

10 New York Students Rising

Higher Education Joint Legislative Public Hearing on 2012-2013 Executive Budget Proposal
Testimony February 1, 2012

**Jackie Hayes of Binghamton, NY
Student of University at Albany**

Good afternoon. My name is Jackie Hayes, I am a student at University at Albany and a member of New York Students Rising, a statewide network of students and campus-organizations dedicated to defending public higher education. We are student started, student run, and student directed. You are going to hear from three other students today, but I wanted to briefly outline what we are asking for.

As you may know this year there are minimal cuts proposed for SUNY and CUNY and even a potential increase in funding for Community Colleges. Administrators may be happy with this, but I think it is a sign of the very depressing times we live in that we could be happy because that we aren't being cut and that state support for SUNY and CUNY will be kept at abysmally low levels. Maybe if I were an administrator I might be happy that although the state cut SUNY and CUNY's budget collectively by about \$950 million in the last three years, they allowed them to raise tuition for the next 5 years to fill that gap with student dollars. But I'm not an administrator; I'm a graduate student who is going to leave University at Albany with over \$72,000 in debt all from New York's Public Colleges and Universities. I'm a student who knows that too many other students will leave with comparable amounts of debt. Simultaneously, as a graduate student I also teach a class of 80 students with no TA and make only \$2,000 a year above the poverty wage. From a student and graduate student perspective I feel that we are not in a period of stasis, but that we are in a very deep crisis. If there is one thing that my education has imparted on me and the other students with me today it is that you demand a lot of yourself and those around you in all that you do. That is why we are asking for the following, which may seem far off from your point of view, but for us this is what is required to ensure that SUNY and CUNY stay true to the mission of providing quality, affordable, accessible education:

- **FREEZE TUITION AND FORGIVE STUDENT DEBT.**
- **GIVE STUDENTS INPUT IN SUNY/CUNY POLICY.**
- **REPEAL NYSUNY 2020 AND REPLACE IT WITH THE PUBLIC PIVOT.**
- **STATE FUNDING NOT PRIVATIZATION.**

Next you will hear from three other students from across New York State all emphasizing the need for the above mentioned reform.

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Amir Khafagy of Queens, NY
Student of Laguardia community College

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, my name is Amir Khafagy of Queens, New York. I am currently attending Laguardia Community College. I have traveled to our State's Capitol today to speak on behalf of Community College students statewide. Additionally, I plan to speak out in regards to the deplorable condition of the State's educational system as a whole. As it stands today, the fact remains; our public schools have become nothing more than drop out factories, breeding grounds for poverty. Our State's underfunded Community Colleges are unable to cope with the mass amount of students that are applying for admission. As funding for CUNY and SUNY is evaporating, more students than ever before are applying to Community College and are finding out that their high school education must be re-taught to them. Our State's students want nothing more than the ability to have a chance to do better for themselves, but are constantly feeling like they're being held back.

The gap between rich and poor is no better felt than in the educational system in this state. As the privileged have the luxury of sending their children to elite private schools to obtain the best education, the disadvantaged have no choice but to send their children to failing schools to get DE-Educated. The world around us is continuing to march forward as we stupidly allow ourselves to fall behind. The challenge we face in education today is in dire need of attention, or it risks becoming the problem that will doom us tomorrow. Currently CUNY has more than 180,000 student enrolled, of those attending community college 51% have dropped out in the past 6 years. Only 28% manage to earn a degree, but only earn a degree after 6 years of study rather than the average 2 years it should take.. Many students like myself are required to take noncredit remedial courses in order to advance to college level courses. In fact four of five high school graduates arrive to community college needing some if not all math, reading and writing remedial courses. Many drop out before they have reached college level courses.

It's as if students are paying the price for the failures put upon them by the public high school education system. It is true that many of the most disadvantaged students do receive financial aid. About 40% of CUNY students do not pay any tuition at this time. But many students don't find the application process to be, by any means, easy. And it is not a safe bet for free ride as many like to call it. Students struggle to adjust to a new work load, any misstep and you will no longer be qualified for financial aid. If you have gotten arrested, forget about financial aid. If you are unable to become a full time student because of domestic commitments or need to work to support yourself and your family you will not be qualified for full financial aid. This scenario leads students in to a quagmire. Student must choose between a place to sleep or higher education, school or starvation. Let me ask the members of this committee, what would you choose in our position?

Students who attend community college go to school because we are told this this the best way to lift ourselves up from the grips of poverty, that obtaining a higher education will lift us to a higher degree of statues in our society. We strive for the chance to an equal education because we want to prove to ourselves that we can contribute something positive to the world. We want a chance to really believe that we can have an impact in changing the world for the better. If we were nothing but dead beat losers we wouldn't be in college to begin with. We want to believe that we can go to the moon if we really worked ourselves hard enough. But yet when budget cuts and tuition hikes are brought up we are the first ones to get hit the hardest. We are asked

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to carry the burden for others, for financial mismanagement and shady dealings. New York City students as well as other cities in the state are the victims of poor, unequal, segregated and unjust education. But we don't ask for reparations, all we ask is for justice, a fair deal.

CUNY has had a long and proud history as a free public university system. At one time the world's largest. CUNY as well as SUNY were intended to be a system of schools for the common good, a necessity in a productive society. The implementation of tuition and the pattern of tuition increases has become an economic disaster for those who cannot afford it. Tuition has held back the poor and benefited the rich. The apartheid of tuition blocks out those who need an education the most, as well as contributes to the cycle of poverty. Ladies and gentlemen of the committee I challenge you today to make the public university system just that, public and free for all who wish to attend. Help restore the right to a free and equal education for every New Yorker. I implore you to not leave the students behind, not to build walls around our right to a free and equal education, to uphold the States duty for the public good.

I warn you today that an uneducated public is the biggest factor in cultural damnation, but if you take up this cause I can assure you ladies and gentlemen this state, this country, will see an unrestricted flow of prosperity and blessings. On one final note, I ask you today to see that a right to a free education is not an expense to the state but as an investment in its future, a necessity for the common good. Thank you.

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Jonathan Saxton of Rochester, NY
Student of University of Albany

I'm Jonathan Saxton. I'm from Rochester, New York and when I graduated from high school my goal was to get a college education in my own state. After graduating from Monroe Community College I chose to continue along an educational path integral to my interests which is why I am currently a senior majoring in Political Science at SUNY Albany. The most salient things I have learned at SUNY are:

- 1.) The majority of my classes including those necessary for my general education requirements are taught by Teaching Assistants who make \$8,000-\$15,000 a year. These instructors are like me because they are simultaneously pursuing a higher education and struggling to make ends meet while garnering meager pay.
- 2.) I've learned that my identity as a student is centered around my taking on debt in order to attend classes. This is evident in the tuition increases which continually add stress and a financial burden on top of academic responsibilities. I understand that borrowing against my future does not make me unique amongst my peers. Most of the students at SUNY must also take on thousands of dollars of debt in order to accomplish their educational goals. In fact, 71% of University at Albany students graduated with an average of \$24,000 in debt in 2010.

And this brings me to my third point:

- 3.) Which is more of an answer to the question of what does it really mean to be a student at SUNY Albany? The answer is that being a student at SUNY means watching professors lose their jobs because budgets are shrinking to pay for the facilities and the instructors at the College of Nanotech, that my TA's will make \$400 per 40-student class they teach, that academically advantageous programs like EOP will lose funding while SUNY administrators receive pay increases.

SUNY Albany has failed to meet my expectations. I am more than disappointed that SUNY Albany's Student Assembly has represented the student body in its support of the NYSUNY 2020 bill, while not making students aware of what the bill entails, as well as their inability to acknowledge dissent of students and faculty that oppose the bill. I am disappointed that administrators continue to get raises and six-figure salaries, while students are asked to take on more debt.

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Students and faculty cannot be expected to accept these challenges to the quality of the State University of New York; not while there is a state obligation to ensure that our public institutions of higher education do not become privatized and that our Universities actually care about the financial and personal well-being of the students they teach and faculty they employ.

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