



UNITED UNIVERSITY PROFESSIONS

Testimony on
Maintaining Quality, Equity & Affordability in Public Higher
Education throughout the Pandemic and Beyond

Presented to
Senator Toby Ann Stavisky, Chair
New York State Senate Committee on Higher Education

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Chairwoman Stavisky, members of the Senate Committee on Higher Education and other members of the Legislature, thank you for inviting United University Professions (UUP) to testify at this public hearing on maintaining quality, equity and affordability in public higher education throughout the pandemic and beyond.

My name is Dr. Frederick E. Kowal, and I am the president of UUP. It is my honor to represent more than 37,000 academic and professional faculty at the State University of New York (SUNY). Our members live and work in communities across the state of New York, serving hundreds of thousands of students and patients at 29 SUNY comprehensive, technical, specialized and university centers, SUNY academic medical centers and state-operated public teaching hospitals, and System Administration.

I commend the Chair and the leadership for examining the needs of our university system and for gathering input leading up to a crucial budget session. Thank you for having the wisdom and courage to take steps to institute a fairer tax system in our state during last year's budget session. This was a prudent decision, one that is now proving successful as the state's fiscal recovery shows a projected surplus. In his October report, Comptroller DiNapoli notes that businesses taxes are up \$1.9 billion compared to last year, personal income tax receipts are \$8.9 billion higher year-to-date than last year, and the state's general fund ended September with a balance \$4.5 billion higher than at the same time last year.

Although it seems every year is a crucial budget year, 2022 brings opportunities and needs like never before. For the first time in a decade, we have a new executive, one who knows and values SUNY, we see revenue reports that will allow us to invest, and we have a state Legislature committed to providing a quality, accessible, affordable education, and opportunity to the residents of this state. Now is the time to advocate for critical funding for SUNY —funding that is long overdue and needed more than ever.

In my 8 years as UUP President, I have never been prouder to represent our membership than I have over the last 20 months. The strength of our university system and those who work and learn there have been tested. UUP members have risen to the occasion. At our campuses, UUP members have supported

students as they moved to new modes of instruction and faced the personal and academic challenges brought to the fore by the COVID pandemic.

At SUNY's public teaching hospitals, our frontline health care members continue to provide life-saving care through the pandemic, working short-staffed and long hours, while investment in health care infrastructure has fallen by the wayside. There is no doubt that the challenges brought on by the pandemic were exacerbated by years of deliberate damage delivered through systemic underfunding of our public health care and higher education systems. UUP stands ready to partner with the Legislature, the SUNY Board of Trustees, Chancellor Malatras and campus leadership to bring the needed investment to SUNY.

Investing in people, infrastructure, health care and access will be key for the state to build a healthy public higher education and health care system.

Infrastructure (Human and Physical Capital)

Since the Great Recession, our SUNY campuses have been forced to fund operations by passing the bill onto our students. Gov. Cuomo was no friend to UUP and no friend to SUNY; he fostered a public university system that has been forced to rely more and more on revenue from students' tuition and fees. For example, at the University at Albany students pay \$7,070 in tuition, an additional \$3,398 in fees, and more than \$15,000 for campus housing and a meal plan. At Plattsburgh, tuition is also \$7,070, with fees totaling \$1,871 and an additional \$14,740 for housing and a meal plan. This vicious cycle of disinvestment has left SUNY unable to adequately attract, retain, and matriculate students. The abandonment of our public higher education system has directly led to drops in enrollment. SUNY's campuses have been left to wither on the vine. Year after year of flat budgets included no operating aid increases, which pitted SUNY administrators against unions and campus against campus, scrapping for already scarce resources. The time is now to reverse this and fund our state's public higher education system. UUP stands ready to work with the Governor, the Legislature, the SUNY Board of Trustees, and SUNY leadership to deliver real results for our students, our patients, and our communities across New York State. This year's budget must include an infusion of \$150 million in new direct operating aid to the state-operated campuses. This is a necessary first step in reversing the state's decades-long disinvestment of SUNY.

Now is also the time for New York State to take its place as a true leader in public higher education. It can do so by creating a University Endowment for SUNY. Dozens of other state university systems across the country have created such a fund. This endowment would provide a long-term funding resource to rebuild SUNY academic departments, which have been depleted by chronic underfunding. This funding would allow SUNY to grow degree programs, hire and promote a more diverse SUNY workforce and create more full-time, tenure-track lines to better serve our students.

Additionally, the state needs to reinvest in SUNY's physical infrastructure. We must push for continued critical maintenance and new capital projects to improve our campuses. Let's jointly advocate for the reinstatement of a five-year Capital Plan for SUNY. But let me be clear: UUP fiercely objects to the campus matching program in the current capital budget. That program has set up a system based on the existing financial means of a campus rather than their physical infrastructure needs. It leaves financially struggling campuses without an avenue to secure funding for necessary — and potentially dire — capital needs. Instead, we ask SUNY to join us in redirecting those funds to a green transformation program for campuses to begin addressing climate change and reliance on fossil fuels. If they do not, we ask the Legislature to make this important change.

Health Care

We must acknowledge and learn from what our members at SUNY's public teaching hospitals have sacrificed and been through for nearly two years. We must recognize that their life-saving work continues today. Like no time in our history, we are called to fight for our state university *teaching* hospitals.

To put it bluntly, our SUNY hospitals have been cut off from state funding. Gov. Cuomo didn't just ignore our state university hospitals, he defunded them — to the benefit of his political donors and political interests. His administration limited the hospitals' ability to serve the most vulnerable in our society—which is mandated in SUNY's mission statement. SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University, Stony Brook University Hospital and Upstate Medical University should be treated like every other state agency. New York State must cover the debt service of these life-saving institutions, which would allow them to make needed capital improvements and expand services.

From COVID to debt service, to Medicaid cuts and federal changes to the DSH program, our SUNY hospitals have been under assault, while the need for their

services and care only grows. Despite very limited state funding and an executive with no interest in supporting SUNY's teaching hospitals, these institutions have proved their value and importance, time and time again.

Downstate, Stony Brook and Upstate have treated thousands of COVID patients. They have continued providing community care and to date, they have administered more than 50,000 COVID vaccinations. UUP is urgently requesting proper state support for our SUNY hospitals with the restoration of essential mission funding, so our state hospitals are properly staffed and prepared to fight this pandemic and any future public health crisis.

State support to our hospitals was drastically reduced between 2008 and 2017. In 2018, Gov. Cuomo shortsightedly eliminated this funding completely. I ask every member of the Legislature join us in requesting restoration of this critical mission funding.

Our nation is facing a health care staffing shortage — and that shortage will only grow more severe in the coming decade. Certainly, the pandemic put additional strain on our health care system, but this crisis is nothing new. Data from a 2019 Association of American Medical Colleges survey tells us that many states across the country could see an estimated shortage as great as 124,000 physicians by 2034, including shortfalls in primary and specialty care. This is a serious problem that requires immediate attention and real solutions. Right here in New York, we will see the greatest shortage of any state in the nation of medical support professionals such as medical assistants, clinical lab technicians, and physical therapists by 2026, according to a Mercer report.

Medical education programs are similarly burdened with a lack of capacity. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing estimates that roughly 75,000 qualified nursing school applicants in 2018 were not accepted into a program due to lack of adequate classroom space, faculty, or training facilities to accept more students. Our SUNY institutions must be part of the solution to address this impending public health crisis.

Lastly, as many members of this committee know, and the legislators from New York City know, SUNY Downstate is at the epicenter of a severe maternal morbidity crisis. This academic medical center has a mission to serve the Central Brooklyn community regardless of a patient's income or ability to pay for care, making it uniquely positioned to research and address maternal morbidity and children's health care issues. SUNY Downstate should expand its services and

mission to be the center of maternal and child services in Brooklyn. In conjunction with these efforts, we support the passage of the Chisholm Chance Plan, introduced by Sen. Zellnor Myrie.

Access

SUNY can — and must — play a role in reshaping our future by expanding courses and program slots for students in the medical field. It must also fully implement the Medical Educational Opportunity Program, introduced by UUP and adopted by SUNY last year. It is imperative that this program, rolled out as a pilot program this past summer, be expanded to include students studying to become clinical lab technicians, nurses, physician assistants and physical therapists. The Medical EOP is a major component to address the staffing crisis at SUNY's hospitals.

I want to thank the members of this committee and the entire Legislature for beginning to address the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) Gap in this year's budget. More than 40 percent of students receiving TAP attend SUNY; more than one-third of students at SUNY's state-operated campuses receive TAP. The TAP Gap, the difference between the maximum award available under the TAP program and the tuition price, is the portion of SUNY tuition that campuses ultimately absorb for TAP awardees.

You have heard me speak before about the impact that closing this gap will have on our public higher education system. In short, this investment will not only improve access, but it may also make the difference in making our financially fragile public higher education system financially secure. For these reasons, I am urging the Senate, Assembly, and Gov. Hochul to fast forward the four-year timeline and eliminate the TAP Gap now. We should forgo a phased-in approach to shrinking the TAP Gap and solve this compounding problem once and for all. This approach will bring needed resources to the SUNY campuses that are fulfilling their mission, accepting TAP eligible students, providing educational opportunity to thousands of students who might not otherwise be able to afford a SUNY education, and giving a pathway to upward economic mobility for students and their families.

I know the members of this committee and the leadership of the state Legislature share the belief that a SUNY education should not leave students with tens of thousands of dollars of debt. It is our hope that you will join UUP in urging Gov. Hochul to expand and reform the Excelsior Scholarship. We must tear down the façade that the Excelsior Scholarship was a "free college" program. It is

a “last dollar” program that does not pay student fees or room and board and covers less than half the real cost to attend college. We can begin to fix this program to better serve our students and their families and utilize the significant funds that have gone unspent since the program’s creation.

On behalf of our 37,000 members, I’d like to thank you all for the opportunity to address you today. In closing, I thank you for your time and I look forward to working closely with you as we advocate together for a stronger SUNY.