

**TESTIMONY OF THE PROFESSIONAL STAFF CONGRESS/CUNY
ON UPDATES AND IMPROVEMENTS TO THE
NEW YORK STATE TUITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM
BEFORE THE NEW YORK STATE ASSEMBLY
COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION**

DECEMBER 10, 2014

Delivered by Dr. Steven London, First Vice President

Good morning Chairperson Glick and members of the Higher Education Committee. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today about the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) on behalf of the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), the union representing 30,000 faculty and professional staff at The City University of New York (CUNY).

As you know, CUNY's founding mission is to serve the "whole people" of New York—to be the people's university for our great City. Seventy-five percent of CUNY undergraduates are people of color. Forty-one percent are immigrants, and fifty-six percent have family incomes below \$30,000 per year. CUNY is the city's greatest source of opportunity for low-income and working-class students, and is the best hope for ending the city's income inequality crisis.

The Assembly knows the value of CUNY and has fought hard for the University. The PSC thanks you for your support, especially for your successful efforts to increase State Base Aid to community colleges over the last three budgets, and for your role in increasing the maximum TAP award this year to \$5,165. The community college funding restorations are helping to rebuild CUNY, but, truthfully, it must be said that CUNY's success has come despite years of State disinvestment. The PSC has documented the State's pattern of disinvestment in publications delivered along with our budget testimony for several years now. The latest is called *New York Has an Inequality Crisis. CUNY is the Solution*.

Disinvestment is highly relevant to a discussion on TAP. Cuts to State funding for CUNY have led to a four-fold increase in tuition at the CUNY senior colleges since 1990 and a three-fold increase at the community colleges. The most recent tuition hikes—and one more is scheduled for next year because of the SUNY 2020 law—like all of the ones before them, have been used to shift the onus of funding CUNY from the State to student and families. All this has made CUNY less affordable for students who qualify for small and moderate TAP awards and driven up the cost of TAP for the State. And the low-income students who are underserved by TAP or completely left out of the program have been severely hurt.

It's clear from our perspective, as the people who teach, mentor and serve CUNY's 270,000 matriculated students, that the State must do two things to protect and increase access to higher education: 1) fully fund CUNY and SUNY so we can stop depending on tuition hikes to restore investment in public higher education, and 2) reform and modernize TAP to accommodate to the changes that have taken place in the forty years since TAP was established.

TAP has, of course, made CUNY possible for hundreds of thousands of New York students. It's a program to be proud of, but it has problems. Some were built in to it, some are the result of rule changes made to TAP when Albany passed austerity budgets, and some are the result of the TAP's failure to keep up with the times. Our state-wide student body is much different today from what it was in 1974 when TAP was established and different even from what it was a generation ago when the State's disinvestment began in earnest and tuition began to climb rapidly. CUNY's multinational, multicultural, multiracial, and working-class student body is a testament to that. And the way many students attend school is different, too. TAP needs to be realigned with the needs of today's students. That is why the PSC supports the Coalition to Reform TAP's platform of TAP changes. I urge you to support them.

I also urge you to reform TAP so that the tuition discounting policy enacted under NY SUNY 2020, which requires CUNY to absorb the cost of tuition hikes for low-income students, is no longer needed. CUNY loses out on revenue that the University would have received if the maximum TAP award had covered the whole cost of tuition. Even with the \$165 increase to the maximum TAP award, this policy will cost CUNY an additional \$8.6 million in Financial Year 2016. Albany should protect student access without reducing CUNY's resources.

There are three critical TAP reforms for CUNY students I want to focus on: 1) passing the NYS Dream Act; 2) making TAP work for independent childless adults; and 3) allowing part-time students to truly benefit from TAP.

NYS Dream Act

Undocumented immigrant students who graduate from New York State high schools or GED programs should have access to TAP and other State financial aid. In 2002, the Legislature allowed such students to pay in-state tuition rates at CUNY and SUNY, and an estimated 4,500 undocumented students are now able to attend CUNY because of that historic reform. The PSC has great confidence in the contributions that other undocumented students will make to New York State if financial aid gives them the opportunity to attend college. A legislature in 2002, divided between a Democratic Assembly and a Republican Senate, recognized the contribution that undocumented students make to the economic and cultural vitality of our state. What was right and good for New York then, is right and good for New York now. These motivated and talented young people are part of our State; they deserve a chance at a better life—and we need the new ideas and innovations that college will bring out of them.

The governor has promised to make the NYS Dream Act law. The best way for him to keep that promise is to include funds and rule changes to implement it in the next State budget and for the Legislature to pass it.

The laws written for TAP were written largely with full-time, dependent students—who went right from high school to college—in mind. But, we believe there are today a great number of students who don't fit that mold—who are vastly underserved by TAP. Either they don't go to school at all, or they enroll full time—possibly taking out loans. Many of them drop out because they just can't make it financially. Who are these students?

1) Independent Childless Adults

TAP awards for financially independent students with no dependents are determined by an award schedule that hasn't been updated since 1994. They can't qualify for TAP if they earn more than \$10,000 net income, and when they do qualify, their awards are much smaller than the awards for dependent students. At \$3,025, the maximum TAP award for dependent students doesn't come close to covering tuition at CUNY.

The Higher Education Services Corporation's (HESC) annual report estimates that 19,500 independent students received TAP in 2013-2014. These low-income students are perhaps the most harmed by CUNY's annual tuition hikes. They are essentially the working poor—people trying to do better, trying to improve their economic and intellectual future. But the laws that govern TAP weren't written with them in mind. Beyond them, as I said, is a huge reservoir of low-income, working people with only a high school education or with some college who are struggling in the modern economy. They earn too much to qualify for TAP, but not enough to ever afford to go back to college for the education they need to get ahead. Making TAP work for them should be a priority.

The State should raise the income thresholds on TAP award schedules for independent single students to a level that makes sense for 2015, and provide that all TAP schedules incorporate the same maximum grant level. And the maximum grant level should rise \$6,500 for all students to cover the rising cost of CUNY and SUNY.

2) Part-Time Students

Twenty-three percent of CUNY students work more than 20 hours a week. Fifteen percent are raising children. Students with such responsibilities should be able to attend CUNY part time and receive TAP without having to clear the hurdle of having to enroll full-time for a year first. The Center for an Urban Future's excellent report, *Tapped Out*, released just a few weeks ago, notes that just 91 out of almost 40,000 part-time CUNY community college students received part-time TAP in 2013. (Another 44,000 undergraduate students are enrolled part time at the CUNY senior colleges.) Clearly, Part-Time TAP doesn't work. It doesn't work for the tens of thousands of low-income part-time students who can't receive it, and it doesn't work for the students who for academic reasons or because of work or family obligations would be better off attending college part time but instead enroll full-time to qualify for TAP in their first year.

Part-time students should have access to part-time TAP beginning with their first semester, their TAP awards should be prorated to match their credit load, and part-time TAP should be available to them for the full length of time that it takes them to complete college, not for a six or eight semester limit, as is currently the case. If TAP is available by credit hour, then there should be some reasonable life-time credit limit, but that limit should allow students some flexibility if their interests change, if they transfer, or if they "lose credits/eligibility" for some other reason. The Pell grant program recognizes such a need and allows up to six years of coverage in a students' lifetime.

In closing, I want to thank you again, Chairperson Glick for the work you and your committee have done to protect and expand college access. I know you recognize the need to make TAP work for all students who need it. Thank you for creating this forum for us to explain what needs to be done to reform TAP to meet the needs of today's students, and to provide a whole class of students with access to the opportunities provided by a college education.