

TESTIMONY OF DR. JAMES DAVIS
PRESIDENT, PROFESSIONAL STAFF CONGRESS, CUNY
BEFORE THE NEW YORK STATE ASSEMBLY
COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

To explore how colleges and universities in New York have adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic and the long term outlook for higher education

November 30, 2021

Thank you, Chair Glick and committee members for the invitation to speak with you today. I am James Davis, President of the Professional Staff Congress, the union representing 30,000 faculty and professional staff at CUNY.

The subject of today's hearing aligns with the mission to which PSC members have dedicated their careers: providing quality public higher education to “the whole people” of New York City.

The pandemic has severely impacted CUNY students, PSC members, and our communities. We know of 57 members of our CUNY community who have died due to COVID. And for example, in Jamaica, Queens, the neighborhood surrounding York College, one out of every seven people were diagnosed with COVID; one out of every 214 died.

CUNY students had to pivot abruptly to remote learning. They lost face to face interaction with professors, peers, and many of the support services that keep them on track to graduation. For our members, these difficult times were exacerbated when CUNY laid off approximately 2,800 adjunct teaching faculty. Attrition has also led to the loss of roughly 600 full-time faculty and staff in the past 18 months. All too often, the remaining instructors faced larger rosters in online classes – a problematic result, since remote instruction benefits from smaller class size. CUNY had a shortage of advisors and counselors before COVID hit. And the need has increased during the pandemic, as students faced dire circumstances: the pressures of balancing their work and studies, of the first-generation college experience, of poverty and institutional racism, have been compounded by unemployment, illness, and the loss of friends and family. Recall that more than half of CUNY students have annual household incomes of less than \$30,000.

Our CUNY community—students, faculty and staff—is still reeling from this trauma. This committee’s continued support is critical to ensuring health and safety in all of our CUNY

workspaces and classrooms. And we need a New Deal for CUNY that can finally end decades of racial and educational inequities that were laid bare during the pandemic.

We know of about 1,000 laid-off adjuncts who have been rehired. But all of our laid-off colleagues should be able to return to work. Now we are in the midst of the difficult task of ensuring a safe return to campus, which requires a massive health and safety effort while ensuring accommodation for members that still require remote work.

Health and Safety is Paramount

The PSC trained more than 200 members to conduct safety walkthroughs of CUNY facilities with the administration. We built the power to ensure that many unsafe facilities were either remediated or taken offline, and CUNY's safety policies were improved. We successfully shifted CUNY from an honor system for mask-wearing among unvaccinated individuals to a real mask mandate, and have pushed to reduce the number of staff commuting to work on campus during the Delta variant surge. The situation varies from college to college, but in several programs and schools the start of in-person classes was delayed until students were vaccinated.

However, health and safety concerns remain. Throughout the fall semester, the CUNY administration has reiterated a target for 70 percent of classes to meet in-person in the Spring term, along with a mandate that all full-time faculty teach at least one course in-person. Of course, many of CUNY's professional staff have been working on campus throughout the current semester. But a safe return to increased in-person instruction and work should be informed by current data, not by arbitrary benchmarks, and be negotiated with the union.

The New York State legislature has an oversight role of the University's use of funds and its protocols for opening the campuses. You can help keep CUNY accountable on federal stimulus expenditures and intercede, as you and your colleagues have before, to make sure CUNY does the right thing.

Even now, we have had to resort to FOIL requests for ventilation data on CUNY facilities. That is because many colleges either denied or ignored our requests to date. We need your help obtaining the data to confirm workplace safety as the pandemic continues. It's outrageous that the university has resisted the disclosure of ventilation data to the union, and it undermines our members' confidence in the administration.

CUNY's Budget Request: a steppingstone for quality and equity

CUNY has finally requested a budget worthy of its mission, and it doesn't include a tuition hike. The ambitious request for an additional \$416 million (NYS: \$313M | NYC: \$103M) over last year's enacted budget includes funding for several priorities in the New Deal for CUNY bill, including 1,075 new full-time faculty lines, opportunities for full-time conversion appointments for adjuncts, and additional full-time mental health counselors. ⁱ

We are optimistic about the New Deal for CUNY (A5843) legislation introduced last year. Some of the bill's key priorities are reflected in CUNY's budget request. We urge the committee to fulfill that request and put us on the path toward a New Deal for CUNY. It is essential to begin reversing the decades-long disinvestment. As I discussed in a [recent Daily News op-ed](#), key budget requirements to move CUNY forward include:

More full-time faculty

Since the 1970's the number of full-time faculty per student has decreased dramatically: today there are more than 4,000 fewer full-time faculty than in 1975, when 24,000 fewer students were enrolled. The beginning of the decline in CUNY's full-time faculty count corresponded with the end of free tuition and came on the heels of the increase in enrollment of students of color. Now, with a CUNY budget request that reflects our university's needs, a new governor, a new mayor in the wings, and broadened support for CUNY, New York State has a real opportunity to begin to reverse this injustice and to restore the ranks of CUNY faculty.

Members of the committee who represent students at New York's two great public university systems should know that Black and brown students have inadequate access to full-time faculty at CUNY *and* SUNY. A recent study by our University Faculty Senate and earlier this month explained in an op-ed by Assembly Member Reyes shows empirically that in SUNY and CUNY senior colleges, "white students have substantially greater opportunities for full-time faculty instruction, compared to Black and Hispanic students." ⁱⁱ

More academic advisors and mental health counselors

Student-to-advisor ratios at CUNY were as high as 1,500:1 at some colleges before the pandemic. The ratio of students to mental health counselors was 2,400:1. While counselors do their best under intense workload pressure, students still report that the wait times to see a counselor can be weeks. The Legislature allocated \$1 million for mental health services in the last budget. We are grateful for that investment. But CUNY requested \$6 million last year from the state for mental health services, and the need is great. Federal pandemic funds have been used to lift some of the burden by hiring part-time counselors, but those funds are temporary.

Community Colleges

Enrollment at CUNY's community colleges has declined due to COVID, but these institutions will be critical to the state's economic recovery, as they have been after every recent recession. Community colleges are the gateway to a CUNY senior college for many students. They are the first place workers turn to reskill after a layoff or to pursue further education or certification requirements. The Legislature has steadily reinvested in Community Colleges since the deep cuts of the Great Recession. We urge you to continue your commitment to them and the students they serve by supporting the full \$300 per FTE request CUNY has made.

Capital improvements

It is well known by anyone who has visited a CUNY campus, CUNY is in the midst of an infrastructure crisis that predates COVID. Thanks to an influx of federal pandemic funds, CUNY can begin addressing this crisis with upgrades to ventilation systems and other improvements to ensure that our campuses adhere to the highest health and safety standards and adapt to the pandemic. CUNY's \$1.2 billion capital request will help upgrade CUNY to a safer place of working and learning: an essential component of quality education.

Expanding Affordability

Thank you to the State Legislature for last year's commitment to closing the TAP Gap by 2025. By increasing the maximum TAP award by \$500, the Legislature reduced the TAP Gap by about 30% and provided an additional \$23.1 million to CUNY senior colleges. It's critical that New York State follow through on its commitment to eliminate the remaining TAP Gap.

Grant programs like New York State's TAP and the federal Pell grant are essential to making CUNY a more affordable university to the majority of our students. And we applaud the University for not seeking a tuition hike in the budget request. But the PSC envisions a tuition-free CUNY for all undergraduate students.

We also applaud the "CUNY Comeback Program," a smart use of one-time federal stimulus funds. It supports students who otherwise couldn't register for classes because of small debts to the colleges. The program could boost enrollment by reopening CUNY's doors to as many 50,000 students.ⁱⁱⁱ

While broader student debt relief is at the forefront of the national discussion about education policy, the need for free college is equally evident on the Federal level, as free public community college originally figured in President Biden's America's College Promise, but did not survive reconciliation process. Federally funded free public community college should become a reality, but New York State can become a leader nationally on its own by fully supporting those seeking an undergraduate degree at a public institution in New York City, a centerpiece of the New Deal for CUNY.

And tuition is just one piece of the puzzle. As students and the PSC have advocated in recent years, it's equally important to remove obstacles to academic progress, such as the costs for books, reliable internet, and even food. Last year, New York City's budget partially funded key student needs, including childcare, food insecurity, and remedial skills programs. And the nationally recognized ASAP program is successful, in part, because it relieves the financial burden in these areas.

CUNY: statewide economic engine of upward mobility

Expanding affordability not only helps students and their families but also improves graduation rates. Getting students out of classroom and into the workforce is an essential step to move our economy beyond the pandemic's devastating impact on many communities.

Earlier this year, New York City Comptroller Stringer's office released a report confirming the strong return on investment CUNY students have on the state's economy and tax base: ^{iv}

- CUNY graduates working in New York State earned a combined \$57 billion annually (\$67,000 on average) in 2019;
- \$28.6 billion more than students would have earned without a post-secondary degree;
- CUNY graduates working in New York paid an estimated \$4.2 billion in State income taxes in 2019.

CUNY students and the PSC members who educate them are a lifeblood for their New York communities.

Conclusion

The pandemic brought havoc to so many lives. The federal government provided one-time emergency aid to keep the University and the State afloat. But that aid will run out in two years. It is intended to sustain our underfunded public university and protect health and safety through the pandemic. The University Budget Request is an advance in this new political moment that, if fully funded, can restore CUNY's vitality and set us on a path toward the New Deal for CUNY.

ⁱ [CAL1021.pdf \(cuny.edu\)](#)

ⁱⁱ [A tale of two university systems: Stop targeting faculty cuts to CUNY and SUNY schools serving Black and Brown students - New York Daily News \(nydailynews.com\)](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [Governor Cuomo Announces Sweeping \\$125 Million Debt Relief Program For At Least 50,000 Students – CUNY Newswire](#)

^{iv} [Comptroller Stringer Analysis: CUNY Graduates Earn Combined \\$57 Billion Annually, Highlighting CUNY's Significant Contributions to Local and State Economies : Office of the New York City Comptroller Scott M. Stringer \(nyc.gov\)](#)