

Testimony of UND Student Body President, Matt Ternus

The student body at UND has faced numerous challenges given the ongoing pandemic. From adjusting to different methods of course instruction, to finding new ways to connect with one another, my classmates have consistently made the most of being a UND student.

While we continue to adapt, it would be wrong for me to not note the struggles and stressors that face our students every single day. From the COVID pandemic itself, to the areas the virus may impact other parts of lives, in addition to other factors that may be weighing on students, we are going through a lot right now. As a matter of fact, recent studies suggest that 71% of students have seen increased stress levels during the pandemic (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7473764/>).

Our campus has worked hard to meet the demands of student mental and behavioral health. UND's own Counseling Center, just this last week, launched their new first appointment online scheduling system, seeking to break barriers in regard to access to their services. In the first four days of the system being available, the University Counseling Center saw a 33.3% increase in new clients. Students want to utilize services for mental and behavioral health and making those services more accessible only benefits our students.

For a better look into student thoughts on mental health and the work our campus is doing, we have provided in the written testimony a firsthand account from a UND student about the work our Counseling Center does, and the experience the student had with them.

"I am a student at the University of North Dakota. I reached out for help from the University Counseling Center (UCC) in September because my mental health had gotten to the point where I couldn't keep ignoring it and pretending to be okay any longer. I called and was able to set up an appointment within 48 hours from my phone call, which was crucial because I really needed someone to talk to and looking back I somewhat fear what may have happened if I would have had to wait a long time to be seen. I met with a counselor via Zoom, and ended up seeing her regularly for the next few months... My counselor was wonderful, and it's honestly admirable she was able to provide me the support she did while also attempting to keep straight the details of so many other students seeking care... I am doing considerably better presently than I was when I first sought care from the University Counseling Center, and it provided a crucial service in a time of great need. They do their best to maintain at least a few openings for emergency visits, because an urgent mental health crisis can be just as dangerous as an urgent physical health crisis. I am sure many other students have experienced a similar usage of the counseling center providing them care quickly to ensure their safety and well-being... Many students likely aren't as lucky to have great health insurance to be able to afford private professional care in addition to their already high costs of attending school. For these students, and any that require urgent mental health intervention, the University Counseling Center is a vital resource for ensuring they are able to continue dealing with the stressors of school and life, in addition to the added impacts of the pandemic that have been compounding that already-high stress. At a minimum, maintaining the resources currently available to the UCC will allow it to continue serving its role as a first-responder to get students through difficult periods. However, investing more in the counseling center to expand the volume and frequency of students that are able to receive care, as currently there can sometimes be two to three weeks between appointments, would be hugely beneficial to students suffering from long-term mental health conditions in the future." - UND Student

It's imperative that, during these times, we focus on the mental health of our students. Fully funding Student Behavioral Health requests for UND and every NDUS institution can and will benefit thousands of students across the state.

As I alluded to, there are more stressors than just the virus itself. Food and shelter continue to worry members of our student body each and every day. Be it from a lack of employment, or other reasons, there are those who struggle to put food on their plate, or a roof over their head. Just the other day I spoke with a student who, since we returned in August, has been couch surfing, as they called it, between their friends' houses and apartments because the student doesn't have the resources to have a room of their own. UND has a variety of opportunities ready to meet the food insecurities of our students. Our food pantry on campus has seen 276 visits throughout the year 2020, 116 of those being unique individuals. Our students watch out for their classmates, and have the ability to donate a meal via their campus meal plan through our Swipe it Forward program.

In regard to food, housing, and other common necessary expenses, various philanthropic opportunities such as the Angel Fund, which we will discuss more in depth in a bit, have provided students with the ability to make ends meet.

Given all the stressors of COVID, the University of North Dakota has continued to offer incredible support services to our student body. For those seeking quarantine or isolation, due to close contact or positive cases, UND has been able to provide our students with safe spaces to do so. We have also been able to provide those in quarantine or isolation with meals from our dining center, should that be requested by the student.

I can speak to this personally. In October, I tested positive for COVID-19. I experienced every symptom except for the loss of taste and smell. Thanks to the work of UND, I was able to quickly get into a hotel room for isolation and didn't have to worry about food arrangements for the duration of the isolation. The quick work and support UND provided me ultimately prevented my 4 other roommates from contracting the virus when I had it.

UND cares for the students, and continually shows it. When we transitioned to entirely online education last spring, 50 UND staff members took it upon themselves to call nearly 10,000 students to check in on them. They offered answers to any questions students may have had, and also asked how the students were doing. They understood that, given the circumstances, students may be going through things they have never imagined experiencing. I can speak firsthand that, after my phone call from a UND staff member, I hung up with a smile on my face.

Let me tell you, students weren't thrilled about the back half of the spring semester being online. They wanted to be back on campus and were excited to rejoin the Grand Forks community this past August. By the unique nature of our assembly, we understand there is a weight on student shoulders regarding COVID. And many in our student body take that seriously. For much of the Fall Semester, our student body, which only makes up about 19% of the population of Grand Forks, consistently made up around 50% of COVID tests distributed during our mass testing events (<https://veoci.com/veoci/p/dashboard/jr2p5p3tmp?preview=true>). We know that a healthy student body and a healthy community keeps us in the classroom.

Speaking of classrooms, the idea of renovating Merrifield Hall on campus has me excited. I've taken a handful of classes in Merrifield Hall, just like any student looking to complete an English or History course needed to graduate. Merrifield Hall is, as some of my classmates would describe, a relic amongst its neighboring academic buildings. The aforementioned renovation project would provide our students with the infrastructure to engage in a true 21st century academic experience, consistent with the modern spaces in buildings like the upcoming Nistler College of Business and Public Administration. This project would help centralize campus, too. Right now, some students have to literally sprint from one end of University Ave, in Columbia Hall, to the core academic buildings on campus such as Merrifield. The renovation plans account for moving classes out of Columbia and into halls like Merrifield. And physically connecting core academic buildings through this project will continue to establish a better flow and ecosystem to campus.

The split funding model between state appropriations and local funds provides an excellent opportunity for collaboration in regard to the future of education.

In regard to collaboration, our student body has collaborated with the University on multiple occasions to provide our campus with beautiful new infrastructure. In November of 2018, our student body voted to construct a new Memorial Union. The vote established that our students supported raising our student fees to fund a majority of the project, a project students like myself won't get to utilize before graduation, because we recognize the importance of having those spaces and what it means for our campus. Even with the ongoing pandemic, the project is still on track to open later this summer. And when it's done, as an alumnus, I can't wait to see it open.

Collaboration doesn't just come from buildings, or the services on campus, but too comes from investing in our students directly in the form of scholarship. The state of North Dakota, our UND alumni and donors around the nation understand the importance of students continuing and finishing their educational career.

The Challenge Grant provides countless students the ability to attend higher education. This program too incentivizes our alumni and donors to continue to invest and make a remarkable impact on the lives of students, with state involvement in matching those dollars. An example of a scholarship opportunity, the Open Door Scholarship, has seen over \$677,000 in committed donations. On average, through the open door scholarship, a student will receive \$1,000 (<https://undalumni.org/opendoor?erid=8059522&trid=6619466c-d83a-42d5-82f2-c196139ca8e4>).

And during the last year, our Angel Fund has become a critical component in student scholarships and finances. The Angel Fund serves to support students facing unexpected financial hardships. During the last two semesters, with COVID present, the Angel Fund has fielded 638 requests from students. Nearly 207,000 dollars have been distributed to students, with the average award being \$682.10. These dollars come from over 450 unique donors and alumni who believe in our students and want to give back. And students have utilized this opportunity to meet many necessities such as paying for school, placing food on the table, and putting a roof over their heads.

And when it comes to roofs over the heads of students, we at UND believe modernizing student housing can enhance the student experience and attract prospective students to our campus. Through a Public Private Partnership (P3), UND plans to construct new residence halls and apartment complexes in place of older, current residence halls. These new living spaces would provide our students with exciting living and social spaces where they can engage with their peers and academics in new ways.