

Gabrielle Lerner
Empire State University
Student Government Association President

Honorable Members of the New York State Senate and Assembly Higher Education Committees,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Gabrielle Lerner, and I serve as the Student Government Association President at Empire State University. I'm not just a student leader - I'm also a graduate student, a parent to a five-year-old, and an advocate for a large and often overlooked group: non-traditional and online students.

These students are the backbone of our higher education system. They are working parents, military-affiliated learners, full-time employees, and individuals returning to school after years, sometimes decades away. They juggle jobs, families, and coursework, often studying late at night after putting their kids to bed or finishing a long shift. Yet, the system was not built with them in mind.

One-third of all SUNY students fit the definition of a non-traditional student.¹ Yet, many policies and resources still assume a traditional, full-time, on-campus experience. Today, I would like to address some of the main issues that are plaguing online students, including child care, digital accessibility, and housing.

"The Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimates that 1 in 5 college students are parents, and the biggest barrier to returning to school for students who have dropped out is family commitments."²

The good news is that "during the 2022-2023 academic year, SUNY offered approximately 4,500 child care slots across the 46 SUNY campuses that have a child care center on-site, which served 795 student-parents."³ The bad news is that we need to do some math - So if 1 in 5 college students are parents and there are "approximately 468,000 students"⁴ enrolled at SUNY (minus the 795 parents who benefitted from on campus childcare), that would mean there are about 92,805 parents left behind.

Affordable childcare is a necessity, not a luxury.

Without access to childcare or subsidies for off-campus providers, many student parents are forced to make an impossible choice: their education or their children's care.

¹ <https://www.suny.edu/attend/adult-learners/>

² [https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-19-522#:~:text=What%20GAO%20Found,of%2019.5%20million\)%20were%20parents](https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-19-522#:~:text=What%20GAO%20Found,of%2019.5%20million)%20were%20parents)

³ https://www.suny.edu/media/suny/content-assets/documents/govt-relations/state/SUNY-Report-on-Enrollment-and-Financial-Sustainability_January2024.pdf

⁴ <https://www.suny.edu/about/about-suny/#:~:text=We%20educate%20approximately%20468%2C000%20students,workforce%20and%20professional%20development%20programs.>

On the same trend of affordability, COVID shined the brightest light on the importance of access to reliable and stable internet connection.

Imagine having to go to Starbucks with your children for hours every day to complete your coursework because you don't have access to stable internet connectivity at home.

Well, that is the reality for many of our students who can't afford to spend \$100 per month on wifi. If it comes down to a choice between paying for wifi or groceries to feed their kids for a week; we will always pick the latter. But with your help, we can change that. State-funded technology packages and subsidies for internet services could level the playing field and ensure online students have the tools they need to succeed.

Now, if students can't afford wifi, can you imagine how challenging it is to afford housing? Housing insecurity is a crisis for many non-traditional students, especially those learning online. Unlike traditional students, they cannot access campus dorms and must navigate skyrocketing rental costs while balancing school and work. Expanding state-funded housing assistance and allowing financial aid to cover off-campus housing would be a game-changer.

The truth is that non-traditional students are not asking for special treatment; we are asking for fairness.

We have an obligation and opportunity to shift the paradigm to an inclusive system that recognizes the evolving landscape of higher education and invests in diverse opportunities to ensure that every student, regardless of age, employment status, or family responsibilities, has an opportunity to succeed.

Thank you for your time and commitment to the future of higher education in New York.

In summary, we are asking for:

- ✓ Childcare support: so student parents don't have to choose between a chance to attain an education and caring for their children. (A5413)
- ✓ Digital equity: so online students aren't left behind.
- ✓ Housing support: so financial burdens don't derail educational opportunities. (A09615 & S04247)