

Testimony re: 2023-2024 Executive Budget Proposal—Higher Education

Submitted to:

New York State Senate Finance Committee and Assembly Ways and Means Committee

Submitted by:

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Thank you, Chairs Weinstein, Krueger, Glick, Stavisky and all other committee members, for the opportunity to provide testimony. My name is Tydie Abreu and I am the Senior Director for Policy & Social Impact for Hispanic Federation (HF); a non-profit organization seeking to empower and advance Hispanic communities through programs and legislative advocacy. HF's testimony is also informed by the Latino Education Advocacy Directors (LEAD) Coalition, which consists of leading educational advocacy organizations committed to improving Latinx academic outcomes and opportunities in New York State. Created by the Hispanic Federation, the coalition works to highlight and address the educational needs of Latinx students in the following ways: identifying and supporting effective practice, public policy advocacy and research, and the advancement of a shared educational agenda.

Funding to Mitigate the Latino College Completion Crisis

While we've seen an overall slowdown in the number of 18- to 24-year-olds enrolling in college in recent years, Latinos are challenging this trend. Not only is their freshman enrollment at a four-year public institution growing at the fastest rate of any other demographic, but they're also the only group that saw growth in 2022. According to the most recent research by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC), Latinos were the only sector that reflected a 13.3% increase during the spring of 2022, compared to 2021 and 2020.¹ In spite of this growth, however, Latino students are less likely to enroll in college or graduate than their peers. This disparity has been linked to a number of factors, including access to financial aid and support services like counseling and academic advising.

Financing A Postsecondary Education

We're extremely grateful for the Executive budget including several important investments this year. The \$32 million for SUNY and \$18 million for CUNY to fund financial aid to help cover the tuition costs of New York residents is extremely important, especially considering the budget's authorization of annual tuition increases for CUNY senior colleges and SUNY State-operated

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/10/07/hispanic-enrollment-reaches-new-high-at-four-year-colleges-in-the-u-s-but-affordability-remains-an-obstacle/>

campuses. Additionally, we're optimistic about the \$75 million appropriation for initiatives at campuses that support innovation and provide students with needed supports to participate in programs that enable career pathways aligned with the workforce development needs of the future. Although these investments are promising, the Legislature can ensure that the adopted budget includes additional and expanded supports.

Studies show that financial constraints are a major reason why Hispanics do not complete a bachelor's degree. The reasons for this disparity are varied:

- Hispanic students tend to have lower family incomes and more family members who depend on support from the head of household.
- Students from lower income families tend to take on more debt than those from wealthier families, even after accounting for differences in future earnings potential.
- Many families and students shy away from higher education because they perceive it as an impossible dream that can only be achieved after taking on crippling debt.
- The cost of higher education is rising faster than inflation, but federal grants and loans do not keep pace.

To heighten the number of enrolled Latino college students, Hispanic Federation strongly urges the legislature to include and prioritize the following budget and legislative recommendations in their one house budgets, as they directly benefit and remedy the issues many Latinx young adults face when trying to achieve their post-secondary dreams.

I. The New Deal for CUNY: Mental Health Supports and Academic Advising

Hispanic Federation also supports the New Deal for CUNY. CUNY has 16 colleges classified as Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) and it serves as a powerful engine for economic mobility. However, degree attainment for Latino students in New York stands at 27% vs. 53% for White students;² it is no secret that affordability is one of the issues driving this disparity. More than 60% of undergraduate students at CUNY have household incomes under \$30,000 and many struggle with food insecurity and housing insecurity.³ This presents great barriers in a student's college completion.

The New Deal for CUNY will ensure that tuition across CUNY's 2-year and 4-year institutions is free, that mental health supports are more widely available for students, increases the number

² <https://www.edexcelencia.org/research/latino-college-completion/new-york>

³ <https://psc-cuny.org/clarion/2021/april/new-deal-cuny-free-tuition-and-more-investment/#:~:text=The%20New%20Deal%20for%20CUNY%20mandates%20that%20all%20tuition%20and,federa%20state%20and%20city%20funds.>

of full-time faculty, and ensures that there are more academic advisors. **We support the New Deal for CUNY's ask for \$40 million for expanded mental health and academic advising; \$28 million for senior colleges and \$12 million for community colleges.**

Academic advising is extremely important and can prevent dropouts, ensuring that students remain on track to graduate. Limited access to advising leads to students enrolling in courses that do not contribute to their majors, lengthening the time they have to graduate and increasing the cost of their attendance. A majority of Latino and other students of color are first generation college students and therefore the state must invest in supports that help students realize their dreams of a college degree.

In the wake of the pandemic, the intensity of long-term trauma is still prevalent for many students, but especially for Latino and underserved students. It is urgent for the state to invest in hiring more staff support and focus on trauma-informed mental health workers for CUNY. Additionally, the appropriations must ensure that mental health experts are trained in culturally relevant and linguistically diverse practices that meet the needs of our students.

Institutions of higher education must prioritize the immediate and long-term needs of students' mental health. The legislature can facilitate these support systems by prioritizing funding for the New Deal for CUNY and ensuring that academic advisors and mental health workers are bilingual and culturally responsive, and include professionals that address trauma-based needs. Access to mental health services and supporting students' social/emotional wellness improves the odds for students to succeed. This can also make a difference in long-term goals for success in postsecondary and career opportunities.

II. Expanding TAP Eligibility & the Minimum Award

The state made significant advancements in student financial aid by expanding part-time TAP and increasing maximum TAP awards by \$500 to \$5,665. This year, we are requesting that the Legislature maintain that momentum by raising the eligible income threshold for TAP to \$110,000 and the minimum grant amount to \$1,000, which will make the program more accessible to more students. Most TAP grant recipients come from households with annual earnings of less than \$20,000. The majority of the neediest students who qualify also get a federal Pell Grant.

However, even with the maximum Pell Award, many students use federal and private student loans to pay the remaining tuition gap since the cost of higher education keeps rising. To combat the growing student debt crisis, the state should increase the TAP household income eligibility threshold to enable more students to afford a college education.

It is also important to note that the New York Net Taxable Income used in TAP calculations does not reflect family size. Currently, a student from a family with a gross income of \$41,000 with three children receives a TAP award only \$240 greater than a family with the same income and

only one child.⁴ To enable families to encourage postsecondary education, TAP should take into account family size and consider this for a student's TAP award.

In summation, the New York State Executive budget includes incredible investments in higher education, but there is still much room for improvement. The Legislature must address these gaps in the budget and include supports for Latinx and underserved students by making investments that provide access to culturally and linguistically relevant mental health/socio-emotional supports, investing in academic advisors through the New Deal for CUNY, and expand the eligibility and minimum award for TAP. These policy proposals and investments will guide students towards fulfilling postsecondary and career opportunities. I thank you for your time and reemphasize the imperative to prioritize these investments and welcome any opportunities for partnership.

⁴ <https://www.suny.edu/about/leadership/board-of-trustees/meetings/webcastdocs/Attachment%20C1%20-%20Tap%20Report.pdf>