

Thank you, Chair Fateh and members of the committees for this opportunity. Hello, my name is John Runningen; I go to M-State in Fergus Falls and I am the president of LeadMN, which is the statewide student organization that represents 100,000 community and technical college students. My journey begins in Fergus Falls, MN. I came from a farming family, where we made just enough not to receive SNAP but not enough to buy groceries. I never believed college was an option for someone like me because I wasn't a straight-A student and didn't come from a wealthy background. If it weren't for the support of my teachers pushing me to try and talking about the choice to go to my local community college, I wouldn't be in the position I am in today. I chose to go to my local community college because it was supposed to be the "affordable" option. Being a first-generation college student, I didn't understand any of the nuances of enrolling or what the FAFSA even was. Because of this lack of knowledge that the system "assumes" everyone knows, I had to take out student loans because I wasn't aware of the options available to me. This put me into financial debt for the first time in my life, and that was even before I opened a textbook for one of my classes. As a non-traditional student, Minnesota needs more people like me going to college to obtain the skills necessary to meet the workforce needs.

In this session, I hope to continue the bold vision for Minnesota's higher education that we created last year with the passing of the North-Star Promise. We need to create a high school culture that supports students in taking the next step to a post high school degree or certificate. We know and understand our economy demands that more and more workers obtain certificates or degrees after high school. Now more than ever before, it is extremely important to address the Fafsa completion issue we have in Minnesota. Minnesota is currently ranked 40th in fafsa completion in the nation, with only 44% of high-school graduates completing the fafsa.

This is leaving millions of dollars of aid on the table because we are not supporting the next step in getting our students into college. Minnesota ranks 26th in the nation for leaving Pell Grants on the table. At LeadMN, we believe we can change the narrative by making FAFSA completion part of the high school graduation process by having students opt-out rather than opt-in. The results are significant in the six other states that

have adopted this to help more students enter college and get them the \$49 million in federal Pell Grants that are going unused because of poor FAFSA completion in Minnesota.