

Testimony of Sigmund Shen, Associate Professor
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Before the New York City Council Committee on
Higher Education

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Thank you for hearing our testimony on the need to restructure faculty workload. This is really a discussion about the quality and depth of public higher education in New York City. Teaching doesn't just mean lecturing a classroom or test prep; it also means caring about each student, knowing him or her, understanding his or her level of preparation, and finding undiscovered ways of reaching that person.

When you factor in the large class sizes and the 27-hour teaching load at CUNY's community colleges, just a three-hour reduction can mean the difference between 90 students and 60 students in a semester. When your college's commitment to the crucial principle of open admissions means both a wide range of abilities in the same classroom, and that a majority of your students are immigrants, 90 vs. 60 is literally a qualitative difference. Frankly, it means passing or failing to many of my students. In the first-year composition courses I normally teach, I routinely find that 20% of my students will not pass the course. For those 20% of students in danger of failing, this is what it means: With 90 students, I'd have to give primarily written feedback, hand scrawled in a rush on their paper and handed to them at the end of class. With 60 students, I'd be able to give them substantial verbal feedback, in an actual, one-to-one, give and take conversation. Instead of waiting days or even a week to get answers to their questions, they'd be able to hear answers within seconds. And of course, that individualized conversation leads them to deeper questions. That individual attention also makes me better able to cajole students who need counseling into walking to the counseling center, or better able to intervene on the behalf of students who are having trouble navigating the bureaucracy. I try to do this with my students, but often don't have time to know them well enough to identify such problems until it's too late.

A three-hour reduction would also enable me to spend more time and more consistent, sustained, consecutive hours on scholarship. I'd be more excited about my field and more up-to-date, and more excited and better able to articulate that excitement to my students, treating them as potential scholars themselves rather than simply as customers.

I served on the hiring committee in the English department for two years and more than one of our candidates, during the interview, very candidly expressed incredulity when we notified them of the workload. Humanities Ph.D.'s can do basic arithmetic and very clearly understand that CUNY's claim to being a research university is empty. I don't know if I have personally seen faculty from diverse backgrounds dissuaded from working at CUNY because of the workload, but I do know that when workload suppresses active scholarship, it discourages the experimental, the unorthodox, and the minority voice, perspective, or methodology. People don't have time to innovate or

investigate, let alone waste time arguing for the importance of an emerging field. This leads to an essential conservatism and timidity in scholarship, at a time in American history when, more than ever, we need to serve our diverse, hard-working students, and protect the production of academic knowledge in the humanities and the sciences.