



**TESTIMONY OF THE
NEW YORK PUBLIC INTEREST RESEARCH GROUP
BEFORE THE
NEW YORK STATE SENATE COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION
ON
MAINTAINING QUALITY, EQUITY & AFFORDABILITY IN PUBLIC
HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGHOUT THE PANDEMIC AND BEYOND
NOVEMBER 16, 2021
Queens, New York**

Good morning, my name is Ayesha Schmitt and I am the Higher Education Coordinator for NYPIRG, the New York Public Interest Research Group. NYPIRG is a non-partisan, not-for-profit, research and advocacy organization. Consumer protection, environmental preservation, higher education, mass transit, and civic empowerment are our principal areas of concern. We advocate for a free and quality public higher education to make one of the most important institutions in New York State accessible to all and to boost racial and economic equity. Today I will be speaking on the issues of equity and affordability that CUNY and SUNY students face during the pandemic and onward.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Since the pandemic began, students have gone through myriad problems from struggles with isolation and loss of loved ones, to job loss and financial hardships that make it difficult for students to stay in school and finish their degree. However, serious issues with college accessibility were clear even before the COVID-19 pandemic. During the past decade, New York State passed budget after budget that provided stagnant funding for higher education, while raising tuition costs and leaving too many students ineligible for financial aid programs. Even though, during the same time period, the state's All Funds budget increased by over 26%.¹

While there were some bright spots in NY's higher education budget over the years -- the passage of the Jose Peralta Dream Act, expansion of opportunity program funding, the rejection of some tuition hikes, and the increase in maximum TAP awards, to name a few -- the fact remains that the state's budget realities over the past decade should have allowed for increased state support for

¹ Citizens Budget Commission, "NYS Trends During the Cuomo Administration," Fiscal years 2011-2019, October 18, 2018, <https://cbcny.org/research/nystrends-during-cuomo-administration>.

public colleges and universities, and halted the growing tuition burden placed on public college students and their families.

Then the pandemic hit, and students, their families, and the rest of the NY college community faced a compounding education crisis. NYPIRG has collected accounts from college students at CUNY, SUNY, and private non-profit institutions sharing their experiences when paying for their college education.

Overhaul Financial Aid for Students

Isabellah Paul, a sophomore transfer student double majoring in Political Science and Women & Gender Studies at Hunter College lost her scholarship when she transferred and was not eligible for financial aid because her single mother works full time. She now has to take out loans and work part time while being a full time student to cover tuition and other costs like textbooks and transportation. Added to this are her responsibilities helping to support her family, which creates a more stressful learning environment.

Many students are the first in their family to attend college and struggle navigating their financial aid options. Kiara Knox is a first generation student and a senior at Hunter College. Her and her parents found the FAFSA process overwhelming and found it even more worrisome when looking at postgraduate studies like law school. Daniela Medina, a freshman at City College, has a similar problem with navigating the bursar's office, struggling to receive answers about the FAFSA and financial aid packets while she pays for most of her tuition out of pocket. She also has to think about the costs her family will face when paying for college for her two younger siblings.

Jordan Gibberman, a SUNY Purchase student had his tuition covered by the Excelsior Scholarship but had to take out both federal and private loans to pay for associated college costs like room and board before the pandemic. Jordan lamented losing the opportunity to dorm due to the pandemic, while still footing the student loan bills for the previous semesters he lived on campus.

Alexis DiBartolo and Isabelle Pastore, both students at SUNY Cortland, had some financial aid help but paid for the rest of their college costs by taking out student loans, holding down part time jobs, and with help from their parents. Isabelle's father was unfortunately laid off due to the pandemic and had her questioning whether finishing her degree was even feasible for her.

Eligibility gaps in financial aid programs leave too many students out. Inadequate or inflexible awards leave students with growing student loan debt and having to balance school and work demands.

This coming legislative session, NYPIRG calls on the Governor and State Legislature to overhaul the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) by increasing the maximum award to match public college tuition rates, including graduate students and students who are incarcerated, and covering the winter and summer semesters. We also call for expansions in proven opportunity programs like SEEK, EOP, and HEOP to help support students with financial burdens.

Counseling and Advisement

The pandemic has not only affected students financially but also physically and mentally. The pandemic has been an emotionally taxing time for students as they are isolated and had to quickly adjust to an online learning environment. Student support services have struggled to keep up with student needs. Whether it is grief counseling or help needed for juggling classes, work, and other responsibilities, students are struggling to schedule appointments with mental health experts on campus when they need them most.

Currently CUNY only has one mental health advisor for every 2,700 students.² Students like Randy Garcia, a sophomore at the City College of New York, struggled to schedule an appointment with a counselor when they felt stressed and burnt out, sometimes having to wait weeks or months to get an appointment. Anna Compton, a student at Hunter College, was continuously referred off campus despite asking for on-campus assistance, which then led to longer wait times for a counseling session.

Students are also struggling receiving proper advisement to be able to graduate on time. Melissa Dominguez and Anna Compton, two seniors from Hunter College both ran into trouble with long wait times and miscommunication when trying to schedule appointments with advisors to enroll in classes needed to graduate. Both were later caught off guard when they found out that they are a few credits short for graduation. This only then adds to stress and time it takes for students to graduate.

To remedy these issues students are facing and more, NYPIRG calls for the passage of the New Deal for CUNY legislation (S.4461/A.5843) and analogous funding to SUNY. The passage of this bill will support things like smaller class sizes to improve student educational experiences and get them the additional academic support they need. It would also improve funding for advisement, hiring enough advisers to fully support the student body. As for mental health, this bill will fund enough counselors to meet the ratio recommended by the International Accreditation of Counseling Services of one advisor for every 1000 full time students.

² Professional Staff Congress - CUNY, Executive Budget Testimony, February 4, 2020
<https://nyassembly.gov/write/upload/publichearing/001101/002253.pdf>

Public higher education boosts racial and economic equity and helps to strengthen our economy. It should not be a huge financial risk for students when they and their families are already struggling to make ends meet. College-educated workers earn more than their high-school educated peers contributing more to the economy. CUNY graduates stay to work in New York at higher rates³ and studies have shown that for every \$1 invested in SUNY, the economy reaps \$8 in benefits.

College should be affordable for all, to provide access to one of the greatest economic equalizers for any individual who seeks it. As society works to recover from the pandemic, it is vital that we not return to the status quo in higher education.

Thank you.

³ NYC Comptroller's Office, "CUNY's Contribution to the Economy," March 12, 2021, <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/reports/cunys-contribution-to-the-economy/>.