

**Testimony of CWA District One**  
**FY2022 NYS Budget: Higher Education**

**Tuesday, February 4, 2021**

CWA District One represents approximately 4,500 graduate student employees at the State University of New York. SUNY employs these graduate students as teaching, graduate, and research assistants. Their duties range from teaching courses, grading exams, and papers, to conducting laboratory research. **This testimony is submitted in support of removing mandatory broad-based fees for graduate student employees serving a minimum of a half-time appointment in the SUNY system in the FY2022 budget.**

This labor is vital to the function of SUNY. Many classes are actually taught by graduate student workers. In fact, at Stony Brook University, an independent audit found that 60% of instruction was performed by graduate students. Additionally, graduate student workers are the backbone of innovation and bleeding-edge research. Yet, despite their key role in the education and the economy of New York state, they are forced to face dire financial challenges.

A major contributor to this economic hardship is compulsory fees. In addition to tuition, SUNY schools charge their students fees. Both undergraduate and graduate students are subject to these fees, charged at regular points throughout the academic year. In recent years, the cost of these fees has risen steadily alongside tuition at public colleges and universities in the U.S. The increase in fees is a financial response to the problem of inadequate state funding for public higher education. Fees function as backdoor tuition for public universities to circumvent state-imposed tuition caps and sustain their operating costs.

Graduate student employees with full appointments are expected to work 20 hours per week for their departments and are compensated with an annual stipend and, in most cases, a tuition waiver. These hours do not include the research hours graduate student workers are expected to complete. Yet despite significant work responsibilities, they must still pay fees, which increase every year. For graduate student-workers engaged in full-time coursework, average fees across the four SUNY University Centers currently exceed \$2,000 per academic year. At the University at Buffalo (UB), which has the highest fees in the SUNY system, domestic graduate students pay upwards of \$2,600 per academic year in fees. For international graduate students at UB, fees can be as much as \$2,800 per academic year.

Graduate students employed by SUNY as teaching and research assistants are not exempt from these fees, which can constitute up to 25% of their annual stipend for those making the contractual minimum of \$10,158 (for the 2020-21 academic year). During COVID-19, graduate student workers were forced to forgo their scheduled raises, keeping their contractual minimum the same. At the same time, the fees increased. While stipend amounts vary considerably between campuses and academic departments, the average graduate employee stipend across the four University Centers is about \$20,000 per academic year for TAs and GAs with full appointments. For those graduate employees earning the average stipend, the amount they must pay back to their university each year in fees can represent as much as 17% of their annual income.

For graduate student employees, fees effectively constitute a pay-to-work system. A substantial portion of graduate student income that would normally go towards paying rent, buying groceries or making car payments, must be paid back to their employer in the form of fees. Moreover, these fees must be paid upfront unless you go on a payment plan. Yet payment plans cost an upfront \$45 to enroll and spreading out fees lead to additional fees. In other words, the SUNY system charges graduate student employees to work and then charges them interest if they can't pay. These fees cause enormous hardship, both financial as well as psychological on our members. Every year graduate employees take out loans, skip meals, and even sell blood plasma just to pay their fees. Yet there has been no help from the institution or the State. Last year, after announcing an annual fee hike equivalent to 1% of their income, CWA members communicated this hardship to Stony Brook Dean of Students Richard Gattaeu, he responded that grad students are always welcome to use the community food pantry to help make ends meet.

Besides the hardship they cause, in many cases, these fees are used to fund systems and services that graduate workers utilize in their capacity as employees, such as the software programs used to collect and assess student assignments and submit grades. In an especially absurd case study, the "Academic Excellence Fee" is reported to help fund GA and TA, and assistant professor employment lines. This constitutes a "pay-to-work" system in which employees are being charged for the maintenance and upkeep of the workplace and even the workforce, rather than the employer bearing full responsibility for such operating costs, as is the norm in most workplaces.

During COVID-19, while some graduate student workers were able to teach and do their research remotely, others were forced to continue to serve in person. No assistance was provided to help with internet costs or any other work-from-home costs. For those teaching in person, graduate student workers were not given PPE nor clear instructions on safety precautions despite significant COVID-19 cases on campus. In fact, even when the 100 COVID-19 case threshold was broken, that was supposed to lead to campus closure, the campus remained open and in person instructors were expected to continue their duties.

The state higher education institutions cannot close their funding gaps on the backs of graduate student workers, who already struggle to pay for basic needs. These are supposed to be the next generation of scientists, educators, and thinkers. They are supposed to use their knowledge and training to drive future growth, innovation, and civic well-being. Yet they cannot do that working in poverty. We must put an end to this practice immediately.

**We ask the committee to include language in the FY2022 budget that would waive these fees for graduate student workers serving a minimum of a half-time appointment.** Last year, S.3916 filed by Chairwoman Stavisky and A.7241 filed by Assemblymember Pichardo would do just that. This bill is being refiled and awaiting a bill number. This bill would exempt all graduate students employed by state systems as Teaching Assistants, Graduate Assistants, and Research Assistants from paying fees. This bill passed the Senate in 2019, passed the Senate Higher Education committee in 2020, and we are hopeful to see this language included in the budget this year. As members of the Higher Education Committees, we urge you to champion this issue and end mandatory fees for graduate student employees at the SUNY system.