

Submitted Testimony



The State University of New York  
**Student Assembly**

**The Funding Priorities  
of the Student Assembly of  
The State University of New York**  
*January 24, 2016*

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## **Mental Health Resources and Child Care Center Funding**

Good afternoon members of the Senate Finance Committee and Assembly Ways & Means Committee. Thank you for letting us come before you and spend some time. My name is Nicholas Simons and I am the Chief of Staff for the SUNY Student Assembly. I am seated alongside our Chief Financial Officer Patrick Gareau, our Secretary Margaret Ketchen, our Director of Legislative Affairs Rey Muniz, and one of our university representatives Christopher Ortega.

This year, we put out a survey to all schools to identify the main issues on their respective campuses. A call for increased mental health resources on campus was the most popular response. These concerns are part of a national trend: 58% of campuses nationwide have seen an increase in anxiety disorders, 89% have seen a rise in depression, 33% have no psychiatrists available, and 31% of campus counseling centers have waitlists. Across SUNY, center directors have reported an increase in appointments, an increase in hospital admissions, 10% of students system-wide that seek services many not be the only ones who need them. It was also reported that specific populations do not seek services, like veterans, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and international students. There are a significant amount of students who arrive on campus with mental health issues and don't seek treatment at their on-campus center. In terms of staffing, 46% of these centers have only one or two staff members, only some of which have volunteers to help.

Most centers indicated no access to psychiatric services whatsoever. To complicate matters, there are insufficient options for referral surrounding the campus, should a student need to seek additional help. Our students cannot be subjected to long waits with the possibility of limited assistance any longer. Counseling centers need the help of the state to ensure they provide assistance to our students in need. SUNYSA is calling on the legislature to invest in SUNY counseling centers across the state that are currently being overutilized at their current capacity. An internal report underscored the dire circumstances many of these centers are facing. Respondents indicated that their

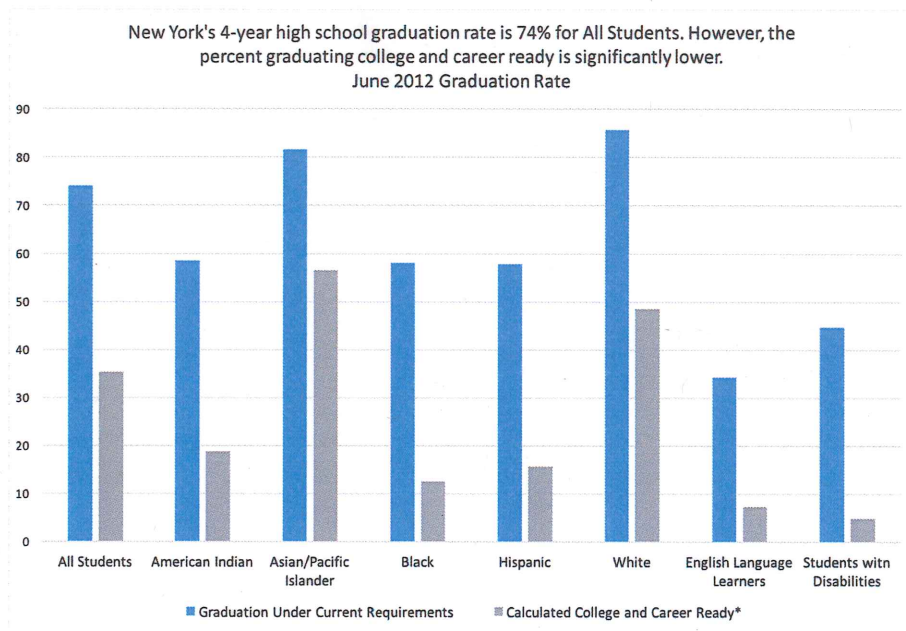
counselors are “totally burnt out” and that the departments “simply cannot keep up this pace”. This is an issue to be settled now. Lives are at risk.

Mental health resources is a make-or-break issue for many students in our system who cannot perform academically without these key services. Another such issue is that of quality on-campus child care for the children of students, faculty, and staff.

Child care offerings at SUNY campuses have grown in the past years with state funding remaining the same. The push within our system to provide parents, a growing demographic of students, with proper child care has not been met with state support. That said, most center find themselves understaffed and overbooked when trying to keep up with faculty, staff, student, and community traffic. SUNY provides child care for 5,000 children at 53 centers across the state. 31 of these centers can be found on community college campuses and 22 on our state-operated campuses. 62% of these child care centers are accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, which is the nation’s highest standard of quality for early care and education. In 2009, students aged 25 and older accounted for about 40% of all undergraduate and graduate students. That 40% figure is expected to rise to at least 43% by 2020. One quarter of undergraduates in the SUNY system are raising children; of those students, 43% are single mothers and 11% are single fathers. With child care center funds remaining relatively stagnant in recent years, SUNYSA calls on the legislature to increase those funding streams in the coming session so that we can collectively take a step toward providing for the children of those seeking a better life for their families.

## College Preparedness and Food Security

Student readiness is an issue that has garnered national attention in the world of higher education. Right here in the state of New York roughly 50% of all students entering college require remedial courses that delay completion and drive up student debt. What's more, The SUNY-wide successful completion rate of remedial math courses for traditional first-time, full-time matriculated students is 59.1% (compared to 73.6% for reading and writing). Math readiness is a key indicator of a student's potential for success in college. More than a third of students that are already behind are so underprepared that they are unable to pass even a remedial math course. This is in no way the fault of students but rather a silent criticism of our state's primary and secondary education system and its ability to adequately prepare students for college level education.



*This chart shows the increasing gap between the overall number of High School graduates and those that are actually prepared for college*

As the chart indicates the largest disparities impact minority communities, a demographic already consistently underserved and underrepresented in higher education. Investing heavily in college readiness programs needs to focus primarily on

geographies correlated with low socio-economics status and other risk factors. We believe that equity should be the primary driver behind any discussion regarding college preparation and that means a bottom up approach.

It is also important to note that there are ample economic benefits to investing in college preparedness. If New York increased its college attainment rate by just 1% – from 33.8% to 34.8% – the state would capture a \$17.5 billion talent dividend. In driving down student debt (exponentially incurred after a 4th year of study) graduates are better able to begin making large impact financial decisions like purchasing a home or starting a retirement fund. SUNYSA is calling upon the state legislature and the federal government to develop a clear, long term logistical and fiscal commitment plan to primary and secondary education college preparedness programs with special emphasis on underserved geographies and demographics. It is our firm belief backed with statistical evidence that this will help bridge socio-economic disparity, increase retention and completion, improve education equity, and improve the economy.

When assessing key elements of success, education and physical wellness are often two major contributing factors. Unfortunately, while students are receiving a world class education at SUNY institutions, many are unable to satisfy something as simple as their base nutritional needs. Food insecurity stems from a number of conditions, the primary of which is financial inability to maintain a healthy diet. A study of students at public higher education institutions found that 34% of the students reported food insecurity over a 30-day period, and 35% reported food insecurity over a 90-Day period. What's worse is that similar studies have reported even higher rates among minority students, compounding the hurdles these demographics already face.

Worded bluntly, millions of college students are going hungry daily and many are suffering from long term malnutrition. After the cost of tuition, fees, room and board, and textbooks in addition to associated costs these students simply aren't able to afford a sufficient diet. This impacts everything from mental health to academic performance.

This is nothing short of an embarrassing failure on the part of universities and the state and federal government. It is abundantly clear that immediate and substantial action must be taken to address this problem.

The umbrella of food insecurity does not only cover financial barriers. Also to consider are religious requisites, allergy related insecurity, moral preference or even geographic inability to access quality and nutrient rich food. By some estimates more than 750,000 residents of New York City alone live in a food desert. The religious and cultural multiplicity of our student population also increases the need for more nuanced consideration of food availability particularly on the more remote SUNY campuses. These considerations are of the utmost importance to ensure that inclusion and diversity are not only accepted values but promoted ones.

The Student Assembly would look favorably upon a bill that mandates every SUNY campus to develop a comprehensive food security action plan that encompasses every aspect of food security including but not limited to financial, moral/religious, allergen related, and geographic food insecurity. Additionally, investment of time and capital into these plans should be incentivized by a grant program that rewards the best plans with supplemental state funding. This structure encourages every campus to critically examine the issue of food security and enables best practices.

## **Educational Opportunity Program**

As SUNY students, we have a long lineage of excellence. SUNY is synonymous with new ideas and innovation, and is constantly recognized for its commitment to diversity and access. One of the most successful examples of this is the Educational Opportunity Program, commonly known as EOP. Students enrolled in this program truly are given an opportunity. It caters to students that may come from disadvantaged economic backgrounds, and allows them to pursue an education that might otherwise be completely out of reach. EOP is something that all SUNY students are proud of. It speaks to our strong belief in equality and inclusion and our firm conviction that everyone should be able to receive a degree. The EOP funding added at the tail end of later year's session has been cut in this year's Executive Budget. We simply can not permit those funding cuts. As of the end of last year, we have 10,551 students enrolled in this program a nearly 12% increase since 2015. These incredible students are working hard towards a degree that they otherwise might never have had the opportunity to receive. With the proposed budget cuts in place, some of these students may not be able to continue their education. They will be left without the assistance they deserve, and may have to resort to tens of thousands of dollars worth of debt, or simply dropping out. We are respectfully requesting that this body restore the funding cuts and continue to bolster this vital program. It is imperative that we protect these students along their pathway to success.

## **Community College Base Aid**

SUNY has a long and proud tradition of outstanding community college education. Throughout the state, community colleges perform a myriad of functions from educator and developer, to incubator and economic driver. They bring culture and diversity to our communities and provide New Yorkers with the opportunity to learn, grow, and most importantly, to succeed. Community colleges are a point of access for hundreds of thousands of people who are looking to better themselves. These are people who want to start a business or learn a trade. They want to transfer onto a four year university or receive a certificate to get that promotion. In short, community colleges are an unparalleled source of opportunity. A study conducted by the New York Association for Community College Presidents states that the economic impact of community colleges is over \$15 billion dollars annually. As many of you know, our community colleges rely on various funding sources to thrive. These include state funding, county funding, and of course, tuition dollars. A metric was developed through to determine the fair share of those respective sources. Despite the increasingly important positions that community colleges play, it has been evident for years that the state has consistently failed to pay its equal share of base aid. In fact, Community Colleges are getting only \$22 more per FTE today than they were ten years ago.

This is simply unacceptable. Community Colleges are forging new partnerships every day that function as economic catalysts. Whether you are studying viticulture at Finger Lakes or nursing at Jefferson, it is clear that our programs are an overwhelming success. They are steadily producing a job ready workforce for New York state and yet they have consistently been forced to function without the funding that they are due. In order to adjust to this, tuition increases have become all too common. As we mentioned before, this is not a burden that students are even remotely capable of bearing. This is an issue that will eventually affect our entire system. Community colleges are by their nature accessible and affordable. When the affordability factor is compromised, so too is enrollment. Fewer students enrolling and fewer students completing two year degrees



means fewer students transferring onto a four year degree and eventually migrating into the professional workforce.

We simply cannot allow this to happen. We understand that budgets are tight. As students, tight budgets and limited funds are a fact of life. What we also understand is an obligation to pay our dues. We are here to ask that the state meet their statutory obligation, and increase base aid funding to community colleges to sufficient levels. Restoring sufficient funding is clearly not something that we expect the legislature to do in just a single session.

## **SUNY SA Budget Increase**

The priorities outlined thus far are all well-known topics that our state desperately needs to make progress on, and there appears to be some consensus on this. Taking positive steps on them is more a matter of political will and priorities than a disagreement on their importance. The final item on our legislative agenda, however, is one that we expect members of the Assembly and Senate to be less aware of.

The SUNY Student Assembly is funded as a university-wide program within SUNY. A line item “for expenses of university-wide student governance” can be found on page 630 of State Ops Appropriations Bill of the 2018 Executive Budget in the amount of \$57,100. This line represents the SUNY Student Assembly budget, and is equal to what it was in the 2017 enacted budget.

This \$57,100 dollars is spent by the Student Assembly primarily on meetings, conferences, and modest stipends for four elected Executive Board members. Our Executive Committee totals about 30 members and is made up of 15 representatives, each representing a handful of campuses in their sector and collectively voting for SUNY’s 64 campuses, and an Executive Cabinet. The Executive Committee meets once per month and the SUNY SA budget pays for hotel and transportation accommodations for these 30 leaders from around the state to convene and do the business of the students they represent. Of the 30 or so student leaders that log thousands of hours of work per year only four are offered any sort of compensation in the form of meager stipends.

It is a daunting challenge to try and represent 600,000 SUNY students from 64 campuses on a budget of \$57,100. It is the smallest line in the SUNY department budget, a telling sign of where we rank on the priority list. SUNY SA has take on this challenge admirably in over the years, but we are constantly reminded that we could do more for the students and be more representative as members of our team propose ideas that we can not afford.

\$57,100 allows for essentially no extra travel to campuses outside of our Executive Committee meetings, including for the elected representatives to visit the campuses they represent and strengthen their connections to them. It allows for no marketing to spread awareness. It allows for no major programming, events, or high profile speakers at our conferences. It forces us to rely on volunteers to do countless hours of professional work for no compensation instead of being able to provide small stipends to everyone on the SUNY SA Executive Committee.

In review of other system wide student governance structures, we have found that they categorically capture on average more than half a million dollars per year through various fee based and direct funding mechanisms. The state recognized the importance of having a body that can represent the student interests and we hope the state will take substantial steps to help ensure that our organization can actually do its job effectively.

A strong SUNY Student Assembly compliments many of the values that New Yorkers hold dear, and addresses many of the challenges that we face. Genuine student representation in higher education policy-making illustrates the values of democracy that form the bedrock of our society. It is critically important that our society continue to improve its civic engagement, and higher education plays a vital role in the development of good citizens.

SUNY SA is a shovel-ready project that can turn a small state investment into a large impact on our state. With additional funding, we can deepen our already existing network among student government presidents and other student leaders throughout the state. We could raise awareness that students are citizens and have every right to participate in the decision making at their institutions, and we could provide them an opportunity to do so. These activities can have a lasting impact by developing our future leaders and making civic engagement a standard feature of the SUNY student experience.

By increasing the aforementioned system-wide student governance line from \$57,100 to \$90,000, the Student Assembly would be able to increase our physical presence on campuses throughout the state and spread awareness to contribute to an ever-improving civic culture in New York State. The amount we currently receive is miniscule and wholly inadequate to administer system-wide student governance from Long Island to Buffalo. We respectfully ask that legislators agree with our vision of stronger student advocacy networks and greater student representation in decision making bodies, and provide the Student Assembly with an increase in funding.