education bill will have a greater impact in addressing the college affordability crisis than investing in the Minnesota Commitment to Higher Education.**

2. Investments in Addressing Basic Needs

We thank both the Minnesota House and Senate for supporting the \$26 million request for student support services. This investment will provide resources to colleges and universities so that they may help address students basic needs and complete their degree. A report by Gallup found that 63% of associate degree students considered dropping out because of emotional stress. To address the mental health crisis, students need more resources on campus to help us stay in school, graduate and move into the workforce.

We urge the conference committee to include language that creates a basic needs taskforce so that the state of Minnesota can develop a comprehensive plan to address student basic needs.

Over the last six years the legislature has supported a variety of efforts to address these issues, but now is the time to assess that work across Minnesota's higher education institutions. The Senate's language will allow students, faculty and staff to come together across the state to identify policy recommendations to best support students.

One of the programs that we know has been effective at addressing food insecurity is the Hunger Free Campus program and grants. **We urge the conference committee to allocate the Senate funding of \$1.8 million to the Hunger Free Campus grants** because institutions need these resources to provide food resources to their students. Minnesota is facing a food cliff with the end of the health emergency and campus food pantries will not be able to provide adequate food to support students in the next two years without additional support. The Senate acknowledges this crisis by allocating an additional \$500,000 in FY24 for one-time equipment grants to food pantries.

3. Emergency Assistance for Students

All too many students live on the edge and are just an unexpected financial situation away from having to drop out of school. Emergency grants for students have proven to have a tremendous impact on a student's ability to overcome unexpected financial situations that can often negatively impact their academic success. They work not because they are providing students with large amounts of money, but because they can jumpstart a process to connect students with a campus support system that prevents them from being in an emergency again. **We urge the conference committee to allocate the Senate target of \$14.4 million for the emergency grant program.**

4. Z-Degree and Open Educational Resource Funding

LeadMN supports investments that expand Z-Degree's to more of our community and technical colleges. On average, Minnesota community and technical college students pay \$1,200 a year in textbook costs, which are often paid out of pocket. These high costs often lead to students delaying the purchase of textbooks and falling behind in class, or place students in a position in which they have to choose between meeting their own basic needs or buying a textbook. The Z-Degree program and further investments in OER have proven that they can have a major impact on college affordability and improving student success. **We urge the conference committee to allocate the House target of \$2 million for the open textbook and z-degree programs.**

5. Student Parent Support Initiative

If Minnesota is going to address the workforce shortage, we need to provide skills to student parents so that they can obtain a higher paying job. However, student parents face a myriad of challenges in going back to school and completing their degree. We support the House target of providing \$7 million base budget support to this program. One-time money is not what student parents need.



In addition to the priorities above, we wanted to recognize some additional priorities that we urge the conference committee to support:

- **Tuition Freeze**

The enrollment declines and the pandemic have highlighted the critical need to make college more affordable for future students. According to the Education Trust, Minnesota has the fifth most unaffordable two-year colleges in the United States for low-income students. The National College Attainment Network also found that 60% of Minnesota two-year colleges are not affordable for low-income students.

Our students are putting in the work to support their educations, but we need the state to continue to invest in community and technical colleges and keep tuition frozen to help ensure college remains affordable and accessible to all Minnesotans. We believe that the free college effort is the best way to make college affordable because it will target those that need it the most. That being said, **we urge the conference committee to consider including both free college and a tuition freeze for students in the final omnibus bill.** Such a move will send a message that the Minnesota legislature wants to truly make college affordable for students.

- **Minnesota State Stabilization Funding**

We thank both the House and Senate for supporting Minnesota State's request for stabilization support. This money will protect critical programs and services on campus to ensure that student continue to receive a quality education.

- **Menstrual Products Policy and Funding**

We urge the conference committee to support the Senate's position on mandating colleges and universities provide menstrual products free of charge in restrooms. This is a basic needs and gender equity issue for our students.

- **State Grant Simplification and Federal Conformity**

The coming changes to the FAFSA process will dramatically improve the financial aid process for students and it is critical that the state of Minnesota has the resources to conform to the new process and simplify the state grant program. **We thank the House and Senate for being aligned on this issue.**

- **Workforce Scholarships**

LeadMN supports the expansion of the workforce development scholarships to construction, education and public safety-related programs and the added flexibility for colleges to designate an eligible program every two-years based on regional workforce needs. The continued expansion, increased flexibility, and funding of this program not only improves college affordability for the students who receive the scholarships, but also benefits the businesses and sectors in which these students intend to work. When these students graduate with less student debt, they will be able to buy homes, start small businesses, grow their families, and invest back into their communities.

- **Supplemental Aid to Non-Metro Colleges:** Additional investments are needed to ensure that access to an affordable and quality education is available for students residing outside the Twin Cities metro area. Our rural colleges are critical to the vitality and success of our Greater Minnesota communities and workforce. Without adequate investments in these colleges, our state will struggle to meet the demands of the 21st century economy. Many of these colleges are the only accessible postsecondary institutions for significant distances, making it even more critical to provide them with the funding they need to connect with and educate students in our rural communities.



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- **Sexual assault policy funding**
Colleges and universities need resources to effectively implement the sexual assault policies. We thank the House and the Senate for agreeing to fund this important initiative.
- **ISRS/NextGen funding**
The integrated statewide record system is critical to the academic success of our students because it is how students track their progress toward their degree. Over the last several years Minnesota State has been working to update this system and this funding is critical to ensuring that they can finish this project.

We want to thank the conference committee for listening to the concerns and priorities of our students. Our community and technical college students need you to keep them at the center of your decisions as you move forward in the final weeks of session. As the future welders, electricians, farmers, nurses, police officers, mechanics, and counselors, they are the backbone of our state economy, our local communities, and the success of our state.

In closing, we want to thank you for your efforts throughout this entire legislative session in supporting students' basic needs and college affordability. Our students have greatly appreciated the opportunity to work with you on student focused provisions, and for the opportunity to share their personal stories and struggles with you as they work towards their degrees. Thank you for making our students a priority!

Sincerely,

John Runningen
President
LeadMN – College Students Connecting for Change

cc: Senator Putnam
Senator Oumou Verbeten
Representative Wolgamott
Representative O'Neill
Governor Tim Walz
Commissioner Dennis Olson