

March 28, 2023

Dear Education Finance Committee Chair Youakim and Members of the Committee,

I am writing to request that you strike lines 69.32 through 70.3 of the DE1 amendment to HF 2497 which states an eligible institution must not require a faith statement during the application process or base any part of the admission decision on a student's race, creed, ethnicity, disability, gender, or sexual orientation or religious beliefs or affiliations. I write this letter not only as the parent of a current PSEO student, but someone whose academic career was positively changed by my own PSEO experience at a private faith-based college.

Almost 30 years ago, I was a high school student who was unsure about what I was going to do after high school. I wasn't sure if I was smart enough to make it through college, but a guidance counselor at my high school told me about Minnesota's PSEO program and encouraged me to apply to the College of St. Scholastica in Duluth. To say that I was an unremarkable student would be to put it mildly. My grades were quite mediocre, I wasn't athletic and didn't feel like I had any special talents. Though not a troubled kid, I didn't really start getting my act together until my last two years of high school. For some reason, this guidance counselor thought that PSEO would be a good experience for me. I ended up getting accepted into their program and took only three classes during my senior year, but it was by far the best thing that happened to me in high school. My experience at CSS allowed me to experience college classes, earn some college credit and realize that I could make it through a four-year college successfully. Ultimately, I ended up attending a different college and earning a four-year degree. The degree I chose was heavily influenced by those positive early experiences with classes at CSS. I have often wondered what my path would have looked like after high school if I didn't have that PSEO experience that gave this unremarkable high school student a chance to try something that felt outside of her comfort zone.

I could tell you about the positive experience my son has had at the University of Northwestern through their online PSEO program, but I'm sure you have received many, many letters that echo a similar sentiment. If this bill passes and the faith-based universities are required to drop their statement of faith requirement for admission, a couple of the major providers of PSEO have said that they WILL drop their in-person program. For these universities, faith is an integral part of what makes these schools who they are. What impact will this have statewide? There will be less seats available, which will increase the competition for in-person learning. The students with excellent grades or great test scores will not be the ones that will lose out on this experience. It will be the marginal students who could stand to benefit the most -- Students like 17-year-old me, back in 1994, that felt like a "nothing" and that I wasn't college material. In an education bill that is meant to improve education in Minnesota, passing this portion will be detrimental and downright devastating for some students who inevitably lose out. How is this helping to improve education for Minnesota high school students who are at a pivotal time in their lives?

From a finance standpoint, faith-based universities who are participating in PSEO classes are not directly funded by the state of Minnesota. The tuition is paid by the student, who receives PSEO credit for a course which is funded by the state. The state is not funding PSEO-eligible courses. They are funding a student's tuition for the PSEO-eligible courses that the student registered for. This is an important difference. Although universities like UNW and Crown are Christian institutions, all the classes that are offered through the PSEO program are non-sectarian, so no tuition is going toward "religious" content. Students in the state have many choices on where they can choose to attend PSEO. No one is being forced to attend a Christian university or take classes with religious content in order to earn college credit and taxpayers are not funding faith-based colleges.

Please amend this bill to remove the language stating that PSEO can only be offered through institutions that do not require a statement of faith.

Sincerely,

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