



Luca O. Rallis
SUNY Trustee & SUNY SA President
H. Carl McCall SUNY Building
Albany, New York 12246

Written Testimony of Luca O. Rallis, SUNY Student Assembly President
Joint Budget Hearing on Higher Education
February 24, 2026

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this written testimony today. My name is Luca O. Rallis, and I serve as President of the SUNY Student Assembly, representing the nearly 1.7 million students of the State University of New York across 64 campuses and affiliated learning sites.

Thanks to the leadership of Governor Kathy Hochul and the State Legislature, SUNY students have benefited in recent years from historic investments in public higher education. These investments have stabilized campuses, supported a resident undergraduate tuition freeze, and strengthened essential programs that promote access and completion for low-income, first-generation, nontraditional, and all students across our system. SUNY students are deeply grateful for this unprecedented support, and we recognize the Legislature's central role in securing it.

This year, the SUNY Student Assembly respectfully requests that the Legislature build upon a strong Executive Budget with two core legislative adds that advance equity, basic needs security, and second-chance opportunity for New Yorkers:

Invest \$1M in temperature-controlled food pantry lockers.

Nationally, surveys have found that roughly 40 percent of college students experience food insecurity, with even higher rates at public two-year institutions. Research on New York public colleges similarly shows that food and housing insecurity are widespread, especially among non-traditional students. Recent disruptions to SNAP have further strained students' ability to reliably access nutritious food. Campus food pantries play a critical role in meeting this need, but limited hours, long lines, and concerns about stigma often keep the students with the greatest need from accessing them.

In response, SUNY has successfully piloted temperature-controlled food pantry lockers on select campuses, enabling 24/7 stigma-free distribution of perishable, nutritious food. Food lockers can supplement the work of food pantries by providing students with the ability to pick up fresh refrigerated food after-hours. These lockers allow students to reserve items online and pick them up at any time, eliminating barriers related to class schedules, work shifts, caregiving responsibilities, transportation, and other time constraints.

We respectfully request that the SFY 2026–27 budget include a \$1 million appropriation to expand SUNY's temperature-controlled food pantry locker initiative. This funding would:

- Support purchasing and installing food pantry locker units at 20 additional campuses across the system.
- Enable campuses to integrate lockers with existing food pantries and basic-needs operations, ensuring safe and effective distribution of perishable, nutritious food.
- Improve access for non-traditional students, working adults, student-parents, commuter students, and those with irregular schedules, who are least able to visit pantries during limited hours and often need these resources the most.

Invest \$3M in SUNY’s Higher Education in Prison (HEP) program.

Approximately 20 SUNY institutions provide educational services in approximately 29 State prisons and one federal facility, offering incarcerated students access to college courses and academic support. SUNY’s Office of Higher Education in Prison coordinates these college-in-prison partnerships and oversees the Re-entry Navigator program, which helps students transition from correctional facilities to SUNY and CUNY campuses and persist to degree completion.

Research consistently demonstrates that access to college education in prison is one of the most effective strategies for promoting public safety and economic mobility. Incarcerated individuals who participate in higher education are significantly less likely to return to prison than those who do not. SUNY’s HEP Re-entry Navigator Program builds on this impact by working with students beginning six months before release and through the critical post-release period to support academic planning, financial aid, and enrollment at SUNY and CUNY campuses.

The SUNY HEP program’s mission is to offer a SUNY college presence in every New York State correctional facility, based on clear evidence that education reduces recidivism and strengthens communities. Despite the immense success and impact of the program, SUNY’s HEP program receives no direct state tax support, limiting SUNY’s ability to reach every facility and fully develop degree pathways, particularly baccalaureate offerings.

We respectfully request that the SFY 2026–27 budget include a \$3 million appropriation to support SUNY’s Higher Education in Prison (HEP) program. This funding would:

- Expand high-quality college offerings toward a SUNY presence in every State correctional facility, including four-year degree pathways.
- Strengthen and broaden the Re-entry Navigator Program to reach more students with structured academic re-entry support.

By supporting these two modest but high-impact investments, the Legislature can help ensure that no SUNY student’s academic success is derailed by hunger and that New York’s incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students have equitable access to

life-changing higher education that reduces recidivism, promotes economic mobility, and strengthens communities across our state.

In addition to these targeted priorities, the SUNY Student Assembly strongly supports several broader higher education investments that are essential to fully realizing the promise of a world-class public system:

- **Increase direct state tax support** to strengthen academic programs, sustain essential campus services, and uphold the resident undergraduate tuition freeze as proposed by the Executive.
- **Expand capital funding** beyond the Executive's proposal, with a focus on critical maintenance projects that repair aging facilities, improve accessibility, and ensure that every SUNY student is warm, safe, and dry.
- **Strengthen affordability programs**, including TAP, Excelsior, and SUNY Reconnect, by expanding eligibility and removing barriers.
- **Restore cuts proposed by the Executive and make additional investments in the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP)**, to build on continued successes and meet an ever-increasing demand

Together, these targeted priorities and broader investments will help ensure that SUNY remains affordable, equitable, and responsive to student needs. We thank Governor Hochul and the Legislature for their continued leadership and urge you to adopt a final budget that fully reflects this commitment to SUNY students.