

## People's Board of Trustees Testimony

### Harry Blain, the Graduate Center and City College

Public higher education is essential for a decent and dignified society. It is not a bargaining chip or an item-line on a budget. It is not a luxury only to be enjoyed in good economic times or a shiny advertisement to be marketed on the subway.

When society and government truly commit to public higher education, they send an unmistakable message. They say, in the elegant simplicity of CUNY's founding phrase: The *whole people* are entitled to more than a minimum wage, elementary healthcare, or other material necessities. They say: The whole people are entitled to more than mere survival. They say: The whole people are worth more than the price that their labor fetches in a brutally unequal economy.

When society and government truly commit to public higher education, they declare – without reservation – that the whole people deserve intellectual life. They have the right to read, think, reflect, and explore. They have the right to take risks and make mistakes, to pursue youthful political fantasies and to remake themselves later in life. They can try, try again, fail again, and fail better. They can inherit their rightful share of a fundamentally collective social investment.

CUNY's first big betrayal of this vision has festered for nearly half a century. The city university thrived as a free university for 129 years; it has declined ever since. The upward trajectory of tuition fees is matched only by the miserable slide of public money. In a cruel and bizarre twist on our founding mission, the growth of precarious academic labor – cheered and encouraged by short-sighted politicians and college administrators – ensures that CUNY now plays no small part in swelling the ranks of New York City poverty.

Perhaps the bitterest insult is how this has all happened while governors, mayors, chancellors, and college presidents have cheerfully continued talking about “social mobility,” “diversity,” and “opportunity.” If only I could express the scorn and anger on my students' faces when these words come up. If only those distant custodians of austerity – the Board of Trustees – could see the depths of contempt in which they are held.

The plague of coronavirus has taught us many – mostly depressing – things. I don't need to repeat the now well-documented special viciousness that this virus has inflicted on the whole people.

But one lesson ought not to be forgotten: We can make social investments when we want to. Ours not a crisis of means, but a crisis of will and conviction. Department chairs blame college presidents, college presidents blame the chancellor, the chancellor blames the governor, the governor blames the president, and the president blames the Martians.

The truth is: all (except the Martians) are complicit. Diligently, unambiguously, steadfastly, and with utmost humanity, we say to all the crisis-makers, crisis-predators, and crisis-mongers: We are coming for you.