

Testimony before the New York State Senate Committee on Higher Education

Wednesday, October 27, 2021

Good afternoon. I'd like to start by thanking Chairwoman Stavisky and the rest of the Senate Committee on Higher Education for holding this hearing and inviting me to testify on behalf of CWA District 1 and CWA Local 1104 regarding this important issue.

I've met many of you before. I testified before this Committee pre-pandemic and I have lobbied and met with many of you over the past two years.

My name is Andrew Dobbyn and I'm a graduate student completing my PhD in Philosophy at Stony Brook University. I'm also State President of GSEU (Graduate Student Employees Union) of CWA Local 1104 representing 4,800 graduate student workers at the SUNY school system across the state. SUNY employs these graduate students as teaching, graduate, and research assistants. Their duties include teaching courses, grading exams and papers, and conducting laboratory research.

This labor is **vital to the function of SUNY**. At Stony Brook University, an independent audit found that 60% of instruction was performed by graduate students. Contrary to popular belief, it is not the gray haired professor, but graduate employees who are teaching your children, and teaching your constituents' children. In the laboratory as well, graduate workers are the backbone of innovation and bleeding edge research. Yet, despite our key role in the education and the economy of New York State, we face dire financial challenges.

Our problems stem from a twofold problem: **compulsory fees and poverty level wages**. When I last testified, fees were breaking the wallets of our members. For the majority of GSEU members these fees still do so, but through collective action, we have won the elimination of most fees at Stony Brook and Buffalo campuses. Yet some fees remain, and there is no guarantee that our administrations will hold to this bargain in the future. We need legislative action to solve this problem for good.

In addition to tuition, SUNY schools charge their students fees. Both undergraduate and graduate students are subject to these fees, charged at regular points throughout the academic year. In recent years, the cost of these fees has risen steadily alongside tuition at public colleges and universities in the U.S. In the case of Stony Brook, fees have doubled in the last decade.¹ The increase in fees is a financial response to the problem of inadequate state funding for public higher education **and** the improper allocation of that funding at the campus level. Fees function as a backdoor tuition for public universities to circumvent state-imposed tuition caps and sustain their operating costs. They also provide universities with a supply of cash they can spend with less oversight than state appropriations.

Graduate student employees with full appointments (0.5 FTE) are expected to work 20 hours per week for their departments and are compensated with an annual stipend and, in most cases, a tuition waiver. Yet the majority of TAs in SUNY must still pay fees. For graduate student-

¹ Seltzer, R. (2017). "Net Price Keeps Creeping Up." *Inside Higher Education*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/10/25/fees-still-rising-faster-aid-college-board-report-shows>

workers engaged in full-time coursework, average fees across the four SUNY University Centers currently exceed \$2,000 per academic year.

Graduate students employed by SUNY as teaching and research assistants are not exempt from these fees, which can constitute up to 25% of their annual stipend for those making the contractual minimum. While stipend amounts vary considerably between campuses and academic departments, the average graduate employee stipend across the four University Centers is about \$20,000 per academic year for TAs and GAs with full appointments. For those graduate employees earning the average stipend, the amount they must pay back to their university each year in fees can represent as much as 17% of their annual income. For graduate student employees, fees are effectively an employer-levied tax on their income that presents a significant financial burden for many. These fees cause enormous hardship, both financial as well as psychological, on our members.

As graduate students and employees of the SUNY system, we ask the committee to support legislation that would waive these fees for graduate student workers. State Senate Bill S4972A, filed by Chairwoman Stavisky, would do just that. This bill would exempt all graduate students employed by state systems as Teaching Assistants, Graduate Assistants and Research Assistants (on .25 appointments Full-Time Equivalent and above) from paying fees. This bill was part of the Assembly and Senate One House budget, we hope to see it there again. As members of the Senate higher education committee, we urge you to support this issue.

Compounding the problem of fees is the problem of poverty level wages. SUNY Stony Brook has a multibillion dollar operating budget. Of this budget instructional (not research or admin) wages comprise roughly \$400 million. If I were to ask you how much 60% of instructional labor comprises of that \$400 million, what would you say? Would you be surprised to learn that our wage bill is less than 10% of that number? The university spends more on capital project debt interest (\$77 million), than they do on the majority of instruction. This pattern is not unique to Stony Brook, but a common problem across the SUNY system. A sliver of spending funds the work vital to the function of SUNY universities while the rest goes elsewhere

According to HUD, "extremely low income" in Suffolk County is \$27,300 and "very low income" is \$45,500. With a base stipend of \$20,000 we are substantially below "extremely low income." The results of this underpayment are stark. My colleagues are working to develop fusion power, next generation miracle drugs, and groundbreaking historical research, yet many of them live in credit card debt, sell blood plasma, and extract their groceries from dumpsters and trash cans. While that may sound like hyperbole, it's common. The people teaching your constituent's children are very smart, but also very poor, very tired, and very stressed. Such poverty has a direct and negative impact on the quality and reliability of said instruction.

These poverty wages also ensure that for many, graduate study comes with a corollary: have family support or prepare to suffer. I chose Stony Brook because I could live with my parents, my fiancée chose it because she could live with her grandparents. The unofficial family support requirement means that many working class students do not finish their programs or don't attend at all. This encourages a less diverse and less representative instructional workforce, again impacting the quality of education at a diverse university with a largely working class student population.

While money may be tight, the funding needed to ameliorate these situations is comparatively small. For example, to double the base stipend at Stony Brook, from \$20,000 to \$40,000, would require \$20 million, or about 5% of the total instructional wage bill. To put that in perspective: the Stony Brook Foundation has underperformed the broad market by about 50% since 2015. If the SB foundation merely matched a market return on our endowment, that 20 million would be more than covered. This is not the only solution, but rather to demonstrate that our predicament is matter of funding priorities, rather than funding itself. **Our poverty is a policy choice.**

When I last spoke to this committee two obstacles to action were cited: a lack of a supermajority in the State Senate and an austerity regime hostile to higher education spending. We now enjoy a democratic supermajority and have raised revenue by several billion dollars. If there ever was a time to fully fund higher education, and to make sure that funding went to those who needed it most, now is the time. NYS higher education institutions cannot close their funding gaps on the backs of graduate student workers, who already struggle to pay for basic needs. **We must put an end to pay-to-work fees and poverty wages.** The future of SUNY depends on it. I urge you to support bill S4972A's inclusion in the One House budget and provide adequate funding for SUNY that promotes fair wages and improved quality of instruction.

Thank you for listening to our testimony today and for your consideration of these important issues.