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Thank You, T. Denny Sanford

SOUTH DAKOTA – The South Dakota Freedom Scholarship Board, the South Dakota Workforce Scholarship Board and staff of South Dakota Workforce Scholarships, along with our ten university partners, join countless South Dakotans in mourning the passing of T. Denny Sanford, whose vision and generosity helped create one of the most transformative scholarship programs in state history.

The South Dakota Freedom Scholarship exists because of Mr. Sanford's bold challenge to the South Dakota Legislature just prior to the start of the 2021 legislative session. His challenge was simple yet historic: create South Dakota's largest public-private partnership for a need-based scholarship program.

That challenge began with a \$100 million commitment from First PREMIER Bank and PREMIER Bankcard, contingent upon a \$50 million investment from the State of South Dakota. South Dakota rose to the challenge. Avera Health and Sanford Health also stepped forward, each committing \$12.5 million over ten years in support of the initiative. The scholarship itself reflects a shared commitment between the state, private partners, and recipients, who must meet established requirements or repay the scholarship investment.

In 2022, after the program became operational, Mr. Sanford and First PREMIER Bank/PREMIER Bankcard strengthened their commitment with an additional \$50 million gift. Today, the Freedom Scholarship endowments are valued at more than \$250 million, securing educational opportunities for South Dakota students for generations to come.

The South Dakota Freedom Scholarship program continues to grow and expand its impact. In the first four years, more than \$21 million in scholarships have been awarded to students across the state. This summer alone, \$7.2 million is being awarded for the 2026-2027 academic year across ten participating universities.



During the 2025-2026 academic year, the average annual scholarship award approached \$4,000 per student. Since its inception, approximately 3,500 South Dakota students have received Freedom Scholarships, with many benefiting from multiple years of support.

The program's impact extends well beyond financial assistance. Freedom Scholarship recipients persist in college and complete bachelor's degrees at statistically significant rates. These graduates are helping build South Dakota's workforce and communities, with a high percentage choosing to live and work in the state after graduation. Many are serving in critical fields such as education and healthcare, helping meet workforce needs while strengthening the future of South Dakota.

"The Freedom Scholarship represents more than financial assistance," said Elli Haerter, Executive Director of South Dakota Workforce Scholarships. "It represents a belief in South Dakota students and in the future of our state. Mr. Sanford's generosity created opportunities that thousands of students may never have imagined possible. His legacy will live on through every student who earns a bachelor's degree, builds a career, and contributes to South Dakota's future."

The combined generosity of Mr. Sanford, First PREMIER Bank and PREMIER Bankcard, the State of South Dakota, Avera Health, and Sanford Health ensures that the South Dakota Freedom Scholarship will continue in perpetuity, opening doors for generations of students yet to come.

We extend our sincere condolences to Mr. Sanford's family, colleagues, staff, and friends. We are profoundly grateful for his vision, leadership, and unwavering belief in the potential of South Dakota's young people.

Thank you, T. Denny Sanford. Your impact will be felt for generations.

About South Dakota Freedom Scholarship

The South Dakota Freedom Scholarship Board governs the scholarship. South Dakota Workforce Scholarships, a registered South Dakota nonprofit corporation and a section 501(c)(3) organization, provides operations, board administration, and support. The South Dakota Community Foundation stewards the endowments that fund the South Dakota Freedom Scholarship. Recipient and graduate figures are estimated and pending final confirmation from each participating university.