

Chair Cowles, members of the Board of Trustees,

As you heard from us in October, we were heading out for our first in-person campus visits in nearly two years. We were happy to be able to see real people and our campuses again. While visiting the universities, we had the ability to meet with administrators and staff, the faculty associations, and a multitude of student groups. We discussed our advocacy priorities with everyone, and, as promised, we would like to share our findings with you all.

When discussing priorities from the proposed supplemental budget request, we heard a lot of excitement regarding the tuition freeze, basic needs, and mental health funding. These are all high priority issues for students and seeing them in Minnesota State's supplemental request is affirming. In a moment, we will be sharing just how desperately needed affordability measures and student support measures are.

As we discussed our other priorities around affordability and access, our debt relief advocacy garnered an outpouring of support and interest on campuses. It was devastating to hear our own faculty and campus employees – some of whom have been sharing their talents with our system for decades – share their own student debt stories with us. One tenured faculty leader told us that he has paid as much in interest as he has on his original loan balance, which was five figures. He described eating leftover food on campus because he cannot always afford his own groceries, and he stated that he's not even considered middle class in most of the state. It was humbling, but important, to see university presidents, faculty, administrators, and students support this important work and express interest in joining in affordability efforts together.

Similarly, another priority of ours that received a lot of attention and support on campuses is our effort to increase student wages. Unlike the wages of faculty and staff, students' on-campus wages have not increased with inflation and are not a livable wage in most of our communities. One campus administrator in northern



Minnesota named that their campus was losing on-campus student employees to off-campus opportunities that pay more. A majority of student workers are making less than \$12 an hour; most are in the \$10-\$11 range. Meanwhile, off-campus employers facing worker shortages are offering \$15+. Everyone has suffered financially during the pandemic, with those already marginalized suffering the most. Students who are low-income, who are parents, who are funding their education themselves, they cannot afford the cost of living and education if they only take on-campus work. We were grateful to hear several university Presidents support an effort to increase student wages and thank the universities who are already working on a wage increase.

As we consider our budgetary priorities for next year, and as we begin to understand the impact of this ongoing economic crisis, we hope the system and the Board of Trustees will join campus and student leaders in asking for funding to support student wage increases.

Additionally, we have witnessed the barriers put in place by our institutions to mental health resources. Intentional or not, these barriers have put students in situations where they are unable to receive the care that they need and deserve on campus. Requiring students to use insurance to receive their mental health care can prevent students whose parents/guardians aren't supportive of mental healthcare from getting care, prevent students who don't have insurance or sufficient coverage from getting care, and can create surmounting co-pay and deductible costs that may not be affordable. Along with student wage increases, we would like to see funding for more mental health professionals, particularly professionals of color and other underrepresented backgrounds, who can better support our diverse student body, in the next budget cycle.

Affordability and access are critical to use achieving the vision of Equity 2030: to close gaps in outcomes for students of color, low-income students, and first-generation students. As we consider this supplemental budget request and looking at the next budget cycle, we're hopeful we can remember these tough, but important, campus conversations to enhance access and affordability for all students.



Sincerely,

Emma Zellmer, 2021-2022 State Chair

Arnavee Maltare, 2021-2022 Vice Chair

Pierre Young, 2021-2022 Treasurer