

***New York State Legislature Joint Assembly & Senate Legislative Public Hearing:
Higher Education: Fiscal Year 2017-2018 State Executive Budget Proposal***

Testimony of Hercules E. Reid

Student, New York City College of Technology, City University of New York -CUNY

Vice Chair for Legislative Affairs, CUNY University Student Senate -USS

January 23, 2017

Good afternoon members of the New York State Legislature,

My name is Hercules E. Reid, and I serve as Vice Chair of Legislative Affairs for the CUNY University Student Senate and two-term President of the Student Government Association at City Tech. It is an honor to be here today, for the first time representing a population of people who are depending on me to express their many concerns and aspirations. What I share in common with most of you is that I was elected to represent the people. I am a Senior at New York City College of Technology, a CUNY school in the heart of downtown Brooklyn, sitting in between the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridge. I will be graduating with an Associates and Baccalaureate Degree in Architectural Technology in June of 2017. I'm working to become a licensed architect with hopes of designing and building beautiful, resourceful and sustainable structures, such as the bridges that connect Brooklyn and Manhattan, allowing citizens from all across the state the ability to navigate the CUNY system from Borough of Manhattan Community College to City Tech.

As a student I have directly benefited from my engagement in programs such as the Black Male Initiative (BMI). Through BMI, I was able to save money on textbooks for a few semesters and received the necessary one on one tutoring to pass my remedial and beginning level courses. Without BMI, I know I would not have survived my first academic year at City Tech. Throughout my time in CUNY I have seen and learned about the great benefits of opportunity programs such as BMI, CUNY ASAP, SEEK, CUNY LEADS, which, allows CUNY to not only remain accessible, but also enhances the quality of our education. We encourage you to challenge any divestment in these programs. We humbly ask that you not only challenge any divestment, but also aid in the growth, expansion and investment of these programs.

We are also asking you to support our students by providing more capital investments to support eroding facilities and development of new state-of-the-art centers of education. We are very appreciative of the governor's investment in critical maintenance for our senior colleges. The reality is our students need to be in a safe and comfortable learning environment to excel and succeed. I have sat in classrooms at City Tech with temperatures measured at above 90 degrees. We understand that there are challenges associated with maintaining facilities, however we need an investment, which will allow us to enhance our facilities to meet the needs of society in the next generation. Understanding that some of our students have children, more funding needs to be added from the state and city budget to provide access for child care centers and services on campuses to aid parents pursuing or continuing their degree.

We feel compelled to mention that USS is strongly against any raises in tuition. In the SUNY2020 bill which was passed in 2011, we were promised a Maintenance of Effort provision. Tuition rose for five

years, students paid their fair share, and today, in 2017, we still have not a commitment from the executive budget to support a maintenance of effort.

The Governor's Executive Budget proposes another five years of unaffordable tuition hikes to CUNY students. An increase in tuition of \$250 totaling \$1,250 over the suggested five years. This would bring tuition to \$7,580 at CUNY senior colleges and create a \$2,415 gap between tuition and the maximum TAP award of \$5,165. Raising tuition at CUNY is contradictory to the Governor's plan to make college more affordable.

Legislation like the DREAM Act, which the governor is looking to pass is an example of truly aiding not only the privileged but also the unprivileged and underrepresented population of individuals the state of New York have sworn to represent and protect. We encourage you all to make it your business to pass the Dream Act on behalf of all the "Dreamers" out there striving to be better individuals in society and the community.

When accessibility is mentioned that does not only reference ADA Compliance, but the need for public transportation to commute back and forth to college.

MTA is looking to raise the fare yet again. What serious conversations or legislation has been created to address this on behalf of how it affects access to Higher Education in the City. I have so many friends now who miss class on multiple occasions because they can not afford the fare on that day for class. How many students need a monthly or weekly metrocard due to being a full-time student, yet purchase rides regularly because they cannot afford the full price of a monthly, in fear of not having money to eat throughout the month. We are asking you to consider, but the idea of a reduced fare initiative for college students. Even something as minimal as 30% reduced fare would increase revenue for the MTA due to more students being able to purchase a monthly or weekly metro. We ask that you take action to make transportation affordable. I can directly tell you how hard it is to pay the ever increasing cost of rent, tuition, food, textbooks, and an ever increasing metrocard. If we thought what we were requesting was unreasonable or unfathomable, I would not be here speaking with so much conviction. You all are the people that can make or break Higher Education not only for the present, but also for the future.

In addition to what my colleague mentioned the also, The State Education Law 6201 Legislative findings and intent reads that "Only the strongest commitment to the special needs of an urban constituency justifies the legislature's support of an independent and unique structure for the university. Activities at the city university campuses must be undertaken in a spirit which recognizes and responds to the imperative need for affirmative action and the positive desire to have city university personnel reflect the diverse communities which comprise the people of the city and state of New York."

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Testimony of Jona Kerluku

*Student, Lehman College, City University of New York - CUNY
Vice Chair for Fiscal Affairs, CUNY University Student Senate - USS
January 23, 2017*

Good afternoon members of the New York State Assembly Committee on Higher Education,

My name is Jona Kerluku, I am a student majoring in Exercise Science, minoring in Mathematics in a pre-medical track at Lehman College at the City University of New York. This fall I had the honor and privilege to be elected Vice Chair for Fiscal Affairs for the CUNY University Student Senate. I will graduate Herbert H. Lehman College this Spring 2017 in hopes to continue a career in medicine. I emigrated from Albania in 2001 and chose the City University of New York to receive my Bachelor's Degree because it was all that my mother and I could afford. I have committed a lot of my time to volunteering in several public hospitals around the city, participating in scientific research, athletics, and most recently student government. I spoke to hundreds of students throughout my years from different demographics throughout the CUNY system and we all feel strongly against the increases of tuition.

I would like to focus my testimony on the importance of reforming the Tuition Assistance Program. The 5 year tuition increases that are included the Executive Budget will increase tuition to \$7,580 and further enhance the gap between tuition and the maximum TAP award, which is currently \$5,165. I ask that you reconsider the difficulty for working class and low-income students to fill a \$2,415 gap. As one of those students, I want to tell you that the burden of the TAP gap is real and consequences of could potentially defer the dreams of many New Yorkers. Students are already working extra hard to cover living expenses, transportation, books, and meals.

Perhaps the idea Governor Cuomo had in mind was to cover the gap with the Excelsior Scholarship. But as you've heard before, the Scholarship is fairly restrictive and there are tens of thousands of students and potential students at CUNY that will not receive any of the benefits the scholarship is promising. I am especially concerned for part-time students and undocumented students who are currently not receiving any TAP funding. These students are often going to school part-time precisely because they have to work and go to school. The excelsior program assumes that our students have the option to take 15 credits a semester. While this goal is desirable, the reality is that many of our students have real life responsibilities and we need to find a way to help them.

We are requesting an increase in the maximum TAP award to keep up with the rising costs of tuition and index the award so that if tuition increases in the future so will award amounts. Despite the inconsistency students face when applying for TAP, the restrictions on part-time students hinder a large portion of the CUNY population from completing their education. These constraints cause students to manage an overwhelming course load during the semester which limits the extracurricular activities they can provide attention to, like sitting up here today, or apply for internships instead of running out of school to go to work. For us to have remarkable statistics as a university, we need to provide an affordable and accessible system for the 450,000 students asking for an education. The benefit of a free public education system is that students are relieved of the burden of having another bill. In senior colleges, 32.3% to 48.8% of undergraduate students have a household income of less than \$20,000 in senior colleges and community colleges, respectively. More than 30% of students in senior and community colleges work over 20 hours per week to keep up with living in New York City. Students cannot focus on school if they have to worry about overwhelming tuition hikes. We are counting on each of you to help modernize financial aide for our students.

As my colleagues mentioned, The State Education Law 6201 Legislative findings also reads that that “The legislature finds that in order to meet the state's responsibility to provide post-secondary education in New York city beyond the associate degree level, as it does elsewhere in the state, there should be full state funding of senior college operating and debt service.”

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***Testimony of Chikaodili Onyejiukwa
Student, Hunter College, City University of New York -CUNY
Chairperson, CUNY University Student Senate -USS
January 23, 2017***

Good afternoon members of the New York State Legislature,

My name is Chikaodili Onyejiukwa, I'm a senior at Hunter College at the City University of New York, majoring in Community Health Education. I serve as Chairperson for the City University of New York University Student Senate also known as CUNY USS. USS is the elected student governance organization responsible for representing the interests of the nearly 500,000 students that attend CUNY each academic year. I also have the distinct honor to serve as a CUNY Trustee. I'm also a proud member of assembly district 32 represented by Assemblymember Vivian Cook and Senate district 14 represented by senator Leroy Comrie.

Over the past several years, since the SUNY 2020 plan was adopted in 2011, our organization, USS, has been working diligently to call on the CUNY Board of Trustees and our legislative bodies to freeze the annual tuition increases at CUNY. We have also been working with local leaders and organizations to put our minds together and explore constructive approaches to returning CUNY to being a well funded and tuition free institution of higher learning. The CUNY University Student Senate is a steering member of the CUNY Rising Alliance. CUNY Rising is a growing alliance of 30+ community groups, non-profits, unions, student advocates and faith-based organizations that serve, mobilize and minister to millions of New Yorkers. In December, CUNY Rising released a white paper making the case for free and quality education at CUNY.

Last year, after a long battle and persistent advocacy efforts from our students and community leaders, CUNY and SUNY students were given a break from 5 years of perpetual tuition hikes. We want to thank every member of this legislature for making that happen. We are happy to have you as representatives of our great state. And again, the students at CUNY are calling for a tuition freeze and investments into our university.

I was most surprised to see that the Executive Budget proposes 5 years of \$250 tuition hikes for CUNY and SUNY students. This call for tuition hikes comes just two weeks after a proposed plan for a tuition-free CUNY and SUNY. We cannot have alternative tuition proposals. The notion that we will have tuition increases within the same institution that is declared will be tuition free, is inherently contradictory. Either we are committed to making CUNY and SUNY free of cost for our students or we are not. We are asking that the New York State Assembly and

Senate reject any attempts to increase our students tuition. We have paid our share over the past five years through tuition increases, and now we are asking for relief that we have outrightly earned.

There has been a decade long trend of disinvestment in public higher education. What New Yorkers need is a REAL investment in public higher education. We need a commitment from our Governor and state legislators that our students and professors are a priority to the great state of New York. We can make a REAL investment in CUNY by passing and signing a Maintenance of Effort Bill that ensures that our university remains well funded as the price of running a competitive university rises every year. We can make a REAL investment by reforming our Tuition Assistance Program by expanding the eligibility criteria and increasing the maximum award. We can make a REAL investment by fighting for the Dream Act and making sure that our students that are undocumented have a shot at the american dream as well.

The student population at CUNY is very different from most college institutions. Most of our students are working, low-income, or in short, people who fall outside of the traditional college student. The excelsior program is too restrictive and many of our students will not reap the benefits being offered by the program.

As stated in the New York State Education Law, Legislative Findings and intent “The city university is of vital importance as a vehicle for the upward mobility of the disadvantaged in the city of New York.”

The academic ladder remains an important component in attaining personal and professional success and, for many of us, CUNY remains as the only viable option of higher education—not because we would not excel in other academic institutions, but because CUNY is affordable and accessible. I know the legislature has a profound understanding of how important public higher education is to a successful New York workforce. We are asking that you make a REAL investment in CUNY.