

TO: CUNY Board of Trustees
RE: Testimony to the Board
DATE: May 8th, 2023

Good afternoon, Trustees. My name is Dr. Kevin Kolack, and I have been a tenured member of the chemistry faculty at Queensborough Community College for 10 years. The COVID-19 public health emergency may be ending, but I am here to tell you about the persistent impact of pandemic learning loss on our current students. Despite austerity budgeting, my colleagues and I are doing everything we can to meet the increased academic needs of our students. But we are stretched thin. And we need your help.

Before my appointment at QCC, among other jobs, I was an adjunct faculty member both inside and outside of CUNY for a decade and a half. At public and private colleges of all sizes, I've seen that on the whole, students are students. However, what's unique about the average New York City community college student is the extreme challenges they face balancing school and life. It's hard to work 40 hours a week to pay rent, attend classes full time, and study. It's extra hard to do that while arranging childcare, or if you're hungry since free school lunch ends with high school graduation.

We are seeing loss of content knowledge, loss of study skills, and deficiencies in all areas directly related to our general education objectives. Now is not the time for larger classes or more asynchronous online courses developed by nonfaculty. As a CUNY Mindset Associate, I've been invited to speak to a variety of audiences on the importance of Belonging in our students' learning. Loneliness was labeled an epidemic by the Surgeon General last week. Social inclusion is a critical key to success for our community college students. As the past chair of the eLearning Committee and a campus thought leader in remote education even pre-pandemic, I am here to tell you that most of our students belong ON campus, in small classes, guided by attentive, caring, well-compensated faculty. Larger classes, taught by fewer faculty, with less time for students will not serve these students well.

My colleagues are caring and thirst for professional development opportunities. QCC faculty arrive as subject matter experts, but then eagerly pursue pedagogical training opportunities. However, we've lost 15% of faculty in my department and there are no plans to replace them. We are stretched thin. Austerity budgeting is driving good instructors out of higher education, and they are being replaced with...nothing. Adjuncts should be compensated fairly. Full-time faculty should not have to teach extra classes as adjuncts to make ends meet. And our focus should be on teaching, and not diluted having to negotiate an expired contract.

As trustees, you must contend with the Frankenstein funding mechanism at work in obtaining the allocation for CUNY's community colleges from both the mayor and the governor. I urge you not to approach them from a position of austerity, as funding CUNY is a public value not a handout. My wife is a product of the NYC public school system and received both her undergraduate and graduate degrees from CUNY. As an engine of economic mobility providing the public good of education to a mostly traditionally marginalized population, funding CUNY provides the city and state with a phenomenal return on investment. Unlike privately endowed institutions, our allocation mostly dictates our budget, but the public good of education is too great to budget for austerity.

The front-line essential workers of CUNY need your help. We need you to appreciate the ways in which strained faculty are rising to meet the additional learning challenges of pandemic-impacted students. We need you to see that we are stretched thin. And we need your advocacy to fully staff our departments so that we can continue to help our students succeed in community college and in life. Thank you.