

**Testimony of David Thompson**

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**Prepared for the Minnesota House of Representatives  
Committee on Higher Education**

Regarding HF 2073, FY 2023-24 Higher Education Budget

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My name is David Thompson. I am a practitioner-researcher at The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice and a resident of St. Cloud, Minnesota. **The Hope Center’s primary expertise is in basic needs security among college students.** We provide coaching and technical assistance to institutional staff and faculty, as well as to state and federal agency leaders. The Hope Center also conducts an annual basic needs survey of college students, the largest such survey in the nation.

I testify today regarding HF 2073, the 2023-24 higher education budget bill. My testimony can be summarized as follows: The State Legislature should adopt the higher funding levels for the Student Parent Support Initiative, the Basic Needs Working Group, the Hunger-Free Campus Initiative, and the Emergency Assistance for Postsecondary Students (EAPS) initiative.

The evidence is clear: addressing students’ basic needs is essential for ensuring their success in college.<sup>1</sup> Our work at The Hope Center shows that basic needs insecurity in higher education is real, pervasive, and something that we can absolutely solve with the right combination of political will and strategic investment. If we fail to meet students’ basic needs, they will face a much steeper and more treacherous path to a college degree. Each student forced out of higher education is a personal tragedy, a failure for the Minnesota state economy, and a waste of state taxpayer dollars.

### STUDENT PARENT SUPPORT INITIATIVE

Nationally, more than one-in-five undergraduate and nearly one-in-three graduate students are parenting a dependent child while enrolled in classes.<sup>2</sup> Parenting students earn grades comparable to non-parenting students but complete college at much lower rates, reflecting nonacademic challenges that often undermine student success.<sup>3</sup> In the most recent Hope Center Student Basic Needs Survey, seven out of ten parenting students reported experiencing food or housing insecurity—a rate that is 15 percentage points higher than non-parenting students.<sup>4</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, almost half of all parenting students missed at least three or more classes in the last semester because they lacked adequate child care.

We applaud Governor Tim Walz’s proposal for a Minnesota Student Parent Support Initiative, which will provide critical support to pregnant and parenting students. The program will fund

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<sup>1</sup> Broton, K. & Cady, C. (2020). *Food Insecurity on Campus: Action and Intervention*. Johns Hopkins University Press; Wolfson, J. et al. (2021). The effect of food insecurity during college on graduation and type of degree attained: evidence from a nationally representative longitudinal survey. *Public Health Nutrition*, DOI: [10.1017/S1368980021003104](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980021003104)

<sup>2</sup> Author calculations from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study: 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Anderson, A. & Green, A (December 2022). [Roadmap for change to support pregnant and parenting students](#). Urban Institute.

<sup>4</sup> The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. (2021, March). [#RealCollege 2021: Basic needs security during the ongoing pandemic](#).

grants to create or expand campus-based child care and increase access to community-based providers at a time when many students struggle to afford these services.

Providing state funding to address the shortage of child care for parenting students will help more students complete a degree or credential and enter the workforce at a time when federal resources are woefully insufficient. In Minnesota, just 13 percent of federal Child Care Development Fund resources support parents enrolled in education and training activities.<sup>5</sup> Without federal support, colleges have found on-campus child care challenging to sustain. The proposed state child care funding under this is an essential first step in stabilizing the financial model for child care delivery to parenting students.

The Minnesota Student Parent Support Initiative represents a significant step forward in addressing the needs of students whose daily struggles are rarely appreciated. Supporting pregnant and parenting students and their children is a wise and timely investment in student success and economic growth. **The Hope Center supports the Senate proposal to fund SPSI at \$6.67 million in FY 2024.**

### **BASIC NEEDS WORKING GROUP**

For many years, policymakers viewed the needs of students in higher education through the prism of two financial levers: tuition and financial aid. While these factors often determine whether a student will be able to enroll in college and complete with a degree or credential, the student experience is far more complex than a simple tuition affordability ratio can capture. Indeed, tuition and fees comprise only one-fifth of the cost of attendance at the average community college nationwide, and only two-fifths of the cost of attendance at the average public four-year college.<sup>6</sup> The other 80 percent and 60 percent, respectively, of students' cost of attendance result from non-tuition expenses like housing, food, transportation, child care, and technology.

In 2019, the Hope Center published its report on basic needs insecurity among Minnesota college students. Almost 10,000 students at 25 two-year and three four-year public colleges and universities responded. According to these students:

- 37% were food insecure in the prior 30 days
- 48% were housing insecure in the previous year
- 18% were homeless in the previous year

Such widespread basic needs insecurity has pernicious effects. It leads to anxiety and depression, distracts students from their academic studies, undermines academic performance, and heightens the risk of dropout. It is imperative that Minnesota explore student basic needs insecurity to

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<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2022, May). [FY 2020 Preliminary Data Table 10 - Reasons for Receiving Care, Average Monthly Percentage of Families.](#)

<sup>6</sup> Ma, J. & Pender, M. (2022). [Trends in college pricing and student aid 2022.](#) College Board.

identify opportunities at both the policy and institutional levels to strengthen students' ability to meet their basic needs. **The Hope Center supports the Senate proposal to establish a Basic Needs Working Group managed by the Office of Higher Education.**

### **EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE FOR POSTSECONDARY STUDENTS**

The Emergency Assistance for Postsecondary Students (EAPS) program provides vital emergency aid for students in need. Unlike financial aid, it is not distributed on an academic term schedule according to complex eligibility rules. Rather, emergency aid goes to students who experience a contingent event that endangers their ability to continue their postsecondary education. Most of us have known someone who went through such an experience: a car breaks down, a laptop dies, a rent payment comes due at the wrong time. In a job market characterized by volatility, low wages, and multiple part-time jobs, such emergencies are likely to become increasingly normalized. What's more, few students can count on family or personal savings to float them during difficult times.

Emergency aid gets students the assistance they need rapidly to ensure they can stay enrolled in college and remain focused on their classes. **The Hope Center supports the Senate proposal to invest \$7.5 million in EAPS in FY 2024.**

### **HUNGER-FREE CAMPUS ACT**

Despite many of their best efforts, institutions of higher education in Minnesota lack the resources to fully tackle food insecurity on campus. The Hunger-Free Campus Act will fund grants to invest in dedicated staff on every campus to coordinate benefits and initiatives for students and will require participating institutions to notify students who receive need-based financial aid of their potential eligibility to receive SNAP, WIC, and other federal and state nutrition benefits.

Beyond the direct services that institutions will be expected to provide, the Hunger-Free Campus Act will build capacity among institutions and raise the profile of anti-hunger activities, driving home an important message: food insecurity is nothing to be ashamed of. When students can ask for assistance and receive it, they will be more likely to stay in school, concentrate on their studies, and graduate with a degree. **The Hope Center supports the Senate proposal to fund the Hunger-Free Campus Act at \$1 million in FY 2024.**

### **CONCLUSION**

At both the state and federal levels, our higher education and public benefit systems have fallen behind the times. Students are leaving college not for lack of talent but for lack of basic needs security, the legacy of disinvestment and misunderstandings about who students are and what they need to succeed. More robust support for basic needs security is essential to ensure that all Minnesotans have the opportunity to achieve their educational aspirations.

I thank this committee for its leadership and for the opportunity to share our perspective and evidence.