

**Testimony Before the New York State Legislature  
2015 Joint Budget Hearing on Higher Education**

**February 10, 2015**

**By New York City Council Member Inez Barron,  
Chair of the Committee on Higher Education**

Good afternoon Chairs Farrell, LaValle and Glick and members of the Committee on Higher Education. I am Council Member Inez Barron and I have the distinction of serving as the Chair of the Committee on Higher Education in the New York City Council. Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today on the Executive Budget regarding Higher Education.

What is our obligation as a society to provide education opportunities?

Is it our responsibility to educate people so that they can function and contribute to society—improving social conditions, advancing technology, sustaining and protecting the environment, reaching goals of peaceful coexistence? I say yes.

If so, then it is required of those of us charged with governing the people to equip them with the tools—academic, trade, artistic, intellectual, cultural and physical to fulfil those objectives.

As this society expands in technology, people in this country with only a high school education will have limited access to functioning productively in the emerging economy. The employment trend has shown that employment increases have been concentrated at the lowest earning level and thereby contribute to the expanding income inequality chasm. Today the top 1% earn more than the bottom 80% combined.

The City University of New York (CUNY) was established in 1847 as the Free Academy, with the premise that higher education was not reserved as a privilege for the gentry but a right for all those seeking it, without regard to economic status. The goal of the Free Academy was to provide access and excellence. This shining example of quality higher education existed as tuition-free for nearly 130 years, even withstanding the economic depths of the Great Depression. Fortunately, I was able to attend CUNY because Hunter College was tuition-free and I met the entrance requirements. Sadly, tuition was imposed in 1976, during the period of the backlash to gains of the Civil Rights Movement. Unfortunately, in 2011, this legislative body, adopted what was presented as a “rational tuition policy”, which imposes a yearly increase in tuition at SUNY and CUNY colleges. Today, fifty-six percent of CUNY’s 270,00 degree students have household incomes of less than \$30,000. Seventy-five percent are people of color. Thirty-eight percent experience food insecurity. Forty-two percent experience housing insecurity. To date, CUNY’s twenty-four institutions have produced thirteen Nobel Prize Winners: 5 medicine, 3 physics, 2 chemistry, 2 economics and 1 physical medicine.

In 1990, the State contributed 74% in aid to senior colleges and 36% to community colleges. Tuition accounted for 21% of senior college budgets and 22% of community colleges. Today, **State aid only accounts for 52% at senior colleges and 26% at community colleges.** Tuition contributions have risen to 47% at senior colleges and 44% at community colleges.

Recognizing the burden that tuition imposes, and that textbook costs and other fees are denying some students an opportunity to attend college, last year the New York City Council allocated \$10.9 million to establish a Merit Based Scholarship Program which gives a yearly \$800 award to students who maintain a B average. This is a nominal amount but helps to defray some student costs.

President Barack Obama has boldly advanced a plan for free tuition for the first two years of college. The American College Promise is an approach to expanding education opportunities to many who have been locked out. I would encourage the State to explore ways in which we can partner with the federal government to make this a reality. In conversation with CUNY Chancellor James Milliken last year, he too indicated his support of the concept of free tuition for the first two years of college.

In addition to this merit based approach, I am also advocating for a needs based scholarship initiative for students not covered by TAP and Pell.

The education spectrum is a continuum of instruction from pre-kindergarten to post graduate. At the college level, the enrollees are students who have come through the system and completed secondary education. Yet, although NYC students graduate being certified as having met the criteria, woefully, only 21% are college or career ready. This failure of schools, which has deprived our children of their constitutional entitlement to a sound basic education is due to factors which include inadequate teacher preparation and inadequate funding. In 2007,

after 12 years of litigation, the Court held that NYC was entitled to \$5.6 Billion to compensate for the decades of underfunding by the State. For the past several years, NYS has ignored and defied that Court decree. I continue to call on NYS legislature to honor its obligation as noted in the Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE) settlement, so that NYC students will have sufficient number of properly prepared teachers, smaller class size, current texts and technology and highly effective school leadership.

In CUNY Community Colleges, 75% of the students are NYC graduates and sadly, 78% of them need at least one remedial course. This lack of adequate preparation has necessitated the need for remedial courses which for CUNY has been relegated to Community Colleges. (It should be noted however, that other so-called Ivy League colleges offer remedial classes at their four year institutions.) These programs are for high potential, academically under-prepared, low income (185% of FPL) students to gain access to higher education, remain in school and graduate. These programs offer academic support, counseling, career advisement and other best practices of successful student performance. The 8,207 students of Percy Ellis Sutton SEEK program receive a book stipend of \$1,100 and the 2,509 College Discovery (CD) students receive \$700.

In 2002, my predecessor, Council Member Charles Barron, saw the appalling situation of the paucity of Black males admitted to and retained in CUNY. He cited this inequity as a reflection of the historical racist policies, both *de jure* and *de facto*; the continuing social conditions that perpetuate poverty and income inequality; unemployment and underemployment; an

education system that distorts and omits our great African heritage; and underfunding by both City and State. The result of attempting to address this situation was the creation of the Black Male Initiative (BMI). It is a stellar program which operates on all CUNY campuses, is open to all underrepresented groups of students and is now baselined in the City budget.

The evidence of success of these programs is encouraging. Compared to non-program students, the one year retention rate is 9% point higher; the three year graduation rate is 8% higher and the transfer to Bachelor's Program is 23% higher. At Baruch's Opportunity Program, 89% earned passing grades, even though they were not eligible for admission through the regular admission procedure. Seventy-nine percent of SEEK students and eighty percent of CD students earned a gpa of 2.0 or better and forty three percent of SEEK and fifty percent of CD students earned a 3.0 or better. SEEK student Mark Smiley graduated with a 3.99 grade point average and won a \$300,00 scholarship to medical school.

I call upon the NYS Legislature to restore the proposed cuts to these exemplary effective programs. The ASAP program has gained national recognition, but is unjustifiably eliminated from the budget. SEEK, CD, Joseph Murphy Institute, Child Care Centers, ATTAIN labs are all targeted for reduction and it is up to the Legislature to restore the funding and consider increases needed to keep pace with inflation.

The overall funding to Community Colleges is proposed for a \$3.4 million cut. This represents 26% of the total budget for community colleges, currently at \$845.4 million. We cannot operate

our higher education institutions based on raising tuition that students pay. In fact, we should be moving in the direction of reducing tuition costs, until ultimately, higher education is tuition free—an entitlement of birth.

The Governor's plan to shift from funding based on enrollment to performance based will undermine the goal of using education as an equalizer. This corporate model will join policies that perpetuate inequality in our society. As a former NYC elementary school principal, I certainly know the value of preparing academic plans and setting performance objectives. I was required to meet or surpass the annual yearly progress targets set by the State. But the Campus Performance Improvement Plan being the basis of determining ten percent of a college's funding allocation is divisive and furthers the schism between schools. The impact of providing greater financial allocations to some schools over others will certainly affect the ability of a school to provide additional resources, greater variety of course offerings, smaller classes, more instructional staff and other educational support. Likewise for the proposal to give financial incentives to campus presidents for their participation in Start Up NY.

I think that the NY DREAM Act should be a stand alone bill, not tied to the political positions regarding allowing tax credits.

The Higher Education budget should also increase funding to address the issue of a lack of advancement of Blacks and Latinos on the tenure track to full professors. Over the last twenty

years, there has only been a 1% increase in Black faculty at CUNY and no significant pool of Ph.D. There needs to be a vibrant, aggressive recruitment plan.

The efforts on behalf of reducing sexual assault on college campuses, providing resources to the survivors and creating a safe college environment must continue. Only five percent of persons who are assaulted reports the crime to the authorities. Some of the reasons cited were: they did not think it was important enough; they had been drinking; the victims felt they would be treated like criminals. We must expand the outreach to students as to what constitutes sexual assault and what bystanders should do.

Thank you for this opportunity. If there are any questions, I will be glad to answer them.