

Thank you, T. Denny Sanford



South Dakota Freedom Scholarship exists because of Mr. Sanford's bold challenge to the South Dakota Legislature in 2021. His commitment to supporting higher education and investing in South Dakota's future continues through this lasting legacy. [Learn more](#) about the impact of his vision and how it continues to make a difference today.

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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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.

July 20, 2026

SDSU honors the legacy of philanthropist T. Denny Sanford

By SDSU Strategic Communications



T. Denny Sanford (photo courtesy of Sanford Health)

With the passing of philanthropist T. Denny Sanford, many will remember the buildings, programs and institutions he funded, but at South Dakota State University, his greatest legacy may be measured in the lives transformed through educational opportunity.

Sanford's generosity touched SDSU in numerous ways, including his landmark investment that helped establish the Freedom Scholarship in South Dakota, as well as support for the Dana J. Dykhouse Stadium and the Mike Huether Public Service Academy.

"Denny understood that education changes the trajectory of lives for generations," SDSU President Barry Dunn said. "He believed in the potential of young people, especially those whose circumstances might otherwise limit their opportunities. In that respect, he made one of the wisest investments possible."

Since its 2022 inception, the Freedom Scholarship has opened doors for first-generation college students, students facing financial hardship and others who have demonstrated exceptional promise.

"Denny knew firsthand that life's circumstances can present significant obstacles," Dunn said. "Having lost both of his parents at a young age, he understood the importance of opportunity and hope. Through the Freedom Scholarship and his other gifts, he gave thousands of students the chance to pursue an education, build meaningful careers and create brighter futures for themselves and their families."

Those students are Sanford's enduring legacy. Their achievements will continue to ripple through South Dakota and beyond for generations.

"Buildings eventually age, and programs evolve," Dunn said. "But an education changes a person forever. The graduates whose lives were transformed by Denny Sanford's generosity will carry his legacy forward through their work, their families and their service to others. That is a remarkable gift to South Dakota."

The SDSU community extends its deepest sympathies to the Sanford family and all who were touched by his extraordinary generosity.

T. Denny Sanford's impact on SD's higher education

by: [Jordan DeSmet](#)

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SHARE

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (KELO) — People throughout South Dakota and beyond are mourning the loss of T. Denny Sanford.

The well-known philanthropist died Saturday at the age of 90.

Beyond his contributions to health care, Sanford's giving also extended to higher education.

The South Dakota Board of Regents says Sanford donated more than \$300 million, which has either directly or indirectly helped South Dakota's public universities. Those dollars have helped fund things like scholarships and school facilities.

T. Denny Sanford's donations have helped fund things like the Beacom School of Business and Knudson School of Law at the University of South South, Dana J. Dykhous Stadium at South Dakota State University and much more.

"Denny Sanford has given students an outstanding opportunity, which he talked about, I think, was the greatest gift one generation can give the next is the opportunity to succeed," Partridge said.

On top of facilities, Board of Regents president Jeff Partridge says Sanford's generosity also helped fund the need-based Freedom Scholarship. More than \$150 million of Sanford's money has gone toward the program.

"Most of the time, they were a first generation college, so they were able to come to school and get a great education in South Dakota and really improve their station in life. It has an impact on families for generations when that happens," Partridge said.

Build Dakota Scholarship board member Dana J. Dykhouse says Sanford contributed \$25 million to that program. KELOLAND News caught up with Dykhouse over the phone.

“Over 4,000 young people have, received those full ride scholarships and are out in the workforce today,” Dykhouse said.

The Build Dakota Scholarship requires a three-year work commitment to a South Dakota business, which Dykhouse says has benefited South Dakota’s workforce.

“Usually, after working for a company for three years and getting settled in South Dakota, they tend to stay here. They get settled and become part of our community,” Dykhouse said.

So, the impact Sanford has had on South Dakota’s colleges and universities can’t be denied.

“We’re very thankful for what he’s done for our state, and we’re very thankful for what he’s done for higher ed,” Partridge said.

Sanford’s contributions to higher education also includes a large contribution to help establish Augustana’s hockey program.

Tuesday, you will hear several South Dakota universities discuss how Sanford’s donations have impacted them.

‘It’s unmatched’: SD colleges on Sanford’s giving

by: [Jordan DeSmet](#)

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SHARE

VERMILLION, S.D. (KELO) — The late T. Denny Sanford is well-known for his contributions to health care, but his philanthropy can also be felt at South Dakota’s colleges and universities.

Sanford, a billionaire who lived in Sioux Falls, [died on Saturday](#).

Take a walk on the campus of the University of South Dakota, and you'll probably find something that was made possible through T. Denny Sanford's philanthropy.

"It's unmatched. What he's been able to do with his generosity has really shaped what we've been able to do as a campus," USD president Sheila Gestring said.

Gestring says Sanford's donations have gone toward scholarships, the Knudson School of Law, Beacom School of Business, National Music Museum and the eventual Gassen Family Fieldhouse.

"His gift in the law school literally transformed the law school. The law school is now at capacity and thriving and doing incredibly well. The business school has this beautiful, modern, contemporary environment for our students to be learning in. It's just tremendous," Gestring said.

Sanford also gave \$25 million toward the Build Dakota Scholarship, a program that helps students earn technical degrees for free. Southeast Technical College president Cory Clasemann says the scholarship has brought over 1,000 students to the school.

"Most of our trades programs have a waitlist, so it's really just helped build the interest and said, 'Let's do it.' We have more interested than we can actually get into the programs right now," Clasemann said.

Sanford's footprint can also be felt in Madison. Dakota State University chancellor Jose-Marie Griffiths, who I interviewed on the phone, says Sanford contributed to Dakota State University athletics, the Madison Cyber Labs and more.

"That allowed us to increase faculty, which then allowed us to increase the number of students. Since that time, we have more than doubled the number of students engaged in computer and cyber sciences," Griffiths said.

It's an impact that will be felt for years to come.

"I think it's widely known that he would say, 'Aspire to inspire before you expire.' He has certainly lived those words and lived a life of significance. That shows throughout the University of South Dakota and throughout the state of South Dakota," Gestring said.

Sanford has also given money to South Dakota State University. He contributed to Dana J. Dykhouse Stadium and the Mike Huether Public Service Academy.



South Dakota Community Foundation

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Over the course of SDCF's history, we've had the opportunity to interact with some deeply committed and incredibly generous philanthropists, including T. Denny Sanford. Passionate about the power of education, Mr. Sanford's leadership helped to establish two premier South Dakota scholarship programs: Build Dakota and Freedom. Both funds are held here at SDCF.

"Few South Dakotans have given as much, or as thoughtfully, as Denny. His philanthropy has shaped education, health care and civic life across the state – establishing a legacy of giving that will be felt for generations," said Stephanie Judson, SDCF President and CEO.

As other posts have described, Mr. Sanford's example has been instrumental in creating a culture of giving across South Dakota – by inspiring others to give generously to the causes they care about.

Our thoughts and prayers are with his family. [See less](#)

