

## **Jillian Abbott Written Testimony to the CUNY Board of Trustees Hearing Date Feb 5, 2024**

Below you will find testimony from four CUNY students which describes the impact of the Chancellor's decision to manufacture a budget crisis at CUNY. Their testimony focuses on cancelation of classes, especially the cancelation of needed classes at the last minute before the beginning of the spring 2024 semester.

To give their testimony added context:

In an email dated January 9, 2024, PSC\_CUNY President James Davies said, "Incredibly, CUNY also just reduced its preliminary state budget request, public since June, cutting over \$180 million from necessary programs and initiatives they had previously sought to support. At the city level, CUNY removed a request to restore \$61.5 million in operating funds that have been slashed in the Mayor's Program to Eliminate the Gap."

Since then the Governor Kathy [Hochul announced a \\$75 million dollar grant](#) from the Simmons Foundation for CUNY which the Chancellor has said will be used to start a new Master of Science degree and hire 25 faculty members at the CUNY Graduate Center. Another announcement of an additional [\\$10 million grant to The CUNY Graduate School of Journalism](#), now named after its de facto owner, billionaire, Craig Newmark, on January 25, all this after a 2022 \$22 Million grant to Hunter College's nursing program. I could go on.

While I have concerns about the impact of private money/priorities on public education, I'm not opposed to it *per se*, however, there seems to be an important directional change imbedded in this pattern of funding, namely all the private funds secured are directed towards postgraduate or specialized programs. Again, this would be fine if receipt of this money was **in addition** to full funding for CUNY's deeply under resourced undergraduate programs, funding that will not come, because it is no longer being asked for.

Coupled with the Chancellors decision to voluntarily reduce CUNY's budget request to both the City and NYS (in the complete absence of consultation), these budgeting maneuvers take on an ideological bent. That is, we see the privatization of funding for post graduate programs coupled with the abandonment of CUNY's core mission to educate the city's underserved via associate and bachelor's degrees.

His action also raises the question of how CUNY's fancy, flush graduate programs will source their students? Decades of underfunding place our vulnerable students at a disadvantage when competing for limited spaces in our graduate and specialized programs. So much so, an argument can be made that these changes amount to welfare for the well-to-do, those who get their undergraduate degrees at prestigious private schools can push CUNY's traditional students aside and take up the seats and degrees at CUNY's graduate schools at bargain prices (relative to openly private institutions).

Meanwhile, with CUNY's undergraduate graduation rates hovering around 30 percent, these budgeting decisions can only result in fewer underserved New Yorkers benefitting from a completed higher education degree.

Had the Chancellor kept his original requests for City and State funding, far from austerity, CUNY could have entered a period of renaissance, wherein teachers could have been paid a living wage, enabling them to focus on two or three classes per semester instead of the often five, six or more they must take on to survive in this most expensive city. Classroom technology could have been updated for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and part time teachers, still the bulk of CUNY instructors, could be paid to be trained in Brightspace, the Learning Management System they will need to teach from this fall, and for which CUNY is currently refusing to pay to train them.

I could go on, but the point is, that if the original budget request had been maintained, CUNY's traditional working class students might have had a chance of being among those who benefit from these private grants and from the proposed new, upmarket, private graduate programs. Instead, working class and other underserved New Yorkers will be excluded and further marginalized.

This current administration despises my vision – a New York where every resident can reach their full potential – and is actively working to prevent it by hobbling teachers, condemning them to poverty, and to teaching in classrooms barely fit for human habitation, let alone conducive to learning. In this way they ensure that inequality will increase and opportunity for New York's underserved will evaporate further.

This is not something the Chancellor is doing, it's something he has done. CUNY has been privatized. Past tense. It is a fait accompli.

Actions speak louder than words, and while The Chancellor talks about teaching and learning, his actions have curtailed the facility's capacity to teach and CUNY's undergraduate students' opportunity to learn.

I'm taking the opportunity of this hearing to document the impact of your cruel greed and indifference on the students who fall under your care – not for now, I know none of you care – but for the future. Things change, ideologies fall away, and the time will come when there will, once again, be administrators and researchers at CUNY who are committed to public education and social justice.

These student testimonies focus on the impact of just one of your initiatives - class cancellations, especially last minute cancellations.

These students have given me their names and written permission to share their testimony, however, because I've been blacklisted from full time employment for my activism, I will withhold their names unless required to give them.

I have read these testimonials, but I have not edited or even proofed them. These are the words of students as delivered to me.

I thank them for their courage, and the strength to speak when no one is listening.

#### Student 1

My expected graduation year is 2025, there were four classes I needed to get towards my major, a couple days before the semester all of the classes I needed to go towards my graduation were all cancelled. When it came time to try and replace them all of the other classes I needed were cancelled as well, and because some of those classes were only for certain semesters that would force me to take 7-8 intense courses for my last semesters if they don't end up getting cancelled again. It's been an extremely stressful situation to be put in, especially for those of us who are barely getting by now. Me personally I am on financial aid and I can only be a full time student in order to receive that full payment. Being put in a situation where essentially you would be forced to spread yourself thin in order to catch up is extremely fair.

#### Student 2

This semester, I have been affected by class cancellations. One major class was canceled for me. Even though it's just one class, it has negatively impacted my progress in staying on track. I have other courses such as minor and general courses to complete. I started to realize how much this was going to impact me, so I decided to schedule an advisement meeting. I was informed that they are uncertain about the availability of the major class I need to take to graduate. Furthermore, I was told I might have to take summer or winter classes to have a chance of graduating at my expected graduation date. It's frustrating that the one class I need for my major is slowing me down and causing me to invest more time to figure out a solution to graduate on time

#### Student 3

Anxious.Worried.Annoyed. These were some of the emotions I had felt from the cancellations that occurred due to the various scheduling-building issues that occurred during the previous enrollment process. A few classes were canceled that were detrimental to me due to my recent changes from the last semester. Last semester I was unhappy and honestly miserable with my courses at the time due to material, professors, and a few other factors which led to me deciding to drop my major at the time and switch to Communications Technology since switching has been a bright spot in my life... but getting to this point was a struggle. Due to the fact that I was switching and I am an ACE student to help cover all the financial needs I now have to follow a PERFECT schedule with no room for classes I am interested in. I most definitely cannot fail a single class or I will not graduate in time and no longer be eligible for my ACE benefits. Since changing my major and working with my advisor who is great even though I know I stress him out we have a plan with no room for error that was in jeopardy as I had multiple cancellations. Of these cancellations, there was one CT class in particular that was getting canceled, and had no other options where I was frantically emailing departments and trying to figure a way to get in because I need to be full-time to qualify for most student aid and without 5 classes I would lose it all. Other classes were canceled as well but after working through it there were other options whether I liked it or not like my WRIT 303 class which went from being in-person to now asynchronous. This is better than nothing and I am grateful to be at least enrolled but I don't learn well online and have a preference for in-person learning but I will persevere as I have no choice but to pass by any means possible. I understand things happen and not everything is perfect but thousands of dollars were at stake for me, it didn't alter me as bad as

it could have but the stress and anxiety were worrisome enough which hopefully will not happen again especially not with such little time before the semester.

#### Student 4

Before I begin going on about how the class cancellations have made my growth as a person even harder, some context is needed. Back in 2018-2019 I never wanted to go to college. I was young and naive and believed that my dream of being a bestselling author would be enough and that if I just focused on that for some years, I would have some books, they would sell, and I'd be set. However my mother and I made a deal. She and my step-father would pay tuition fully if I went to college and graduated. It wasn't really a deal more so a demand, but it was one that I accepted. I didn't do the greatest in the first semester of my freshman year but I was getting my footing on college life. But then, covid came along and pulled the rug from under my feet. Online classes were near useless for learning anything. Because my parents were both essential workers I also had to cook all to most of the meals for the family. My mental health, spiritual health, and morale went to an overall low. Nevertheless, I persevered and did my best to keep up with classes. I didn't graduate in 2024. This is important because this now meant I had to pay my own tuition because my parents were now fed up with paying a couple thousand dollars for the past couple of years (understandably). I don't qualify for Financial aid and on top of that, I also have to pay rent to live with my parents because I didn't graduate within four years. So now I have a morning job that I need to take so that I have room to take class during the day. I wake up at 3:00am in the morning to make it to my 6:00am shift to pay. I barely have any money to pay for both. The thought of quitting college for a little bit and going back when I had the money but that's just time being wasted. The past three months I've been building up the will to get back into college, pass my classes, and start my career. I applied to my classes and was ready to finally get back on my feet with a fresh heart. Then, two of my classes were cancelled. It was really last minute and it instantly brought me back to the place I was back in covid. Luckily, I'm still standing strong.

#### **Jillian Abbott Written Testimony to the CUNY Board of Trustees Hearing Date Feb 5, 2024 Addendum**

I would like to add an addendum, because I was so pressed for time I forgot one of the most important point:

That is, the difference between state and city funding is this - public funding involves a transparent public process and later public accountability (in theory at least), private funding is done in the dark, with no scrutiny or accountability other than if the billionaire is happy the funding goes on.