

11

***New York State Legislature Joint Assembly & Senate Legislative Public Hearing:
Higher Education: Fiscal Year 2017-2018 State Executive Budget Proposal
Testimony of Chikaodili Onyejiukwa
Student, Hunter College, City University of New York -CUNY
Chairperson, CUNY University Student Senate -USS
January 23, 2017***

Good afternoon members of the New York State Legislature,

My name is Chikaodili Onyejiukwa, I'm a senior at Hunter College at the City University of New York, majoring in Community Health Education. I serve as Chairperson for the City University of New York University Student Senate also known as CUNY USS. USS is the elected student governance organization responsible for representing the interests of the nearly 500,000 students that attend CUNY each academic year. I also have the distinct honor to serve as a CUNY Trustee. I'm also a proud member of assembly district 32 represented by Assemblymember Vivian Cook and Senate district 14 represented by senator Leroy Comrie.

Over the past several years, since the SUNY 2020 plan was adopted in 2011, our organization, USS, has been working diligently to call on the CUNY Board of Trustees and our legislative bodies to freeze the annual tuition increases at CUNY. We have also been working with local leaders and organizations to put our minds together and explore constructive approaches to returning CUNY to being a well funded and tuition free institution of higher learning. The CUNY University Student Senate is a steering member of the CUNY Rising Alliance. CUNY Rising is a growing alliance of 30+ community groups, non-profits, unions, student advocates and faith-based organizations that serve, mobilize and minister to millions of New Yorkers. In December, CUNY Rising released a white paper making the case for free and quality education at CUNY.

Last year, after a long battle and persistent advocacy efforts from our students and community leaders, CUNY and SUNY students were given a break from 5 years of perpetual tuition hikes. We want to thank every member of this legislature for making that happen. We are happy to have you as representatives of our great state. And again, the students at CUNY are calling for a tuition freeze and investments into our university.

I was most surprised to see that the Executive Budget proposes 5 years of \$250 tuition hikes for CUNY and SUNY students. This call for tuition hikes comes just two weeks after a proposed plan for a tuition-free CUNY and SUNY. We cannot have alternative tuition proposals. The notion that we will have tuition increases within the same institution that is declared will be tuition free, is inherently contradictory. Either we are committed to making CUNY and SUNY free of cost for our students or we are not. We are asking that the New York State Assembly and

Senate reject any attempts to increase our students tuition. We have paid our share over the past five years through tuition increases, and now we are asking for relief that we have outrightly earned.

There has been a decade long trend of disinvestment in public higher education. What New Yorkers need is a REAL investment in public higher education. We need a commitment from our Governor and state legislators that our students and professors are a priority to the great state of New York. We can make a REAL investment in CUNY by passing and signing a Maintenance of Effort Bill that ensures that our university remains well funded as the price of running a competitive university rises every year. We can make a REAL investment by reforming our Tuition Assistance Program by expanding the eligibility criteria and increasing the maximum award. We can make a REAL investment by fighting for the Dream Act and making sure that our students that are undocumented have a shot at the american dream as well.

The student population at CUNY is very different from most college institutions. Most of our students are working, low-income, or in short, people who fall outside of the traditional college student. The excelsior program is too restrictive and many of our students will not reap the benefits being offered by the program.

As stated in the New York State Education Law, Legislative Findings and intent “The city university is of vital importance as a vehicle for the upward mobility of the disadvantaged in the city of New York.”

The academic ladder remains an important component in attaining personal and professional success and, for many of us, CUNY remains as the only viable option of higher education—not because we would not excel in other academic institutions, but because CUNY is affordable and accessible. I know the legislature has a profound understanding of how important public higher education is to a successful New York workforce. We are asking that you make a REAL investment in CUNY.