



Testimony of Aaron Ray

President, Higher Education Opportunity Program Professional Organization (HEOPPO)

I submit this testimony on behalf of the Higher Education Opportunity Program Professional Organization (HEOPPO), the statewide association representing HEOP directors, associate and assistant directors, counselors, and practitioners across New York's independent colleges and universities. Our members work directly with thousands of economically disadvantaged, first-generation, and historically underrepresented students who rely on HEOP to access, persist in, and complete higher education.

We are deeply concerned by the Executive Budget proposal that includes a 6% reduction in HEOP funding. Such a cut would have immediate, measurable consequences for student access and success across New York State. HEOP is not an auxiliary or discretionary program. It is a foundational component of New York's higher education infrastructure and one of the state's most effective tools for advancing economic mobility and workforce development.

As federal education infrastructure is reduced or destabilized and responsibility increasingly shifts to the states, New York faces a defining moment. History has shown that when federal protections and investments recede, students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds bear the greatest risk. In this evolving landscape, HEOP is not supplemental. It is essential to state-level infrastructure. Strengthening it now is both a protective measure and a strategic investment in New York's future workforce and long-term economic stability.

HEOP's success is rooted in its comprehensive, evidence-based model. Programs provide intensive academic advising, tutoring, summer bridge programming, emergency financial support, career development, and holistic student support. These services significantly improve retention, graduation rates, and post-graduate outcomes for students who have historically been excluded from higher education.

It is important to underscore that HEOP does not exist because its students lack the ability to succeed at rigorous institutions. HEOP exists because access to educational opportunity in the United States has never been evenly distributed. The quality of a student's K-12 education can vary drastically depending on their school district,



geographic location, and family income. HEOP responds to these structural inequities by ensuring that talent, determination, and potential—not zip code—determine a student’s trajectory. Without programs like HEOP, students are too often left to internalize systemic inequities as personal inadequacy, which can manifest as imposter syndrome and undermine their persistence. HEOP interrupts that cycle. It affirms that these students belong, and it provides the tools and support necessary for them to thrive and contribute meaningfully to New York’s academic, civic, and economic life.

A funding reduction of this magnitude would directly result in students receiving less functional support, diminished academic and advising services, reduced summer program capacity, increased staff caseloads, and ultimately higher rates of student attrition. At a time when students and their families are facing rising costs of living, increasing mental health needs, and growing financial insecurity, reducing HEOP funding moves New York in the wrong direction.

Rather than cutting funding, HEOPPO urges the Legislature to support a 20% increase in HEOP funding. This increase is necessary to address years of underinvestment relative to program costs, keep pace with inflation, stabilize staffing, expand programming to eligible students currently being turned away, and strengthen program outcomes. It will also allow HEOP to better align with New York State’s workforce priorities in healthcare, education, STEM, and public service.

Since 1964, New York State has operated on the fundamental understanding that a thriving economy is inextricably linked to an educated and technically trained citizenry. Opportunity Programs are the mechanisms that ensure this promise extends to all New Yorkers. Without increased investment, we risk undermining the mission established by Percy Sutton and Dr. Alan Ballard, and carried forward by Arthur O. Eve—the commitment to the Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge as a pathway out of poverty and toward generational opportunity.

HEOP represents a strong return on investment for New York State. Graduates disproportionately remain in New York, contribute to the workforce, support their families, and reinvest in their communities. Few public investments produce comparable long-term economic and social impact.

As Governor Hochul has stated, an educated populace is the best defense against tyranny. HEOP operationalizes that belief every day.



For these reasons, we respectfully urge the Legislature to reject any proposed reduction to HEOP funding, restore and increase HEOP funding by at least 20%, and publicly affirm HEOP as essential infrastructure for New York's educational and economic future.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Aaron Ray'.

Aaron Ray

President

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