



May 16, 2024

The Honorable Omar Fateh, Chair
Senate Higher Education Finance and Policy Committee
95 University Avenue West
Minnesota Senate Building, Room 3219
St. Paul, MN 55155

The Honorable Gene Pelowski, Chair
House Higher Education Finance and Policy Committee
491 State Office Building
St. Paul, MN 55155

Dear Chairs Fateh and Pelowski and conferees:

As we look to the end of the 2024 Legislative Session, I want to take a moment to thank you both for the strong collaboration and positive working relationship you and your House and Senate staff have shown myself and the entire Minnesota Office of Higher Education (OHE) team. We are grateful for your thoughtfulness in discussing proposals as you put together this session's Higher Education Budget and Policy Bills.

Specifically, I want to thank you the inclusion of many items my agency has advocated for this session.

Data is central to all of our work at OHE. This bill will improve our data collection, requiring public colleges and universities to report additional data on students, programs, finances, and outcomes. This new reporting will better inform our work, strengthen programs, increase public transparency, and improve accountability.

The bill includes vital provisions to address sexual harassment and sexual misconduct on college campuses. The bill will expand and clarify the definition of "sexual misconduct" for the purposes of college policies and support services, while enshrining additional rights and protections for victims of sexual misconduct. We are also grateful to see the inclusion of requirements for schools to provide "comprehensive training" on sexual misconduct prevention and response, as well as allowing students to select an "advisor" to support them during the investigation and disciplinary process for sexual misconduct complaints. This is not only good policy, it sends a strong message that sexual harassment and sexual misconduct will not be tolerated and that the State stands with students and their right to a safe learning environment.

Another area that will greatly benefit students are the items supporting student parents. We are thrilled to see additional rights and protections being enshrined for student parents, as well as the addition of a requirement for public colleges and universities to designate "navigators" to provide information to parenting students on support services and resources. We believe these changes will provide student parents with the support necessary for them to complete their education.

Too often, the national conversation around student debt excludes the ways institutions use "bargaining chips" like withholding a person's transcript or restricting enrollment as ways to collect. This bill rightly addresses this practice by prohibiting these practices except under certain circumstances. The bill also takes the measure one step further, requiring requires schools to have a policy on how they collect on student debts. When there is transparency in the debt collection process, students win.

This bill strengthens my agency's ability to ensure a high-quality postsecondary education for all. Two key items here are expanding the definition of "school" and "physical presence" to include more types of instruction, and then requiring private career schools and colleges to be licensed to operate in Minnesota and meet certain standards. These provisions are critical for holding schools accountable and continuing our state's legacy for cultivating a first-rate workforce.

The next item we were happy to see included in the Higher Education Budget Omnibus Bills is the deadline extension for my office to award the David J. Tomassoni Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) Research Grant. This grant will play a vital role in improving the lives of Minnesotans impacted by ALS, and the flexibility offered by this extension will ensure we award research projects that show the greatest promise of having an impact.

We also want to thank you for your partnership in addressing the projected shortfall for the Fostering Independence Higher Education Grant. Minnesota Foster Youth face unique barriers in accessing higher education, and this grant is breaking down those barriers and changing lives. The overwhelming interest in this program truly justifies the investment and we are grateful to provide the support necessary for Foster Youth to attend college. Being able to transfer funds from the North Star Promise program to cover this shortfall is a common-sense solution that effectively uses allocated funds.

Finally, we are very happy to see our recommended changes to the North Star Promise program included in the bill. After last session, we met with members of the higher education community and heard concerns around how the bill language for the new program might adversely impact students and reduce their overall financial aid. The technical changes you are making this session will ensure North Star Promise works as intended. Chairs Fateh and Pelowski, I want to once again thank you for the excellent working relationship between the Office of Higher Education staff and your talented, hardworking staff, as well as all committee members. I look forward to working with you and all conferees to ensure the final bill is one that will best serve Minnesota students.

Sincerely,



Dennis Olson,
Commissioner