President Hammersmith’s Testimony for Legislative Town Hall Meeting

West Minnehaha Recreation Center, 685 Minnehaha Ave W., St. Paul
6:00 p.m., 26 February 2009

Members of the Minnesota Legislature:

Good evening, and thank you for this opportunity. My name is Sue Hammersmith. I am the President of Metropolitan State University, which is part of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) system. Our home campus is located on 7th Street in East St. Paul, and many of our students reside in St. Paul. However we serve the entire seven-county metropolitan area. We teach in 17 locations throughout the Twin Cities.

Our student body is nearly 10,000 per year. We specialize in meeting the educational needs of working adults, veterans, displaced workers, and those who must juggle school and family responsibilities.

- Our average student is 32 years old.
- Two-thirds attend part-time and work at least one job.
- An increasing number have been displaced by layoffs, cut-backs, or declining business activity.
- 10% are veterans.
- 30% are students of color. And at Metropolitan State, by the way, the graduation rates of our minority students are the same as the graduation rates of our white students. We’re the only institution in the state to have achieved that success.

In this economy, we are seeing a significant increase in demand for our offerings. Our enrollments for the current semester are 9% higher than a year ago, and we expect that growth to continue.

Many residents of the Twin Cities must stay in the Twin Cities to complete their education – whether they be working adults who are place bound, students on a budget that does not permit them to leave for a residential
experience, or members of close-knit communities who want to stay in touch with their culture and their support system. Many choose Metropolitan State for its applied focus, its use of practicing professionals as faculty, or its diversity of age or culture.

For large numbers of these men and women, neither the University of Minnesota nor the area’s private universities and colleges will provide the flexible, affordable access to the programs they need. What is the cost of a baccalaureate education in the Twin Cities? At the private institutions, at today’s tuition and fee rates, it averages $107,000. At the for-profit institutions, it averages just under $60,000. At the University of Minnesota, the average cost is $43,000.

MnSCU, by contrast, offers Twin Cities residents high-quality baccalaureate degrees for tuition and fees of $20,000. That’s less than one-fifth the cost of the private institutions and less than a half the cost of the University of Minnesota.

Metropolitan State University as well as the ten MnSCU community and technical colleges in the Twin Cities are all experiencing a sharp increase in enrollment demand. The Twin Cities MnSCU institutions enroll 72,000 students. That’s a lot of workforce development.

These men and women recognize that higher education is a great investment and that MnSCU is the only affordable option in the Twin Cities. These Minnesotans are doing their part to deal with this economy and to prepare for a better future. Now the State must do its part.

The governor’s budget proposal would reduce MnSCU appropriation by nearly 11 percent, or $146 million. This is on top of a $20 million “unallotment” we were given in January, and we expect that the February revenue forecast will prompt another “unallotment.” And this comes after a decade of enrollment growth without additional state funding. As one of our professors pointed out during the forum on Monday, the governor is proposing a state allocation to MnSCU that is just 1.16% above what it was in 2002.

Our challenge is not to reduce our operations, but to meet the growing demand in the most economical way possible. We’re committed to doing that. Our faculty has ratified a contract which calls for no wage increases over the next two years. We have held positions vacant, frozen travel, streamlined operations, deferred projects, and increased class size.
We will do our part, but we need your help. Our students already are incurring heavy debt, are working full-time or multiple part-time jobs, and sometimes are having trouble getting into the classes they need. When enrollments are up 9%, does it make sense to cut funding by 10% or 15%?

Our students are doing their part – juggling work, family, and personal responsibilities – to prepare themselves for the new economy. And we’re trying to do our part. But we need your help.

In this period of financial difficulty, and especially when the state begins to pull out of the recession, offering high-quality degree programs, with adequate capacity to serve the need of our citizens, will be critical to Minnesota’s recovery. We need to protect core programs and not raise tuition to the point that it shuts off the genuine access that the MnSCU institutions offer.

Metropolitan State University plays a critical role in moving the state toward greater economic vitality. Without a highly-skilled workforce, Minnesota’s long-term growth in a global economy is jeopardized. The MnSCU Board of Trustees and Chancellor have challenged Metropolitan State to grow our enrollments to 20,000 by the year 2020 in order to meet the current and growing demand for bachelor’s and graduate programs.

MnSCU is the most affordable and accessible higher education resource in Minnesota. Without your support, though, we will not be able to meet the current and coming demand. That would turn into a workforce development crisis.

Thank you for listening, and thank you for the important and difficult work you are doing. May “the Force” be with you!