



Office of the University Student Senate  
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**Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the 2026 Executive Budget Proposal on Higher Education**  
***Testimony of Akkeem Polack, Chairperson of the CUNY University Student Senate & CUNY***  
***Trustee***

***February 24, 2026***

*New York State Senate Standing Committee on Higher Education Committee: Chair Toby Ann Stavisky, Ranking Member, Joseph A. Griffo and Committee Members Patricia Fahy, Andrew Gounardes, Robert Jackson, John C. Liu, Rachel May, Dean Murray, Peter Oberacker, Gustavo Rivera, and Lea Webb*

*New York State Assembly Standing Committee on Higher Education Committee: Chair Alicia Hyndman, and Committee Members Rodneyse Bichotte Hermelyn, Marianne Buttenschon, Monique Chandler-Waterman, Sarah Clark, Chris Eachus, Michael J. Fitzpatrick, Phara Souffrant Forrest, Scott Gray, Judy Griffin, Anna R. Kelles, Donna A. Lupardo, John T. McDonald III, Karen McMahan, Brian D. Miller, Kwani B. O'Pharrows, Sam Pirozzolo, Michael Reilly, Karines Reyes, Nader J. Sayegh, Rebecca A. Seawright, Joe Sempolinski, Jo Anne Simon, Doug Smith, Robert Smullen, and Al Stirpe*

Good evening, Members of the Joint Committees of the Assembly and Senate for Higher Education. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

My name is Akkeem Polack, Chairperson of the CUNY University Student Senate and a CUNY Trustee representing more than 240,000 students across 26 campuses.

CUNY has long been a pathway to opportunity for working class and immigrant families. Today that promise is strained and one of the most immediate barriers students face is transportation. For many students commuting is a hidden tuition. Transportation can consume 7% or more of their total expenses. Many spend over \$100 each month simply to reach class, and for more than 60% of students from low-income households, that cost can determine whether they attend at all.

We appreciate the \$1.4 million transportation pilot included in CUNY's budget request funded equally by State and City. A five-day OMNY card providing 75 trips per student is meaningful progress and reflects sustained student advocacy.

But the need far exceeds a pilot. Free OMNY cards for all CUNY students remain our top priority. Reliable transportation is essential for equitable access retention and timely graduation especially when more than \$70 million already supports fare free transit for high school students with no comparable investment for CUNY.

Further targeted investments matter as well. Disability Services at \$7.8 million would ensure that students with disabilities have modern tools for learning mobility and digital access. CUNY CARES at \$4.6 million would expand mental health and wellness resources across all 5 boroughs. Modernizing campus infrastructure and technology will ensure classrooms, labs,

libraries and digital systems remain reliable and accessible for twenty first century learning.

These are not isolated requests. They are investments in the success of CUNY students and in New York's future workforce. Thank you for your time and your commitment to public higher education.





## University Student Senate – OMNY Pilot Program for Eligible Students

**Why This Matters?** Transportation remains one of the most immediate and preventable barriers for CUNY students. With many commuting across boroughs to attend classes or work, public transit access is essential. For students already burdened with housing, food, and tuition insecurity, rising transportation costs can mean missed classes, reduced course loads, or even withdrawal. A targeted and sustainable model ensures that those most in need continue to access education without interruption.

Metric	Value
Pilot Budget	\$1,400,000
Cost per Student (Semester)	\$450
Students Covered	3,111
Trips per Student	75
Total Trips Provided	233,325

**Pilot Program: \$1.4 Million Budget:** This pilot model offers an efficient, cost-effective alternative to a full-scale, universal program. Instead of offering unlimited weekly OMNY cards, this plan provides eligible students with a **5-day, 2-ride-per-day card**, 75 trips per student, designed specifically to cover commuting for in-person classes but to be used at their discretion.

Category	Estimated Distribution
Pilot population (based on original plan)	100%
Students with disabilities	20%*
Student Parents	20%*
Students who were in the Foster Care System	20%*
Low-income Community College Students	35%*
International Students	5%*

**\*Under review for finalized percentage by Policy Planning**

The CUNY Student Commuter Grant Pilot Program provides a free OMNY for eligible students each semester, renewed based on academic performance. Eligible students must be enrolled at CUNY, take at least two in-person classes, and cannot already receive ASAP benefits. Cards are non-transferable and valid only on days CUNY campuses are open, for subway, local bus, and Access-A-Ride. Once a student has received from the **OMNY Program**, they cannot apply until all other eligible students receive the program.

**Our goal is to secure equal or increased funding for the OMNY Program in future semesters to support eligible CUNY students.**

# ABOUT USS CUNY

One voice, united for over 240,000 CUNY students.

The University Student Senate (USS) of the City University of New York (CUNY), founded in 1972, advocates for accessible, affordable, and high-quality education. USS protects student rights, supports public higher education, and promotes student welfare across CUNY. Our delegates represent over 240,000 students from 26 campuses.



Advocating for Students Since 1972

Representing 240,000+ CUNY Students  
USS is the voice of over 240,000 students across 26 campuses

Driving Policy and Change  
USS leads advocacy efforts on critical issues like transportation, mental health, and essential student services

More Information

[www.usscuny.org](http://www.usscuny.org)



555 W 57th St, New York, NY 10019



## CUNY University Student Senate



Representing  
**240,000+**  
CUNY students

"The Student Voice of CUNY"

LET'S BUILD  
A STRONGER  
CUNY





## FREE OMNY CARD CAMPAIGN

(formerly #FREEMETROCARDS)

CUNY's inclusion of \$1.4 million in its budget request reflects meaningful progress as a direct response to student advocacy. The funding supports a pilot program that would provide eligible students with a 5 day two rides per day OMNY card totaling 75 trips per student, with \$700,000 from the State and \$700,000 from the City. While this is an important step, it does not meet the full transportation needs of CUNY students. Free OMNYCards remain our priority because reliable transportation is essential for equitable access to education.



SIGN OUR  
PETITION



## MODERNIZING CUNY CAMPUSES WITH STRONG INFRASTRUCTURE AND ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY

CUNY students deserve campuses that match the scale of their ambition. Modernizing infrastructure and upgrading technology across the university ensures that classrooms, labs, libraries, and student spaces are safe, reliable, and built for twenty-first century learning. This initiative supports better Wi-Fi, updated academic software, improved digital systems, and well-maintained facilities that enhance both in-person and online learning.



26 CAMPUSES, 70+  
STUDENT LEADERS,  
WE ARE THE STUDENT  
VOICE OF CUNY

## EXPANSION OF CUNY CARES AND MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT ACROSS ALL FIVE BOROUGHES

Broader coverage across all five boroughs would ensure no student is left without essential assistance due to campus location. Through CUNY CARES (\$4.6M), strengthening mental health and wellness support would provide students with the stability needed to remain enrolled, succeed academically, and balance school, work, and personal responsibilities.

## EQUITABLE ACCESS THROUGH MODERN ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

Many students rely on specialized tools for reading, writing, mobility, and digital navigation. When campuses lack adequate funding or updated equipment, students with disabilities face preventable academic barriers. Access, Success, Inclusion through Disability Services (\$7.8M) ensures investment in modern assistive resources so every student can fully engage in their courses and participate confidently in the academic community.

## STAY CONNECTED



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