



Testimony
to the
**Senate Finance Committee and
Assembly Ways and Means Committee on the
Proposed 2026-27 Executive Budget for
Higher Education**

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***Representing more than 700,000 professionals in education and healthcare
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Chairperson Krueger, Chairperson Pretlow, honorable members of the Legislature and distinguished staff, I am Melinda Person, President of New York State United Teachers (NYSUT). NYSUT represents more than 700,000 teachers, school-related professionals, academic and professional faculty in higher education, professionals in education and healthcare and retirees state-wide.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on the proposed 2026-27 New York State Executive Budget for Higher Education. Today's hearing comes at a critical time for education in our state. I appreciate this time to connect with members of the Legislature and representatives of the higher education community to share priorities, discuss experiences from the past year and examine ways that we can work together for the betterment of our students, educators, our two- and four-year colleges and the communities they serve.

My testimony represents the voices of more than 80,000 faculty and professional staff who work in public colleges and universities across the state, as well as the three SUNY teaching hospitals. These include the members of United University Professions at the State University of New York, the Professional Staff Congress of the City University of New York and the faculty and staff at nearly all the SUNY community colleges in the state.

Before I begin, I would like to thank you all for the work that you did in crafting last year's enacted budget, and for your continued advocacy on behalf of higher education. Your efforts, such as the funding floor and "hold harmless" language for our community colleges, debt service for the SUNY hospitals and the support for essential programs at our two and four-year schools, have benefited our public colleges and universities as well as their students.

Unfortunately, public higher education is under attack nationally. We are facing potential cuts in funding, a roll back of diversity programs, diminished support for students and the removal of protections for faculty, staff and students. New York must reaffirm the role that public higher education plays in our society by standing up for a just, inclusive and well-funded system of public higher education. Our state must be a leader in protecting faculty, staff and students. With uncertainty coming from our nation's capital, we are depending on you to support SUNY, CUNY and New York's community colleges to protect the jobs our communities rely on, the academic freedom our faculty defends, groundbreaking research, access to opportunities for working class families and workforce needs our business communities depend on.

We are pleased to see that the 2026-27 executive budget proposal continues the investment we have seen in the last three enacted budgets and we are encouraged by increases in operating support to both SUNY and CUNY. However, we were disappointed to see cuts to programs that have historically been supported by the Legislature such as, EOP, STEP, C-STEP, the CUNY Black Male initiative and the SUNY Asian American Institute. At a time when the federal government is curtailing accessibility and attacking diversity initiatives, we need to invest in programs that expand access to the largest number of students possible.

Comprehensive funding for our public colleges and universities remains a critical need. Federal action taken to decrease diversity and impose barriers for some of our most vulnerable populations to enter college is extremely concerning. If we cannot attract a more diverse subset of students and meet them where they are and support their successful completion, the chronic workforce shortages many professions are facing will only continue to plague us and hold back economic growth. Public higher education offers a solution, creating economic opportunity and a bridge into the middle class. When we close the door to public higher education, we do not just hurt the students we are shutting out, but we weaken the economy as a whole and the entire workforce suffers.

In addition, our colleges and universities need more full-time faculty. They are still struggling to provide enough mental health counselors, system-wide, to meet the complex needs of our students. Proper mental health support is a vital strategy in keeping our students healthy, engaged in school and on track to graduate, so lacking this support is a threat to the ongoing stability and viability of our postsecondary institutions and mission.

NYSUT is continuing its call for a transformational investment to revitalize our public colleges and universities and reaffirm public higher education's role in our society. Our proposal includes significant investments in operating support, student support and funding to provide all New Yorkers with access to quality public higher education. We are also asking for increases in capital funding to maintain, modernize and increase the energy efficiency of CUNY and SUNY's aging infrastructure. These investments will strengthen our two- and four-year SUNY and CUNY schools as well as the three teaching hospitals at SUNY Upstate, Downstate and Stony Brook, and signal that New York is the place to learn and thrive.

As companies consider where to locate, they are drawn to places with a pool of highly trained and educated employees necessary to fill high-demand jobs. We continue to see major companies in the tech and innovation spaces moving into New York. Micron's decision to build a new factory near Syracuse was largely based on their understanding that they would have access to a skilled workforce.

SUNY, CUNY and our community colleges help to provide that pool by preparing New Yorkers for current and future job opportunities. A growing number of employment opportunities require advanced degrees and special skills, further underscoring the need for significant state investment in public higher education. Additionally, some programs in areas with critical workforce shortages, such as nursing, are very expensive to maintain and operate. If we limit state support, access to financial aid and pipeline programs, we will not meet our growing industry needs.

The education and training available to students in public higher education also creates social mobility and limits economic disparities. If our public higher education system is affordable and accessible to all, it will become an economic driver that will keep New York at the forefront of innovation.

State Investment

Although we've seen funding improvements in recent years, New York's SUNY state-operated campuses and CUNY city-operated campuses are still struggling to recover from at least a decade of flat funding. As a result, SUNY has four state-operated campuses (ESF, Buffalo State, Potsdam and Fredonia) with combined structural/projected deficits of \$41.8 million. That decade of underfunding has resulted in a steady decline in full-time faculty, poorly compensated adjunct faculty, a decline in crucial support services. For example, CUNY currently has only 35 full-time faculty for every 1,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) students, and the ratios for mental health counselors and academic advisors are also troubling with some campuses having one academic advisor for every 1,200 students.

Inflation and high-interest rates guarantee that operational costs will continue to rise. To address this, state dollars must be allocated to fund mandatory costs passed on to CUNY and SUNY, including fringe benefits, utility costs, building rentals, contractual obligations and incremental salary increases. Without sufficient state funding to cover rising costs, CUNY and SUNY will be forced to absorb them to the detriment of student programs and services.

A significant state investment is needed to grow enrollments, attract the highest quality faculty members and maximize the quality of higher education in New York. We ask that you continue to prioritize operating aid for public higher education as we head into 2026-27. We must build upon the momentum generated by recent budgets. Our public colleges and universities, still struggling with the weight of poor decisions made a decade ago, cannot withstand another period of austerity.

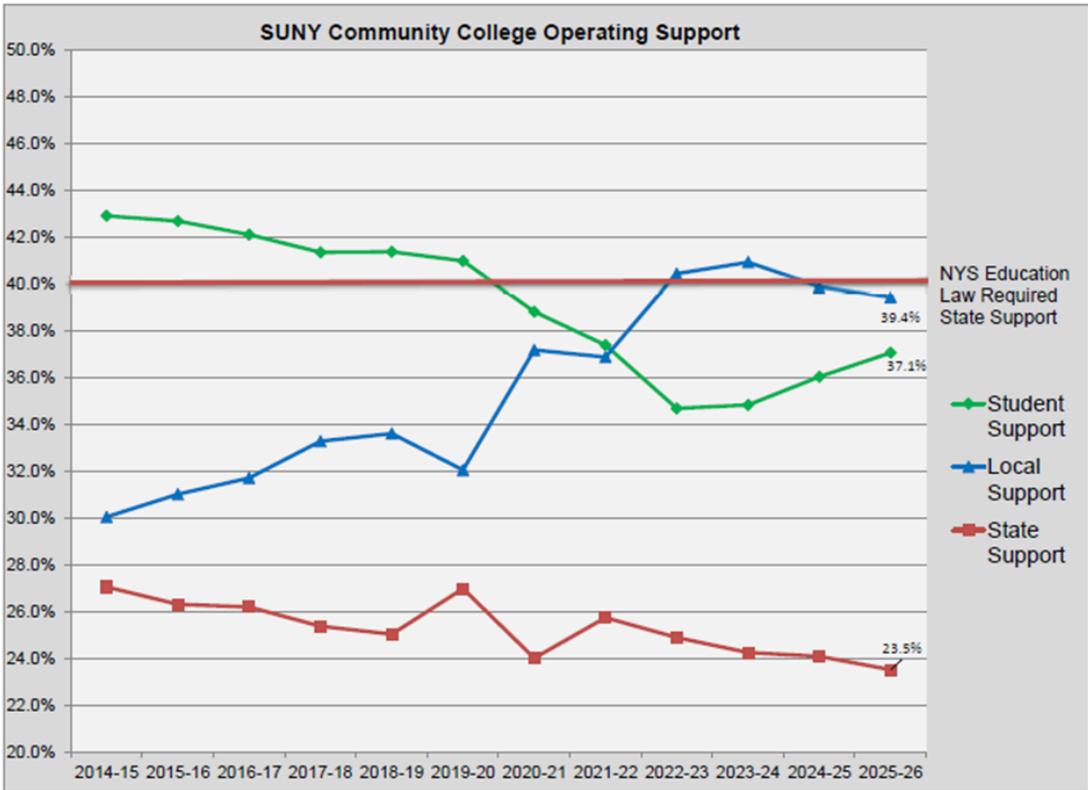
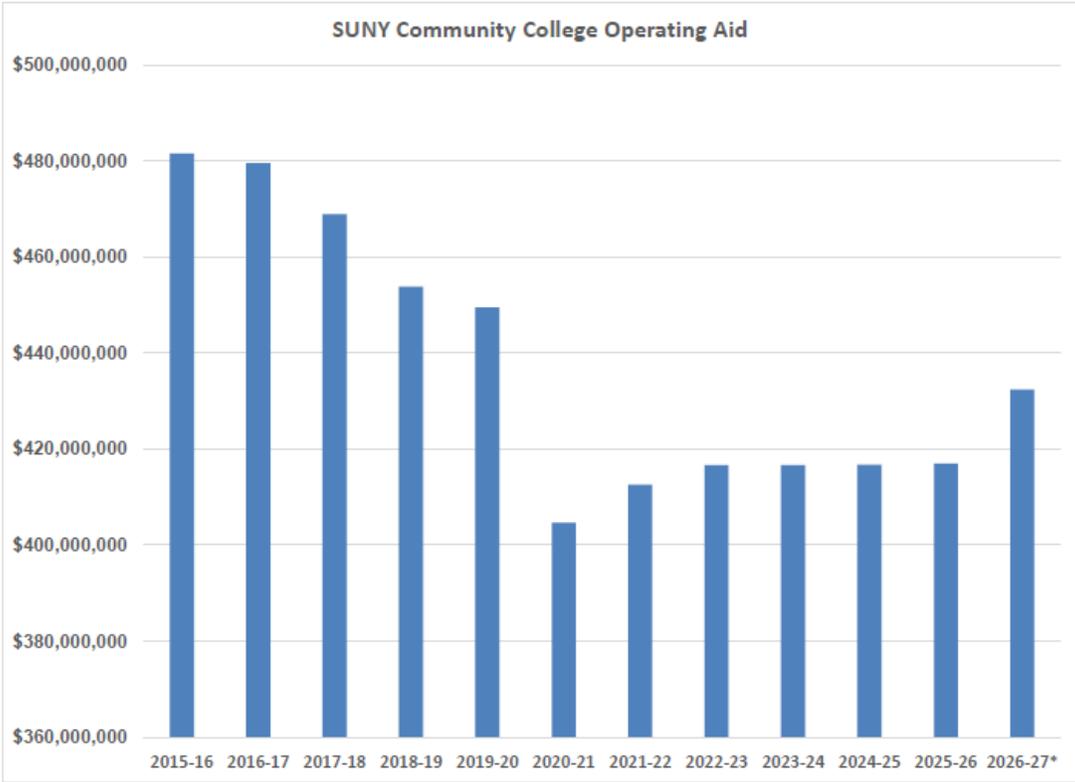
Community Colleges

Community colleges educate and prepare students for the workforce and advance social mobility. They provide an essential foundation for those seeking to move on to four-year campuses or universities. Community colleges are also able to collaborate with regional employers and develop and provide training to address specific local workforce needs.

While we appreciate the modest increase in operating aid in the executive budget, we are disappointed that our community colleges are slated to receive essentially the same level of base aid funding allotted to them in last year's enacted budget. To fully meet local demand more support is needed.

State education law requires the state to pay 40 percent of community college operating costs. We know the Legislature is committed to supporting our community colleges, but the proposed state funding is still well below that which is required by law.

As the charts below illustrate, SUNY community colleges, even with recent increases in enrollment, are still receiving significantly less in operating aid than they did in 2015.



Over that same period, students paid the lion's share of the operating costs of these campuses. Over a 10-year period — from 2008-09 to 2018-19 — SUNY community college students went from paying 40.8 percent of the operating costs to approximately 41.4 percent. New York students' financial burden to attend community college is nearly double the national average. Meanwhile, the state's contribution decreased from 30.8 percent to 25 percent during the period from 2019- 2023 and remains appallingly low today even though New York ranks as the sixth most expensive state for community college students. Also concerning is the fact that the state contribution varies from college to college.

Year after year, budget after budget, we have seen the state "notwithstanding" the law at the expense of our students and community colleges. This practice must stop. Accordingly, we call on the state to provide an additional \$101.7 million to CUNY and \$95 million to SUNY, which would bring the state to 33 percent of what it is statutorily required to pay to these institutions. While this would still be well short of the state's full 40 percent obligation, it would be a good first step.

We would also welcome an opportunity to participate in any process designed to create a new funding model for these institutions. The FTE funding model, which allocates state dollars based on a set amount multiplied by the number of FTE students enrolled, is inadequate. The reliance on enrollment trends over the past decade has resulted in unpredictable funding and general instability. We should insulate our campuses from short-term enrollment fluctuations and prepare them for long-term growth and sustainability.

Moreover, while we are grateful for the introduction of the funding floor in 2019 and recognize that it was a valuable tool during the pandemic, it is far from a panacea. Budget after budget, the message to the community colleges is to be grateful for the funding floor because without it, things would have been much worse.

The time has come to do more than just assure the colleges that they will get 100 percent of last year's funding. This model fails to recognize that community colleges are losing money, even with the funding floor, because the cost of everything has gone up since 2019. Funding for our community colleges has not remotely kept up with the rate of inflation. Without a significant increase in base aid funding, colleges will have no choice but to reduce academic programs and student services and shift costs to our students through tuition increases.

To break this cycle and truly help our community colleges, NYSUT supports establishing a predictable funding floor, which guarantees that base funding be equal to no less than the highest amount received in any of the previous three fiscal years, indexes state contributions to inflation and protects colleges against enrollment-based funding reductions. Indexing the funding floor to inflation, using the Commonfund Higher Education Price Index (HEPI) would require a \$15.4 million investment from the state.

Even with the positive impact of the SUNY Reconnect program, many of our community colleges are continuing to deal with low enrollment and are struggling to survive. In fact, twelve of the thirty campuses may be characterized as fiscally distressed. To address this problem, NYSUT is advocating for an increase in small college aid, which is woefully underfunded at \$940,000. To provide our community colleges with the support they need, we will be advocating for this fund to be increased to \$3.7 million.

The CUNY ASAP program was created to help students earn their associate degrees as quickly as possible — with a goal of graduating at least 50 percent of the enrollees within three years. The program is designed to help students overcome systemic barriers and other hardships that prevent them from graduating by providing them with academic, social and financial support. The ASAP model has been successfully implemented at Westchester Community College through their Viking Roads program. Student retention and graduation rates have gone up dramatically at both the CUNY and Westchester Community College ASAP programs. We are seeking to expand ASAP to all our SUNY community colleges.

While we were encouraged to see continued funding for the SUNY ASAP program in the executive budget proposal, we are disappointed that this plan only covers 13 of our 30 community colleges and concerned that the funds allocated (approximately \$2,000 per student as opposed to \$3,400 per student spent at CUNY and the Viking Roads program) are insufficient to guarantee program success.

In addition to funding for ASAP-like programs, we are asking for an additional \$125 million to stabilize our community colleges and put our students on a path to equity and social mobility. This long overdue investment will enable community colleges to stabilize faculty and staff, bolster student services, reduce financial losses from high-cost programs like nursing and advanced manufacturing and invest in scaling high-need programs.

Public Higher Education Access for All

Every dollar invested in SUNY and CUNY yields even greater returns for New York's tax base. However, a continued shift of costs from the state to students has placed additional financial burdens on our students and their families and has reduced access to the high-quality education every New Yorker deserves.

NYSUT continues to advocate for a public higher education system that delivers results and sets up our students for success without leaving them hopelessly in debt. To accomplish this, we support state investment in SUNY and CUNY two- and four-year colleges and universities and oppose tuition and fee increases. We must not pass additional costs to our students. To improve access to public higher education, we support providing every New Yorker with 60 tuition and fee-free credits to be used at any SUNY or CUNY school.

We would like to thank the governor for taking an important first step in making public higher education a reality for more New Yorkers with her New York Opportunity Promise Scholarship initiative for our public community colleges. However, we are asking for an investment to expand the New York Opportunity Promise Scholarship so that more students can have access to a world-class public higher education at our SUNY and CUNY colleges and universities. While we support the changes in this year's executive budget proposal, which expands the list of high-demand fields and allows students aged 25 to 55 who are enrolled in an approved program leading to an associate degree in nursing to participate in this scholarship program, even if they have a post-secondary degree, we believe the program should be made available to more New Yorkers. Accordingly, we ask that it be expanded to include every SUNY and CUNY college or university that offers associate degrees in the academic programs that have been identified as shortage areas, cover students ages 18-55 and allow applicants who have obtained a post-secondary degree (instead of restricting them) so that they are able to enroll in all of the approved high-demand programs, not just nursing.

SUNY Hospitals

The three SUNY teaching hospitals in Syracuse, Brooklyn and Stony Brook are state hospitals that serve all New Yorkers regardless of their ability to pay. Unfortunately, these facilities, which have been chronically underfunded, are now facing the specter of diminished federal support.

To safeguard the future of these critical institutions, the state must equip these hospitals, so they are able to withstand federal cuts and be prepared for the next health crisis. We must fund their growth and expansion so that they can keep up with myriad advances in healthcare and the complex needs of the communities they serve.

Properly funding these vital teaching institutions will ensure their viability and financial stability. We appreciate the executive budget proposal to provide \$150 million in capital funding for alterations and improvements to SUNY Upstate, SUNY Downstate and SUNY Stony Brook. We were also pleased to see \$100 million in operating support for SUNY Downstate.

We ask that these teaching hospitals be held financially harmless from any federal cuts and that they receive \$75 million to cover employee fringe benefits. Additionally, although the state once provided \$157 million to the three SUNY hospitals for debt service relief, they are now the only state entities that do not, as a matter of course, receive debt service relief from New York state. We therefore ask that the state provide \$82 million to cover debt service, as is done for every other state agency.

Conclusion

New York's public colleges and universities form a world-class higher education system that is essential to the state's economy and innovation. We are at a pivotal moment — we must do the right thing and embrace public higher education by investing in this system as a public good that fuels an engine of social mobility for millions and serves as a driver of economic growth for our state.

I ask the Legislature to fund public higher education to the level our students deserve and our state requires; reject any cuts to public higher education in the executive budget proposal; stand with educators and students to ensure that the choice to pursue quality, public higher education will not be taken away from those who can least afford to lose it; and build upon the executive budget proposal by securing additional aid for our colleges, universities and teaching hospitals so they may continue to provide the high-quality services New Yorkers deserve and have come to expect.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today and for all you have done to improve public higher education in New York state. I look forward to continuing our work.