



The State University of New York
Student Assembly

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SUNY Student Assembly Testimony

Joint Legislative Public Hearing on 2019-2020 Executive Budget

Proposal: Higher Education

Monday, January 28th, 2019

Delivered By:

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Introduction

On behalf of the SUNY Student Assembly and SUNY's 1.4 Million students, I would like to thank Chairpersons Weinstein, Krueger, Glick, Stavisky and all members present at this hearing for allowing us to testify today.

My name is Alex George, I am a graduate student at the University at Albany and I serve as the Chief of Staff for the SUNY Student Assembly. I am joined by Langie Cadesca, President of the Student Association of the University at Albany—one of the four University Centers in the SUNY system. SUNYSA President and Trustee Michael Braun, Vice President Austin Ostro, and our Government Relations team wish they could be here, however, they are currently in Washington D.C. with student leaders from CUNY, the University of California System, the Cal State System and the State University System of Florida speaking with members of Congress and the Department of Education on the importance of federal financial aid, DACA, and Title IX.

The Student Assembly is the recognized overarching student government for the SUNY System. The Student Assembly advocates on the local, state, and federal levels on behalf of the collective student interest on matters of higher education policy. Today, we will be discussing the importance of furthering the investment of public higher education across our state—including the need for a new funding formula for SUNYs 30 community colleges, improving the excelsior scholarship, investing into mental health, increasing capital funding support, providing retention grants through the emergency fund program, and expanding EOP and EOC.



Community College Funding

Community colleges are the backbone of the SUNY System. The 30 community colleges throughout SUNY are a beacon of education in communities across the state, providing affordable, accessible education for residents. Community college enrollment is heavily tied to the economy; historical enrollment at SUNY community colleges trends upwards when the economy is doing poorly, as residents see the value and opportunity of a higher education in the face of economic downturn and unemployment risk. However, when the economy is doing well, as it has been over the course of this year, we see large decreases in community college enrollment. This year, 27 of our 30 community colleges saw a decrease in enrollment. The current funding model punishes our community colleges for this cyclical enrollment, decreasing the appropriation that supports educational programs and student activities that are critical for our students' success.

SUNY and the Student Assembly are proposing a hybrid funding model that anticipates this cyclical enrollment. This model provides the SUNY Community Colleges with much needed stability and investment while also recognizing the importance of enrollment in their operations by setting a steady funding "floor" and providing an increase in per FTE funding. Under this funding "floor" model, SUNY's Community Colleges will receive the higher of either the average of their most recent three-year State Aid levels or the previous fiscal year allocation. In addition, this program will increase the per FTE funding by \$125, growing 4.4 percent from \$2,847 to \$2,972. Colleges that see their FTE increase will be funded according to the traditional funding model. This proposal follows over a year's worth of work by the Presidents and Chief



Financial Officers of the 30 community colleges and will ensure the stability of our community colleges.

Excelsior Revisions

We commend the Governor and the members here today for their contributions to the Excelsior Scholarship Program in its goal of making public higher education more affordable and accessible for students across the state. The Excelsior Scholarship means a great deal to our students, and now, more than 50% of SUNY students attend college tuition free thanks to this program, in combination with existing financial aid from the State, federal government, and the campuses themselves.

Though with every new program, there are adjustments which need to be made to correct for unforeseen problems. The Student Assembly believes that the Excelsior Scholarship application process can be streamlined and made more accessible to students. The current application includes questions which are unnecessary in determining student eligibility and includes many questions which are potentially confusing or misleading. We recommend that the number and wording of questions on the application be reviewed in order to simplify this process for students. Additionally, we believe that the application should be released on October 1st, the same time as FAFSA and TAP, in order to decrease confusion and consolidate the financial aid application process; the application window should also be lengthened, as current deadlines exclude late registrants, who are disproportionately community college and nontraditional students.



Furthermore, the Excelsior Scholarship statute requires students to be on track to graduate by earning at least 30 credits per year of attendance. Since this is the case, campuses are mandated to review the number and type of credit earned by both returning and transfer students. For transfer students, it requires significant campus resources to review applicable credits and submit the electronic records to HESC in the application process. This process also impacts students. This past year, a student who graduated with their Associates Degree in two years from SUNY Ulster transferred to SUNY Delhi. Some of her credits did not transfer, taking her “off-track” to graduate in four years, thus making her ineligible for Excelsior by HESC, despite her intention of making up lost credits and graduating on time.

The credit verification process for transfer students should be eliminated. These students who are beginning their degree at a four-year school should be treated the same as an incoming freshman would, who’s eligibility is determined by their family income. The student is still required to take 30 credits per year and, if for some reason transfer credits were not accepted and they had to take an extra semester to finish, the student would be deemed ineligible for the Excelsior Scholarship for that additional semester anyways. Eliminating this credit verification would not only streamline the application process for transfer students, but it would make financial aid more accessible for students who want to continue their education and pursue a four-year degree.

Lastly, the current requirements of the Excelsior Scholarship award create additional barriers for Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) students. In its current form, ADA students



may take as few as 3 credits in order to receive a prorated Excelsior Scholarship award, which is the same for ADA students in the TAP program. However, ADA students must earn all credits they attempt—which means they are treated differently than non-ADA students who are not required to earn all credits attempted to retain eligibility. ADA students should be able to attempt the number of credits they feel appropriate without the fear of losing their scholarship eligibility.

Telecounseling

Increasing the provision of mental health services is increasingly critical for institutions of higher education. Current data shows that 1 in every 12 U.S. college students makes a suicide plan; each year over 1,100 college students take their own lives. In the SUNY System, over 30% of students report suffering from anxiety and/or depression. The influx of need in this area has left SUNY struggling to keep up—only 23% of SUNY Community Colleges and 34% of SUNY State Operated Campuses reporting being able to meet their current student mental health needs.

Addressing these discrepancies requires creative and technological innovation. Over the past three years, SUNY has piloted a telehealth initiative that provides psychiatric services to our students through Upstate Medical University. Beginning in the 2016-17 academic year, this service began at 4 campuses and experienced immense success. Campuses praised the quality of the clinical care and the convenience of the telehealth platform. Most students were seen within two weeks of their referral. Within the community setting, the wait for psychiatry services can be as long as three months for an initial appointment, if a provider is accepting new patients. In addition to providing clinical care for students, Upstate also provided consultation services for medical professionals on the campuses, helping support treatment for students not involved



directly in the project. The healthcare providers at Upstate reported high satisfaction with the project, stating that the patient engagement was high, and the telehealth software was easy to use.

In the following two years, given additional funding by New York State, SUNY expanded the program to 8 campuses, providing enhanced access to care for hundreds of students. However, the 2019-20 Executive Budget has depleted the funds which allow this program to operate. The SUNY Student Assembly requests that the legislature restore the \$600,000 appropriation for telecounseling to ensure that our students have access to the critical services that they need. This investment would continue to expand the number of campuses which participate in this service, while ensuring the continuation of this service for those students who have come to depend on it.

Capital Funding

Capital funding for our Universities is critical to the quality of student life, expansion of our research capacity, and consistency with New York State's energy goals. Studies have shown that the physical environment has a significant impact on student attraction, learning, retention, and the commitment to supporting the institution after graduation. We have seen this at my campus—where significant investments into facilities such as the campus center, as well as academic buildings supporting the School of Business, School of Homeland Security, and School of Criminal Justice enhances the in-class and out-of-class experience for students, which has had significant returns for the University. Modern, up-to-date facilities are essential to providing a quality education for students. Quality SUNY education provides upwards mobility for underserved communities.



Furthermore, as technology emerges, and artificial intelligence becomes more widespread, SUNY needs to be forward thinking in its efforts to prepare the next generation of workers for jobs in a technologically advanced society. Critical maintenance is not enough to provide SUNY the resources necessary to ensure SUNY students and graduates can take part in New York State's goal to build a robust 21st century economy.

Lastly, SUNY owns 40% of all publicly owned buildings in New York State—having the largest, most comprehensive university-connected research foundation in the nation. Investment into capital can have tremendous returns for the state. For example—thousands of students across the state use SUNY's transportation system to get from their residence halls to class—let's electrify SUNY's transportation system and lead the way for the expansion of electrical, public transportation across the state.

EOP/EOC

Higher education serves as a ladder to economic prosperity. The Student Assembly believes that every student capable of completing a program of higher education should be given to the opportunity to do so in order to create a better life for themselves and their families.

SUNY has worked continuously to achieve this goal and has extended the ladder of opportunity through its' Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), which will provide more nearly 11,000 disadvantaged students with a chance to pursue a college education in the 2018-19 academic year; as well as our Educational Opportunities Centers (EOC) which, located across the state, have provided thousands of New Yorkers with a second chance to pursue an education.

The 2019-20 Executive Budget proposes a \$7 million cut to EOP (11%) and a \$5.5



million cut to EOCs (16%). These cuts are compounded by rising housing costs, living expenses, fees and books, creating a significant hardship for our lowest-income students. The Student Assembly calls for the legislature to not only protect these programs, but to strengthen them to ensure that every student has the opportunity to pursue an education.

Emergency Aid

The Student Assembly strives to ensure that all students have access to education and have the ability to graduate in the amount of time prescribed by their program. However, all too often students experience damaging life events that prove detrimental to their ability to stay on track. In the course of the year, students may unexpectedly come face-to-face with severe medical emergencies, homelessness, domestic violence, or loss of employment, among others. These events take a toll on the ability of students to focus on their education, as their health, safety, and wellness comes first.

SUNY has taken steps to provide relief to these students. In the 2018-19 school year, 7 SUNY schools piloted a grant program which provides monetary assistance to students facing emergency and unplanned circumstances that may negatively impact their ability to pursue an education. These grants, generously provided by the Gerstner Family Foundation & Heckscher Foundation for Children, in coordination with the SUNY Impact Foundation, have provided students with the means to get back on their feet and continue their educational pursuits. In one instance, a student was the victim of a sexual assault related to the student's off-campus part time job, which resulted in them ultimately leaving the employer and struggling to pay for some months of rent. The fund was used to assist the student with rent. In another instance, a student



was behind on her rent and in danger of being evicted. She stated in her application that she had already cut back on groceries and was thinking about dropping out of college. The fund assisted in covering her back rent, getting her back on track with her bills, and allowing her to stay in school. In the short time that this program has been in operation, dozens of stories like these have arisen which show the dramatic impact of this fund on students and the importance of continuing to provide these grants.

Under the current program, students can receive a grant up to \$2,000, and grant pools are allocated to the participating SUNY schools based on undergraduate enrollment. The Student Assembly requests that this model be continued and expanded across each of the 64 campuses throughout our system.

Conclusion

The Student Assembly looks forward to working with Chairpersons Weinstein, Krueger, Glick, Stavisky and all members present at this hearing in the pursuit of these initiatives and others which strengthen the SUNY System, provide for our students, and ensure that SUNY continues to be the premiere system of public higher education in the nation.