

**Testimony of
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Before the New York City Council Committee on Higher Education**

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First, I express heartfelt thanks for the opportunity to address you today. **During this time of political and social uncertainty, I have pinned my hopes on the progressive and enlightened leadership of my City Council.** Your decisions will determine whether or not New Yorkers will be able to enjoy the freedoms that many elected representatives at the state and federal levels seem to want to take away from us. Thank you for all of your hard work to ensure we can continue to be *exactly* “Who We Are,” as Speaker Mark-Viverito emphatically stated in her address at the Kings Theatre a couple of weeks ago.

One thing we *definitely* are is: CUNY. I’m certain that a significant number of CUNY graduates (myself included) are in this room. **A great many New Yorkers have studied at a two-year or four-year CUNY college, or have a family member, friend, neighbor, or colleague who did.** To single out one such person in the room: we at Brooklyn College are incredibly proud that Council-member Williams is one of our alumni. I’m sure he’s not the only member of this committee with a connection to CUNY. I hope you will think about this impressive and extensive network as you listen to and ponder our testimony today.

I’m here to provide you **a professor’s perspective on why you should allocate \$35 million to the Faculty Partnership for Student Success Initiative.** These funds will allow CUNY to restructure its faculty’s time so that we can give our students more one-on-one attention. You know already that our students are incredibly—and, I daresay, *atypically*—passionate, resourceful, driven, and, above all, diverse. Most of them step onto our campuses without the advantages and privileges that students at other colleges bring to bear on their education. Because of these disadvantages, our students need as much time as we can possibly give them.

As you know, **CUNY has contributed dramatically to the social mobility and career success of students of color, low-income students, and first-generation college students.** They are New York City residents who in many cases would not be able to attend college at all if CUNY were not an option. I know you have listened to testimony regarding the importance of faculty advisement and mentorship in students’ success. So, instead of reiterating that research, I will offer some specific stories about what a typical semester entails for me, and why a restructuring of my time as an associate professor would make a significant impact on me and my students.

This is my eleventh year as a full-time professor at Brooklyn College. Before joining the BC faculty, I taught three years as an adjunct lecturer at Hunter and Baruch while I was working toward my doctorate degree at the CUNY Graduate Center. This means that I have been a CUNY professor for 27 semesters. Every semester is different, but during all of those 27 semesters, **I have had countless conversations with students seeking my advice or support outside of the classroom.** Here are three examples from this past semester (fall 2016):

1. **I had a series of meetings with a student—I’ll call her Amani—who was struggling in my class.** We discussed basic strategies for reading comprehension, note-taking, exam

preparation, and working effectively within a team. During these conversations, I learned that Amani is a single mother of two who was only able to take my class because she could enroll one of her daughters in a program at our campus's Early Childhood Learning Center. Her daughter played and learned there while Amani attended class. I'm proud to say that although it was touch-and-go for a while, Amani passed my course—an accomplishment that allowed her to increase her chances of graduating this spring.

- 2. I convened five students in my office so that I could help them resolve a conflict that emerged during a team project.** I deploy a teaching method called Team-Based Learning (TBL) in my classes, in which students work together in permanent, stable teams for the entire semester. In Team-Based Learning, students wrestle with real-life questions and problems during class time rather than listening passively to a lecture—engaging the course content actively while also developing skills that they can use wherever life takes them. As I'm sure you have all experienced, working in a team is never easy. Often, I need to coach students on how to give and accept constructive feedback, how to communicate effectively, and how to transform disagreements into opportunities for growth. Last semester, the members of one particular team had a rough time getting along. So, they sought my help. I invited them to my office and, for nearly an hour, they discussed and worked out the conflict. Along the way, I interjected with suggestions about how they might rephrase a critical statement more productively, and provided specific examples of alternative wording. By the end of the meeting, the students had identified the root of the conflict and created a plan for moving forward. Several of them sought me out later to thank me for investing time in their team, expressing gratitude for the way I coached them through the crisis.
- 3. I helped one of my master's students—I'll call her Anna—to complete my course despite a difficult medical challenge.** This personal setback caused Anna to withdraw from her master's program a few weeks shy of the semester's end. But my colleagues and I refused to give up on her. We did not want all of her hard work to go to waste. Anna's faculty advisor alerted her professors to the situation, and after Anna received the medical attention she needed, we worked together to ensure she could complete her remaining assignments and receive credit for her courses. Last week, I administered her final exam, making special arrangements to do so because I am on research leave this semester. I'm thrilled to tell you that she earned a B+, despite everything. This means that if she decides to reenroll at Brooklyn College in the future, she will not have to retake my course.

These are just three of the many encounters I had during a single semester. They mirror and echo countless conversations I've had with students during my thirteen years as a CUNY professor. These are success stories. But there are an unbearable number of stories I could share about how I've failed. Too often, I have failed students who needed me to intervene—situations in which I have been unable to intervene due to pressures and demands on my time. Though I try to take heart in the success stories, the failures never cease to haunt me.

If the City Council were to provide the funding CUNY needs to restructure professors' instructional time, here are four things I could accomplish:

- 1. If I taught one fewer course per year, I could meet with more students, and meet with them more often.** Whenever I notice that a student isn't participating in class, or is struggling to keep up, or misses a class without explanation, I ask him or her to meet with me—because in my experience, this is the single most important thing I can do to ensure that

the student does not drop or fail my class. But because a substantial proportion of my students need this kind of support, and because of the unusually high course load at CUNY, I can rarely help every student who needs it.

2. If I taught one fewer course per year, **I could do a better job staying on top of the latest developments in my field, thereby ensuring that I pass them on to my students.** Within the current workload structure, I have very little time for my own professional development and self-improvement as a teacher.
3. If I taught one fewer course per year, **I could invest more time in my research—and, more importantly, get my students involved in my research.** Right now, it is difficult to model for them what it means to be a critical thinker, an intellectual, and a scholar. With seven courses to teach every year, it is impossible to devote ample time to my research and writing.
4. If I taught one fewer course per year, **I could be a representative of CUNY in my field and in the academic profession at large.** When CUNY professors are visible in the field, the prestige of the university increases. So does the value of a CUNY degree. But relatively few CUNY professors serve as officers in professional organizations due to demands on their time. As a result, our unique perspectives as professors at a diverse, urban, public university go unheard and unacknowledged. I have been nominated several times for prestigious positions in national organizations. In only one instance was I able to accept the nomination—and in that case, I accepted only because my term as an officer would overlap with my sabbatical. I have also been asked to serve as an editor or co-editor for three leading academic journals. But all three times, I had to decline, due to the unusually high number of courses I teach as a CUNY professor.

I confess: **I frequently ponder what it would be like to teach at a better-funded public university or a private college.** Not only would I be teaching students with fewer challenges, but also I would have more time to invest in research, professional development, and student mentoring. But I have something that my peers do not have: I have CUNY students. I have the great honor and privilege of working with diverse individuals who inspire, galvanize, and teach me every day.

So, I have stayed at CUNY—despite other offers and opportunities that have come my way—because I know I can make a difference. I know that if I were a professor elsewhere, my students would likely complete their degrees and enjoy success no matter what I did. This is not always the case with CUNY students. Our students have incredibly complicated lives. They face challenges that I can hardly wrap my head around sometimes. For many, simply showing up to class constitutes a small miracle. Their dedication, commitment, and drive to succeed—despite the odds and obstacles—are why I am testifying today. My mission is to help them become the movers and shakers they hope to be: activists, artists, scientists, entrepreneurs, perhaps even elected representatives, like Council-member Williams. My colleagues and I share a deep, abiding belief that we are doing the most important work we could possibly do. I sincerely hope you share this mission and vision. If you do, please do everything in your power to support the Faculty Partnership for Student Success Initiative.