



PROFESSIONAL STAFF CONGRESS/CUNY

TESTIMONY

EXECUTIVE BUDGET:
THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK, FY 2025
JOINT HEARING, NEW YORK STATE:
SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE
ASSEMBLY WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE

February 8, 2024

Delivered by Dr. James Davis, President Professional
Staff Congress/CUNY

Good afternoon, Senate Chairpersons Krueger and Stavisky, Assembly Chairpersons Weinstein and Fahy and all members of the committees. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to testify today and for your critical support for public higher education.

The Legislature has worked with the Governor in the past two budget cycles on the arduous process of setting CUNY back on course after decades of disinvestment. More than \$400 million in new annual operating aid has entered CUNY. Support for the New Deal for CUNY has raised the profile of our exceptional students and the work our colleagues do with them. Thank you Senator Gounardes and Assembly Member Reyes for your leadership on this legislation; it deserves to be fully funded and passed.

Without these resources, CUNY would be in a far more precarious position. We have seen 575 new full-time faculty hired in the past two years, and laudable efforts to boost enrollment, aided by enhancements to the Tuition Assistance Program. PSC members are faculty and professional staff who are deeply committed to their students and their disciplines, and they believe in CUNY's historic mission to educate "the children of the whole people" of New York City. They continue to make it possible for CUNY to help propel more students into the middle class than all the Ivy League schools combined.¹ And we love what we do.

But CUNY now faces financial pressures that are more intense than any I have seen in twenty years as a professor, and we need your commitment and the Governor's for more resources. Student enrollment is not quite back to pre-pandemic levels, but it has made a decisive rebound. The crisis we face is not a crisis of student enrollment but of student attrition and understaffing. In the four years from 2018 and 2022, CUNY experienced a net loss of 1,313 full-time employees, a 7% decrease, even *with* that infusion of 575 new faculty that you helped to provide.² Sharper cuts still have fallen on budgets for adjunct faculty and other part-time staff. Enrollment is increasing across almost every CUNY campus, with few exceptions, and applications for next fall hit an all-time high.³ What awaits these students? My members know how to educate the students we serve and support their academic and personal development. But they cannot be effective in a chaotic environment in which hundreds of classes are being canceled up to the week before the semester, instructors come and go like a subway turnstile, and vacant staff positions go unfilled by design.

In this context we must commend Senator Liu and Assembly member Mamdani for sponsoring the REPAIR Act. This visionary legislation deserves support because it would allow New York City to collect revenue from private universities that enjoy more than \$100 million in annual

¹ In 2020 the Brookings Institution listed 12 CUNY campuses that propelled its students toward the [greatest upward mobility to the middle class](#).

² CUNY FY 2023 Preliminary Year End Financial Summary, Committee on Finance and Administration, October 2, 2023

³ [CUNY Applications More Than Quadruple in October – CUNY Newswire](#)

property tax exemptions - Columbia and NYU - and to direct these resources to the City University, which educates hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers. As the state and the city stare down major deficits in the years ahead, it is time that foregone revenue of this scale is reconsidered.

When I testified here last February, it was the day our contract with CUNY expired. As we now approach one year working on an expired contract, and as the administration continues to claw back funds from the campuses in order to close deficits, PSC members feel anxious and unappreciated. On behalf of the 30,000 faculty and staff we represent, I need to convey the urgency of a budget that will fund a fair contract and improve our students' learning conditions.

Crisis at Nine “Colleges of Concern”

The CUNY administration credits tight fiscal discipline for improving what they call “structural deficits,” from nearly \$234 million in fiscal year 2022 to \$128 million this fiscal year.⁴ Their austerity measures include increasing enrollment caps on classes, reducing student services such as library hours and cafeteria access, and abrupt layoffs of hundreds of faculty and staff on contingent appointments, including 26 Queens College full-time substitute Lecturers right before the start of this semester. Despite the fact that all but three of CUNY’s 24 colleges ended fiscal year 2023 with a surplus, the administration cut across-the-board in fiscal year 2024, anticipating the expiration of federal stimulus funding and slow enrollment growth. This past fall, when nine of the colleges (Chart 1) failed to show sufficient progress in meeting their savings targets, the administration pursued further cuts, requiring tens of millions in additional savings. This was on top of the \$57 million in fiscal year 2024 savings that these nine campuses alone were already tasked with delivering - two community colleges, six senior colleges, and one professional school.

Brutal is the only word to describe these mid-year cuts. It is excruciating for academic professionals who are invested in educational quality to operate in this environment. Moreover, the PSC has yet to learn of any CUNY administrator making sacrifices while they demand sacrifices from our members. Where was the Board of Trustees’ concern for fiscal discipline when they approved 30 percent raises for the top two executive vice chancellors in 2022, and where is the Board’s call now for furloughs for the executive staff to help achieve cost savings in 2024? PSC members have heard enough about the university’s “multi-pronged strategies” for reducing costs; every prong affects us and our students, not them. We urge the legislature to advise the CUNY administration against implementing the mid-year cuts to the “colleges of concern,” especially now, as the state budget process presents an occasion to collaborate to identify the needed resources.

⁴ City University of New York: Stabilizing the University’s Finances, 2024

Chart 1: Colleges of Concern

Campus	Expected cuts	Impact	Senate district	Assembly district
Borough of Manhattan Community College	TBD	Staff hiring reductions - one person rehired for every three people who departed	Brian Kavanagh, District 26	Deborah Glick, District 66
Brooklyn College	\$3.5 million	TBD	Kevin Parker, District 21	Rodneyse Bichotte, District 42
College of Staten Island	\$2.4 million	TBD	Andrew Lanza, District 24	Sam Pizzozzolo, District 63
John Jay College	\$4.5 million	200 classes cut; staff hiring reductions: one person rehired for every three people who departed	Brad Hoylman-Sigal District 27	Linda Rosenthal, District 67
Kingsborough Community College	TBD	TBD	Jessica Scarcella Spanton, District 23	Michael Novakhov, District 45
New York City College of Technology	TBD	TBD	Andrew Gounardes, District 26	Jo Anne Simon, District 52
Queens College	TBD	26 full-time faculty members were laid off just days before this semester began	John Liu, District 16	Daniel Rosenthal, District 27
School of Professional Studies	TBD	Undergraduate capstone courses (except for clinical nursing) will be raised to a cap of 17 from 5-10	Liz Krueger, District 28	Tony Simone, District 75
York College	\$1.9 million	150 Spring classes cut in late January	Leroy Comrie, District 14	Vivian Cook, District 32

Improving Retention and Graduation Rates: a Matter of Racial and Economic Justice, and a Wise Investment in Workforce Development

CUNY students have a distinctive profile.

- Over 80 percent of incoming CUNY undergraduates are New York City high school graduates.
- Half of CUNY students come from households with annual incomes below \$30,000, and 36% have reported food insecurity.
- 80% are people of color.
- 44% are in the first generation of their families to attend college.
- 13% are supporting children.
- 35% are foreign-born.⁵

But full-time freshmen decline to return for their second year of college at alarmingly high rates at both the community colleges (40% stop out) and the senior colleges (20% stop out).⁶ It would be a shame if, having worked to expand the pool of CUNY applicants, Governor Hochul and the CUNY administration fail to properly support the new students coming to our campuses and those who are persisting.⁷ CUNY is also working to streamline its application process and making transferring between CUNY schools easier. Governor Hochul's proposal to admit students at the top of their class will also raise enrollment.⁸ This is on top of New York City Council Speaker Adams's "CUNY Reconnect" program, which has helped 25,000 stopped-out students re-enroll in CUNY.

We recognize the effort to bring students to CUNY, and they are working. But if there are not enough faculty to foster academic progress or professional staff to advise and support students, a successful enrollment strategy will be sabotaged. The CUNY administration should be advocating for full funding to ensure students can complete their studies and get the wraparound services they need. But preemptive budget cuts and hiring restrictions are being pursued instead of robust funding requests to meet the University's actual needs.

⁵ Sources: A Profile of Undergraduates at CUNY Senior and Community Colleges: Fall 2019; CUNY Celebrates First-Generation College Students For Their Courage, Tenacity And Drive To Succeed, November 8, 2019; New York City's 2021 MMR; enrollment by race and ethnicity, fall 2019; Student Experience Survey 2018

⁶ "Stabilizing the University's Finances," CUNY report submitted to the New York State legislature, January 2024

⁷ [CUNY and NYC Public Schools Team Up to Transform College Application Process for Seniors – CUNY Newswire](#); [Governor Hochul Announces Transformation in Higher Education Enrollment Offering All New York High School Seniors a Place at SUNY and CUNY | Governor Kathy Hochul](#) ; [Queens Chronicle](#); CUNY Reconnect sees over 25K+ registrants; Adult students are resuming higher

⁸ [Governor Hochul Announces Initiatives to Increase Access to Higher Education | Governor Kathy Hochul \(ny.gov\)](#)

For example, the CUNY Board of Trustees stripped out key initiatives when they approved a revised fiscal year 2025 budget request in December:

- Enrollment and Retention request dropped from \$20M to \$6.7M (\$3.4M state/\$3.3M city)
- Graduate Education request of \$15M to the state was zeroed out
- Academic & Career Advisement dropped from \$34.1M to \$18.5M (\$5.3M state/\$13.2M city)
- Workforce Skills & Employment Outcomes dropped from \$25.6M to \$14M (\$7M state/\$7M city)
- Facilities Maintenance & Enhancement dropped from \$30M to \$10M
- STEM focused donor matching (\$50M) and STEM majors funding (\$50M) were both zeroed out
- IT Support dropped from \$15M to \$4.8M
- Restoration of City PEG cuts \$61.5M was zeroed out

The CUNY administration should request what it needs because public investment in CUNY students, faculty and staff, and the communities that we serve pays dividends for the state. A [March 2021 report from the New York City Comptroller](#) showed that,

- Nearly 80% of CUNY graduates stay in New York.
- CUNY graduates working in New York State earned a combined \$57 billion annually (\$67,000 on average) in 2019, or \$28.6 billion more than they would have earned without a post-secondary degree.
- CUNY graduates working in New York State paid an estimated \$4.2 billion in state income taxes in 2019.
- CUNY graduates represent 10% of the private workforce in New York State.

Response to the Governor's Executive Budget

We are grateful for Governor Hochul's advocacy for public higher education. This is evident in her two previous budgets and various policy initiatives. As my testimony shows, however, CUNY desperately needs new operating aid. Not the same as last year, and certainly not the \$26.8 million reduction in programs. The Executive Budget includes cuts vital programs and services such as nursing program expansion, mental health services, and CUNY's School of Labor and Urban Studies. PSC appreciates the Governor's announcement of new funding for the "Create AI" initiative and we look forward to engaging her office to advance more public dollars for CUNY.

There are resources in the state economy to resist these cuts and add hundreds of millions more to the CUNY budget. CUNY's return on its investment repays New Yorkers many times over, as research consistently shows. Governor Hochul must not retreat from her commitment to public higher education.. We urge the Legislature to hold her to it, and urge you to secure significant new investments in CUNY, as you have before.

Low-income, working-class families are leaving the state because they cannot afford housing and other costs of living. According to a [December 2023 report](#) featured in The New York Times, the families who left New York at the highest rate in 2022 were those who make between \$32,000 and \$65,000 a year, and come disproportionately from communities of color, like our students do. A great public university like ours helps move generations of students out of poverty into the middle class.

Our elected leaders should want the long-standing trend of CUNY graduates staying in New York to continue. But what can we expect if New York State's budget priorities deemed their education less important than tax breaks for the wealthy? A population, by the way, who has only gotten wealthier.⁹ Meanwhile our members and students face rising costs for housing, healthcare, childcare, groceries, utilities and more. We believe the legislature wants these communities to flourish, and a strong public university is the path to economic security.

PSC Vision for this Fiscal Year

CUNY must firm up its foundation for current and future students to succeed. The New Deal for CUNY is the cornerstone on which to build. New resources have helped to slow the alarming rate of faculty attrition, but each component of this legislation must become reality. [PSC requests the following](#) for the FY25 budget cycle:

\$385 million | Full-time faculty Support for faculty hiring will address racial inequities in student access to full-time professors and improve CUNY's full-time faculty-to-student ratio, which remains stubbornly low. Unfortunately, gains in prior cycles have been eroded by attrition, and CUNY still largely runs on adjunct labor (Senior Colleges: \$341 million, 2,306 faculty hires; Community Colleges: \$44 million, 376 faculty hires).

BMCC's recent practice of canceling "low-enrolled" classes to save money is a big problem for students in political science. Just last semester, two of my students found that courses they needed to graduate with a political science degree were canceled. To prevent their graduation from being postponed and their transfer plans derailed, I helped them through the onerous, bureaucratic process of finding another class and

⁹ [Some Millionaires Moved Out, but There Are Still Plenty Left - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#)

substituting it for the course that they initially selected. - Dr. Heather James, Political Science Professor, Borough of Manhattan Community College

\$87 million | Enhanced wraparound support, academic advisement, mental health counseling, food insecurity For most CUNY students, the University is their only access to mental health counseling and other supports. CUNY lags behind the national average ratio of academic advisors to students. We must hire full-time academic advisors and mental health counselors and relieve food insecurity (\$67 million to improve staff-to-student ratios for advisors and mental health counselors; \$20 million to address food insecurity).

\$700 million | First 60 Credits Free CUNY is a transformative path through which poor and working New Yorkers attain higher education and economic success. First-dollar, tuition-free college credit is an investment that will pay dividends for the state.

\$82.7 million | Mandatory Cost Increases Fund the basic year-over-year cost increases required to operate CUNY, including negotiated employee salaries and fringe benefits.

\$24.5 million | Graduate Education Support Align fellowships and stipends with peer institutions and NYC's cost of living. Increase support for doctoral programs to connect students with CUNY research centers and graduates with jobs in the academy and industry. Expand and diversify research-focused faculty who mentor graduate students (\$24.5 million for fellowships/stipends, 50 faculty hires, and other investments).

\$11.7 million | Raise Community College Funding Floor. Lift and fund a stable floor and increase base aid to \$3,250 per student. The state has never met its legal obligation to fund 40% of community college operations. Community colleges are a springboard to careers and a pathway to further higher education. They are job creators and must not be forced to operate in a state of constant vulnerability.

\$1.7 billion | Invest in Capital Infrastructure. We support the CUNY administration's capital request to maintain and improve the University's infrastructure across its 300 buildings (\$1.7 billion). A recent independent assessment showed that only 8% of CUNY buildings meet the "state of good repair" standard. CUNY students and employees deserve safe, welcoming conditions for working and learning.

Coupled with mold and moisture-ridden spaces, bed bug and rodent issues, and a capital footprint in desperate need of an upgrade, this further disadvantages the students that Medgar faculty and staff serve. - Kevin Adams, Director of Community Standards/Student Conduct Officer Medgar Evers College

One year working with an expired contract

The 30,000 CUNY faculty and staff represented by the PSC are seeking to renegotiate our expired union contract with the University to secure competitive salaries, pay parity for adjunct faculty, and other gains. Much of the current fiscal trouble at CUNY can be traced back to the State's failure to fund collective bargaining agreements at CUNY under the prior governor. It is time to return to the principled practice of fully funding contracts. Let's make New York a state that cares for its residents as both citizens and workers.

PSC's [bargaining agenda](#) seeks job security, safe working conditions and just wages. These common good goals are only achievable with the public investment that CUNY deserves. An increase of 7.15% for fringe is certainly positive to see in the Governor's Executive Budget, but we assure you we plan to fight for the additions that our members need.

A strong contract will help CUNY achieve its goals of a faculty and staff that reflect the diversity of the students. For example, as described in Chart 2, the average salary for professors at CUNY senior college lags far behind that of professors at most institutions in a cohort of regional and comparable colleges and universities. Structural impediments to diversifying the faculty are reflective not only of society but of the wages the University can offer.

Conclusion

At the heart of these issues of access and quality in public higher education is a fundamental question of fairness. New York must not slide further down the ranks toward inequality. [According to a 2022 Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy report](#), New York has the highest concentration of wealth of any state in the nation and the deepest economic inequality. New Yorkers worth over \$30 million (fewer than 0.4% of the population) possess \$6.7 trillion dollars in wealth. We have the resources to fund college for New Yorkers and we know CUNY is key to reversing this inequality.

Thanks to the efforts of this legislature to work with the governor, the past two years have helped CUNY recover from the devastating pandemic. But the constraints cited by the executive branches here in Albany and in City Hall have led the CUNY administration to go after our colleges for deep, preemptive cuts, even those with healthy, reviving enrollments. Such ill-advised, unnecessary austerity measures could easily send these colleges into a tailspin of student attrition and understaffing from which they will not recover. Your intervention this year is more critical than ever.

CHART 2: Professor salaries as of 2022

