

State University of New York Student Assembly

President Marc J. Cohen

2018 Joint Budget Hearing Testimony

January 23, 2018

Higher Education

On behalf of the SUNY Student Assembly, and SUNY's 1.3 Million students, I would like to thank Chairpersons Weinstein and Young and the entire Assembly Ways and Means and Senate Finance Committees for allowing us to testify this morning. I would also like to thank Assemblymember Glick and Senator LaValle, and the Assembly and Senate Higher Education Committees for all that they do to support the State University of New York.

My name is Marc Cohen, I am a graduate student at the University at Albany, and I serve as President of the SUNY Student Assembly and as a member of the SUNY Board of Trustees. I am joined by Student Assembly Chief of Staff Austin Ostro. The Student Assembly is the recognized system-wide student government, supporting SUNY's 1.3 Million full and part-time students. The Student Assembly advocates on the local, state, and federal levels on behalf of the collective student interest across a large range of policy areas. Twice annually, SUNYSA brings hundreds of the system's student leaders together for our general conferences, where we establish our advocacy priorities, and student leaders have an opportunity to network and learn from one another.

Outside of our conferences, elected representatives for our four-year and community college campuses meet monthly for our Executive Committee meetings, where we review progress on our advocacy efforts and refine our goals and strategy. The Student Assembly also serves as the

vehicle for representation of the student voice on the SUNY Board of Trustees. The Student Assembly President, by statute, is a voting member of the Board... the only voting member of the Board not appointed by the Governor. The Student Assembly also operates standing committees devoted to prioritized policy areas, which have open membership for any interested student. Focuses of these committees include Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Sustainability, and Campus Safety.

In just her first few months in office, Chancellor Kristina Johnson has gone out of her way to engage the Student Assembly in a wide array of policy discussions. We appreciate the input SUNY allowed the Student Assembly in crafting its executive budget request in November. We were pleased to see certain key SUNY and Student Assembly legislative priorities find their way into the budget proposed by the Governor last week. We applaud the Governor's call for a food pantry serving every public college campus in New York State so that no student need worry about where they will find their next meal as they focus on their education. We were also pleased to see the continued expansion of the Excelsior Scholarship in the Governor's budget, which will help even more New Yorkers access a higher education.

There were some significant funding areas where the executive budget falls short, and we encourage legislative action to ensure vital services continue to be provided to all SUNY students. Last year, thanks to the leadership of Assemblymember Glick and Senator LaValle, \$300,000 was appropriated in the enacted budget to launch a pilot program to offer tele-mental health counseling to students on four SUNY campuses. Nearly two-thirds of SUNY students lack access to a full-time mental health professional on their campus. Telemedicine is a cutting edge way to give them access to the medical resources they need in a cost effective way.

While the program only launched this past semester, we have already heard from student government leaders and administrators on the four pilot campuses about how beneficial the program is proving to be for students. We would like to see the program expanded in the coming budget year to ten campuses, which SUNY's Academic Affairs office estimates would cost \$1.15 Million dollars.

Unfortunately the proposed executive budget removes all funding for this program. It is essential that the legislature act to ensure students across the system have access to the mental health resources they need to thrive. Successful pilot programs deserve to be taken to scale, and we hope that the Assembly and Senate see fit to include increased funding for tele-counseling in their proposed budgets. Promoting mental health can have a positive impact on a host of policy priorities including combatting the opioid epidemic, ensuring college completion, keeping campuses safe, and enhancing the overall student experience.

As previously stated, the Student Assembly appreciates the Governor's commitment to combatting food insecurity on our campuses. Nearly 25% of students reported experiencing food insecurity in the 2015-2016 academic year based on a survey of students attending forty colleges by the National Student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness. We appreciate the work SUNY system and our campuses have done over the past few years to promote food security. 70% of SUNY campuses currently operate a food pantry. The Governor announced a \$1 Million dollar appropriation to support the creation of the food pantries in the lead up to the State of the State, but that appropriation failed to materialize in his proposed budget. At least some new funding should accompany a requirement for all campuses to operate food pantries so that campuses do not have to redirect funding from any other function.

The proposed budget also continues the state's traditional Full-Time Equivalency (FTE) basis for funding community colleges. The issue with using FTE as the sole basis for funding is that a decrease in full-time enrollment does not automatically translate to a decreased need by students for academic and administrative services on their campuses. In a year when twenty-seven out of thirty of our community colleges are facing decreasing enrollment, this issue takes particular prominence. SUNY proposed changing the community college formula in its budget request to ensure the same type of funding guarantee enjoyed by our four-year schools due to maintenance of effort. If the legislature does not act to fix the broken FTE basis for community college funding, students will suffer the consequences of cuts to essential services.

Students were also disappointed to see cuts to opportunity programs like EOP and EOC in the Governor's proposed budget. Cuts exceeding \$10 Million dollars to these programs would harm

SUNY's ability to strengthen the diversity of the system, and to ensure it is an accessible institution for low-income, often underrepresented, New Yorkers. We appreciate that in past years the legislature has added millions to the Governor's requests for these programs, but thousands of EOP and EOC students are being forced to worry about the future of the programs they depend on. The budget deficit should not be erased at the expense of students who need a helping hand from the State of New York the most.

Thousands of SUNY Dreamers, undocumented students who came to the United States through no fault of their own, also have reason to worry. Washington is letting them down, and many have reason to fear for their future in the only country they have ever known. Albany should do its part to make up for Washington's failure by passing the DREAM Act which is included in the Governor's proposed budget. Every New Yorker should have access to the Tuition Assistance Program and the Excelsior Scholarship, including Dreamers. The legislature should act to give these students some measure of security in our state.

Students across the state are counting on you to adequately fund the programs they depend on. Remember that all money appropriated towards higher education is an investment in our collective future. As the Chancellor noted this morning, 73% of SUNY graduates stay in New York after they complete their education. Every dollars invested in SUNY yields a five to one return, and the skills and knowledge accrued at SUNY power our state's economy. Properly investing in SUNY now will yield tremendous benefits for New York State in the decades to come. Once again I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify this afternoon, and we look forward to answering any questions you may have.