

**TESTIMONY OF DR. JAMES DAVIS, PRESIDENT
PROFESSIONAL STAFF CONGRESS/CUNY**

**New York City Council Preliminary Budget Hearing - Higher Education
March 14, 2023**

Thank you Chair Dinowitz and Chair Brannan for the opportunity to speak today. As President of the 30,000 member Professional Staff Congress, I am here to ask you to invest in CUNY and to oppose the budget cuts proposed by the Executive.

Representing faculty and professional staff at CUNY's 18 colleges and 6 graduate and professional schools, the PSC must advocate for our members, our students, and the communities that CUNY serves. Right now, New York's historic public higher education system is at serious risk. Under-investment has placed in jeopardy the opportunities afforded to current and future students. As an unrivaled catalyst for social and economic mobility, CUNY deserves to be protected and fully funded. Investments in CUNY yield immense dividends, not only the kind that can be quantified in our tax base and earnings potential, but also the impacts across generations on families and communities.

No More Cuts

The city cannot allow austerity budgeting to undermine educational quality and access. The combined effects of the expiration of federal pandemic relief funds and the cuts in the Program to Eliminate the Gap (PEG) will be excruciating. After suffering PEGs of more than \$39 million in the current fiscal year, additional cuts of more than \$10 million have been demanded for Fiscal Year 2024, for total reduction of nearly \$50 million. Should these proposed cuts be implemented, the University will lose 211 pedagogical staff in addition to the 128 that were lost to attrition at the community colleges through cuts imposed this year. An additional 4.75% reduction is proposed for the out-years. That will crush CUNY, just as we are helping to bring the city back from the pandemic. Fewer staff to assist students and guide them to graduation, fewer counselors to support students facing challenges that were deepened by the pandemic, and fewer full-time faculty at colleges that already rely disproportionately on adjuncts to deliver our academic programs.

Resources are needed to enhance these student supports and advising services. That includes additional funds for the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), along with investments in advisors, transportation subsidies, supplemental mental health services, and improved English language access programs.

In anticipation of an adverse budget, the CUNY administration has demanded cuts to our colleges which, if implemented, will do irreparable harm. They have targeted \$128 million in savings university-wide, \$34 million at the community colleges alone. Every campus must carve 5-7% off its Fiscal Year 2024 budget, all non-mandatory hiring is frozen, and all personnel actions must pass a central Vacancy Review Board. Rather than deprive our students, faculty, and staff of much-needed resources, the city should honor the transformative impact CUNY has on our economy and prevent these cuts from being implemented.¹

PSC's Key Investment Proposals

Comprehensive Student Support and Advising - \$35.5 million

ASAP provides comprehensive student support and advising at a ratio of 1 advisor per 150 students, as well as other supports, including tutoring, textbook subsidies, and transportation assistance through free MetroCards.

Recognized by the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and replicated by other community colleges across the country, ASAP's three-year graduation rate is more than double that of non-ASAP colleges nationwide. \$35.5 million to hire 264 full-time academic advisors (to achieve a ratio of 1:150) will help students persist and graduate. As you know, ASAP has proven particularly effective for students who are low-income, first-generation in college, or academically underprepared. We believe the program must expand to give students resources to succeed, especially as our staff and students struggle to overcome the financial and psychological challenges of the pandemic.

An overlooked element of student retention is ensuring students can get to campus. Most CUNY students take public transportation, and the city has observed that student MetroCard programs encourage attendance. Student success is predicated on many social determinants, not just the quality of their coursework but also the "whole student," including their ability to access transportation and their mental wellness.

Mental Health Services - \$10 million

CUNY needs \$10 million to hire 58 full-time mental health counselors working in-person to bring campuses closer to the recommended ratio of counselors to students.

Mental Health Workforce Retention and Development Initiative - \$11 million

To train more mental health professionals at CUNY, \$10 million is needed to fund a public loan forgiveness program, along with \$1 million for new faculty to implement this program at CUNY.

Sustain Funding for English Language Access and Increase Funding for CUNY Programs

In FY23, the council allocated significant funding to English language learning for adults and children. This includes \$463,000 in discretionary funds for CUNY programs that support basic literacy and English language skills. The council should continue this funding and direct additional resources to this critical area. The CUNY Language Immersion Program (CLIP) meets the needs of students who begin college with language gaps. The classes in this vital program are taught primarily by adjuncts paid poverty wages. Funding to support conversion to full-time lines is needed to solidify CLIP at the community colleges. English-language learners should be able to flourish at CUNY.

Additional budget items

The CUNY Reconnect program that the council helped to initiate has already brought 14,000 students back to campus.² This program should not be cut in its infancy. The \$4.4 million be restored, and more. Community college enrollment decline is subsiding, so now is the time to enhance this hands-on program that brings former CUNY students back to our classrooms.

Childcare programs are essential to students, and this council has demonstrated leadership on the issue. CUNY's childcare programs should not be cut by \$600,000. Many of our students are parents;

the last thing they need as they pursue their goal of a college education are additional childcare challenges, nor are such cuts in the best interest of New York City.³

We find cuts to our Research Institutes and the School of Labor and Urban Studies (SLU) to be of great concern. SLU has expanded to offer undergraduate and graduate-level degree programs. It is one of the fastest-growing CUNY schools, having launched a new bachelor's degree program and partnered with City College on a leadership program. It is a model of adult education that will help CUNY grow.

Capital Needs Continue

Any university system with only 8% of its buildings in a state of good repair is courting disaster, like the one at Bronx Community College (BCC) this academic year. The College was forced to return to fully remote classes in November, when the boiler system broke. And earlier this month on one of the coldest days of the year, a pipe burst, leaving Colston Hall without heat. These kinds of crises must be averted, and it should be noted that Colston Hall had a pipe burst in 2019. BCC may sound like an anomaly, but half of CUNY's 300 buildings are more than 50 years old. This made social distancing during COVID a real challenge and upgrading ventilation systems a herculean effort. Capital investments should ensure that our members and students have safe, sustainable spaces and that CUNY campuses are good neighbors in the community.

Closing

We urge the council to understand CUNY for what it is, a beacon of hope for working-class New Yorkers and an unparalleled driver of social and economic mobility. This budget for CUNY is a down payment on the future of the city. Now is the moment to reject austerity, restore previous staffing cuts, and expand the programs that foster the well-being of not only the CUNY community, but the entire city. All CUNY students deserve the resources and support to succeed in their academic programs and their careers beyond.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

¹ Office of the New York City Comptroller: CUNY's Contribution to the Economy, March 12, 2021. In 2019 alone, CUNY graduates earned \$57 billion and paid \$4.2 billion in state taxes.

² [CUNY Starts Spring 2023 Semester by Exceeding its Re-enrollment Goal This School Year – CUNY Newswire](#), January 25, 2023

³ [Council Passes Legislation to Increase Accessibility for Child Care Services in New York City - Press \(nyc.gov\)](#) October 12, 2022