



Office of the President

Testimony

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on Higher Education**

My name is Bassam M. Deeb and I am the President of Trocaire College. We have campus locations in Western New York in the city of Buffalo and the town of Lancaster.

Trocaire College is a private, career-oriented Catholic college that strives to empower students toward personal enrichment by developing the whole person; our students are never just a number. As a first generation college student, who has spent 30-years working in higher education, I understand the value of higher education and I could not be more proud of the opportunities that Trocaire College provides for our students.

Trocaire offers three bachelor's degrees, 12 associate degrees and eight certificate programs in healthcare, business, hospitality and technology, as well as workforce development certification and training. In fact, Trocaire College is the third largest workforce development provider in Western New York, offering 1,095 courses or programs, including partnerships with organizations throughout the region to deliver offerings to their employees.

Trocaire prepares students for success in the Western New York workforce, which is important to our non-traditional student body. Approximately 40% of Trocaire's students are single parent heads of household who work to support their families while attending college; in fact 50% of our students are enrolled part-time. The student body is also very diverse; approximately 30% of our students are African American, Hispanic or Latino, or non-Caucasian. Furthermore, in the 2014-2015 academic year, 31% of all students were first-generation college students. There are thousands of Trocaire graduates (over 10,000) working in communities throughout Western New York.

The average age of a Trocaire student is 26 year and from a home where the average annual income is \$48,595. Approximately 54.7% of Trocaire students are Pell eligible indicating the low-income denominator. 94% of Trocaire students receive some form of financial aid. Over the past six years, the unmet financial need of the student body has almost doubled. Six years ago, the average unmet need was \$5,049; today that number is \$8,938.

Over the past several years, Trocaire has made every effort to ensure that our students are leaving college with minimal debt and are able to pay back what they owe. Our most recent data, shows the median debt for undergraduate students who completed their degree to be at \$ 21,485. The student three year default rate stands at approximately 11.7%.

This illustrates the pressure on our student population to juggle family, work, and study, which presents challenges for persistence and graduation. Trocaire has a significant presence of part-time (50% of enrollment) and transfer students (65% of enrollment). When considering all new

students (first-time, full-time, part-time, and transfers) our average graduation rate is 48% reporting out at 3 years and 58% reporting out at 6 years.

To support our students, Trocaire conducts annual fundraising efforts under the auspices of the Trocaire Grant. The funding is used to supplement the deficit in higher education funding from federal or state resources. Trocaire prides itself on limiting our tuition increases every year and have always looked at indices such as HEPI (Higher Education Price Index) and CPI (Consumer Price Index) to set our annual increases. With our full-time tuition at approximately \$15,000, Trocaire is by far one of the most affordable private higher education options in Western New York.

As a private and enrollment driven institution, we must fully finance the cost of educating every student. Unlike our colleagues in the public sector, we do not receive base line support from a local sponsor, such as county funding, or the state. We are extremely grateful to the legislature for continuing to provide access to funding under Bundy Aid and HECAP which goes a long way to helping us manage our expenses.

I am proud that Trocaire College was the first western New York institution, among 21 public and private institutions, to receive a PTECH grant in collaboration with the city of Lackawanna, NY School District, BOCES and the Catholic Health System. I would suggest that PTECH is the type of program that should be dramatically enhanced by the state as it does not favor private over public and vice versa.

The proposed Excelsior Scholarship program would be devastating to our students and to Trocaire. Legislators have heard from CICU about the impact of the program on the private sector as a whole and you received compelling data about the potential devastating effect this program could have on close to 90% of the private institutions that enroll less than 2,000 students. My focus in this testimony is on the following items: impact on new program on completion-agenda; impact of program on-part-time students; and student choice.

Impact on new program on completion-agenda

As someone who has spent his career of working at institutions of higher learning committed to access for traditionally underserved students, completion has always been my front and center focus.

However, as I have learned, there is no silver bullet, quick fix solution to this complicated problem with many contributing factors. I am sympathetic to the goal of on-time graduation but this challenge cannot be addressed by simply mandating that every student attend full-time (12 credits) or taking a heavier load of 15 credits per semester as being promoted by the new program.

There are a number of factors that impact the completion agenda, including: the academic preparedness of the student; the personal capacity of the individual to take the number of courses being proposed; and life priorities of the student. In our case, with such a large number of individuals being head of households, there are family care issues, employment issues, etc. to create a balance with pursuing higher education.

A more pragmatic way to approach the completion agenda is identifying the barriers and allocating proper funding to address each challenge rather than providing a subsidy to one part of the higher education sector and mandating that the student take 15 credits hours per semester. I understand the urgency behind this approach, but in my experience in working on this exact issue it is unlikely that these two efforts will solve such a complex issue. Given Trocaire's mission and success in this space, I would volunteer to be a part of a task force taking a holistic approach to this challenge; this conversation is long overdue.

Impact of program on-part-time students

Nearly 60% of Trocaire's students attend college part-time. We simply have a high number of individuals who had earned academic credit through previous participation in higher education. As a matter of fact, we have many students who received college degrees and are returning for re-training in order to benefit from the new regional Western New York economy, especially in STEM related fields. Often our students have exhausted eligibility of federal and state aid, and under the new proposal, they will not be eligible to participate. While much has been made about increasing the amount of TAP funding, with which we agree, another option would be to revamp the aid for part-time students to encourage those who have accumulated credit to return to school and complete their credentials.

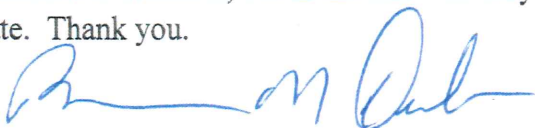
Choice

Students in New York State have a remarkable opportunity to find an institution that meets and fits their needs in a way that will change their lives, not just their future earning potential. It is the intersection of the SUNY and CUNY system with New York's private colleges and universities that makes our state so unique. A student's choice often has to do this size of the campus and student body, the school's fundamental mission, and even religious affiliation – not just the cost of an education although we are not naïve to the cost implications.

The value of higher education is different for each student and using government dollars to re-engineer the higher education landscape in New York State is not in line with who we are. Now more than ever, we are embracing diversity and choice, but the Excelsior Scholarship diminishes this and students should not be punished for making a decision that is right for them because it is not in-line with the government's agenda.

In conclusion, I want make clear that Trocaire College and its historical mission will be negatively impacted by the proposed Excelsior program. We are all in favor of increasing the completion agenda but we ask for you to let us work with you to identify ways that are systemic in order to make New York states residents proud.

Let us not be swept up by headline grabbing, quick fix solutions that promises a free college education to students, but in the end will only irreparable harm higher education in New York State. Thank you.



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