

Written Testimony of CWA 1104-GSEU

FY2024 NYS Budget: Higher Education

Submitted: February 17, 2023

CWA 1104-GSEU represents approximately 4,500 graduate student employees at the State University of New York. SUNY employs these graduate students as teaching, graduate, and research assistants. Their duties range from teaching courses, mentoring students, grading exams and papers, to conducting laboratory research. **This testimony is submitted in support of phasing in a permanent waiver of mandatory, broad-based fees for graduate student employees serving a minimum of a half-time appointment in the SUNY system in the FY2024 budget.**

This labor is vital to the function of SUNY. Many classes are actually taught by graduate student workers. In fact, at Stony Brook University, an independent audit found that 60% of instruction was performed by graduate students. Additionally, graduate student workers are the backbone of innovation and bleeding edge research. Yet, despite their key role in the education and the economy of New York state, they are forced to face dire financial challenges. This was particularly true during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Aside from inadequate stipends, the largest contributor to widespread economic hardship faced by graduate student workers is compulsory fees. In addition to tuition, SUNY schools charge their students fees. Both undergraduate and graduate students are subject to these fees, charged at regular points throughout the academic year. In recent years, the cost of these fees has risen steadily alongside tuition at public colleges and universities in the U.S. The increase in fees is a financial response to the problem of inadequate state funding for public higher education. Fees function as a backdoor tuition for public universities to circumvent state-imposed tuition caps and sustain their operating costs.

Graduate student employees with full appointments are expected to work 20 hours per week, for their departments and are compensated with an annual stipend and, in most cases, a tuition waiver. For graduate student-workers engaged in full-time coursework, average fees across the SUNY system range from \$1,000 to \$2,600 per academic year.

Graduate students employed by SUNY as teaching and research assistants are not exempt from these fees, which can constitute up to 25% of their annual stipend for those making the contractual minimum. While stipend amounts vary considerably between campuses and academic departments, the average graduate employee stipend across the four University Centers is about \$20,000 per academic year for TAs and GAs with full appointments. For those graduate employees earning the average stipend, the amount they must pay back to their university each year in fees can represent as much as 17% of their annual income.

For graduate student employees, fees effectively constitute a pay-to-work system. A substantial portion of graduate student income that would normally go towards paying rent, buying groceries or making car payments, must be paid back to their employer in the form of fees. Moreover, these fees must be paid upfront unless you go on a payment plan. Yet payment plans to spread out fee payments come with additional fees. In other words, the SUNY system charges graduate

student employees to work and then charges them interest if they can't pay. These fees cause enormous hardship, both financial as well as psychological on our members. Every year graduate employees take out loans, skip meals, and even sell blood plasma just to pay their fees.

For the last few years, SUNY graduate employees have fought for financial relief of fees through the State legislative process as well as directly on the campus level. With enormous legislative support, this legislation has passed the Senate in 2019 and made it into the Senate one house budget in 2021 and both one house budgets last year. Additionally, due to significant advocacy and committed activism from CWA-GSEU members on campus, some of the University Centers have agreed to provide fee relief through the use of scholarship funds. In fact, four out of five SUNY University Centers have some level of fee relief at this point, indicating a recognition that these fees are unjust and graduate student employees deserve to be excluded from the fees. It is past time to end this system once and for all.

We ask the committee to include the following language in the FY2024 budget that would phase out these fees for graduate student workers serving a minimum of a half-time appointment over the next four years. As members of the Higher Education Committees, we urge you to champion this important issue and end mandatory, broad-based fees for graduate student employees in the SUNY system. Thank you.

Language to be included in FY2024 Budget:

Section 1. Paragraph h of subdivision 2 of section 355 of the education law is amended by adding a new subparagraph 11 to read as follows:

(11) Beginning in the two thousand twenty-three--two thousand twenty-four academic year no current and future mandatory university/college fees, with the exclusion of the graduate student association student activity fee, shall be charged to a state university of New York graduate student serving a full-time or half-time appointment as a graduate teaching assistant, graduate assistant, graduate research assistant, graduate research associate, or graduate teaching associate:

§ 2. Section 6206 of the education law is amended by adding a new subdivision 21 to read as follows:

21. Beginning in the two thousand twenty-three--two thousand twenty-four academic year no current and future mandatory university fees, with the exclusion of the graduate student association student activity fee, shall be charged to a city university of New York graduate student serving as a graduate assistant, adjunct instructor, adjunct lecturer, adjunct college laboratory technician or a non-teaching adjunct staff member.

§ 3. This act shall take effect immediately.