



CORNELL STUDENT ASSEMBLY

**Testimony**  
to the  
**Senate Standing Committee on Higher Education**  
and  
**Assembly Standing Committee on Higher Education**  
on the  
**Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education**  
**July 28, 2020**

Prepared by  
Cornell Student Assembly Office of Student Government Relations  
109 Day Hall  
Ithaca, NY 14853  
[www.cornellosgr.com](http://www.cornellosgr.com)

**Testimony of students from Cornell University  
to the  
Senate Standing Committee on Higher Education  
Senator Toby Ann Stavisky, Chair  
and  
Assembly Standing Committee on Higher Education  
Assembly Member Deborah J. Glick, Chair  
on the  
Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education  
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Chairperson Stavisky, Chairperson Glick, honorable members of the Legislature and distinguished staff, we are Cornell Student Assembly's Office of Student Government Relations (OSGR). We advocate for Cornell University and New York State students at the local, state, and federal government levels. In June, we wrote a [letter](#) that has been signed by 10 New York Student Government Associations that represent 800,000 students as a response to COVID-19.

Thank you for granting our request for a public hearing on the impact of COVID-19 on higher education and the opportunity to invite Cornell University students to testify. The testimonies below represent the concerns of over 15,000 undergraduate students who attend Cornell University.

Today you will hear from Dakota Stennett-Neris, who has been impacted by high rent, Mohammad Islam, an Educational Opportunity Program scholarship recipient, and John Clancy, a potential Excelsior scholarship recipient.

**New York State Student COVID-19 Response**

As college campuses closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic across New York state, students lost more than access to libraries and lecture halls; they lost jobs, their ability to pay for [housing](#), and the resources to support their everyday lives. Income earned by students is [crucial](#): 43% of full-time students and 81% of part-time students reported being employed prior to the pandemic.

COVID-19 layoffs are [disproportionately impacting](#) New York students, with students losing the jobs they rely on to make ends meet.

Simultaneously, the New York State Division of the Budget has announced that the [initial budget control actions](#) outlined in the Fiscal Year 2021 Enacted State Budget Financial Plan will reduce state spending by \$10.1 billion. We recognize this dilemma, however, and acknowledge that an investment in students now will lead to [greater prosperity](#) for New York State in the future.

### **Students Impacted by High Rent**

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the various inequities on and off Cornell University's campus became increasingly apparent. One of the most evident of these divisions was students' abilities to pay rent. Over 50% of Cornell students live off campus and the ability to pay for such rent is crucial for students to be able to focus on their studies. When students were forced to relocate due to the pandemic, not all students had the same options for housing. Rent is not expendable, and when the pandemic created a wave of unemployment, students had to choose between the cost of their education or going to the supermarket. Hear the story of Dakota Stennett-Neris below.

#### ***Dakota Stennett-Neris, student at Cornell University***

I am Dakota Stennett-Neris, a rising sophomore at Cornell University, majoring in Biology & Society with a double minor in Inequalities Studies and Law and Society. I have decided to share my personal experience with you today in hopes of shining a light on my unique but unfortunately common situation as a result of COVID-19. I strongly support the procuring of additional funds for students at Cornell University who require increased support due to the current pandemic. These funds would allow for equal access to education for enrolled college students through increased affordability, protection of health through appropriate safety measures, and a smoother transition into a new method of learning/ living. With these tangible goals in mind and with the help of additional funds, the mental, physical, and emotional well-being of constituents at Cornell will be increased drastically.

In mid-March of last semester, students were sent home across the country with anywhere from a few days to two weeks to move out. As I frantically gathered my belongings

and left my campus I began to feel a shift in the paradigm of my new reality. Over the last few months, my parents, who are hardworking Americans, have lost their jobs due to COVID-19 and have been forced to file for unemployment. Unemployment sends them around \$400 a week which amounts to \$1600 a month for a 3 person family living in Harlem, NY. The average rent for last year (2019) was around \$3,475 a month for an apartment in Manhattan. On a daily basis, my family and I have to decide whether we can afford to go food shopping, pay for wifi (remote learning), or another utility bill. My family can barely afford the rent for our apartment in New York City and the burden of financing my housing and furthermore my tuition for this upcoming academic year is frightening and overwhelming. In addition to financial instability, Covid-19 has made it increasingly difficult to care for my grandmother. During this time she has lost her ability to walk, speak, and eat. This decline in health has resulted in her removal from her original retirement home and placement into a hospital/rehabilitation center where we were charged tens of thousands of dollars because of a lack of access to available and affordable senior housing during this pandemic. This expense paired with the unlivable wages provided to us through unemployment, tuition for this academic year, and the cost of distance learning in terms of utilities (computer, internet, electricity, etc.) is unfathomable in this time of extreme hardship and stress.

In expanding the funding that the university obtains in order to provide its students with basic necessities for this upcoming year, I believe the quality of life and attainment of education will be greatly enhanced. I am the first to go to college on my father's side and the second for my mother's. I am a low-income Black Puerto Rican student womxn who has overcome immense systemic hardship to be able to attend such a prestigious university and I do not want money, the main reason my father could not attend college, to be the impediment to my education. No student, who has worked hard to get into any institution and has been accepted, should be deterred from going because of money especially if the cause is an uncontrollable and dangerous pandemic. I am asking that my story be taken as an example of many college students' experiences and daily struggles. I am not an anomaly, but instead a representative of a multitude of college students who need this funding and support from their state. I strongly urge for the

obtainment of additional funding to Cornell University from New York State. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

### **Educational Opportunity Program Students**

The Education Opportunity Program (EOP) and Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP) Scholarships impact more than 45 campuses across New York State. At Cornell more than 200 (60 per class) students are beneficiaries of these programs. While the two programs target students in private and public colleges respectively, both have been supporting low-income and first generation college students since the late 1960's. Most alumni of both programs continue to live in New York, enriching its economic and social fabric by working as physicians, teachers, attorneys and public servants. EOP and HEOP students have been impacted by COVID-19 greatly, and without support in place, struggle to learn on a similar playing field as others.

#### ***Lesly Gissell Zhicay, Educational Opportunity Program student***

My name is Lesly Gissell Zhicay, I am a constituent of Corona, Queens, one of the most affected communities by COVID-19, and because of EOP, I am also a student at Cornell University. From the moment I set foot in Cornell, I felt all the disparities between growing up in a place like Corona and living in Cornell. These disparities became even clearer in late March when the pandemic hit. While COVID-19 ravaged my community, I was able to remain on campus. From my dorm, along with the rest of the world I saw the images of refrigerator trucks outside of Elmhurst hospital, the hospital I was born in. I also saw the lines of people including my sister waiting for food that wrapped around the streets outside of NYS Senator Jessica Ramos Office. In that time, I was able to successfully complete my freshman year at Cornell with a 3.6 GPA, something I'm not sure I would have been able to do had I returned home. It was then that I realized the main difference between growing up Corona and living in Cornell, I was no longer trying to survive, I was able to thrive through a world pandemic because of EOP.

Moreover, I was able to extend my stay through the summer at Cornell through Pre Professional Programs (P3), a program offered to me due to my status as an EOP student. Throughout this time, I have been able to remotely intern at Cornell Law's Legal Clinic as an

interpreter. Using the skill my parents instilled in me since childhood, Spanish I have been able to help farmworkers and juveniles apply for appropriate visas. I would not have been able to complete my internship had it not been from the funding I received. So now a year into Cornell not only have I been able to survive a world pandemic but thrive as well.

I still have three more years to go and there are students like me who are just beginning their journey and or are looking to programs like EOP to be able to attend institutions like Cornell. I would not have applied to Cornell had it not been for EOP and neither would I have survived and thrived during a world pandemic if it were not for EOP. Funding for NYS Higher Education programs may seem like the last thing on people's mind right now but for students like me programs like EOP make the difference between surviving and thriving and we deserve to thrive. My community gave me the skills to survive any adversity that might present itself in my path. Hence, I can confidently say that in three years when I graduate as a first-generation college student and am on my way to becoming an attorney, I will owe it to my community and to programs like EOP, to fight for my community's right to survive and thrive without having to leave our communities.

***Mohammed Islam, Educational Opportunity Program student***

My name is Mohammed Islam. I am an Educational Opportunity Program student at Cornell University's land-grant School of Industrial and Labor Relations. The pandemic has negatively impacted students in higher education in the past academic year and will continue to do so in the upcoming academic year. This is why I am testifying in favor of increased financial support for higher education students.

In April, my family lost its source of income and both of my parents fell ill to COVID-19. Focusing on class assignments became almost impossible as my thoughts surrounding the impaired health of my loved ones and the lack of financial security of my family were in my mind 24/7. When the pandemic hit, my worlds collided. I was not just the first generation, low-income college student trying my hardest to battle imposter syndrome and stay on the same level with kids from more privileged backgrounds, but I was also the center member of my family - the caretaker of my parents, the role model of my brother, the budgeter of

finances. I felt a sense of hopelessness at the time. I thought I was going to be orphaned at the age of 18 and become homeless due to not being able to make rent. All throughout this, I had to reassure my younger brother everything would be okay, while I did not myself feel stable. I am fortunate that my parents recovered from the virus, but I foresee many students in New York state feeling the same hopelessness I faced and possibly the added stress of having lost family members.

Unfortunate circumstances surrounding COVID-19 negatively impact all students but Educational Opportunity Program students and low-income students overall are hit harder. It is difficult for us to rely on financial support from our parents that are also struggling at this time. Additionally, due to the current state of the economy, it is hard for us to find a job that is compatible with the schedule of being a full-time student and consider the risk of damaging our own health and our family members' health.

Being a low-income student makes college that much harder because our focus must constantly be divided. Now in the middle of a pandemic when the global economy is suffering, our attention is not divided, it is diverted. We cannot even begin to think about how we are going to manage to study and work next year because we do not know if we are able to afford to attend. We should not have to choose between our health, our family, and our desire to invest in our future.

Increased financial support for higher education students will not solve all the problems we are facing but it will help alleviate some stress surrounding financial hardships. Thus, I urge the committees to increase financial support for higher education students. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to share my story and the story of so many others facing similar hardships.

### **Excelsior Scholarship Students**

The Excelsior Scholarship, in combination with other student financial aid programs, allows students to attend a SUNY or CUNY college [tuition-free](#). It was announced in 2017 and is the first program of its kind in the United States. The scholarship is open to families making \$125,000 a year or less. The scholarship provides valuable financial assistance to upper working class and middle class students in the face of the rising cost of a college education.

***John Clancy, Potential Excelsior Scholarship Recipient***

My name is John Clancy and I am a rising Junior in the New York State School of Industrial Labor Relations at Cornell University. I am testifying today in order to bring awareness to an important issue for many students in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to the immediate issues of reopening and testing, this pandemic has had a substantial impact on the affordability of higher education in New York State. One aspect of this impact is the possible end of new acceptances for the Excelsior Scholarship Program. The Excelsior Scholarship was established in 2017 with the vision of ensuring tuition free public higher education for students coming from upper low class and middle class New York State households. In making this scholarship, its proponents in Albany recognized the rising cost of a college education. Additionally, they recognized that a rising number of professions require employees to have associates and bachelor's degrees. This program is the first statewide program of its kind in the United States. The program originally started with eligibility open to New York State residents coming from families making \$100,000 or less, with eligibility eventually open to families making \$125,000 or less by 2019. Governor Cuomo even announced in his State of the State address this year that he wanted the program to be extended to families that make \$150,000 or less. Regardless of this change, my family was set to reach the threshold for this year and be eligible for the scholarship for the first time.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed all that. On July 21st, news outlets around the state [reported](#) that the program may be cut due to budget shortages stemming from the economic impact of the pandemic. While it is true that I am not among the most economically disadvantaged students in New York State, the rising cost of a college education has made it difficult for me to realistically consider some of my previous career goals. I am hoping to go to law school or graduate school after college. However, the high cost of these programs means that without assistance of programs like the Excelsior Scholarship, those options may be less attainable to both myself and other middle class students without incurring large amounts of debt. In addition to this potential setback at the start of our professional careers, we are set to enter an economy that will still be feeling the impact of this pandemic, creating an even more precarious situation for all of us. The Excelsior Scholarship is a critical part of New York State's

commitment to its students and halting or stopping the program will hamper the future success of New York's next generation of leaders. Thank you for your time today and for hearing my testimony.

### **DACA Students**

DACA students are at a significant disadvantage when compared to their peers at Cornell University. DACA students have already been excluded from CARES Act funds under Title IV of the Higher Education Act. This exclusion prevents DACA students from receiving the immediate financial support from the government that their peers were given. Eligible DACA students that fall under the New York State DREAM Act should be granted financial assistance through a subsidized loan program.

### **Conclusion**

New York State has been a tremendous supporter of higher education initiatives and its students have contributed significantly to the state's and nation's economy. However, the COVID-19 Pandemic has highlighted significant challenges that will impact students and their families. Extending support to all students during this time is critical in maintaining a strong commitment to higher education and ensuring resilience as New York State and its economy reopens.

We thank you for this opportunity.