Darleny Suriel, Policy Assistant, #DegreesNYC,
BMCC Student
New York State Senate and Assembly Higher Education Committee
COVID-19 Impact on Higher Education
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Good Morning. First and foremost, I would like to thank Senator Stavisky, Assemblymember Glick, and The New York State Senate and Assembly Committee on Higher Education for the opportunity to share my testimony. My name is Darleny Suriel. I am the Policy Assistant for #DegreesNYC, a collective action initiative focused on achieving education equity in the K-16 systems in NYC. As the Policy Assistant for #DegreesNYC, I also co-lead The #DegreesNYC Youth Council, a cohort of high school and college students who also advocate for educational equity in their campuses. I am a Sophomore at the Borough of Manhattan Community College. Before COVID, I worked Monday-Friday during the day and attended school on evenings and weekends. Although balancing this schedule felt overwhelming at times, I believed it was worth it because I was ultimately working towards a college degree that would guarantee me social mobility, a solid career path, and financial stability. You see, like many of us in this virtual room, I believed that college was the great equalizer. COVID-19 quickly proved that this was not true.

When COVID happened, many students, including myself, had to deal with l obstacles that negatively impacted their education. From struggling with mental health, to not having access to basic needs, or just having issues with their internet, many students found themselves struggling to adapt to this difficult transition. One of the challenges I faced when schools shut down was difficulty accessing high-speed internet. This prevented me from being fully present in my classes & important work meetings. This also caused me to miss out on a lot of valuable instruction time. I

remember feeling frustrated and afraid that teachers would penalize me for something that was out of my control. This "Digital Gap" that I experienced is something a lot of students throughout NYC can relate too. About one million households did not have access to good-quality internet when this pandemic started, a digital gap that disproportionately affected black and brown students who come from low-income communities.[1] It especially affected those students who live in shelters where internet access is prohibited. This digital gap brought to light the different ways in which education inequity still exists outside of schools & campuses. It made people question: how can education be the great equalizer if the only students that have access to neccessary academic resources are those who can afford it? Although the DOE & CUNY colleges began to loan students devices and hotspots to combat this issue, it still made students like me wonder: Why did it take a global pandemic for our schools to provide students with these digital resources? And now that colleges have seen how detrimental the digital gap is to a student's ability to succeed academically, even before COVID, will they continue to work towards closing this digital gap post-COVID?

Another example of Education inequity that COVID has highlighted has been the fact that not all students live in a home environment that is conducive to learning. For some students, school is their safe space where they can focus on their academics without the trauma, pressure, and/or responsibilities that they may experience at home. Distant learning has exacerbated the stress some students may face at home. Students are now forced to perform academically while dealing with their living conditions. This can negatively affect a student's willingness to participate in class; especially when a teacher or professor requires you to have your camera on to receive credit for attending the class, even if you do not feel comfortable doing so. According to the ReachNY Reopening Brief, Over 50% of students in NYS felt disconnected from their teachers This may be due to the fact that some professors have not been offering office hours or any form of communication outside of class hours. 60% of students also felt

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[1] "Opinion: Amid the COVID Crisis, Closing the Digital Divide is ...." 19 Mar. 2020, https://citylimits.org/2020/03/19/opinion-amid-the-covid-crisis-closing-the-digital-divide-is-more-urgent-than-ever/. Accessed 28 Jul. 2020.

disconnected from their classmates.This kind of isolation can contribute to the decline of a student's mental health.

It is no secret that this pandemic has impacted the mental health of students of all ages across NYC. Over 80% of students in NY have expressed concern about developing or worsening depression, anxiety, and other mental illnesses. [2]I have personally witnessed this happening with my classmates who have shared this in class, with friends who have expressed their reluctance to going back to school if distant learning continues, and even some Youth leaders in the #DegreesNYC Youth Council, who have shared in our meetings that they felt depressed during COVID. I can relate to their experiences because my depression and anxiety have also worsened due to COVID. As the eldest in my household, and the only one with digital literacy in my home, I have also been responsible for homeschooling my two siblings who are disabled during this pandemic. This responsibility added to the pressure I already faced going to school fulltime while balancing my job. Juggling all these responsibilities caused me to feel extremely depressed, overwhelmed, burnt out and unmotivated. This ultimately hurt my productivity professionally and academically. I also felt anxious because as someone who has no training on how to teach students with special needs, I was afraid that I was doing damage to the development of my siblings, particularly my autistic little brother. I fear that I wasn't homeschooling him right. This cultural pressure is something that many first-generation students face as primary caretakers in their households. These personal obstacles compiled with additional stressors and triggers these students may be experiencing can do irreversible damage to the psyche of a student.

One of the consequences of COVID has also been mass unemployment, which has disproportionately affected mostly black and Hispanic communities. Students who were working part-time jobs and seasonal jobs have been affected by this. Over a

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[2] "Poll: Four in five New York college students worry about ...." 28 May. 2020, https://newyork.edtrust.org/press-release/poll-four-in-five-new-york-college-students-worry-about-staying-on-track-to-graduate-because-of-pandemic/. Accessed 28 Jul. 2020.

quarter of students ages 16-24 have lost their job due to COVID.[3] Many students depend on the income provided by their jobs to pay for food, books, transportation, and even tuition. Unemployment means that the number of students who experience food and housing insecurity will increase. Currently, less than half of the student population in NYS believes they will be able to afford these basic expenses if the pandemic continues. According to ReachNY, 74% of students say they will need more financial aid to be able to continue their education. Nicole Pozo, an international student at Lehman College who got furloughed indefinitely from her part-time job at a retail store, had to take out a loan to be able to pay her tuition for the spring 2020 semester. Unemployment has also affected the level of financial support parents can contribute to their child's tuition. As was the case with one of the Youth Leaders in our Youth Council, who was an HS senior getting ready to go to college, and had to take on multiple jobs to be able to afford to go to school because her parents could no longer afford to pay for college due to COVID. It is getting to a point where students have to choose between surviving or getting an education. Yet, I find it troubling that CUNY is still considering raising the cost of tuition at a time where students can barely afford to go to college. Raising the tuition for college students whose health, finances, and education is being disproportionately affected by COVID will only widen the economic and social gap that public education is supposed to help close.

The truth is, the impact of COVID will be felt long after COVID itself is gone. It is imperative that during these very difficult times, students feel as though they are being heard and supported by the leadership at their school as well as by local elected officials. The first step to ensuring this is to be transparent with students and give students an open invitation to all conversations, taskforce, committees, or any decision-making process that will ultimately affect their education. The second step is to ensure that students have access to the resources that support their basic needs, educational needs, as well as their mental health. These resources should be available

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[3] "Unemployment undercount was greater for women, Asians ...." 30 Jun. 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/30/unemployment-rate-is-higher-than-officially-recorded-more-so-for-women-and-certain-other-groups/. Accessed 28 Jul. 2020.

to all students regardless of their race, gender, socio-economic status, documentation status, or disability. Moving forward schools & colleges should continue to be flexible with students when it comes to grading, attendance, and credit transfer during the pandemic. Many students are still learning how to navigate getting their education during a pandemic while experiencing personal grief, loss, struggles, and mental health issues that are impacting their academic performance. Finally, I strongly recommend freezing tuition for CUNY and SUNY students. It would be very insensitive and disrespectful to students to increase tuition at a time when thousands of students and their families are facing unemployment, eviction, and hunger. Thank you for your time.