

Board of Regents Public Forum on the University Budget
Wednesday, June 17, 2009
Testimony of Kem Tae Lynch, Member of AFSCME 3800

My name is Kem Tae Lynch, and I am a University of Minnesota clerical worker, alumna and current graduate student. The University of Minnesota is unique in many different ways, but shares a mission with all state funded universities- to educate its state citizens for a reasonable cost. We are not Harvard or Yale or MIT- nor should we aspire to be. We should not be spending millions of dollars building elaborate buildings in hopes of attracting corporate research dollars; instead, the university should be focusing on providing students with the best possible education at a cost that will not put them in debt to the tune of 40 grand. I have heard the university administration's recent message of "either we raise tuition astronomically or we lay off a large number of staff." This is a false dichotomy and serves to pit front line staff against students. Clerical workers are not the problem. Our salaries have remained stagnant while the number of vice-deans, vice-provosts and vice-presidents has risen dramatically. The budget is not a zero sum game between students and front line staff, with upper level administration remaining inviolate. Lower paid employees have already made their sacrifices, and continue to do so, especially now with the cut to the Regents Scholarship. I wonder if anyone had explicitly laid out the numbers for you before you voted for the cut?

Let's say you're a student trying to finish up an undergrad degree in CLA. You need to pass the language requirement, so you register for Spanish. This class is 5 credits. Right now, the cost of tuition per credit is about \$320. So the total cost of that class is \$1600 and your share would be \$160. If you made my hourly wage, \$160 is 20% of your 2 week take home pay. \$160 is a week's worth of groceries. It could be three months of medical copays. It is the cost of school clothes and shoes for a child. Faced with the choice between paying upfront for a class and feeding your family, you will feed your family. 70% of those using the Regent's Scholarship are bargaining unit and civil service employees. We are the lowest paid employees here at the U, and we simply cannot afford to pay hundreds of dollars up front for a class, and just HOPE that we'll recoup 8 months later on our income taxes.

Even worse, I already have my BA, and therefore qualify neither for the Hope credit nor the 10% tuition costs. Instead the 25% tuition cost I am facing has effectively put my masters degree out of reach. Each graduate credit costs about \$900. For someone making \$70,000, \$650 — or 25 percent of the cost of a three credit graduate course — is a manageable expense. For me, \$650 is \$100 less than my biweekly paycheck. My fellow clerical workers and I have already paid the price of the university's misplaced budgetary goals. Now it is time for others here to make some sacrifices.