



UNITED UNIVERSITY PROFESSIONS

Testimony on the 2026-2027 Executive Budget

Presented to

Senator Liz Krueger, Chair
Senate Finance Committee

and

Assemblymember J. Gary Pretlow, Chair
Assembly Ways and Means Committee

February 24, 2026

Prepared by

United University Professions

PO Box 15143

Albany, NY 12212-9954

800-342-4206

www.uupinfo.org

UNITED UNIVERSITY PROFESSIONS

Chairperson Krueger, Chairperson Pretlow, distinguished members of the Senate Finance Committee and Assembly Ways and Means Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the 2026-2027 Executive Budget.

My name is Dr. Frederick E. Kowal, and I am the president of United University Professions (UUP), the largest higher education union in the country. It is my honor to represent more than 37,000 academics and professionals who work at SUNY. Our members live and work in communities across the state of New York, serving hundreds of thousands of students and patients at 29 SUNY comprehensive, technical, specialized and university centers, SUNY academic medical centers and state-operated public teaching hospitals, and System Administration.

I would like to thank you for your strong financial support for SUNY over the past few years. The increased state investments you have provided have helped SUNY start to recover from deep cuts inflicted during the Great Recession and over a decade of austerity funding under the Cuomo administration. While increased state funding in recent state budgets has helped campuses, the majority of SUNY campuses are, unfortunately, still struggling financially. In this testimony, I will highlight UUP's state budget funding priorities to continue to lift up SUNY and the New Yorkers it serves.

State Operating Aid

The FY2027 Executive Budget provides a net increase of \$49.3 million in operating aid for SUNY state-operated campuses. While I appreciate this investment, it does not go far enough to address the untenable financial situation of most SUNY campuses. When you consider the deep cuts of the Great Recession, the austerity budgets of the Cuomo administration and the recent unprecedented attacks on higher education by the federal government, it is critical that New York state provide significant increased resources to SUNY campuses.

New York state has the resources to make strategic, increased investments in SUNY to continue to reverse the financial damage sustained over the last 15 years. We should ensure that every campus in SUNY has the funding it needs to provide a first-rate higher education to all its students, regardless of where they reside in our state.

To that end, UUP requests a total increase of \$141.8 million in state operating aid over last year's enacted state budget. Of this amount, we request that \$100 million be provided for general operating support to be utilized across the SUNY system. This increased funding is desperately needed to stabilize cash-strapped campuses and to provide enhancements to student academic programs and services. We request the remaining \$41.8 million be directly allocated to four of our most financially distressed campuses. These four campuses and their deficits are:

- SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry (ESF): \$8.3 million
- SUNY Buffalo State University: \$16 million
- SUNY Fredonia: \$11 million
- SUNY Potsdam: \$6.5 million

Again, I want to express my sincere gratitude to the Legislature and the Governor for the support provided to SUNY in recent years. This level of funding was more than enough to address the deficits of a number of financially struggling campuses. However, SUNY has not allocated this funding based on campus need. While the university system has provided increases to each campus and the percentages of those increases may look significant, it is important to realize that those percentage increases were applied to a very inadequate base amount; they are not at all sufficient to address our campuses' financial issues. That's why we are again calling on the Legislature to directly allocate funding to SUNY's four most distressed campuses. The direct state allocations (campus budget schedules) to individual campuses in the state budget have not increased in 15 years. We urge you to make these direct appropriations to ensure these campuses have the resources they need.

I deeply value all 29 state-operated SUNY campuses, and that means standing up for the ones that are most disadvantaged. I hope you will join me in advocating for these smaller regional campuses that are struggling financially. These campuses also lack access to other funding streams to which the university centers have access, such as the state's matching fund for research endowments. Additionally, the financial situations of ESF, Buffalo State, Fredonia and Potsdam are due to over a decade of underfunding, not the institutions' failure to perform well. As I detail below, these campuses are very successful in terms of student outcomes, offer unique programs and fill shortages and contribute substantially to their local economies and communities. Allowing these campuses to drown in debt will lead to unnecessary cuts that will take opportunities away from New Yorkers who seek to enjoy SUNY's diverse offerings in communities across the state.

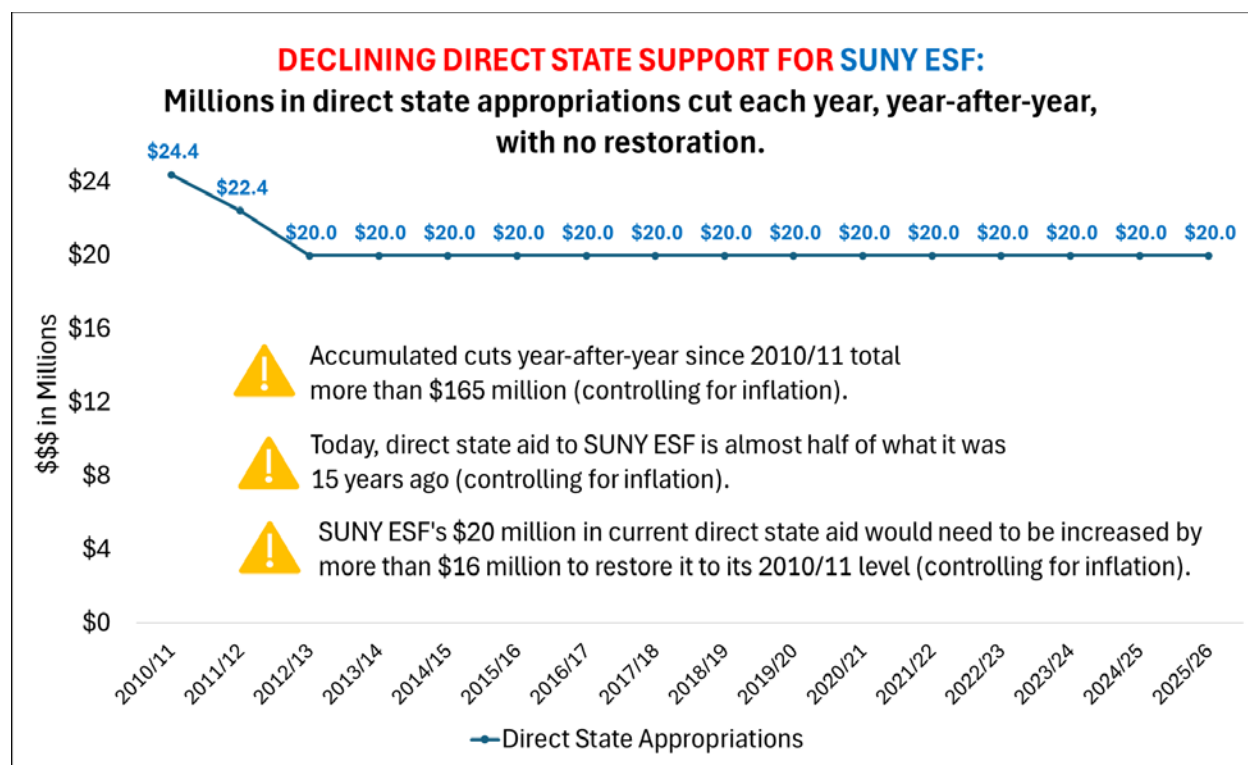
Again, New York state has the fiscal resources for strategic investments, and SUNY should be one of them. The state budget reflects our state's values and priorities, and New York,

now more than ever, should continue to demonstrate its commitment to public higher education. Making significant increased investments in SUNY makes sense, especially given the constant attacks on higher education and public employees coming from the Trump administration. New York should boldly assert its ideals by continuing to expand access to affordable public higher education for all sectors of the population.

UUP's request of \$141.8 million is a miniscule portion—a mere 0.05%—of the \$260 billion Executive Budget. This relatively small investment would have a huge impact on SUNY, its students, the communities it serves and the future of the state's economy. SUNY is a wise investment that delivers significant returns. Every state dollar invested in SUNY generates a return of over \$8. SUNY campuses are anchor institutions in their communities and economic powerhouses, as I will detail below.

SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry (ESF)

The chart below illustrates a problem UUP has been sounding the alarm on over the last four years. As you can see, direct state appropriations for SUNY ESF have not increased for 15 years.



It is important to note that when controlling for inflation, the accumulated cuts to SUNY ESF since the 2010-11 state fiscal year total more than \$165 million. In fact, direct state aid to

ESF is almost half of what it was 15 years ago, when factoring in inflation. Moreover, ESF's \$20 million in current direct state aid would need to be increased by more than \$16 million to restore it to 2010-11 levels (controlling for inflation).

SUNY ESF is one of the nation's leading institutions focused on the study of the environment, developing renewable technologies, and building a sustainable future. ESF is central to educating the workforce that will navigate the challenges posed by climate change, now and in the future. Additionally, ESF is renowned for its research excellence. Research at ESF is remarkably diverse, making important contributions in the fields of aquatic ecosystems, bioenergy, biotechnology, biodiversity, ecology, genetic engineering, nanotechnology, remote sensing, wildlife disease prevention and many others. Sponsored research at ESF during 2023-24 reached \$21.5M and continues to grow dynamically in volume, diversity of projects, and impact. In fact, ESF is No. 1 in per-capita research expenditures in SUNY and has a Carnegie Research Classification of "High Research Activity." ESF is the smallest R2 institution nationally by numbers of students and SUNY's only R2 campus. One example of ESF faculty research that delivers benefits is a project to detect toxic algae blooms in lakes and near-real-time water quality monitoring systems for drinking water. Additionally, ESF faculty are important advisors to policymakers in areas such as statutory decarbonization targets and wildlife management actions for at-risk species.

ESF also has deep ties with its local community and places a strong emphasis on service learning. ESF students log more than 70,000 service hours annually. In addition, ESF has a Center for Community Design Research (CCDR), an outreach program that partners with communities, elected officials, agencies, not-for-profit organizations, and other academic programs. The CCDR provides technical assistance, educational programs, and research projects that build community capacity to manage sustainable futures. ESF's impact is further amplified through its Timbuctoo Climate Science and Careers Summer Institute. This program provides immersive learning experiences and career exploration in the environmental sciences for New York City high schoolers from systemically marginalized communities. Additionally, the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment conducts outreach focused on increasing educational opportunities for Native American students in environmental sciences, research collaborations, and partnerships with Native American communities to address local environmental problems. The Open Academy makes ESF accessible to lifelong learners, youth, and the greater community. The Open Academy provides an "ESF in the High School" program and provides a flexible learning option that meets the needs of nontraditional students, including a rising number of adult learners.

ESF has a positive impact on its local community and the world through its education, service and research. ESF also performs well based on several outcome metrics. ESF's graduation rate exceeds that of the SUNY average. The college's 4-year graduation rate for the 2017 cohort was 59%, compared to the SUNY average of 55%. Additionally, first-year applications for the 2023-24 academic year were up 44%; and ESF's fall-to-fall enrollment increased by 6.5% in 2024 and rose by 5.4% in 2023 (Source: SUNY System Administration Office of Institutional Research and Data Analytics). Post-graduation data also shows ESF's success in educating students and preparing them for the workforce. Based on outcomes data from the class of 2023, 98% of graduates found a position within 6 months, 71% are employed in New York, 48% work in Central New York, and 72% secured their position through a campus connection. Approximately one in four employees at the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation are ESF graduates.

SUNY ESF is in severe financial distress and needs additional state investment. ESF is still recovering from over a decade of flat funding after deep cuts implemented during the Great Recession. Direct state operations funding for ESF has been flat at \$19,979,700 since 2012. When factoring in inflation, this flat funding equates to a cut of over \$10 million over this time period. Faculty and staff are constantly being forced to do more with less, and this is unsustainable.

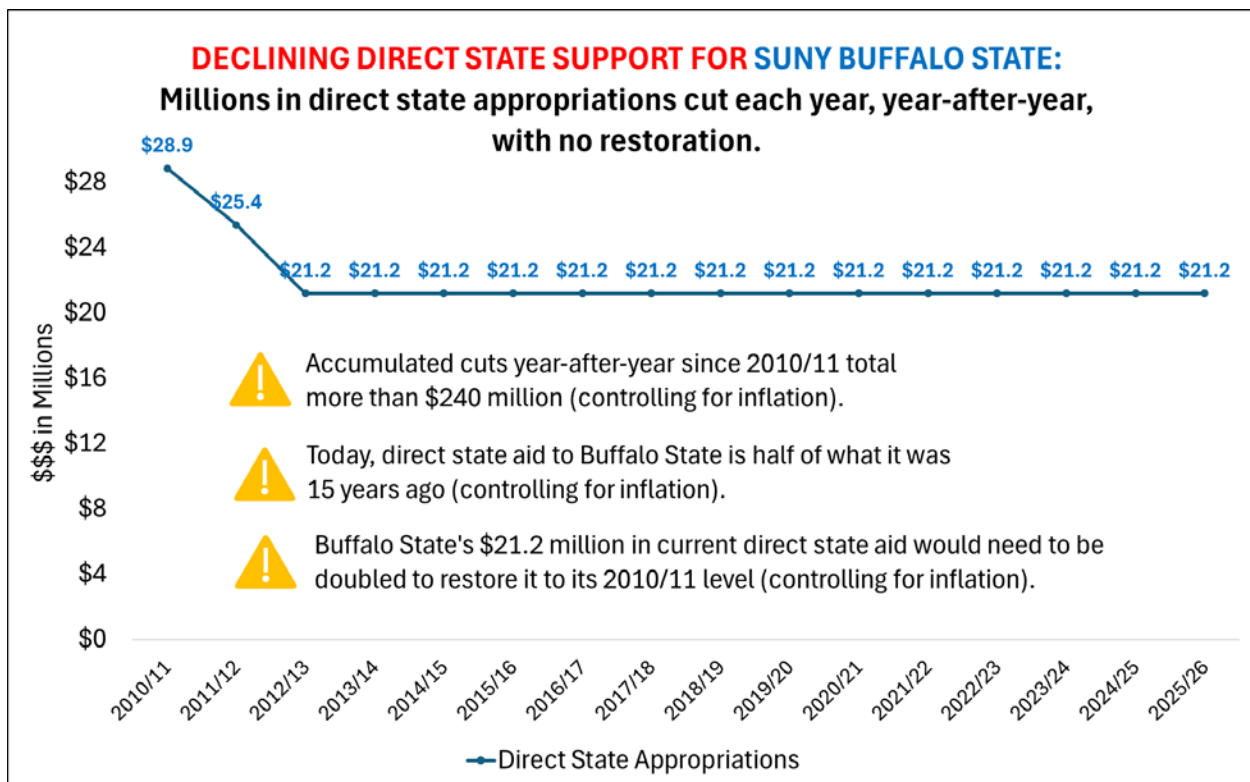
Due to years of underfunding coupled with increased enrollment, ESF has a structural deficit of \$8.3 million. This flat funding has in large part, caused the college's current structural deficit and necessitated management to propose a "stability plan" in 2025 that would reduce the number of full-time faculty and professionals, cut support for graduate students, and hamper the institution's ability to attract and retain students. SUNY ESF's enrollment has steadily increased over the past few years, and student applications have risen dramatically. Unfortunately, the college has been unable to accept the increasing number of qualified students seeking to attend the college due to space constraints and its financial condition. What's also clear is ESF's success in attracting students and its need for additional funding to support current and future students – and the faculty and staff who serve them. However, management's proposed stability plan seeks a reduction in the number of faculty, staff and programs, which would reduce ESF's educational quality and endanger its important mission.

UUP calls for increased operating support to put ESF on a path to fiscal sustainability and to prevent damaging cuts. ESF's \$8.3 million deficit should be addressed, and I urge you to restore the \$425,000 in funding for ESF's Timbuctoo Summer program that the Governor eliminated in the Executive Budget.

Another way the Legislature can help ESF is by increasing the reimbursement rate for conducting research for state agencies. Despite boasting a substantial \$26 million research portfolio, the majority of this work consists of below-cost contracts conducted for state agencies, including the departments of Environmental Conservation, NYSERDA, and the Office of Parks and Recreation. This crucial research, which directly serves the needs of New York's government and citizens, does not fully cover its own expenses and leaves ESF to effectively subsidize essential, public-serving work. This systemic underinvestment in ESF hurts the college and harms the mission of those agencies.

SUNY Buffalo State University

The chart below illustrates the same story of state funding for SUNY Buffalo State. Since SFY 2010-11, the aggregate cuts to Buffalo State are over \$240 million when accounting for inflation. Buffalo State's current direct state aid of \$21.2 million is only half of what it was 15 years ago (controlling for inflation) and needs to be doubled to restore funding to 2010-11 levels.



Buffalo State is a vital institution for Western New York. It offers unique academic programming, fills shortage areas, and contributes substantially to the local economy. Buffalo State is home to the renowned Garman Art Conservation Department, which features state-of-the-art studios and labs that repair and restore a large range of original works of art from all over the world. They also host the only in-person Master of Public Administration degree in Western New York, in addition to master programs in applied professions such as social work, speech language pathology, and engineering technology. Cutting-edge research projects also take place at Buffalo State, from the Great Lakes Center, dedicated to improving the quality of the environment through its WNY Partnership for Regional Invasive Species Management (WNY PRISM), to its Institute for Community Health Promotion (ICHP), which links research and education to community health outcomes. Other major research includes topics in engineering technology, physics, chemistry, math, and data science to solve problems in clean energy, advanced materials, and future technologies at the Center for Integrated Studies in Nanoscience and Nanotechnology (CISNN).

SUNY Buffalo State contributes significantly to the local economy. The college also provides creative outlets for youth community members at the Youth Voices Conference, a showcase of media production, poetry, and art show to display student creativity from more than 11 schools across Western NY. It also connects community members with the Burchfield Penney Art Center at Buffalo State and the Continuing Professional Studies Office, which provides high-quality professional development, workforce training, and lifelong learning opportunities for individuals seeking to enhance their skills and advance their careers. Additionally, Buffalo State's Small Business Development Center provides management and technical assistance to start-up and existing small businesses throughout Erie County and the Niagara Frontier. Also, the campus is home to the Buffalo State Child Care Center, an inclusive, full-day preschool classroom for special education which is helping to combat shortage of services in Buffalo and Erie County.

The excellence produced by SUNY Buffalo State is also supported by data. The college's Fall 2025 incoming undergraduate freshmen class was up 3.7% from the previous year. In addition, SUNY Buffalo State's retention rate for its Fall 2024 class increased by 7.8% from the previous year. Yet, due to SUNY's reluctance to allocate increased state aid based on campus need, Buffalo State is still struggling with a deficit of \$16 million. In 2025, the campus implemented a Framework for Financial Stability plan that eliminates academic programs and cut jobs. Programs that have been targeted for deactivation include the bachelor's in Early Childhood Education. This is counterproductive given the substantial need for increasing the number of childcare providers in this state and the emphasis

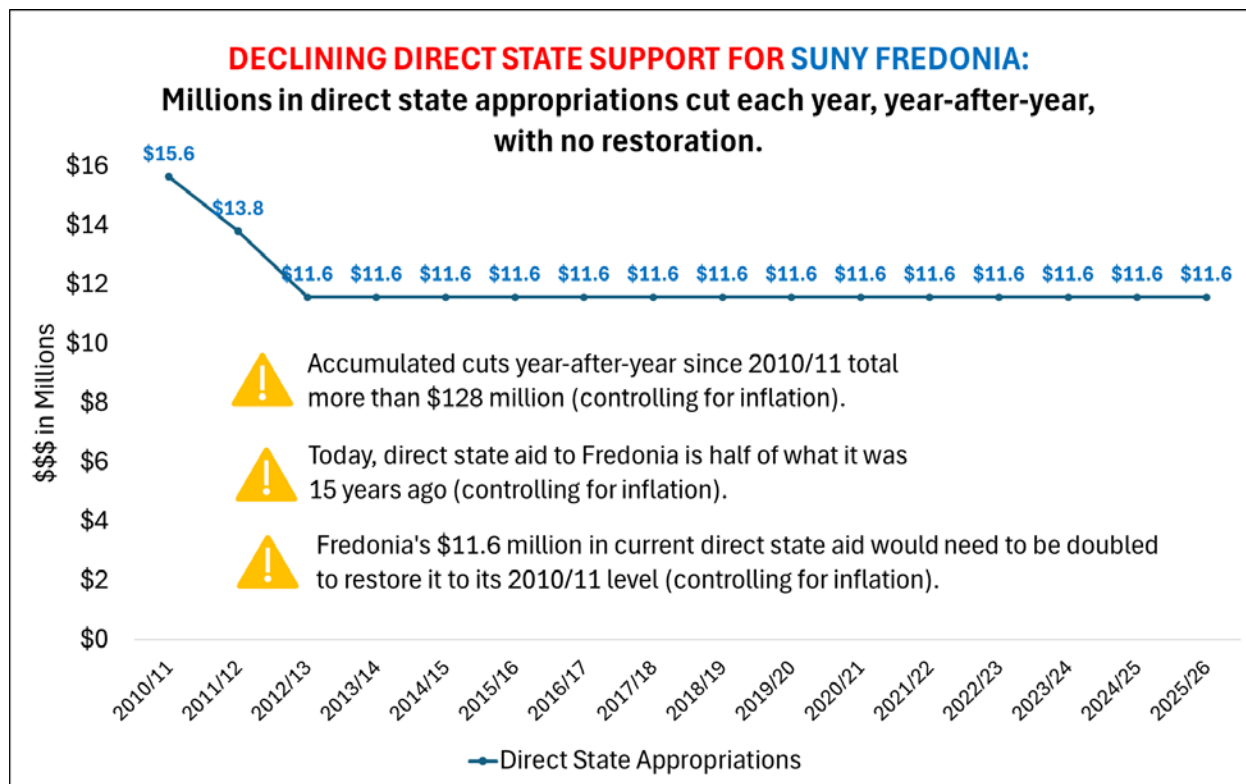
placed on expanding pre-K education. Moreover, Spanish education, Spanish and Indigenous Studies/Anthropology have also been targeted. Eliminating these programs will erase most Latin culture and Indigenous Peoples focused courses on campus. Community partners have identified Spanish and other language programs as a critical need in the educational community at the k-12 levels. Other targeted programs include the master's in Chemistry, Physics, Applied and Computational Mathematics, and Urban Education. At-risk programs include Art and Design/History, several economics minor and master programs, and bachelor's programs in Physics and Physics Education.

The deactivations of programs at SUNY Buffalo State are putting the college in a death spiral. The program cuts will result in lower enrollment which will result in more needed cuts, a vicious loop. In addition, there was no true shared governance in the process and no discussion of the true implications of these cuts across the campus or in the community, except for the SUNY identified KPI which fail to adequately address the costs and benefits of individual programs.

The college has also initiated hiring freezes and is offering a voluntary separation program for full-time, retirement-eligible employees. Buffalo State needs enhanced state support to preserve its academic offerings, staffing levels, and contributions to the community.

SUNY Fredonia

Again, the same story can be told for Fredonia, as illustrated by the chart below. When accounting for inflation, accumulated cuts since SFY 2010-11 total \$128 million. Adjusting for inflation, SUNY Fredonia's current direct state aid of \$11.6 million is only half of what it was 15 years ago and needs to be doubled to match 2010-11 levels.



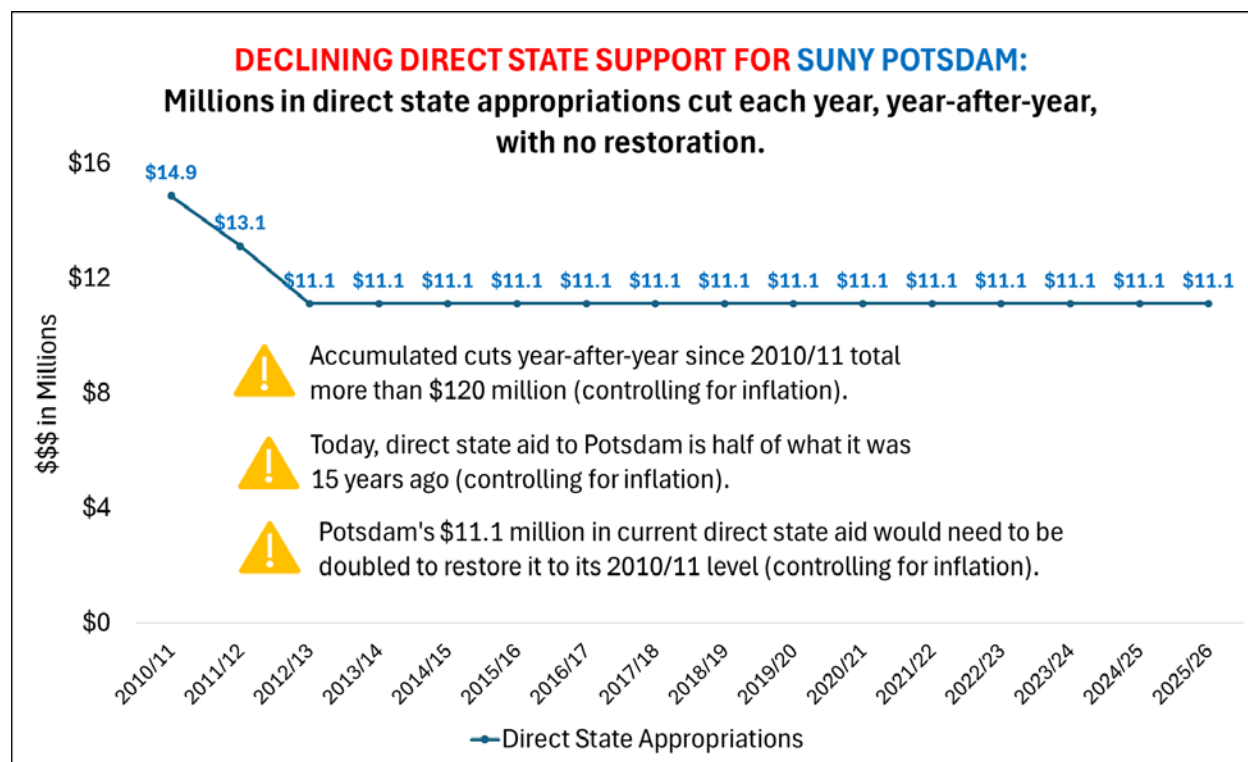
SUNY Fredonia is a major economic driver for the surrounding rural region. Fredonia is one of the largest employers in Chautauqua County and contributes \$204 million annually to the region comprising Erie, Chautauqua, and Cattaraugus counties. Additionally, the campus draws tens of thousands of visitors every year. Fredonia students and visitors contribute to the local economy through housing, shopping, dining, and more. The college is valued by its local communities, and it gives back to them through volunteering. Students participate in the Rockefeller Arts Center on Stage for Youth Series, which brings live theater to young audiences that's designed to encourage thinking, creativity, and fun in conjunction with school lessons. The college also hosts an annual Fredonia food truck event that raises thousands of dollars for United Way, an organization that partners with local groups to expand access to nutritious foods and quality healthcare and education services.

SUNY Fredonia's Fall 2024 enrollment increased by 7.2% for first-time undergraduate students. Despite this growth, retrenchments and budget cuts were implemented at the college to address its deficit, which stands at \$11 million. Programming cuts among French, Spanish, photography, and philosophy disciplines are occurring. Other programs at risk include Art History, Sociology, and other visual arts. Program cuts have been met with backlash, protests, and demands that SUNY fairly fund the school, especially from students.

Increased funding would help to protect SUNY Fredonia's unique programming and strong community impact.

SUNY Potsdam

For Potsdam, the chart below shows a funding picture that has contributed to a structural deficit. Combined year-after-year cuts since SFY 2010-11 total \$120 million when controlled for inflation. Today, inflation-adjusted direct state aid to Potsdam is half of what it was 15 years ago. Potsdam's \$11.1 million in current direct state aid would need to be doubled to restore it to its 2010-11 funding levels, after accounting for inflation.



Much like Fredonia, SUNY Potsdam serves as a beacon of opportunity and economic activity for its rural surroundings. Home of the Crane School of Music since 1886, Potsdam has a long legacy of excellence in music education and performance. The Crane School of Music is one of only 10 Yamaha Institution of Excellence programs nationally. The uniqueness and excellence of the Crane School of Music is a major draw that attracts students and visitors to New York's North Country. Potsdam injects an estimated \$375.9 million of economic activity into the Jefferson, Lewis, and St. Lawrence County region each year. It is one of the largest employers in St. Lawrence County and one of the region's largest economic engines.

Potsdam also has a fast-growing applied sociology program, the first in SUNY that involves an internship requirement – integrating academic study with practical experience. Also unique to the college is its Law Enforcement Training Institute, which trains local hires. Potsdam is also working to streamline K-12 physical education and environmental careers for students. The college's strong academic programs contribute to research gains in wildlife resilience and ferritin, a protein inside cells that regulates iron levels that can cause diseases like anemia, cancer and heart problems.

SUNY Potsdam also sponsors art and music events open to the public each year and offers targeted youth programs including summer and day camps – with an emphasis on literacy monitoring, technology, math and science, music, athletics, and swimming. Also aiding the community is the Wagner Institute for Sustainability and Ecological Research (WISER), which works to combat food insecurity and teach sustainable practices.

Thousands of Potsdam alumni across the country have seen great success; at least four alumni currently work for NASA and graduates have collectively been nominated for 35 Grammy Awards.

Unfortunately, Potsdam is facing a \$6.5 million deficit due to years of underfunding. It faces program cuts in a dozen bachelor's programs and two master's programs, including Music Performance and Public Health. Additionally, the college is looking to trim faculty and staff, which will further harm the institution's mission of teaching and supporting students. Additional state aid will prevent devastating losses of programs and staffing that would undercut this institution's success.

SUNY Public Teaching Hospitals

UUP urges the Legislature to stand up for its public teaching hospitals, which, along with higher education, have become large targets of the federal government. Changes implemented in the "One Big Beautiful Bill Act" (OBBBA) will have devastating impacts on SUNY's hospitals. With looming federal Medicaid cuts, new Medicaid work requirements, changes to the Essential Plan, and the expiration of premium tax credits for the Affordable Care Act (ACA) expansion population, many people will lose health coverage. In fact, the Fiscal Policy Institute (FPI) estimates that a million New Yorkers are at risk of losing health coverage over the next two years due to the OBBBA. This will put additional strain on our SUNY hospitals, which already serve very high numbers of uninsured patients. Individuals without health insurance are more likely to forgo care until it becomes an emergency, and they rely on safety net hospitals like SUNY hospitals instead of a primary care office.

Furthermore, the elimination of certain funding streams like the Managed Care Organization (MCO) tax will worsen the financial situation of SUNY hospitals. Public employees at SUNY hospitals in Syracuse, Brooklyn, and Stony Brook need state support to continue to provide high quality and timely care with the impending federal challenges.

I thank the Governor for reappropriating the \$450 million in capital funding for upgrades to the emergency department and burn center at SUNY Upstate Medical University and \$750 million for the modernization of SUNY Downstate University Hospital. I also appreciate the Governor's inclusion of \$50 million in capital funding for each hospital and \$100 million in operating aid for Downstate, and I urge you to include all of these investments in the enacted state budget.

In addition to these items, the most impactful way you can support the SUNY hospitals is to cover employee fringe benefits and debt service costs. SUNY hospitals are the only state agency entities required to pay for their own employee fringe benefits and debt service costs. This practice is inequitable and should be reformed. Public employees at SUNY hospitals do amazing work, treating the most disadvantaged and vulnerable patients with compassion. Fringe benefits, such as their own health insurance, should be covered by the state. UUP joins SUNY in requesting a downpayment of \$75 million for this purpose in this year's state budget.

The state should also cover debt service costs for SUNY hospitals, as it does for every other state agency. This is more important than ever, given the historic capital funding SUNY hospitals received last year. SUNY Upstate and Downstate will not be able to afford the necessary improvements approved for those facilities if they are forced to cover debt service costs themselves. Debt service for the three hospitals and the Buffalo Jacobs School of Medicine totals \$82 million. The state would be treating SUNY's public teaching hospitals fairly by covering these costs – which would allow the hospitals to improve their facilities and invest in their core missions of patient care, teaching, and research. I thank you for including debt service in the final budget over the past few years, and I urge you to make this coverage permanent.

Finally, we support SUNY's request for reforming Disproportionate Shares Hospital (DSH) funding for SUNY hospitals. It typically takes 3-4 years for these hospitals to receive reimbursement for Medicaid and unreimbursed losses, which is a significant financial burden for them to carry. I support SUNY's request to base the initial DSH payment on recent audited losses and their request for the state's Department of Health and Division of the Budget to explore shifting to a directed state payments (DSP) model.

Educational Opportunity Program (EOP)

I was disappointed to see that the Executive Budget cut EOP by \$2.6 million. I urge you to restore this cut and invest an additional \$20 million in the program. EOP's success is widely known, and I appreciate its many champions in the Legislature. This program offers a pathway to college for disadvantaged students who otherwise would not have the opportunity to pursue higher education. There is a huge demand for EOP from qualifying applicants, and I urge you to commit the funding necessary to help these New Yorkers achieve their dreams. According to SUNY, EOP enrollment has increased by 20% over the past three years while program funding has only increased by 3%, and expenses are projected to exceed revenue this year and in future years.

Additionally, I ask you to invest \$5 million to expand the Pre-Medical Opportunity Program, which supports EOP students on a pre-medical track and helps them prepare for medical school. Finally, I encourage you to enact a Mental Health Educational Opportunity Program (MHEOP) and appropriate \$5 million to implement it. Both of these extensions of EOP will help address provider shortages in our state and help diversify the fields of medicine and mental health.

Capital Funding

I would like to bring to your attention the dire need for critical maintenance funding for SUNY campuses. SUNY's deferred maintenance backlog is over \$10 billion, and the rise in construction costs since the pandemic has been a challenge. The Executive Budget's investment of \$595 million for critical maintenance is not enough to ensure safety and positive learning environments across SUNY. UUP supports SUNY's request of \$1 billion for critical maintenance. This request includes \$600 million for transformational, sustainable critical maintenance, consisting of a wide range of buildings to support the educational experience, including spaces for academics, research, and student life. It will also prioritize sustainability to lower ongoing operation costs. The remaining \$400 million would go to emergency avoidance and critical infrastructure projects, primarily to address deteriorating infrastructure and system failures. This is necessary to ensure the safety of students, faculty, and staff as well as to minimize costly emergencies.

Artificial Intelligence

Thank you for your tremendous work on regulating artificial intelligence (AI) and ensuring that safety and labor protections are prioritized. I especially appreciate the Legislature and Governor adding SUNY as a covered entity under the Legislative Oversight of Automated Decision-making in Government Act (LOADinG Act). These protections for public employees are a huge win, and I thank Senator Gonzalez and Assemblymember Otis for sponsoring and leading the charge on this important legislation.

I appreciate your consistent work on AI and encourage you to remain vigilant. AI is rapidly evolving, and it is important to ensure proper precautions are being taken to protect New York's workers and the public. I look forward to continuing to work with you on this issue.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the 2026-27 Executive Budget for Higher Education. Again, I would like to reiterate that the state has the resources to make a strategic increased investment in SUNY. I appreciate your support for SUNY and urge you to continue the progress made over the last several years, especially to make up for the lack of state investment over the past 15 years. I urge you to provide the requested increased state support to campuses, stand up for our state hospitals, and expand the Educational Opportunity Program. I am happy to answer any questions and provide any assistance you may need. Thank you.