

# *Testimony*

**to the  
Senate Finance Committee  
and  
Assembly Ways and Means Committee  
on the  
Proposed 2022-23 Executive Budget  
for  
Higher Education  
February 7, 2022**

*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 2022-23 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 2022-23 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.

Today, thanks to COVID-19 and technology we have all been forced to master since March of 2020, instead of facilitating distance learning, I will be distance testifying. When I watched this hearing on my laptop a year ago, I never would have imagined that we would still have to be virtual a year later. COVID-19 has truly changed our lives.

Before I begin, I would like to thank you all for your advocacy on behalf of higher education. I truly believe that the work that you did in crafting last year's enacted budget saved the community colleges from what would have been disastrous cuts. I do not like to think about what would have happened at my home campus at Erie Community College without the "hold harmless" language the Legislature negotiated into last year's budget. I would also like to thank you for rejecting the sweeping cuts proposed in the 2021-2022 executive budget and for prioritizing the safety of all New Yorker's. While we are still battling COVID-19 and its variants, I am certain that your foresight last year put us in a much better place this year.

While appropriate funding for our community colleges remains a critical need, this year, because of COVID-19, the actual health and safety of our students and our members remains paramount. As we continue to deal with the many, ever evolving challenges presented by COVID-19 we must be able to shift our funding priorities to address the changing landscape. For example, after all that we have been through with COVID-19, 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.

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.

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, plummet.

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, quality, public education.

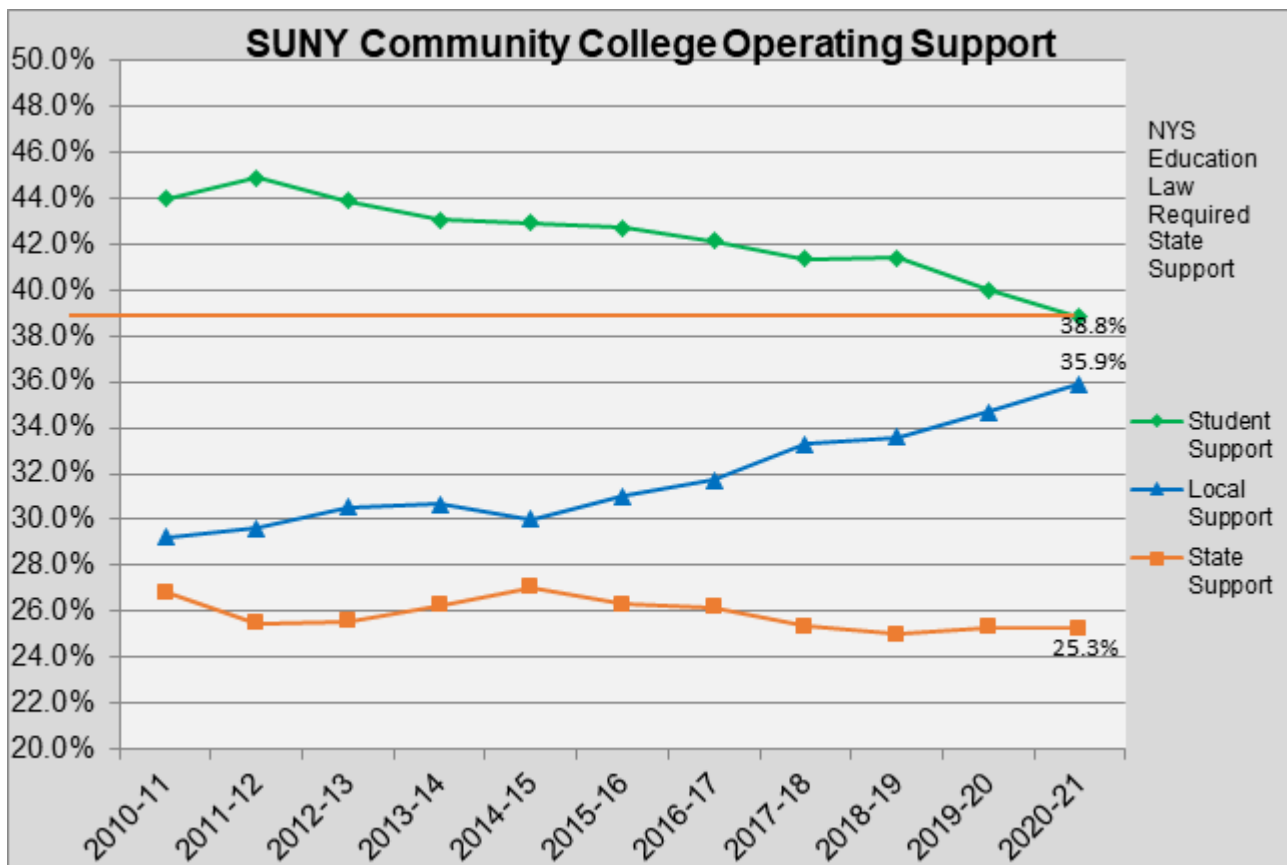
As you know, our community colleges, like our four-year institutions of higher education, have struggled over the last decade. Again, I would like to thank all of you for your ongoing commitment to community colleges. Year after year, the Legislature has had to step up and provide a lifeline to these critically important colleges. The legislature, in the 2021-22 New York State Enacted Budget established a 98 percent funding floor and provided \$2,997 per full-time equivalent (FTE) student for community colleges, which represented a \$50 increase per student and a \$14.4 million increase in base aid. Unfortunately, even with this assistance, community colleges saw reductions in state funding due to sharp reductions in enrollment. Any decline in state aid forces campuses, already operating on razor thin margins, to raise tuition and/or make cuts to academic programs and student services to survive.

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.

**CHART A**



As Chart A illustrates, SUNY community college students are paying 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.

The COVID-19 crisis has cast doubt on the validity of another historical truth, which held that in bad economic times enrollment in public higher educational institutions, particularly community colleges, increased. The pandemic has injected a degree of uncertainty that makes it nearly impossible to predict enrollment and budget accordingly. The current health crisis has exacerbated a situation that was already untenable for most of our community colleges, has forced cuts and layoffs and will make it very difficult for them to absorb and effectively manage any significant increase in the student body.

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 two most likely are a relatively strong (pre-COVID-19) economy and a general decline in population for many areas of the state. Sadly, shifting demographics, declining K-12 enrollments state-wide and migration from New York have been steadily 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. Unfortunately, even with the assistance provided in the 2021-22 enacted budget, community colleges saw reductions in state funding due to sharp declines in enrollment. Faced with declining or uncertain enrollments and decreased state funding, community colleges are being forced to raise tuition to continue to serve their students. Any decline in funding, even with an increase in tuition, inevitably leads to cuts to programs, student services and faculty positions. 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 2021-2022. While we are grateful for this support — as it will help to stave off further financial distress — it does not provide enough support to undue decades of budgetary neglect. 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 2018-2019, before they were ravaged by COVID-19. This would give the SUNY community colleges an additional \$35.7 million and would do much to guarantee that these institutions will still be recognizable and open for business when the students return.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

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