



Minnesota State Board of Trustees Minnesota State System Office
Chair Jay Cowles
30 7th Street East, Suite 350,
St. Paul, MN 55101-7804

January 26, 2021

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

The start of a new semester is normally a time of excitement for the new year, but for way too many students it is the time they realize that they won't be coming back to school this semester. Either because they can't afford it or because they are now on academic probation because of the multitude of challenges that they faced in the last semester.

This pandemic is taking a toll on college students across Minnesota. At the end of last semester, LeadMN surveyed 8200 on how their semester was going and what we found was very concerning. Students reported that they were doing much worse compared to the spring students.

Students top concern is by far catching or spreading covid. With 78% reporting some or significant concerns about catching covid. Mental health and anxiety were the next highest concerns for students. When it comes to how distance learning was going 30% were somewhat or very dissatisfied.

One student said, "I'm struggling to finish my classes with anything higher than a C and am purposely failing one class because it's too difficult online and I don't receive enough help to be able to do much of the work required of me."

Another said, "Haven't been able to keep up with homework due to homelessness. Just recently moved into a place but it's too late to catch up with homework. Haven't been able to work much. Especially with no child care."

Pretty soon, colleges will no longer need to hear the pleas from these students, because they will just drop out. They will join the tens of thousands of students that will have their dreams of school crushed because of the pandemic, but also because those in charge have been too slow to respond to this pandemic.

When these concerns are brought up it is often met with, what I view as a student, as a righteous indifference. An indifference because those in charge know that they were just bailed out by the federal government and the finances of their institution will likely be OK. When



institutions are not measured by student success, but by dollars and cents, we get a system that fails the moral test of government.

Last summer, I encouraged Minnesota State to address student academic probation issues because I know firsthand that the spring semester was tough on students and that the fall would likely be too. Here we are at the beginning of the spring semester and you are just now considering an SAP policy change that is too little, too late. Students that struggled this fall have already been told that they are a failure, and those students are not coming back.

We also asked Minnesota State to bring empathy in how emergency grants were shared with students. One student told me it was the most humiliating experience for them because their campus required multiple documents to prove that they were having financial issues. Instead of sending the money to the student, they required that they send the money to the landlord, alerting the landlord that the person was having financial problems.

This is happening because of the desire to let 37 institutions do it their way, rather than following best practices. Students can no longer accept responses like, “we are working on that” or “we will get back to you” as solutions to the challenges created by the pandemic. Those responses are not solutions, especially when they are followed by inaction.

Problems in this country are only getting worse because too many of us are willing to look the other way. And unfortunately, it has been easier for this Board to look the other way when we are only allowed to submit written testimony. Why is it possible to zoom college and university presidents into a meeting but not the leadership of faculty, staff and students. This board should not use the pandemic to hide from the concerns of students, faculty and staff. If anything, this crisis should be a call for more engagement to address these problems rather than less.

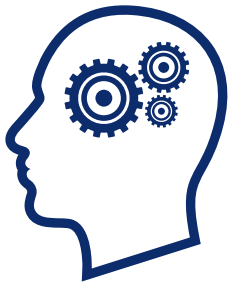
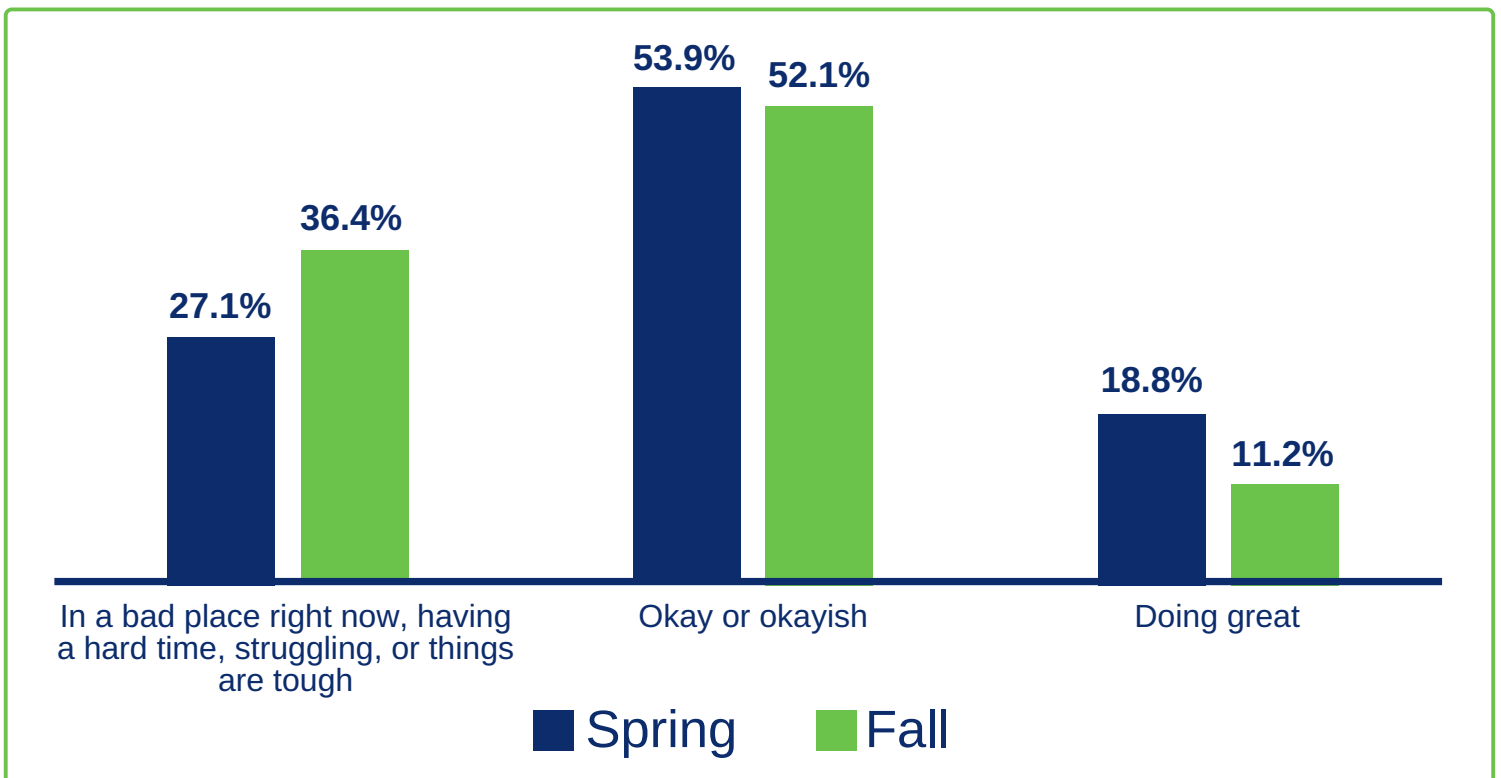
Sincerely,

Priscilla Mayowa
President of LeadMN

COVID IS TAKING A TOLL ON COLLEGE STUDENTS

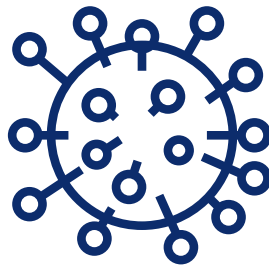
Following up on our spring 2020 survey, LeadMN followed up with students on how the pandemic was impacting them. From November 24 through December 8, over 8,200 Minnesota State community and technical college students responded.

Students are doing worse now than they were in the spring, with a 9.3% increase in the number of students who reported that they are struggling.



65%

Are Concerned About Their Mental Health, With 26% Being Significantly Concerned



78%

Are Concerned About Catching Covid-19 or Spreading it to Others



39%

Are Concerned About Being Able to Afford Food or Housing in the Next 30 Days

STUDENTS SHARED THEIR STORIES WITH US

I'm struggling to finish my classes with anything higher than a C and am purposely failing one class because it's too difficult online and I don't receive enough help to be able to do much of the work required of me.

-Minneapolis College

I am in nursing school **trying to do the learning from home with 3 kids home to distance learning as I am also a mother.** My father just passed away a month ago as well.

-Hibbing Community College

I'm just stressed out with life at the moment. **I feel so much pressure to help support my family and still preform well in school, unfortunately school is taking the hit for that.** I have a lot of anxiety about what's to come and I don't even know what I need help with at this point.

-Century College

I tested positive for symptoms for COVID on Nov. 8th and I'm struggling to focus on getting my studies done. I'm behind and I can't seem to get organized and don't know if I will pass my classes.

-Alexandria Technical College

I am immunocompromised so I am fearful of getting sick with COVID, but I feel better now that classes have moved to online. **I lost my job due to COVID and have had 0 form of income for the past four months.**

-Rochester Community and Technical College

Haven't been able to keep up with homework due to homelessness. Just recently moved into a place but it's too late to catch up with homework. Haven't been able to work much. Especially with no child care.

-Normandale Community College

I'm definitely not ok. Between bills and medical expenses (I live on my own) and a parent with cancer, **I am on the verge of having to drop out.** However, my situation could be so much worse so I try to stay grateful.

-Ridgewater Community College

With everything switching to online an zoom, it had become tough. I feel disinterested in learning because I am sick of watching everything on the computer screen. **I used to be an A/B student but have now become a C student.** College is tough, but with all these changes it's become tougher. I wish we were cut some slack this year but it feels like the teacher don't care either

-Minnesota West Community and Technical College

Because my job shut down for the second time because of Covid, and I'm almost out of unemployment. Staying at home all day everyday has gotten to me mentally, with all the stress of no job for another month, worrying about food, pets, and possibly getting kicked out of my house because I can't pay rent in time. It makes me consider on seeing a therapist but again, I don't have the money too.

-Riverland Community College



Chancellor Devinder Malhotra
Minnesota State System Office
30 7th Street East, Suite 350,
St. Paul, MN 55101-7804

January 14, 2021

Chancellor Malhotra,

The pandemic continues to take a toll on Minnesota's community and technical college students. According to a recent student survey conducted by LeadMN, over a third of students are having a really difficult time, which is a nine point jump from the spring.

But while all of us are suffering from the pandemic, that suffering is not distributed equally. Just this past week we saw that all of the 156,000 jobs lost across the nation in December, were jobs held by women. We know that communities of color are being disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. And many of the students who faced the largest barriers to their academic and co-curricular success before the pandemic are now facing near insurmountable challenges. Combine this with the thousands of students who have lost their jobs or had their working hours reduced, have to take care of sick family members, or have to provide their own childcare while balancing work and school, and many students are hitting a breaking point.

The recent funding for colleges included in the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act is meant to help provide relief to students by requiring that colleges provide the same amount of student emergency funds as they did under the CARES Act. Since the Department of Education has opted out of providing confusing and punitive guidance to groups of students, LeadMN strongly urges you to make changes to the guidance that the system office provides to campuses to ensure that relief goes to the students who need help the most.

LeadMN has been reviewing how all thirty community and technical colleges distributed their CARES Act emergency funds this past year and has included recommendations based on that review and other best practices from national organizations such as The Hope Center and MDRC.



While we understand that the interpretation and guidance put in place by the Department of Education around the CARES Act emergency funds was done hastily and colleges worked to get funds out as fast as possible, there is room for improvement in how funds are distributed. With the increased flexibility for emergency grant funds, we hope that the system office will again deliver guidance to colleges, as it did with the CARES Act funding, and encourage them to take an approach that maximizes emergency funding for the students with the greatest need.

We strongly encourage you to provide the following guidance to colleges:

1. **Funds should be disbursed on a needs-based basis**

The system office should not recommend that money go to every student and the money should instead be more targeted based upon a student's needs. First 50% of the money should be allocated to Pell eligible students through an automatic disbursement and the remaining funds should be dedicated to an application based emergency grant program. Colleges should also set aside a small portion of their funds to automatically award emergency aid to targeted groups of students who may require additional support, but may take longer to identify.

2. Colleges should use CRRSA funds allocated to institutions to support students by:

- a. **Forgiving financial hold balances for students** who dropped out since the pandemic, so that they can re-enroll without a financial hold in the future. Colleges should also consider giving students who dropped out due to the pandemic a refund or allow them to retake classes at no cost so that they can re-enroll and complete their degree.
- b. **Improving access to mental health resources** and support to help address the major increases in mental health issues facing students.
- c. **Refunding students for the tuition increase** during the spring 2021 semester.
- d. **Purchasing technology for students** (laptops, hotspots).

3. **Streamline the emergency grant application process**

When using application-based emergency grants, unfortunately some colleges are requiring students to provide onerous proof that they are poor or have challenging circumstances. Not only does this go against the recommended best practices on emergency grants, but it also places an unnecessary burden on students who need help, delaying their access to funds by forcing them to provide things like bank statements or proof of unemployment or a reduction in hours. Colleges need to stop this practice and trust that when students seek out these funds, they are in a situation which warrants it. Putting students through a difficult application process shows a lack of trust in students and an indifference to their situation.



The beginning of the semester is always a difficult time for students financially and we urge the system office and colleges to lead with empathy for our students. They are attempting to juggle so much right now, and these emergency grants have the opportunity to make life just a little easier. Treating students with dignity and respect is an easy way that we can support students.

Sincerely,

Priscilla Mayowa
President
LeadMN – College Students Connecting for Change

