

EVELYN JONES RICH

Testimony before the Board of Trustees of the City University of New York

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Good afternoon. I am Evelyn Jones Rich, a citizen of this great City and a holder of four terminal degrees, one of which is a Master of Arts in Social Studies granted by Hunter College in 1965. I am a CUNY Alumna, a retired faculty member (Associate Dean in the School of Education) and a member of the Professional Staff Congress.

In an April 15, 2023 letter to the New York Times commenting on college rankings, Chancellor Rodriguez wrote, “Public colleges across the country have been providing a quality education to students of all backgrounds at affordable prices for decades, and students who want degrees without the debt would be wise to consider them.”

Despite the odds which I shall briefly outline, CUNY is a wonderful institution. Since its founding it has delivered a quality education to hundreds of thousands of students. For decades its free tuition, its access to world-class faculty and its support mechanisms have played a major role in building not only a premier university – the most diverse in the nation – but a premier City.

My comments challenge the Chancellor and Trustees to live up to that statement in a climate where CUNY students, staff and faculty are denied the resources they need to sustain a premier higher education institution.

Let me be more specific. First as a NYC resident, understand that what happens to CUNY is important to me. CUNY’s ability to attract and educate NYC

residents shapes the climate of the City, the operation of its institutions, the services it delivers and the cultural and recreational amenities it provides. CUNY graduates make up much of the City's workforce, educate its children, and care for its senior citizens. Many of its elected officials are CUNY graduates. We seek a tuition-free and fully funded university.

It is important to note that beginning with mid-century demographic changes, CUNY has evolved from a white, middle class institution to a diverse institution of Blacks, whites, browns and immigrants. Statistics suggest that 70 % of CUNY's students live in poverty and many of them and their families have limited, if any, access to quality medical care.

Long starved of adequate funds beginning with the Fiscal Crisis of 1976, finally the New York State legislature has begun the task of more adequately funding CUNY's four-year colleges. The 2024 budget recently provided CUNY – in response to its relentless and effective lobbying – with many of the dollars requested in A Better Deal for CUNY, including a small, 119.7 million allocation for CUNY's Community Colleges. Both the City and the State fund CUNY, as you know.

My challenge to you this evening is to provide the long neglected and very needy Community Colleges with the funds they need to educate the thousands of students seeking Associate degrees. CUNY's NYC funding has been cut by more than \$60 million in Fiscal Years 2003 and 2004. These cuts follow decades of underfunding and austerity most recently due largely to the pandemic and declining enrollment. However they also reflect a lack of commitment and political will by

elected officials. An educational establishment fueled largely by adjuncts cannot boast of excellence nor does it properly serve its students. Rather it undermines the quality of the education which Chancellor Rodriguez touts. Over the past year in response to the austerity which drives and has driven the NYC budget for years as well as those who prepare it, demands in the form of “savings targets” have been paramount. These include reducing adjunct budgets, threats of adjunct layoffs and widespread understaffing of support staff. Unfilled faculty and staff lines have now been eliminated.

Just the opposite is needed. Community Colleges primarily educate the City’s poor, the working class and new immigrants. This is due essentially to the fact that the City’s K-12 schools remain segregated, the UFT protects incompetent teachers and the most effective schools are located in white neighborhoods inaccessible to the City’s brown and Black and brown students. The so-called elite schools require rigorous entrance examinations for which intense and often expensive preparation is required. A dated study asserted that about three quarters (3/4) of incoming freshman students at CUNY need remediation. I know from long experience with NY City’s K-12 system that these students have not failed. Their schools have failed them. CUNY’s Community Colleges now take assume the task of providing them with the basic education which they were denied and to which they are entitled.

This costs money! Yet, we all know that education is the key to social and economic mobility. CUNY is not only an educational institution. It is an effective poverty program and an economic development engine. Investment here will pay

off in the future as we continue the task of building a better CUNY which better meets the needs of its students and the City in which they reside.

The CUNY Rising Alliance has brought new leadership and vibrancy to the fight for fair funding for CUNY. It links community organizations and students in a common struggle. What do I expect of you? The Mayor has not even proposed modest increases to CUNY's budget but instead continues a drumbeat of cuts. Stand up to Mayor Adams, himself a holder of two CUNY degrees. You know him and he knows you! Simultaneously, insist that the City Council in its deliberations identify the funds the Community Colleges need to educate their students. Note that there are four reserve funds in the 2024 Executive Budget with a total of \$8 billion to supplement those already existent.

I know personally three of you Trustees including Billy Thompson with whom I collaborated as a pro bono education lobbyist for the Education Priorities Panel supporting CFE vs. State of NY. I know Freddy Ferrer as the Bronx Borough President whose mayoral campaigns of 2001 and 2005 I supported. I know Henry Berger as an election lawyer and friend who - like me - marvels at the tasks CUNY undertakes. You three know the Mayor. Lobby him on behalf of the Community Colleges.

Next, I ask that you lead your fellow trustees on this mission of service to CUNY students and would-be students. Find the money to fund their education. The times demand no less.

