

**NYS Senate Higher Education Committee Hearing
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**Testimony by
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Chair Stavisky and members of the Senate Standing Committee on Higher Education, thank you for the opportunity to present oral testimony on *Maintaining Quality, Equity and Affordability in Public Higher Education*.

As a nation, throughout the State of New York and Capital District, and at the University at Albany, we have faced many unforeseen challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic. We know these continue to be difficult times and we appreciate your commitment to and investments in public higher education.

I would like to begin by providing a brief overview of the University at Albany. Before I do so, I am pleased to highlight that I recently initiated my fifth year at UAlbany. At the time of my appointment, I was the first Latino president of any SUNY four-year university or college. Today, there are three Latino/a presidents, including Presidents Milagros Peña of Purchase College and Alberto Jose Cardelle of SUNY Oneonta. I am also the executive director of the SUNY Hispanic Leadership Institute (HLI). HLI is designed to identify, develop and recruit, and ultimately support, retain and foster the success of Hispanic/Latinx leaders within the SUNY system. We also appreciate the financial support that is provided for this excellent program.

The University at Albany has more than 23,000 members within its campus community and is home to nine colleges and schools and over 50 research centers and institutes across three campuses.

Founded in 1844 as a normal school to train teachers, the University has evolved into one of SUNY's four major university research centers. Anchoring the next chapter in UAlbany's 177-year history are five core strategic priorities: student success, research excellence, diversity and inclusion, internationalization, and engagement and service. Since 2005, UAlbany has been among the nation's 131 elite Carnegie Classified R1 doctoral degree-granting universities. The "R1" category describes top-tier doctorate-granting universities with "very high research activity."

As the Capital Region's only public research university, UAlbany drives tremendous economic growth across our communities, with an annual impact of more than \$1 billion. Indeed, every tax dollar invested in UAlbany generates \$12 in regional economic impact. With its nationally respected programs, top-ranked professors and strategic location, UAlbany offers a world-class education.

Access is central to what UAlbany is about. We have one of the most diverse student populations in the SUNY system and are one of the most diverse R1 institutions in the

country. Among our 3,000-plus first-year students, 43% identify as underrepresented minorities, and among our undergraduate student body (which is 20% Black, 18% Hispanic, and 8% Asian) 33% are first generation college students. Enrollment in our Honors College has doubled to approximately 250 students since the pandemic began and is far more diverse, with a marked increase in Latino/a, Black and Asian American students.

Widely recognized for our longstanding academic and research strengths in areas including atmospheric and environmental sciences, education, political science, public administration and policy, public health, sociology and social welfare, we have made significant investments in emerging and new strategic areas including weather and climate sciences, health sciences, minority health disparities, emergency preparedness, cybersecurity and artificial intelligence, as well as engineering and computer science.

If this excellence is not accessible to all New Yorkers, we are missing opportunities as a public university to change lives.

Running labs and research centers (and funding graduate students!) to support research is expensive. Thus, while research does bring in external funding, there are start-up and maintenance costs that will never be fully covered by that external funding. Engineering is a good example of this. While UAlbany's College of Engineering and Applied Sciences faculty are doing great on external research funding, we had to make significant investments in faculty, equipment, and labs to make that possible. We also borrowed more than \$70 million to build ETEC, our new academic facility designed to advance interdisciplinary research and development, and to increase collaborations with industry and other external partners. These are costs largely not incurred by non-research-intensive institutions. However, as a public research university, the research we do is for the public good and can have significant positive societal impact, whether we focus on climate, disasters, cybersecurity, minority health disparities or mental health.

We are also very proud of the gains we have made, not only in increasing representation among students of color, but also in graduating those students.

As of fall 2020, UAlbany has 13,176 undergraduates and 4,505 graduate, doctoral and professional students, and more than 1,000 instructional faculty.

The University received the Higher Education Excellence in Diversity (HEED) Award from *INSIGHT 21 Diversity* magazine in 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021, and it was highlighted as a national leader in advancing racial equity in 2020 by The Education Trust.

In terms of social mobility, *U.S. News & World Report* listed UAlbany among the top 7% of performers (2021), *Education Reform Now* listed UAlbany among the top 6% (2020), and *CollegeNET* listed UAlbany among the top 2% (2020).

Additionally, UAlbany joined a select group of colleges and universities in receiving the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's Community Engagement Classification, which recognizes higher education institutions committed to community engagement (2020).

The University at Albany has a wide array of academic and research strengths. Here are several highlights.

UAlbany's longstanding strength in health sciences—punctuated by a unique 35+ year partnership with the New York State Department of Health—has been highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic. With prominent research and leadership in critical surveillance testing and contact-tracing programs, a collaboration was formed between the University's pioneering RNA Institute and its leading School of Public Health—the only school of public health in the nation that we know of that is jointly created and operated by a university and a state health department.

A critical differentiator within the health sciences is UAlbany's leadership in health equity and minority health disparities, which resulted in a prestigious \$10 million NIH endowment grant, as well as a \$1 million gift from the Hearst Foundations to expand the Health Disparities Fellows program within the University's nationally acclaimed Center for the Elimination of Minority Health Disparities. In recognition of our faculty's expertise in health equity and minority health disparities, New York State commissioned UAlbany to conduct research on the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on communities of color.

UAlbany's growing expertise and reputation in emergency management, with a strong focus on cybersecurity and artificial intelligence, creates an unparalleled area of strength and opportunity. The nation's first stand-alone College of Emergency Preparedness, Homeland Security, and Cybersecurity is complemented by the School of Business's strong portfolio of research in cybersecurity which, combined with cybersecurity research in UAlbany's other schools and colleges, has resulted in NSA accreditation to the University as a Center of Excellence in Cybersecurity Research.

The University's expertise and state-of-the-art research in climate science draws upon many disciplines, including emergency management, engineering, natural sciences, social sciences, social welfare, public policy, public health, the arts, and the humanities. UAlbany's globally acclaimed Atmospheric Sciences Research Center, the Department of Atmospheric and Environmental Sciences, and the nationally acclaimed New York State Mesonet, highlight its strengths and impact in the area of weather and climate.

We are also extremely proud of our new ETEC building, a state-of-the-art facility and hub for innovation, scholarship, applied research and commercial development designed to foster cross-disciplinary collaborations to confront complex problems. It also leverages an asset that no other university in New York can: our proximity to the nerve center of New York State policy and decision-making.

For the past 21 months, all of us in higher education have been working nonstop to navigate the pandemic, which has impacted every aspect of work and life on our campuses. Since the fall of 2020, the University, led by its RNA Institute, School of Public Health, and Emergency Management Office, has been among higher education's leaders in having a COVID-19 testing program. The University has also been front and center in partnering with the state to protect our communities by hosting drive-thru testing and point of dispensing (POD) vaccine sites on campus. We are in many respects starting a new chapter, but challenges remain. One of the top concerns today among college presidents is the mental health of students—and employees.

Counseling centers on campuses across the nation are seeing this firsthand as they endure a surge in needs pertaining to mental health. At UAlbany, our Counseling and Psychological Services Center is on track to handle a record number of clinical student appointments this semester.

Higher levels of students experiencing anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation and thoughts of self-harm create capacity challenges, with demand outpacing the level of service expansion. An important lesson that we are learning is that mental health cannot be “just” a counseling center issue. Mental health and well-being are campus-wide responsibilities, and a collective approach is needed to address these critical issues. As part of this effort, UAlbany recently joined eight universities nationwide that have adopted the Okanagan Charter, designating UAlbany as a Health Promoting University (HPU) and member of the United States Health Promoting Campuses Network (USHPCN).

Health Promoting Universities (HPUs) aspire to transform the health and sustainability of current and future societies, strengthen communities, and contribute to overall well-being. The global initiative is based on evidence showing that people who experience well-being tend to be more productive, are better able to engage in deeper learning, have a greater sense of belonging and stronger sense of community. The USHPCN is guided by the Okanagan Charter, an international charter that calls on post-secondary schools to embed health into all aspects of campus culture. The charter began in Canada in 2015 and is now active across the globe.

Affordability and retention are inextricably related—and affordability is central to UAlbany's accessibility and the life-altering potential of the education it provides.

This is particularly true given that 42% of our full-time undergraduate students are eligible for need-based federal Pell Grants, and nearly 23% have zero Expected Family Contribution toward the cost of their education.

UAlbany is affordable, especially when compared to private institutions, but financial hardships remain a burden and can be a significant barrier to retention. To combat this, UAlbany has financed microgrants to help students avoid or remove registration holds from their accounts. We have also invested unprecedented amounts of funds for

undergraduate and graduate scholarships, EOP, and retention and persistence initiatives.

Additionally, via an initial grant from the Heckscher Foundation for Children and the Gerstner Family Foundation, and through the continued support of our faculty, staff and community members, the University launched a Student Emergency Fund in 2018 which supports students who may experience a financial emergency, such as a house fire, burglary, or eviction. To date, requests for funds have increased by 400% as a result of the pandemic.

While UAlbany cannot singlehandedly change the macro-economics of higher education in the United States, it is fully committed to ensuring that students who have done everything correctly do not see their academic progress arrested due to modest unpaid bills—especially now when so many families are reeling financially from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In recognition of the fact that college students are often faced with significant financial challenges while enrolled at institutions of higher education, the University has stood up several resources to help ensure our students are able to succeed academically while also meeting their basic needs.

Two of these resources include the University's on-campus food pantry and UAlbany's professional clothing facility. The Purple Pantry, launched in 2019, is available to all UAlbany students, faculty and staff and offers patrons a wide range of nutritious food, such as fresh fruit and vegetables, grains, pre-packaged meals, meat and dairy products, and non-perishables, as well as an assortment of toiletry items. Our professional clothing facility, Purple Threads, makes business attire immediately available for students who may be in need.

UAlbany, like many universities across the nation, is struggling to maintain affordability, accessibility, and quality. New Yorkers should be able to expect these things from their public education system. This year's enacted budget presents challenges in meeting the costs we have in order to excel, and absent additional revenues – be it additional direct State support or a sustainable tuition plan - we cannot keep up with inflation. Of course, we want to try to minimize the cost of higher education for our students, but additional revenues are needed. For example, our employee salaries, negotiated by the State through collective bargaining, increase our expenses by roughly \$6 million annually.

We have done our part. Over the last year, we have realized nearly \$25 million in permanent savings without retrenchments, layoffs, or furloughs. We are targeting another \$8 million in reductions, but that may not be enough.

The federal stimulus money received by the University, while critical and appreciated, is by no means a windfall. The share of the three stimulus bills that our campus can keep will total about \$47 million, while our pandemic-related expenses and lost revenue total

\$63.2 million to date. In other words, the stimulus has made the hole that we need to climb out of much shallower, but not all losses have been recovered..

A bright spot is that the enacted State budget increases funding for EOP and TAP funding for students while setting a course for the elimination of the so-called TAP Gap starting in 2022-23.

Eliminating the TAP Gap alone will save our campus \$6.5 million annually by 2024-25 that we would have otherwise lost. We greatly appreciate this support, as well as continued support for employee benefits and capital costs, and the opportunity to share our financial pressures.

To maintain and increase quality, equity and affordability in public higher education at UAAlbany while maximizing our contribution to the State, we need more direct investment by the State – especially absent a tuition rate plan – in both the areas of operating aid, and capital funding. Supplementing this, we are redoubling our efforts in terms of recruitment, retention, and other revenue-generating initiatives.

Thank you again for your leadership and strong support of higher education and the students we serve, and for the opportunity to address you today. I look forward to working with you in the weeks and months ahead. I am happy to answer any questions.