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CUNY USS

New York State Senate Testimony for Affordable Education at CUNY

Hello, my name is Saaif Alam and I am the CUNY University Student Senate Vice Chair of Disability Affairs studying at John Jay College. I am testifying today on behalf of students with disabilities and graduate students to talk about the lack of equity and issues of affordability that has been impacting them during the Pandemic. I understand those challenges because I myself am a graduate student with a disability understand the financial constraints graduate face during the Pandemic and the lack of support our students with disabilities have from the pandemic. It is pivotal that the needs are addressed on behalf of these students because these communities of students were impacted during the Pandemic.

Our students with disabilities and our fellow graduate students struggled with equity. CUNY is comprised of 11,000 students with disabilities . Many of these students struggled during the Pandemic. I have been interacting with students with disabilities and they said that they were struggling to communicate with their Professors regarding accommodations. When I was communicating with the Disability Centers, the directors expressed that Faculty Development training is optional regards to accommodations. Many faculty members do not end up attending the sessions because they do not get paid. Due to the lack of quality Faculty Development training the accommodations from our faculty members do not meet our students' expectations. Our Infrastructure development needs improvement to ensure our campuses from Medgar Evers College, York College, College of Staten Island , Lehman College are not ADA compliant. Students in those campuses express that they are not able to properly commute to campuses. There is lack of funding for infrastructure. Students with disabilities struggle to receive adequate tutoring and academic advisement. They expressed that some tutoring centers and academic advisement services are not fully trained to provide accommodations for students with disabilities(eg extra time and course substitution option). For graduate students, students expressed lack of engagement with their campuses. Students in the Masters Program do not receive a stipend to work on their Masters Thesis. Also, graduate students with disabilities do not receive adequate peer tutoring services.

Our students with disabilities and graduate students with disabilities struggled with affording their tuition. Our students with disabilities struggle to earn a scholarship that would fully pay off their tuition. For instance the John Jay Accessibility Center offers a \$500 scholarship for high achieving students with disabilities. This is not enough for them to pay off their expenses since a full time student(spend thousands of dollars on their tuition). Many of them faced unemployment and others depend on SSI to pay off their living expenses. For those students with disabilities who do not receive financial aid face a financial cost worrying about paying their tuition cost. Our graduate students do not receive financial aid and they either pay out of pocket

or take out a loan. Our graduate students work in jobs that still do not make ends meet paying off their living expenses and tuition costs. Some of them teach as adjuncts and still are not satisfied with the salary they earn to afford their necessary expenses. For graduate students who take out a loan could not pay it off until years after they graduate with their Masters or Professional Degree.

Although CUNY invested in the CUNY Deal, I am asking you to place more pressure on the Board of Trustees to ensure the funding is properly allocated to help students with disabilities succeed (eg faculty development training, investment for accommodations for tutoring and academic advisement services, making sure the campuses are ADA compliant and more scholarship for this community of students). Also I am asking you to pressure the Board of Trustees to allocate for funding for graduate students(eg ensure Masters students receive a stipend for their thesis, more investment on extracurricular activities to keep them engaged, salary raise for adjuncts and more scholarships for high achieving graduate students). I am also asking you to cancel students debt for Graduate students who contributed their hours at work on or off campuses so they can achieve their career goals without worrying about student debt for the most of their lives. Also I am asking you to collaborate with the rest of the state senate to extend tap awards financial aid to low income graduate students so it can alleviate the financial burden and they could meet graduation requirements. Please take action as soon as possible so our students with disabilities and graduate students can receive the representation they deserve during the the in person transition to classes. Thank you for your time.