



**Higher Education
Services Corporation**

Statement by Dr. Guillermo Linares
President
New York State Higher Education Services Corporation

Annual Joint Hearing

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

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New York State Higher Education Services Corporation
99 Washington Avenue
Albany, NY 12255

www.hesc.ny.gov

Good morning, Chairs Krueger, Pretlow, Stavisky, Hyndman and esteemed members of the Senate and Assembly. I am Dr. Guillermo Linares, President of the Higher Education Services Corporation (HESC), joined by our HESC Executive Vice President Doris Gonzalez. Today, we are pleased to discuss the 2025-26 Executive Budget recommendations and our collective commitment to ensuring all New York State Students have access to education.

Through financial support and diverse opportunities, the commitment of Governor Hochul and this Legislature to student success remains steadfast and visionary.

HESC's Mission and Impact

As HESC President, I am proud to work alongside Governor Hochul and the Legislature to empower students across New York State.

At HESC, we make education affordable by administering over 30 grant, scholarship, and loan forgiveness programs, supporting nearly 300,000 students annually. Key initiatives like the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) and Excelsior Scholarship enable over 182,000 New Yorkers—58% of full-time resident undergraduate students—to attend SUNY and CUNY tuition-free. This includes 53 percent at SUNY state-operated campuses and 66 percent at CUNY senior colleges.

2025-26 Executive Budget Highlights

Governor Hochul's 2025-26 Executive Budget continues to strengthen our State's higher education system with \$1.03 billion for HESC financial aid programs, including over \$850 million for TAP.

The Expansion of TAP

The expansion of TAP over the past two years is remarkable. The adjustments last year to increase TAP's eligibility thresholds opens the door to education funding for approximately 93,000 more students, including 48,000 students newly eligible for TAP.

Added to that are previous expansions that made students in non-degree programs at SUNY and CUNY community colleges, and part-time students taking at least six credits, eligible for TAP. In this budget, Governor Hochul is simplifying access to college aid by consolidating the state's three financial aid programs for part-time students and expanding part-time TAP eligibility to those taking as few as three credits per semester.

TAP Difference Report

While these new investments aim to open doors for more students, it's also vital to reflect on the lasting impact of TAP. Our May 2024 TAP Difference report highlights that TAP recipients are more likely to enroll in four-year institutions, complete their degrees quicker, and graduate compared to those who did not receive TAP.

We are seeing first-hand its impact. Joshua, a recent graduate of SUNY Albany who now works as a SUNY Admissions Recruitment Advisor, refers to his TAP award as “a lifeline.” Joshua comes from a low-income background and said that “without this vital grant he wouldn't have been able to go away to college”. He said that his college education isn't just about a degree but rather a gateway towards empowerment. His success represents the kind of outcomes we want to replicate thousands of times over.

New Investments in Free Community College for High-Demand Occupations

Building on the success of expanding access to higher education through TAP, the Executive Budget takes another significant step forward by investing in free community college programs tailored to meet the needs of both students and New York's future workforce.

The Executive Budget includes \$47 million to offer free community college at SUNY and CUNY, covering tuition, fees, and books, for students ages 25 to 55 who are pursuing first-time associate's degrees in high-demand fields like nursing, teaching, technology, and engineering, sectors vital to New York's future workforce needs.

Increased Outreach in Support of Universal FAFSA Completion

To elevate educational access and workforce readiness, we also must address another critical component of higher education success: ensuring families can access the financial aid they need. By investing in initiatives like Universal FAFSA completion, we aim to bridge the financial gap for thousands of students across New York, ensuring that no opportunity is left untapped due to unclaimed aid.

In 2024, HESC led statewide outreach through initiatives like FAFSA Ready; hosted 65 FAFSA-related events and 211 financial aid workshops with 10,700 attendees and introduced the first-of-its-kind NYS FAFSA Ready Training Program, equipping counselors and community-based partners like the Boys and Girls Club and NYS Library Association with the skills to help students with FAFSA and TAP applications.

Our strategy is working! As of February 7, New York State ranked fourth nationally for the percent of Class of 2025 high school students who submitted their FAFSA applications. Over the last 15 years, New York has never ranked higher than eight in this category.

We have also expanded our communication efforts with more than 52,000 students who are now receiving text messages reminding them about financial aid deadlines. In the past year alone, 3.2 million users have visited our web site.

Real Story, Real Impact

Kellie, mother of Binghamton University student Emma, shared the importance of those messages, "Getting text reminders about important deadlines has been a game-changer for our family. With Emma's busy schedule at Binghamton and everything else going on, those timely texts have made sure we never miss her renewal application. It's such a relief!"

Modernizing our Financial Aid Systems

Expanding outreach is crucial in reaching our students, but we recognize the need for a more modern, efficient system to better serve our students, families, counselors and financial aid professionals.

With Chamber support, HESC remains focused on modernizing our financial aid application system. We redefined our approach to award work in a more incremental, segmented way, rather than issuing a large, multi-year contract to one vendor. This will allow HESC to meet the evolving needs of students, parents, and educational partners. We look forward to keeping you updated on this work.

Closing

Thanks again to Governor Hochul for her commitment to NYS students and State Operations Director Kathryn Garcia, Deputy Secretary of Education Maria Fernandez, and NYS Budget Director Blake Washington for their support.

With continued support from the Governor and Legislature, New York leads in equitable access to higher education, building a stronger and more inclusive state — one student at a time.

Thank you.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have.