

New York State Assembly and Senate  
Standing Committees on Higher Education

Joint Hearing on Higher Education:  
The Impact of Covid-19 on Higher Education in New York  
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Hearing Testimony  
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Thank you, Assemblymember Glick, Senator Stavisky, and members of the Assembly and Senate Committees on Higher Education for calling today's hearing on this important topic. I appreciate the opportunity to address your committees on behalf of New York's private colleges. Thank you for your continued support of New York's college students.

I am Mary Beth Labate, President of the Commission on Independent Colleges and Universities. CICU represents more than 100 private, not-for-profit colleges and universities across New York and the nearly 500,000 students they educate.

Like all New Yorkers, we are grateful to Governor Andrew Cuomo and the Senate and Assembly for leading our state through the Covid-19 crisis. Your leadership and our collective efforts have flattened the curve and paved the way for restarting our state's economy. Thanks to the heroic efforts of New Yorkers and the state's data-driven approach, infection rates are low and New York is a model for the rest of the country. We have the opportunity to safely reopen higher education in our state. Doing so is imperative, but it will not be easy.

Governor Cuomo has called on New Yorkers not simply to return to the status quo, but to "build back better." Higher education is a key piece of that puzzle. We prepare New Yorkers for the economy of our future, conduct research that tackles the hardest questions and could prevent the next pandemic, and provide first-generation students with the opportunity to uplift themselves, their families, and their communities. Forty percent of Black and Latinx students who attend college in New York are enrolled at a private college. We cannot do this work alone, we need the state to be our partner in this critical endeavor.

The pandemic has cost private colleges more than \$700 million in lost revenues. Yet in spite of these staggering losses, for New York's private colleges, the health and safety of their communities has always been paramount, and that remains true as they work to reopen amid the Covid-19 crisis. The guidance on higher education reopening was issued on June 20 and since that time, colleges have invested millions, often being forced to dip into already depleted reserves, to retrofit their facilities and provide PPE and testing for students, faculty, and staff. They are reimagining operations and reinventing policies to keep their communities safe. They have developed close relationships with their local health departments to complement their contact tracing efforts. Institutions that have decided to reopen fully or partially in-person are doing so while following, and in most cases exceeding, the state's guidance for higher education.

The expense of preparing a campus to open during a pandemic is monumental – from face coverings to reconfigured classrooms to testing and technology to improve online courses. Private colleges and universities have made a massive investment in the health and safety of their campuses for the fall and beyond.

Add to that the additional financial needs our students have. Private colleges in New York already provide more than \$6 billion in aid to students from their own resources each year. With historic unemployment across our country, small businesses struggling, and many people unable to work because of health concerns, students' financial needs have increased tremendously.

As St. Bonaventure University, incoming senior Jonathan Pena said: "Although we are in a pandemic, I am excited to go back to St. Bonaventure. With the steps the University has taken to ensure safety of all people in our community, SBU is where I want to finish my undergraduate education. In addition, as an HEOP student, the resources I am given are essential to my learning experience, some of which can only be effective in person."

Kaycee Viator, an incoming junior at Roberts Wesleyan College, shared how the Covid-19 crisis has affected her and her classmates: "I think that the State should know that there are some students who are unfortunately having their mental and emotional health deteriorate because of the rapid changes that have taken place over the past several months. There are plenty of students who rely on their jobs to help pay for their college education, but since the shutdown occurred, plenty of them have not earned the amount of

money they planned to and may end up applying for an additional loan to pay their bill. ...Students are not only students, but have lives outside of the classroom that should be given attention so that their entire well-being can be kept intact and can be as healthy as possible.”

There are several specific areas where the state can help ensure students like Kaycee and Jonathan continue to have the higher education opportunities they deserve.

**Student Aid:** Programs that provide financial aid and opportunities for students are more critical than ever as our state grapples with historic unemployment and a faltering economy. **The Legislature must ensure that these programs – including TAP, Bundy Aid, HEOP, Enhanced Tuition Awards, and others – are fully funded.** Already, the state has withheld a portion of financial aid through Bundy Aid and we fear that the same will be true for HEOP, TAP and the Enhanced Tuition Awards program, all of which are initiatives that help low income New Yorkers go to college. I urge the state to avoid reducing these critical aid programs. New Yorkers, including many front-line workers and their families, rely on these programs. They should not be asked to sacrifice again.

**Public Health Partnership:** College campuses are essentially small cities, with housing, retail, dining, transportation, research labs, performing arts venues, and more. Restarting our operations is uniquely challenging. Luckily, our campuses are rife with experts in fields like public health, virology, and epidemiology who have been deeply involved in developing reopening plans. But we cannot shoulder this burden alone. We need the state’s help, especially with testing. While New York should be commended for standing up a testing operation that is more robust than any other state’s and for helping other states with their testing needs, it is still not clear that there is sufficient testing across the state to meet the needs of returning college students. It is imperative that colleges have access to reliable and affordable Covid-19 testing so that they can keep their communities safe. **We ask the state to make college campuses a priority for free or low-cost testing.**

New York’s mandatory quarantine for travelers from states with high infection rates provides important protection to our state, but it also poses a logistical and financial hurdle for students and colleges. With the current list of 31 states, we estimate that at least 56,000 private college students will be impacted by the quarantine order. Securing and paying for space for these quarantines, not to mention altering travel plans and the start date of courses, is an expensive new hurdle for students and colleges, but colleges are doing all that they can to comply. I fear, however, that it will mean fewer students bringing their talents to New York. We have asked New York to consider alternatives that would maintain health and safety but would be more practical to enforce.

**Threats to International Students:** Earlier this month, the Trump Administration issued a surprise new ruling that would have resulted in the deportation of international students who take only online courses this fall. As many institutions, and individuals, decide online-only courses are their preferred option for the fall, this directly threatened the ability of thousands of students to continue their studies in New York. We are grateful to Attorney General Letitia James for her quick action in filing suit against the Trump Administration for this mean-spirited and unnecessary policy. Thankfully, the administration reversed course, but colleges and universities remain alert for other gratuitous attempts by the Trump Administration to harm our students and our institutions. In addition, ICE’s rules still won’t allow new students to obtain a visa to study in the United States if their institution offers only online courses, presenting another major hurdle for students and institutions.

**Federal Relief:** The CARES Act provided New York’s private colleges with \$286 million to split evenly with students. The \$143 million for campuses provided much-needed, immediate financial relief to colleges and universities, helping to hold off some layoffs and more drastic measures. However, it is a drop in the bucket compared to the massive financial hit – both decreased revenue and increased expenses – that private colleges are facing. We are optimistic that there will be a next round of federal stimulus that includes additional funding for higher education. Without that funding, many New York institutions will again be on the

precipice of financial doom. This would harm students, employees, and communities in every corner of the state. The CARES Act also provided \$164 million in funding for education in New York called the “Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Fund.” Higher education received none of this money. **If the next round of federal stimulus funding again provides money to the state to support education and COVID response costs, we ask that higher education – public and private – be provided a share of those funds.**

None of these challenges are happening in a vacuum. I have served in my current role for four years and during each of those four years I have come to you warning that private colleges in New York are struggling. Historic disinvestment by the state, ever-increasing regulatory burdens, and the unfair playing field created by programs that benefit one sector over another have taken a tremendous toll on private colleges. It is make-or-break time for many of New York’s private colleges, their students and the local economies that we support. Without meaningful action at the state and federal levels and the opportunity to welcome students back to campus in a safe manner, we risk waking up a year from now with a much less robust higher education system in our state. There will be lost jobs, displaced students, and anchor-less communities as a result. There will be significantly fewer students to count in New York’s Census population. The economic, civic, and cultural losses will be staggering.

Already, many private colleges have been forced to make the painful decision to furlough and lay off faculty and staff and reduce salaries. The public sector’s state subsidy insulates them from making some of the tough financial decisions private colleges face.

In addition to educating nearly 500,000 students, our campuses also support more than 400,000 jobs statewide. New York’s economy cannot be restarted and New York cannot be “built back better,” unless private higher education is a part of the equation.

In closing, **I implore you to focus your efforts in ways that help all New York students.** Whether they attend a public or private college, students deserve to know that their college has the resources necessary to keep them safe in the fall. Whether they attend a public or private college, students and families deserve financial aid to help make their dreams reality. Whether they are employed by a public or private college, employees deserve to know the state has done all it can to help their employer ride out this storm. And whether they are home to a public or private college, New York’s communities deserve the assurance that their state won’t let their community’s anchor be diminished by this crisis.

As policymakers, you have the power to help. By supporting the safe reopening of our campuses, fully funding student aid programs, advocating for equitable distribution of federal funds, and helping colleges and universities access reliable and affordable testing resources, you can help to ensure that New York’s centuries-long legacy as a leader in higher education is not undone by this crisis.

Thank you for your time.