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*New York State Legislature Joint Assembly & Senate Legislative Public Hearing:  
Higher Education: Fiscal Year 2017-2018 State Executive Budget Proposal*

*Testimony of Jona Kerluku*

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Good afternoon members of the New York State Assembly Committee on Higher Education,

My name is Jona Kerluku, I am a student majoring in Exercise Science, minoring in Mathematics in a pre-medical track at Lehman College at the City University of New York. This fall I had the honor and privilege to be elected Vice Chair for Fiscal Affairs for the CUNY University Student Senate. I will graduate Herbert H. Lehman College this Spring 2017 in hopes to continue a career in medicine. I emigrated from Albania in 2001 and chose the City University of New York to receive my Bachelor's Degree because it was all that my mother and I could afford. I have committed a lot of my time to volunteering in several public hospitals around the city, participating in scientific research, athletics, and most recently student government. I spoke to hundreds of students throughout my years from different demographics throughout the CUNY system and we all feel strongly against the increases of tuition.

I would like to focus my testimony on the importance of reforming the Tuition Assistance Program. The 5 year tuition increases that are included the Executive Budget will increase tuition to \$7,580 and further enhance the gap between tuition and the maximum TAP award, which is currently \$5,165. I ask that you reconsider the difficulty for working class and low-income students to fill a \$2,415 gap. As one of those students, I want to tell you that the burden of the TAP gap is real and consequences of could potentially defer the dreams of many New Yorkers. Students are already working extra hard to cover living expenses, transportation, books, and meals.

Perhaps the idea Governor Cuomo had in mind was to cover the gap with the Excelsior Scholarship. But as you've heard before, the Scholarship is fairly restrictive and there are tens of thousands of students and potential students at CUNY that will not receive any of the benefits the scholarship is promising. I am especially concerned for part-time students and undocumented students who are currently not receiving any TAP funding. These students are often going to school part-time precisely because they have to work and go to school. The excelsior program assumes that our students have the option to take 15 credits a semester. While this goal is desirable, the reality is that many of our students have real life responsibilities and we need to find a way to help them.

We are requesting an increase in the maximum TAP award to keep up with the rising costs of tuition and index the award so that if tuition increases in the future so will award amounts. Despite the inconsistency students face when applying for TAP, the restrictions on part-time students hinder a large portion of the CUNY population from completing their education. These constraints cause students to manage an overwhelming course load during the semester which limits the extracurricular activities they can provide attention to, like sitting up here today, or apply for internships instead of running out of school to go to work. For us to have remarkable statistics as a university, we need to provide an affordable and accessible system for the 450,000 students asking for an education. The benefit of a free public education system is that students are relieved of the burden of having another bill. In senior colleges, 32.3% to 48.8% of undergraduate students have a household income of less than \$20,000 in senior colleges and community colleges, respectively. More than 30% of students in senior and community colleges work over 20 hours per week to keep up with living in New York City. Students cannot focus on school if they have to worry about overwhelming tuition hikes. We are counting on each of you to help modernize financial aide for our students.

As my colleagues mentioned, The State Education Law 6201 Legislative findings also reads that that "The legislature finds that in order to meet the state's responsibility to provide post-secondary education in New York city beyond the associate degree level, as it does elsewhere in the state, there should be full state funding of senior college operating and debt service."