



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

Last spring, LeadMN challenged this board and the Chancellor to develop a new approach for the 2021 legislative session. COVID-19 has exposed the obstacles that far too many of our students face from college affordability, to racial disparities, to struggling to have their basic needs met as they grapple with food insecurity, mental health, and finding a stable place to live.

As the Board of Trustees begins its work this year there must be a greater sense of urgency to tackle these challenges instead of trying to spin things at the capitol that everything is alright. Students have been calling for reforms for years and yet the strategy of tinkering around the edges, hoping for things to get better, is not working for students or Minnesotans. Minnesota State continues to follow the same playbook for each reform initiative, whether it was “Students First,” or “Charting the Future,” to “Reimagining Minnesota State,” to now “Equity 2030.”

With the impending budget crisis for the state of Minnesota, we can’t balance campus budgets on the backs of students. For the last decade students have been at the breaking point because state budget cuts have disproportionately impacted higher education. This approach caused a significant decline in student enrollments and disproportionately impacted BIPOC communities that can’t afford these large tuition hikes. Minnesota has the 5th most unaffordable two-year 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. It is time for the Board of Trustees, the Minnesota Legislature and the Governor to confront these realities to show that the call for racial equity is more than just lip service.



Over the next year, LeadMN student leaders will be working to tackle the aforementioned issues and the following four priorities:

1. **Address Funding Disparities for Community Colleges**

Minnesota's community colleges are gateway institutions for BIPOC communities to achieve their version of the American Dream. Unfortunately, we make it way too expensive for them because of a broken funding formula that benefits other institutions. We need equity in how we fund our community colleges so that students get the support they need to be successful.

Policy Recommendation: Bring an equity lens to the Minnesota State system funding formula and the Minnesota State budget funding process for higher education.

a. **Expand Open Education Textbooks**

The Z-Degree Program has been a valuable way to reduce the cost of college textbooks by supporting faculty in moving toward a free textbook model. This program should be renewed this year and focused on developmental education courses. Too often these courses are the off ramp for BIPOC communities to higher education. Since these courses cannot be covered by financial aid, we must find as many ways as possible to reduce the costs to students that can't afford to take these classes to even begin their college journey.

Policy Recommendation: Expand Z-Degree program to all developmental education courses.

2. **Expanding Support for Students Basic Needs Insecurities**

The higher ed tropes of eating ramen for every meal or going hungry, being perpetually stressed or depressed, of struggling to make rent every month – these are not humorous anecdotes, nor an acceptable status quo. These old stereotypes have their roots in real problems with profound consequences. And in Minnesota, many students live with these problems every day. A 2019 Hope Center report found that 49% of Minnesota State 2-year college students struggled with housing insecurity, 18% were homeless, and 39% experienced food insecurity. A nationwide Hope Center survey from earlier this year, following the onset of COVID-19, found that 76% of college students were having mild to severe struggles with their mental health. We cannot be an education system where the necessities of life must be sacrificed to pursue a degree.

Policy Recommendations:

- a. Establish a single point of contact on campuses to connect students to basic needs resources onsite and with community partners, as well as coordinating efforts on campus with student leadership to end the stigma around basic needs.



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- b. Provide guidance on the expansion of food security efforts on campuses beyond the first step of establishing a campus food shelf.
- c. Create pathways to address the mental health needs of students, including expanded counseling departments with the American College Counseling Association-recommended staff-to-student ratio of 1 counselor for every 250 students, as well as recommendations on community partnerships to pursue.
- d. Develop strategies to address the immense housing insecurity crisis students face, including ways campus basic needs facilitators can serve as liaisons between students in need and community housing resources.
- e. Develop guidance on how campuses can use their emergency grant programs and community partnerships to address the transportation barriers students encounter in both the Metro and Greater Minnesota.

3. **Address Racial Inequities in College Completion**

“About 40 percent of all community college students who started their education in 2012 graduated within six years, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. But only 35.7 percent of Hispanic students and 27.5 percent of black students graduated from a two-year institution within that same time period. Furthermore, nearly 55 percent of black students who started at a community college in 2012 did not complete their studies and were no longer enrolled at any institution.”¹ What this means: the path to racial equity for community colleges in MN and nationwide starts with closing attainment/transfer gaps, period.

a. **Expand Transfer Pathways**

In 2015 the state legislature required the Minnesota State system to create transfer pathways for 26 academic programs. This work has been implemented, but more can be done to improve the transfer process and create further pathways for students, especially students of color, to pursue a bachelor’s degree from a community or technical college.

Policy Recommendation: Create transfer pathways for Associate of Applied Science degree programs and expand transfer pathways to new academic areas.

b. **Redesign Punitive Academic and Financial Aid Policies**

Glaring inconsistencies exist in the practices in which community and technical colleges engage when compared to the more equitable standards by which the

¹ Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Huie, F., Wakhungu, P.K., Bhimdiwala, A. & Wilson, S. E. (2018, December). Completing College: A National View of Student Completion Rates – Fall 2012 Cohort (Signature Report No. 16). Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.



4-year universities abide. Students at community and technical colleges who are at a greater risk of being placed on academic warning, suspension, or probation are most likely to be 'at-risk' (low-income, first generation, and/or students of color). Unlike their peers at state universities, these students are not being given the opportunity to adapt to their new academic environment, even though they may be less academically prepared than university students who must meet more stringent admissions requirements.

Policy Recommendation: Community and technical colleges should adopt a graduated scale of Satisfactory Academic Progress.

4. Create a Cultural Proficiency Environment

Students time and time again continue to identify the lack of cultural proficiency as a problem within their campuses. When students experience bias and micro-aggressions from their own faculty and staff, it is clear that these educators are not prioritizing cultural proficiency. We often hear from our students of color that their faculty members will call on them regularly in front of the whole class to be experts on their race. Students of color have also reported that white administrators will comment on how "articulate" they are at speaking English. There is also the behavior of refusing to call or even attempt to recite a student of color's name, which is a direct dismissal of their identity.

Cultural proficiency is the policies, practices, values, and behaviors of an institution that enables them to engage effectively with groups and institutions who are different from them. Minnesota State colleges need to effectively interact in a variety of cultural environments, advocate for the diverse population of students we serve, and intentionally learn from students' cultural differences. If our colleges and system cannot do this, it will continue to dismiss students' experiences, help perpetuate superiority beliefs, and eliminate others' cultural beliefs by disempowering and limiting students' skills and abilities.

Policy Recommendation: Develop a proactive plan to support all students in becoming culturally competent and assess the impact of those programs.

Urgency for Change

As we move into one of the most critical legislative session in decades for Minnesota higher education, we must do everything in our power to make sure students come first. Minnesota cannot afford to exclude thousands of students of color from obtaining a college degree because of excessive price tags. Minnesota cannot afford to saddle another generation of students with crippling student loan debt. Minnesota CANNOT continue to allow major



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educational and equity gaps to exist at our post-secondary institutions. As the largest public higher education system in Minnesota, the future of our state's economy, racial equity, and confidence in public higher education will be influenced heavily by the choices that Minnesota State makes over the next few years. It is absolutely imperative that we implement change with a sense of urgency that is so often absent from higher education.

Sincerely,

Priscilla Mayowa
President
LeadMN – College Students Connecting for Change