

Testimony of CWA 1104 GSEU
Graduate Students Employees Union
FY2027 NYS Budget: Higher Education
Tuesday, February 24, 2026

The Graduate Students Employees Union (GSEU) CWA Local 1104 represents approximately 5,000 graduate student employees at the State University of New York. SUNY employs these graduate students as teaching, graduate, and research assistants. Their duties range from teaching courses, grading exams, and papers, to conducting laboratory research. **This testimony is submitted in support of:**

- 1) Including Senate Bill S9034A in the FY27 budget, which would codify the commitment to phase out mandatory broad-based fees for graduate student employees serving a minimum of a half-time appointment in the SUNY and CUNY system.**

- 2) Expanding the currently proposed tuition freeze to include graduate students and international students.**

In 2022, graduate student workers won a commitment to fund phasing out mandatory broad-based fees for SUNY graduate workers and have successfully received \$3 million in FY24, \$6 million in FY25, and \$9 million in FY26. We thank the legislature for honoring this commitment and putting graduate student workers on the path toward more financial security. However, we want to ensure graduate student workers are protected in perpetuity by codifying this commitment in statute.

This labor performed by graduate student workers is vital to the function of SUNY. Many classes are actually taught by graduate student workers. In fact, at Stony Brook University, an independent audit found that 60% of instruction was performed by graduate students. Additionally, graduate student workers are the backbone of innovation and cutting-edge research. Yet, despite their key role in the education and the economy of New York state, they face dire financial challenges.

A major contributor to this economic hardship is compulsory fees. In addition to tuition, SUNY schools charge their students fees. Both undergraduate and graduate students are subject to these fees, charged at regular points throughout the academic year. In recent years, the cost of these fees has risen steadily alongside

tuition at public colleges and universities in the U.S. The increase in fees is a financial response to the problem of inadequate state funding for public higher education. Fees function as backdoor tuition for public universities to circumvent state-imposed tuition caps and sustain their operating costs.

Graduate student employees with full appointments are expected to work 20 hours per week for their departments and are compensated with an annual stipend and, in most cases, a tuition waiver. Yet they must still pay fees. For graduate student employees, fees effectively constitute a pay-to-work system. A substantial portion of graduate student income that would normally go towards paying rent, buying groceries or making car payments, must be paid back to their employer in the form of fees.

Because of the commitment made by the legislature in 2022, the situation has improved. However, we must ensure graduate students continue to see the phasing out of these exorbitant fees. Additionally, due to several grant cuts universities are facing from the federal government, this has drastically impacted the ability of graduate students to continue their careers. We should take all steps to protect this vulnerable group who conduct the research at public universities across our city and state.

The state higher education institutions cannot close their funding gaps on the backs of graduate student workers, who already struggle to pay for basic needs. These are supposed to be the next generation of scientists, educators, and thinkers. They are supposed to use their knowledge and training to drive future growth, innovation, and civic well-being. Yet they cannot do that working in poverty. We must codify the commitment to end this practice immediately.

We ask the committee to include language in the FY2027 budget that would codify the existing commitment to phase out these fees for graduate student workers, and freeze the cost of tuition for graduate and international students at public colleges across the state. This is the equitable solution to support the working students and families of New York. As you are members of the Higher Education Committees, we urge you to champion these issues and commit to ending the balancing of the budgets on the backs of our students.