



May 10, 2022

Senator David Tomassoni
328 Capitol
75 Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr Blvd
St. Paul, MN 55155

Representative Connie Bernardy
369 State Office Building
100 Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr Blvd
St. Paul, MN 55155

Chair Tomassoni and Chair Bernardy,

Minnesota's future workforce has hit a "code red" moment that jeopardizes the state's economy and future success of every Minnesotan. Not enough Minnesotans are getting the postsecondary education they need to meet the state's workforce needs. This supplemental budget is an opportunity for state leaders to begin to address this problem before it spirals out of control. We appreciate that you listened to the needs of students during this legislative session and urge you to address college affordability and student basic needs.

A LeadMN survey of 7,700 Minnesota community and technical college students found that 90% of them had struggled to pay for school and living expenses this year. We also found that two in five students said they had considered dropping out. **Minnesota has a college affordability crisis that must be addressed if we want to retain college students and propel the economy forward.**

Free College Grants

LeadMN strongly urges the conference committee to include the Free College Grant program in the final higher education omnibus bill. The high cost of college continues to be the single greatest barrier for community and technical college students, leading students to sacrifice their basic needs, mental health, and even childcare while trying to afford a postsecondary degree and a chance at a brighter future for themselves and their families. This program has the potential to drastically improve college affordability and access for tens of thousands of Minnesotans.

But the power of this program lies not just in its ability to eliminate the cost of tuition for low-income Minnesotans who could most benefit from the socio-economic benefits of a postsecondary credential. It also lies in the ability to help change the narrative about who can afford to go to college. Kitchen table conversations will no longer be about how a family will afford tuition, but rather about what career path a student should choose. Students who never thought college was within reach financially would be able to access the education that allows them to escape poverty, support their families, and contribute back to their communities. These potential students are our future nurses, teachers, radiologists, law enforcement officers, welders, and electricians.

In the last decade free college programs have expanded to at least twenty states, both Republican and Democratic. One of these states is Tennessee, where in 2014, the Republican legislature and Governor created the Tennessee Promise, a last dollar grant program similar to the Free College Grants included in the House omnibus bill. Tennessee implemented the program to boost degree attainment, workforce training, and economic development and the results speak for themselves:



ENROLLMENT INCREASED 2014-2016



32% INCREASE AT TECHNICAL
COLLEGES. 30% INCREASE AT
COMMUNITY COLLEGES

3-YEAR GRADUATION RATE



GRADUATION RATES
INCREASED FROM
13.8% TO 21.5%

DEGREE AND CERTIFICATE ATTAINMENT



82% INCREASE IN DEGREE
ATTAINMENT AFTER 5
SEMESTERS.

Source Tennessee Higher Education Commission & Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation. Tennessee Promise Annual Reports.

In Minnesota, Pine Technical College has launched a free college program that has dramatically boosted enrollment 63%, while most of the state colleges enrollments have fallen by 25% or more. This program has shown how rural communities can retain young people and prepare them for higher paying jobs. Earlier this session, the Senate Jobs and Economic Growth Finance and Policy Committee heard testimony from mayors in southwestern Minnesota. Their communities were struggling to retain college students and educated workers, due in part to competition from affordable higher education programs in neighboring states. A Free College Grant program is exactly what is needed to keep these students and our future workforce in our communities, and to stop Minnesota from being a net exporter of college students each year.

It is no secret that Minnesota has a significant workforce shortage yet by the year 2025, three out of four jobs in the state will require a post-secondary degree. Minnesota's past investments in education built a great quality of life for residents and a strong middle class that benefits the state's economy. That is in jeopardy if we don't find ways to encourage more Minnesotans to pursue an education after high school. Action is needed to ensure that we have the educated workforce and economy to support a robust and healthy middle class in the 21st century. The Free College Grant program would build that future for Minnesotans.

Minnesota State Basic Needs and Mental Health Request

LeadMN strongly urges the conference committee to include the Minnesota State request for mental health and basic needs funding included in the House omnibus bill. This funding request builds on the legislation that LeadMN worked with legislators to write and pass last session to create a mental health awareness program at every college and university, and legislation which makes basic needs resources and support more accessible to all students.



After college affordability, basic needs and mental health are consistently raised as the two greatest barriers to student success. We strongly urge you to include this funding in the final higher education omnibus bill.



18%
OF STUDENTS EXPERIENCED
HOMELESSNESS IN THE PAST
YEAR



49%
OF STUDENTS EXPERIENCED
HOUSING INSECURITY IN
THE PAST 30 DAYS



39%
OF STUDENTS EXPERIENCED
FOOD INSECURITY IN THE
PAST 30 DAYS

Source: Minnesota State Colleges and Universities #RealCollege Survey Report, 2019

In conclusion, conference committee members can all agree that Minnesota needs to invest in Minnesotans to address the state's workforce needs. This committee has a historic opportunity to work together to better support students so that they can reach their potential and be the fuel that drives our state's economy.

Sincerely,

Axel Kylander
President
LeadMN – College Students Connecting for Change

Cc: Sen. Rarick;
Sen. Clausen;
Sen. Housley;
Sen. Jasinski
Rep. Christensen;
Rep. O'Neill;
Rep. Keeler;
Rep. Klevorn