



May 3, 2021

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St. Paul, MN 55155

Representative Connie Bernardy  
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Chair Bernardy and Chair Tomassoni,

The 2021 higher education omnibus bill comes after the most disruptive and difficult year in modern higher education, at a moment when the students of now and tomorrow will be able to look at as an inflection point—the moment where their dreams of a better life were secured by responsive public policy or foundered and sunk on the edges of an unaffordable and unsupportive system. If we want students to come back to higher education, then things must be different going forward. We must be even more hyper focused on students – making college more affordable, responding to their basic needs, and ensuring their success – because 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 180,000 Minnesota community and technical college students, we strive to bring to you the student voice to provide student centered solutions and feedback. This session, we have worked to bring forward multiple policies on mental health and basic needs that meet the moment of the pandemic and the challenges of modern college students head on, and we hope that you will join with us in making those student focused solutions a reality.

**Investments in Community and Technical Colleges and Freezing Tuition:** Thank you for your support for making college more affordable through tuition cuts and tuition freezes this session. LeadMN supports Minnesota State's budget request for \$75 million in campus responsiveness and stabilization funds, along with a freeze in tuition for our community and technical college students. Minnesota's community and technical colleges serve more students of color than all of Minnesota's public and private non-profit universities combined. They also serve the most low-income students and returning adult learners. If we want our state to be successful in closing opportunity gaps, meeting our degree attainment and workforce needs, and eliminating social and economic disparities, then we need the legislature to invest more in the postsecondary institutions and system that educates the backbone of our state, and can provide the best path to success, Minnesota State.

In the current biennium, state funding for higher education made up about 7% of the state's expenditures, prior to the 2008 Great Recession it was over 9% and in the early 1990's it was over 14%. Students need the state to reprioritize higher education funding. A 2020 report by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York found increased state appropriations at two-year colleges led to higher degree attainment and better long-term financial outcomes for students such as increased income, homeownership, and car buying. They also found that for every \$1000 increase in state appropriations per student at a two-year college, it also made it 15% more likely for a student to transfer to a university, and 20% more likely for a student to complete a bachelor's degree.<sup>1</sup> This report is just one of many that illustrates the positive impact that increased state investments can have on improving student outcomes.

The pandemic has also further 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

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<sup>1</sup> Chakrabarti, R., Gorton, N., Lovenheim, M. State Investment in Higher Education: Effects on Human Capital Formation, Student Debt, and Long-Term Financial Outcomes of Students, 2020 [https://www.newyorkfed.org/medialibrary/media/research/staff\\_reports/sr941.pdf](https://www.newyorkfed.org/medialibrary/media/research/staff_reports/sr941.pdf)



States for low-income students.<sup>2</sup> The National College Attainment Network also found that 60% of Minnesota two-year colleges are not affordable for low-income students.<sup>3</sup> 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.

**Mental Health Awareness Program and Basic Needs Support:** LeadMN strongly supports and urges the adoption of the mental health and basic needs provisions include in the Senate omnibus bill, along with funding to implement them and further address these issues. This session LeadMN students worked to introduce two bills, SF2001 and SF1631, which were included in the Senate omnibus higher education bill. These provisions require the creation of a Mental Health Awareness program at each college and university, easily accessible information on mental health on each college's website, funding for mental health training, the creation of a basic needs resource hub, and the creation of a basic needs resource trigger to get students support as soon as they enter the doors of a college, rather than waiting until they are in crisis.

Over the course of this session, students have raised the issues of mental health and basic needs in committee hearing after committee hearing. These provisions were designed based on best practices and feedback directly from our students. By bringing a student focused lens and student voice to these policies, we know that they will have a real impact when enacted. Including these provisions in the final omnibus bill will help ensure that meaningful, student focused steps, are taken at every community and technical college to address these issues.

**Hunger Free Campus Grants and Expansion:** LeadMN strongly supports the Hunger Free Campus competitive grant language included in the Senate omnibus bill. This session LeadMN worked closely with the Senate to help craft this grant language, which will ensure that funding is directed to colleges whose students have the highest need. LeadMN also supports the expansion of the Hunger Free Campus Act designation to students at Minnesota State Universities, University of Minnesota, and the private non-profit universities. When community and technical college students transfer to a university, be it public or private, the issue of hunger transfers with them. Expanding the Hunger Free Campus Act designation to Minnesota's universities will ensure that they have resources in place to help students who are struggling with food insecurity.

**Workforce Scholarships:** LeadMN supports the expansion of the workforce development scholarships to construction-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.

**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 \$1200 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.

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony Jr, M., Nichols, A., Oliver Schak, J. How Affordable are Public Colleges in Your State For Low-Income Students?, 2019. <https://edtrustmain.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/18122721/How-Affordable-Are-Public-Colleges-in-Your-State-for-Students-from-Low-Income-Background-December-2019.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> The Growing Gap, Public Higher Education's Declining Affordability for Pell Grant Recipients, National College Attainment Network. 2020



**Online Tuition Differential Refund:** As stated in the fiscal note for SF2101, “Colleges and universities were directed to not charge the differential rate if courses transitioned online were not intended to be sustained beyond the pandemic.” It should be ensured that this guidance was enforced at all colleges, and refunds or tuition credits should be issued to students if it was not.

**Supplemental Aid to Non-Metro Colleges:** Additional investments are needed in order 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 21<sup>st</sup> century economy. Many of these colleges are the only accessible postsecondary institution 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.

**Transcript Access:** LeadMN supports the language included in the House higher education omnibus bill that would prevent colleges from withholding transcripts if a student has an outstanding balance of less than \$500. Minor outstanding financial balances should not hold students back from educational or economic success.

**Increased Funding for Emergency Assistance Grants:** LeadMN supports continued funding for the Emergency Assistance for Postsecondary Students program. 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 and lead to dropping out.

**Childcare Grant Improvements:** LeadMN supports the improvements and changes to the Minnesota Childcare Grant. These changes will make the grants more accessible to our student parents at a time when many are being crushed by the costs of childcare.

**Student Focused Solutions:** 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’ mental health, 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,

Priscilla Mayowa  
President  
LeadMN – College Students Connecting for Change