



The State University of New York
Student Assembly

Testimony of The State University of New York Student
Assembly (SUNY SA)

Joint Legislative Budget Hearing Higher Education

President Bradley Hershenson

February 4th, 2021

On behalf of the students of our great University system we very much appreciate the efforts of Senator and Committee Chair Krueger, Senator and Committee Chair Stavisky, Assemblymember and Committee Chair Glick, Assemblymember and Committee Chair Weinstein, as well as their colleagues in the legislature for hosting a hearing address the investment needed in higher education across our state.

The Student Assembly is the recognized system-wide student government supporting the students of SUNY. The Student Assembly is comprised of Student Leaders from across the state and represents the students of the many University centers and colleges, technology colleges, and community colleges, and advocates on the local, state, and federal level. The President of the Student Assembly serves as the head of the organized student government for all 64 campuses in the system and holds the position as the only student member of the SUNY board of trustees. The Student Assembly brings together hundreds of student leaders from across the state and beyond to participate in student leadership conferences, where student advocacy priorities are finalized, and members are offered the opportunity to network and learn leadership skills from students, campus and system administration, and faculty through various workshops and networking opportunities.

Additionally, Student Assembly representatives meet on a monthly basis to coordinate advocacy efforts and further refine strategies towards the advancement of quality and affordability in public higher education. The Student Assembly operates a variety of committees focused on ensuring academic excellence

throughout the system and highlights the areas of campus safety, disability services, gender equity, and sustainability.

The Student Assembly urges the state to recognize and act upon the magnitude in which under-funding public higher education has on the delivery of services and the quality of education across the system during these challenging and uncertain times. The Committee clearly identifies the benefit to the state from an accessible State University due to the return on investment made by students pursuing higher education in New York.

Graduates of SUNY are likely to work and live in New York and continue to stimulate local and state economies through employment and taxes. Adequately funding higher education holds the potential to yield a greater return on investment for the state as students, faculty, staff, and alumni from across the SUNY system continue to enhance the quality of life and economic prosperity in the communities they live in.

Various state and federal financial aid programs greatly benefit the students of SUNY. The Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) aids eligible students in attending in-state postsecondary institutions. However, there is a consistent gap in the funding mechanism that penalizes campuses for accepting and enrolling students who utilize the Tuition Assistance Program. The shortfall in funding by the state to provide this support has severely diminished the ability of our campuses to provide quality education and critical student services. Our institutions have been forced to balance the budgets on the backs of their own students. Now more than ever investment is needed for student success.

With increased investment by the state in institutions of public higher education students can benefit more from quality education, services and programs such as mental health counseling, food pantries, EOP, academic advisement, and gender and sexuality resources at an affordable cost.

Additionally, programs such as the Excelsior Scholarship, in combination with other student financial aid programs, allows some students to attend a SUNY college tuition-free. This program can be helpful to students. However, what is needed now is measures to incorporate support for the real costs associated with pursuing a degree. Housing, food, transportation, textbooks, equipment, fees, and other items are all financial stresses of students. Expanding the promise of the Excelsior Scholarship and implementing measures that would allow for these costs to be covered would help students.

One item that we must put forward is the notion of equity for the student voice of SUNY. Our organization, which serves as the student government representing the 64 campuses of SUNY, has operated for decades with funding from the system administration at the level of around \$57,000 annually to operate state-wide. This is less than \$5,000 per month. For the past two years \$150,000 was made available to our organization. This year only \$70,000 has been made available. This limited funding is extremely inadequate to support the organization of the elected student leaders of the SUNY system as we lack basic resources such as staff, and adequate equipment and office space. The answer to our call for proper funding of our own organization is a longstanding proposal for a \$0.50 cent fee per student, per semester, to fund our organization. This proposal has been

collecting dust for almost two decades and has never been considered at the SUNY Board of Trustees despite overwhelming support from students. The call for its implementation spans decades and was affirmed in the recent years of 2019 and 2021. We need your help to ameliorate this crisis that has left SUNY students separate and unequal from our colleagues at CUNY, California, and other elected student organizations of state-wide institutions. The CUNY University Student Senate currently operates with over \$700,000 in funding collected by a \$1.45 fee per student to represent 25 campuses. We currently operate with more than ten times less resources system wide in our representation of 64 campuses. We are charged with bringing forward the voices of students to represent their best interests yet have never been granted the resources needed to do so.

Right now, we are at a crossroads. We call upon the legislature to put the blinking red lights on tuition increases (or at least a STOP SIGN) and instead help move SUNY down a new pathway. The path we must forge is one of increased investment in public higher education that supports students and does not increase tuition during a pandemic.

The Student Assembly urges the state to invest in public higher education by funding the shortfall created by the Tuition Assistance Program, making amendments to and expanding current financial programs available to students, and recognizing its fundamental role and responsibility to offer a world class education at an affordable cost to all with support to its student voices. With an increase in funding and expansions of aid programs and services campuses across the state will be equipped to provide a greater quality education to address the

backgrounds and needs of all students during these challenging and uncertain times.