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CITIZENS LEAGUE ANNOUNCES HIGHER ED PRIORITIES

St. Paul, MN – The Citizens League, a member-based policy group, today announced a new focus on higher education that it believes will help Minnesota students complete post-secondary degrees. After several years of stakeholders dialogues aimed at improving higher education outcomes in Minnesota, the League has identified dual credit programs, credit transfers, and career and technical education availability as keys to student completion and meeting workforce demands.

The focus comes at an important time as policymakers are looking for creative solutions to combat a looming workforce shortage and some of the worst educational disparities in the nation for underserved and underrepresented.

Pahoua Hoffman, Policy Director for the Citizens League explains, “In the next decade, Minnesota will see unprecedented demographic shifts, with baby boomers retiring and our workforce growth slowing significantly, which will put additional pressures on the state to produce a skilled workforce. Unfortunately, nationwide we’re seeing an increasing cost of tuition coupled with high non-completion rates in post-secondary education, and the reality is that the value of a degree isn’t realized unless you complete.”

With over 37 million Americans with some college, but no degree or certificate, the cost of non-completion has become the target for groups like the Citizens League aiming to improve higher education, and solving the question of “what’s preventing students from completing?”

Beginning in 2012, the Citizens League started examining this question, partnering with MnSCU to facilitate conversations with former students who were on record as not having completed their degree program. While participants’ experiences were relatively unique, several themes emerged including high cost of tuition and insufficient assistance in identifying career pathways.

While some key stakeholders in Minnesota point to tuition freezes as the solution to affordability, the Citizens League recognizes tuition is only one component. There are several other factors that impact students; the level of preparedness, awareness of potential career paths, and issues of credit transfers that often penalizes students and saddles them with additional requirements and debt.

“We know that post-secondary preparedness needs to start even earlier, but many high school students—especially low-income students and students from underserved communities—are still not aware of dual credit opportunities such as Post-Secondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) and Concurrent Enrollment. When there are opportunities for high school students to earn college credits, it can spark an interest and increase the likelihood that a student will enter some kind of post-secondary education after high school, which decreases the time to earn a credential.”

What the Citizens League has called the “credit transfer trap,” describes the barriers students encounter when transferring from one institution to another. Transfer policies and practices vary among institutions, shaped by mission, financial need, influential faculty members, and even treated differently by institutions depending on whether these credits were earned from regionally or nationally-accredited schools. These variables pose unique challenges for students.

As for career and technical education, the Citizens League has found that over the last few decades, institutional and legislative reforms at the K-12 level have systemically pushed career and technical education into the background. “We need to lift up career and technical education programs so that we can train a new generation of skilled workers to meet current and future workforce needs,” said Sean Kershaw, Executive Director.

Kershaw adds, “There’s a real opportunity to impact student completion and, in turn, start to take on one aspect of higher education affordability. We hope all Minnesotans take an active role in the dialogue to help us find innovative solutions.”

The Citizens League will be focusing on these three issues in order to support others already working in these areas and to develop recommendations.

About the Citizens League:

For 62 years, the Citizens League has created common ground across parties and ideologies to solve some of the biggest challenges facing Minnesota. On issues like schools, taxes, transportation, health care, and water, some of Minnesota’s greatest public achievements have emerged from the Citizens League. Citizens League members connect with other Minnesotans, learn to lead on issues that matter to them and create solutions that achieve the common good.

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