

New York State Senate Committee on Higher Education  
Maintaining Quality, Equity & Affordability in Public Higher Education  
throughout the Pandemic and Beyond  
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Testimony of Félix V. Matos Rodríguez, PhD

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Thank you Chair Stavisky and members of the Senate Higher Education Committee for inviting me to testify today. I am grateful that we are able to gather together in person after almost 20 months of doing so much remotely. It would be remiss of me to not acknowledge the loss of life we have suffered individually and collectively. The City University of New York profoundly mourns these losses and honors members of our community on our central *In Memoriam* webpage; colleges also have means of remembrance. Our *In Memoriam* page is a first step in collectively remembering those who have passed on and their life work and contributions to CUNY.

Despite this devastating pandemic, CUNY continues to distinguish itself and be recognized for our quality, affordability and effectiveness in propelling students up the socio-economic ladder. Recent accolades include ten of CUNY's senior colleges being named among the top-performing public schools in the northern United States in 2021 rankings by U.S. News & World Report and six

CUNY community colleges qualifying for the 2023 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence - considered by many as the highest recognition for community college achievement in the nation. CUNY's community colleges were the only ones recognized in New York State.

Since the pandemic began, the CUNY has made strong strides to keep the affordability a priority. In April 2020, CUNY established the Chancellor's Emergency Relief Fund to provide aid to students in need amid the COVID19 crisis. The Fund grew to over \$10 Million through the generosity of foundations, corporations and individual donors. This enabled us to assist 12,000 students, including undocumented students who were excluded from the Federal Cares Act Relief. In addition, the colleges raised another \$8.6 Million to assist an additional 10,000 students.

In October 2020, the University expanded its mental health services to assist the increasing numbers of students at CUNY struggling with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The \$5 million expansion, supported with funds allocated to the University through the first federal round of funding known as the CARES Act, allowed colleges to reach more students with face-to-face online counseling and other remote wellness services as they continued to pursue their

degrees at a distance from their professors, classmates and campuses. The CARES Act also provided the University with \$118 million for institutional needs, including the purchase of computers, tablets and internet hotspots for students who needed them to fully participate in remote education and tuition and fee refunds. The average award per student was \$736 and the University assisted over 161,000 students. The second round of federal relief funds, the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSAA), provided grants averaging about \$720 to help students meet educational and living expenses during the pandemic.

The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) is the third round of federal stimulus funding, and was passed in March 2021. CUNY colleges received almost \$800 million in ARPA allocations, half of which is committed to additional student emergency grants and is being disbursed to our students in this semester and in Spring 2022. The remaining portion of the ARPA funding is available for college institutional needs. In working with our campuses, proposals were developed for the use of our remaining stimulus funds, and our collective plan was recently approved by the Board of Trustees. A major component of our federal stimulus strategy is the CUNY Comeback program, which we announced this past July. The CUNY Comeback program a sweeping plan that has eliminated about \$95 million

in unpaid debt for at least 52,000 students who attended CUNY and suffered financial hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic. The initiative is one of the nation's largest student debt forgiveness plans of its kind. Additionally, students who did not accrue unpaid tuition and fee balances during the period but experienced financial hardship stemming from the pandemic received relief in the form of enhanced Student Emergency Grants.

At the same time that the University was processing emergency grants to students, we worked to provide an all-encompassing network of services that made it easier for students to pursue their academic goals. This assistance was critical as more students faced food and housing insecurity, and more lost their jobs and lacked income. Despite the severe academic and economic challenges students faced in completing their degrees amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the City University of New York conferred a record high number of degrees: 59,295. This is an increase of nearly 5% from 2019-2020, and is the highest in our history. In fact, over the past decade, CUNY has conferred over half a million degrees (516,217 to be exact).

In August 2021, CUNY suspended a long-held policy that banned CUNY schools from releasing the official transcripts of students and graduates who owe

the University unpaid tuition and fees. Separately, we directed CUNY colleges to lift financial holds on approximately 74,000 students who were enrolled during the semesters of the COVID-19 pandemic, clearing the way for them to register for the Fall 2021 semester even if they owed outstanding tuition and fee balances to CUNY.

I am very proud of the efforts that The City University of New York has made to assist students financially and personally during the pandemic. I received many moving letters of gratitude from students. Still, consistent with the overall University trends, our enrollments have declined. Going forward into the next budget season we are hopeful that the State will continue to support our community colleges by providing flexibility within the State FTE funding formula and that the City keeps its commitment to restore the budget cuts from the community colleges.

The University's Budget Request includes initiatives to partner with the City and the State to combat the effects of the pandemic. In order to provide equity and affordability at the City University of New York, we intend to concentrate on student success, workforce development, advancing social mobility, improving student wellness and optimizing our campus infrastructure. We will concentrate

on student success by requesting funds for full-time faculty, increasing online learning, working with K-12 institutions to improve college readiness and serving adult learners who may have displaced during the pandemic.

Although I look forward to the formal budget request presentation early next year in Albany as we normally do, let me highlight one of our priorities which is to increase the number of full-time faculty positions, including lecturers, and to reduce reliance on a part-time teaching workforce. CUNY seeks \$94.1 million for 1,075 new full-time faculty lines, 500 of which be dedicated for new lecturer lines. If funding is secured for this initiative, it is our expectation that some of these lecturer positions would be filled from our existing adjunct faculty. Hiring of full-time faculty is directly tied to student success and retention. Full-time instructors have a particularly high impact in courses that have low rates of passing. Having full-time faculty teach more introductory courses will help students identify faculty mentors and faculty advisors who can assist in navigating through obstacles instead of giving up and dropping out. Additionally, full-time faculty have time to focus on new course development and revision of existing courses. This investment in full-time faculty will allow for greater stability in course offerings, student mentoring and will create a career pathway for our faculty.

CUNY's faculty and staff are a key ingredient in our student success strategy and keeping our standard of being a beacon of social mobility and transformation in New York and we want to acknowledge their contributions here today as I conclude my testimony.

I thank you again for the opportunity to join you today at this hearing and I am happy to answer any questions.