



March 8th, 2021

Dear Chairman Monson and Members of the Committee:

My name is Gracie Lian, and I am the current President of the North Dakota Student Association. The NDSA is an organization that is directly funded through a small student fee paid by all students attending North Dakota University System (NDUS) institutions, and our organization is tasked with representing and advocating for students across all eleven of North Dakota's public institutions.

I'm very excited to be here today to speak on behalf of higher education in North Dakota. For those of you who I have not met, I am a student at the University of North Dakota studying English and Political Science with plans to graduate this spring. Graduation will not be the end of my time with the NDUS as I will immediately jump into a master's program at UND. I love this university system and the opportunities that it has provided me with, and I've been lucky enough to see first-hand the great work that is done for higher education in our state thanks to continued state support and wonderful NDUS and institutional leadership. Ever since my first semester at UND and my first NDSA meeting in September of 2017, I have seen our university system on the fast track to rapid change – and that was even before the pandemic. Since my first year, I've seen some aspects of higher education change greatly for our students, while other aspects have remained the same despite the fluctuating world around us.

As part of my testimony, I have also attached a document outlining the NDSA's pre-session legislative priorities. The first item on that document is funding the NDUS at the full Needs-Based Budget level. The NDSA is extremely supportive of the version of SB 2003 that the Senate has forwarded to the House and its intention to not only fully fund the Needs-Based Budget but to also increase certain areas. The NDSA believes it is important to reiterate just how critical it is to fund the NDUS at levels that fully support our university system. Right now, our students are experiencing large disruptions to their lifestyles and their educational pathways, and we need to continue investing in them and the stability of their education. That way, as we work to return to a new normal, we can return stronger than ever. Furthermore, our students can return without fear of sweeping program cuts or reductions in essential services and scholarships.

The next item on our list of priorities is the Challenge Fund Grant. At its 2:1 private to state dollar matching agreement, the program has consistently been successful in encouraging private donors to invest in our universities. The scholarships and advancements in educational technology on campuses that this fund provides are irreplaceable. Affordability is more important than ever to students. Therefore, scholarships that are made possible by this program are a large part of what brings students to our campuses. I promised myself that I would never go to school at UND, but because of the incredible scholarship opportunities provided by you, the state legislature, I and many of the peers I've spoken with picked UND or other NDUS institutions to continue our education. Without North Dakota scholarships I wouldn't have had the opportunity to become involved with higher education advocacy or get involved on campus. These extracurricular activities have provided me with more learning opportunities than the classroom in many ways. Additionally, scholarships have allowed me to fully focus on my education without worrying about paying bills or putting food on the table. I was very happy to see that the governor recommended the same funding level with the potential to raise it further. I cannot overstate how impactful this program is to students and their ability to go to college and stay in college.

Jumping down to our last listed priority, Open Educational Resources, or OERs, are textbooks or other educational materials that are provided to students at either no-cost or a very low-cost. This is made



possible by investments made by universities, through grants, or as in this case, by a state legislature in their higher education budget. I am in four classes this semester – two of which are using OERs while the others required textbooks. I only bought two books, but together they cost me \$400. For comparison, that is more than the price for one credit at UND. I've spoken with other students who have, in some cases, paid \$800 or more for one semester's worth of textbooks. A UND professor, Dr. Virginia Clinton, published research on OERs in 2019 titled "Efficacy of Open Textbook Adoption on Learning Performance and Course Withdrawal Rates: A Meta-Analysis." The research found that "there were no differences in learning efficacy between open textbooks and commercial textbooks. However, the withdrawal rate for postsecondary courses with open textbooks was significantly lower than that for commercial textbooks."

I have seen students time and time again drop classes because they couldn't afford course material and therefore couldn't engage with and keep up with the learning material. North Dakota has been a leader in OERs thanks to the foresight of this body to invest early in this endeavor back in 2015. This is a trend the NDSA would like to see continue. In an audit that was released by the university system, the state's first \$77,000 investment directly for textbooks saw a return in student savings between \$1.1 million and \$2.4 million. It's difficult to narrow down to the exact cost savings as students will often look for cheaper options online or buy books from people who have previously taken the class, but the savings are immense either way and have only grown since the original audit. At UND alone the savings have been estimated at \$10 million for students in just five years. OERs are low-cost investments with huge returns to students, both in cost and in terms of educational success.

The three priorities that I have mentioned – the Needs-Based Budget, the Challenge Fund Grant, and Open Educational Resources – all follow a theme of one of the most important aspects of our university system: how affordable it is for students to attain a quality education. It's what brings students here, it's what helps them graduate on time, and it's what helps retain them. Because of the pandemic, now more than ever affordability must remain a top priority for our system. The financial struggles I have seen my peers endure have been dire. Questions of whether they can continue their education have led many students to pause their education, and I'm sure many high school juniors and seniors are making the same calculations as they consider their educational future. The cost of higher education now, more than ever, is on the minds of students.

Beyond affordability, the coronavirus has also brought student mental health to the forefront of conversations surrounding higher education. Mental health in higher education has been an increasingly important topic over the past decade, and the pandemic has only exacerbated the challenges that students face. COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of mental health services on campuses, and the NDSA fully supports SB 2003's proposed allocation of \$284,400 for mental health services across the NDUS. Data from the American College Health Association in 2019 indicated that one in three college students reported some kind of mental health disorder and more than 40 percent sought mental health treatment at some point within the four years of their undergraduate education. Inside Higher Ed, an online publication focused entirely on higher education, consistently reports that students have had difficulty accessing mental health care while also experiencing higher rates of depression since the pandemic began, prompting calls for a broad response from colleges.¹

¹ <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/07/13/survey-finds-higher-prevalence-depression-among-students-and-difficulties-accessing>



I have spoken and worked with many high-achieving students from across the state who shared their struggles with mental health during the pandemic. Common consensus has been that the pandemic has made it more difficult for them to perform at the academic levels that they're capable of. They're experiencing new barriers and stressors and increasing access to mental health resources is what would truly help them succeed personally and academically.

Lastly, it's important to discuss online education and the shift to virtual learning that has taken place over the course of this pandemic. First, the NDSA would like to recognize the astounding resiliency the NDUS, university administrations, faculty, staff, and students have shown across the state to make higher education attainable during this pandemic. We'd also like to thank NDUS, SBHE, and institutional leadership for bringing our students back to campuses – this decision has been integral to student success this year.

COVID-19 has proven that, on a large scale, higher education online is feasible. However, despite the successes we have seen as a system and as a state, I would also caution us not to think that students prefer large-scale online education all of the time. Last semester, more than ever before, students struggled academically. I know of many students who have taken a break from their education until they can return to in-person instruction because online learning simply isn't feasible for them. Furthermore, in-person classes are often where students make connections with their peers and form life-long friendships and bonds – this is especially important for first-year and transfer students as they move to new communities, often without any local connections or support systems. Pushing large-scale, online classes, especially for general education courses, could negatively impact experiences and opportunities for students and make it more difficult for them to truly feel like a part of the university community. If a typical 18 to 22-year-old student has moved to a community for their education, they have moved to that community because they prefer in-person education. If they wanted to learn online, they would have applied to an online school.

In-person classes also help to provide students with opportunities to get involved in organizations. Learning in college goes beyond the classroom – it extends into organizations that students join, leadership positions that they hold, and the development of crucial soft skills such as communication, management, and teamwork. The pandemic has shown how important in-person education and human interactions are for mental health, education, and personal development.

These comments are not meant to turn us entirely away from online education, and the NDUS has made great strides in virtual education. However, I think it is important that institutions remember to be precise and deliberate in choosing which classes and programs are pushed to online-only options. There is no doubt that online education has a future, but in-person instruction will always retain its value and should therefore be supported and funded.

The NDSA's priorities – funding the Needs-Based Budget, Challenge Fund Grants, OERs, and Student Mental Health – reflect some of the main concerns of NDUS students today. Affordability and mental health, both of which directly lead to continued academic and personal success, are necessities now more than ever before because of the coronavirus pandemic.

In summary, the NDSA supports SB 2003 as it stands and urges the house to vote do pass as. The bill sufficiently funds the needs of our educational system and ensures that in this time of instability, the



state continues to invest in its most important resource – its people. Now is not the time to turn away from higher education. Now is the time to invest in the future leaders and citizens of North Dakota.

Sincerely,
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