



UNITED UNIVERSITY PROFESSIONS

Testimony on the New York State Tuition Assistance Program

Presented to
Assemblymember Patricia Fahy, Chair
Assembly Committee on Higher Education

November 28, 2023

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Chairperson Fahy, members of the Assembly Higher Education Committee and distinguished staff, thank you for inviting United University Professions (UUP) to testify at this hearing on the Tuition Assistance Program.

My name is Dr. Frederick E. Kowal, and I am the president of UUP, the largest higher education union in the country. It is my honor to represent more than 37,000 academic and professional faculty at 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'd also like to thank the Legislature for their dedicated work in closing the TAP Gap, which has been vital to improving the financial condition of many of our campuses.

The rising cost of higher education has been national news for several years. Tuition, fees, and room and board costs have skyrocketed at an unsustainable rate across the country. Here in New York, we have kept the cost of tuition at SUNY—the same since 2019, but other costs have continued to rise steadily. That has put obtaining a college degree out of reach for too many New Yorkers.

This year is the 50th anniversary of the New York State Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) which has helped make college more affordable and accessible for more than 6 million New Yorkers. For many of them, it made the remote possibility of a college education a reality. As we celebrate the successes of this program, we can also look to build upon them to help more students afford and earn a college degree.

Student Fees

Unlike tuition increases, which require legislative approval, campuses have the ability to increase mandatory fees on students. In years where tuition costs are frozen, these fees can still increase, making it difficult for students and families to financially plan for college. It is important to note that these fees are not covered by TAP.

Looking across the SUNY system, the increased fees—on top of tuition—is making college more and more unaffordable, putting a college education further out of reach for so many students. The average annual fees at the 26 state-operated campuses are about \$1,910 per year, but some campuses are well over \$3,000 annually. The table on the following page shows the cost of mandatory fees annually for each state operated SUNY campus. Optional fees such as parking fees and others are not included in this total.

Campus	Annual Student Fees (2023-24, Full-time undergraduate NYS Residents)
University at Albany	\$3,398.00
Binghamton University	\$3,293.00
University at Buffalo	\$3,711.50
Stony Brook University	\$3,490.00
Alfred	\$1,792.00
Brockport	\$1,628.00
Buffalo State	\$1,416.00
Canton	\$1,619.00
Cobleskill	\$1,606.00
Cortland	\$1,745.00
Delhi	\$1,650.00
Empire State	\$506.00
ESF	\$2,212.00
Farmingdale	\$1,506.20
Fredonia	\$1,701.00
Geneseo	\$1,896.00
Maritime	\$1,595.00
Morrisville	\$1,699.00
New Paltz	\$1,454.00
Old Westbury	\$1,419.00
Oneonta	\$1,742.00
Oswego	\$1,699.00
Plattsburgh	\$1,811.00
Polytechnic	\$1,508.00
Potsdam	1,642.00
Purchase	\$1,883.00

Given the lack of adequate SUNY state operating aid over the last 15 years, these fees are needed for campus operations to continue to provide students with an array of campus services. There should be, however, some control over fee hikes so that students and families can plan for the cost of attending college.

Rolling fees into tuition costs would accomplish that. By doing so, fees would not increase without legislative approval—and they would become TAP-eligible. This could provide greater access to college for many students. If the Legislature adopted this change, corresponding increase in the maximum TAP awards would also be necessary for this initiative to be effective.

Increase Access to TAP, Increase Enrollments

As we have seen declines in enrollments at both public and private higher education institutions, we have also seen a decline in enrolled students who receive TAP. Enrollments have fallen about

9% at state-operated campuses from 2018 to 2022, but the number of students receiving TAP has declined 26.5% during the same period.

In addition to this decline, the total number of Pell Grant recipients has decreased every year since 2011, declining 35% in total. SUNY campuses disproportionately serve students who are Pell recipients compared to private colleges and universities. These decreases in Pell and TAP students are alarming, as part of SUNY's core mission is to provide a quality education with the broadest possible access. Increased state support for tuition assistance would certainly be a major component in increasing enrollment.

The current maximum income limit for students who are dependents has remained at \$80,000 for over 20 years and is well overdue for an increase. Even a modest increase to a family with a yearly income of \$100,000 would increase access for thousands of more students. This, coupled with other assistance programs like the Excelsior Scholarship and Pell grants, could help lower the overall cost of SUNY and help students graduate with less debt.

When trying to increase enrollments, it is important to target and provide incentives to attract non-traditional students. The current TAP maximum income for single, independent students with no dependents is just \$10,000; it is \$40,000 for married students with no other dependents. These low-income limits make it extremely difficult for any working individual to receive assistance through TAP and may discourage them from trying to get or complete their degree.

In addition to increasing the income threshold, it is wise to consider increasing the minimum award. The minimum award has remained at \$500 since the program's inception; the cost of tuition has increased significantly since then. The minimum award does not go nearly as far as it could in helping to lower the cost of attending college. Increasing the minimum award to \$1,000 would provide desperately needed additional support for the thousands of TAP-eligible students.

As we celebrate the 50th year of TAP, there are minor changes that can be made that would have a profound impact on the accessibility of a SUNY education. These changes will help with lowering the cost of a SUNY degree while ensuring that there is operating support for our campuses.

Other Costs

Tuition is only a small portion of the true cost of attending college. While SUNY has a presence in every region of the state, students often leave their hometown to attend college. Whether it is because students are looking for a traditional college experience, or because the program they want to enroll in isn't available to them nearby, thousands of students decide to live on campus.

The average cost of a standard double occupancy room for the year is over \$9,205. The average cost of the recommended meal plan for full-time on campus students is over \$6,100 per year. Many of these meal plans do not even cover three meals a day for students. It is easy to see why campuses are directing resources into more social safety nets for students, such as food pantries and campus homeless liaisons.

SUNY administration often quotes the statistic that 52% of full-time in-state undergraduate students pay no tuition after financial aid, but this figure is ignoring the bulk of the cost of attending college. It costs students over \$15,000 annually to live on campus—and this figure does not consider other indirect costs, such as books, and personal expenses.

Looking at the overall decline in Pell and TAP students attending college, additional financial support to help pay for room and board could entice these students to go to college rather than foregoing a higher education degree. This could be provided on a sliding scale based on need. Such support would help make New York a leader again in affordability while ensuring access for disadvantaged students.

In Closing

Both the Governor and the Legislature have committed to making SUNY the premier public higher education system in the nation, and UUP is eager to be a part of the solution to that challenge. Part of how we reach this goal is by ensuring broad affordable access so that students from across the state can earn a college degree without an insurmountable amount of student debt.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide UUP's perspective on this important issue. I look forward to continuing to work with you on these and other issues regarding SUNY and higher education.