NDSA Legislative Priorities: Pre-Session

Prepared by the NDSA Executive Team
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Funding the North Dakota University System

We advocate that the North Dakota legislature funds the North Dakota University System at the full 2021-23 NDUS Need-Based Budget Request levels. If the budget request is not met, universities will once again need to cut positions, programs, and certain operations. Without adjusting for inflation, the current 2021-23 budget request remains lower than the 2011-2013 NDUS State General Fund Appropriation. After the significant cut in funding to the NDUS during the 65th legislature, another cut of that magnitude, which is what Governor Burgum's budget proposes at a funding level of $93.4 million, would severely and irreparably impact our system of higher education. Because of the pandemic, it's now more than ever that we need to be funding and investing in North Dakota's future workforce, their education, our current university system staff, and our institutions of learning for future stability and economic recovery.

Challenge Fund Grant

We advocate for increasing dollars appropriated to the Challenge Fund Grant. This program encourages higher education foundations to seek donations from private donors through a two-for-one match program where for every $2 a donor gives the state will provide the institution with $1. Since its inception, the Challenge Fund Grant has amassed almost $200 million dollars in aid for student scholarships and new technology and innovation on NDUS campuses. In the 2013-2015 biennium, the Challenge Fund Grant was funded at $30 million but was cut to only $2 million in the 2017-2019 state budget. The NDSA thanks the legislature for increasing the appropriation to $9.4 million during the 2019-2021 biennium and advocates for the legislature to allocate funds to the program at or exceeding the 2019-2021 appropriation.

Student Mental Health Access and Funding

We advocate for fully funding every NDUS institution's Student Behavioral Health Budget Request. Mental health has always been important for university students, but it has become even more imperative to fund mental health resources due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Scientific studies are beginning to show increased levels of anxiety, stress, depression, and even suicidal thoughts among students of higher education since the pandemic began.[1] Poor mental health greatly affects the education and lives of students, and thus in order to prevent students from discontinuing their studies and/or taking drastic measures to hurt themselves, the state must support and invest in resources to assist them. Students often cannot afford private counseling and don't know where to find resources, but with proper funding NDUS institutions can combat those barriers to health services and make sure students' mental health needs are being met.

Open Educational Resources (OER) Funding

We advocate for continued NDUS and ND state legislative support, monetary and otherwise, for open educational resources (OERs). OERs are educational materials that are provided at no-cost or at a low-cost to students due to their "open" nature, meaning that they are created and developed specifically for free use by the public. Most often they come in the form of textbooks or other educational learning tools. This "free to students" model does, however, require monetary investment on the front end by institutions of higher learning to develop the resources. Once developed, the resources provide incredible cost-savings to students. A 2018 NDUS audit of OERs in our system found that an original investment of $77,000 by the 2015-2017 legislature for institution-level grants to develop OERs resulted in an estimated savings to students of at least $1.1 million to at most $2.4 million[2]. Very small investments can have very large impacts on savings to students, which is why the NDSA encourages the NDUS and the legislature to provide OER funding at or exceeding historical funding levels.

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[1] https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7505693/
[2] https://www.nd.gov/auditor/2018-north-dakota-university-system-open-educational-resources