

**Testimony of**  
**Christopher J. Rosa, PhD, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Student Inclusion Initiatives**  
**Carrie Shockley, EdD, University Director, Disability Programs**  
**& Director of the JFK, Jr. Institute**  
**before the**  
**New York State Senate Committee on Higher Education**  
**November 16th, 2021**  
**York College**

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Good Morning Chair Stavisky and members of the New York State Senate Committee on Higher Education,

Thank you so much for inviting us to testify at this morning's hearing.

Along with CUNY's remarkable Director of Disability Programs Dr. Carrie Shockley, I'm Chris Rosa, CUNY's Assistant Vice Chancellor for Student Inclusion initiatives. Carrie and I deeply appreciate the opportunity to discuss the needs of CUNY students with disabilities in general, and the opportunities for student with intellectual disabilities presented by our CUNY Unlimited program in particular.

As you know, the pandemic was a disruptive force in higher education, and posed many challenges for CUNY, and for colleges and universities, across our State and nation.

These challenges have been felt acutely by our students with disabilities, and the campus administrative offices charged with providing our students with critical reasonable accommodations and support services. On most CUNY campuses, requests by students with disabilities for accommodations and support services more than doubled in remote learning environment. In determining how to most meaningfully address students' accommodation needs, we all certainly found ourselves in unfamiliar territory; students and disability services professionals alike had to figure out what worked best in a virtual environment. For some students with disabilities, learning from the safety and natural supports of their homes positioned them to thrive, while for others – the heroic efforts of our disability services professionals to support them, notwithstanding – pandemic related-stressors, public health challenges, social isolation, and struggles with remote learning modalities caused them to stop out. Our campus disability services professionals are actively working to re-engage these students in the hope that they'll be able to resume their studies at CUNY in Spring 2022. As we transition back to traditional classroom learning environments, the need to provide more supports and services to our students with disabilities will be critical to their persistence and success; and that is why we are so appreciative of the state's efforts to provide \$2 million in supplemental State support for enhancing services for students with disabilities at colleges and universities throughout New York State. CUNY's share of these funds - \$300,000 – will arrive at our campuses in the Spring 2022, just when our students will need it most!

The pandemic also precipitated a paradigm shift in CUNY's delivery of its signature Disability Programs. This past year, we transitioned our CUNY LEADS programming from in-person employer "Meet & Greets" to the LEADS Online Learning (LOL). Moving these career readiness programs to an online format allowed for greater participation across campuses, with student travel no longer a barrier. LOL is a student-facing monthly seminar series that supports work-readiness skill development. As students make their transition to summer internships and graduates pursue employment, our spring series entitled "Creating a Roadmap to Success" focuses on career mapping and exploring alternative routes to employment success. Participants from across our signature Disability Program – including students on

the autism spectrum served by CUNY's Project REACH – actively participated. Because of its scalability and ability to meet students “where they are” – literally and figuratively – our CUNY LEADS team plans to continue LOL programming in the coming year.

Our ability to sustain the transformative impact of CUNY LEADS on the employment chances of students with disabilities will be critical to their ability to benefit equitably from the State economy's post-pandemic recovery. New Yorkers with disabilities still face a staggering employment gap as compared to New Yorkers without disabilities; and any gains we achieved on this front were largely washed away by the economic disruption of the pandemic, as New Yorkers with disabilities experienced job loss at twice the rate of New Yorkers without disabilities. As our state economy comes back online, we're anticipating that 70 percent of jobs produced in our State's post-pandemic economy will require some level of higher education. At this moment in our State's history, meaningful access to higher education to New Yorkers with disabilities has never been more critical to accessing jobs and pathways to equal employment opportunity, social mobility, and full and equal partnership in the American Dream. The state's modest but important increase of \$164,000 in CUNY LEADS funding allowed CUNY to incrementally increase its capacity to support the career readiness for the very students whose employment opportunities are mostly likely to be compromised by pandemic-induced/ economic dislocation.

Indeed, while the pandemic has challenged employment opportunities for all students with disabilities, some groups of disabled students' career chances have been more profoundly affected than others. Of all New Yorkers with disabilities, job opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities have been impacted the most, largely because employment opportunities for people with ID have historically been limited to food service and retail sectors of our economy – the segments of the State's economy that have been most impacted by pandemic-related economic disruption. In light of these developments, our CUNY Unlimited program has never more important to the life chances and independent living of New Yorkers with intellectual disabilities. In partnership with the non-profit AHRC and our colleagues at the New York City Department of Education's District 75, CUNY has developed an inclusive higher education program that allows students with ID to benefit equitable for our University's historic role as an engine of social mobility and independence for New York families. CUNY Unlimited will offer students with ID the opportunity to earn a U.S. DOE-certified meaningful credential, which verifies to employers that these students have achieved core competencies in basic literacy, civic engagement, independent living, and career readiness through their experiences at CUNY. The data indicate that CUNY Unlimited participants are employed at a rate 20 percent higher within 3 years of graduation than similarly situated individuals with ID who do not participate in inclusive higher education.

Our recommendation is for the New York State Governor and the Legislature to continue its leadership in providing additional State support for CUNY students with disabilities. We would be remiss if we didn't recognize the critical work of Senator Stavisky and the members of the Senate Higher Education Committee for their steadfast and strong support in this effort with new funding made available in last year's final budget.

Our students were delighted by this important recognition of the students with disabilities. The CUNY Coalition for Students with Disabilities urges building on this progress.

Finally, we realize that we cannot turn solely turn to our State leaders in our efforts to secure additional support for students with disabilities, and that is why CCSD is requesting that Mayor-elect Adams and the members of the City Council support a CUNY & NYC DOE budget request to expand CUNY Unlimited programs for our students would with intellectual disabilities in all five boroughs. The cost of this

CUNY/DOE initiative would be less than \$1 million, annually. Any assistance that you could provide in encouraging your colleagues in New York City government to support this effort would also be greatly appreciated.

Thank you for your abiding commitment to access and opportunity for CUNY students with disabilities.