

The City University of New York
Testimony of Chancellor Felix V. Matos Rodriguez
New York State Senate and Assembly Standing Committees on Higher Education
Public Hearing
The Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education
July 28, 2020

Good morning, Chairs Stavisky and Glick, members of the Senate and Assembly Higher Education committees, staff and guests. I am Félix Matos Rodríguez, Chancellor of The City University of New York. Thank you for inviting CUNY to participate in this hearing on the impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge those from CUNY who have lost their lives from COVID-19. CUNY, like our City and State, has been hit hard by this terrible coronavirus. Let me again express my deepest condolences to the families and others who have lost a loved one. To honor the memory of our talented and cherished faculty, staff, and students, as well as retirees and alumni whose lives have been taken by the coronavirus, we have launched an "In Memoriam" page on CUNY's website so they are always with us. We will further commemorate their memories with a memorial event, when it is safe to do so.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, CUNY, like schools at every level, had to confront a rapidly developing situation and make almost instantaneous decisions affecting the health, well-being and future of our 275,000 students, 20,000 faculty and 28,000 staff. Our highest priorities have been to protect the health and safety of our students, faculty and staff and to ensure academic continuity for our students. And our decisions are guided by the principles of equity and inclusion that are core to CUNY's mission. Equity and inclusion are especially important because of who the coronavirus

has impacted in disproportionate numbers — those who come from our most diverse neighborhoods, the very same communities that are the backbone of CUNY.

Beginning March 19, 2020, consistent with Governor Cuomo's NYS on Pause executive order, CUNY converted almost 50,000 in-person courses to distance education. This required our faculty, many who had not taught online before, to quickly revise their course syllabi, learn new platforms, and adopt new pedagogical strategies to create the conditions for their students to meet the corresponding learning outcomes. It also required our students to secure devices and internet connections, learn new platforms for those who had not previously enrolled in online courses, and restructure their already complicated lives to adapt to a new learning paradigm and remote support structure that kept them away from their campus communities. Staff adapted to remote work and continued to give valuable advice and support to colleagues as well as to deliver wrap-around student support services. And it required all involved — faculty, students, and staff — to do all of this while caring for family and adapting to a new, complicated reality.

We are grateful for our faculty, staff and students. We are especially grateful for our essential workers, who have continued to ensure that our campuses are safely maintained. Many of these workers are in public safety and buildings and grounds.

The University enacted several policies and practices to ensure student success given remote instruction. I will describe some of these policies in detail.

Since the majority of CUNY students come from backgrounds of limited financial means, it became obvious that many of our students would not be able to successfully complete the Spring semester without having a dedicated device that they can use for their academic work. The University, therefore, utilized its state capital budget to purchase over 33,000 devices, comprised of both laptops and iPads. Colleges also purchased technological equipment needed by students, faculty and staff. We are very appreciative of our funding partners who assisted in ensuring that these purchases

could be made as quickly as possible. The devices were delivered to students, both through physically distanced pickup at their local campuses as well as shipment to their homes.

Another way to promote student success is through professional development opportunities. To this end, we have offered a series of online instruction trainings. More than 1,000 faculty have already participated in the first two CUNY School of Professional Studies Online Teaching Essentials (OTE) workshops. A third group of more than 660 faculty began on July 9, and another workshop is tentatively scheduled for early August. These workshops give faculty first-hand experience of what it is like to learn online in an asynchronous environment in Blackboard. CUNY is offering other programs to help faculty master best practices in online teaching and learning. As the result of a partnership with the Association of College and University Educators (ACUE) and the National Association of System Heads (NASH), 300 faculty at CUNY's senior colleges are scheduled to participate in the 25-week ACUE *Effective Teaching Practices* program this summer and fall. Four hundred twenty faculty at CUNY's community and comprehensive colleges will earn an ACUE micro credential in online teaching in fall 2020 through a partnership between CUNY, ACUE and the Carnegie Corporation. Three hundred faculty have signed up to participate in the *CUNY Summer Faculty Webinar Series: Special Topics in Innovative Pedagogy*, a four-week series in late July and August that will address Open Pedagogy and Mindset approaches for increasing student motivation and engagement in online and in-person settings. CUNY is also negotiating with another national leader in online teaching to provide advanced training for an additional 240 CUNY faculty who taught online prior to spring 2020 or have already taken SPS's OTE course. This an impressive pedagogical investment in the expertise and professional growth of our faculty and one that will translate into better teaching and quality education for our students.

A sampling of other actions taken to assist our students includes pushing the date to withdraw from courses to the last day of the semester; obtaining regulatory waivers to allow students in essential health fields to graduate early and join the fight against the

pandemic; establishing partnerships to enhance workforce opportunities for our students; and collaborating with state and city agencies allowed for University resources to be made available for use by our local communities.

As a result of COVID-19, to combat student financial and emotional hardship, the CUNY Board of Trustees announced the creation of the Chancellor's Emergency Relief Fund. The Chancellor's Emergency Relief Fund has raised over \$5.5 million in contributions and awarded \$3 million in grants to CUNY students thus far (\$500 grants to 6,000 students). In April, students began receiving grants with priority given to those with the highest financial need, those in proximity to graduation and those who are student-parents. May and July distributions focused primarily on undocumented students and others who were not eligible for Federal CARES Act funds. To date, 57 percent of the recipients have been undocumented students. Students from foster care have also received grants. The remaining funds will be distributed in August and September. The Fund has been supported by the Carroll & Milton Petrie Foundation, the James and Judith K. Dimon Foundation, Robin Hood, the Jeffrey and Shari Aronson Family Foundation and The New York Community Trust along with other corporate, philanthropic, and individual donors. We are very grateful to our philanthropic partners, and proud of our ability to get these funds into the hands of our students so quickly.

CUNY students have also received financial assistance from the Federal CARES Act. This federal stimulus legislation, formally known as the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, provides emergency grants from the U.S. Department of Education to eligible students to help cover education-related expenses caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The CARES Act directs student recipients to use the funds they receive for unexpected expenses, unmet financial need, or expenses related to the disruption of campus operations resulting from the coronavirus including expenses for food, housing, course materials, technology, health care or childcare. In order to be eligible, students must meet basic eligibility for federal Title IV financial aid. These eligibility criteria include having a demonstrated financial need certified by the family-income information provided on the student's Free Application for Federal Student Aid

(FAFSA); being a U.S. citizen or national, permanent resident, or other eligible noncitizen; and being enrolled in a degree or certificate program and making satisfactory academic progress.

CUNY's total student allocation from the program is \$118 million. We moved promptly after we received the funds, being one of the first colleges in the nation to distribute the funds starting on May 22. We are very pleased to report that about \$108 million of the total allocation has already been disbursed to over 157,000 students. The average award is close to \$700, with some students receiving well over \$900. Our allocation formula considers students' financial need, and whether they are caring for dependents. We plan on allocating the remaining \$10 million of the funding shortly.

The second half of the CARES Act funding, which is \$118 million plus \$14 million from the Minority-Serving Institution (MSI) component of the CARES Act, is the institutional aid that will be allocated to the campuses. We submitted a plan to the State that prioritized student support, mental health funds, reimbursements to campuses for COVID-19 related costs like refunds, and investments in online infrastructure and training. Although our plan for distribution of this combined \$132 million has been approved by the State, we have decided to hold off on allocating these funds until we finalize our overall budget strategy for Fiscal Year 2021, in case adjustments to our CARES plans are required. This is the most prudent way to proceed in these financially uncertain times.

For the past several months, we have been preparing for an extremely challenging fiscal environment in the upcoming academic year. While we are pleased that our summer session enrollment numbers are very strong (total enrollment increased 14.5%), it is still unknown how the coronavirus will impact our enrollment for the Fall 2020 semester.

Our funding partners at the State and City are also facing severe funding shortfalls, which will have a direct negative impact on CUNY's operating budget. New York City's

Fiscal Year 2021 Adopted Budget includes a savings target for CUNY of \$46.3 million, which represents about 9% of the community colleges' all-funds operating budget.

While we all remain hopeful that the federal government will act as it should, we realize that these are financially challenging times for both the State and City. The University is taking steps to meet this challenge, one of which was to implement a freeze on all personnel actions, including all hires and discretionary salary increases, with limited exceptions related to safety, operational disruption, or cost reduction. We will continue these efforts, which to date have generated \$17 million in annualized savings for Fiscal Year 2021.

Traditionally, the University Board of Trustees is presented a budget for the new fiscal year in June. We are delaying the presentation and approval process for the Fiscal Year 2021 budget until more information is available regarding another federal stimulus bill, and its impact on State and City finances. This includes consideration of the proposed tuition increase and student health and wellness fee. In the meantime, and to guarantee the continuous operations of our University, we have authorized month-to-month budgets for the colleges and Central divisions so they can continue to cover expenses, such as personnel and necessary purchasing.

We have reappointed college assistants and other hourly employees for a month at a time starting with July, and will do the same for August. In a similar way, we would have liked to postpone the re-appointment process for adjuncts until we had finalized our budget, but our faculty union pushed to only extend the deadline for these final decisions to June 30, when we did not have a full picture of our financial outlook. If the fiscal and enrollment situation are more favorable in August, we plan to re-appoint some of the adjuncts. We very much value the critical contribution of our adjuncts, which was underscored in the historic collective bargaining agreement that was announced in October, in which adjunct pay per course was increased by over seventy percent.

Commented [MOU1]:

Commented [MOU2R1]:

To prepare for the fall semester, our colleges have invested resources to purchase personal protective equipment, such as masks and gloves, and other supplies like hand sanitizer and disinfecting wipes, to ensure the safety of these campus workers. The University has also completed bulk purchases of these items to deliver to campuses as needed.

Colleges are drafting reopening plans that conform to CUNY Guidelines for Safe Campus Reopening, which integrates New York State guidance in addressing the myriad operational and academic challenges ahead as we plan for a time when our college communities return to their campuses. The Guidelines cover a range of safety protocols for students, faculty and staff; strategies for limiting congestion and procedures for disinfection of buildings, classrooms and other enclosed spaces; and considerations ranging from course scheduling and grading policies to concerns about vulnerable populations and student life. Each CUNY campus will have a Campus Reopening Committee to prepare and implement its reopening plan. The reopening plans will take a phased approach to reopening campuses and will also anticipate actions that may need to be taken to prevent the spread of the virus or due to a future pause. Campuses are also asked to consider, and address, factors involved in reopening facilities such as campus childcare centers, libraries, labs and health and wellness services, as well as circumstances affecting students with disabilities and student life activities. Campus plans require consultation with campus stakeholders such as faculty, students, staff and unions, among others.

At present, the University continues to operate under the Governor Cuomo's NYS on Pause executive order. A recent change is that some schools have approved research reopening implementation plans, which allows for the resumption of research activities on campus. At present, seven CUNY colleges have approved plans — City College of New York, Hunter College, Queens College, York College, Brooklyn College, John Jay College, and Lehman College. CUNY is proud of the important research its faculty is engaged in and the ability to resume that research safely.

Ultimately, all decisions on fall classes are pending final guidelines from the Governor's Office that are expected to be issued early next month. To prepare for the Fall 2020 Semester, as per a recent CUNY Board of Trustees resolution, CUNY is working to offer "its academic courses and programs for as many of its academic courses and support services as is reasonably practicable, in an online modality and remote format." Exceptions will be made for courses that cannot be effectively delivered at a distance, such as those courses which are highly experiential, or services that involve some form of tangible exchange, such as food pantries. These in-person courses and services must meet New York State and University guidelines for on-site instruction or delivery. As a point of reference, a preliminary analysis performed by the University suggests that approximately 90% of courses offered for the Fall 2019 term could be, if needed, candidates for online delivery for the Fall 2020 term with approximately 10% requiring some accommodations for in-person learning. Again, I stress, the primary consideration in all scenarios is the safety of students, faculty and staff.

Throughout these challenging times, CUNY continues to do the work necessary to continue serve our vital mission — providing a first-rate public education to all students, regardless of means or background. Despite the disruption and formidable challenges caused by the pandemic, 55,000 CUNY students received their degrees this spring. We were even able to appoint seven new college presidents (with four appointments being made in June 2020), and we will conduct three additional searches in the fall.

COVID-19 greatly impacted our students, faculty and staff, and it has highlighted the impact of structural racism and inequality on our society, our institutions and individuals. But this, also, is true: CUNY continues to prove its effectiveness and its vital importance as a critical, transformative engine of social mobility, and an institution that is needed by so many — now, more than ever. Thank you.