

Testimony

**to the
Senate Finance Committee
and
Assembly Ways and Means Committee
on the
Proposed 2023-24 Executive Budget
for
Higher Education
February 27, 2023**

*Testimony of
Andrew Sako,
President
Faculty Federation of Erie Community College
to the
Senate Finance Committee
Liz Krueger, Chair
and
Assembly Ways and Means Committee
Helene E. Weinstein, Chair
on the
Proposed 2023-24 Executive Budget for
Higher Education
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Chairperson Krueger, Chairperson Weinstein, honorable members of the Legislature and distinguished staff, I am Andrew Sako, President of the Faculty Federation of Erie Community College.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the proposed 2023-24 New York State Executive Budget for Higher Education. My testimony will focus on the issues facing Erie Community College, the 29 other SUNY community colleges and nearly all their faculty and staff.

Before I begin, I would like to thank you all for your continuing advocacy on behalf of higher education. I truly believe that your work has saved the community colleges. Whether it be from establishing and standing firm on a funding floor and “hold harmless” language to supporting myriad programs, I know that every community college and particularly my home campus at Erie Community College has benefited from your attention.

The 2022-23 enacted budget was a welcome change from the austerity budgets of the past. For the first time in a decade, public higher education stakeholders were not forced to start from a deficit and negotiate just to break even. Funding for higher education was not cut and critical programs were not eliminated. While this was a great start, more needs to be done to support our community colleges.

Unfortunately, one good year simply cannot erase the years of damage caused by cuts and flat budgets. We must build upon the gains made in 2022 and continue to invest in and strengthen our systems of public higher education. We must reaffirm the role that public higher education plays in society and stand up for a just, well-funded and inclusive system. Accordingly, NYSUT is calling for a significant state investment in New York’s community colleges.

Robust funding for our community colleges remains a critical need this year as we continue to deal with the seemingly endless challenges presented by COVID-19. For example, as hard as this may be to believe, we still do not have enough mental health counselor’s system-wide to meet the emerging and often more complex needs of our students. The numbers were insufficient before the pandemic hit and forced students to simultaneously study, work, deal with the stress of the pandemic and care for their loved ones. Since our colleges often provide the only mental health services our students have access to, we were disappointed to not see dedicated funding in this year’s executive budget proposal for the hiring of more mental health counselors.

While we are thankful for many of the initiatives contained in this year’s executive budget proposal, more is needed to reverse the impact caused by years of underfunding. We will once again be looking to our friends in the Legislature to continue to advocate for our community colleges as we struggle to emerge from the pandemic and provide critical services to our residents who need it the most.

As you know, our public institutions of higher education have been reeling from years of austerity budgets. This disappointing practice severely restricts these institutions' ability to grow, anticipate emerging workforce trends and remain competitive. The impact of flat funding and related fiscal neglect are felt by students and our members. Campuses across the state continue to face difficult decisions directly related to inadequate resources. Without proper state investment, community colleges are left with no good solutions and are either forced to raise tuition or eliminate programs and student services, neither of which are good for enrollment.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 and its variants continue to impact every New Yorker in some way. The pandemic has required us to figure out a new work/life balance as we try to return to what has become a very elusive normal. Historically, when there has been an economic downturn, enrollment at our public colleges and universities increases. Unfortunately, COVID has reversed that trend and we have seen enrollment numbers, particularly at our community colleges, continue to slide.

Whether enrollment is down from COVID driven fear or economic loss, we must continue to support our community colleges until we emerge from this dark time. Our campuses must remain viable options for people who have lost their jobs or their careers and need to be retrained so that they may re-enter the post-pandemic workforce. For many, our SUNY community colleges will be the way out of economic hardship and the key to any financial recovery.

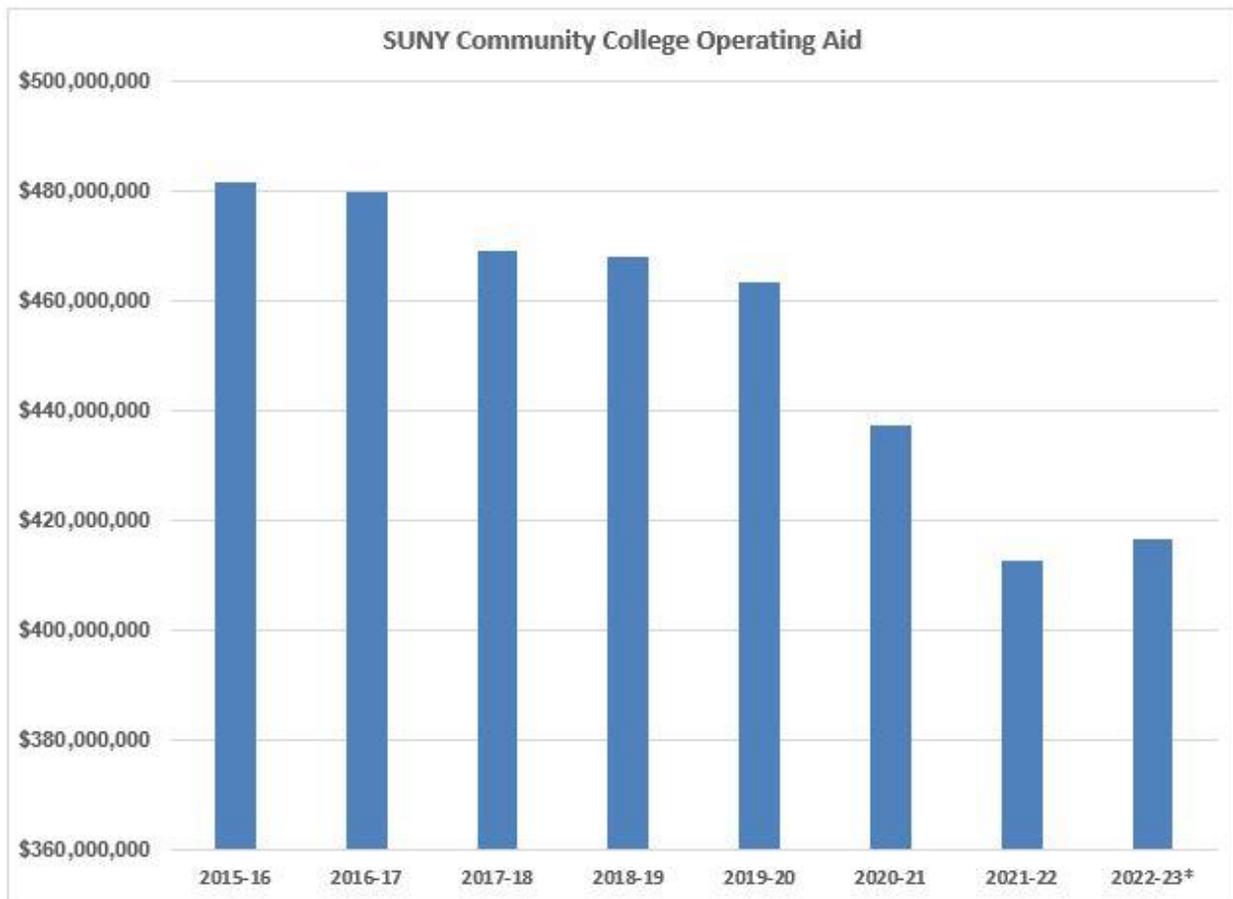
Educational inequality, already one of the most pressing issues of our time, has been made even worse by COVID-19. Distance learning, necessitated by this awful virus, has brought into sharper focus the need to narrow the gaps between the haves and the have nots. Access to reliable internet and laptops disproportionately impacts black and brown communities. As I am sure you know, public higher education is the pathway out of poverty for countless low-income families. The education our colleges and universities provide elevates our poorest New Yorkers to the middle class. Unfortunately, when the state fails to meet its statutory obligation to properly fund our community colleges, our students and our communities suffer. Worse still, these effects are most strongly felt in our low-income communities and the impact is borne by those who can least afford to shoulder it.

Access to quality public higher education is a crucial component in the state's efforts to recruit and retain businesses and industries. As businesses consider where to locate, they are drawn to locations with an available pool of highly trained and educated employees. Our community colleges help to fulfill that requirement by instructing and preparing New Yorkers for current and future job opportunities. Properly funding SUNY community colleges helps to ensure that all New Yorkers have access to an affordable, high-quality public education.

Community colleges educate and prepare students for the workforce and provide the necessary foundation for those seeking to move on to four-year campuses or universities. In addition to educating all types of students where they live and work, community colleges significantly advance social mobility. We often collaborate with regional businesses and employers to develop and provide training to address specific local workforce needs.

Notwithstanding the Legislature’s commitment to community colleges, state funding to these campuses is not commensurate with the provisions of the state education law, which require the state to pay 40 percent of the operating costs of these campuses. As I am sure you are aware, the state is not remotely meeting this obligation and, in fact, has not done so for fifty years.

To make matters worse, despite declining enrollments, our funding continues to be based on the totally inadequate full-time equivalent (FTE) funding model, which gives us state dollars based on a set amount multiplied by the number of FTE students enrolled. Also troubling is the fact that we are seeing preemptive fiscal belt tightening by college administrators overreacting to a still unrealized recession and the cessation of federal funds.



As the chart above illustrates, SUNY community colleges, with last year being the sole exception, have seen decreases in operating aid since 2015. Over that same period, again, excluding last year, which was the exception, due to an influx of federal dollars at the local level, students paid the lion's share of operating costs of these campuses. Over the ten-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. While the state's contribution for the same period decreased from 30.8 percent to 25 percent. Year after year, in budget after budget, we have seen the state "not withstand" the law, at the expense of our students and community colleges. This practice must stop. Accordingly, we are calling on the state to fulfill its obligation and provide 40 percent of the funding for these critical institutions.

Before COVID-19, New York's community colleges were grappling with slowly declining enrollments. According to SUNY, New York's community colleges have seen a 23 percent drop in student enrollment in the last decade. This drop can be attributed to several factors but the most likely are a relatively strong (pre-COVID-19) economy, a general decline in population and steadily rising student-borne costs. Sadly, shifting demographics, declining K-12 enrollments state-wide and migration from New York have been eroding the ranks of potential community college students for more than a decade. To help illustrate this point, more than 1.4 million people have left New York since 2010. Unfortunately, the pandemic dramatically accelerated the downward trend in enrollment, and we are seeing colleges with double digit percentage drops. (e.g., over 20% at Nassau Community College).

Simply put, the current per FTE funding methodology for community colleges does not work in the COVID-19 world as it makes community college funding unpredictable and unstable. The financial futures of our community colleges will remain bleak until the inadequate funding model, which gives these institutions state funds based on a set amount multiplied by the number of FTE students enrolled, is changed. This model does nothing to insulate campuses from enrollment fluctuations. As enrollment continues to decline, we must develop a better funding model for our community colleges and insulate them from funding shortfalls.

In this year's executive budget proposal, community colleges are slated to receive 100 percent of what they received in 2022-23. It is noteworthy that executive budget proposal authorizes up to a 20% withholding if community colleges do not adopt a plan to operate without reliance on the base aid funding floor. We would welcome an opportunity to participate in any process aimed at creating a funding model that works for our institutions. While we are grateful for this support, a community college receiving, year after year, 100 percent of the amount it received in its worst year ever, is not a sustainable model. If we see another COVID variant, and enrollment numbers continue to drop, our colleges could conceivably receive less and less, to the point that they are no longer viable.

Accordingly, we are asking the Legislature to give our community colleges 100 percent of what they were allocated in 2019-20 or \$3250.00 per FTE. This would give the SUNY community colleges an additional \$23 million over what is proposed in the 2023-24 executive budget proposal and would do much to guarantee that these institutions will still be recognizable and open for business when the students return.

While we know that COVID-19 and the bad economic climate that came with it had a particularly negative impact on enrollment and retention at our community colleges, it disproportionately impacted our students who bear stresses that make it extraordinarily difficult to stay in college under the best of circumstances. In fact, many of our students struggle — a reality that has only worsened since COVID-19. Community colleges serve a diverse population of, oftentimes, first-generation students, and more than 50% of our students are students of color with median family incomes well under the New York state average. Accordingly, food insecurity is a very real issue for many of our students and their families and, for most, their colleges provide their only access to mental health services.

For many would-be, and actual community college students, COVID-19 became the proverbial straw that broke the camels back. For students already struggling to manage daily life, juggling work, caring for loved ones and paying bills, the added pressures that accompanied COVID-19 simply became too much. Potential students elected to not enroll and enrolled students dropped out. To encourage students to enroll and successfully complete their degree programs, we are asking for \$100 million to bring a model of CUNY's successful ASAP program to our SUNY community colleges.

The CUNY ASAP program was created to help students achieve their associates degrees as quickly as possible with a goal of graduating at least 50% of the enrollees within three years. The program was designed to help students overcome the systemic barriers and personal responsibilities that kept 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 in both programs. We would like to expand this excellent program to all our SUNY community colleges.

Lastly, NYSUT will be advocating for a public higher education that delivers results and sets up our students for success without leaving them hopelessly in debt. Students attend New York's public colleges and universities because they know they will receive a high-quality, accessible education that opens doors to new opportunities. However, a continued shift of costs from the state to students has placed an additional financial burden on our students and their families and reduced access to the high-quality education every New Yorker deserves. Every dollar invested in SUNY and CUNY yields even greater returns for New York's tax base. If we continue to reach into the pockets of our students instead of investing public dollars into higher education, we will not be setting up our students for success, instead, we will be setting them up for years of student loan payments. Accordingly, we oppose tuition increases and, instead, support an investment in SUNY and community colleges to improve access to public higher education at no additional cost to students.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.