

Testimony re: 2022-2023 Executive Budget Proposal—Higher Education

Submitted to
New York State Senate Finance Committee and Assembly Ways and Means Committee

Submitted by
Tydie Abreu, Policy Analyst & Compliance Specialist at Hispanic Federation
LEAD Coalition, a Project Powered by Hispanic Federation

February 7th, 2022

Thank you, Chairwoman Krueger, Chairwoman Weinstein, and all other committee members, for the opportunity to provide testimony. My name is Tydie Abreu and I am the policy analyst for Hispanic Federation (HF); a non-profit organization seeking to empower and advance Hispanic communities through programs and legislative advocacy. HF's testimony is also informed by the Latino Education Advocacy Directors (LEAD) Coalition, which consists of leading educational advocacy organizations committed to improving Latinx academic outcomes and opportunities in New York State. Created by the Hispanic Federation, the coalition works to highlight and address the educational needs of Latinx students in the following ways: identifying and supporting effective practice; public policy advocacy and research; and the advancement of a shared educational agenda.

Supports to Mitigate the Latinx College Enrollment & Completion Crisis & Strengthening Economic Opportunities for Students

New York State's college students have been deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. While college enrollment has been on the decline for years, Latinx students have been enrolling at exponential rates. Now, the coronavirus pandemic forced many of them to decide between staying in school and working to help their families survive the economic recession caused by COVID-19. Since the coronavirus pandemic began, Latinx communities have been hit hard due to their jobs as essential workers and multigenerational living conditions.

The pandemic has impacted the progress that Latinos have made in higher education.

According to the National Student Clearinghouse, college enrollment in New York State declined by 3.4% in the Fall of 2020 compared to the previous year¹. The trend continues this school year. Many students have had to put their education on the back burner as they worry about their jobs, finances, housing and supporting their families. Degree attainment for Latino students in New York stands at 27% vs. 53% for White students;² it is no secret that affordability is one of the issues driving this disparity. To heighten the number of enrolled Latinx college students, Hispanic Federation strongly urges the legislature to include and prioritize the following budget and legislative recommendations in their one house budgets, as they directly benefit and remedy the issues many Latinx young adults face when trying to achieve their post-secondary dreams.

We're extremely grateful for the Executive budget including several important investments this year. Part time TAP will encourage college enrollment for the many students who usually decide to not pursue a higher education in order to work and support their families. The ten percent increase to the opportunity programs will also provide the many Latino and underserved students with the wrap around services to complete their degrees. Additionally, appropriations for community colleges and child care on campuses will further enable students to enroll and complete their degrees. The Executive budget's appropriations for CUNY & SUNY apprenticeship programs at community colleges will provide students the experience and mentorship to enter into high-paying and in-demand fields in their communities. Lastly, the prohibition of transcript withholding will enable students to transfer and continue their education and career pursuits with less barriers. Although all these policies are long-sought wins, the Legislature can ensure that the adopted budget includes additional and expanded supports.

I. Linguistically Relevant and Culturally Appropriate Mental Health Supports

We commend the many legislators that support legislation to address the mental health needs of students. It is equally important for this commitment to be delineated in the state budget. As the pandemic continues, the intensity of long-term trauma is still prevalent for many students, but specially for Latinx and underserved students. It is urgent for the state to invest in hiring more

¹ [COVID-19: Stay Informed - National Student Clearinghouse Research Center \(nscrclearinghouse.org\)](https://www.nscrclearinghouse.org/research/covid-19-stay-informed)

² <https://www.edexcelencia.org/research/latino-college-completion/new-york>

staff support and focus on trauma-informed mental health workers for colleges and universities. Additionally, the appropriations must ensure that mental health experts are trained in culturally relevant and linguistically diverse practices that meets the needs of our students.

Institutions of higher education must prioritize the immediate and long-term needs of students' mental health. The legislature can facilitate these support systems by prioritizing funding for bilingual counselors and/or professionals that address trauma-based needs and are culturally engaged within the communities. Access to mental health services and supporting students' social/emotional wellness improves the odds for students to succeed. This can also make a difference in long-term goals for success in postsecondary and career opportunities.

II. Develop and Train Bilingual Educators

A recent data report from the State Education Department highlights that the state experienced a nearly 10% increase in Multilingual Learners over a three-year period.³ For over two decades, K-12 schools have experienced extreme educator shortages that can support Multilingual Learners and English Language Learners (MLLs/ELLs). To better serve these students, it is imperative for New York State to invest in a diverse teacher workforce to meet the needs of multilingual learners. More specifically, the state must create bilingual educator pipelines, training, recruitment and retention programs. Culturally and linguistically responsive teachers can ensure MLLs/ELLs receive the support services they deserve.

The budget should include appropriations to attract, support, and incentivize candidates by eliminating barriers to entering the teaching profession or changing career pathways by doing the following:

1. Funding partnerships between colleges and universities and K-12 school districts to develop pathways into teaching for current paraprofessionals

³ http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/bilingual-ed/nysed_ell_mll_data-report_2018-2019-a.pdf

2. Creating mentorship programs for bilingual educators to support their career growth and providing opportunities for leadership development
3. Creating loan forgiveness and tuition assistance programs specifically for bilingual educators

These investments in career and higher education programs can leverage efforts that already exist and provide financial aid and targeted supports to grow the bilingual teacher workforce. K-12 and higher education institutions should receive additional funds to strengthen and generate a more symbiotic relationship that can address gaps and issues in either end of the education spectrum.

III. Transcript Withholding at All Higher Education Institutions

We commend CUNY and SUNY's decision to permanently end transcript withholding. This will benefit thousands of students, allowing them to continue their educational goals or enter the workplace. For so many Latinos and students of color, higher education is the great equalizer and is the key to economic mobility. However, the long-time practice of transcript withholding has contributed to further financial instability for students. Alumni that encounter employers requiring proof of a degree cannot produce one, limiting the fiscal benefits a college education is meant to provide and keeping college graduates in a financial rut. Additionally, access to transcripts will allow students to continue their higher education either by transferring to complete their degree or transitioning to graduate studies.

Unsurprisingly, transcript holds mainly affect low-income students of color placing a significant roadblock to their economic advancement. There is a myriad of reasons why a student may be unable to pay off their debt including a financial emergency or unanticipated expenses. A temporary suspension of this practice will only continue to hurt students who have been most impacted by the financial fallout of the pandemic. Studies indicate that schools collect merely a few cents on the dollar holding transcripts ransom⁴. In a time where so many are reeling

⁴ https://protectborrowers.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Withholding_Dreams_SBPC.pdf

financially, we must create more avenues for our communities to earn a living wage – this practice prevents hardworking, ambitious individuals from doing so.

Governor Hochul has proposed that all institutions end this devious practice or face a fine per violation. We call on the legislature to ensure private institutions follow in CUNY and SUNY's footsteps and cancel transcript withholding which leaves students with debt and no degree. By eliminating this debt collection practice entirely, higher education can continue to be a beacon of light for so many and enable students to continue their pursuit for success and a better quality of life.

In summation, the New York State Executive budget includes incredible investments in higher education, but there is still so much room for improvement. The Legislature must address these gaps in the budget and include supports for Latinx and underserved students by making investments that provide access to culturally and linguistically relevant mental health/socio-emotional supports, create programs and incentives to develop and retain bilingual educators, and ensure that transcript withholding is cancelled at all degree-granting institutions. These policy proposals and investments will guide students towards fulfilling postsecondary and career opportunities. I thank you for your time and reemphasize the imperative to prioritize these investments and welcome any opportunities for partnership.