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2015-2016
Executive Budget Testimony

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Joint Legislative Public Hearing
New York State Assembly Committees on Ways & Means and Higher Education
New York State Senate Committees on Finances and Higher Education
February 10, 2015

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon! I want to first thank: Chairpersons John DeFrancisco, Denny Farrell, Ken Lavalle and Deborah Glick, members of the Senate and Assembly, and their legislative staff for allowing us this opportunity to speak today. It is a privilege to be here on behalf of the nearly half million students of the State University of New York to comment on the 2015-2016 Executive Budget.

My name is Lori Mould, and I am currently a student at SUNY Empire State College, an alum of Genesee Community College and the President of the Student Assembly of the State University of New York. I am pleased to be joined by fellow students Devin Ellen Sonne from Mohawk Valley Community College and Marc Cohen and Rey Muniz III, both from the University at Albany. Together, we will specifically address SUNY students, the legislative priorities of our Student Assembly and with your support, ways in which we can work together to continue to enhance the services provided to our students to ensure their continued success.

It is the mission of the Student Assembly of the State University of New York to empower the students of SUNY—through advocacy—to seek continued access to quality, affordable higher

education; to support the goals and initiatives identified by the students of SUNY as paramount to their success. We are here to discuss the role that SUNY will play in the future of New York.

It is no secret that the financial burdens incurred to complete a college degree are growing exponentially. From tuition, fees, student loan interest rates, housing costs, food, and travel; our students and their families have to stretch themselves to the limit to secure the monies needed to complete their degrees. They work twice as hard and sleep half as much in order to make ends meet. It is sad to say that many students have indebted themselves by borrowing thousands of dollars at astronomical interest rates. The statistics show that this generation has a steeper hill to climb than any other generation in the history of American higher education. The costs associated with college are higher than ever before.

With that being said, we are here to discuss the needs of our students and how we can combat the hardships that our students are facing. Investment in SUNY is not a one way revenue stream. We generate $5.00 in spending for every $1.00 that the state invests. SUNY is responsible for providing students with various services and supports that are directly responsible for ensuring our students access, completion, and ultimately success throughout their educational endeavor. We are researchers and developers. We are the up and coming workforce. We are the future of New York and we have come here today requesting that our elected officials help us as we advocate for our students. **I now yield to Representative Devin Ellen Sonne.**

Community College Base Aid: SUNY has a long and proud tradition of outstanding community college education. Throughout the state, community colleges perform a myriad of functions from educator and developer, to incubator and economic driver. They bring culture and diversity to our communities and provide New Yorkers with the opportunity to learn, grow, and most

importantly, to succeed. Community colleges are a point of access for hundreds of thousands of people who are looking to better themselves. These are people who want to start a business or learn a trade. They want to transfer on to a four year university or receive a certificate to get that promotion. In short, community colleges are an unparalleled source of opportunity. A study conducted by the New York Association for Community College Presidents states that the economic impact of community colleges is over $15 billion dollars annually. As many of you know, our community colleges rely on various funding sources to thrive. These include state funding, county funding, and of course, tuition dollars. A metric was developed through which to determine the fair share of those respective sources. Despite the increasingly important positions that community colleges play, it has been evident for years that the state has consistently failed to pay its equal share of base aid. This is simply unacceptable. Community Colleges are forging new partnerships every day that function as economic catalysts. Whether you are studying viticulture at Finger Lakes or engineering science at Mohawk Valley, it is clear that our programs are an overwhelming success. They are steadily producing a job ready workforce for New York State and yet they have consistently been forced to function without the funding that they are due. In order to adjust to this, tuition increases have become all too common. As we mentioned before, this is not a burden that students are even remotely capable of bearing. This is an issue that will eventually affect our entire system. Community colleges are by their nature accessible and affordable. When the affordability factor is compromised, so too is enrollment; with fewer students enrolling and fewer students completing two year degrees this means fewer students transferring on to a four year degrees and eventually migrating into the professional workforce. We simply cannot allow this to happen. We understand that budgets are tight. As students, tight budgets and limited funds are a fact of life. What we also understand is an

obligation to pay our dues. We are here to ask that the state meet their statutory obligation, and increase base aid funding to community colleges to sufficient levels. Restoring sufficient funding is clearly not something that we expect the legislature to do in just a single session. As such, for this year, we are only asking for a $250 dollar increase per full time equivalent to community college base. It is time to step up to the plate and follow the legal prescriptions set forth and to stop piling the burden on top of students. With proper funding, there is no limit to the role that community colleges can play in the future of New York's economy. **I now yield my time to Director Rey Muniz III.**

Textbook Affordability: Another very important item we would like to tackle today would be the increasingly important issue of textbook affordability. Consider the following

1. The annual average costs of textbooks is over $1,200 dollars. That is equivalent to 27 tanks of gas or roughly 111 meals.

2. The cost of textbooks has risen 812% in just 35 years.

3. More than 65% of students have forgone the purchase of a textbook due to cost and 94% of those students reported that they feel as though that will negatively impact their grades.

Due to financial aid schedules, insufficient award amounts, and varying degrees of textbook availability, this is often a cost that the student bears directly. Not only does this put students at a distinct disadvantage based upon social-economic status, but it threatens to negatively impact completion rates. Despite some minor efforts, this challenge has largely gone unanswered. Now, it is time that we address this issue in a substantive manner, identifying key areas for investment. First, we ask that this assembly pass bill A.1178, the Textbook affordability act, which authorizes the creation of a task force to identify key textbook cost reduction strategies. This

includes investigating open access texts, print on demand technologies, digital textbooks, and greater collaboration with faculty, publishers, and college bookstores.

We believe that investment into the findings of this task force will be a bold stride in leadership on the part of the legislature and a giant step forward for struggling students.

On Campus Childcare Centers: Amidst an upward trend in non-traditional educational tracts many college students are representing a growing student demographic: Parents. In order to accommodate growing demand, SUNY childcare centers throughout the system have been expanding programs, accepting more charges, and stretching every dollar to the max. For years, childcare centers have been woefully underfunded, unable to service the demand. Despite the fact that these programs are already struggling, the executive budget has consistently cut hundreds of thousands of dollars annually from program funding. We would like to thank the members of this legislature for restoring that funding year after year. Today however, we are here to tell you that these dollars are simply insufficient. Across the system, childcare programs are sinking. Desperate parents who are trying to receive an education to help provide for their families are forced to drop out because of the abject lack of affordable child care. In underfunding this program, we do them a great disservice. We ask that this year, the legislature support a net increase to SUNY childcare funding to help put these programs back on track to assist thousands of parents each year. **I now yield my time to Senior Director Marc Cohen.**

Increased EOP funding: SUNY has a long and distinguished track record of student excellence. SUNY has become synonymous with new ideas, progress and innovation, and is continually recognized for its commitment to diversity and access. One of the most successful examples of this is the Educational Opportunity Program, commonly known as EOP. EOP

supports worthy students who come from disadvantaged economic backgrounds, and allows them to pursue an education that might otherwise be unavailable to them. EOP is something that all SUNY students can be proud of. It speaks to our strong belief in equality and inclusion and our firm conviction that everyone who is willing to work hard, regardless of economic status, should be able to receive a degree. In many instances, it allows students to break a cycle of generational financial dependency by becoming well educated and employable. This year's agenda is: Opportunity for all. Unfortunately, EOP funding is under attack having been cut significantly in the executive budget. We cannot permit those funding cuts. As of the end of last year, we have 9,359 students enrolled in this program. Nearly 10,000 students who are working tirelessly towards finishing a degree that they otherwise might never have had the opportunity to receive. With the proposed budget cuts in place, some of these students will not be able to continue their education. They will be left without the assistance so necessary to their success, We are respectfully requesting that this body restore the $1.3 million dollars that was cut from this program. It is in everyone's best interest to assist these students along their pathway to success. **I now yield my time to President Lori Mould.**

Conclusion: We understand the fiscal constraints that the state is currently facing. It is a difficult decision making process that students face on a daily basis. Every semester we have a list of tough choices to make. Should we buy that textbook, or hold off and see if the library has a copy? Can we get by without that calculator for one more week? Should we really add another $10,000 dollars of debt to our plate? These are the questions we ask and these are the choices that we have to make. We are here today, not asking for a handout but instead, we are here to request that the state strengthen its partnership with SUNY and continue the mutually beneficial trend that it has in years past. SUNY can continue to be the driver behind the New York State

economy. Every dollar that SUNY receives is an investment that has a tangible, measurable return. We are a system of almost a half million students who created tens of thousands of jobs, provided an educated workforce, world renowned research, and offering unparalleled opportunity to every New Yorker. We are poised to reach new heights, achieve even greater things, and to show the nation what it looks like to do public higher education the right way. Let's make SUNY synonymous with success. Let's invest in our states future, not flat-line it. We the students of SUNY are asking you to stand by our side, continue to expand our partnership, and to help us reach ever higher levels of accomplishment. Once again, we thank all of you for the opportunity to speak today, and we look forward with great anticipation to the future.