

Testimony of Dr. James Davis

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before the

New York Assembly Standing Committee on Higher Education

and

New York Assembly Standing Committee on Mental Health

November 30, 2022

Mental health needs of students at institutions of higher education

Good afternoon, I am James Davis, President of the Professional Staff Congress (PSC). We represent 30,000 faculty and staff at the City University of New York. Thank you, Chairs Glick and Gunther, for holding this hearing.

There is little doubt why the committees are holding this hearing. There has been a sea change in how our society approaches mental health. We are reckoning as New Yorkers with our obligation to address mental health as vigorously as we address physical health. As advocates for public education, you understand how critical mental health is to a student's ability to make academic progress and the ability of the staff to support them. There are fewer higher education institutions in New York State where the need is as acute as it is at CUNY.

The material challenges that our students face can take a psychological toll, even on the most resilient. In 2019, a "Healthy CUNY" survey showed that one in six undergraduate students suffered from depression. (Q and A on Mental Health as a Barrier to Academic Success at CUNY, March 2019 | A Report by Healthy CUNY survey Group and Nick Freudenberg, CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy)

CUNY needs enhanced mental health services to become a stronger institution. Our administration understands this too; their Fiscal Year 2024 budget request acknowledges this need in its \$12 million "well-being initiative" proposal. After an arduous transition to remote learning during the pandemic, our students have also suffered disproportionately from unemployment and reduced income. In April 2020, at the height of the pandemic's first wave, half of surveyed CUNY students reported some form of

housing or food insecurity. (The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on College Students' Health and Financial Stability in New York City: Findings from a Population-Based Sample of City University of New York (CUNY) Students.)

A sustainable transition beyond the pandemic must include resources to mitigate the adverse mental health impact of these conditions.

PSC welcomes CUNY's Fiscal Year 2024 request for additional mental health services, including its recognition that staff too deserve mental health services. (City University of New York, FY 2024 Budget Request, November 2022, page 16.) In supporting this request, we add emphatically that an even greater investment is needed for students and PSC members. That is why the PSC has advocated, as a key element of the New Deal for CUNY legislation, improving the staffing ratio of mental health counselors to students.

Prior to the pandemic, the ratio of mental health counselors to students was 1: 2,700 at CUNY. CUNY reports in its budget request that because of private funding and non-recurring federal funding, it has reached the "ratio closely approximating" the International Accreditation of Counseling Services recommendation of 1:1,000. CUNY would need to baseline 171 mental health counseling positions to meet this recommendation.

Online teletherapy and increased virtual counseling sessions have their place, particularly during a pandemic that has precluded in-person interaction. But as in-person meetings resume, CUNY needs to increase the human capacity to meet the demand for *on campus* services and the funding to support those services. There was a time that tele-health was the only way to access care, and there is a convenience factor associated with it, but it cannot remain the prevailing model. Mental health services need to be organized around campus-based counselors. The needs of CUNY students will not be met if such an important service is outsourced.

Unless additional full-time counselors are funded through the operating budget, we shouldn't be surprised if many CUNY students will again have to wait weeks to get an appointment. (New York City Council, September 20, 2021 Committee on Higher Education hearing: Oversight - Update on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY.)

Student retention is a major concern at CUNY - how to help students who enroll persist to graduation. Improved access to mental health counselors will undoubtedly enhance student retention. Our students experience stressors and competing demands that impede their academic progress. Instead, CUNY can and should provide the resources that keep students on campus, focused, and supported by an academic community. Mental health is prerequisite to our students' ability to realize their academic goals.

Finally, I need to note that, like mental health counselors, academic advisors play an essential role for CUNY students. This is particularly true for first-generation college students, who often lack experience with registering for classes, choosing a major, and matching their interests to a career path. CUNY students rely on academic advisors to help them navigate our institutions, understand their strengths and talents, and consider their future options.

But CUNY's current ratio of students-to-advisors is as high as 1,500:1 at some colleges. To help support students on the path to graduation, the New Deal for CUNY would gradually increase the number of academic advisors to reach a ratio of one academic advisor for every 600 FTE students. To achieve this recommended ratio, CUNY will need to add 250 academic advisors university-wide.

The core issues remain: staffing levels fall dangerously below recommended professional standards and waiting times to see a counselor are unacceptable. The PSC urges your committees to advocate for the funding that CUNY students and PSC members deserve.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today.