



TESTIMONY OF DR. HEATHER JAMES-ZUCKERMAN
LEGISLATIVE REPRESENTATIVE, PROFESSIONAL STAFF CONGRESS/CUNY
New York City Council FY26 Higher Education and Finance Committee
Executive Budget Hearing
May 15, 2025

Good afternoon, Chairs Dinowitz and Brannan and Council Members. On behalf of the 30,000 faculty and staff represented by PSC/CUNY, thank you for your continued advocacy on behalf of the City University of New York.

On Thursday, May 1 Mayor Eric Adams announced that all funding cut by his administration over the past three budget cycles would be restored. CUNY's community colleges, funded largely by the city, have lost nearly 500 full-time positions since Mayor Adams took office. The restoration amounts to \$96 million in operating money plus \$30 million for ASAP, ACE and the Brooklyn Recovery Corps at Medgar Evers College. In response, PSC President James Davis said:

"At a time when colleges and universities face unprecedented authoritarian attacks from the federal government, these baselined City budget restorations made by Mayor Adams are welcome news. CUNY's faculty, staff, students, and the communities our colleges serve are subject to intense economic and political instability right now. As PSC members have said consistently, we need steady funding and support from City Hall."

Mayor Adams's restorations put CUNY back to pre-COVID funding levels. Today, we ask that you help us do more. We ask that you help CUNY remain the people's university and invest in our City's future at a time when students are scared and struggling. We ask you to help us bridge the funding gap created by the federal government's attack on research. Yesterday, one of my colleagues at BMCC wrote to amNY about the impact of President Trump's

sudden freeze on National Science Foundation grants. Her work, which examines how health conditions impact STEM students, has been abruptly halted. Meanwhile, at Queens Community College, a program which offered stipends and tuition, as well as funds for travel to conferences, for students doing research in Natural Sciences, math and engineering was cancelled. This program allowed our City-funded community colleges to place students in labs at four-year colleges over the summer. The program had been going on for over 20 years but grant investigators were told that their work no longer aligned with administration's priorities.

CUNY moves more students into the middle class than the ivy leagues but how can we continue to do so when research that supports at-risk students in high demand fields is devalued? As you heard from CUNY during the March Preliminary Budget hearing, CUNY was issued 24 stop work orders putting \$21.7 million at risk. As of late April, the PSC is aware of over 60 cancelled grant-funded projects. Surely that number is already higher.

The number of federal grants cancelled because of the MAGA political agenda continues to increase. Every lost grant represents lost scientific progress, lost knowledge creation, and foregone economic growth. Jobs and academic progress are also at great risk. The university needs funding to bridge the gaps where it can to keep professional researchers and support staff employed and help more student researchers on track to complete their studies.

In this political moment, New York City and CUNY must be a safe haven for students. We must robustly support their educational journey so that they can persist despite fear as did the generations before them that have made countless contributions to our city and nation.

PSC Budget Requests

We applaud the Council's request to baseline funds for CUNY Reconnect with \$8.8 million to continue the program and another \$2.9 million for its expansion. CUNY Reconnect successfully brought back over 47,000 CUNY students since its pilot in 2022-2023.

We also propose:

- CUNY's request to fulfill the university's obligation to the January 2025 ratified contract.
- Additional operating support to help CUNY navigate federal government cuts to grant funding.
- An additional \$5.5 million to support an ASAP-for-all model and provide all students with academic support in CUNY's most successful and nationally recognized

program. ASAP's system of full financial aid, robust wraparound services, and high-contact advising leads to a graduation rate twice that of non-ASAP students. That's what the college experience should be for every CUNY student, and we need more funding to get us closer to that goal.

- Expansion of ACE - the senior college version of ASAP. According to CUNY, "The most recent ACE freshmen cohort admitted to John Jay College realized a four-year graduation rate of 60 percent vs. 41 percent for a matched comparison group of non-ACE students, and the first transfer cohort at Lehman College realized a two-year graduation rate of 61 percent vs. 30 percent for a matched comparison group of non-ACE students. These effects are so large that they actually reduce the average cost per graduate by about 13 percent".
- Hiring a more diverse pool of advisors and other faculty and staff to end CUNY's crisis of understaffing. Moreover we ask the Council to send a clear message to CUNY administration - restored operating money must be used for hiring. Positions taken off the books cannot stay there. The City funds nearly 75% of community colleges. Adams' cuts decimated staffing and CUNY must make rehiring a priority.
- CUNY Reconnect has been an unquestionable success bringing back 47,000 students. PSC was pleased to see the Mayor include a \$5.9 million restoration to the program. These funds should be baselined and agree with CUNY that the program receive an additional \$2.9 million for expansion.
- Replicate ASAP's successful use of free metrocards to all CUNY students. Our members regularly hear that too many students do not make it to class or risk punishment when they evade a fare because they do not have the funds available to commute to campus. CUNY and the Council have urged the City Administration to fund a MetroCard/OMNY pilot program with \$500,000 in FY26 to provide transportation benefits for 473 students in need. We encourage you to expand this program to include more students. If it is necessary to begin with a limited rollout, we support the University Student Senate suggestion to prioritize:
 - Student Parents who use the childcare centers at CUNY:
 - Current Data: 1400 childcare seats available in CUNY
 - Cost \$739,200
 - Students who are in Foster Youth College Success Initiative (FYCSI) were in the foster care system:
 - Current Data: estimate of foster care students within FYSI CUNY
150

- Unlimited MetroCard for four months, cost \$79,200
 - College Discovery students:
 - Support 956 students, cost \$504,768
- Support Public Safety
 - *Increase Mental Health Access for Students.* This committee knows all too well the stress college students are facing. CUNY students often have less access to support systems than their peers while balancing the obligations of work and family. This is evident in the demand for mental health services. We support CUNY's request to hire more counselors at our community colleges that would serve more than 5,600 additional students. (\$2.8M)
 - *Increase Faculty and Staff Numbers to Accommodate Proposals Likely to Increase Enrollment.* We support the Progressive Caucus' Crisis to Care proposal that would be instrumental to helping the thousands of New Yorkers get access to mental health care. But CUNY's community colleges must be fully funded and adequately staffed to provide those services. (\$7M)
 - Finally, we ask that you fund critical programs highlighted in the People's Plan. To ensure our city does not fall back into the cycle of dysfunction, there must be a plan to make the city affordable and invest in long-term public safety solutions that focus on eliminating the obstacles and not criminalization of people in need.

Capital Budget

We support CUNY's budget request, especially their \$150 million ask to modernize the Allied Health and Natural Science buildings at Hostos.

We ask that you help us support public safety with more health professionals. CUNY is essential to building out networks of nurses, social workers, mental health counselors, addiction services and others needed to help stabilize the city's social safety net.

We strongly support CUNY's \$150 million request to modernize its Allied Health and Natural Sciences Buildings at Hostos. CUNY graduates approximately half of the city's nurses each year, CUNY has a growing medical school, and there are dozens of teaching programs across the University. We have met with members in various healthcare professional programs who have made clear that CUNY's current facilities will not meet the demand for access to clinical training needs or to the faculty and staff students need.

Conclusion

Over the past three budget cycles, this Council has taken action to ensure our great public university not only survives, but thrives. Yet there are potentially rough waters ahead as our members watch research funding pulled and students are targeted. With the support of the council, we will continue to see CUNY's enrollment continue to climb beyond pre-pandemic figures and turn back years of austerity budgets. But we still need you. Students, faculty and staff at CUNY need you to stand with us. Stand with us to defend public higher education from threats from Washington and ensure that CUNY grows, continuing to support the economy, workforce, culture, and civic life of our great city.

Thank you.