



University Student Senate  
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**New York State Higher Education Committee 2021 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing**  
***Testimony of Sumana Ali, Vice Chair of Legislative Affairs for the***  
***CUNY University Student Senate (USS)***  
**FEBRUARY 4<sup>th</sup> 2021**

Greetings members of the New York State Legislature,

Thank you for holding this hearing on higher education. My name is Sumana Ali, and I serve as the Vice-Chair of Legislative Affairs for the CUNY University Student Senate (USS) and a student government member at Lehman College. As a low-income student, I can attest that COVID-19 has exasperated all the existing issues on our campuses and communities.

Before the pandemic, poverty was already a significant issue among CUNY students. Sixty percent of CUNY students report an annual household income of less than \$30,000. Before the pandemic, the Bronx was still impoverished. It was normal to see food-insecure students visit the food pantry to sustain themselves and find homeless students sleeping in the library. Most of my peers are from low-income communities, and over forty percent of them lost their jobs due to COVID-19. Students in CUNY have lost their jobs, missed payments on their loans, and are currently on the verge of being evicted from their homes. My peers report increased experiences with food and housing insecurity and the need for more mental health resources.

I am a part of the SEEK program at Lehman College; the program on my campus has had to cut over 70% of its academic support programs (tutoring and mentorship). If it weren't for opportunity programs like SEEK, CD, and ASAP, students like me would not be able to go to school full-time. I have family members who are currently serving this city as first responders because of the SEEK program. Our city needs CUNY to support the low-income populations who pursue higher education to lift themselves out of poverty.

Even after countless barriers, CUNY students graduate with loans and serve this city as essential workers and first responders. We are only asking for a chance to educate ourselves and have an opportunity to get out of poverty. Our students need support from the state legislature because the public health crisis has brought out the existing inequalities in our communities.

New York has one of the highest income disparities in the country. Higher education is the most sustainable way to ensure that low-income people have access to the opportunities they need. I am calling on the state legislature to reverse the damage done by the TAP Gap, provide funding



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to opportunity programs like SEEK, expand tuition assistance programs and gradually decrease tuition costs. We must ensure that programs like the excelsior scholarship help low-income students because currently, they do not. We must also ensure that the state does not cut the CUNY budget in any way because disinvesting from education at a time like this is inhumane and a disservice to the people of this state. If you say that you care about low-income people, this is the time to prove that you do.

Thank you for your time and consideration.