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**TESTIMONY OF THE  
CUNY UNIVERSITY STUDENT SENATE  
BEFORE THE NEW YORK STATE SENATE  
IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HIGHER EDUCATION  
July 28th, 2020**

Good morning, my name is Timothy Hunter. I am the Chairperson of the CUNY University Student Senate (USS) and the Student Trustee on the City University's Board of Trustees. Founded in 1972 with the mission of preserving the accessibility, affordability, and excellence of higher education within the CUNY, the organization is charged with protecting the rights of the student body and promoting the general welfare of its student constituents and the University. As New York City is the epicenter of the global coronavirus pandemic, we must ensure the needs of students attending the City University of New York are centered in policymaking.

**ACADEMIC CHALLENGES DURING COVID-19**

The coronavirus pandemic has left immeasurable struggles for the CUNY community. Many students have experienced hardship at a heightened level throughout these unprecedented times. Issues such as food and housing insecurity affected many students due to unemployment and lack of resources. Academic challenges were also faced with the lack of equipment and technology being provided by our university. According to a recent CUNY student experience survey during COVID-19 conducted by Healthy CUNY, a university-wide initiative based at the CUNY School of Public Health, more than half of respondents (57%) reported that their ability to do school work decreased due to the coronavirus pandemic. Out of those who reported decreased ability to do school work, 73% said it was due to their emotional/mental state, 60% said it was due to changes in family responsibilities and household tasks, and 58% said it was due to changes to online learning.<sup>1</sup>

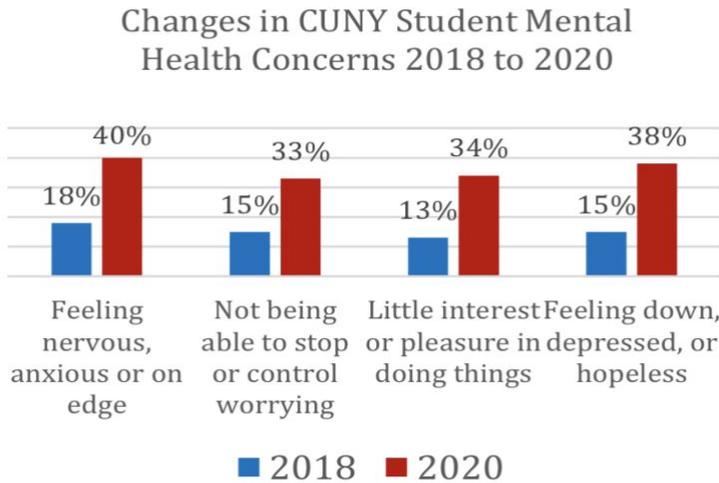
**MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES DURING COVID-19**

It is clear that mental health-related issues have surged within CUNY in recent years, however, because of coronavirus, those issues have only been exacerbated, affecting the retention rates and graduation rates of students. Before COVID-19 access to mental health counselors on CUNY

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<sup>1</sup> Healthy CUNY Preliminary Report: Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on CUNY students May 15, 2020, by Nicholas Freudenberg, Heidi Jones, Meredith Manze, and Patricia Lamberson, all at the CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy

campuses were extremely limited where students would often wait months to see a counselor. New York State Senator Andrew Gounardes introduced legislation mandating a ratio of one clinical, non-student mental health staff member per one thousand students on all SUNY and CUNY campuses (Senate Bill 3717). According to the 2020 Healthy CUNY Survey, on more than half of the days in the two weeks prior to the survey, over one-third of students reported the following:



- Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge (40%)
- Little pleasure or interest in doing things (38%)
- Unable to stop worrying (33%)
- Feeling down, depressed, or helpless (33%)<sup>2</sup>

It's clear, based on the 2018 Healthy CUNY Student Survey, the rates of these negative feelings within the

CUNY student population have more than doubled, likely due to the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

### **FOOD INSECURITY DURING COVID-19**

According to the Healthy CUNY Survey on the impact of COVID-19 on CUNY students, levels of worry about running out of food because of lack of money were more than three times higher in 2020 than in 2018. In addition, students also cut or skipped meals due to lack of money at higher rates than they did in 2018. Lastly, students reported having gone hungry often or sometimes more frequently in 2020 than they did in 2018. **At the same time, 70% reported a decrease in income for other members of their households and 54% a decrease in their own income due to coronavirus.**<sup>4</sup>

### **TAKE REVENUE FROM WALL STREET, NOT STUDENTS**

Due to austerity budgets prior to the pandemic, paired with additional cuts post pandemic- CUNY students are expecting to see their tuition raise by an additional \$320 in annual tuition

<sup>2</sup> Healthy CUNY Preliminary Report: Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on CUNY students May 15, 2020, by Nicholas Freudenberg, Heidi Jones, Meredith Manze, and Patricia Lamberson, all at the CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy

<sup>3</sup> Healthy CUNY: Promoting Health for Academic Success: An Assessment of Challenges and Opportunities at City University of New York; February 2018, see: [https://sph.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Promoting-Health-for-Academic-Success.2.12.18\\_-FINAL.pdf-2.13.18.pdf](https://sph.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Promoting-Health-for-Academic-Success.2.12.18_-FINAL.pdf-2.13.18.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*

and fees (\$200 for tuition and \$120 for a new ‘health and wellness’ fee) for academic year 2020-2021. At a time when so many New Yorkers are burdened with the socioeconomic consequences of COVID-19, particularly those living in the city as they directly dealt with the immediate fall out, New York State should invest in the public urban university that plays a vital role in our economy.

CUNY is increasingly relying on student tuition rather than state funding to maintain and run our university. At the same time, many students at CUNY are essential workers who have been working in hospitals, pharmacies, the MTA and other fields vital to the state's recovery. Yet, as most come from largely minority and low-income communities, CUNY students are disproportionately burdened by the impact of the pandemic in addition to the tuition increase. Imagine families budgeting for a tuition increase while also suffering economically from what may be the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression. Public colleges like CUNY are meant to be a gateway to the middle class. CUNY students should not have to pay for tuition with their salaries, savings or loans- until they are at their breaking point.

New York State needs an estimated \$61 billion over the next four years to close its enormous budget deficits.<sup>5</sup> The state should generate revenues from those with the most means to help pay for essential services like quality public higher education. New York has a century-old Wall Street sales tax on its books but does not collect it. The stock transfer tax would make an enormous difference in state revenues – but only if it is collected. Enacted in 1905, the NYS stock transfer tax, if fully collected, could raise billions of dollars annually in new revenue – yet it has been fully and automatically rebated since 1981. For most investors, this is an unseen tax – it wouldn't be felt even if it was collected. Most people who have investments are not buying and selling stocks with great frequency. Wall Street speculators, on the other hand, seek to jump in and out of investments at a rapid pace, and those would be the people who would pay the vast bulk of the tax.<sup>6</sup>

As New York State grapples with the widening budget gap, we ask the Senate and Assembly to be bold in its vision in creating the path to economic recovery by enacting revenue generating solutions like the stock transfer tax. It is a tax that is already on the books and ready to be collected and could help fund public agencies like the City University of New York.

Investment in CUNY is important now more than ever. As an institution that serves predominantly 80% Black and students of color it is imperative the most marginalized students

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<sup>5</sup> WSKG: Cuomo: Report Predicts \$61-Billion State Deficit Over 4 Years, see: <https://wskg.org/news/cuomo-report-predicts-61-billion-state-deficit-over-4-years/>

<sup>6</sup> Fiscal Fairness; Better Choice Budget Campaign FACT SHEET, see: [www.fiscalfairness.org/stocktransfer.pdf](http://www.fiscalfairness.org/stocktransfer.pdf)

receive equal access and opportunity to their higher education. Investment in CUNY would allow for more resources and programs for the most marginalized students in New York City. The TAP GAP (Tuition Assistance Program) which is approximately \$88 million dollars, disproportionately affects our students and highlights the equity issue at our university. The larger a pool of TAP recipients attending a CUNY college the bigger the TAP GAP becomes. While colleges are forced to eat out of their own budget students are directly affected by library hours being cut, poor infrastructure, smaller course offerings and more. In order to alleviate these issues that are due to systemic underfunding from our government, revenue is needed. When returning back to Albany, we ask for the Senate and Assembly to prioritize passing legislation that generates substantial revenue from those who benefit most in society and are affected least by the state's financial shortfalls and health threats, to fully invest in vital public agencies like CUNY.

Thank you.