

Statement by Dr. Guillermo Linares
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To the
New York State Senate Committee on Higher Education
on
Maintaining Quality, Equity & Affordability in Public Higher Education

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Chairwoman Stavisky, and members of the Senate Committee on Higher Education, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. I am Dr. Guillermo Linares, President of HESC, and I'm joined today by HESC's Executive Vice President, Elsa Magee.

State Overview:

New York State is home to two of the nation's largest public university systems, and the most four-year degree-granting institutions of any state in the nation. Postsecondary education options for New Yorkers or those looking to attend college in New York range from vocational training schools to small liberal arts colleges and large research university centers -- all of which can be found in urban, suburban and rural settings across the State.

Nearly 1.2 million students are enrolled in higher education programs in New York State across all sectors, with nearly 700,000 postsecondary students attended a SUNY or CUNY college or university, and over 500,000 enrolled at a private college or university.

Financial Aid Overview:

Since 2012, State spending for higher education has increased by \$1.5 billion, or 25 percent. In all, New York invests \$7.5 billion annually on strategic programs that help New York students access in higher education each year.

In addition to competitive public college tuition rates, New York State offers an array of need-based and merit-based student financial aid programs to support the attainment of a college degree. Our programs provide educational support for targeted populations including veterans and their family members, and survivors of disasters that have touched our State; and our loan forgiveness programs support college graduates with loan repayment. Collectively, these financial aid programs provide more than \$1 billion to help ease college costs for hundreds of thousands of students and families throughout the State.

Through the longstanding Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), the State of New York provides one of the most generous need-based financial aid programs in the nation. In 2019-20, TAP awarded more than \$838 million in college tuition grants to more than 297,000 students attending a public, private or proprietary college in NYS—with annual awards averaging \$3,318 per recipient.

New York State provides college access, equity and affordability through its wide range of scholarship programs -- from our Excelsior Scholarship, the nation's first free tuition program covering two- and four-year colleges, and the Enhanced Tuition Awards program; groundbreaking programs such as the Get on Your Feet (GOYF) Loan Forgiveness Program -- which assists new college graduates in managing their student loan debt as they transition from college to career; programs to increase and retain workers in farming, social work, and as district and indigent legal attorneys; and the Jose Peralta NYS DREAM Act, a program which is near and dear to me, that expands college affordability to thousands of deserving immigrant students who attend and graduate from New York State high schools.

New York also invests \$247 million in support of educationally disadvantaged students through opportunity and training programs. Since 2012, funding for these programs has increased by \$112 million or 83 percent.

Student Debt:

The Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS) report on Student Debt and the Class of 2020, reports that 54 percent of New York State college seniors graduated with student loan debt—with only 18 states having a lower proportion of graduates with loan debt. With average loan debt at \$30,951, New York State college graduates fared better than students from every other Northeast state, including Connecticut (\$35,853), Maine (\$32,764), Massachusetts (\$33,457), New Hampshire (\$39,928) New Jersey (\$35,117), Pennsylvania (\$39,375), Rhode Island (\$36,791) and Vermont (\$34,866).

Programs such as TAP, the Excelsior Scholarship, and Veterans Tuition Awards, each provide full tuition awards for students who opt to attend a public college or university. As a result, nearly 230,000 public college students are now attending a SUNY or CUNY institution tuition free.

To assist students who have graduated from a New York State college or university with student loan debt, New York State makes available \$20,000 to \$120,000 in student debt relief through a number of targeted and general loan forgiveness programs. Programs such as the Get On Your Feet Loan Forgiveness Program provides up to two years of loan payments (up to any amount) for every eligible college graduate, while the Doctors Across New York Loan Forgiveness Program awards up to \$120,000 to physicians who serve for 3 years in shortage communities.

Conclusion:

New York State has consistently sought to ensure college accessibility and affordability to State residents based on need and merit. New York is one of only two states to offer a need-based entitlement grant program (TAP), and the only state to offer a need-based entitlement loan forgiveness program (GOYF). As a state, we maintained student access to an affordable college education in the face of economic challenges caused by the pandemic by preserving student financial aid and opportunity programs that serve our neediest students, continuing full support for over \$1 billion in HESC financial aid programs, as well as over \$200 million in funding for higher education opportunity programs and training centers, holding harmless students who were unable to complete academic requirements needed to maintain financial aid eligibility because their enrollment was disrupted by coronavirus, and extending financial aid award duration limits for those students who, because of the pandemic, were unable to maintain satisfactory academic progress due to illness, course closure, or other special circumstances.

Collectively, our efforts have served to benefit hundreds of thousands of our students and families each year in their pursuit of a postsecondary education.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.