

My name is Jeff Ballerini, an academic adviser for F-1 visa and undocumented students at Queensborough Community College, and I wish to speak out against the cuts the Board of Trustees seeks to level against CUNY. During my decade-long tenure, the College's Center for International Affairs, Immigration, and Study Abroad has struggled under great adversity that has been the direct result of pervasive austerity and chronic structural underinvestment that has continually plagued our system of higher education.

For a long time, the office ceiling above the desks in the reception area leaked whenever it rained. Despite several months of outreach to our Buildings and Grounds department, they were unable to address the problem until the water-logged tiles disintegrated and fell onto the floor, desks, and chairs below. Thankfully, no one was hurt as the collapse happened overnight, but the event served as a stark reminder of CUNY's perennial under-resourcing. In 2019, our department physically shrank when management moved the entire complement of academic advisers from their offices across campus to the Library Building, triggering a cascade of relocations that pushed me into my colleague's office space and her into the cramped reception area with the secretary where she operates to this day.

Not only is our staff subject to a confined working environment, but key services and programs have been eroded over time. Years ago, our department employed an attorney that offered legal counsel to those who needed guidance navigating the Byzantine thicket that is American immigration law. Prior to my arrival in 2013, he left and was never replaced.

When COVID-19 shut down the world in March 2020, we had to abandon our participation in the Global Citizenship Alliance, a prestigious leadership training program held every spring break in Salzburg, Austria where CUNY students convene with peers from other universities across the United States to discuss issues of worldwide importance and learn how to become agents of change in their communities. We thought that our absence was temporary and looked forward to the day when we would rejoin the program. Sadly, this was not to be; the crowning glory of our study abroad disappeared in the blink of an eye when, soon after the pandemic began ravaging the globe, the College took away the funding to cover participants' expenses. Despite dedicated lobbying by our department head, the College has not restored this support, nor given any indication that it ever will be.

On a hot summer day in June 2021, I, along with other College employees, visited staff offices to ensure that the campus was properly equipped and adequately prepared to welcome community members back to in-person learning for the fall semester. To our surprise, the HVAC systems in the Library Building were inoperative, resulting in a sweltering environment that made work almost impossible. The staff in the Continuing Education department, whose offices are on the first floor, huddled next to tiny plastic fans and were soaked with sweat. We promptly notified Facilities of the matter and it was resolved, but only weeks later.

As we are about to conclude our second year of resumed on-campus operations, austerity continues to undermine our basic administrative functions. Our OTPS budget has been slashed repeatedly and we sometimes must wait weeks or more to receive much-needed supplies to keep the office running. Two months ago, I spent over thirty minutes using a paper cutter to convert a stack of legal paper to letter size so we could print immigration documents our international students need to conduct their affairs in the U.S.

However, all this pales in comparison to the potential hardships ahead of us if the cuts sought by the board come to fruition. Earlier this semester, management informed our office that we may be unable to retain our secretary in the next fiscal year, which would result in a devastating twenty-five percent staff reduction. Such a loss would be especially problematic because at this time we are working to onboard nearly ninety international students for the fall 2023 semester, double the forty to fifty we would have prior to the pandemic. Now that U.S. embassies and consulates around the world are reopening, students overseas no longer must defer their dreams of pursuing an American higher education and are again able to obtain an F-1 visa. All at once, three years of pent-up demand have been unleashed, producing a population surge the likes of which we have never seen. To cope with this massive influx, I have had to lean on my advisement colleagues to supply desperately needed capacity by advising and registering some of my advisees. As there are nearly four months left before the start of the fall term in late August, the number of new arrivals will undoubtedly continue to grow. A staff reduction will only increase the strain on our already overtaxed resources, force us to take on ever-burgeoning workloads, and degrade the high quality of service we have striven to give our caseload. Oftentimes, I stay at the office until six or seven o' clock at night and either shorten my lunch break or skip it altogether to keep up with the flood of emails, appointments, and walk-ins that come every day,

It doesn't have to be this way. Instead of pushing for spending cuts, the Board must lead the charge for further investment in CUNY. [The state legislature in Albany rejected Governor Hochul's proposed tuition hike and seeks to increase our operating expenses by \\$103 million. The New York City Council responded to Mayor Adams' Program to Eliminate the Gap \(PEG\) with calls to restore the \\$36.9 million in cuts](#) and allocate additional funds to hire the faculty and staff needed to provide the high-quality education students deserve.

In addition, CUNY must cease its dereliction of their employees and come to the bargaining table to negotiate a new contract. The PSC has formed a just platform that respects and supports its members' needs. To further delay these conversations is disrespectful of the people that make CUNY a powerful force of enlightenment, social justice, and economic prosperity.

Put down the bone saw and pick up the bandages!