



NYS Higher Education Committee Hearing

Testimony of Trustee and President Austin Ostro

State University of New York Student Assembly (SUNY SA)

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On behalf of the SUNY Student Assembly, and the 1.4 Million students of our great University system, we very much appreciate the tireless efforts of Committee Chairs Krueger, Weinstein, Stavisky, Glick, their respective colleagues, and staff for hosting a hearing to address the cost of higher education, financial aid programs, and other challenges to students with respect to affordability and accessibility.

The Student Assembly is the recognized system-wide student government supporting the students of SUNY. We are comprised of Student Leaders from across the state and represent the students of the many University centers, colleges, technology colleges, and community colleges. In addition, we are also involved in advocacy on the local, state, and federal level. The President of the Student Assembly serves as the head of the organized student government for all 64 campuses in the system and holds the position as the only student member of the SUNY board of trustees. Twice annually the Student Assembly brings together hundreds of student leaders from across the state and beyond to participate in student leadership conferences, where the organization's advocacy priorities are finalized, and members are offered the opportunity to network and learn leadership skills from students, campus and system administration, and world class faculty through various workshops and lectures.

Additionally, Student Assembly representatives meet on a monthly basis to coordinate advocacy efforts and further refine strategies towards the advancement of quality and affordability in public higher education. We operate a variety of committees focused on promoting academic excellence throughout the system and highlight areas of campus safety, disability services, gender equity, and sustainability.

The Student Assembly urges the state to recognize and act upon the magnitude in which under funding public higher education has on the delivery of services and the quality of education across the system. The Committee clearly identifies the benefit to the state as an accessible State University due to the return on investment made by students pursuing higher education in New York. ¹Graduates of SUNY are more likely to work and live in New York and continue to stimulate local and state economies through employment and taxes; currently SUNY campuses contribute \$28.6 billion annually to New York's economy. Adequately funding higher education holds the potential to yield a greater return on investment for the state as students, faculty, and staff from across the SUNY system continue to enhance the quality of life and economic prosperity in their communities.

State and federal financial aid programs continue to greatly benefit the students of SUNY. Above all, the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), New York's largest grant program, administered by the Higher Education Services Corporation aids eligible students in attending in-state postsecondary institutions.

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Schultz, Laura. "The Economic Impact of the State University of New York." *www.rockinst.org*, Nov. 2018, Pg3, rockinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/11-1-18-BTN-SUNY-Drives-NYS-Economic-Engine.pdf.

²TAP Grants are based upon New York State family taxable income at the maximum level of \$80,000. For qualifying students, Tap provides grant funds up to \$5,165 to cover the costs of tuition. The Number of SUNY students at state-operated campuses and community colleges have risen to represent 40 percent of the total number of TAP recipients across the state.³ This participation rise represents both a silver-lining in covering the cost of education, but a bleak future for campus operating budgets.

There continues to be a consistent gap in the funding mechanism which penalizes campuses for accepting and matriculating students who utilize the Tuition Assistance Program. Institutions of public higher education across the state are obligated to cover the difference between the maximum TAP award and the cost of tuition at each campus. Currently, SUNY resident undergraduate tuition reaches \$7070⁴, while the maximum TAP award is \$5,165⁵, leading to a \$1905 gap in funding per student.

This combined figure cost SUNY and CUNY statewide a total of \$139 million dollars last fiscal year.⁶ A funding shortfall of hundreds of millions of dollars over the last 8 years. Individual campuses must finance this funding shortfall through operating costs before they are able to allocate funding for measures of quality education and critical student services.

There are two aspects of public higher education in New York State that remain true. The cost of tuition and the gap in funding for the Tuition Assistance Program both continue to rise. ⁷Since 2009, tuition at state operated campuses has risen 63%, contributing to an increase in the SUNY TAP gap from \$20 million in 2012 to nearly \$65 million in 2018. The shortfall in funding for the program has required SUNY and CUNY to allocate millions of dollars of operating costs over the years in which the gap has existed. Overall, the gap has resulted in students and their families paying more for less. The lack of investment by the state to provide funding in this matter has severely diminished the ability of individual campuses to provide services to students and enhance the quality of education offered. For example, ⁸SUNY Fredonia's core operating budget has declined from an all-time high of \$17.8 million in 2008-2009 to approximately \$11.3 million in 2018-2019, for a cumulative loss over the last ten years of

² "TAP Eligibility & Income Limits." *NYS Higher Education Services Corporation - TAP Eligibility*, www.hesc.ny.gov/pay-for-college/financial-aid/types-of-financial-aid/grants/tap-eligibility.html.

³The State University of New York, An Analysis of the Tuition Assistance Program <https://www.suny.edu/about/leadership/board-of-trustees/meetings/webcastdocs/Attachment%20C1%20-%20Tap%20Report.pdf>

⁴ SUNY Smart Track - Empowered Financial Planning, Tuition and Fees <https://www.suny.edu/smarttrack/tuition-and-fees/>

⁵ Higher Education Services Corporation (HESC), TAP Award Amounts <https://www.hesc.ny.gov/pay-for-college/financial-aid/types-of-financial-aid/grants/estimate-your-tap-award.html>

⁶ It is time to fill the GAP in TAP, PSC CUNY https://www.psc-cuny.org/sites/default/files/GAPTap_Coalition.pdf

⁷Reichman, Hank. "A New Deal for SUNY and CUNY." *ACADEME BLOG*, 2 Jan. 2019, academeblog.org/2018/12/24/a-new-deal-for-suny-and-cuny/

⁸ "Fredonia Budget Issue 'Serious'." *Fredonia Budget Issue 'Serious'* The Post Journal ,26 Dec. 2018, www.post-journal.com/news/page-one/2018/12/fredonia-budget-issue-serious/.

roughly \$53.2 million. This is due to the combination of stagnant funding, a widening TAP gap, and rising institutional operating costs, and Fredonia is not alone.

With increased investment by the state in institutions of public higher education students can receive quality services such as mental health counseling, academic advisement, and gender and sexuality resources at an affordable cost. It is imperative that the state invest in SUNY as the students have selected the State University for its commitment to providing the people of New York educational services of the highest standard, with the broadest possible access, fully representative of all segments of the population in a complete range of academic, professional and vocational postsecondary programs.

The Student Assembly supports increases in direct operating support for the SUNY system. In order to offset the need for the scheduled increase in tuition, our system requires a \$25 million investment this legislative session. This investment would allow SUNY to freeze the rate of tuition for hundreds of thousands of students and preserve the affordability of public higher education in New York.

Additionally, a funding floor must be established for SUNY community colleges at a minimum in the amount no less than the amount appropriated and made available in the prior fiscal year. It is imperative that our campuses operate with consistent streams of revenue. Investment in our community colleges will allow our system to develop new academic programs, attract greater numbers of students, and strengthen the ongoing SUNY contribution to economic development in counties across New York.

As an institution of public higher education, The State University of New York (SUNY) has an obligation and an opportunity to be a leader in the field of environmental sustainability. SUNY accounts for one of New York's largest energy consumers, with a utility and vehicle fuels budget of over \$250 million. Additionally, over 40% of public infrastructure in the state is accounted for by SUNY, and our community of students, faculty, staff, and alumni represent more than five million people.⁹

The proposed capital investment in SUNY would allow for our campuses to accelerate the process of retrofitting buildings to meet environmental standards. Upgrading utilities such as water, heating and cooling, and electricity are all major components of our footprint. Proper resource management of water can yield low flow systems that reduce water by millions of gallons. Additionally, Campus ponds and other bodies of water in our environment can be utilized for irrigation of fields, and green infrastructure can be utilized to ensure proper storm water management measures are taken. Heating and cooling costs are also a major expenditure and can be tackled by investment into projects such as green roofs, solar, wind, and geothermal energy where appropriate. Energy efficient lighting and technological devices can also yield great savings as an investment into our campuses and state.

No hearing would be complete without drawing attention to the plight of graduate students who suffer from insufficient support for stipends. Stipends aid students in offsetting tuition costs to advance their education. We urge the committee to review graduate student financial support and invest in research opportunities for students who are pursuing advanced degrees. Similarly, important programs such as EOP and CSTEP deserve your continued support.

⁹ SUNY, Sustainability, Capital Facilities <https://system.suny.edu/capital-facilities/energy-management/sustainability/>

With respect to loan programs, state policy should focus on enhancing grant availability, and accessibility, thus minimizing the burden of student debt. We advocate that availability for NYS TAP, and New York Aid for Part-Time Study should be enhanced, with thresholds altered to increase participation. We should concentrate our efforts on defining access to higher education as an economic investment in the future of the state of New York.

The Excelsior Scholarship, in conjunction with other student financial aid programs, allows some students to attend a SUNY or CUNY college tuition-free. This program continues to succeed as it aids students in graduating on time and with less debt. The Student Assembly supports the proposed executive amendment to the program which expands the promise of the Excelsior Scholarship and implements measures that would allow for a greater number of students to apply the scholarship to their academic success. Additional alterations regarding the course credit minimum for the scholarship would allow for typical students to pursue their education free from the 30-credit calendar year mandate in which it may not be viable for all. Furthermore, expansions of the program to cover additional costs associated with pursuing a degree such as fees, books, room, and board would alleviate excessive student debt and the need for additional employment while matriculated.

The Student Assembly urges the state to invest in public higher education by funding the shortfall created by the Tuition Assistance Program, making amendments to current financial programs available to students, and recognizing its fundamental role and responsibility to offer a world class education at an affordable cost. With an increase in funding and expansions of aid programs campuses across the state will be equipped to provide a higher quality education and student services that address the backgrounds and needs of all students.