



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 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. Although it seems every year is a crucial budget year, 2022 brings opportunities and needs like no time 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 education and opportunity to the residents of this state. Opportunity, coupled with a public higher education system that desperately needs repair, brings us to a moment when the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. deeply resonate, for we are “confronted with the fierce urgency of now.” 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 to their patients— while working very long hours with minimal PPE and other health care resources. 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, Board of Trustees, Chancellor Maltras and campus leadership to bring the needed investment to SUNY. Investing in 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 tuition dollars. 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.

This year's budget must include an infusion of 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.

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 their 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. UUP is urgently requesting the 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. I ask each and every member of the Legislature join us in requesting this funding.

Our nation is facing a health care staffing shortage — and that shortage will only grow more severe in the coming decade. The pandemic put additional strain on our health care system, but this is not a new crisis. Data from a 2019 Association of American Medical Colleges survey tells us that many states across the country could see an estimated shortage of between 37,800 and 124,000 physicians by 2034, including shortfalls in both primary and specialty care.

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 will bring needed resources to the SUNY campuses that are fulfilling their mission and providing educational opportunity to thousands of students who might not otherwise be able to afford a SUNY education.

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 to cover student fees, as well as room and board for students in the program. We must tear down the façade that the Excelsior Scholarship was a "free college" program. In doing so, we can begin to fix this program to better serve our students and their families.

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 and advocating together.