

Testimony Before the New York State Legislature
2016 Joint Budget Hearing on Higher Education

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By New York City Council Member Inez Barron,
Chair of the Committee on Higher Education

Good Afternoon Chairs Farrell, Young, LaValle, Glick and members of the Joint Hearing on the 2016-2017 Executive Budget proposal regarding Higher Education. My name is Inez Barron and I am a member of the New York City Council, representing the 42nd district. I have the distinction and privilege of serving as the Chair of the Committee on Higher Education. I am pleased to appear before you today and offer this testimony in response to areas of the Executive Budget, which I believe are deficient in terms of funding for Higher Education. The Executive Budget proposed by the Governor seeks to extend the annual tuition increases for New York residents attending The City University of New York (CUNY). As you know, CUNY has 24 institutions and serves 275,000 degree-seeking students.

Students currently enrolled in their fourth year at CUNY have seen a 17% increase in their tuition since their admission four years ago. If these students follow the national trend and complete their course of study in six years and if the proposed annual tuition increases are implemented, they will have endured a 28% increase in tuition by the time they graduate. By comparison, many workers across this state do not have the assurance of any such annual increases in their salaries and in fact the stagnation

in wages is increasing the income/wealth gap. As related directly to CUNY, while the State University of New York (SUNY) workers can expect to see their wages rise to \$15 an hour, CUNY workers have been excluded from that provision. This just adds insult to injury, since they have not had a contract since 2008.

The national trend of taking six years to complete a bachelor's degree is attributed to various factors. Included among these factors is a new "non-traditional" student; burgeoning family responsibilities; insufficient financial resources and poorly prepared high school students. Recent data show that of those who graduate from a New York City high school only 21% are college or career ready. Also disturbing is data that show that 79% of CUNY's first year students require remedial coursework. Sadly, much of this negative situation can be attributed to the fact that for decades New York City was underfunded by the State for primary and secondary education. More disturbing is the fact that the State has chosen to renege on its agreement through a court settlement in response to the Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE). Until the State meets its financial obligation to provide a "sound, basic education" to the students of NYC, who are predominately black and brown students, receiving free or reduced meals, we will continue to see inadequately prepared students graduating from NYC schools.

Shockingly and unexpectedly, the Executive Budget proposed by Governor Cuomo calls for a 45% decrease in state support for CUNY senior colleges. This \$485 million reduction cannot reasonably be thought to be accommodated by NYC's budget. Requiring NYC to pay 30% of CUNY's senior college operating costs (\$1,232,120) and debt service (\$334,820) is unconscionable.

NYC realizes the benefit that can accrue to students who attend institutions of higher learning and we have taken action. The NYC Council has instituted a merit based scholarship program available to all NYC high school students who graduate with a 2.5 grade point average and enroll in CUNY. The NYC council is committed to providing incentives and financial support to students. This program is now in its third year of operation and the NYC Council is expected to offer \$19 million to continue and expand the program.

President Barack Obama is raising the call for states to join in expanding postsecondary education opportunities by initiating the America's Choice Promise. The objective is to provide tuition-free college courses for fulltime students at community colleges. He is proposing that the federal government will bear 75% of the cost with the states contributing the remaining 25%. The NYS Executive Budget proposals are in stark contradiction to President Obama's plan. This Executive

Budget does not offer support for the President's plan and in fact presents impediments to achieving the President's goals. The CUNY Board of Trustees can be seen as moving to align itself with the President's objectives. At a recent Board of Trustees meeting they voted to reject any tuition increases at their community colleges. Congratulations! This is a step toward the objective of returning to the unfettered ability to obtain an exceptional high quality education at a CUNY school—tuition-free.

Alarming, the Executive Budget also seeks to eliminate two highly-effective exemplary programs that have been utilized by students who are fulltime workers and students who are challenged to meet their financial obligations. I am speaking of the Joseph Murphy Institute and the Accelerated Studies Associates Program known as ASAP.

At a recent NYC Council hearing held by the Committee on Higher Education, testimony was presented regarding the benefit of the Murphy Institute and discussions centered on expanding the institute into a school. All witnesses spoke of the positive impact the program had, the acclaim of its journal, the *New Labor Forum* and the unique design of courses offered to meet the specific needs of the labor industry. Witnesses highlighted the ability to have tailor made classes to address the

needs of the workforce as employees seek to upgrade their skills and advance their employment.

President Obama referenced CUNY's ASAP program as a model for the country. This unique program is an effective way to support students academically, socially through mentoring, providing technical materials, textbook grants and covering transportation costs. This program acknowledges that tuition costs are but one component of college education and that related costs can be even more burdensome.

Finally, the State legislature passed legislation last year regarding the Maintenance of Effort with a commitment to maintain the operation costs and reasonable wage increase at CUNY without being funded by increased tuition. This is part of the responsibility of the State to its residents. Education, in its formal dimensions, begins as early as infancy for children in child care centers. Primary and secondary education are recognized as responsibilities of the State and in this age of rapidly expanding technology and global competition, the State must assume the responsibility of providing public education in the post-secondary years. Career, technical and academic offerings beyond high school must be brought under the aegis of public education.

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