



Chair Moe, members of the Board of Trustees,

We are ecstatic to be joining this meeting in person with you all. During the past two weeks, staff members and officers at Students United had the opportunity and pleasure of visiting several of the Minnesota State Universities, including Metropolitan, Mankato, Southwest, Winona, Bemidji, and Moorhead. It was more than a pleasure to see students, staff, and faculty members on campus. Each of the institutions we represent fosters student and civic engagement on campus, and we're grateful for the opportunity to discuss this today.

As many of us know and have experienced, engagement and a sense of belonging on campus has been difficult to maintain under Covid-19. Many students, like myself, experienced sentiments of isolation and exclusion from campus spaces. We were thrilled to see the hard work and effort each campus is making to rebuild student engagement and community through campus events and reopening public spaces.

After conversing with campus administrators, staff, and students, access to basic needs resources on campus continues to be of utmost importance. We would like to address several points of concern that have arisen surrounding basic needs and equity.

A priority expressed during each of our visits was the importance of allocating greater mental health resources for students. To elaborate, there are limitations to the mental health resources on campus. Counseling centers and telehealth visitations are usually booked at full capacity. In addition to tangible resources, creating an environment that fosters and destigmatizes mental health care continues to be an obstacle as well. Additionally, it is essential that campus climate among staff, faculty, and students reflects values of understanding and empathy for students experiencing mental health issues. We are hopeful and eager to work with the System office and Board of Trustees to expand access to equitable mental health care on each campus by providing additional funding, establishing a more competitive environment/market to attract mental health professionals, and establish a more culturally aware and responsive mental health environment among students, staff, and faculty.

Another priority was the importance of supporting our campus food pantries. Food pantries are pivotal in tackling food insecurity that many students on campus face as a result of rising costs. However, due to limited funding and staffing, many pantries cannot operate at full capacity. There is also a disparity between food pantry practices on each campus. For instance, some campuses only can open once monthly by appointment while other campuses offer walk-in shopping multiple times a week. To make food pantries accessible across the board, it's essential that all students, regardless of their campus, receive barrier-free access to their food pantry and resources. As we consider our budgetary priorities, we hope the system office and Board of Trustees will help alleviate this ongoing problem and barrier by choosing a more affordable plan for international students and consider payment/insurance plan exceptions for low-income/underserved students. Going forward, we hope to see additional staffing support and funding allocated for each university so they can best achieve this for their students.

Additionally, we were pleased to see menstrual products are accessible to students at several of the food pantries. However, the inaccessibility of menstrual products is still a concern for students, staff, and faculty. General access to menstrual products is often only provided in the women's restrooms and not in gender-neutral restrooms due to supply and financial limitations. Having menstrual products only accessible in the women's restroom excludes the needs of non-binary and transgender students who deserve equal and safe access to these products as well. Menstrual products are a necessity, not a luxury, and we hope that the system and Board of Trustees can support each campus by allocating funding for free menstrual products across each campus.



We want to also take this time to highlight a few barriers which we have brought up in previous testimonies that were highlighted by students during our campus visits. The rising cost of the international health insurance plan continues to be a barrier for international students. Some international students are forced to push back or suspend their enrollment entirely due to rising costs. As we all know, the international student community plays a vital role in the foundation of each campus, and each international student deserves an equitable and affordable education. The current system, unfortunately, makes this a difficult reality to attain for too many students.

Another barrier brought to our attention was student-parent support on campus. Across the board, resources and guidance for student-parents are limited. Without proper support centers or facilities, student-parents are often forced to miss class and do not have the availability nor space to focus on homework, extra-curriculars, and other commitments which causes a disruption in their academics. Along with childcare facilities, staff and faculty have a difficult time supporting student-parents on campus as they have little data and resources available to them about the student-parent population as data around student/parent enrollment is restricted. We encourage data around student-parent enrollment on each campus to be made accessible to staff and faculty so they can reach out and offer support, guidance, and mentorship to student-parents throughout their academic journey. As we consider our budgetary priorities, we hope the system office and Board of Trustees will help alleviate these ongoing barriers and prioritize creating more accessible resources for students.

We at Students United recognize that the barriers of basic needs and accessibility addressed today are, and have always been, a priority of the System Office. As we continue to advance our Equity 2030 vision, we are hopeful in our collective ability to continue building an equitable higher education environment inclusive of the needs of low-income, historically underrepresented, multicultural students and students of color by dismantling the systemic barriers that pose a threat to the educational experience for its students, as addressed today.