

April 3, 2020

Dear Chair Powell, Vice Chair Sviggum, President Gabel, members of the Board,

In response to the unprecedented spread and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, institutions and industries have had to adapt in profound ways, shifting operations on short notice and under dire circumstances. President Gabel has tirelessly spearheaded communications to students and the University community that have made possible a continuation of the University's operations, upholding the University's core mission; and we are sincerely grateful for her leadership. In line with President Gabel's central principle of authentic student engagement, we would like to express concerns with the Comprehensive Student Fee Refund Proposal before the Board today, particularly regarding housing and residential life as well as the equity of the model on which the proposal is based. At this time, we are unable to support the current proposal and we have outlined our concerns and questions on which we seek clarification in order to move forward with a transparent plan that students and the University community deserves.

Housing and Residential Life (HRL)

While Governor Walz issued the Stay at Home Order on March 28th, on March 11th, the Office of the President began to communicate that students should not come back to campus if they have a safe alternative.

With the limited two hours we had for consultation and processing of this proposal, it remains unclear the specific standards and dates by which the Housing and Residential Life (HRL) refund will be issued. Furthermore, the proposal presents Tier 1 and Tier 2 regarding the \$1,200 credit and the 100% refund from March 28, respectively. The spreadsheets in the docket materials provide Tier 1 and Tier 2 not as options but as summands in the grand total of the table, indicating that both tiers would be implemented according to this proposal. However, the proposal in its current state does not clearly identify to whom each Tier would apply.

Before offering support of any refund plan, we would like to see a breakdown of the cost of living in each campus housing option from March 16th until the end of that option's contract, contrasted with how much a student living there will be refunded based on this proposal in comparison to the previous approach of a \$1,200 credit. Students, lawmakers, and even members of the Board have raised concerns about the previous approach and until we see that this proposal demonstrates a comparatively greater degree of support for students, we maintain our serious concern with the proposal as it stands before the Board today.

Broader Context from the State Level

At the state level, lawmakers from both parties are advocating for \$100 million in rental assistance to Minnesotans, based on the notion that we can't expect renters who have been laid off or had hours cut cannot be expected to afford their full housing costs in these unprecedented times¹. Many student workers have also lost their sources of income; yet under this proposal, students remaining in University housing would receive no financial assistance for their room and board costs. For a number of students, Housing and Residential Life facilities may be their safest place to remain, yet this proposal largely leaves them out, effectively penalizing those students that have made the choice to stay based on what is best for them. We must consider that all students are facing greater financial strain at this moment, and some do not have the option of returning to another home at this time. Moreover, students are being left out of federal and state responses to the COVID-19 crisis, most notably being carved out of the cash disbursements in the federal CARES Act. It is incumbent upon the University to ensure students in need aren't slipping through the cracks in this proposal as well. The University of Wisconsin is spending \$78 million refunds system-wide for housing and dining only². By comparison, the combined Tier 1 and Tier 2 proposals are estimated to be worth around \$22 million. While the University of Wisconsin has roughly three times as many students as Minnesota does, the Tier 1 and Tier 2 proposals combined still fall more than 10% short of Wisconsin's proposal when comparing amounts allocated for room and board refunds. Considering proposals at the state level as well as action that has been taken by our peer institution, this proposal makes the University a laggard in terms of the financial relief it is providing to its constituents that are facing financial challenges.

With the difference between Tier 1 and Tier 2, we would like to see how the proposal was able to get the number of students that are on the University campuses across the system. With the start and end of spring break being different for different University campuses, we seek clarification on why March 28 was the date selected for the refund when, for example, Morris students were asked to start moving out by March 22. Many of the students from across the University system might not have access to wi-fi or the internet from their homes, so they are forced to live on campus to be able to do their work on their classwork.

As mentioned earlier, students have been advised to stay home since mid-March. In light of this advice, many students have chosen to stay on-campus in residence halls and other University-owned housing. This proposal does not equitably deal with the concerns facing these students. While students who have moved out will be receiving credit from the University,

¹ Minnesota House Housing Finance and Policy Division Virtual Press Conference, 4/1/2020.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQype6ADrM4&t=703s>

² Wisconsin Colleges To Refund Tens Of Millions Of Dollars To Students Due To COVID-19, Wisconsin Public Radio, 03/30/20
<https://www.wpr.org/wisconsin-colleges-refund-tens-millions-dollars-students-due-covid-19>

students who remain on-campus will not receive a similar refund. The students that remain on-campus might have no safer alternative, and these students should not be penalized for their circumstances. The University of Minnesota should refund them on-par with students that have chosen to leave campus.

Fees Aside from Housing and Residential Life

As outlined in the proposal, there are many student groups that have ceased operations because they can no longer meet or conduct programming in person and on-campus. Additionally, many other Student Services Fees (SSF) related activities have been extremely modified or postponed. Additionally, student organizations like the Minnesota Student Association are in possession of budgeted SSF funds that are tied to the Spring 2020 semester per the SSF allocation process. Student organizations who possess those funds are extremely restricted in terms of any potential reallocation of those funds to support student led aid initiatives in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

That being said, our concern is two-fold:

As the Student Services Fees refund portion of this proposal will impact the greatest amount of students, we don't believe that a refund of the 50% of SSF fees (plus the Rec Center fee) that would have applied from March 28th, 2020 to May 15th, 2020 is sufficient. We ask that the administration conduct a consultation/notice and comment period with students to determine what a more realistic refund proposal would entail. Due to the extremely limited time we had to review this proposal, we do not have a specific alternative proposal to offer at this time.

Additionally, we do not believe in any scenario where student groups currently holding SSF funds allocated for the Spring 2020 semester should be asked to return those funds to help defray the cost of this proposal.

Conclusion

As it stands today, due to concerns articulated above, we find ourselves unable to support the proposal. In seeking clarity and transparency for the sake of providing the greatest support to students in these unprecedented times, we look forward to receiving clarification on the mentioned points so that the University can continue to champion students' success and wellbeing.

Sincerely,
Austin Kraft, Chair of the Student Representatives to the Board of Regents