

Dr. Stephen M. Nelson
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Board of Trustees
Minnesota State Colleges and Universities
30 7th Street East, Suite 350
St. Paul, MN 55101-7804

Dear Board Members,

My name is Stephen Nelson, and I'm a Philosophy Instructor at Northland Community and Technical College in Thief River Falls, MN. This is my fifth year as a full-time faculty member at NCTC. Prior to coming here, I was a PhD student at the University of Minnesota for seven years, several of which I also taught philosophy courses at MSU-Mankato and Metro State University as an adjunct faculty member. I'm originally from Williston, North Dakota, but I've lived in Minnesota for over a decade now, and I feel lucky to be able to live and work here. I'm proud to be part of our excellent state higher education system, and I'm willing and happy to do what I can to help keep it excellent. I do, however, have some concern about some national trends in higher education spreading here and potentially jeopardizing much that is special and significant about our state system.

This letter is in regard to the recommendations brought forward by the Task Force on Long Term Financial Sustainability. The proposed recommendations shift the focus from our students receiving an extraordinary education to promoting a business-like model that puts financial efficiencies first. Such an approach would truly create a crisis in our ability to carry out our mission of providing an extraordinary education that is accessible and affordable for all Minnesotans.

A commitment to an extraordinary education recognizes and respects the uniqueness and autonomy of our campuses and the economic and cultural vitality they contribute to the communities they serve. NCTC is not a huge college, but it's an important asset to the community of Thief River Falls. We train the community's welders, automotive technicians, and nurses, allowing people from this region who want to stay and build careers here to find stable, good-paying employment. We draw people to this region with programs that will allow them to work with cutting edge technology like robotics and unmanned aerial systems. We provide a solid Liberal Arts program for students who want to get their two-year degree locally before starting a career or transferring to a university. Our programs are also an asset to high school students in the region. Many Lincoln High students in Thief River take classes at NCTC, some of whom complete their AA at the same time as their high school diploma, and many other students at small high schools nearby are able to take college-in-the-high-school classes due to NCTC faculty serving as mentors in the program. The community comes to our campus to watch plays, go to concerts, and attend athletic events—not just ours, we also host community theater, high school band festivals, and youth basketball tournaments. All of this is to say that our college is a hub in a network of support threaded through this community, and the push to simplify services and streamline curricula in the system could very easily have a negative impact on our region that would not be balanced by the small amount of cost savings to the system that might be gained.

A commitment to an extraordinary education recognizes how integral all faculty are to students' ability to succeed and recognizes that faculty working conditions are student learning conditions. Efforts to divide and devalue our faculty destabilize our classrooms and colleges, and disrupt student learning. Our state's commitment to a largely full time stable faculty who are best able to meet the needs of students, students who continue to come to our classrooms with an increasingly wide variety of needs and challenges, is and should remain a point of pride. Attempts to decrease the number of full time faculty and create a second class workforce by dividing full and part-time faculty must be rejected outright.

We have experienced challenges in the past, and, as individual colleges and a system, have emerged from those challenges by engaging in inclusive, respectful, fully transparent discussions that put students and our responsibility to provide an accessible, affordable extraordinary education at the center of any proposed solutions. We are always ready to engage in efforts to expand and improve access to the education and opportunities our students receive in our classrooms and throughout our campuses; however, these recommendations threaten to do just the opposite.

The “education as a business” model that these recommendations reflect, by equating simplicity with efficiency, bigger with better, and sacrificing student needs for bottom line thinking, have proven to be fundamental failures and must be rejected. An alternative to this model is one that views our state colleges and universities as a *public good*, something valuable for the good it does for our citizens in helping improve their lives, both in the education we provide and in the wealth of support and engagement we offer our communities. This public good model recognizes economic realities along with all the other factors that go in to shaping what is best for the public, unlike the business model that has a difficult time seeing the value in the parts of a college that don’t fit on a budget line or balance sheet.

The business model is evident in the proposed recommendations, where it can be seen that other values are appealed to inconsistently, more as afterthoughts than driving forces. For example, the report criticizes the “fierce independence” of the campuses for creating “unnecessary barriers”, saying instead we should harness the system’s “collective power”; at the same time, it suggests that dividing faculty unions will make things more “creative and flexible”. If the report is truly motivated by the value of harnessing our collective power (a worthy value), then I would expect recommendations that encourage more *unity* between the faculty unions, not division. These kinds of inconsistencies in the rationales make it difficult to see the recommendations as truly motivated by any values beyond those related to business and budgets. Therefore, I ask that you reject the proposed recommendations and commit to an inclusive, transparent process that puts students and the public good first.

Respectfully,



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