

**Testimony of
Andrew Sako,
President of the
Faculty Federation of Erie Community College
to the
Senate Finance Committee
Liz Krueger, Chair
and
Assembly Ways and Means Committee
J. Gary Pretlow, Chair
on the
Proposed 2025-26 Executive Budget for
Higher Education
Feb. 25, 2025**

Chairperson Krueger, Chairperson Pretlow, honorable members of the Legislature and distinguished staff, I am Andrew Sako, President of the Faculty Federation of Erie Community College.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the proposed 2025-26 New York State Executive Budget for Higher Education. My testimony will focus on the issues facing Erie Community College, the 29 other SUNY community colleges and nearly all their faculty and staff.

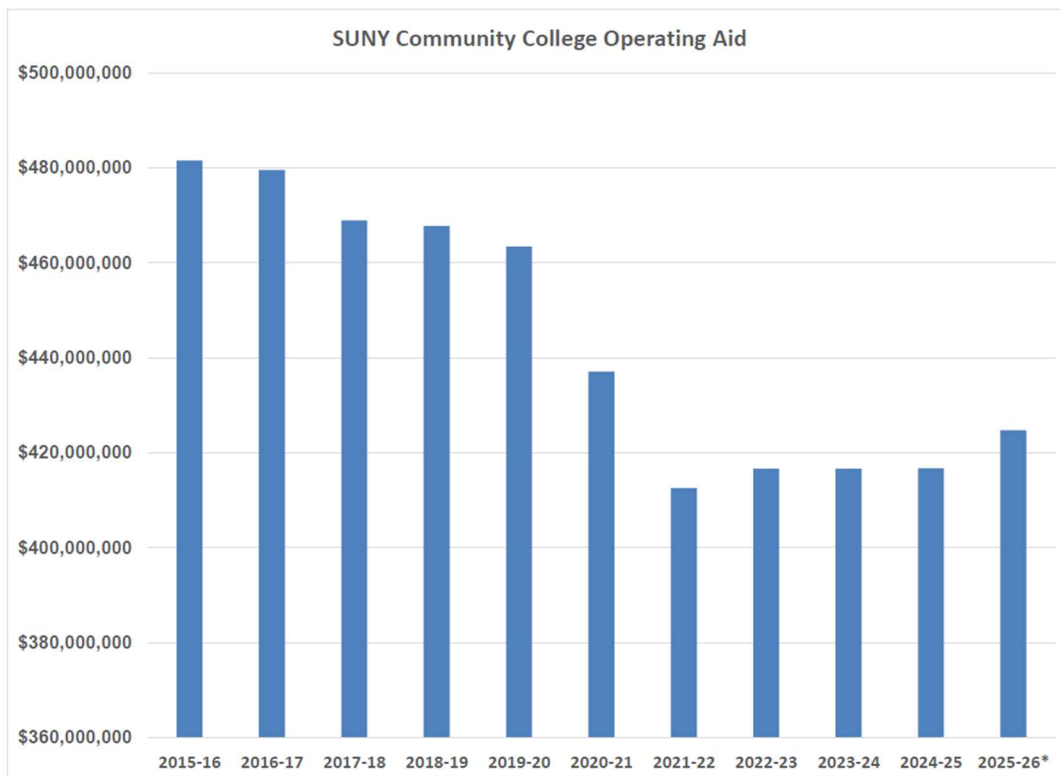
Community Colleges

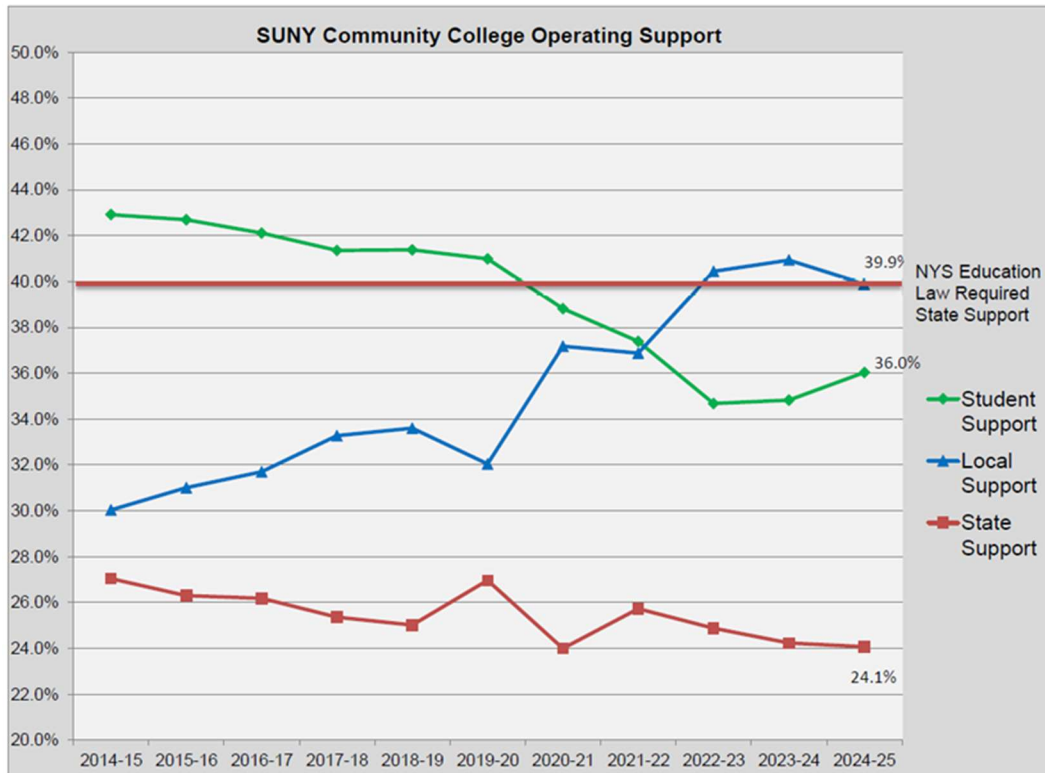
Community colleges educate and prepare all types of students for the workforce. They provide an essential foundation for those seeking to move on to four-year campuses or universities. They advance social mobility. Community colleges are also able to collaborate with regional employers and develop and provide training to address specific local workforce needs.

While we appreciate the modest increase in operating aid in the executive budget proposal, we are disappointed that our community colleges are slated to receive the same level of base aid funding allotted to them in last years enacted budget. This is flat funding. More support is needed.

State education law requires the state to pay 40 percent of community college operating costs. We know the Legislature is committed to supporting our community colleges, but the proposed state funding is still well below that which is required by law.

As the charts below illustrate, SUNY community colleges are still receiving significantly less in operating aid than they did in 2015.





Over that same period, students paid the lion's share of the operating costs of these campuses. Over a 10-year period — from 2008-09 to 2018-19 — SUNY community college students went from paying 40.8 percent of the operating costs to approximately 41.4 percent. Meanwhile, the state's contribution decreased from 30.8 percent to 25 percent during the period from 2019- 2023 and remains appallingly low today. Also concerning is the fact that the state contribution varies from college to college. At Columbia-Greene Community College, for example, the state's contribution is 14.4 percent.

Year after year, budget after budget, we have seen the state "notwithstanding" the law at the expense of our students and community colleges. This practice must stop. Accordingly, we call on the state to provide an additional \$101.7 million to CUNY and \$95 million to SUNY, which would bring the state to 33 percent of what it is statutorily required to pay to these institutions. While this is still well short of the state's full 40 percent obligation, it is a good first step.

We would also welcome an opportunity to participate in any process designed to create a new funding model for these institutions. The FTE funding model, which allocates state dollars based on a set amount multiplied by the number of FTE students enrolled, is inadequate. The reliance on enrollment trends over the past decade has resulted in unpredictable funding and general instability. We should be working to insulate our campuses from short-term enrollment fluctuations and prepare them for long-term growth and sustainability.

The CUNY ASAP program was created to help students earn their associate degrees as quickly as possible — with a goal of graduating at least 50 percent of the enrollees within three years. The program is designed to help students overcome systemic barriers and other hardships that prevent them from graduating by providing them with academic, social and financial support. The ASAP model has been successfully implemented at Westchester Community College through their Viking Roads program. Student retention and graduation rates have gone up dramatically at both the CUNY and Westchester Community College ASAP programs. We are seeking to expand ASAP to all of our SUNY community colleges.

While we were encouraged to see continued funding for the SUNY ASAP program in the executive budget proposal, we are disappointed that this plan only covers 13 of our 30 community colleges and concerned that the funds allocated (approximately \$2,000 per student as opposed to \$3,400 per student spent at CUNY and the Viking Roads program) are insufficient to guarantee program success.

In addition to funding for ASAP like programs, we are asking for an additional \$100 million to stabilize our community colleges and put our students on a path to equity and social mobility. This long overdue investment will enable our community colleges to stabilize faculty and staff, bolster student success services, reduce financial losses from high-cost programs like nursing and advanced manufacturing and invest in scaling high-need programs.

Public Higher Education Access for All

Every dollar invested in SUNY and CUNY yields even greater returns for New York's tax base. However, a continued shift of costs from the state to students has placed an additional financial burden on our students and their families and has reduced access to the high-quality education every New Yorker deserves.

As part of our New Deal for Higher Education, NYSUT advocates for a public higher education system that delivers results and sets up our students for success without leaving them hopelessly in debt. That is why we continue to support investment in SUNY and CUNY two- and four-year colleges and universities. and we oppose tuition increases. To improve access to public higher education, we must not pass on additional costs to students.

We would like to thank the governor for taking an important first step in making public higher education a reality for more New Yorkers with her New York Opportunity Promise Scholarship initiative for our public community colleges. While we support increasing access, we believe that the program should be made available to more New Yorkers. Accordingly, we would ask that it be expanded to include every SUNY and CUNY college or university that offers degrees in the academic programs that have been identified as shortage areas, cover students ages 18-55 and remove the language restricting applicants who have obtained a post-secondary degree.

We are asking for an investment to expand the New York Opportunity Promise Scholarship so that more students can have access to a world-class public higher education at our SUNY and CUNY colleges and universities.

SUNY Hospitals

The three SUNY teaching hospitals in Syracuse, Brooklyn and Stony Brook are state hospitals that serve all New Yorkers. Unfortunately, these facilities have been chronically underfunded in executive budget after executive budget. Instead of continuing this practice, the state should equip these hospitals so they are prepared for the next health crisis and fund their growth and expansion so they can keep up with myriad advances in healthcare and the complex needs of the communities they serve. Properly funding these vital teaching institutions will ensure their viability and financial stability.

We appreciate that the executive budget proposal includes \$150 million in capital funding for alterations and improvements to SUNY Upstate, SUNY Downstate and SUNY Stony Brook. We were also pleased to see \$450 million in capital funding allocated to SUNY Downstate and \$200 million for modernization and revitalization at SUNY Upstate.

We ask that SUNY Downstate receive \$100 million in operating support, and we ask for \$75 million to cover fringe benefit costs at all three hospitals. Additionally, although the state once provided \$157 million to the three hospitals for debt service relief, SUNY hospitals are now the only state entities that do not, as a matter of course, receive debt service relief from New York state. We therefore ask that the state provide \$68 million to cover the SUNY hospitals' debt service, as is done for every other state agency.

We remain concerned over the future of SUNY Downstate hospital. The residents of central Brooklyn have made it very clear that they do not support any form of closure or transfer of services to another hospital system. We would encourage the SUNY Downstate Community Advisory Board to take time in their deliberations and give the community time to air their concerns and share their ideas for the future of Downstate.

Closing SUNY Downstate is a terrible, short-sighted way to avoid fixing problems caused by decades of fiscal neglect. Now is the time to invest in what central Brooklyn deserves, a modern, revitalized, reimagined healthcare center.

Conclusion

New York's public colleges and universities form a world-class higher education system that is vital for the state's economic leadership and innovation. We are at a pivotal moment — we must do the right thing and embrace the New Deal for Higher Education, which reinvests in this system as a public good, fuels an engine of social mobility for millions and serves as a driver of economic growth for our state.

I ask the Legislature to fund public higher education to the level our students deserve, and our state requires; reject any cuts to public higher education in the executive budget proposal; stand with educators and students to ensure that the choice to pursue quality, public higher education will not be taken away from those who can least afford to lose it; and build upon the executive budget proposal and help us secure additional aid for our colleges, universities and teaching hospitals so they may continue to provide the high-quality services New Yorkers deserve and have come to expect.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today and for all you have done to improve public higher education. I look forward to continuing our work.