



To: Senate Higher Education Committee in support of SF2481 (Hunger Free Campus Appropriation)

From: Tracy Rahim, Student Life & Basic Needs Coordinator, Minnesota State College Southeast

Date: March 18, 2025

Thank you to Chair Fateh and members of the committee for reading my testimony. My name is Tracy Rahim, and I am the Student Life and Basic Needs Coordinator at Minnesota State College Southeast where I serve students on our campuses in Winona and Red Wing, as well as online. I am testifying about the importance of the Hunger Free Campus Grant program and the significant impact it has on the students I serve in Greater Minnesota. Southeast is currently designated as a Hunger Free Campus.

According to the Student Basic Needs Survey conducted by The Hope Center of Temple University in September 2024, **39% of the respondents indicated that they have low or very low food security**. This means that almost 4 in 10 Southeast student respondents have limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food, or the inability to acquire such food in a socially acceptable manner. Pell eligible students (49%) and parenting students (54%) at Southeast have a significant higher rate of low or very low food security.

Furthermore, the survey illustrated that for these students, 49% cannot afford balanced meals, 42% are worried their food will run out, and 33% indicated the food they purchase does not last. This demonstrates the incredible need our students face as they hope to elevate their life through education.

Southeast operates two independent food pantries on our Winona and Red Wing campuses to serve currently enrolled students. We do not receive federal TEFAP funding that requires us to also serve the wider community. **In Fall 2024 alone, we purchased more than 11.5 tons of food** from Channel One Food Bank to help feed our students. From August 2024 through February 2025, our Red Wing food pantry had 4,607 visits and our Winona food pantry had 8,004 visits. We do not restrict the number of visits our students can make to the pantries but do limit the number of items students can take in various food categories each visit to ensure more students are served. Students have full choice in what they wish to take from the pantry to meet their needs. In addition to our physical campus food pantries, we are running a pilot Virtual Food Pantry for our online students this year who do not reside near one of our campuses to access one of the pantries. It is important that our online students' food security needs are supported as well as those who physically come to our campuses. Our Virtual Food Pantry is modeled after SUNY-Empire State.

Our pantries are solely funded by grants, fundraising, and donations. Therefore, it was wonderful that we received a \$15,000 sustaining Hunger Free Grant (which required a \$7,500 campus match) this fiscal year. We applied for the funds in May 2024 and were notified of the grant approval in August. However, we did not receive the grant contract until December, and we could not spend any funds for which we would seek reimbursement until the contract was signed. As you can imagine, purchasing more than 23,000 pounds of food for two food pantries in the Fall semester was very costly without access to these grant dollars. But that is what we needed to do to ensure our students had access to nutritious food.

As a grant recipient this year, I would be in full support of shifting the grant administration to the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System Office for a more seamless and efficient grant process from start to finish. As Basic Needs Coordinator, I currently run our emergency grant program that is funded through the Legislature and is administered through the System Office. This has been a very positive experience for both me and my students to ensure we have timely communications, updates about funding, and full support when issues have come up.

I would also be supportive of an increase to the grant amount that campuses can apply for, especially for those of us who operate on multiple sites across our regions. It is not uncommon for me to be shuttling groceries between my two campuses when I can find the best deals at a local grocery store in either Winona or Red Wing so I can make grant dollars stretch. Southeast received the same amount of funding this year as a campus who operates one food pantry.

Removing the required 50% campus match for campuses who already have the Hunger Free Campus designation would be very helpful. Most of our campuses operate like Southeast and do not receive any direct funding from their campus to run their pantries. So, we must cobble together funds from other sources to meet this campus match requirement.

We are grateful for the Hunger Free Campus Grant to help fund our food pantry operations, so our students do not need to choose between textbooks and a meal. I also appreciate the work that the Minnesota Legislature has done to ensure that funding is available for the next biennium. Without these types of grants to operate our pantries, our students with low food security would not have readily available access to food and would be more likely to drop out of college.

Furthermore, other programs that help to supplement food for individuals such as the Supplement Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) have barriers in place from the USDA that limit college student eligibility. Several of my students have applied for public assistance programs like SNAP but have been denied due to these barriers. For example, a Southeast nursing student gave up steady work as a Certified Nursing Assistant to upscale her life by becoming a Registered Nurse. With studies, clinical hours and limited on-call work, she was denied SNAP benefits because the hours in the classroom and at her clinical sites do not count toward the work hour requirement for SNAP. She currently works in one of our food pantries and uses it regularly to supplement her grocery store visits. In these tumultuous times at the federal level, we do not anticipate that proposed language in the Farm Bill to ease up on requirements for SNAP eligibility for college students will be accomplished anytime soon. Subsequently, it is beholden on our colleges to support our students' food security needs to the best of our abilities so they can continue to be successful in and out of the classroom.

It is truly an honor to serve our most vulnerable students and see them walk across the graduation stage to earn their credentials. For some students, the college experience is a breeze. But for others, especially those who experience food insecurity, college can be a hard-fought battle when they have to worry about where and when their next meal will come. The Hunger Free Campus Grant allows me and my basic needs colleagues around the state to provide the most basic resources for our students: food on their plates and groceries on their shelves so they can achieve their goals of becoming Minnesota's next nurses, welders, teachers, and construction workers.