

Center for Disability Rights, Inc.

Testimony of Center for Disability Rights before the Joint Budget committee hearing on Higher Education 1/24/17

Thank you to Senator Young, Assembly Member Farrell, and the Joint Budget Committee for this opportunity to testify before Higher Education in the Governor's 2017-2018 Budget. My name is Gregg Beratan and I am a Policy Analyst at the Center for Disability Rights. I am disabled person, and have taught in the CUNY system. The Center for Disability Rights (CDR) is a disability led, not-for-profit organization headquartered in Rochester, New York. CDR advocates for the full integration, independence, and civil rights of people with disabilities. CDR provides services to people with disabilities and seniors within the framework of an Independent Living Model, which promotes independence of people with all types of disabilities, enabling choice in living setting, full access to the community, and control of their life. CDR works for national, state, and local systemic change to advance the rights of people with disabilities by supporting direct action, coalition building, community organizing, policy analysis, litigation, training for advocates, and community education.

The center for Disability rights has no objection to what was *in* the Governor's Budget for Higher Education: our objections lie in what was *missing* – any consideration for Disabled students.

Making SUNY & CUNY tuition free

The Governor proposed making SUNY and CUNY tuition free for students of families earning less than \$125,000 per year.¹ This proposal will fail to address fees and room and board costs which have prevented many students from working-class families from attending college. In addition, the SUNY and CUNY schools have had ongoing and significant problems with a lack of accessibility for students with disabilities. Free tuition means nothing to someone who cannot get in the door or to someone who cannot get into the dormitories to study and interact with their classmates. SUNY and CUNY schools must be fully accessible to students with disabilities.

In addition to the physical accessibility, we hear from students in both systems that teaching and learning supports need to be more accessible. We are disturbed by stories of professors banning

¹ ELFA Article VII – Part D P.121 et seq

laptops from classrooms and refusing other accommodations for disabled students (including students being kicked off of programs when they acquire disabilities). When these accommodations are required under the ADA, they are not optional. Increasing online options for students, while an interesting development, cannot be taken as the answer to accessibility issues. Online options must be made accessible, but they do not absolve the university systems of the responsibility to make all of their programs accessible. As someone who has been a disabled student trying to navigate higher education, I know first hand how unaccommodating universities can be. It is wonderful that the universities all have offices of disability services, but these offices are far from adequate to actually accommodate disabled students. Without a system wide approach to accommodating disabled students, SUNY & CUNY schools will continue to be inaccessible to many disabled students.

If the State truly wants to make Higher Education available to all, it must start by making it accessible to all! Any plans for free tuition must include plans to make the University more accessible. To not do so makes free tuition just an empty promise out of the reach of many disabled students.

Getting to Higher Education

Given that disabled unemployment is more than twice that of the nondisabled population, no community is more in need of access to higher education than the Disability Community. Disabled students face numerous systemic barriers in navigating New York's primary and secondary education systems, which prevent many disabled students from achieving academic success. Low expectations, a lack of support for IEPs and 504 plans, and a system that funnels disabled students onto a path that does not qualify them for the universities that the Governor is offering to pay for.

College is, as the Governor has said, the key to entering the modern workforce. For our community, the lack of support in primary and secondary school will keep many disabled students from being admitted to the SUNY and CUNY schools. Without addressing these limitations, our community will never benefit from the Governor's proposal for free tuition.

Hire Disabled Administrators and Scholars

SUNY & CUNY like much of Higher Education has an appalling record when it comes to hiring disabled academics and administrators. While this may not make them unique to higher education it is something the state cannot ignore. Disabled administrators are more likely to consider accessibility issues and accommodation needs in the shaping of policy. They have an inordinate impact on the systemic decisions that impact upon the experiences of disabled students.

Disabled Scholars bring a wealth of knowledge and experience that the State's university systems very much in need. As someone who has taught in the CUNY system I am acutely aware of how isolating it can be to be the only disabled faculty member. I also saw how much it meant to the disabled students we had to have a disabled faculty member. Even disabled students

from other departments would approach me for advice on how to get accommodations, how navigate their departments. The importance of representation on the faculty cannot be overstated. It adds to the quality of education we offer students and it shows disabled students that despite the often hostile landscape of higher education success is possible.

In conclusion, as the CUNY Chancellor said earlier today, "Higher Education is a remarkable engine for social and economic change." As this budget currently stands disabled students will continue to be excluded from that change. To avoid this, this committee and the Senate and Assembly as they consider and vote on this budget must show the political will to make sure that disabled students receive the support they need. As things currently stand this Budget does not do that.

I look forward to working with all of you this year to Make New York Higher Education Accessible to all people with disabilities.

Thank You,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gregg D. Beratan". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Dr. Gregg D. Beratan
Policy Analyst
The Center For Disability Rights