

Testimony of Dr. Penny Lewis, Secretary
Professional Staff Congress/CUNY
Before the New York City's Committee on Finance
Oversight – Mayor's November Financial Plan
December 8, 2022

Good afternoon, I am Penny Lewis, Secretary of the Professional Staff Congress/CUNY and a faculty member at the School of Labor and Urban Studies. We represent 30,000 faculty and professional staff at CUNY.

Thank you, Chairman Brannan and committee members for the opportunity to testify before you today. We are very appreciative that the committee is holding this hearing at such an important moment in the city budget cycle. PSC is here today because the City University of New York is central to the city's priorities and values, and to remind the council of the critical role CUNY has in our economy, education and ability to reduce poverty. This is especially true of community colleges which receive approximately 47% of their funding from the city. (April 10, 2022 CUNY FY2023 State Enacted and City Preliminary Budget Analysis.)

However, CUNY's capacity to perform these roles is becoming harder and harder. As you know, CUNY's budget was cut 3%, worth \$14.6 million by the city this fiscal year. These cuts have led to the loss of 146 faculty and professional staff positions since the pandemic. The Mayor's proposed mid-year cuts of an additional 3%, worth \$13.7 million are not just an unfair burden on our members and students, but make the University's ability to rebound after the pandemic much more difficult. It also makes the city's rebound more difficult.

CUNY's proven return on investment has the power to elevate our economy by uplifting workers, communities, and families. As members of the finance committee you should especially appreciate the findings of a [2021 New York City Comptroller's report](#) that found CUNY graduates contribute \$4.2 billion to the state economy annually. (New York City Comptroller, CUNY's Contribution to the Economy, March 12, 2021) It is fiscally responsible for the city to invest in the university, particularly the community colleges, which rely on city funding to serve the highest need population.

CUNY is a public institution, as diverse as the city itself, that promotes racial equity, boosts the local economy, and ensures safer, more sustainable communities for the future. The Executive should be making strategic **investments** in CUNY, not putting it on the chopping block. For example, access to full-time faculty should not vary between white students and students of color. But, looking at campuses across the city and state, this is currently the case. As cited in an op-ed by Assembly Member Karines

Reyes last year, a University Faculty Senate study showed that white students have “substantially greater opportunities for full-time faculty instruction, compared to Black and Hispanic students.” Simply put, CUNY needs **more** full-time faculty, not fewer. (Assembly Member Karines Reyes, A tale of two university systems: Stop targeting faculty cuts to CUNY and SUNY schools serving Black and Brown students, Daily News, November 15, 2021.)

Budget cuts from the city bewilder our members and students and feel like a betrayal, especially after Governor Hochul’s historic investments in public higher education. After decades of austerity, the state committed \$122 million in recurring funds to CUNY this fiscal year. This should mean new faculty and staff; expanding the Tuition Assistance Program to make college more affordable or free to more students; hiring more mental health counselors and funding more childcare slots, which we know has become a critical issue for this council.

Why would the Mayor depreciate the state’s investment by imposing additional cuts that target community colleges when reports show that CUNY moves people out of poverty:

- Raj Chetty’s [College Mobility Report Card](#) CUNY lifts more people from the lowest income bracket to the middle class than Ivy League colleges combined.
- Brookings Institution [Middle Class Mobility](#) study focuses on several of CUNY’s senior colleges, but highlights community colleges: Borough of Manhattan Community College, Hostos, LaGuardia, Queensborough, Bronx Community College and Kingsborough.

CUNY students have average family incomes of less than \$30,000. They work at low-wage jobs, raise children and support parents. So many of them thrive at CUNY - thanks to their perseverance and dedicated PSC members - despite these challenges and coming from under-resourced public schools. The city’s budget should focus on removing barriers to student successes, not building them.

This week, Speaker Adams released an update on the [impact of CUNY Reconnect](#) on bringing students back to CUNY campuses to finish their degrees. We thank the council for funding this initiative. (New York Council Press release, December 5, 2022, City Council Speaker Adams and Chancellor Matos Rodríguez Unveil Plans for ‘One Stop’ Welcome Center at York College to Help Students Re-Enroll in School, <https://council.nyc.gov/press/2022/12/05/2314/>) It is an example of the wrap around services students need to succeed, like ASAP, remediation, mental health counselors and access to convenient child care.

Supporting comprehensive student support and advising and cutting class sizes with adequate faculty to student ratio is essential to providing quality education. But we need you to stand with us and reject additional cuts to CUNY’s budget.

The PSC will continue to fight for:

- Comprehensive Student Support and Advising
- More Faculty
- Expanding Mental Health Services and Mental Health Workforce Development
- Sustaining Funding for English Language Access and Increase Funding for CUNY Programs

Finally, these across-the-board mid-year cuts are not targeting just CUNY but the majority of city agencies. Which leads us to wonder: is the executive trying to modify the current or jumping ahead to negotiating next year's budget?

With adequate funding, CUNY can leverage its resources to respond to structural economic inequality. To do so, we must invest in the life-changing, wrap-around services that enable students to reconnect to CUNY, stay enrolled, and graduate into family-sustaining employment and productive lives.

Thank you.