

TESTIMONY OF DR. JAMES DAVIS
PRESIDENT, PROFESSIONAL STAFF CONGRESS, CUNY
BEFORE THE NEW YORK STATE SENATE COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION
Maintaining Quality, Equity, and Affordability in Public Higher Education throughout the
Pandemic and Beyond
OCTOBER 25, 2021

Thank you, Chair Stavisky 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 PSC members have dedicated their careers to providing quality public higher education to “the whole people” of New York City.

The pandemic hit CUNY students, PSC members and the communities that we serve brutally. We know of 57 members of our CUNY community who have died due to COVID. One out of every seven people in the zip code surrounding Queens College was diagnosed with the virus; one out of every 322 died. The numbers are worse in the communities around other CUNY colleges. In Jamaica, Queens, the neighborhood surrounding York College, where you will hear testimony on November 16, one out of every seven people were diagnosed with COVID; one out of every 214 died.

CUNY students had to adjust in a matter of days to remote learning. Remote learning separated students from their professors and from the many support services that help them stay enrolled and on track to graduation. These difficult times were exacerbated for our members when CUNY laid off approximately 2,800 adjunct teaching faculty. Thankfully, approximately 1,000 have been rehired. Attrition over the last 18 months also led to the loss of more than 500 full-time faculty and staff. Many of those that remained faced larger virtual classes, a problematic result, as remote instruction requires smaller class sizes. CUNY had a real shortage of advisors and counselors before COVID. But the need has only increased during the pandemic, as students faced dire situations: 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 members. More than half of CUNY students have an annual household income of less than \$30,000.

Our CUNY community—students, faculty and staff--is still feeling the effects of 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 has 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. 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 for the professional staff and faculty. On October 18, University Provost Daniel Lemons reiterated management's target for 70 percent of classes to meet in-person in the Spring term, and a mandate that all full-time faculty teach at least one in-person course this Spring. Of course, many of CUNY's professional staff have been working on campus throughout the fall semester. The safe return to more in-person learning and work must be informed by current data, not by arbitrary benchmarks, and should be negotiated with the union.

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

Even now, for instance, ten CUNY colleges have refused to provide the PSC with requested data about ventilation in buildings, information to which we believe the OSHA regulations entitle us. Six have denied our request, and four have not responded. We need your help obtaining the data to confirm the safety of our worksites as the pandemic continues. It's outrageous that colleges have denied or ignored these requests, and it undermines employee confidence in the safety of their workplace.

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

As I mentioned, the CUNY administration has finally requested a budget worthy of its mission, and it doesn't raise tuition. 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 grateful, Chair Stavisky, for your co-sponsorship of the New Deal for CUNY (S4661)ⁱⁱ, the legislation introduced last year that helped CUNY to shape this year's budget request.

We urge the committee to fulfill CUNY's budget request and put us on the path toward a New Deal for CUNY. It is essential to begin reversing the decades-old disinvestment in CUNY. 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 rising support for CUNY investments, 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 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."

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 to hire 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 COVID 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,"ⁱⁱⁱ a smart use of temporary 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.

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 featured in President Biden's America's College Promise, but may not survive the partisan reconciliation process. Federally funded free public community college should become a reality, but even if it doesn't New York State can become a leader nationally on our 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.

But 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. New York City's budget last year 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.

Last 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 <https://www.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/page-assets/about/trustees/meetings-of-the-board/CAL1021.pdf>

ⁱⁱ [NY State Senate Bill S4461 \(nysenate.gov\)](https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2020/S4461)

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

^{iv} [CUNY's Contribution to the Economy, NYC Comptroller Scott Stringer, March 2021](#)