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**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE JOINT FISCAL
COMMITTEES OF THE NEW YORK STATE
LEGISLATURE REGARDING THE 2012-2013
EXECUTIVE BUDGET**

**THE FUNDING PRIORITIES OF THE STUDENTS
OF THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK**

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Presented by:

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INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the portions of the Governor's budget relating to public higher education.

My name is Kaitlyn Beachner and I am the elected president of the SUNY Student Assembly and a voting member of the SUNY Board of Trustees.

The Student Assembly of the State University of New York is comprised of student leaders elected by their peers from across all 64 SUNY campuses. Empowering students throughout the state, the SUNY Student Assembly is committed to student life and ensuring the representation of SUNY students at the state and national levels, as well as within the SUNY system. We are proud of our work with the state over the past few years on the issues that matter to students, including Rational Tuition and an end to annual cuts to SUNY.

THE BUDGET REALITY

SUNY students understand all too well the difficult fiscal position that New York State currently faces. As the country emerges from the deepest recession of our lifetime, families continue to struggle with the long-term and deeply personal effects of a foreclosed home or a lost job.

At the same time, students have seen a college degree become the new high school diploma—the new normal—as gainful employment requires an ever-greater level of education. And this isn't a bad thing. We want residents of New York to be the best-educated and most successful doctors and engineers and teachers and entrepreneurs in an increasingly competitive global economy.

We also want New York students to be the driving force behind the state's and country's economic recovery. To emerge from this Great Recession stronger than we entered, it will mean giving our next generation of workers the tools they need to pull this country up by the bootstraps. However, this recovery cannot take place without a significant commitment by the state to invest in a first-class public higher education system and invest in the students who enroll in that system.

This commitment by the state must mirror the hard work and sacrifices that students and their families make every day in order to build a better future for the state. SUNY's enrollment numbers are at a record high at the same time as student loan debt has overshadowed credit card debt in this country. As the cost of a college education soars ever higher, students have turned to community colleges and part-time jobs in ever-greater numbers. They will do anything to make a better future for themselves, their families, and their state and country. The state should seek to bolster their efforts, not hinder them.

THE STUDENT REALITY

Take the story of Emily, a senior at the State University of New York in Albany who comes from a strong SUNY lineage: her mother, father, sister and half-brothers have all attended SUNY schools. Shortly before Emily started college, her family experienced the unexpected loss of critical child support, presenting a major setback to their financial situation. Her sister was already attending SUNY Binghamton and the prospect of her mother supporting both of their college educations single-handedly was a daunting challenge. Luckily, with the availability of state and federal financial aid in the form of a TAP award, federal SMART and Pell grants and federal Stafford loans, Emily had a chance to attend college, where she was able to participate in a life-changing service-learning program to Bangalore, India and serve as a role model for her fellow students as a Student Senator.

Emily's story is powerful, but hardly unique. There can be no doubt that an affordable public higher education must be a top priority for the state of New York if we are to become a national and international leader in innovation, research, and economic development here at home.

Here are the numbers:

FACT: College enrollment is up, but completion rates are down. The University of Michigan Population Studies Center reports that for the high school class graduating in 1972, almost 50 percent entered college within two years, with this rate rising to 72 percent for those graduating in 1992. Over the same period there was a more than 5 percentage point decline in the college completion rate, from 51.1 percent to 45.3 percent. The recession has only exacerbated this trend.

FACT: Community college enrollment is trending upwards, and it started even before the recession. According to the same report, between the high school graduating class of 1972 and the graduating class of 1992, the share of students starting at a two-year institution rose from 29 percent to 39 percent.

FACT: The state is not paying its fair share to reflect this increase. As Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver said, "By law, this state is obligated to fund up to 40-percent of the operational budgets of our community colleges, but only once in four decades has the state fully met that obligation. Now, when these learning centers are so important to our economy, to our companies and to our workers, we must increase our investment in them."

And FACT: This underinvestment by the state is hurting our students and the state. Rising tuition, without additional investment in SUNY in past years, has hurt our ability to produce the talented students and attract the innovative companies that will make up the 21st century economy. Science and engineering degrees make up just 30 percent of higher education degrees conferred in New York State. Compare that with 44 percent in California and 36 percent in New Jersey, as well as 63 percent in Japan and 53 percent in China. Meanwhile, New York State's share of the nation's academic research and

development spending has declined from 10 percent in 1980 to under 8 percent in 2008, at a projected cost of almost 30,000 jobs—despite our state having the single largest public higher education system in the United States.

POLICIES TO BRIDGE THE GAP

So, what can you do to reverse these trends and make New York State the premiere location for technology and business? The SUNY Student Assembly has heard from students around the state and determined three foundational pillars that, when standing together, can support the kind economy we all know New York needs and deserves.

First are our community colleges, the backbone of American higher education. SUNY has done a tremendous job integrating community colleges and four-year institutions into a coherent system that will power a new New York State economy, allowing students to achieve their associates degree or easily transfer into a bachelors program within SUNY. Community colleges nationwide are also some of the top enrollers of veterans receiving post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, making them one of the most important ways to show the state's appreciation for those who sacrificed to defend our liberties. However, our community colleges have succeeded despite the state government, not because of it in recent years. On average, the counties have paid their part in this area, covering approximately 30 percent of the costs of community colleges. On the other hand, the state has repeatedly cut its support for community colleges, leaving students and families to make up the difference to the tune of over 40 percent of funding. In 2012, it is no longer enough to keep community colleges at even levels of funding; we need you to act, to show the state's commitment to community colleges with deeds, not just words. We do not expect the state to meet its 40 percent funding obligation overnight, but we do hope to see concrete steps in the right direction this year.

The second pillar of a strong New York economy is a robust system of state-based financial aid. President Obama spoke in Michigan last week about higher education in the United States and noted that, "In the coming decade, 60 percent of new jobs will require more than a high school diploma." He called an affordable higher education an "economic imperative" to make sure we can meet that demand. In recent years, we have seen the end of graduate TAP and cuts to the federal Pell grant and Stafford loan programs, and an end to subsidized loans for all graduate students, making it much more difficult for many students to attain the education needed to succeed. It is exactly at this moment, when other states and the federal government are cutting back financial aid, that New York State should increase its own aid and ensure that its students are the best educated and carry the least amount of debt. If we want to not only catch up to, but also surpass other states in producing STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) degrees and academic Research & Development, this is our best opportunity.

Finally, the sprawling SUNY system will need additional, campus-specific investment from the state to build academic programs that meet the needs of the new economy and strengthen student services that provide necessary support in an increasingly competitive

and stressful academic environment. The Governor's proposal to expand the NYSUNY 2020 Challenge Grants is significant for acknowledging the importance of investing in SUNY, and we look forward to seeing those grants awarded to the proposals that will spur economic revitalization and recognize the diversity of SUNY, including its community colleges and Ag/Tech schools.

CONCLUSION

SUNY students are not asking for anything unreasonable. The interests of the students and the state are aligned: we both want New York State to succeed, to be the center of a global economic recovery, and to be the heart that pumps innovation and technology into the United States and around the world. In these difficult times, we ask that you stand with us, stand with the students of SUNY, to make this a reality by paying your fair share to community colleges, helping to keep SUNY accessible, and continuing to invest in SUNY.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you all today.