

Students United Declares State of Emergency

Students Update State and Federal Legislative Priorities in Response to Student Needs in the Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic

March 23, 2020 – On Friday, March 20, the Students United Board of Directors (made up of all seven Minnesota State university student body presidents) met to address concerns and assess student needs in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, Students United is declaring a State of Emergency and has implemented several changes to the organization’s operating procedures, including cancelling their April conference and reprioritizing their legislative priorities.

Students agreed on the following Minnesota State system, state, and federal legislative priorities:

Article 1: Short-Term:

Section 1: System:

1. A strong condemnation of, and accountability for, xenophobia and bigotry in response to this pandemic.
2. An honor system for class absences should be employed that ensures no student is required to provide a doctor’s note or other documentation if they need to miss class to care for their health or the health of others.
3. On-campus housing should remain open for the remainder of the semester and the CDC guidelines should be employed to ensure sanitation and safety.
4. If on-campus housing has extra space available, students experiencing homelessness should be allowed to apply to live there at no extra charge.
5. On-campus basic needs services such as food pantries, dining centers, free transportation services, etc., should be rearranged to ensure at-risk students still receive necessary goods and services, regardless of previous enrollment in these plans, while preserving the health and wellbeing of all.
6. If work-study jobs cannot be moved to tele-work, remaining work-study funds should be distributed to students’ accounts.
7. If on-campus jobs cannot be moved to tele-work, all employees (including student employees) should receive paid leave for the remainder of their employment terms.
8. International students with on-campus jobs should receive the same treatment as other on-campus student employees, barring any federal restrictions or risks to the student.
9. International student services on-campus should remain available virtually to ensure F-1 and J-1 students receive the guidance they need in these complicated times.
10. Students on institution-sponsored health insurance should continue to receive regular coverage through the remainder of the semester.
11. Emergency grants and aid should be made available indefinitely.
12. Students in need of equipment, technology, and/or internet/broadband access in order to complete their instruction should have that cost subsidized or those items provided.
13. Students should receive leniency, including a pause on academic probation and no restrictions on enrollment for the summer 2020 or fall 2020 semesters, in relation to tuition and fee payments this semester.
14. Students should be allowed to drop a class without receiving a W or their transcript.
15. Students should not be charged for housing that has been closed or for meals that they have not been able to access during the Covid-19 campus closures.
16. Support alternatives/reschedules to commencements/graduations to ensure students and their loved ones have an opportunity to celebrate their hard work.

Section 2: State

1. A strong condemnation of, and accountability for, xenophobia and bigotry in response to this pandemic.
2. Ensure all state financial aid disbursements for Spring 2020 and Summer 2020 are final and do not require payback, regardless of enrollment or credit status.
3. Employ a moratorium on all utility shut offs and evictions.
4. Provide emergency funding to the public colleges and universities to meet the enormous health and economic needs, including the funds necessary to meet our system agenda.
5. Grants should be made available for all students who have lost work due to pandemic related causes in order to allow them to continue their education.
6. Have a special enrollment period for MNsure to ensure anyone who lost health coverage, or does not have coverage, can get it.

Section 3: Federal

1. A strong condemnation of, and accountability for, xenophobia and bigotry in response to this pandemic.
2. Provide emergency funding to the public colleges and universities to meet the enormous health and economic needs, including the funds necessary to meet our system agenda.
3. Allow for direct emergency funds to cover students’ basic needs.
4. Expand Pell Grant eligibility for all students in order ensure that they do not reach their lifetime limit before completing their program as a result of Covid-19. Pell Grant eligibility should be extended by one semester for all students due to the disruptive nature that Covid-19 has had on all university students.
5. Ensure no penalty to student’s Satisfactory Academic Progress status. Covid-19 will undoubtedly create disruption to instruction time and quality over the next few months. Congress should allow for flexibility in student’s ability to access Title IV if they are below the satisfactory academic progress requirements.
6. Allow for the continuation of the student loan interest rate reduction to 0% until a full economic recovery has occurred.
7. Expanding eligibility to public benefits, including unemployment, SNAP, housing, etc., to all.
8. Ensure immigrants can use public benefits and bail outs without being deemed a “public charge” or otherwise impact their immigration status.
9. Allow all student loan borrowers to go into automatic deferment if they miss a payment during the COVID-19 outbreak without a financial penalty regardless of whether the loan is subsidized or unsubsidized.
10. Ensure all federal financial aid disbursements for Spring 2020 and Summer 2020 are final and do not require payback, regardless of enrollment or credit status.

Article 2: Long-Term

Section 1: System

1. An honor system for class absences should be employed that ensures no student is required to provide a doctor’s note or other documentation if they need to miss class to care for their health or the health of others.
2. A system that does not penalize students for dropping classes should be enacted.
3. Fully fund basic needs programs—including food pantries—across institutions to serve students.
4. Ensure institution-sponsored health insurance provides coverage out-of-state, tele-health coverage, emergency response hotlines, and a guarantee of coverage in emergency situations, including if the institution shuts down or a student must drop out.

Section 2: State

1. Additional emergency grants should be extended, or new grants should be created for college and university students.
2. Provide long term funding for public college and university students’ basic needs.

Section 3: Federal

1. Allow for the continuation of the student loan interest rate reduction from 0%-1% on all current and future student loans.
2. Allow for the continuation of the extension of Pell Grant eligibility by one semester for all students.
3. Provide long term funding for public college and university students’ basic needs.
4. Allow all student loan borrowers to go into automatic deferment if they miss a payment without a financial penalty.
5. Provide financial aid to states that are providing health insurance to unemployed individuals and families.
6. End the public charge rule.
7. Lift travel restrictions, including pre-pandemic travel bans.

Ultimately, the COVID-19 pandemic has put a microscope on the existing dynamics that impact our students, higher education, and the community as a whole. The ramifications of this pandemic on people’s wages, workplaces, health, safety, their ability to pay bills, and their ability put money back into the community are in no way their personal failings. Neither are many other situations students navigate before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Students frequently worry about choosing between their health and paying their bills. Students often take public health risks to keep their grades up or pay off fees. Students are always asked to pay their tuition and their rent and their bills without regard to circumstances outside of their control. Students are not given such leniency when a personal tragedy or crisis impacts their ability to achieve high academic success. Pandemic or not, these policies are the right thing to do.

Our mission: Led by Minnesota State University Students, we are the inclusive voice for all future, current, and former students. We actively work to represent and support Minnesota State university students and advocate at a campus, state, and federal level for higher education policies that make a positive impact for our students and communities.