



**New York State Senate and Assembly Joint Hearing:
How COVID-19 Has Impacted Higher Education
Submitted by Zaret Cortorreal, Student at Lehman College, CUNY
and Young Advocate with Young Invincibles
Tuesday, July 28, 2020**

Good afternoon. My name is Zaret Cortorreal, and I am a Young Advocate with Young Invincibles. I want to thank Senator Stavisky and Assemblymember Glick, Chairs of their respective Higher Education Committees, as well as members of the committee, for the opportunity to provide testimony today on how COVID-19 has impacted higher education.

I was born and raised in the Dominican Republic. I came to the United States in 2015. I had always wanted to attend college in the US because I understand its importance for my future and well-being. I started school at Borough of Manhattan Community College where I was an ASAP student. I am now a senior at Lehman College, studying accounting, with a planned graduation in Spring 2021. I'm also an ACE student, which provides me with the additional advising and financial support to continue my education. Without this program, I wouldn't be able to attend college.

Housing insecurity and homelessness is very real among college students, even before COVID-19. I'm sure it's even worse now given the economic crisis this pandemic has created. Unfortunately, I found myself in a similar situation, where I couldn't afford a place to live. Because I had to take 15 credits that semester, I could not continue working my full-time job and had to reduce my work hours. Since I don't have any family here nor enough money to get another place, I had no choice but to move into a shelter.

Shelters do not provide the support and resources necessary for students to continue their education. For example, it didn't allow for occupants to use a laptop and have internet access, making it harder for me to continue my coursework, which is now all online. As a result, I had to go to a friend's house to complete my school work. I am very grateful that my friend was able to help. But, as the virus grew, she didn't want me coming over given that I was exposed to

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many different people in the shelter, which I could understand. During this time, I also found out that I was with a child so commuting from the shelter to my friend's house just to complete my work was really a struggle. Due to my situation, I was temporarily removed and placed in a campus dorm which is currently coming to an end on July 31st.

Professors were also not very supportive and flexible in the transition to online learning. Some professors thought that I was using my situation as an excuse. One of them told me that if I wanted to pass the class, I would have to submit my homework no matter what. I was also told that if I missed class then I would lose points. One professor told me that I would have to drop the class if I did not complete the assignments. In addition, many of the professors would only take questions during class and wouldn't respond to questions via email. They were not flexible at all!

Not every college student has a place where they can continue their education remotely. Because many do not have access to the internet and use computers inside the shelter, CUNY should place students living in shelters and other students experiencing homelessness in a dorm or facility where they can study and work remotely. In addition, computers that came equipped with internet access would also be extremely beneficial. In addition, professors should be flexible with students. Living in a pandemic with not much support only causes more stress and mental health issues that not everyone knows how to manage, especially homeless students like me.

Given all of the additional challenges that I encountered this semester, I am grateful to have successfully completed the semester. I will continue to pursue my degree as well as a paid internship or job this semester, and I am optimistic about my future. In the meantime, I hope that my testimony today allows you to provide the necessary support to help students like me in the fall and in future years, regardless of the pandemic. Thank you.