



**U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor
Higher Education and Workforce Investment Subcommittee Hearing
July 7, 2020**

**A Major Test for Higher Education: How Congress Can Help Students and Institutions
Cope with COVID-19**

Sharon Pierce, Ed.D. M.S.N., Minneapolis College President

Chairwoman Davis, Ranking Member Smucker, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Sharon Pierce, president of Minneapolis College, a member of the Minnesota State System of Colleges and Universities. My testimony will describe the impact of the global pandemic on two-year community and technical colleges and our students; and the importance for Congress to provide additional aid.

The effects of COVID-19 were felt with significant impact among community college students across the nation. Our students attend the only comprehensive community and technical college in Minneapolis. Our urban setting allows students who are unlikely to succeed elsewhere to have an opportunity to attain their credential, elevate their socio-economic status and contribute to the economy of the region.

A third of our students are from the first generation in their families to attend college. 72 percent are from groups under-represented in higher education. Nearly half rely on Pell Grants for tuition assistance and nearly 70 percent rely on some form of financial aid. As you can imagine, these students typically face multiple barriers to their academic success even in a pre-pandemic environment. COVID-19 put many of our students out of work, unable to support their families and unable to access transportation and social services they rely upon. It also elevated mental health concerns for them as well as the family members they care for. And, even for the hardest working students with the most grit, it completely disrupted their educational journeys.

Imagine a student who already faces such barriers now suddenly trying to navigate courses through an online platform. In many cases, this means using a smart phone and having poor or no Internet access readily available. It requires additional effort and abilities to connect with instructors, classmates, tutors, the library and all the support services our campus provides to help them succeed.

In short order, over an extended spring break, our campus went to work to put as many measures in place as possible to help students complete their spring semester courses. Students, staff and faculty who lacked adequate devices to work remotely were provided with

devices and technology tools such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, a learning management system, virtual classroom labs and Office365. The devices were procured, set up, deployed and training was provided wherever it was needed over the span of a few days as we hastily prepared to move our instruction and operations to a remote environment. The support and training required to ensure functionality and collaboration in an ongoing online environment continues. We purchased and deployed hot spot devices for students without adequate internet access.

More than 900 Spring semester course sections transitioned to alternative, remote delivery and all but five percent of Summer semester courses are being delivered online. For the students who were unable to attend class and do their coursework from home because they are homeless or live in highly distracting circumstances, we modified our Academic Success Center's computer lab to provide social distancing and implemented strict and frequent cleaning protocols to allow this space to remain open as well as safe. Students taking courses that required specialized hardware and software also relied on this resource.

Dozens of videos and online tutorials have been created to assist students and employees in transitioning to off-campus work locations. Our food shelf on campus remained open to support students as long as it was allowed and, then, began providing snack packs and contact information for other food resources.

More than 500 employees were transitioned from working on campus to working in their home offices in a matter of days. This was a complete transformation of the way we work and required innovative methods to monitor and address ongoing issues such as network connectivity, training, ergonomics, workers' compensation issues, leaves of absence and employee accountability in a remote work environment.

With the uptick in cybercrimes seen through this crisis as well as an intense increase of users accessing our network and website, we increased security awareness and practices to continue to ensure the privacy of student and employee data. Data management processes and practices were refreshed to ensure data security in teaching, learning and working remotely.

To continue supporting the enrollment of new students, we created an online orientation experience and transitioned from traditional, Accuplacer testing to multiple measures assessments and a self-placement process. A virtual registration platform and labs were implemented and the Admissions content available online was significantly transformed and expanded. Virtual tabling and collaboration events are being held to continue to identify how to help students in this continually changing environment.

College policies were revised to enable prompt decision-making and to offer students expanded grading options and withdrawal periods to ensure they received credit for the work they achieved prior to the pandemic. The Minneapolis College Foundation created an Emergency Needs Fund to quickly gather and distribute support for students.

Commencement and end-of-year events transitioned to online gatherings. It is challenging to maintain a sense of community. Support services shifted to online delivery and the phone system was modified to provide continuous student support remotely, allowing employees to answer campus phones from home. With employees and students quarantined at home, we urgently built a robust COVID-19 website landing page with many links and volumes of content structured for ease of use to ensure continuity and engagement. Now our new "front door", the website hosts operational and pandemic-related communications and resources for our campus community <https://www.minneapolis.edu/covid-19-information>. This includes resources for

online learning, innovative technologies and an exhaustive list of personal and professional support references and assistance. In addition, hundreds of existing webpages were updated to reflect the changes being made to function effectively online including a new live chat feature.

On-campus events were cancelled, making it particularly challenging for our many students who rely on the support from the campus community to persevere. Like other schools and colleges across the country, we celebrated our 2020 graduates with a virtual event online using video and social media.

In addition to the extensive list of actions taken during the various stages of quarantining, a [Back-to-Campus Preparedness Plan](#) has been developed to address our multi-faceted approach to prepare students, employees and our campus itself when it becomes safe to return to campus. This includes extensive protocols, communications and training for the following:

- Social distancing and return-to-campus etiquette
- Screening practices for those exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms
- Handwashing
- Air quality
- Respiratory etiquette
- Cleaning and disinfecting

We have and will continue to provide ongoing support and referrals for mental health, food insecurities and other basic needs to encourage students and employees to persevere through the unique challenges being faced.

Minneapolis College received \$4.6 million in Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act Relief - IHE/Student Aid funding. \$2.3 million was disbursed via emergency grants as follows. Eligible students each received \$100. Pell Grant recipients received additional funds based on their credit loads directly. Students were also able to apply for additional emergency aid to meet individual need and/or change of economic status not reflected in the previous year's FAFSA application. In addition to direct grants, CARES-IHE/Student Aid funding provided eligible students up to \$1,000 each for food, housing, course materials, healthcare, childcare, transportation and technology-related expenses incurred due to disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The guidance for the student portion of CARES Act funding was difficult for institutions to unravel and establish eligibility guidelines. Institutional plans were quickly formulated but needed frequent revising due to changing guidance received from the Department of Education. Because of these revisions, more than two weeks elapsed between when funds were available to the College and when we could disburse them to students. The ongoing rulemaking by the Department of Education to define student eligibility creates uncertainty and limits our ability to direct this aid to the most at-risk students. This includes DACA and undocumented students who make significant contributions to the economy and will play an important role in its recovery. It also includes adult basic education students who are seeking entry into the economy. Serving the needs of these students is embedded in the missions of community and technical colleges such as ours and serves the greater good.

After accounting for tuition revenue, state appropriations and federal pandemic assistance, the College will utilize approximately \$3 million of our own funding, including reserves. This is both significant and not sustainable. However, using a portion of our own funds will allow for the time needed to better assess the need for more significant budgetary changes when we know the full extent of how COVID-19 will impact our operations. Minneapolis College will continue to

reallocate and reduce expenditures as part of our ongoing efforts to prepare for potentially significant revenue losses. Determination of short-term changes versus long-term changes will be an ongoing effort in the coming months and years. We are exploring financial modelling options that will allow us to rebuild our reserves and continue rightsizing of staff and faculty to align with evolving student needs. These models include delaying asset preservation and replacement projects, reductions in personnel and services, and possible elimination of programs.

Technology investments need to be at the forefront of decision-making so that this critical backbone, which allows our students, staff and faculty to work efficiently, becomes a part of our routine operations now, as well as after our ability to return to campus is restored. Our antiquated data information structure prohibits prompt reporting, responsiveness and it handicaps effective decision-making to accurately address ongoing changing needs. Students need to be provided with ongoing, updated hardware, software, network access, training and more. A more robust and well-funded laptop lease program for students is needed. Faculty and staff need to continue teleworking to allow them to maintain proficiency and technology in their home offices. Faculty across all disciplines, especially in our career and technical education programs, need new types of training to advance their skills and nimbleness in teaching using alternative delivery in synchronous and asynchronous formats. The intensive three-week training program being provided this summer targets faculty whose classes include labs and who are just beginning to teach online.

Our Emergency Operations Team (EOT) needs more in-depth emergency preparedness training and continually improved technology tools so we can be better prepared to respond even more promptly in future crisis situations. This will require a more strategic approach to our cybersecurity and an ongoing commitment to updating devices, applications and security. Access to affordable, high-speed Internet in our neighborhoods is essential. Equitable access to education can only be achieved by ensuring all students have the technology tools they need to persist in their academics and receive support services as needed, whether they are on campus or functioning remotely. We estimate the average cost per student for two years enrollment is approximately \$1,100.

To provide a safer campus environment, we need to invest thoughtfully in facilities upgrades including contactless hardware for all faucets and toilets, additional cleaning supplies and equipment as well as personal protective equipment. We also need to engineer and install stanchions, plexiglass and other facilities equipment to allow for physical distancing. And, of course, there are many more, unknown costs that will be incurred as we reinvent our physical operations.

Like many other two-year colleges, Minneapolis College exists within a system. Our College is dependent upon state allocation. The Minnesota State 2020-21 biennial budget request to the Governor and State Legislature focused on investments that would ensure the success of students, continue our commitment to affordability and strengthen strategies that address the workforce opportunity gap. State appropriations provided less than the full request but combined that with a provision for tuition increases of up to three percent. Minneapolis College designed the operating budgets to focus resources on investments that:

- ensure the equitable success of all students regardless of race or ethnicity, economic status, or whether they are the first in their families to attend a college or university,
- continue our commitment to affordability,
- maintain programs and services that serve our current and future students, including enterprise-wide technology infrastructure and the structural capacity for innovation,

- strengthen strategies that address workforce opportunity gaps, and
- ensure long-term financial sustainability.

The arrival of the coronavirus pandemic in March significantly disrupted these plans. Significant new pressures include:

- enrollment declines that are difficult to predict and potentially disabling to our operating budget,
- financial losses beyond tuition, such as parking fees, imperiling revenues necessary to meet fixed debt service and facilities maintenance obligations, and
- uncertainty regarding future state appropriations, which are just as necessary for operating budgets as tuition revenues.

The Federal CARES Act has provided some relief to address financial problems experienced by students and institutions resulting from the pandemic. Planning for fiscal year 2021 budget, however, remains a great challenge.

Moving forward, students who were already facing significant barriers prior to the pandemic must now navigate a new economic reality. They will require greater support as they find their way back to campus to continue their education programs. Additional federal funding providing direct aid to students impacted by COVID-19 will support their continuous enrollment and, therefore, aid in the economic recovery of our nation.

In addition to direct student aid, the ongoing importance of federal stabilization funding geared towards offsetting the operating costs of institutions like ours during this trying time cannot be overstated. While the CARES Act provided badly needed stabilization funding for institutions of higher education, more assistance is vital for us to continue to effectively serve our students and keep our virtual doors open while preparing to safely reopen our physical campus. According to recent estimates, community colleges could easily be facing a collective revenue reduction of \$10 billion, which is 17 percent of current revenues, or more over the next year. This estimate excludes the cost of additional needed supports for students resulting from COVID-19.

With that in mind, we also want to stress the importance of using a student headcount-based formula to allocate future federal stabilization funding to institutions of higher education. This approach will allow us to account for the needs of all our students, including those who attend courses part-time. While well-intentioned, higher education stabilization funding authorized by the CARES Act was allocated through a formula that favored institutions with many full-time and graduate students—underestimating the needs of two-year institutions. We want to thank you and your colleagues for replacing the CARES Act formula with a headcount-based formula in the recently passed Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions (HEROES) Act. We are appreciative of your recognition that part-time students are whole individuals who need access to the same resources as their full-time peers.

We will continue to innovate to support students, employees and the broad spectrum of partners with which we collaborate across the region. We must look ahead to our long-term needs that will allow our institution to continue providing equitable, affordable and high-quality education and transformational educational pathways for our community members who face significant challenges to elevating their socio-economic status. As the nation strives to recover economically from COVID-19 disruptions, higher education will be a critical component of rebuilding thriving business communities and neighborhoods. An unprecedented level of commitment to education by lawmakers is needed now as the decisions being made will directly

influence college students' ability to achieve their academic goals and, in turn, support the viability of their communities.

Thank you