



Chair Cowles, members of the Board of Trustees,

It's May of 2021, and I would like to take a moment to reflect back on the academic year that students have experienced.

We began this academic year with uncertainty about the type of semester we would have and if we would be taken care of. National, state, and local affairs have and had a real impact on many students such as international students who were thrown into absolute chaos when the Trump administration announced they would revoke visas and ban entry for international students whose campuses had moved fully online. While this was eventually rescinded, this was a terrifying factor right on the heels of the semester beginning. One international student from MSU – Mankato told us they wondered “if it’s even worth trying to continue to pursue higher education in the States.”

There was confusion about the protections all students would have, especially students living on campus and students whose programs necessitated in-person components, and the actual quality of education we would be receiving. This, coupled with the deadly second wave of the pandemic between November and January, put students in awful positions. Many of my peers, classmates, and friends were infected with COVID and had to take time off from school and work. Many of us lost loved ones and went through the grueling and further-isolating experience of grief. The difficulty of receiving real, helpful accommodations and the lack of consistency about equity and accommodations across classrooms augmented how difficult this was for many students. A student from MSU – Moorhead described their experience quarantining on-campus as “horrible” and went on to tell us about the total isolation from other human beings, a lack of communication or information, and delayed meal deliveries they experienced. I would argue this is just a base level of what most students have experienced throughout this time.

Throughout the semesters, the difficulties of the moment we are in compounded for students, disproportionately impacting already marginalized students like low-income students, first generation students, students with disabilities and immuno-compromised students, students of color, student parents, LGBTQIA students, and many others. A lack of financial relief, like the months of 2020 with no stimulus checks and, for many students classified as non-resident non-citizens or as dependents, absolutely zero financial relief. A lack of jobs to keep the bills and tuition paid. A lack of internships or academic experiences outside of the classroom. Limited social relationships that make higher education so valuable. An excruciatingly difficult and expensive healthcare system. The threat to a peaceful transition of democratic power. The return of mass shootings. Violence against people of Asian and Pacific Islander heritage. The continued murder of Black and brown people by police, including, within Minnesota, Dolal Idd and Daunte Wright. Continuing to work and school from home spaces without affordable wifi or reliable technology access. Zoom fatigue. Grief. Trauma. And, for many, over a year of total or nearly total isolation.



It was an incredibly difficult year. I will say that no class of college students have ever been put through what this class of college students has been through. Whether you were an undergraduate student completing your final years and graduating without the connection to your peers or even a commencement, like me; a new student who was not able to form connections in the formative years of their university experience; or a graduate student who now may have completed an entire program online that you moved your life around to experience in-person; all my fellow students have my sympathy and I hope system and campus leaders recognize the struggle our students have endured over this year.

As we look towards the 2021-2022 school year, and the possibility of a school year that's mostly in-person, I am reminded that our goal cannot be to "return to normal." Normal does not work for most students. We have an opportunity in front of us this summer to choose to develop an academic year that is better than before. To choose to come out of this pandemic having learned lessons and fundamentally transforming our higher education system for the better. Students United, ourselves, refuses to return to normal. Our Vice Chair, Emma Zellmer, has been elected State Chair for next year. You will hear more from her soon about the unprecedented efforts Students United has taken to transform ourselves and our system, such as our new Debt Relief Fund which aims to pay off all the student loan debt produced by our higher education institutions. People can learn more and donate to the fund at on [our website](#).

We are asking you all, Trustees, Presidents, the Chancellor, Vice Chancellors, and others, to keep the importance of transformation in mind as you make decisions that impact students these next few months.

Congratulations to everyone graduating this semester. You have accomplished something that no one else in history really ever has. You are seen, your accomplishments are seen, and we look forward to supporting you in your journey onto whatever is next.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jonathan McNicholes".

Jonathan McNicholes, 2020-2021 State Chair