

Shelby Burns
Columbia University – Mohawk Valley Community College alum

Testimony at 2021 Higher Education Joint Legislative Budget Hearing

February 4, 2021

Good Afternoon Honorable Members of the Legislature,

My name is Shelby Burns.

I am a student at Columbia University, where I am majoring in Human Rights, and I am a recent graduate of Mohawk Valley Community College. I'm proudly a non-traditional and disabled student. Without the support and guidance of MVCC's Office of Accessibility Resources, I would not have been able to take full advantage of my time in community college, let alone been accepted to Columbia.

Across the New York state, it is estimated that disabled students make up 75,000 of all college students. Unfortunately, those are just the students that feel safe and comfortable enough to register with their college's disability offices to receive fair access to classes, coursework, and campus buildings. Without these services and the staff that fight for us, many of us would be unable to continue our education. Far too often, course materials are inaccessible to screen readers or lack captions or ASL interpreters. Even more discouraging, while all schools are required to be ADA compliant in design, this does not always equate to equal access or safety, including out of date elevators and parking lots filled with potholes. Now, more than ever, in the age of COVID, we see that many accommodations such as virtual and hybrid classes, prerecorded lectures, digital course materials have always been possible. As more students with disabilities require accommodations to adapt to this new normal, the state must invest in students with disabilities and the offices that support them. It is not enough to claim every student has the right to an education. We must make sure access to that education is equitable.

The New York State Education Department's budget request includes \$7 million for enhancing support services for students with disabilities at New York State colleges and universities. This funding is crucial to ensuring access to higher education and career success for disabled students. I urge you to support the State Education Department's "Enhancing Supports & Services for Postsecondary Success of Students with Disabilities" funding proposal in its 2021-2022 Executive Budget Request. Show students with disabilities that you are invested in our futures and join us in making education accessible to all.