

**Testimony of Chancellor Félix V. Matos Rodríguez  
The City University of New York**

**Joint Senate and Assembly Legislative Public Hearing on  
the Fiscal Year 2022 Executive Budget Proposal**

**Thursday, February 4, 2020**

Good morning, Chairs Krueger, Weinstein, Stavisky and Glick, and members of the Senate Finance, Assembly Ways and Means, and the Senate and Assembly Higher Education committees, staff and guests. I am Félix Matos Rodríguez, Chancellor of The City University of New York. I am joined this morning by Executive Vice Chancellor and University Provost José Luis Cruz, Executive Vice Chancellor and Chief Operating Officer Héctor Batista, and Senior Vice Chancellor and Chief Financial Officer Matthew Sapienza.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify this morning. It is an understatement to say that a lot has changed since I last appeared before you a year ago, but I am proud to be able to share today how The City University of [New York stood strong against a relentless pandemic](#), and outline our priorities, plans and goals for the coming fiscal year and beyond.

I am extremely honored and humbled to oversee the premier and largest urban public university in the United States, serving 500,000 students, 19,000 faculty and 21,300 staff at our 11 four-year-colleges, seven community colleges and seven graduate and professional schools. On behalf of the entire CUNY community, I want to thank Governor Cuomo, the State Senate, and the State Assembly for your past and sustained support, which has enabled CUNY to deliver strong results for our students and the citizens of New York.

Back in early April, as the coronavirus was tightening its grip on New York, Governor Cuomo issued an executive order allowing the state's fourth-year medical students to graduate early so they could help in the battle against COVID-19. One week later, members of the inaugural class of the CUNY School of Medicine received their degrees and began joining the front lines as volunteers in city hospitals. It was a moment that symbolized so much about CUNY. Most of those first-ever CUNY MD's are from racial and ethnic groups that have been both traditionally underrepresented in medicine and disproportionately affected by COVID-19. In the kind of virtual commencement that would later become the norm, I told them how proud I was of their willingness to put themselves on the line.

2020 was a year that both demanded and inspired great fortitude and resourcefulness from our students, faculty, staff and leaders. The coronavirus was largely a remote concern when the year began, but it soon gained a foothold in New York that forced CUNY to all but shut down its 25 campuses on March 12 and quickly pivot to distance education. [When classes resumed](#) after a week-long academic recess, 95 percent of the University's 50,000 course sections had transitioned to online instruction. We quickly realized that thousands of students lacked the tools to participate in distance learning. With support from the Governor, we purchased 33,000 laptops and tablets and made sure they were safely distributed to students in need, as well as

provided 4,000 personal hotspots for those students who required enhanced Wi-Fi capability. It was just one part of our broad efforts during the year to help our students weather the academic, economic and emotional challenges they faced.

I want to emphasize that these are efforts that won't stop when the pandemic is over. We enthusiastically support the Governor's proposal to require all internet providers in the state to offer affordable broadband service to low-income households. If enacted, it will bring a critical benefit to tens of thousands of CUNY students whose education has been hampered by inadequate access to remote learning technology.

Early in the COVID-19 crisis, we [established the Chancellor's Emergency Relief Fund](#) with \$1 million each from the Carroll and Milton Petrie Foundation and the James and Judith K. Dimon Foundation. By the fall, support from additional donors [grew the fund to more than \\$8 million](#) and allowed us to distribute emergency grants to more than 10,000 students. Individual colleges and schools raised more than \$8.6 million in addition, enabling them to help thousands more, and for a total of nearly [\\$17 million in emergency relief funds](#) across the university. We were also among the first systems in the nation to disburse \$118 million in student emergency grants that were funded by the federal CARES Act, in the end distributing nearly 200,000 grants averaging approximately \$600. An additional \$118 million in aid to students will be allocated shortly, using federal Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act funds.

CUNY joined the city's battle against the coronavirus on many fronts. Campuses [used 3D printers](#) to produce personal protective equipment. Experts at the School of Public Health and Health Policy produced [a weekly tracking survey](#) of New Yorkers' attitudes and behaviors around the pandemic. CUNY scientists repurposed their work to take on [coronavirus-related research](#). One project that gained national attention devised a process for monitoring the level of coronavirus in the city's wastewater to help identify new outbreaks before testing did and guide health officials' response. The University also made its campuses available to serve as testing sites, and provided expertise in helping to train contact tracers. And [so many students rallied](#) to help their fellow New Yorkers even as they faced unthinkable pressures and loss.

CUNY takes seriously its role in the civic life of New York, never more so than in the pandemic year of 2020. Our non-partisan CUNY Votes campaign helped register students for the November election, and CUNY was an important partner in New York City's drive for a complete and accurate [2020 census](#) count despite the obstacles presented by COVID-19. The 260 student members of CUNY's Census Corps reached more than two million New Yorkers through texts, calls and over 3,000 mostly virtual events, helping the city achieve a record-breaking self-response rate of nearly 62 percent. And our Center for Urban Research's pioneering mapping service won national praise for helping local officials focus on hard-to-count communities.

The perseverance and accomplishment came amid a backdrop of widespread grief. CUNY campuses and Central office have been deeply saddened by the loss to COVID-19 of many dear members of our community, including 22 staff members, 16 faculty, four students, and countless CUNY retirees and alumni. Among them were [Allen Lew](#), CUNY's senior vice

chancellor of the Office for Facilities, Planning and Construction Management, who attended this hearing with me last year. The University's website now includes an [In Memoriam](#) page to pay tribute to those we've lost.

Through it all, we stayed the course and [students pressed on](#). This past academic year, [CUNY conferred 56,527 degrees](#), the second highest total in our history and just shy of the record high awarded the year before.

CUNY has many reasons to be optimistic about the future. The long-awaited coronavirus vaccine became available for public distribution in December, and we were extremely proud that it was a CUNY nursing alumna, Sandra Lindsay, who was the first person in the U.S. to receive it.

Looking ahead to life after COVID, we redoubled our efforts to help our students succeed, graduate on time and find sustainable career paths that will also help drive the state and city's economic recovery. Among the most important developments were a plan to [expand mental health services](#) on campuses and a new partnership, [the New York Jobs CEO Council](#), which is working with the CEOs from 27 of the largest employers in the New York area to create a pipeline to job opportunities for 25,000 CUNY students. We also focused our professional development training to help 3,400 faculty become better online teachers, part of a larger, longer-range initiative [to improve pedagogy at CUNY](#).

These efforts will be greatly aided by a pair of \$10 million gifts from foundations that are important CUNY partners. One of the investments, from [BNY Mellon](#), will support innovative educational programs and workplace initiatives that will help train 40,000 underserved students for high-demand jobs, closing equity gaps and supporting the region's post-pandemic economic recovery. The other grant, [from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation](#), will advance CUNY programs in racial, ethnic and social justice studies and the [humanities](#), and expand a program that provides a pathway to careers in the arts for students from underrepresented communities. The gift also contributed \$2.5 million to the student emergency relief fund. This \$10 million award is the largest gift the Mellon Foundation has made to CUNY in their 45 years of support.

Fall 2021 may seem far away, but the scheduling of courses is already beginning like it normally does across our campuses. With that in mind, and encouraged by the arrival of COVID-19 vaccines, we have announced plans for a safe and gradual return to mostly in-person instruction and support services in time for the start of classes in Fall 2021. We'll be spending the coming months preparing and making adjustments as needed.

At the same time, we are in the midst of a major transition in leadership that began with my appointment as Chancellor two years ago this May. I have continued to assemble a cabinet and college presidents of unprecedented diversity who reflect the City we live in and the students we serve. The Board of Trustees has appointed nine new presidents during my tenure, the last two this past Monday. They include the first two Asian-Americans to ever serve as CUNY college presidents, three women, and three African Americans.

Now let me turn to the Governor's Executive Budget proposal. We fully understand and appreciate the large fiscal challenge that the State is facing for the upcoming fiscal year, and commit to being good partners by continuing our responsible fiscal stewardship of this University. We also appreciate, despite the enormous fiscal challenge, the Governor's plan maintaining close to \$2.4 billion in support for CUNY – including full funding for financial aid and opportunity programs that support for our neediest students. We also recognize the generous support we receive from the State – for debt service, fringe benefits and other campus operating expenses – will enable us to protect our core academic mission in tough fiscal times.

We are pleased that the Governor's plan continues stability for our critical opportunity programs, SEEK and College Discovery, as well as continues to include \$4 million for Open Educational Resources (OER). The OER program, originally started by Governor Cuomo, is funding that we have leveraged to significantly reduce the costs of textbooks for our students. Our students saved over \$50 million in textbook costs over the last four years, which amounts to students saving \$12 for every \$1 invested by New York State. Despite the projected shortfalls brought on by the pandemic, the Governor's budget protects our shared values, specifically that quality higher education must be accessible to all low- and middle-income New Yorkers, and we thank him for his leadership.

I would now like to take a few minutes to address tuition. The capacity to adapt and plan ahead is critical to effective leadership, and we welcome the flexibility that the Governor's proposal to extend the Predictable Tuition Policy through 2025 gives us. Students who are in the most need continue to have any additional out-of-pocket tuition costs significantly defrayed or covered completely by New York State's generous financial aid programs – TAP, Excelsior, SEEK, College Discovery, and the Peralta DREAM Act – along with Federal Pell grants. We are also appreciative of the proposal to establish lower tuition rates for high-demand certificate programs, which would allow our colleges to be able to react to market demand and provide for greater flexibility when developing more training opportunities to help rebuild the economy.

CUNY's Budget Request for Fiscal Year 2022 takes into account our needs as well as the current fiscal environment. Our focus is on responding to the pandemic and jumpstarting New York's economic resurgence. Some of the initiatives for which we are seeking support include prioritizing student mental health, creating a nursing pipeline program, forging connections with private-industry partners to create career pathways for our students, expanding the successful CUNY Corps internship program, and enhancing diversity within our full-time faculty ranks. We are also seeking crucial capital budget support to enhance our IT systems, the needs of which have come to the forefront due to our transition to online learning. Our Budget Request is available on our website, and we will ensure that members of these committees receive electronic copies, as well as appropriate Assembly and Senate staff.

I would be remiss if I did not add that our Budget Request and our future outlook is predicated upon the assumption that there will be significant additional financial support from the Federal government to New York State and New York City. If this assistance is not forthcoming, our outlook would change significantly.

Regarding the University's capital program, we appreciate the Governor's Executive Budget commitment to CUNY's infrastructure needs, including its \$284 million investment in critical maintenance for senior colleges and the \$36 million in matching funds for community colleges. This new funding, along with \$2.8 billion in proposed reappropriations for capital projects, will continue to make a significant difference in upgrades or replacements for aging, mission-critical elements of these buildings.

One of the most critical issues affecting CUNY's capital program is the age of its facilities. The University's facilities portfolio consists of 29 million square feet in 300 buildings across our 25 campuses. The average building at CUNY is more than 50 years old; most are over 30 and some exceed 100.

Capital construction is a known strong economic engine to restart economies. CUNY has been a major part of that process for New York State and City. For every \$100 million in construction spending, nearly 1,000 direct and indirect jobs are created for the local economy, and with our continued commitment to supplier diversity, added investment in CUNY's capital program will certainly benefit state-certified MWBE vendors. Indeed, [CUNY's state MWBE utilization rate](#) — representing the engagement with MWBEs on state-funded contracts — was 31.9 percent in State FY2020, exceeding the 30 percent target set by Gov. Cuomo, the highest MWBE goal of any state in the nation.

Thanks to the continued support of our New York State partners, I am extremely optimistic of the future of this great University, despite the challenges we have collectively faced from the coronavirus. Having seen our administration, faculty, students and staff pull together and lift one another, even as their families and communities were buffeted by profound difficulty and loss, it shows me that CUNY, like New York itself, will always persevere. I have never been prouder to be a member of the CUNY community, or more certain of the integral role this University plays in the sustenance of New York, than I have been this year.

That concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions.