

Testimony of Dr. Penelope Lewis, Secretary, Professional Staff Congress/CUNY

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New York City Council Committee on Higher Education: Oversight - Online Degree Programs: Past, Present, and Future

Thank you, Chairman Dinowitz and committee members for the opportunity to testify before you today. I am Penny Lewis, Secretary of the Professional Staff Congress/CUNY and a faculty member at the School of Labor and Urban Studies. I have taught hybrid courses, including one for an MA certificate whose course offerings are entirely online (though there are in-person meetings as well).

We have heard from CUNY, and see that CUNY is committed to expanding its online degree programs and presence. We come to you to express our concerns about the possible directions this is already taking, and our sense of some best practices that should be in place as any expansion is considered. First and foremost, we would like CUNY to be completely transparent with their goals, and to actively and consistently consult with the union and faculty governance bodies, in recognition of the critical roles each group plays in creating high quality online degree programs. The expansion of “CUNY Online” in particular is something that the university should be regularly meeting with the union and governance bodies about. Specific questions about this program can be found at the end of this testimony.

Further, we are concerned that online is best only for certain students, and its expansion without adequate support for students, the vetting of students, and support for faculty teaching the courses will erode academic standards and decrease student learning and success at CUNY. We know that our colleagues provide many high quality online degree programs and classes at CUNY. But we have a double concern. Expansion without investment will strand our online students. And, on the other hand, prioritizing online degrees over the in-person needs of our students will hurt our in-person students.

For CUNY students, especially in their first year and those returning to their studies, in-person classes provide a continuum of support that is not available in remote classes. So many students were and continue to struggle with injustices that COVID magnified: not having regular internet access, a quiet place to attend class or study, dealing with family and friends’ deaths and illnesses, not to mention unemployment. Online programs offer flexibility, but we hear from colleagues in faculty and union meetings that this is often a mirage. Students chime into classes, off-camera, from work, or during commutes, and are thus not able to meaningfully engage or learn. Students are frequently unable to engage the self-directed work that asynchronous online courses demand, and disengage or engage poorly. Again and again, we hear that students are too often not really learning. This should not be a surprise-K-12 has found clear evidence of the same. When building relationships is central to one's work as it is for

advisors and counselors, remote school adds a complication factor when historically face-to-face meetings allowed these connections to thrive.

For the faculty, prepping for online classes takes longer than in-person, and encouraging adequate engagement and providing meaningful assessment of students is often more time intensive than in person classes. At most campuses, CUNY faculty are often paid a small stipend for developing an online class, but across the campuses there's rarely additional support beyond that initial investment. A 2019 study found the recommended ratio of student to faculty in online classes should be 12 to 1: for the courses to be successful, more faculty are therefore required. Though they may exist, we know of no degree programs at CUNY that approaches this best practice class-size norm. Online courses across the university are frequently over enrolled—there are jumbo courses with hundreds on some campuses, with limited TA support, and frequently already too-high caps in other courses—25, 35 and 40 students are not uncommon. We are deeply concerned that CUNY will explore online education as a cost savings path, when in fact done well online education demands greater investment in faculty training and support, smaller class sizes, technical support, and student supports.

Finally, we are concerned that faculty expertise and rights, in addition to general concerns for student success, are being overridden by administrative pushes for wholly online, asynchronous degrees, as in CUNY Online. Last spring, CUNY's University Faculty Senate received a report prepared by the CUNY University Faculty Senate Committee on Libraries and Information Technology (April 2022) that raised central questions regarding the expansion of online degrees, especially those developed by the CUNY Online "online program manager," which I quote at length here:

Integration of an "independent unit" [CUNY Online] with the principles of shared governance at CUNY

- What representative bodies govern the development of CUNY Online?
- What committees will interact with the unit and what mechanisms will ensure faculty involvement in decision-making?
- What kind of ongoing support and training will the OPM instructional designers have, and what rights and responsibilities will they have to engage in decisions guiding the direction of online education at CUNY?

Access to campus resources for fully online students

- Will online students have full access to their campus libraries? Computer labs, campus wifi, and printing services? Will they pay the same student activity fee, and student technology fee to support such services?
- Will fully online students have access to advisors, counselors, food pantries, wellness centers, accessibility/disability offices, etc.?
- Will fully online students have the same opportunities and access afforded to students who are able to access their home campus or another CUNY campus?

Quality of instruction and educational standards

- What level of orientation to online learning will be provided to students (before and after enrollment) including minimum tech standards and self-identifying “characteristics of successful online learners”?
- Will the online course development adhere to principles of universal design for accessibility?
- What plans for continuing assessment will occur with the expansion in online programs and how will this be communicated to elected faculty representatives in the UFS?

The question of faculty rights to intellectual property is also critical, as their report raises. These are all questions that CUNY should have positive and substantial answers to before greater investment in more online degrees. The UFS report concluded,

CUNY Online must not become a sub-standard version of CUNY or “CUNY-lite.” Note: SUNY Online says: “you will earn the same diploma as our on-campus students,” and “the faculty that teach online classes are the same faculty that students learn from on-campus.” If the online degree programs do not uphold existing standards for academic excellence, if students are not adequately supported throughout their studies, how will CUNY protect its hard-earned reputation for providing high-quality, affordable education? We are concerned that this rapid expansion of CUNY’s fully online degree programs runs the risk of creating a two-tiered university experience that will ultimately diminish the perceived value of a CUNY degree.

We recognize that remote work allows students who need it the opportunity to better manage work-life issues. So many CUNY students are juggling jobs, child and elder care that remote degrees can be attractive. At PSC we believe tuition and the cost of attending college should not be a barrier, nor should not having access to affordable and convenient childcare. As you know, in last year’s budget we advocated for free tuition and expanding access to affordable childcare. In the state wide New Deal for CUNY legislation, supported by this body, we ask for more full time faculty and greater access to mental health counselors. We hope that you and CUNY will address these key issues that we believe are barriers to attending in-person classes in advance of efforts that minimize in-person teaching.

Thank you for your time.