



2023

Federal Legislative Agenda

This year, Students United is committed to advocating on behalf of policies at the state and federal level that increase affordability, widen access to basic needs, and encourage civic engagement among students.

Students United is an independent, non-profit organization funded and operated by students.

TABLE OF CONTENTS



Introduction

Overview.....	2
---------------	---

Affordability

Supporting the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.....	3
Support for increasing the Pell Grant.....	4

Basic Needs

TRIO Program funding.....	5
Across our seven campuses, students have resoundingly	6

Civic Engagement

Empowering students' voices.....	7
----------------------------------	---



Federal Legislative Agenda Overview

Affordability

Supporting the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act: We believe fundamental updates to the HEA will reduce barriers to education through additional Pell Grant funding, basic needs support for students and institutions, and improvements to student borrower relief programs.

Support for increasing the Pell Grant: Congress needs to raise the maximum award and return the Pell's purchasing power to its historic peak of approximately three-quarters of the cost of attending a four-year public institution. Increasing the Pell will create greater access to higher education for students.

Basic Needs

TRIO Program funding: Providing more funding to a program that is data-proven to increase graduation rates and prepare students to enter the workforce is a worthwhile investment in the future of Minnesota and our country.

Supporting increased mental health resources: Across our seven campuses, students have resoundingly called for more resources and access to mental health support. That is why Students United is prioritizing efforts to expand the scope and scale of mental health resources across our system.

Civic Engagement

Empowering students' voices: In addition to our Get-Out-The-Vote efforts throughout the midterm election cycle, Students United is committed to strengthening and improving ballot access for future generations. That is why Students United is supporting the [Youth Voting Rights Act](#).



Affordability

Supporting the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act

The Higher Education Act (HEA) is the overarching law that governs higher education, and facilitates the relationship between the federal government, colleges and universities, and students. This critical legislation authorizes many federal aid programs within the U.S. Department of Education, including programs that aim to increase higher education access for low-income and first-generation students, including the Pell Grant. In addition, the HEA outlines the federal rules and regulations that govern accreditation, transparency, and compliance with Title IV.

First signed into law in 1965, the HEA is scheduled for reauthorization by Congress every five years. However, the HEA has not been reauthorized since 2008, and it has been running on a series of temporary extensions ever since. While there have been efforts in each previous Congress to renew the HEA in some form, none have ever gone beyond the committee level. **The failure to reauthorize the HEA results in an outdated law which fails to meet the needs of students today.**

In taking action to reauthorize the HEA, Congress would have the opportunity to: further invest in the Pell Grant program, while ensuring its sustainability; increase transparency of outcomes within higher education; renew state-level investment in higher education; and enhance students' well-being through increased funding for campus safety, mental health programs, and combatting sexual assault.

Eventually, we want to see all the topics above and all we are advocating for in this legislative agenda included in a comprehensive reauthorization of the HEA. **We believe these fundamental updates to the HEA will reduce barriers to education through additional Pell Grant funding, basic needs support for students and institutions, and improvements to student borrower relief programs.**

AT A GLANCE

The Higher Education Act (HEA) is the overarching law that governs higher education, and facilitates the relationship between the federal government, colleges and universities, and students.

First signed into law in 1965, the HEA is scheduled for reauthorization by Congress every five years. However, the **HEA has not been reauthorized since 2008**. Failure to reauthorize the HEA results in an outdated law which fails to meet the needs of students today.

In taking action to reauthorize the HEA, Congress would have the opportunity to: further invest in the Pell Grant program, while ensuring its sustainability; increase transparency of outcomes within higher education; renew state-level investment in higher education; and enhance students' well-being.



Affordability

Support for increasing the Pell Grant

The Pell Grant has been fundamental to the affordability and accessibility of higher education for students from all backgrounds. In 2022, almost 117,000 Minnesotans received the Pell Grant. Nationally, [48% of Pell Grant funds](#) go to students whose families earn less than \$20,000 annually – the largest majority. Only 7% of Pell Grant recipients come from families that earn over \$60,000 annually.

As part of its spending package for 2023, Congress raised the maximum annual Pell Grant award to \$7,395 — a \$500 increase. **This represented the largest increase in more than a decade. Of course, Students United appreciated congressional action on this critical program, but greater progress is desperately needed.**

State-level disinvestment in higher education and inflation has significantly reduced the Pell Grant's value. As recently as 2022, the Pell Grant only covered slightly more than a [quarter](#) of the cost of attendance for public, 4-year higher education institutions. As a result, according to [research](#) from the National College Attainment Network: "only 25% of public, four-year institutions and fewer than half of public, two-year institutions are affordable to the average Pell Grant recipient."

Given this context, nearly [1,200 organizations joined together](#) in 2021 to call upon Congress to double the maximum Pell Grant award. Students United shares this aim because it would be an important step toward investing as much in today's students as Pell did for previous generations.

We believe Congress needs to raise the maximum award and return the Pell's purchasing power to its historic peak of approximately three-quarters of the cost of attending a four-year public institution. Increasing the Pell will create greater access to community colleges, technical colleges, and universities, and will allow students to enter the workforce without the burden of overwhelming student debt.

AT A GLANCE

The Pell Grant is a targeted program, with almost half of recipients coming from families earning less than \$20,000 a year. Yet, **state-level disinvestment has dramatically undercut the purchasing power of the Pell Grant.**

As recently as 2022, the Pell Grant only covered slightly more than a quarter of the cost of attendance for public, 4-year higher education institutions. This is down from an historic peak of approximately three-quarters of the cost of attending a four-year public institution.

Students United has joined the nearly 1,200 organizations calling upon Congress to double the maximum Pell Grant award. This would be an important step toward investing as much in today's students as Pell did for previous generations



Basic Needs

TRIO Program funding

TRIO is a set of federally funded college opportunity programs that assist individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds in their pursuit of a college degree. More than 800,000 low-income, first-generation students and students with disabilities – from sixth grade through college graduation – are served by over 3,100 programs nationally. TRIO programs provide academic tutoring, personal counseling, mentoring, financial guidance, and other support necessary for educational access, retention, and completion. TRIO programs provide direct support services for students as well as relevant training for directors and staff.

In Minnesota, TRIO Student Support Services (SSS), the TRIO Ronald E. McNair Program, and TRIO Upward Bound are federally funded college opportunity programs, specifically supporting those students who come from disadvantaged and underrepresented backgrounds. This is particularly important given the stark gap in educational outcomes in Minnesota.

In 2019, Minnesota ranked 50th for racial disparities in high school graduation rates. These disparities, however, are not limited to race. A [report](#) from the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank found: “low-income white students significantly trail higher-income white students across Minnesota,” and “disparities span all parts of the state and all types of schools, whether district or charter schools.” Moreover, the report concluded, while gaps persisted and grew in standardized test scores and college readiness, gaps in graduation rates have decreased. Meaning, Minnesota is increasingly graduating students who are unprepared for higher education.

Providing more funding to a program that is data-proven to increase graduation rates and prepare students to enter the workforce is a worthwhile investment in the future of Minnesota and our country.

AT A GLANCE

More than 800,000 low-income, first-generation students and students with disabilities – from sixth grade through college graduation – are served by over 3,100 programs nationally.

In 2019, Minnesota ranked 50th for racial disparities in high school graduation rates. These disparities extend beyond race, however.

Providing more funding to a program that is data-proven to increase graduation rates and prepare students to enter the workforce is a worthwhile investment in the future of Minnesota and our country.



Basic Needs

Supporting increased mental health resources

Across our seven campuses, **students have resoundingly called for more resources and access to mental health support.** That is why Students United is prioritizing efforts to expand the scope and scale of mental health resources across our system.

While college is an exciting time for many students, it's also an environment that can produce many stressors that result in anxiety, depression, and a host of other mental health challenges. **This is compounded by the fact that 75% of all lifetime mental health conditions begin by age 24.** In fact, the [2021 College Student Health survey](#), conducted by the Minnesota Office of Higher Education, found that more than half of respondents reported having issues with their mental health, and suicide remains among the leading causes of death in Minnesota, particularly among college-age students. This is a crisis that demands urgent action from lawmakers.

That is why Students United is calling on Congress to pass the [Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act](#), which provides federal grants for youth mental health and suicide-prevention efforts, including on college campuses. Reauthorizing this bill would provide an additional \$13 million in annual funding for the program at a critical moment for students.

Additionally, Students United supports [The Enhancing Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Through Campus Planning Act](#), introduced by Representative Susan Wild (PA). This bill would require the U.S. Department of Education to partner with the Department of Health and Human Services to encourage colleges to create comprehensive plans to address mental health and suicide on campus.

AT A GLANCE

75% of all lifetime mental health conditions begin by age 24.

The 2021 College Student Health survey found that more than half of respondents reported having issues with their mental health, and suicide remains among the leading causes of death in Minnesota.

Students United is calling on Congress to pass the Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act and The Enhancing Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Through Campus Planning Act



Civic Engagement

Empowering students' voices

Empowering students' voices and promoting civic engagement is a priority for Students United. According to data from the [Pew Research Center](#), nearly 20% of Minnesota's voter-eligible population in 2019 was between the ages of 18 and 29. Additionally, [Data from Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement](#) at Tufts University shows that Minnesota was first in the nation in youth voter turnout in the 2018 election, and a close second in the 2020 contest.

With such a large and engaged portion of the electorate reflected on our campuses, ahead of the 2022 midterm elections, **Students United worked closely with student-leaders, campus administrators, and the Minnesota State system office to register and turnout thousands of students to vote.** Our students recognize that active participation in our democracy is a fundamental responsibility. That is why, in addition to our Get-Out-The-Vote efforts throughout the midterm election cycle, Students United is committed to strengthening and improving ballot access for future generations, including support for the [Youth Voting Rights Act](#).

Among the bill's provisions, this legislation would expand voter registration services on Minnesota State's seven universities and require each institution to offer on-campus polling locations. It's our hope that this will increase the ease with which students are able to exercise their voice. **This is particularly important given the fact that Minnesota has not kept pace with innovative policies that allow for greater access to the ballot box.** In fact, the [Cost of Voting Index](#) now ranks Minnesota 24th in the country in relative ease of voting. This can be attributed to the fact that Minnesota has not adopted more policies that remove barriers to voting such as automatic voter registration and the elimination of burdensome requirements.

AT A GLANCE

According to data from the Pew Research Center, nearly 20% of Minnesota's voter-eligible population in 2019 was between the ages of 18 and 29, and young Minnesotans vote at some of the highest levels across the country.

The Cost of Voting Index now ranks Minnesota 24th in the country in relative ease of voting, because Minnesota has not adopted more policies that remove barriers to voting.

Students United is supporting the **Youth Voting Rights Act** because the bill would **expand voter registration services** on Minnesota State's seven universities and require each institution to offer on-campus polling locations.