



New York State Senate and Assembly Joint Hearing:

How COVID-19 Has Impacted Higher Education

Submitted by Melanie Kruevelis, Senior Manager of Policy and Advocacy, Young Invincibles

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Good morning. My name is Melanie Kruevelis, and I am the Senior Manager of Policy and Advocacy at Young Invincibles. Young Invincibles is a non-profit dedicated to elevating young adults in the political process. I want to thank the Chairs of the Higher Education committees, Assemblymember Deborah Glick and Senator Toby Ann Stavisky for convening today's hearing on how COVID-19 has impacted higher education. As an organization working with young people across New York and the country, we've heard directly from students how the COVID-19 pandemic has upended their college experience. Today, I will focus my testimony on some of the serious concerns we've heard from students, faculty, and community partners, including 1) the transition to remote learning, and its impact on academic performance and persistence; 2) how our state's growing homelessness and hunger crises are directly impacting college students; and 3) addressing the mental health needs that students face during one of the worst public health disasters in our nation's history. Throughout this testimony, I will share recommendations for the semesters ahead, and tangible steps state leaders can take to make sure that students — and particularly, low-income, Black and brown, and immigrant students — are supported through this crisis and beyond.¹

New York's higher education system faced serious challenges when the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in our state, as students, faculty, staff, and administrators quickly adapted brick-and-mortar campus life into online classrooms and virtual advising. And as is the case with much of this pandemic, the transition to distance learning underscored the racial and class inequities that so many New Yorkers are taking a stand against at this very moment. As classes moved online, we saw a stark divide between the students who had the technology and quiet home environment needed to participate in online classes, and those whose home life was not conducive or safe for learning. As one City College student told us at a student roundtable in

¹ For more recommendations, please view our COVID-19 student agenda, "Supporting Young Adults and College Students Through Crisis and Beyond": https://younginvincibles.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/NY_COVID_Response1.pdf

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March 2020, *“Although I am grateful that the universities throughout New York are doing what they can to prevent the spread of COVID-19, I also realize that it adds on another layer of uncertainty and stress that I will have to actively deal with. How will I attend online classes when my Internet connection isn’t always stable?”* We recognize that colleges did work to respond to these issues: the CUNY system, for instance, published campus-level points of contact on the system’s Central website, who can connect students with laptops. Still, as colleges adapted to this digital environment, we know many students ended the semester without adequate Internet access — from students in homeless shelters who cannot use laptops in the shelter or connect to the shelter’s WiFi, to those living in crowded housing conditions, to student parents who must balance their virtual schoolwork with caretaking and homeschooling responsibilities. As New York colleges plan for another semester of blended or distance learning, it is critical to center the experiences of students without the technology, space, or support needed to make distance learning a success. To that point, YI worked with our partners at the Education Trust-New York on a new report on [“Reopening with Equity: 10 Questions for Campus and Systems Leaders.”](#) This report provides guidance on how to center equity principles in planning for upcoming semesters, including on technology questions. We urge the legislators present today to take a look at that report, and to share it with campus leadership.

While ensuring equitable access to computers and Internet is critical for the semesters ahead, we know that the academic challenges posed by COVID-19 go beyond technology access. Students will tell you — learning amidst a pandemic poses profound difficulties. A survey from the CUNY School of Public Health found that nearly three-in-five students said the pandemic decreased their ability to do schoolwork. Our partners at [Education Trust-New York](#) found that more than 80 percent of New York’s college students are concerned about staying on track to graduate — and that Black and Latinx students were more likely to feel concerned about falling behind, when compared with their white peers. As students prepare for another uncertain school year, it is critical that we make sure students are supported, and not held responsible for meeting academic expectations that do not make sense for a semester under COVID-19. *We recommend the following:*

- Center student voices in decision-making around reopening. Ensure that students serve on campus reopening task forces, as well other COVID-19 task forces as well as those that may form to address racism on campus. Campuses must include multiple students on

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these task forces, and work to ensure the participation of historically under-served student groups, such as first-generation, immigrant, Black and brown students, as well as students with children. Decisions from these task forces should be made publicly available and explained clearly to students.

- Campuses must make sure online classes and support programming address the needs of students with limited access to the Internet, or live in disruptive home environments.
- Urge institutions to use credit/no credit grading policies for all semesters that are disrupted by COVID-19. As CUNY Chancellor Felix V. Matos Rodriguez mentioned in his testimony earlier today, CUNY is an example of a system that moved to credit/no credit grading during the spring semester. Yet, we are concerned to hear that CUNY would return to letter grading for the fall. We have not returned to “normal” by any means, and expecting normal grading systems to work for students is misguided at best.
- Colleges should use a co-requisite remediation model, where students are placed in credit-bearing courses that do count towards their degree, while receiving additional help to address academic needs. Charging students for remedial courses that do not count towards their degree did not make sense before the pandemic — and this model of remediation certainly does not make sense now.
- The State must ensure that students do not lose the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) awards if they dip below Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) throughout the pandemic. Under the federal CARES Act, grades under the last academic term did not affect their federal academic requirements, or SAP, to continue to receive Pell Grants or student loans. We urge our state colleagues to work with HESC to ensure that students receiving TAP are not penalized for failing to meet SAP during pandemic semesters. The State should also ensure students opting into credit-optional policies also do not risk losing their state financial aid.
- Support campuses and their ability to provide virtual tutoring, advising, mentoring, and academic support services for students. The Education Trust-New York’s COVID-19 survey found that while 86 percent of students identified these as key supports for helping them persist, just over 60 percent of students reported that their campuses provided such services.

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We also know that the academic challenges facing students extend beyond the virtual classroom. While college students are not always the group folks think of when considering our state's homelessness crisis, the fact is thousands of New York's college students don't have a safe place to sleep at night. This was true before the pandemic: a [March 2019 survey](#) found that 14 percent of CUNY undergraduates experienced homelessness in the last year. Now, as more New Yorkers lose jobs, see a reduction in their unemployment benefits (or are blocked from them entirely due to their immigration status), and with no real rent relief for the majority of New Yorkers who don't own their homes, campuses must plan for the reality that many more of their students will struggle to meet their most basic needs. Just [42 percent](#) of New York's college students think they will be able to afford basic needs like rent and food as the pandemic continues. When you ask low-income New York students, that number drops to 32 percent. When nearly three-in-five of the state's low-income college students can't afford to eat, now is the time to make sure our campuses are equipped to address students' most basic needs, like food and housing. *We recommend the following:*

- Introduce legislation creating a campus-level liaison for students experiencing homelessness at New York's public colleges. States such as California, Louisiana, Maine, and Tennessee have passed legislation creating these roles. In these states, these liaisons are charged with collecting information on the number of students experiencing homelessness, working with financial aid offices to improve the financial aid process for students experiencing homelessness, and managing relationships with local shelters and other housing providers to ensure all students are stably and safely housed. A starting point for this legislation can be convening a statewide task force on college student homelessness, who can study how other states have legislated and implemented these roles.²
- Invest at least \$1-million to sustain campus food pantries. In 2018, Governor Andrew Cuomo mandated that all public colleges in New York have on-campus food pantries, and provided \$1-million in funding to start these pantries. Yet, state investment in these pantries has stagnated since the 2018 mandate. As more students struggle to afford food, the Governor and the legislature should reaffirm its commitment to ensuring no college student go hungry by increasing investment in campus pantries. With increased

² For more information on legislation supporting students experiencing homelessness, read Young Invincibles' November 2018 report, "I Know What's at Stake:" How Homelessness Impacts College Success in New York City" https://younginvincibles.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/YoungInvincibles_Homelessness_College_Success_NYC.pdf

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investment, pantries can not only provide higher quality and healthier food options (a concern we often hear from students), but also connect with other supports that students might need — becoming a hub for students to enroll in SNAP, access emergency grants, and other critical supports.

- Nationwide, just [three percent](#) of college students enroll in SNAP or food assistance programs, though an estimated 18 percent of students qualify. New York can take several steps to expand college students' access to SNAP:
 - New York's public colleges must coordinate digital university-wide campaigns aimed at enrolling eligible students in SNAP, along with other public assistance programs. Colleges should consider using CARES funding to help fund these campaigns, and the State should hold oversight hearings on how CARES funding supported initiatives like these that help students with the fewest resources.
 - The FY21 state budget included a provision to expand SNAP eligibility for students enrolled in career and technical education (CTE) programs at community colleges. We urge state legislators to work with the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance to ensure that this expansion of SNAP is on track for students to enroll in the coming fall semester, and to make sure students, faculty, and staff of eligible CTE programs are informed of this policy change, and trained on how to receive assistance for applying to such benefits. The State should also work with leadership at the state's two year colleges to identify other programs that might be equivalent to Employment and Training programs, including certain career pathway programs and remedial coursework.
 - State lawmakers and institutional leadership must vocally advocate for eliminating federal provisions that bar full-time college students from accessing SNAP, even when they meet other eligibility requirements.

We must also recognize that living through a pandemic has profound impacts on all of our mental well-being — including college students. This is particularly true for Black, Brown, immigrant, and low-income students, who not only are dealing with the trauma of living through a pandemic and economic recession, but also the intergenerational physical and mental trauma that comes with living in a country that does not value your life. New York's college students understand how their ability to persist in college connects to their overall well-being, including their mental health.

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The CUNY School of Public Health found that, among the majority of students who said their academic performance was declining due to COVID-19, 73 percent attributed that decline to their mental and emotional state. Half said they needed increased assistance to deal with their stress, anxiety, and depression. To treat these issues as separate from academic success — as has been the status quo for far too long — will only hurt New York in the long-run, as fewer students persist and complete. *We recommend the following:*

- Close the counselor to student ratio by hiring more counselors to meet the growing demand for mental health services. New York Senate Bill 7317, for instance, closes the ratio of counselors to students to one counselor for every 1,000 students.
- Provide college students with multiple paths for mental health support by strengthening partnerships with mental health providers in the community. College reopening task forces, for instance, might charge a campus administrator with developing stronger partnerships with city and state services, as well as community-based providers who provide mental health services.
- Launch an initiative to provide campus faculty and staff with professional development, training, and information about how to refer students to mental health services.
- Leverage CARES funding to support the continued use of teletherapy and virtual support groups as an option to support students during the COVID-19 pandemic, and promote those services regularly to students. Teletherapy service provision should be tailored to those whose home environments may not be safe for them to engage in teletherapy, including trans and queer young people. Text-based therapy services, for instance, can be an option for those who cannot find a private space at home to safely engage in therapy. Again, funding from the federal CARES Act may support this initiative — but increased investment from the state for campus mental health services will be needed after CARES aid is depleted. We also again urge for oversight and accountability on the use of CARES funding to support student needs.

Now, to state the obvious but necessary: many of the recommendations we made will require resources be directed towards our public higher education institutions and the students they serve. I say this not only because of the budget challenges the state faces, but also because of the roadmap left by the last recession — rising tuition prices, declining financial aid and services for students, and a multi-billion-dollar student debt crisis in New York alone. As we look to

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rebuild New York, we must not cut funding for the programs and institutions that can provide economic stability to the communities most harmed by this crisis, including Black, brown, immigrant, and low-income New Yorkers. We call on the state Legislature and Governor Andrew Cuomo to think long-term about our state's recovery — and that includes resisting cuts to our higher education system. We also applaud members of the Senate and Assembly majorities who are becoming more serious about addressing the inequities laid bare in this moment's dual crises by exploring efforts to raise revenue through various wealth taxes, and redistributing those funds to higher education. Equitable higher education is a critical tool in ensuring New Yorkers can not only survive this crisis, but come out of it stronger than ever.

I thank you for your time and look forward to your questions.