Testimony to the Minnesota State Board of Trustees Finance Committee  
June 17, 2020

Chair Moe, Chancellor Maholtra, member of the Board of Trustees, my name is Oballa Oballa and I am the President of LeadMN.

Today is the last time that I will be before you as a student leader. As I reflect on my time at Riverland Community College, I am so appreciative of the faculty, staff and administrators that have helped me along the way.

I know that in a refugee camp I would not have had the same opportunities that I have had here in Minnesota. But I also want to acknowledge the challenges that students like me face around issues of food insecurity, racism and accessibility to college. During my time here I have fought to make that pathway a little bit easier for my siblings that will follow me and other new Americans that come to Minnesota with some hope and a dream.

Minnesota has the 5th most unaffordable two-years colleges in the United States for low income students according to a report by Education Trust. And our community colleges have the highest percentage and numbers of students of color within all of higher education in the state. Is it by accident that state funding per student is the lowest at our community colleges?

According to IPEDs data from fiscal year 2018, community colleges are allocated $2,598 per student, the state universities are allocated $3,564 and the University of Minnesota is allocated $8,396.

Community college students deserve both a high quality education and an affordable one. We can have the best education in the world, but if students can’t afford to attend, then are we accomplishing our mission? The COVID-19 pandemic and the racial injustice inflicted on George Floyd has exposed these inequities as the New York Times described at the “Minnesota Paradox.”

I was struck by the budget consultation letter from the Alexandria Tech Student Senate, they said, “our President, Michael Seymour, often talks about his experience as an under-privileged minority trying to get in and stay in higher education. Dealing with hard choices of affording a higher education. I sometimes walk away from conversations with him wondering how many Michael Seymours are we financially locking out of our higher education system by keeping the status quo.”
I want to thank the Chancellor for recommending a delay in the tuition increase for FY21. LeadMN strongly encourages the Board to support this move.

We had over 1500 students sign onto a letter urging the Chancellor and Board of Trustees to freeze tuition next year. A student from Central Lakes College said, 

“My parents in no way could ever help me nor do I want them to. They need the money more than I do and I can barely pay for tuition. Raising tuition now more than ever is ridiculous. It would’ve been a year ago. I can’t believe any sort of panel would ever think that students would want to pay more. College students are broke and struggling to afford basic necessities. A tuition increase is so ridiculous I can’t believe any one in charge of a college would be so out of touch that they think it’s a good idea. It sickens me. It’s shameful. Life was hard enough before covid and now I’m struggling so much. I’m out of work, barely eating, trying to pay my bills so I can stay enrolled in fall classes. A tuition increase would be so crushing to me.”

Stories like this are all too common for community college students who are barely getting by. Our students don’t get an annual wage increase and when prices go up, they have to make tough decisions.

The tuition freeze provides only temporary relief, we need wholesale reform in how Minnesota provides a higher education to communities of color. Students have been calling for reforms for years around college affordability and the outcomes that we achieve for students of color. Continuing to tinker around the edges is no longer working. Students, community members and legislators are growing impatient.

We have six months before the start of the 2021 legislative session, let’s use that time wisely to develop a new approach.

Thank you

Priscilla Mayowa
Vice President of LeadMN