



**TESTIMONY OF THE
NEW YORK PUBLIC INTEREST RESEARCH GROUP
BEFORE THE
JOINT LEGISLATIVE BUDGET HEARING ON HIGHER EDUCATION
FOR THE 2026-2027 BUDGET
February 24, 2026
Albany, New York**

The New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG) is a statewide, nonpartisan, not-for-profit organization founded by college students in 1973 to engage their peers in civic life. NYPIRG's broad programmatic work provides students with a range of opportunities to participate in public affairs and advance responses to social problems that matter most to them. In collaboration with and guided by professional staff—researchers, organizers, advocates and attorneys—students tackle pressing issues while learning and developing professional-level skills that will boost their prospects for success in college, the job market and throughout their lives. Our Board of Directors consists of public and independent college and university students elected from campuses with NYPIRG chapters across the State.

First, NYPIRG thanks state lawmakers for the recent steps you've taken to modernize the Tuition Assistance Program by expanding income eligibility, increasing the minimum award, and expanding TAP for part-time students. Last year, you also restored the Governor's ill-considered cuts to opportunity programs.

Unfortunately, this year, the Governor's proposed Executive Budget does not include an increase in the maximum TAP award, nor does it re-establish TAP assistance for graduate students. The proposed budget does nothing to support New York's beleaguered independent college sector. And lastly, the Governor does propose to once again cut the state's successful opportunity programs.

We recommend that this year a significant infusion of support be injected into all sectors of the higher education system. Specific recommendations for the Legislature to advocate for in the final budget include:

- Provide more aid to alleviate the burden of current tuition and fee rates, including providing for the first 60 credits to be free for all public college students, and reforming financial aid programs like the Tuition Assistance Program to be able to cover non-tuition costs.
- Critical infrastructure repair funding across the CUNY and SUNY systems. The state needs to focus its capital investments on infrastructural repairs.
- Dramatically increase base aid support for CUNY and SUNY, including passage of the New Deal for CUNY and analogous funding for SUNY to protect the quality of public higher education.
- Building on the Governor's Opportunity Promise Program, we urge you to expand the program to include every CUNY and SUNY college or university that offers an associate's degree, and to

provide the free associate's degree to all majors and ages of students in the community college system, regardless of whether they have already attained a degree. A well-rounded society is buoyed by well-rounded higher education institutions, inclusive of high-demand majors and liberal arts education alike.

- Expand the Tuition Assistance Program to graduate students, increase the maximum awards to SUNY's tuition, expand the years awards are available from four to six years, make aid available in the summer and winter, and extend eligibility for students with intellectual disabilities in CTP programs.
- Restore cuts and enhance funding for Opportunity Programs.
- Restore Bundy Aid to at least the historical levels of \$100 million (adjusted for inflation, that amount would be over \$260 million today) for independent institutions.
- Expand funding for student support programs including mental health services, supporting the Free Student OMNY Card pilot program, and supporting universal childcare to benefit CUNY and SUNY childcare centers.

Over the Years: Underfunding Higher Education In New York

Decades of state neglect – and worse – have taken its toll on New York's higher education sector. Looking at the roll out of higher education policy named “NYSUNY 2020” in 2011, nearly constant hikes have raised tuition rates by more than 42%. When factoring inflation, the automatic tuition hikes at both SUNY and CUNY have far exceeded the growth in the economy. And while students and their families were asked to shoulder more of the tuition burden, the state did not keep up their end of the bargain to increase state funding.

In fact, policies passed under NYSUNY 2020 created widening gulfs between the financial needs of colleges and the funding levels provided by the State. For one example, prior to 2011, New York would increase the maximum TAP award to match the state's public college tuition. In this manner, the lowest income students would be protected from the impacts of tuition hikes. In addition, students attending independent colleges and universities would benefit from enhanced affordability by boosting TAP support. The state's NYSUNY 2020 law de-coupled the maximum TAP award from rising public college tuition rates and decreed that the colleges themselves would have to supplement financial assistance to the lowest income students. This hole – the “TAP Gap” – racked up many millions of dollars every year over the past decade before, laudably, the Governor and Legislature eliminated it in the FY2023 final budget. However, the financial damage caused by the prior years' gaps has not been restored, and without structural change to TAP reimbursements to colleges and universities, this Gap can reemerge.

The proposed Executive Budget does not adequately address a decade of neglect from the previous administration and the financial toll the pandemic took. The state should be creating a fund to help distressed campuses and increase the largely flat funding for SUNY and CUNY institutions. Not investing holistically in these campuses will only diminish student services and the unparalleled economic opportunity they create.

Institutions of Public Higher Education are Economic Development “Engines” that Produce Real Benefits, Unlike Many of the Highly Touted Projects that in Recent Years Have Produced Little Other than Scandal. The TAP program can play a central role in this investment.

In addition to boosting racial and economic equity, public higher education helps to strengthen the economy. It is one of the best vehicles to move New Yorkers to financial stability and grow the “middle class.” The research into the economic benefits of investing in higher education has been overwhelmingly positive. The successes are well-documented, but here are some highlights that show a significant return on investment (ROI):

- SUNY’s economic impact in New York State is \$31.0 billion. *For every \$1 invested in SUNY, New York State’s economy benefits the equivalent of \$8.67* and is responsible for nearly 2% of the gross state product.¹
- Approximately 296,000 New Yorkers are directly employed at a higher education institution in New York. Higher ed is responsible for \$27 billion in wages. Further, our colleges and universities engage in cutting edge research and development, spending \$8.3 billion on such activities in 2022.²
- CUNY graduates working in New York State earned a combined \$57 billion annually (\$67,000 on average) in 2019 – \$28.6 billion more than students would have earned without a post-secondary degree.³
- CUNY graduates working in New York paid an estimated \$4.2 billion in State income taxes in 2019.⁴ And the vast majority of CUNY graduates remain in New York State - five years after graduation, 85% of those who went to CUNY stayed in New York.⁵
- The average bachelor’s degree holder contributes \$278,000 more to local economies than the average high school graduate through direct spending over the course of a lifetime; and an associate’s degree holder contributes \$81,000 more than a high school graduate.⁶
- Five years post-graduation, 85% of graduates from the City University of New York (CUNY), 70% of those from the State University of New York (SUNY), and 65% of graduates from private colleges remain in New York State.⁷

Community Colleges are also prime examples of what economic development should look like. Research from experts like economist Tim Bartik has shown that **community college workforce education** is one of the most cost-effective ways for governments to create jobs and grow the economy, especially in comparison to giving money away to businesses via tax abatements, grants, and other forms of business subsidies.⁸

New York State and its local governments currently spend about \$10 billion annually on a broad array of economic development programs, largely benefiting big businesses, with results that leave much to be desired. It’s time for New York to begin to redefine “economic development” as improving the quality of life for regular New Yorkers and challenge traditional tax abatement and corporate subsidy style economic stimulus. The state and local governments need to realize that true economic development is about

¹ Rockefeller Institute of Government, “The Economic Impact of the State University of New York, Academic Year 2020” <https://rockinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/SUNY-Economic-Report-AY2020.pdf>.

² New York State Comptroller. “Economic Impact: Higher Education.” September 2024. <https://www.osc.ny.gov/files/reports/pdf/higher-education-economic-impact.pdf>

³ Comptroller Stringer Analysis: CUNY Graduates Earn Combined \$57 Billion Annually, Highlighting CUNY’s Significant Contributions to Local and State Economies. <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/newsroom/comptroller-stringer-analysis-cuny-graduates-earn-combined-57-billion-annually-highlighting-cunys-significant-contributions-to-local-and-state-economies/>.

⁴ Comptroller Stringer Analysis: CUNY Graduates Earn Combined \$57 Billion Annually, Highlighting CUNY’s Significant Contributions to Local and State Economies. <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/newsroom/comptroller-stringer-analysis-cuny-graduates-earn-combined-57-billion-annually-highlighting-cunys-significant-contributions-to-local-and-state-economies/>.

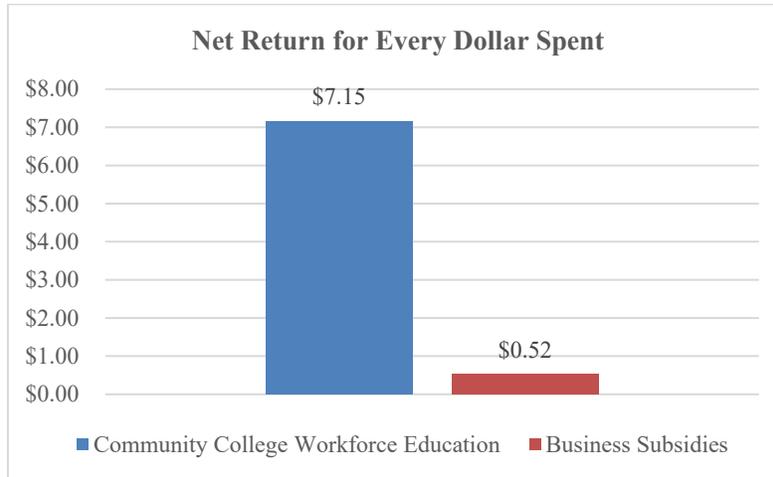
⁵ New York State Comptroller. “Economic Impact: Higher Education.” September 2024. <https://www.osc.ny.gov/files/reports/pdf/higher-education-economic-impact.pdf>

⁶ Rothwell, Jonathan. “What colleges do for local economies: A direct measure based on consumption.” *Brookings*, July 28, 2016, www.brookings.edu/research/what-colleges-do-for-local-economies-a-direct-measure-based-on-consumption/.

⁷ New York State Comptroller. “Economic Impact: Higher Education.” September 2024. <https://www.osc.ny.gov/files/reports/pdf/higher-education-economic-impact.pdf>

⁸ Bartik, 2019 <https://reinventalbany.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Workforce-Development-Everybody-Says-They-Love-It.-But-What-Is-It-November-2022.pdf>.

investments in public goods like childcare, K-12 and higher education, the public workforce, homecare, and affordable housing. These investments benefit individuals, families, workers, businesses, and the overall economic health of local communities. *The state should be investing a portion of these billions of dollars in higher education rather than continuing to support programs that simply do not produce the results they claim to.*⁹



State investments in SUNY and CUNY may lack the “razzle dazzle” of highly touted economic development projects, but they deliver solid results. Day in and day out these institutions power New York’s economy and often are the lifeblood of the communities in which they reside. As a former Governor once commented, the “days of wine and roses are over.” In the 21st Century, policymakers must demand that the “days of risky economic development programs are over.” It’s time to focus on investing in programs that work. Invest in human capital through higher education by putting SUNY and CUNY at the top of that list.

The State University of New York: A Powerful Economic Development Engine

When policymakers think about economic development, they should be thinking in terms of job creation, return on investment (ROI) and stemming the outmigration of residents from the state. SUNY and CUNY not only create jobs, but they also create substantial tax revenues and keep students in New York well after they graduate. This provides the state with a skilled labor force, which is one of the most important aspects of what businesses look for when they choose where to locate.

According to a 2024 report from the Rockefeller Institute of Government, SUNY is a key driver of the New York State economic engine. *SUNY’s economic impact in New York State in the 2020-21 academic year was \$31.0 billion, which represents an eight percent growth in overall state economic impact since 2016.*¹⁰

The SUNY system educates approximately 468,000 students¹¹, employs 72,185 faculty and staff, and has an operating budget of \$12.95 billion in revenues. To put this in perspective, if SUNY were a private company, it would be among the ten largest employers in New York State. The SUNY system includes

⁹ Chart source, New Yorkers for Fiscal Fairness

¹⁰ Rockefeller Institute of Government, “The Economic Impact of the State University of New York, Academic Year 2020” <https://rockinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/SUNY-Economic-Report-AY2020.pdf>.

¹¹ “About SUNY,” The State University of New York, accessed February 10, 2026, <https://www.suny.edu/about/about-suny/>.

community colleges, four-year colleges, graduate and research centers, medical schools and hospitals, a law school, and significant commercialization activities. SUNY provides a powerful economic stimulus:

- **157,600** direct and indirect jobs (72,185 full and part time SUNY employees and 85,415 jobs indirectly supported).
- **Thirty-four percent** of the educated workforce in New York have a degree from SUNY.¹²

The City University of New York: A Powerful Economic Development Engine

According to an April 2024 report from the New York City Comptroller,¹³ State support for CUNY results in a powerful economic stimulus:

- **85 percent** of CUNY graduates stay working and paying taxes in New York State for at least 5 years after graduation.
- CUNY employs over **40,000 New Yorkers** in well-paying, career path jobs.
- On average, a CUNY associate's degree holder receives **67 percent** higher earnings than their peers with only a high school diploma, and a CUNY bachelor's degree holder earns **106 percent** more.

Now is the Time to Dramatically Strengthen Investments in Higher Education:

The state gets such a high return on investment that it makes no sense to shortchange investment in SUNY, CUNY, and independent institutions. If the state wants to stem the tide of working-class people leaving New York, it needs to invest more resources in higher education as graduates tend to stay and work in the state – making significant financial contributions to the economy. Additionally, according to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, positions requiring higher education are projected to increase by 5.5 percent from 2022 to 2032. New York State must educate these students to fill the positions that will be available in the economy.¹⁴

SUNY and CUNY provide job training in areas where there is great demand for workers (nursing and healthcare, technology, agriculture, and teachers, to name but a few). New York's community colleges also provide superior job training with a significant return on investment. The state needs to ensure that it invests appropriate resources in higher education to continue to train the workforce of tomorrow.

The average bachelor's degree holder contributes \$273,000 more to local economies than the average high school graduate through direct spending over the course of a lifetime.¹⁵ Private, not-for-profit colleges and universities contribute an estimated \$97 billion to New York's economy, based on 2022-23 data.¹⁶

Recommendation: The State Must Dramatically Increase Base Aid Support for CUNY and SUNY, including passage of the New Deal for CUNY and analogous funding for SUNY

¹² Rockefeller Institute of Government, "The Economic Impact of the State University of New York, Academic Year 2020" <https://rockinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/SUNY-Economic-Report-AY2020.pdf>.

¹³ New York City Comptroller, Brad Lander "Spotlight - CUNY and the New York City Economy," April 9, 2024, https://comptroller.nyc.gov/wp-content/uploads/documents/Spotlight_CUNY-and-the-New-York-Economy_0424.pdf.

¹⁴ New York State Comptroller. "Economic Impact: Higher Education." September 2024. <https://www.osc.ny.gov/files/reports/pdf/higher-education-economic-impact.pdf>.

¹⁵ Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, "How do college graduates benefit society at large?," https://www.aplu.org/our-work/4-policy-and-advocacy/public-values/societal-benefits/#:~:text=Key%20Takeaways%20*%20Compared%20with%20individuals%20whose,a%20high%20school%20graduates%20over%20a%20lifetime.

¹⁶ Commission on Independent Colleges and Universities, "Economic Impact of New York's Independent Colleges and Universities on the State's Economy," <https://cicu.org/economic-community-impact>.

Given the importance of New York's higher education sector – both in terms of educating the next generation as well as providing an economic stimulus to local communities – it's hard to imagine revitalizing these important entities without significant additional state support. The state must provide funding to make up for revenues lost from enrollment declines and that addresses the decade of disinvestment that preceded the pandemic.

Budget shortfalls at SUNY and CUNY campuses have led to hiring freezes, staff layoffs, department elimination, and the erosion of student services and quality of education. Students have experienced firsthand difficulty in getting into the classes they need to graduate, limited services such as library hours, and advisement gaps across the CUNY and SUNY system. For example, SUNY ESF is facing devastating cuts to its graduate program and needs strong investment in order to stave off potential layoffs and to continue providing quality education to its students.

New Deal for CUNY legislation would support CUNY students by phasing out tuition, setting better student-to-teacher ratios so that students can get the classes they need to graduate and receive adequate individual attention, and increasing the ratio of students-to-mental health counselors. The need for added mental health resources at college campuses could not be clearer. With limited counselors on campus, students may experience long wait-times for services or difficulty being connected to other resources. Analogous funding for SUNY campuses is also needed to reduce the tuition burden and support student services like more class offerings, better advisement, and more mental health services.

The Legislature should increase senior college operating budgets and pass the New Deal for CUNY legislation and analogous funding for SUNY. The Legislature should also provide more aid to alleviate the burden of current tuition and fee rates, including providing for the first 60 credits to be free for all students and reforming financial aid programs like the Tuition Assistance Program to be able to cover non-tuition costs.

Recommendation: The State Should Increase Funding for Bundy Aid for the Independent Sector

Originally designed to uphold the strength and vitality of independent institutions of higher education,¹⁷ Bundy Aid once stood as a testament to the state's promise. Today, New York State's independent higher education sector employs 65% of the state's higher education workforce, contributing \$33 billion in payroll impact.¹⁸ As a result, New York ranks second only to California in higher education employment across public, independent, and for-profit institutions. However, cuts to Bundy Aid reduced the state's total investment in independent higher education by 52%, resulting in an \$18.4 million loss for these institutions.¹⁹ Given that Bundy Aid is the only operating aid that Independent Sector campuses receive, this cut has impacted over 236,000 students.²⁰ **To address this setback, we urge an increase in Bundy Aid to at least its historical level of \$100 million, which, when adjusted for inflation, would exceed \$260 million today, for independent institutions.**

¹⁷ New York State Education Department, New York State Bundy Aid Program, 1969-1981: A Historical Report on New York State Colleges and Universities Receiving State Aid Under Section 6401 of the Education Law (Albany, NY: Cultural Education Center, December 1981).

¹⁸ The Commission on Independent Colleges and Universities, Economic Impact of New York State's Independent Sector, <https://www.cicu.org/data-and-research/>.

¹⁹ The Commission on Independent Colleges and Universities, Stand Up for Student Aid: Restore FY 2025 Cuts to Bundy Aid, Fiscal Year 2024-2025, <https://www.cicu.org/>.

²⁰ National Center for Education Statistics, College Navigator, U.S. Department of Education, accessed February 13, 2025, <https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>.

Recommendation: Boost State Support For Community Colleges

Community colleges are facing continued fragile financial circumstances yet are vital to the state's economy. The job training and re-training for under-employed and unemployed workers provided by community colleges is critical as New Yorkers look to a post-COVID future. To that end, last year the Governor enacted free tuition for first time community college students ages 25-55 for certain majors in specific high demand fields. This year the Governor is proposing a modest expansion of the program; however, it does not go far enough to ensure that all New Yorkers have access to an affordable associate's degree. While community colleges certainly provide needed job training, and support for that is worthwhile, higher education is not reducible to such training. Academic disciplines disfavored by particular employers should not be a luxury for those who can afford it. So, instead of tipping the scales in favor of specific fields and further squeezing the humanities, **we urge that the final budget agreement offer this program to students regardless of which major they choose, their age and whether or not they already possess a degree.**

The State's Tuition Assistance Program

For five decades, New York State's Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) has been the way of directing financial aid to the neediest students in both the public and independent college sectors. In its first academic year (1974), the program offered \$1,500 for the neediest students to cover tuition. While the \$1,500 was more than the maximum public tuition charged at the State University²¹ and the City University²² of New York, the goal at that time also was to help stabilize the costs of attending college in the independent (private) college sector. At that time, the existing state support for independent colleges and universities covered only 22% of private tuition (the maximum state financial aid award to a private college student prior to TAP was \$600). The goal of the then-new TAP assistance was to boost that support to cover half of independent college tuition for the neediest students.²³

Today, the maximum TAP award does not cover public college tuition²⁴ and comes nowhere near half of the tuition costs for independent colleges.²⁵ Add to that the significant additional fees charged at public institutions, which are not covered by TAP, and books and housing, it's easy to see how college has become increasingly out-of-reach – unless loans are taken out.

A lot has changed on college campuses since the early 1970s. A college degree is far more necessary than it was five decades ago.²⁶ Today's college students are older, more likely to be female, and far more diverse than in 1974.²⁷ Also, a lot more students must work to afford college (in addition to the increased debts).²⁸

²¹ Tuition at the SUNY 1974 <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED119552.pdf>.

²² Tuition at the CUNY 1974 <https://cunytime.wordpress.com/quick-facts/cuny-tuition/>.

²³ Higher Education Services Corporation, "Appendix E: New York's Tuition Assistance Program - A History," <https://www.hesc.ny.gov/partner-access/financial-aid-professionals/programs-policies-and-procedures-guide-to-grants-and-scholarship-programs/appendix-e-new-york-s-tuition-assistance-program-a-history.html>.

²⁴ Current SUNY tuition, "Tuition and Fees," <https://www.suny.edu/smartrack/tuition-and-fees/>.

²⁵ College Tuition Compare, "2023 Average Tuition of colleges in New York is \$9,187 for Residents and \$18,639 for Others," February 27, 2023, <https://www.collegetuitioncompare.com/articles/average-cost-of-college-in-new-york/>.

²⁶ Hanford, E., "The Value of a College Degree," American Public Media, <https://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/tomorrows-college/dropouts/value-of-college-degree.html>.

²⁷ Education Data Initiative, "College Enrollment & Student Demographic Statistics," October 1, 2023, <https://educationdata.org/college-enrollment-statistics>.

²⁸ Intelligent.com, "1970 vs. 2020: How Working Through College Has Changed," November 12, 2021, <https://www.intelligent.com/1970-v-2020-how-working-through-college-has-changed/>.

Two years ago, Governor Hochul and state lawmakers took significant steps to modernize and strengthen the program to fit the needs of *today's* college students. Last year, the final budget included expansion of TAP for part-time students. Yet there are still steps to be taken to ensure that college students – both undergraduate and graduate – are adequately assisted and that it be done in a way that will help stabilize both public and independent colleges in New York.

Recommendation: Support Education Equity by Overhauling the Tuition Assistance Program for the Modern Student

New York State's Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) is a generous program that commits the state to aid the neediest college students – both in public and independent institutions. It is TAP that offers “free tuition” to the vast bulk of college students attending public college and contributes to the affordability of attending independent colleges and universities. In the 50 plus years of TAP, the program has helped over six million New Yorkers afford college.²⁹ But a lot has changed since the program's founding in 1974, and TAP is behind the times and student loan debt is reaching a crisis level: 2.4 million New Yorkers now hold outstanding student loans.³⁰ Updating it would have significant social and economic benefits.

TAP should be realigned with the needs of the students and families of today. It should cover more of the cost of tuition for those who qualify and be flexible enough to meet the needs of all types of New Yorkers, not just the “traditional” straight-from-high-school-to-college full-time student that it was initially designed to serve.

Graduate Education

The growing importance of obtaining a graduate education has been well documented. Those with graduate degrees often earn more and thus pay more in taxes. The median usual weekly earnings for full-time workers over the age of 25 with bachelor's degrees was \$1,334 in 2021, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data. Weekly earnings went up to \$1,574 for master's degree holders, \$1,909 for those with a doctoral degree and \$1,924 for workers with a professional degree.³¹ One of the key obstacles to attending graduate school is cost.³²

College costs are a significant barrier to enrolling in higher education, according to a report from Gallup and the Lumina Foundation.³³ The report found that college costs are one of the top three factors driving current college students to consider withdrawing. The report found that:

- “Thirty-two percent of current college students reported they had thought about “stopping out” — or withdrawing for at least one term – in the past six months. The trend is particularly pronounced

²⁹ New York State, “Governor Hochul Celebrates Historic Expansion of Tuition Assistance Program,” May 3, 2024, <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-hochul-celebrates-historic-expansion-tuition-assistance-program#:~:text=CICU%20President%20Lola%20W.,attend%20and%20graduate%20from%20college.>

³⁰ U.S. Senator Schumer, “Schumer Announces Plan To Immediately Cancel Up To \$50,000 In Student Loan Debt Per Student Across Upstate NY; With 2.4 Million New Yorkers Owing Almost \$90 Billion, Senator Leads Charge To Take Immediate Action In 2021 To Attack Student Debt Crisis,” September, 2020, <https://www.schumer.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/schumer-announces-plan-to-immediately-cancel-up-to-50000-in-student-loan-debt-per-student-across-upstate-ny-with-24-million-new-yorkers-owing-almost-90-billion-senator-leads-charge-to-take-immediate-action-in-2021-to-attack-student-debt-crisis.>

³¹ Claybourn, C., “3 Ways Graduate School Pays Off, An advanced degree can be a smart fiscal and career move, experts say,” US News and World Report, January 12, 2023, <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-graduate-schools/articles/3-ways-graduate-school-pays-off.>

³² Graduate Programs for Educators, “Graduate School Challenges and Powering Through,” September 29, 2023, [https://www.graduateprogram.org/2023/09/graduate-school-challenges-and-powering-through/.](https://www.graduateprogram.org/2023/09/graduate-school-challenges-and-powering-through/)

³³ Gallup, Lumina Foundation, “The State of Higher Education 2025 Report,” 2025, <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/644939/state-of-higher-education.aspx> .

among Black, Hispanic, and male students. Students with caretaking responsibilities and students struggling to pay bills are the most likely groups to consider stopping out.

- For students who have stopped out, the number one reason cited is the cost of their program.³⁴
- In a separate report from Gallup and Lumina, only 18% of adults without a college degree thought tuition for a four-year degree was fair.³⁵

There is no doubt that college costs have risen over time. Still, the Gallup and Lumina survey shows affordability continues to play a key role both in whether adults decide to enroll and whether students can remain in school.

And yet, 60% of jobs today require some type of education after high school. Barriers to enrolling and completing a college credential have ripple effects for individuals, who may be less likely to find stable, decent-paying jobs without degrees, as well as for communities and the economy at large, which will struggle without enough qualified workers.³⁶

NYPIRG urges the Legislature to fix TAP by:

- Re-extending TAP eligibility to graduate students.
- Increase the maximum TAP award to the same level as SUNY tuition (which would also eliminate the “TAP Gap”).
- Extending eligibility for students with Intellectual Disabilities in CTP programs.
- Increase the number of semesters of TAP eligibility for all students, recognizing that most students take longer than four years to complete a baccalaureate degree, and allow for summer and winter TAP awards.
- End the \$100 per-year cut to students’ TAP grants in their last two years of school.
- Restore eligibility for TAP to students in default on federal student loans.

Recommendation: Enhance Opportunity Programs

Opportunity programs, which are designed for educationally and economically disadvantaged students, have a steady track record of success in increasing retention and graduation rates among the most at-risk students. New York State has several opportunity programs: Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge (SEEK), Linking Employment, Academics, and Disability Services (CUNY LEADS), Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP), College Discovery (CD), and others. These programs take a comprehensive approach to college access and affordability by building in academic counseling, mentoring, and often providing waivers for related costs such as transit, textbooks, and childcare.

SUNY’s EOP provides access, academic support, and supplemental financial assistance to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, many of them the first in their families to attend college. According to SUNY, graduation and retention rates of Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) students compare favorably to that of the general student population at comparable schools.³⁷ The six-year graduation rate for EOP

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Gallup, Lumina Foundation, “Bridging the Gap: Insights on Cost and Value of a College Degree,” 2025. <https://www.presbyteriancolleges.org/wp-content/uploads/Lumina-Foundation-Gallup-Bridging-the-Gap-Report.pdf>

³⁶ Cagnassola, M. “Here Are the 10 Fastest-Growing Jobs for Workers With (and Without) College Degrees,” Money Magazine, April 12, 2023, https://money.com/fastest-growing-entry-level-jobs/?xid=nasdaq&utm_source=nasdaq&utm_medium=rss_synd&ref=%2Fcollege-costs-enrollment-survey%2F.

³⁷ State University of New York’s Office of Opportunity Programs, <http://system.suny.edu/oop/>.

students is 74%,³⁸ whereas the SUNY-wide senior college rate is 65% – similar results exist for opportunity programs found in the independent sector.³⁹

CUNY’s ASAP assists students in earning associate’s degrees within three years by providing a range of financial, academic, and personal support including comprehensive and personalized advisement, career counseling, tutoring, waivers for tuition and mandatory fees, OMNY Cards, and additional financial assistance to defray the cost of textbooks. ASAP also offers special class scheduling options to ensure that ASAP students get the classes they need, are in classes with other ASAP students, and attend classes in convenient blocks of time to accommodate their work schedules. As students approach graduation, they receive special support to help them transfer to 4-year colleges or transition into the workforce, depending on their goals. Graduation rates for ASAP students are more than double that of their peers who are not enrolled in these programs.⁴⁰ **The Legislature should support Opportunity Program funding by restoring \$2.6 million, plus an additional \$17.5M in the final state budget.**

Recommendation: Invest in Critical Infrastructure Repairs for SUNY and CUNY

SUNY’s capital funding needs came into sharper focus earlier this month when a boiler failed at SUNY Purchase, shutting off heat to academic buildings and forcing classes to go remote for days.⁴¹ Multiple SUNY schools are in need of critical repairs to buildings and heating systems. SUNY Chancellor John King has said that the system has a \$10 billion backlog in critical repairs, which at the current rate of funding, would take decades to complete.⁴² The situation is no different for our CUNY system. According to CUNY’s five-year capital plan, CUNY identified 27,000 systems in need of repair, with a cost of around \$7 billion.⁴³ The legislature should provide both SUNY and CUNY with the necessary funding needed to bring their facilities into a state of good repair.

Recommendation: Expand funding for student support programs including mental health services, supporting the Free Student OMNY Card pilot program, and supporting universal childcare to benefit CUNY and SUNY childcare centers.

Mental Health Services: With 1 in 3 college students experiencing depression or anxiety⁴⁴, it is critical that college campuses offer mental health support. Lack of resources like mental health counseling interferes with students obtaining their degree. Student support services have struggled to keep up with the needs of today’s students. Whether it is grief counseling or help needed for juggling classes, work, and other responsibilities, students are struggling to schedule appointments with mental health experts on campus when they need them most.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ SUNY Fast Facts, <https://www.suny.edu/about/fast-facts>.

⁴⁰ CUNY ASAP and ACE Fast Facts, https://www.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/media-assets/CUNY-ASAP-and-ACE-Fast-Facts_Nov25.pdf.

⁴¹ News 12 Hudson Valley, “Boiler breakdown disrupts heat on SUNY Purchase campus,” February 6, 2026. <https://hudsonvalley.news12.com/boiler-breakdown-disrupts-heat-on-suny-purchase-campus>

⁴² Times Union, “No heat, leaking pipes, old roofs: SUNY chancellor says \$10B in repairs needed,” February 6, 2026. <https://www.timesunion.com/education/article/state-university-ny-campus-need-10b-critical-21335560.php>.

⁴³ The City University of New York Five-Year Capital Improvement Plan, <https://www.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/page-assets/about/administration/offices/fpcm/Complete-Book-Request-2.pdf>

⁴⁴ A Mowreader, “Only One-Third of College Students Have Positive Mental Health,” Inside Higher Ed, September 11, 2025, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/health-wellness/2025/09/11/college-student-mental-health-remains-poor-minority>.

Currently CUNY only has one mental health advisor for every 2,700 students.⁴⁵ Students struggle to schedule appointments with counselors, sometimes having to wait weeks or months to get an appointment.

Students also struggle to receive proper advisement to be able to graduate on time. Students have run into trouble with long wait times and miscommunication when trying to schedule appointments with advisors to enroll in classes needed to graduate. To remedy these issues students are facing and more, **NYPIRG calls for the Legislature to support the passage of the New Deal for CUNY legislation (S.2274 and A.1727) and analogous funding to SUNY** to, among other things, fund enough mental health counselors to meet the ratio recommended by the International Accreditation of Counseling Services of one advisor for every 1,000 full time students.

Student Transit Fares: In a city like New York, mass transit defines where you live, where you play, and where you go to school. It is the great equalizer of opportunity and why accessible, affordable, and safe transportation is so important. For New York City's college students, affording an OMNY tap can be the difference between earning a degree or dropping out altogether. A survey by the Center for an Urban Future found that affording transit was the biggest financial barrier cited by students and advisors when discussing college costs. Acknowledging the importance of mass transit to education equity, New York City's K-12 students receive free Student OMNY cards, yet that resource doesn't exist for higher education. And with housing and food cost increases outpacing wage growth in the City, the need to address transit affordability to support educational attainment could not be more pressing. **NYPIRG urges the Legislature to support expansions to students of MTA fare discounts like Fair Fares and support the CUNY University Student Senate (USS) Free OMNY Card Student Commuter Grant Pilot Program).**

Campus Childcare: CUNY and SUNY childcare centers are a unique and powerful tool for socioeconomic mobility in New York City. The cost of childcare can be a significant barrier toward accessing a degree. According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research, just 8 percent of single mothers who enroll in college graduate with an associate's or bachelor's degree within six years, compared with 49 percent of women students who are not mothers.⁴⁶ Single mothers with only a high school diploma are over three times as likely to live in poverty as single mothers with a bachelor's degree.⁴⁷ It's unsurprising that access to affordable child care increases degree completion rates. Universal childcare in New York State would provide a lifeline for student-parents at CUNY and SUNY.

In conclusion, New York's economy relies on strong CUNY, SUNY, and independent colleges, but these institutions and financial aid programs need additional state funding to make it happen. In order to provide a quality and affordable higher education for all New Yorkers, the state must commit itself to substantially increasing public funding this year and modernizing existing financial aid programs to meet students' needs.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

⁴⁵ Professional Staff Congress - CUNY, Executive Budget Testimony, February 4, 2020
<https://nyassembly.gov/write/upload/publichearing/001101/002253.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Institute for Women's Policy Research, "Investing in Single Mothers' Higher Education: Costs and Benefits to Individuals, Families, and Society." <https://iwpr.org/publications/investing-single-mothers-higher-ed/>.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*