

PROFESSIONAL STAFF CONGRESS/CUNY

TESTIMONY

**EXECUTIVE BUDGET:
THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK, FY 2022**

**JOINT HEARING:
NY STATE SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE
ASSEMBLY WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE**

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TESTIMONY OF THE PROFESSIONAL STAFF CONGRESS/CUNY

Good afternoon, Senate Chairpersons Krueger and Stavisky, Assembly Chairpersons Weinstein and Glick. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to testify today, and thank you for your continued support for public higher education.

Weeks before the pandemic hit last March, the Legislature was poised to make significant new investments in public higher education. Then the world changed. New York State moved to an emergency budget, and many of the initiatives of last spring were put on hold. But both houses of the Legislature, with your leadership, demonstrated last year that New York can make increased funding of CUNY and SUNY a priority. We urge you to build on that momentum in Fiscal Year 2022. And this year much more will be demanded of you. You have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to change the course of history in New York State—by restoring fair taxation and reversing the policies of austerity. On behalf of the 30,000 members of the PSC, I call on you to aim high.

Aiming high will mean passing substantial new revenue-raisers and refusing to accept that even the best case imagined in the Executive Budget represents success. New York State is structurally underfunded because of a failure to maintain truly progressive taxation. For CUNY, the State budget scenario that includes the full \$15 billion in federal funds would mean a return to overcrowded classrooms, inadequate staffing, crumbling buildings and dangerously low student support. The budget the Governor presented, assuming \$6 billion in federal support, delivers major cuts to CUNY. And the State has been quietly cutting CUNY funding all year, under the banner of “withholding” 20 percent of funds and freezing raises.

The PSC joins the Governor in the demand for \$15 billion in federal funds to close the current budget gap, and we will work aggressively to support passage of the full \$1.9 trillion federal relief bill. But I want to be clear: a return to pre-COVID fiscal “normal” would be devastating for CUNY. “Normal” was killing CUNY, and I would say was designed to kill CUNY, just as “normal” systemic racism was suffocating and designed to suffocate our students. The way to create a different future for CUNY and New York is to reject austerity and enact new investments.

The PSC calls on you to:

- 1) **Fund the initial elements of a visionary new investment in CUNY: The New Deal for CUNY.**
- 2) **Raise revenue for New York State by passing the six Invest in Our New York bills.**
- 3) **Undo the damage in this year’s CUNY funding—the 20-percent “withholding” of funds and the freeze on contractual raises.**
- 4) **Reject the cuts to CUNY proposed in the Executive Budget.**

5) Support us in demanding that the CUNY administration use federal stimulus funds to protect classes, students and jobs that have been imperiled by the pandemic.

History shows us that at times of crisis governments must not be timid in their response. The current crisis, like the Great Depression, demands visionary solutions, not defensive austerity. The pandemic has provided ample proof that hollowing out public institutions and services through successive cuts and flat budgets is literally fatal. Fortunately, the solution is within reach, and New Yorkers support it by overwhelming margins: increased revenue. We urge you not to waste that support.

The linchpin of the FY 2022 budget must be increased revenue through fair taxation. The members of the PSC call on you to pass the six revenue bills supported by the Invest in Our New York coalition. We urge you to refuse to pass a budget that fails to increase revenue substantially and restore progressive taxation. The wealth of the rich is created by working people. The rich and their corporations must not be shielded from paying their fair share. Make this the year in which you increase New York’s revenue, invest in a turnaround for CUNY, and repudiate the “normal” that has been slowly crushing CUNY to death.

“Normal” has also been crushing Black and brown New Yorkers. The report recently released by The Center for an Urban Future provides devastating evidence New York City already has gaping disparities in college attainment by race. “Just 20 percent of Hispanic New Yorkers, 27 percent of Black New Yorkers, and 45 percent of Asian New Yorkers hold a bachelor’s degree, compared to 64 percent of white New Yorkers,” the report states.¹ The disparities within neighborhoods are even more shocking. In Jackson Heights, Queens, while only 11 percent of Hispanic residents hold a bachelor's degree, the rate is 58 percent for white residents. In Bushwick, in Brooklyn, 71 percent of white residents have a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 24.5 percent of Black residents and 14 percent of Hispanic residents. These disparities come at a time when the city’s economy is increasingly bifurcated, according to the report. The economy has produced “a large number of low-wage jobs that were accessible to individuals without a college credential and a smaller number of higher-wage jobs that mainly went to those with at least a bachelor’s degree.” The pandemic has made the trend worse.

New York City and State are clearly failing if the agenda is to support public education as a means to reduce inequalities of race, ethnicity and class. This year’s budget provides an opportunity to take an important step in creating a more just and inclusive economy; that step should start with CUNY.

The reasons for inequalities are complex, and they cannot be solved without systemic change. But many could be dramatically relieved by ensuring that CUNY is free, fully funded and a

¹ [Building an Inclusive Economy in NYC: Boosting College Attainment](#), Center for an Urban Future, January 2021.

welcoming intellectual home for New Yorkers of all races and ethnicities. This year, the PSC, as part of a student/labor/community coalition, has developed groundbreaking legislation that will go a long way toward addressing such inequalities: The New Deal for CUNY. The legislation, which will be launched tomorrow, demonstrates that there is a compelling and fiscally sound path to making CUNY tuition-free while at the same time restoring staffing and student support to the levels any students need. Join us tomorrow at the launch—but more important, join us in reimagining what the nation’s largest urban university, the people’s university, could be.

I am proud to join my colleagues from NYSUT and UUP to urge that now is the time to fight for fully funded public higher education. If the public colleges and universities are forced to remain on their current starvation diet, New York’s economic recovery will be slow, partial and racist. The priorities enacted in Albany and City Hall this year and next will set a generational course for the state and for CUNY. History will judge us by how we used the power we had in this moment, however limited, to respond to the crises of public health, economic collapse and systemic racism. I am calling on you—and on all of us—not to fail. One sure way to do that is to embrace the proposals for new revenue and support an investment that empowers CUNY to address racism and inequity.

Raise Revenue by Ending Tax Breaks for the Rich

Demand is growing across the state for an end to the unfair tax system that left New York, the first epicenter of the virus in this country, fatally unprepared for a public health crisis—which also became an education crisis, a housing crisis, a transportation crisis. PSC stands in support of the six revenue bills being advanced by [Invest in Our New York](#). Together, they would end tax breaks for the rich and raise approximately \$50 billion a year for New York.

Nothing is more central to this year’s budget than enacting new, redistributive tax revenue measures that will allow the State to narrow the inequalities broadened by COVID-19. The terrible experience of the pandemic has shown how much New York’s tax breaks for the rich have cost. They left our public hospitals scrambling for ventilators; healthcare workers exposed to illness and death because of a lack of protective equipment; the housing crisis exacerbated; our public schools without the resources needed to support vulnerable students in this crisis; and our public universities desperate for the resources just to allow students to continue their education.

High up on the list of needs being embraced by the entire coalition supporting the package of six bills is \$2 billion for CUNY and SUNY; there is recognition throughout the state that investment in public colleges and universities is essential to the wellbeing of the entire population. The resources that would be freed up by the new revenue bills would provide a lifeline for CUNY and our students, not only restoring academic programs, but supporting the services CUNY

students rely on—essential housing, health and nutritional programs (15% of students reported that they were often or sometimes hungry in a 2018 survey).²

Governors Roosevelt, Lehman, Rockefeller, and Paterson all supported tax hikes on the wealthy when the state faced great economic peril to protect or lesson cuts to critical public services. And in the aftermath of 9/11, Governor Pataki’s veto of a tax hike on the wealthiest five percent of New Yorkers was overridden by a Legislature working to prevent layoffs and cuts to schools and healthcare.³ One hundred eighteen New York billionaires increased their wealth by nearly 15 percent in just the first three months of the pandemic.⁴ New York cannot rely solely on taxing billionaires to restore fair taxation, but a fair and progressive tax increase on their enormous wealth must be part of the solution.

- Progressive Income Tax (S2622), \$12 billion
- Billionaires’ Tax, \$23 billion
- Capital Gains Tax (S2522/A03152), \$7 billion
- Wall Street Tax, \$12 billion
- Heirs’ Tax, \$8 billion
- Corporate Tax, \$9 billion

We also applaud Senator Krueger and Assemblymember Peoples-Stokes for ensuring that the Marijuana Regulation and Taxation Act (S854/A1248) addresses the harm to Black and brown communities caused by the racist implementation of drug laws through the Community Grants Reinvestment Fund.

Enact the New Deal for CUNY and Make Initial Investments This Year

Tomorrow will see the launch of landmark legislation sponsored by Senator Andrew Gounardes and Assemblymember Karines Reyes: The New Deal for CUNY. The PSC invites you to join these legislators as co-sponsors and to pass the legislation this year for a five-year phased-in transformation of CUNY’s ability to serve New York. The New Deal for CUNY redirects current TAP funding and makes CUNY tuition free; it establishes minimum staff-to-student ratios for mental health counselors, academic advisors and full-time faculty, while professionalizing compensation for adjunct faculty; and it supports the call for a five-year capital plan that would make CUNY’s buildings safe, capacious and sustainable.

² [The State of Food Security at CUNY in 2020: An Assessment and Recommendations](#), CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute, May 20, 2020.

⁴ News Release, July 1, 2020 “[118 Billionaires in New York See Net Worth Jump \\$77.3 Billion or 14.8% in First Three Months of COVID-19 Pandemic](#),” Americans for Tax Fairness, Healthcare for America Now, Citizen Action.

Since 2016, the PSC has worked in coalition with student, community and labor groups through the CUNY Rising Alliance. CUNY Rising, which was formed in 2016 and immediately engaged in the effort to defeat a proposed \$500-million cut in State funding for CUNY, has spent the years since that successful campaign developing a vision of what CUNY should be: a free university with enough faculty, mental health counselors and advisors to support and expand students' aspirations for their lives. A university where students learn in appropriately sized classes from a body of faculty that reflects the diversity of the city and the student population. A university with 5,000 new full-time faculty positions, including targeted initiatives to increase racial diversity and create full-time job opportunities for current adjuncts. A university that sets a national labor standard for academia by mandating parity pay for adjunct faculty. A university where once degraded, crumbling buildings become leaders in sustainability. It is a vision of CUNY to be inspired by and to fight for.

The original New Deal, which helped to save the American economy during the Great Depression, had some of its origins in New York. Its premise was that the way out of economic crisis, mass unemployment, hunger and inequality is investment, not austerity. Austerity doesn't work. It amplifies the wealth and power of the rich and deepens existing inequalities. We understand the pressure to accept an austerity budget this year and to believe that merely returning to pre-COVID levels of funding would be a victory. But we urge you to take a stand as courageous as that of the original New Deal reformers. Trust the people with the people's resources.

In the depth of the Depression, New York came up with the money to invest in three new CUNY colleges: Brooklyn and Queens Colleges were founded during the Depression, and Lehman College's beautiful campus was built by the WPA. Where is that vision now? We believe it still exists, and we are counting on you to be its spokespersons within State government.

Investment in CUNY is not charity; it is economic good sense. CUNY leads the nation in enabling low-income students to advance into the middle class and beyond.⁵ CUNY students pour millions of dollars every year into the tax base. Because the majority of CUNY students remain in New York after graduation and move into middle-income jobs, the investment of taxpayer dollars in CUNY is fiscally as well as morally responsible. Take one example. A recent report found that City College, in Harlem, provides a three-to-one investment for taxpayers. Every dollar of public money invested in City College generates three dollars in tax income. City College alone generates nearly two billion dollars in annual income for a ten-county region per year and 16,760 jobs.⁶ There are 24 other CUNY colleges, all with similar

⁵ David Leonhardt, "[America's Great Working-Class Colleges](#)," New York Times, January 18, 2017, detailing results of research led by Raj Chetty.

⁶ [The Economic Value of the City College of New York](#), Emsi, November 2019.

power to repay New York’s investment and transform the life-chances of millions of New Yorkers.

What makes the New Deal for CUNY distinctive even among other progressive legislative initiatives is that it is the joint product of organized students, community groups and the PSC. It is legislation developed by all of us for all of New York. Below are the state funding increases that the PSC requests for Fiscal Year 2022, to provide initial investments for the first year one of the proposed New Deal for CUNY’s five-year phase-in. We are seeking \$154 million in new State investment this year. To allow the time necessary to make what may be the biggest adjustment, the introduction of free tuition, the legislation does not call for that change until the 2022-2023 academic year. With a new administration in Washington, there may well be additional federal funding for free public college tuition, particularly at the community colleges, by that time. The amount we seek is well within reach if the revenue enhancements are passed. The PSC will also call on the City during its budget process to increase its funding to make the New Deal for CUNY a reality.

New Deal for CUNY in Fiscal Year 2022:	\$153.8 Million
Senior College Counselors & Advisors	\$5.6 Million
Senior College Full-time Faculty & Professionalize Adjunct Compensation	\$90.6 Million
Senior Colleges Freeze Tuition. Begin Phase-in of free tuition in FY 2023	\$26.3 Million
Community Colleges Base Aid Increase of \$500 Per FTE Student	\$31.3 Million

For further details, visit cunyrisingalliance.org/nd4c-concept-paper.

The legislation has four main elements:

1. Increase mental health and academic counseling services for students (\$40 million over five years)

The ratio of students to mental health counselors at CUNY is 2,700:1. The International Accreditation of Counseling Services standard is a ratio of 1,000: 1. To achieve the required ratio CUNY would need to add 125 mental health counseling positions. CUNY is equally low in academic advisors for students; the student-to-advisor ratios are as high as 1,500:1 at some colleges. To help students stay on track to graduation, the New Deal for CUNY would gradually improve the ratio of academic advisors to students until reaching a ratio of one academic advisor

for every 600 FTE students. To achieve the required ratio CUNY would need to add 250 additional academic advisors.

2. Increase the number of full-time faculty and professionalize adjunct pay (\$663 million over five years).

CUNY has lost nearly 5,000 full-time faculty positions as a result of chronic underfunding. Prior to the pandemic, the ratio at CUNY was 35 full-time faculty for every 1,000 FTE students. A ratio of 65 full-time faculty members to 1,000 FTE students, or approximately 15 students to one full-time professor, would align CUNY with national averages. CUNY's current ratio of 35 full-time faculty to every 1,000 FTE students creates a student/faculty ratio of 1:29. The New Deal for CUNY would gradually increase the ratio from 35:1,000 to 65:1,000 over five years. To fill the newly created positions, CUNY would be required to ensure recruitment of faculty from underrepresented groups and to prioritize the appointment of adjunct faculty currently employed at CUNY. At the same time, the New Deal for CUNY legislation would set a new labor standard of national importance in higher education by mandated parity pay for the adjunct faculty who remain. Higher education is one of the worst offenders in the gig economy. New York, long a leader in labor rights, should take the lead in setting a new standard.

3. Make CUNY free again (\$796 million over five years).

New York's public university funding model of constantly increasing tuition and robust, but flawed, financial aid is starving our public universities of resources, denying access to college for many low-income New Yorkers who fall through the cracks of the financial aid system, and putting middle-income families into debt. Free CUNY tuition is the better way. At a moment when the nation's new president has pledged to make public community college free and to alleviate student debt, New York has an opportunity to make a relatively modest investment and restore free tuition at CUNY, a commitment that was in place for more than a century. Starting with the 2022-2023 academic year, (Fiscal Year 2023), the New Deal for CUNY mandates that all tuition and fees for in-state undergraduate students within specified time-frames for completion of degree would be eliminated, and CUNY would receive full reimbursement for the tuition amounts.

4. Invest in a capital renewal plan to address urgent issues of safety, accessibility, energy, capacity and maintenance of CUNY buildings.

The New Deal for CUNY requires the Governor to submit to the Legislature five-year capital plans for CUNY as part of the annual budget process. Consistent with CUNY's five-year capital plan, the legislation seeks to repair, modernize and expand CUNY's physical plant. Before COVID-19, enrollment at CUNY had increased 40 percent since 2000, but college facilities had

not grown to meet the demand. Since the pandemic, the needs of CUNY's physical plant have grown and changed substantially.

Undo the Damage in this Year's CUNY Funding

CUNY has already been hit hard by unilateral budget cuts imposed in the current fiscal year. Starting in June, 20 percent of CUNY's State funding has been "withheld" by the Division of the Budget. The University administration responded by laying off 2,900 adjunct faculty and staff, increasing class size, laying off college assistants, represented by DC37, and making deep cuts to academics and services. PSC pressure and the solidarity of academic department chairs saved 1,000 jobs through re-hiring, but almost 1,900 CUNY adjuncts are without CUNY employment, and hundreds have lost their health insurance—in a pandemic. Lacking 20 percent of State funding, CUNY has left a further 500 full-time positions unfilled. Make no mistake: CUNY's budget has already been cut in Fiscal Year 2021, and it must be repaired.

The second unilateral cut, again not approved by the Legislature, is CUNY management's decision to follow the Governor's pattern for other public-sector workers and refuse to implement the two-percent pay raise for faculty and staff that was part of a legal agreement with the PSC. The violation amounts to a no-interest loan to the State from our union members. PSC members, who have suffered illness and loss of life, who have lost other sources of family income and worked tirelessly to keep the University running during COVID, are surely not in a position to be lending money to New York State. It is simply wrong to break promises to public workers while the State fails to implement progressive tax reforms on the richest New Yorkers. It is wrong to withhold CUNY raises when the federal stimulus money can be used to cover payroll.

Reject All Cuts to CUNY in the Executive Budget

The Executive Budget hits CUNY hard. It cuts \$28 million from senior colleges and \$14 million from community colleges. CUNY cannot and must not be subject to these cuts.

Governor Cuomo released two plans to close the State's \$15 billion deficit. The first plan—the one detailed in the budget bills—assumes a \$6 billion infusion of stimulus funding from Washington and closes the remaining gap with a combination of 5 percent across-the-board budget cuts and revenue-raisers, notably a temporary, refundable tax rate increase for extremely high earners, mobile sports gambling and marijuana legalization. The second plan would close the entire deficit with federal stimulus money.

Both budget plans would rob CUNY and the Black and brown communities it serves of the investment needed to help launch New York's recovery from the pandemic and CUNY's

recovery from decades of racialized austerity. Even the plan based on \$15 billion in stimulus aid to New York is a status quo budget that will leave CUNY starving. Under the Executive Budget plan that includes \$6 billion in stimulus, the 20 percent “withholding” from CUNY would be partially restored. But the damage from the withholding has been done, the classes canceled, the jobs lost. A 5-percent cut to the CUNY senior colleges starting in the fall of 2020 would continue into next year. Community colleges and other critical programs would also lose funding.

The Governor’s proposed budget allows for tuition increases of up to \$200 per year. The PSC strongly opposes this tuition hike. We call, instead, for a path to free tuition. Given the financial stress CUNY students are facing right now, another \$200 per year increase, or additional fees, would force many to stop out or drop out.

The PSC urges the Legislature to restore the funding for CUNY detailed below, which is cut in the Executive Budget for Fiscal Year 2022.

Restore CUNY Funds Cut in the Executive Budget:	\$42 Million
• Senior College Operations	\$26.2 Million
• School of Labor and Urban Studies	\$1.5 Million
• CUNY Pipeline Citizenship Now	\$270 Thousand
Senior College Restorations Subtotal:	\$28.2 Million
• Community colleges held harmless against enrollment loss	\$9.95 Million
• Accelerated Study in Associate Programs	\$2.5 Million
• Rental Aid	\$447 Thousand
• Childcare Centers	\$902 Thousand
Community College Restorations Subtotal:	\$13.8 Million

Community College Restorations

The Executive Budget would reduce funding for CUNY community colleges by \$9.95 million, due to temporary enrollment declines during the COVID crisis. The CUNY Budget Request asks the State to restore these funds and freeze community college funding at its Fiscal Year 2021 level.

CUNY community colleges educate an even larger proportion of Black and brown students than the CUNY senior colleges. Community college students are more likely to have remedial academic needs, to have annual family incomes below \$30,000, to be first-generation students, or to be supporting children. They are exactly the students who would have their lives upended by COVID, who would be most challenged by a shift to all online instruction and services. Many of New York's essential workers and their family members attend CUNY community colleges.

As community college students start to rebuild their lives and laid-off workers begin turning to the community colleges to develop new skills and overcome the recession, CUNY will need more resources, not fewer. The Legislature has fought for and won almost yearly increases in funding for CUNY community colleges since the recession of 2008. Losing almost \$10 million when students' needs are so great would undo much of the progress we have made.

Instead of cutting community college funding, the PSC urges that the Base Aid rate of funding for community colleges should be increased by a total of \$500 per FTE: an increase of \$250 per FTE to fund the needs shared by CUNY and the SUNY community colleges, and an additional \$250 to fund the State's share of the community college investments of the New Deal for CUNY. In addition, the formula for funding community colleges should be adjusted to set a minimum floor of State investment of 98 percent of the prior year's funding.

Senior College Restorations

Legislators know that CUNY senior colleges are underfunded. You hear from hundreds of students, faculty and staff every year about the damage underfunding causes. Cutting \$26 million, when colleges have already crammed too many students in classes, cut course offerings, cut college assistant positions, demanded that some professional staff do double duty to boost enrollments and laid off nearly 2,000 adjuncts would send the message that New York is determined to make CUNY students fail. When the racial gaps in college attainment in New York City are a disgrace and the barriers to college success for Black and brown students at CUNY are already high, CUNY's senior colleges cannot sustain a cut of any size, much less a cut of multiple million dollars. Now, when the State needs CUNY to help power the COVID recovery, when the students and communities that CUNY serves are suffering, is not the time to cut CUNY senior colleges. Now is the time to break with the austerity measures represented in the proposed budget and show that there is a better way forward for New York.

Close the TAP Gap

The PSC applauds the Legislature for your efforts last year to provide funding to begin closing the TAP Gap. The TAP Gap is the difference between the amount the State pays to support the education of the 56,000 TAP recipients at the CUNY senior colleges and the actual tuition cost of their education. Tuition is currently \$6,930 at the CUNY senior colleges, but the State's TAP payment to CUNY is capped at \$5,000 per student. By law, the \$1,930 difference must be

waived for students. The TAP Gap grows with every tuition hike. The waivers for all TAP recipients in FY2021 were projected to amount to \$78 million in lost revenue.

CUNY's Budget Request

The PSC supports CUNY's capital request and joins the University in calling for a five-year plan for capital investments. But CUNY's operating funds request, while it includes some valuable initiatives, falls short of the need. And critically, it fails to call for the funds necessary to keep up with fringe benefit increases and contractual increases.

Capital Request

The PSC supports CUNY's Capital Budget request of \$809.8 million from the State and City, especially CUNY's COVID Capital Renewal needs and the University Wide Upgrade of Science Labs. The obvious infrastructure needs that existed at CUNY before COVID are still necessary, but now the entire university must include upgraded HVAC systems, air filters and a host of other items not imagined last year to maintain health and safety protocols.

Years of complaints about delayed maintenance and failing infrastructure, including a lack of running water in some bathroom facilities at CUNY campuses, cannot be ignored during a pandemic. Our members and students deserve to return to a university that has taken the health and safety of students and our members seriously. Ventilation systems, windows, clean water. These are basic needs that are missing on many campuses. A safe reopening cannot be undermined by the lack of funds.

Mental Health Counselors

CUNY requests \$6 million to increase students' access to mental health counselors. Although the PSC supports that request, we state emphatically that a much greater investment is needed. That is why the PSC includes improving the staffing ratio of mental health counselors to students as one of the key elements of the New Deal for CUNY. Online teletherapy and increased virtual face-to-face counseling sessions are important, and we understand that the platforms to put these virtual programs in place have a cost. But CUNY needs funding to increase human capacity to meet not just future but current demand for these services. The core issue remains staffing levels that fall dangerously below nationally recommended standards. These levels must be changed.

Full-Time Faculty

CUNY's proposal to hire an additional 80 full-time faculty focused on Black, race, and ethnic studies due to a grant from the Mellon Foundation is good news. The PSC has campaigned for years for the additional funding needed to recruit and retain a racially diverse faculty. Unfortunately, the University has in the past rejected the collective bargaining proposals the union has advanced to assist in recruitment. But 80 new full-time faculty positions is too slow a

start. If shared among the colleges, the initiative will result in fewer than four new faculty of color per campus. At that rate it will take decades to develop a full-time professoriate that reflects the intellectual, racial, gender and ethnic diversity our students need. The issue is urgent, and the way to address it is through creating thousands of new faculty positions with a shared commitment to anti-racism and diversity.

Flat Fringe Benefits

Fringe benefit increases have been funded repeatedly in the Executive Budget. But this year the Executive Budget holds this category flat at Fiscal Year 2021 levels. CUNY's Budget Request fails to include a request for increased fringe benefits. Thus it builds in a structural deficit, which will no doubt lead to reductions in programs, personnel and services. Failing to provide for this mandatory cost increase makes bad budget sense. The Legislature must push to include funding for fringe benefit increase in the enacted budget.

Accelerating CUNY's Online Presence

Considering the near-total online learning environment we are now experiencing, it is not a surprise to see CUNY request \$8 million for "Improving Equity and Access—Accelerating CUNY's Online Presence." PSC supports breaking down barriers between students and access to technology. But the COVID crisis cannot be the impetus for the cheapening of a CUNY education. Many PSC members are experts in distance education; it has an important place in the future of CUNY—but not at the expense of in-person instruction. CUNY anticipates a huge leap in the number of students taking fully online degrees, from 7,000 this year to 30,000 in 2025. Yet all the research shows that online classes must be smaller than in-person classes generally are if students are to succeed. The recommended ratio of students to faculty members is 12 to 1.⁷ Many CUNY classes since COVID-19 have far higher numbers and college administrators at several colleges have demanded an increase in enrollment maximums for online classes. The post-pandemic CUNY must not be a CUNY of vast online courses where students are left to sink or swim.

Working During a Pandemic

COVID-19 upended our work and our professional lives. CUNY has the sad distinction of having lost more members of its community to COVID than any university in the country. More than [50 members](#) of the CUNY community have died. Our students, who are overwhelmingly from poor communities of color with average family incomes of less than \$30,000, have been battered by illness, grief and loss. In most classes, professors report that nearly every student has experienced the death of a family member or friend. CUNY students have also suffered

⁷ Tomei and Nelson, "[Impact of Online Teaching and Faculty Load--Revisited: Computing the Ideal Class Size for Traditional, Online and Hybrid Courses](#)," International Journal of Online Pedagogy and Course Design, July-September 2019.

disproportionately from unemployment, reduced income, and housing and food insecurity. This is on top of an arduous transition to remote studies.

The transition to distance learning last spring was difficult for faculty, staff and students. But it was particularly hard for the many CUNY students who relied on CUNY campuses for access to the internet as well as a physical space to conduct their studies. Distance learning is still a challenge for many CUNY students who lack adequate internet access. I have heard from faculty that students say they are standing in a closet in their apartment while participating in online classes because that is the only quiet space they have.

As a result of the twin crises in public health and the economy, enrollment is down at many CUNY colleges, for now. Many students still lack adequate internet access or devices. Faculty and staff, facing their own health and financial hardships and the demands of working and parenting during the pandemic, are working harder than ever and are sometimes being pressured to do more than is appropriate. Budget cuts caused by the Governor's "withholding" of funds and City funding reductions have created nearly unbearable strains.

Hundreds of PSC-represented faculty and staff have worked in person during the pandemic. The PSC has been willing to do whatever it takes to keep these members as safe as possible and we pledge to do the same for all faculty and staff—and our students. The union has called for the right to conduct independent inspections of the safety and ventilation of all buildings where PSC members will be called to return to work before those workers return. We urge you to support us in this call, as we urge you to pass a budget with the funding necessary to ensure safety, including for capital improvements that will improve ventilation and sanitization. Re-openings cannot be done on the cheap. We also ask you to join us in calling on the CUNY administration to negotiate with the union over plans for COVID-testing of our members and students and other essential safety needs before reopening.

Chancellor Matos Rodríguez has announced that "CUNY will plan for a safe and gradual return to mostly in-person instruction and support services in time for the start of classes in Fall 2021."⁸ But it is unclear if there will be enough vaccines to allow that to happen safely. In-person higher education faculty have access to the vaccine now, thanks to the work of our union and our partners at UUP and NYSUT. But the Governor's Office still needs to clarify that in-person higher education staff have the same priority. And we must see increased availability of vaccines and appointments for retirees and for the communities of our students. All PSC-represented workers must have access to vaccination if they are required to work in person in the fall.

⁸ [Planning for an in-person Fall 2021](#), January 4, 2021.

Demand Full and Transparent Use of Federal CARES Act and CRRSAA Funds

CUNY colleges have been allocated more than \$700 million in federal funds targeted at the massive needs created by the pandemic. More than half of these funds are available for institutional use, with the remainder specified for direct aid to students. The CARES Act, passed in June 2020 allocated \$251 million in federal funds to CUNY colleges, with at least \$118 million for student aid. CUNY reports that the student aid was distributed to 197,000 students in the fall.⁹ The Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSAA) passed by Congress in December 2020 allocated another \$455 million, again with at least \$118 million for student aid.

We are grateful for your efforts in advocating for federal emergency aid for CUNY as well as to U.S. Senate Majority Leader Schumer and Senator Gillibrand for their continued support securing additional federal funds. But now we need the Legislature to make certain that CUNY uses every dollar New York’s Congressional leaders fought for to ensure that students can continue their progress to graduation, and faculty and staff jobs are protected.

CUNY must be far more transparent about its use of the federal stimulus money. Quarterly reports posted online indicate that CUNY has spent about \$33 million in institutional CARES Act funds.¹⁰ Why is CUNY continuing to hold the remaining \$100 million in institutional CARES Act funds? How is the money to be spent? The Legislature has the responsibility to demand answers about the CARES Act and the new CRRSAA funds.

In an August letter replying to congressional representatives who demanded similar answers about the CARES Act and called for the restoration of adjuncts’ jobs, the CUNY Administration claimed to “have submitted a plan to the State that prioritized student support and mental health services, reimbursements to campuses for COVID 19-related costs such as refunds, and investments in online infrastructure and training. The plan has been approved by the State, but we decided to hold back the use of the majority of these funds until we conclude our budget process.”

Is that budget process now complete? All who care about CUNY, who care about accountable government, should demand the best use and a clear accounting of how the aid is being spent. We request that the Legislature require CUNY to publish robust quarterly reports that detail how federal stimulus funds have been spent, how much of the funds remain and in what accounts they are being held, along with details about how CUNY plans to distribute the funds.

⁹ [Chancellor’s message, Nov 4, 2020.](#)

¹⁰ Quarterly Budget and Expenditure Reporting for [quarter ending Sept. 30, 2020](#) and [quarter ending Dec. 31, 2020](#). The Nov. 4 Chancellor’s message indicated \$41 million had been spent to that point.

The federal money must not be used only to offset budget cuts while course sections are cut, adjunct workers are laid off, class sizes are increased and student services are reduced. Federal funds should be used to keep courses open, allow students with small unpaid tuition debts to enroll and to rehire laid-off adjunct workers, restoring coverage to those who have lost health insurance.

Conclusion

This has been a year unlike any other, and the members of the PSC thank you for holding important hearings throughout the year, for being responsive to our calls, and for being willing to work with us to find solutions through government. Our union has responded to this catastrophic year by demanding more of ourselves and imagining how New York needs to be not just healed but transformed. We ask you to take that imaginative leap with us. We call on you to use your position in government as courageously as the original New Deal reformers used theirs. Whether we are in government or not, we get only a few chances in a lifetime to change history, and I believe this is one of them. The PSC urges you to take it.