

Hello Board of Trustees,

As you are aware, this school year has been quite different for all of our students. The pandemic has created insecurity and inaccessibility for students everywhere. From questions about their ability to successfully complete their education, to worry about paying their bills, to fighting for a more just and equitable community, students are starting this semester with unprecedented concern and anxiety.

Students United is working hard as the collective voice of the students to not only get the answers to the questions we have, but also to make the changes that are necessary. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we are seeing the inequities of the student experience exasperated to the highest levels in a lifetime. The decisions being made by our leaders are, unfortunately, life or death. As such, there has never been a more vital time for an organization to unapologetically advocate for the needs of students. Students are a continually overlooked population, often stereotyped as young, healthy, able-bodied kids who drink too much and throw away their money. In reality, my fellow students include students with dependent children, students who are immunocompromised, students living out of their cars, students who are on public assistance, students with disabilities, students from communities disproportionately plagued by COVID-19, students who were working more than 40 hours a week to support their education and are now without a job, and so many others. Our students are vulnerable, too. And they deserve to have their voices heard and needs met. This is why Students United has been working relentlessly to ensure we can keep our fellow students alive, safe, and living with dignity.

We have been busier than ever and our work is more important than ever. Here's just a few things we have been working on since I began my term on July 1<sup>st</sup>:

Right at the top of my term, already dealing with the difficulties of the pandemic, Students United had to rapidly respond to the federal effort to prevent international students from enrolling in all-online courses, at-risk of being deported or barred from entering the United States. Our students, already burdened with everything else, now were dealt the binary choice of risking their health or being deported. Students United worked with the system office to ensure a plan for international enrollment was in place that would keep students safe and in the country. We worked with our federal partners and legislators to actively oppose the changes to the Student Exchange & Visitor Program's (SEVP) rules. Within days, as many in higher education voiced the same opposition, the rule was reversed.

We continue to diligently work to ensure students' needs, health, and safety are being proactively centered in our system and campus's planning for the year in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. We have worked with our board members--the Student Body Presidents on each of the seven university campuses--to expand understanding of the Board Policy and System Procedure that outlines the student consultation process. We hope this will ensure that student leaders are playing a part in COVID-19 preparedness efforts and that students feel fully informed about their campus's plans for the year.

We have pushed to eliminate the online course differential fee, especially for courses that were supposed to be in-person this year, supported multiple pieces of legislation that would provide COVID relief funds to students, and advocated for the expansion of internet access.

As the summer and early fall continued, the threats to student safety continued, including the new Title IX rules from the Department of Education. We joined higher education leaders across the nation in opposing these rules as they degraded our past efforts to strengthen our sexual misconduct policies. As those federal rules have now gone into effect, we have submitted our input on the system's proposed changes to 1B.3 in hopes of ensuring our new policy is as compassionate and trauma-informed as possible.

The plague of racial injustice is yet another barrier to equal access to higher education and one that has become even more burdensome due to the pandemic. In the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd and the Minneapolis uprising, Students United joined allies among the faculty, staff, and administration to call for meaningful, material change in our system to urgently address both the conditions of our institutions and the responsibility we have to produce socially conscious and culturally fluent members of society. We outlined some of our priority issues and distributed them to the university Presidents, system leaders, as well as members of the Board of Trustees. We want our system to speak openly and honestly about our collective commitments to advancing equity and inclusion, the barriers that may stand in our way, and how we can all partner together to eliminate those barriers and move towards a safer, more equal, and more accessible higher education experience.

Finally, we have made a commitment to ensuring students' voices are heard and counted in their government. This work has included a continuous Census 2020 outreach effort, as we face a historic undercount that may cost Minnesota millions in federal funding, a seat in the House of Representatives, and more. We also launched a voter information page on our website at [www.studentsunited.org/vote](http://www.studentsunited.org/vote) to centralize all of the important information students will need to access their right to vote. We are partnering with the IFO to help support efforts that are already taking place on campuses, as well as producing and distributing mailers and digital media which will directly supply students with information on how to register, how to vote by mail, how to track your ballot, find your polling station, and more. Additionally, we will be producing high-quality, informative voting videos that will be boosted on social media throughout our university communities.

This is just the beginning of our work and the semester has barely begun. Now as we move forward into the academic year, it is our expectation that you will join us in these efforts. We hope to be a resource to each and every one of you and welcome any opportunity to discuss or support work that will advance our shared commitment to student lives, safety, and success.

Sincerely,



Jonathan McNicholes  
State Chair, Students United