



TESTIMONY OF DR. JAMES DAVIS
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New York City Council Committee on Higher Education
Preliminary Budget Hearing
March 20, 2026

Good afternoon Chairwoman Joseph and committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. We are honored to be here for the first budget hearing of the council's new term and pleased for the opportunity to testify before the committee's new Chair Rita Joseph. I am James Davis, President of the Professional Staff Congress, the union representing 30,000 faculty and professional staff at CUNY.

This is a critical committee for a critical time for public higher education. It has been the City council that helped preserve CUNY's budget after the pandemic. This body fought for restorations during the nearly \$100 million in total PEG cuts during the Adams administration. This term marks a new start for advocacy for CUNY funding. Community college enrollment is up nearly 12% since Fiscal Year 2022. This post-pandemic rebound is being driven by new programs like CUNY Reconnect, developed by former Speaker Adrienne Adams, and by Governor Hochul's Opportunity Promise Scholarship, which provides free tuition, fee waivers and books to students ages 25-55 studying in a growing list of high-demand fields.

The Mayor's preliminary budget increases CUNY's overall budget by nearly \$25 million dollars but holds funding for staffing levels flat from last year. We recognize the importance of that investment, particularly at a time of fiscal strain for the city. But enrollment growth at the current scale requires pedagogical investments to ensure students have the faculty and staff to guide them to timely graduation.

Our FY27 City budget request includes:

Fill Vacancies / Bring Back Full-Time Faculty and Staff - Hire 2,876 new full-time community college faculty to achieve a ratio of 65 full-time faculty for every 1,000 students (\$264 million).

Between Academic Years 2019 and 2024, CUNY lost 703 civilian and pedagogical positions, nearly 500 at community colleges, which are funded 75% by the city. These losses were a direct result of former Mayor Adams' PEG cuts. Mayor Adams restored CUNY's funding in his last term, but more than 350 positions remain vacant. This while community college enrollment has gone up nearly 8% since Academic Year 2023. It is not enough to bring more students through our classroom doors; they need to be supported as learners and future members of the workforce, all the way to graduation.

We urge the council to work with Mayor Mamdani to invest in new full-time faculty to bring CUNY staffing ratios in line with national recommendations. CUNY students deserve to be taught primarily by full-time professors who have job security and a competitive salary. Hire 30% of new faculty as lecturers and 70% as professorial appointments. Create paths to full-time employment for long-serving adjunct faculty to move beyond an austerity approach to staffing our colleges and better serve our students.

Fund Student Services that Increase Graduation Rates

- *Hire 352 culturally competent advisors (\$74 million)* Speaker Adams' CUNY Reconnect brought back over 47,000 students since its inception in 2022. There is no question that student advisors improve graduation rates. But more students mean larger case loads and increased demand for community college advising. Resources are needed to improve the ratio of advisors to one advisor per every one hundred students, ensuring student success.
- *Expand ACE - Accelerate, Complete, and Engage - program (\$9.1 million)* CUNY's successful ACE program, the senior college version of ASAP, is an essential tool for moving students to graduate in four years. John Jay's freshmen cohort's graduation rate was 60% vs. 41% compared to non-ACE students. Lehman's two-year graduation rate was 61% vs. 30%.
- *Double the size of the current ASAP annual cohort (\$86 million if all services are covered by ASAP)* As more students enroll in community colleges, the nationally

renowned CUNY ASAP program needs additional support. In addition to improving advising ratios and providing free transit, the ASAP program should expand to include more students. In 2024 CUNY reported, “the ASAP three-year graduation rate [was] 53%, more than double the 25% rate observed in a historically matched statistical comparison group... The most recent average three-year graduation rate across ten ASAP cohorts (fall 2009-fall 2020) [was] 49.1%.” CUNY reports that an ASAP student costs, on average, an additional \$3,440 to educate (lower if the cost of OMNY cards and advisors is covered by other initiatives).

- *Support student mental health by funding an additional 119 counselor hires (\$22 million)* New Yorkers deserve better access to mental health services and too many New Yorkers need but cannot access mental health counselors. CUNY students deserve this access but too often face more challenges that their peers at private colleges. Today, the demand for services vastly exceeds the access to services. Investing in mental health will improve the ratio of counselors to students to one counselor for every 500 students and improve student retention rates.

CUNY Students Deserve a Bold Free Transit Plan (\$24 million for all students at the same rate paid by the Department of Education for K-12 student OMNY cards; \$14 million full-time students only.)

A key demand of students is free access to public transportation. As this committee is aware, any increase in subway and bus fares hinders student success. No PSC member should hear that their student missed a class or appointment because they did not have fare for transit. The vast majority of CUNY students take public transportation to campus, often coming from work or handling child care or elder care. CUNY students deserve to benefit from the same program that already provides this service to K-12 students.

Protect CUNY and Its Research Programs From Trump’s Cuts (\$26 million in bridge funding for lost grants.)

Higher education has been one of President Trump’s consistent targets, so our members have felt under siege, particularly our active researchers. Federal grants have been cancelled, halting years of research - including lifesaving medical research - by our members and opportunities for our students. Litigation by the AFT and other national advocates has helped, but tremendous damage has been done. The current

estimate of loss for NIH and NSF grants alone is \$83 million in New York State. Research is of course at the heart of what we do, much of it in mentorship with our students.¹

Capital budget

The capital and building maintenance budget needs at CUNY are well known. Our colleges include traditional campuses with outdoor space and vertical campuses in New York City's competitive real estate market, and they have diverse and urgent needs. We support CUNY's efforts to upgrade its facilities, not just to achieve a state of good repair but to be resilient and sustainable for generations.

PSC's Health and Safety committee worked tirelessly to ensure CUNY Campuses were safe for a return to campus during the pandemic. They continue advocating for safe working and learning conditions. You will learn more from our Health and Safety leaders today, but I would emphasize that our campuses are facing crises: sections of libraries have been closed because of excessive mold; mold remediation needed for classrooms where classes are still being conducted; ceiling tiles falling on students; elevators regularly malfunction. CUNY's capital request of over \$200 million must be funded.

Thank you for your time, and I am happy to answer any questions.

¹ Grant-witness.us