

Standing up for students

By: Nancy Crotti July 2, 2013 0

Meet Sarah Clarke of the Minnesota State Colleges Student Association

When lobbyist Sarah Clarke wanted to get the state Senate's attention to help part-time public college students, she asked Kelly Charpentier-Berg to testify.

A mother of three, Charpentier-Berg was working three jobs while going to school. She told senators that the formula for Minnesota's State Grant Program was so convoluted that she would have received more grant money if she had taken five credits' worth of classes rather than nine. Her \$110-per-semester grant did not even cover the cost of one textbook.

In previous years, Charpentier-Berg had withdrawn from some courses after learning how small her grant would be. Her testimony helped convince senators to add to the most recent omnibus higher education bill a pilot program that changes the grant-making formula, according to Clarke, director of government relations for the Minnesota State Colleges Student Association (MSCSA).

Charpentier-Berg took over as MSCSA president July 1. Armed with a grant of approximately \$580, she will take 15 credits at three Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MNSCU) schools this fall toward a bachelor's degree in psychology. She is minoring in law and higher education.

"It really does measure how many classes you take," Charpentier-Berg says of the grant. "Legislatively, this was huge for us."

In the previous decade, the legislature had decreased appropriations to state colleges and universities, making the state grant program even more important to students, Clarke said. More than 8,000 working MNSCU students will now receive additional support due to the Legislature's decision to boost state grant funding by \$46 million. MSCSA is working with the state Office of Higher Education to determine the average grant amount.

MSCSA was created in 1998 by the merger of the state's public community and



Sarah Clarke is director of government relations for the Minnesota State Colleges Student Association (MSCSA).

She got an early start in politics, motivated by her parents' near-simultaneous layoffs in 2006 and inspired by her own participation in Minnesota Girls State at the Capitol. (Staff photo: Peter Bartz-Gallagher)



technical college associations. It represents the 100,000 students who attend MNSCU's two-year colleges, which are spread across 47 campuses (some colleges have more than one campus).

The group brought several other students to the Capitol to testify and speak individually with legislators, and asked the rest to email them about the importance of changing the state grant formula, said Clarke, MSCSA's director of government relations.

It also helped persuade legislators to appropriate \$7.3 million to MNSCU's leveraged equipment program. Designed to trigger matching industry donations, the program would outfit the two-year colleges with better equipment for hands-on learning.

"Students are excited about this," Clarke says. "It provides our students the opportunity to work on state-of-the-art equipment so they will be workforce-ready. It kind of gives them that competitive advantage upon graduation."

The group shared in the win when Gov. Mark Dayton signed into law a two-year tuition freeze for undergraduates at MNSCU schools and the University of Minnesota. Clarke credits student leaders with helping make this past session "a huge victory for students."

MSCSA works to cultivate student involvement on every campus. Clarke planned and executed a get-out-the-vote campaign, registering more than 10,000 students. The group also trains students in advocacy, education and leadership to discuss issues such as tuition, fees, articulation agreements and course numbering. The group is also working on making transfers consistent across the MNSCU system.

"It's still a work in progress," Clarke says.

MSCSA will work with the MNSCU system to show that students like Charpentier-Berg need additional support and are on track to graduate and fill important roles in their work, Clarke says. Clarke said she works with the MNSCU government relations team on shared issues, such as the state grant program.

Experience in organizing

Clarke got an early start in politics, motivated by her parents' near-simultaneous layoffs in 2006 and inspired by her own participation in Minnesota Girls State at the Capitol.

"I was struck by how frustrating that is, how my parents and other Minnesotans don't deserve it," Clarke says. "Ever



Kelly Charpentier-Berg told senators that the formula for Minnesota's State Grant Program was so convoluted that she would have received more grant money if she had taken five credits' worth of classes rather than nine. (Staff photo: Peter Bartz-Gallagher)

I was struck by how frustrating that is, how my parents and other Minnesotans don't deserve it," Clarke says. "Ever since, I've been really committed to help elect people who are going to help our state and help our country."

MSCSA is a nonpartisan organization, so Clarke gets to work with DFLers and Republicans. She is careful to keep her own politics out of the work.

Clarke got her political feet wet in the summer of 2011 working with FairVote Minnesota, which promotes ranked-choice voting. She was a field organizer in Minneapolis' Senate District 60 during the 2010 election cycle for womenwinning, a multi-partisan organization that works to elect pro-choice candidates.

Clarke organized all campaign operations in her senate district for womenwinning, managing door-knocking campaigns, political relations and volunteer recruitment. She managed all door knocks, political relations and volunteer recruitments and implemented the field program.

"She did a fantastic job at all of those things" says Susy Bates, political director of the organization. "We had a lot of staff in that office and she did a really good job of working with everyone and keeping morale up in a tough election cycle."

Bates says Clarke works hard and makes the workplace environment positive.

"She was really an ally in the workplace," Bates adds. "Even though I was her manager, I could rely on her to really help me implement the field plan ... without a lot of oversight from me."

DFL State Rep. Frank Hornstein of Minneapolis ran in a difficult race that year. Hornstein said he appreciates Clarke's willingness to do the necessary work that no one else wanted to do.

"Some people just ride in — they don't do the work, they get the credit and they ride on to the next thing," Hornstein says. "This is not the kind of leader she is."

Clarke is volunteering to manage Hornstein's re-election campaign, and has an extraordinary opportunity at MSCSA, according to Hornstein.

"She is a great leader and she is developing other great leaders," he says.

Clarke and Charpentier-Berg will get to work together even more closely this year, training and talking with students about what want done at the Capitol.

"Our students actually set our legislative agenda," Charpentier-Berg says. "I set my priorities by the students. It's their voice."

The Clarke File

THE CLARKE FILE

Name: Sarah Clarke

Job: Director of government relations, Minnesota State College Student Association

Age: 24

Grew up in: Savage, Minn.

Lives in: Minneapolis

Education: B.A., history and political science, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

Family: Steven Clarke (father), Kathy Clarke (mother), Steven Clarke (brother)

Hobbies: Volunteering, reading, running and music

Tagged with:

FAIRVOTE MINNESOTA

FRANK HORNSTEIN

KELLY CHARPENTIER-BERG

MARK DAYTON

MINNESOTA GIRLS STATE

MINNESOTA GIRLS STATE AT THE CAPITOL

MINNESOTA SENATE

MINNESOTA STATE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

MINNESOTA STATE COLLEGES STUDENT ASSOCIATION

MNSCU

MSCSA

OFFICE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

SARAH CLARKE

SENATE DISTRICT 60

STATE GRANT PROGRAM

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