

students united™

federal legislative agenda
2024



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 system, local, state, and federal level for higher education policies that make a positive impact for our students and communities.

THIS YEAR

In 2024, Students United is committed to advocating for policies at the state level that support students' basic needs, college affordability, the rights of student loan borrowers, and investment in our Minnesota State System.

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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This year, Students United has committed to advocating on behalf of policies at the state and federal level that will benefit future, current, and former students at the Minnesota State University system.

Too many students across our seven universities live with the daily burden of food insecurity and, as a result, suffer worse academic outcomes and struggle to complete their degrees. This crisis impacts more than a quarter of students in Minnesota, and it's time to take action. That's why Students United calls on Congress to pass **The Enhance Access to SNAP (EATS) Act of 2023**. This legislation would permanently remove barriers and expand access to SNAP for students enrolled in college part-time or more.

Empowering students' voices and promoting civic engagement is another priority for Students United. Our students recognize that active participation in our democracy is a fundamental responsibility. That is why Students United is committed to strengthening and improving ballot access for future generations, including support for the **Freedom to Vote Act**.

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, including support for **The Enhancing Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Through Campus Planning Act**.

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

ENHANCING STUDENTS' ACCESS TO SNAP BENEFITS

Too many students across our seven universities live with the daily burden of food insecurity and, as a result, suffer worse academic outcomes and struggle to complete their degrees. This crisis impacts more than a quarter of students in Minnesota, and it's time to take action.

Currently, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the federal program that provides food-purchasing assistance for Americans with low incomes, is a primary mechanism for addressing food insecurity. Unfortunately, it is exceedingly difficult for college students to access the benefits of SNAP.

In addition to meeting the usual SNAP eligibility requirements, college students must meet a specific student exemption. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, passed by Congress in 2021, introduced two temporary exemptions to expand postsecondary student access to SNAP during the COVID-19 public health emergency. Specifically, students with work-study and an expected family contribution of zero dollars on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) became eligible for SNAP assistance. However, with the expiration of the public health emergency, the burdensome "work for food" requirements returned.

These requirements were especially devastating because we know that the temporary exemptions afforded access to SNAP to students who desperately needed it. In fact, according to a [report](#) from Minnesota's Department of Human Services, SNAP served 37% more postsecondary students in November 2022 compared to December 2019. Moreover, food insecurity decreased among survey respondents from 73% to 32%.

That's why Students United calls on Congress to pass [The Enhance Access to SNAP \(EATS\) Act of 2023](#). This legislation would permanently remove barriers and expand access to SNAP for students enrolled in college part-time or more. Specifically, students' eligibility would no longer be conditioned on performing 20 hours of outside employment or work-study.

ENHANCING STUDENTS' ACCESS TO SNAP BENEFITS CONT.

At a glance:

- More than a quarter of college students in Minnesota struggle with food insecurity.
- SNAP served 37% more postsecondary students in November 2022 than in December 2019, and food insecurity decreased from 73% to 32% during broader SNAP eligibility.
- Students United calls on Congress to pass The Enhance Access to SNAP (EATS) Act of 2023. This legislation would permanently remove barriers and expand access to SNAP for students enrolled in college half-time or more.

EMPOWERING STUDENTS' VOICES IN THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

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 18 and 29. Additionally, [data from the 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 turn out thousands of students to vote. Our students recognize that active participation in our democracy is a fundamental responsibility. That is why Students United is committed to strengthening and improving ballot access for future generations, including support for the [Freedom to Vote Act](#).

Among the bill's other provisions, this legislation would establish Election Day as a federal holiday, expand voter registration and voting access, and limit the removal of voters from voter rolls. We hope this will increase the ease with which students can exercise their voice in our democracy. This is particularly important given that Minnesota had not kept pace with innovative policies allowing greater access to the ballot box. The [Cost of Voting Index](#) ranked Minnesota 24th in the country in relative ease of voting. This can be attributed to the fact that Minnesota had not adopted more policies that removed barriers to voting, such as automatic voter registration and the elimination of burdensome requirements, until last year.

At a glance:

- According to data from the Pew Research Center, nearly 20% of Minnesota's voter-eligible population in 2019 was between 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 supports the Freedom to Vote Act because the bill would establish Election Day as a federal holiday, expand voter registration and voting access, and limit removing voters from voter rolls.

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.

Students United supports [The Enhancing Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Through Campus Planning Act](#), which Representative Susan Wild (PA) introduced. 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 Enhancing Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Through Campus Planning Act.

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 make 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 further progress is desperately needed.

State-level disinvestment in higher education and inflation have 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 in 2021 to call upon Congress to double the maximum Pell Grant award. Students United shares this aim because investing as much in today's students as Pell did for previous generations is essential.

We believe Congress needs to raise the maximum award and return 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.

SUPPORT FOR INCREASING THE PELL GRANT CONT.

At a glance:

- The Pell Grant is a targeted program, with almost half of recipients 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 a 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 essential step toward investing as much in today's students as Pell did in previous generations.



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