



The State University
of New York

Joint Legislative Public Hearing

How COVID-19 Has Impacted Higher Education

**New York State Senate Standing Committee on Higher Education and
Assembly Standing Committee on Higher Education**

**Testimony Provided by Robert Megna, Officer in Charge
July 28, 2020**

Good morning. I am Robert Megna, and I am privileged to serve as the Officer in Charge of The State University of New York.

I would like to thank Chairpersons Stavisky and Glick; members of the Senate and Assembly; and legislative staff for affording me this opportunity to discuss the remarkable ways, under the leadership of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo, that our system responded to the COVID-19 crisis. I would also like to acknowledge and thank Chairman Merryl Tisch and our entire SUNY Board of Trustees for their leadership and support during these unprecedented circumstances, the great work of our executive leadership team and presidents at all 64 campuses, as well as all the people who keep our system moving forward: the students, faculty, and staff.

Our work the last several months has focused on successfully transitioning hundreds of thousands of students to online and remote learning environments, working to ensure that every student had the technological support to complete their coursework, and transforming several of our campuses into emergency medical facilities in the hardest hit parts of the state. In addition to the many ways that SUNY stepped up from the start, we have also been personally impacted and felt the tragedy of this pandemic close to home. Amongst our students, faculty, and staff, the SUNY family had 1,036 positive coronavirus cases at 38 campuses.

That includes the tragic loss of 11 people whom we called friends and colleagues – heroes like Dr. James “Charlie” Mahoney, who led the Intensive Care Unit at SUNY Downstate. I hope that we can take a moment of silence to honor the lives, memory, and sacrifice of everyone we’ve lost.

To begin, I want to take a moment to discuss the exceptional work of SUNY hospitals at Downstate Health Science University, Upstate Medical University and Stony Brook University. SUNY hospitals provided life-saving treatment to communities at the epicenter of this crisis, with SUNY Downstate selected as one of the few COVID-only hospitals in the state. Our doctors, nurses, staff and medical teams provided around-the-clock care and demonstrated compassion and teamwork. Upstate, for instance, sent a team of nurses to Stony Brook when they needed support the most.

SUNY has been central to addressing racial disparities in COVID-19 outcomes. For instance, Governor Cuomo commissioned the University Albany to lead the state’s research efforts, in coordination with the NYS Department of Health and Northwell Health, regarding the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on minority populations. Groundbreaking work and research on these issues have also been done by University at Buffalo, Stony Brook University, and elsewhere within the SUNY system.

I also want to draw attention to the work of SUNY community colleges who, through the peak of this crisis, were critical in training and supplying over 30,000 workers in what Governor Cuomo called the “helping fields.” These campuses were a pipeline to respond to our needs from essential health care all the way to, tragically, funeral services.

Our students remain on the front lines, and our campuses have and will continue to serve as a hub for service to the community, including hosting test sites and being an extension of medical facilities. All crucial to the fight against this pandemic.

To go back to the beginning, on March 3rd, Governor Cuomo announced that SUNY – alongside our partners at the City University of New York – was bringing nearly 300 study-abroad students home from those countries with increasing positive cases, including Italy, Japan, and South Korea. Within days, that order extended to all students abroad. We coordinated with the Department of Health, county boards of health, and local officials, and established SUNY Brockport and Stony Brook University’s Southampton campus as places where students could safely return and self-quarantine. Shortly after, on March 11th, it was announced that SUNY and CUNY were transitioning to a distance-learning model for the remainder of the spring semester.

Recognizing this was a tremendous disruption for our students, faculty and staff, we worked with each campus to identify a schedule – built around previously-scheduled spring breaks – to ensure that every student was able to make that transition by March 26th.

As a result, most students who were residing in the SUNY residence hall facilities prior to the outbreak moved home. SUNY campuses themselves, however, remained open through the end of the Spring 2020 semester to accommodate students with special circumstances such as those who did not have other safe living and dining arrangements and students with limited or no access to technology and/or required clinical or lab work as part of their educational requirements. Across the system, students who remained on campus followed the social distancing protocols as directed by the state Department of Health and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In addition to providing internet accessible coursework and online support services, which ensured quality education and access for students studying remotely, I am proud to share that SUNY distributed more than 8,000 laptops to students in need. We are continuing to monitor digital access challenges and recently announced that every new student enrolled in the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) has also received a laptop to facilitate a successful pre-freshman summer program and beyond, totaling an additional 2,800 laptops. Our team is also in the process of rolling out a WiFi access program so that any enrolled student can access their home-campus WiFi account at any SUNY campus as well as all locations in the state that participate in this program; it is another step that moves us closer to realizing Governor Cuomo’s Broadband for All goals.

Arrangements were made for each SUNY campus to issue a prorated refund (or credit for the Fall 2020 term, at the student's option) for housing and dining fees, and certain other charges related to campus life that were left unused during the Spring 2020 semester. We also provided campuses the flexibility to adjust grading of classes to Pass/Fail, and our Board of Trustees suspended SAT/ACT testing requirements for the 2021-2022 academic year.

As you can imagine, the undertaking of this transition has been, and continues to be, unprecedented, massive, and costly with our estimates of maximum exposure for refunds alone reaching nearly \$300 million.

Simply put, COVID-19 has destabilized the higher education sector across the country. Public and private institutions large and small have had to transform at a record pace. Higher education is a mobilizing factor for economic growth and the longer this destabilization lingers, the longer our path to economic recovery will be. And unfortunately, our efforts in recent months have occurred in many ways without the necessary support of the federal government.

The CARES Act, signed by President Trump on March 27th, provided little support to New York-based institutions of higher education, or SUNY hospitals.

New York hospitals as you know were reimbursed at significantly lower rates by the federal government for coronavirus patients than hospitals located in states which largely escaped the pain of the pandemic. Additionally, much of the support from the federal government has been in the form of loans, not grants, requiring already struggling institutions to identify ways to repay for their service.

SUNY has been working with New York's congressional delegation to ensure they recognize the need for greater support to New York State in the next stimulus plan currently under negotiation by Congress and the White House.

In the meantime, since the start of the pandemic, SUNY has taken action to manage and mitigate the financial impacts of this crisis to the extent that it can. We have worked with our campuses to implement spending constraint plans that include placing a freeze on hiring except where health and safety and/or revenue generating activities can be identified, as well as instituting other cost reduction measures across campuses in relation to travel, purchases, and large-scale contracts. In addition, all new capital projects and non-essential initiatives were placed on hold except for those already underway, those deemed mission-critical to the academic priorities of SUNY, or projects that include regulatory, compliance, and/or safety components. I'm pleased to share that some priority projects central to our transition to the "new normal" have recently been approved to move forward. We have also identified ways to reduce costs and generate efficiencies across the system through shared services, shared platforms, and leveraging SUNY's "buying power" to cut costs and improve security.

Because New York State, as Dr. Anthony Fauci said, “did it correctly” we are able to put into motion plans for the safe reopening of all 64 SUNY campuses. In April, SUNY established a COVID-19 Resume and Restart Task Force, with *seven* working groups focused on specific areas integral to a safe and successful restart, including:

1. Academic Continuity
2. Physical Preparedness
3. Research Enterprise and Science of Reopening
4. Student Wellness
5. Community Colleges
6. Community Engagement
7. Resources

Our team has worked with each campus to finalize their reopening plans which includes several areas like maintaining social distancing, providing PPE and masks for everyone on campus, screening and testing protocols, safety measures for vulnerable populations, how to contain a potential outbreak, and how to transition to online/remote learning mid-semester if necessary. Reopening plans and how they were developed and reviewed can be found online at <https://www.suny.edu/campus-reopening/>.

Although the ever-shifting circumstances make it impossible to precisely calculate the full impact, SUNY projects that the negative impact as of June 30th totals \$400 million, with potential to reach approximately \$1.0 billion in the coming months. The State – in fact no state – has these kinds of resources. It is incumbent on the federal government to step up and support all New Yorkers and higher education in New York State because collectively we are crucial to future economic recovery.

We thank Governor Cuomo and legislators for your ongoing support. Because of you, there is so much to be proud of. SUNY’s challenges as a result of COVID-19 are only beginning. As we continue to transform SUNY, the largest comprehensive system of higher education in the country, we are committed to meeting the evolving needs of our students and economy. I would be happy to take any questions.