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Chair Cowles and members of the Minnesota State Board of Trustees,

The last 18 months have been extremely difficult for everyone, but they've been especially hard on Minnesota community and technical college students. With a 16.9% decline in enrollment and the tens of thousands of students that are stopping out of community college, it is clear that we have hit a crisis. It is all too easy to say this is outside of campuses and the systems control. The warning signs have been there for years. It has become all too easy to ignore the pleas from students to address the structural inequities that exist within higher education. But we can't ignore the data that is creating a crisis.

Covid alone, however, is not contributing to these major enrollment declines. The job market is flush with opportunities for those who are seeking employment. It was known prior to the pandemic that a workforce shortage was going to occur. Employers are choosing to train individuals in house, rather than waiting for them to go and get a degree. It was known that because of demographics enrollment was going to continue declining. It was known that our students were going to become far more diverse in the coming years. For too long our higher education system has just relied on getting a large number of students in the door each year, with little regard to if they stay, as long as a new student fills their empty spot next year. Those days have long been over, but unfortunately even though it was known they were over, change has been too slow.

In fact, one of my predecessors warned the board in 2019 about these issues when they said, "Until you are willing to acknowledge your own privilege and bias and start looking at these issues from a place of empathy, then there is no way that the system is going to bring about the real change that students need."

There are many higher education institutions that have been adapting to these changes. Large online universities are recruiting in our backyard, providing flexible course opportunities and short-term credentials to the overwhelmingly non-traditional students that should be attending one of our colleges. We cannot continue to tiptoe around the changes that will take us from a higher education system trying to serve students from 10 years ago, to a system that serves the students of tomorrow. Those students are here now and from what I have seen firsthand as a student, you were not ready for us. Campus staff and faculty are fighting every day to try



to support students the best they can, but it is not enough. *We need bold leadership this year from Minnesota State.*

Bold Change #1: Free Community College

In the past few weeks Congress has made public their proposal for a federal and state partnership program to finally make two-year public colleges free. Over recent years, states around the country, under both Republican and Democratic leadership, have recognized the benefits of free college programs and the need for a highly educated workforce that can respond to the needs of a 21st century economy. These free college programs, also known as promise programs, can provide a path to improved economic and social mobility for low and middle-income individuals to pursue their American Dream. Even the University of Minnesota recently implemented their own version of a college promise program, the U Promise. Minnesota State provides one of the best options to address the workforce shortage and some of the greatest racial inequalities in the nation, but our colleges must be affordable to all students, and implementing free college in Minnesota would help achieve that goal.



32.3% Increase In
Tennessee Technical
College Enrollments
From 2014-2016 ¹



30% Increase In First
Time Freshman
Students At Tennessee
Community Colleges ²



9,000 Tennessee
Promise Students
Transferred To A
Tennessee Public
University ³

This is the closest we have been to realizing a groundbreaking improvement in college affordability for our community and technical college students. This fall LeadMN has already sent over 3,000 letters to members of our Congressional delegation in support of free college. In 2019, LeadMN, along with other student groups, worked to introduce free college legislation in Minnesota, helping to lay the foundation for a statewide free college program at our community and technical colleges, and Governor Walz has recently announced a \$35 million investment in the MN Future Together Grants. *It is time for Minnesota State to get behind free community college by supporting the federal investment in tuition free college, and ensure that the MN Future Together Grants are successful.*

¹ Tennessee Higher Education Commission & Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation. (2018). Tennessee Promise Annual Report 2021

² Tennessee Higher Education Commission & Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation. Tennessee Promise Year 2 Infographic.

³ Tennessee Higher Education Commission & Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation. (2018). Tennessee Promise Annual Report 2018



Bold Change #2: Equity 2030

The goal of eliminating the educational equity gaps at every college and university in less than a decade is bold. But so too must be the solutions and the accountability to reach that goal. As we have said before, if the entire system does not work together, and every college goes in its own direction, then we will continue down the path of failure for students.

Minnesota State must continue to pursue bold strategies like reviewing academic appeals forms and health waivers to ensure they are accessible and equitable, and do not place unnecessary burdens on students. Colleges hold our students to a high standard, and when they do not meet that standard, students are held accountable through processes like academic probation and suspension. *There must be clear measurements, benchmarks, and accountability for failing to improve student outcomes and equity gaps as Minnesota State embarks further on the path of Equity 2030.*

Bold Change #3: Addressing Basic Needs

Over the last few years students have been leading the way in addressing food insecurity and other basic needs on our campuses and at the state legislature. We have worked to pass the Hunger Free Campus Act, the Minnesota College Mental Health Awareness Act, and Basic Needs Barrier Reduction policy, and secured funding to support all of these initiatives. But there is more work that needs to be done. The pandemic has further exacerbated basic needs insecurity and mental health issues among students. It is time to take further bold steps to ensure that basic needs barriers are minimized as students pursue their postsecondary goals.

Federal changes to SNAP that make it easier for college students to access the program will eventually expire when an end to the public health emergency has been declared. There are currently efforts to make these changes permanent underway among higher education organizations, including LeadMN. Minnesota State should take action to join these efforts and support making these changes permanent.

We also know the SNAP Employment and Training (SNAP E & T) program is a highly effective way to support students accessing SNAP, with four of our colleges currently participating in the program. States like Washington and Oregon have worked to expand their SNAP Employment and Training program to every single community college in their state. *Minnesota State should pursue making SNAP E & T accessible through every one of our community and technical colleges and start by hiring a SNAP Coordinator at the system office.* This position could add capacity and work with the Department of Health to begin expanding this program to colleges around the state.

Lastly, *Minnesota State should pursue hiring additional mental health counselors across the system.* Even before the pandemic, students were facing major challenges to their success as mental health issues increased. Hiring additional mental health counselors and expanding



telemedicine mental health services to our rural students would provide much needed support to students at an absolutely critical time.

Bold Change #4: Universal FAFSA Requirement

According to the National College Attainment Network, Minnesota currently ranks 38th nationally for FAFSA completions among the high school class of 2021, and we consistently rank in the bottom tier of states for FAFSA completions each year. Only about 50% of Minnesota students eligible for free or reduced lunch enroll in college after high school graduation.⁴ These are students who potentially qualify for millions of dollars in Pell Grant that goes unused each year. But as many as 28% of students never complete a FAFSA because they don't think they will qualify for aid.⁵

This issue directly impacts our college's enrollments. An uncompleted FAFSA is potentially thousands of dollars to pay for college that a student could be missing out on. In the past few years six states have passed FAFSA completion as a high school graduation requirement, and nearly a dozen others have introduced legislation pursuing the change. This policy has shown indications of increasing both FAFSA completions and freshman college enrollments.



\$30 Million in Pell Grants Went Unused By Eligible Graduating MN High School Seniors In 2018 ⁶



6.7% Increase In Freshman Enrollments In Louisiana After Implementing FAFSA Requirement ⁷



25.9% Increase In Louisiana FAFSA Completions The First Year of the Requirement ⁷

LeadMN worked to introduce legislation in 2021 that would create a high school graduation requirement for FAFSA completion, along with an opt out process to ensure the requirement will not prevent a student from graduating. By supporting such a policy Minnesota State can help every Minnesota high school student know what financial support is available to them to pursue a postsecondary education. *Minnesota State should also strongly consider*

⁴ Educating for the Future 2019 Update, Minnesota Office of Higher Education. (2019).

⁵ Why Didn't Students Complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)? A Detailed Look, Department of Education. (2018).

⁶ Students Missed Out on \$2.6 Billion in Free College Money, Nerdwallet. (2018).

⁷ Louisiana Class With Mandated FAFSA Graduates, Enrolls in Record Numbers. (2019). <https://www.ncan.org/news/news.asp?id=456006>



implementing policies and procedures during the admissions process at every college to ensure that every student is completing their FAFSA.

Time For Bold Change

The data was alarming before COVID and now it is much worse. Inaction is no longer an option. Students are demanding bold change in higher education. They are showing their displeasure in enrollment and retention numbers. LeadMN has been working to uplift the voices of those students, not just the ones that have the privilege to be involved.

Sincerely,

Axel Kylander
President
LeadMN – College Students Connecting for Change