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**2025 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Higher Education**  
***Testimony of Akkeem Polack***  
**University Student Senate (USS CUNY)**  
***USS Vice Chair for Legislative Affairs***  
**February 25, 2025**

Good Morning Members of the Legislature,

My name is Akkeem Polack, and I proudly serve as the Vice Chair for Legislative Affairs for the University Student Senate, representing over 200,000 CUNY students across 25 colleges. I am a student at York College, majoring in Communication Technology. I'm also a student from Jamaica.

Like many of my peers, I chose CUNY because its reputation for providing working class people with an affordable and quality education precedes the institution. Indeed, the university has a global reputation for being a vehicle of socio-economic class mobility. While CUNY is full of opportunities, many of our students still struggle with financial and structural barriers that threaten our success.

One of the most pressing challenges facing CUNY students today is the sharp rising cost of living. This, of course, is not unique to New York City. We have seen rents, homes, cars, and groceries skyrocket over the post covid pandemic world. One thing that makes NYC different from the rest of the nation is that we have the largest and most reliable system of public transit in the country. And we could use our public transit system as a tool to bring much needed relief to the students of CUNY.

Many of us travel long distances—sometimes up to two hours each day—just to get to class. Public transit is not optional for us; it is a necessity. However, with increasing subway and bus fares, commuting costs have become an unbearable burden for thousands of students.

That is why the USS is calling on the Legislature to fund FREE METROCARDS for CUNY students.

Access to transportation is access to education. A student who cannot afford a MetroCard cannot attend class. A student who cannot afford to travel cannot take an internship, participate in research, or engage in civic life. Without reliable and affordable transportation, students are forced to make impossible choices—do I go to class today, or do I save that swipe for work so I can afford rent? This is a daily reality for too many CUNY students, and it is one that New York State has the power to change.



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While transportation is a critical issue, it is just one piece of a larger puzzle. If we truly want to support student success, we must also:

- Expand the CUNY CARES Project to address food insecurity, housing instability, and access to health and mental health services. A MetroCard is crucial, but so is ensuring that students are not hungry or homeless while pursuing their education.
- Enhance academic and career advice to help students navigate their studies and prepare for the workforce. We need more advisors, mentors, and career resources to ensure that students graduate with the skills and opportunities they deserve.
- Increase support for disability services by funding additional staff, assistive technology, and accessibility improvements across campuses. Every student, regardless of ability, should have the tools they need to succeed.
- Improve IT infrastructure across CUNY, ensuring students have access to modern technology, reliable Wi-Fi, and updated digital resources that enhance learning.

CUNY has long been the engine of social mobility for New York's working-class and immigrant communities. Investing in CUNY is investing in New York's future.

We urge you to fund Free MetroCards for CUNY students and to continue investing in policies that remove barriers to education. The return on investment is clear—when students can afford to access their education, they graduate, they contribute to the economy, and they strengthen our state.

Thank you for your time and commitment to higher education. I look forward to working with you to ensure that every CUNY student has the support they need to succeed.