



UNITED UNIVERSITY PROFESSIONS

Testimony on University Issues

November 17, 2020

Presented to:

Dr. Merryl H. Tisch, Chairman, Board of Trustees
State University of New York and the Board of Trustees

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Chairperson Tisch, Vice Chairperson Perales and members of the SUNY Board of Trustees, thank you for providing the opportunity for United University Professions (UUP) to testify at this crucial time in the history of our state.

As I address you, SUNY gets closer to the end of the fall semester, the first full semester during the pandemic. The going has been extremely challenging, but dedicated, hard-working UUP members have delivered the top-notch educational experience our students expect and deserve from SUNY—in person and remotely.

That accomplishment has been difficult, to be sure. SUNY Oneonta was forced to shut down for the semester due to a massive outbreak of COVID-19. Others, including SUNY Oswego, SUNY Cortland, Binghamton University, and most recently the University at Albany, have all pivoted to fully remote formats to respond to increasing case counts on campus or in their surrounding communities.

SUNY Oswego and Binghamton University has emerged from their two-week pauses to resume in-person classes.

New chancellor

We applaud SUNY's focus on safety this semester, a focus that has much to do with the appointment of new SUNY Chancellor Jim Malatras. SUNY is now moving swiftly in times of crisis. Working with UUP and campus presidents, the chancellor acted quickly regarding the crisis at SUNY Oneonta and rising COVID-19 levels at other campuses.

He implemented mandatory surveillance testing of on-campus populations and pool testing to screen for coronavirus on campus. He has listened to UUP and agreed with many of our recommendations to keep campuses safe during the pandemic.

Working closely with the chancellor, UUP entered into an agreement Sept. 14 for mandatory coronavirus testing for UUP-represented employees. UUP and the state also agreed on an extension to the telecommuting

agreement that will allow our members to work remotely through the end of the year.

UUP out front, outspoken

UUP has led the way when it comes to keeping campuses safe and the absolute need for safety mandates that accomplish that. On June 1, our union called for the implementation of four measures that would have gone far in containing coronavirus outbreaks on campus and kept our students, members and communities safe.

In our six-page report, “United University Professions—Guidelines for Reopening: Assuring a Safe Working Environment During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” UUP outlines four “core issues:

- mandatory baseline entry testing and recurring COVID-19 surveillance testing for all;
- enacting methods for contact tracing and isolation;
- stringent social distancing requirements; and
- a directive that students and employees wear face coverings in all circumstances involving possible contact with others.

Once implemented, these measures have proven successful in mitigating the spread of coronavirus on our campuses and in our communities. In November, UUP will update its campus safety recommendations to include a continued call for mandatory baseline testing for students and UUP members when returning to campus and surveillance testing thereafter. These are reasonable, necessary steps to improve indoor air filtration and ventilation in all SUNY buildings—and an extension of the telecommuting agreement to reduce density and maintain social distancing on campuses.

A SUNY-wide set of mandatory safety measures must be put in place before campuses reopen for the spring semester. I look forward to expanding UUP’s working relationship with the Chancellor and the Board of Trustees to formulate, mandate and enforce such measures.

Hospital heroes

I would be remiss if I didn’t express my unwavering gratitude to the thousands of our essential workers at SUNY’s public teaching hospitals. These frontline heroes literally put their lives on the line as the first wave of the pandemic swept through New York City and other downstate areas.

Many left their children in the care of family members to put their lives on the line, working double shifts and extra shifts, sleeping at the hospital or in their cars—and later in hotel rooms rented by UUP—to care for the tens of thousands of people who contracted the virus. Gov. Andrew Cuomo designated SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University as an COVID-19-only facility in March. Stony Brook University Hospital was essentially COVID-only, treating even more patients than Downstate did.

Far too many of our members contracted COVID-19 while on the job. We mourn the loss of our members who passed away after becoming ill.

Yet, despite their heroic efforts, our frontline workers have yet to receive hazard pay for their dedication and hard work. For months, UUP has called on the state to provide funding for hazard pay for essential and frontline workers. We've discussed this issue with legislators on several occasions and received positive feedback. On July 22, members of the Stony Brook HSC Chapter joined with three other state unions in a "Heroes Don't Get Zeros" rally to amplify this message.

Involvement by the Board of Trustees on this issue would help propel it this initiative. Today, I call on the Trustees as a body to publicly support hazard pay for our frontline workers.

Essential workers at hospitals in New York City and those run by Northwell Health have received hazard pay. Frontline workers at SUNY have not. This must change. Our members deserve more than our gratitude. They deserve hazard pay for their dedication.

Funding woes amplified by pandemic

With the pandemic comes much anxiety and grave concerns regarding future state funding for SUNY—and the future of the University.

Our campuses are still financially staggered by the state's ongoing disinvestment in SUNY, which began with deep state funding cuts to SUNY during the Great Recession and has continued with a series of flat budgets for the University. Direct state aid dropped by about \$660 million from 2007-08 to 2019-20, a decrease of nearly 50 percent, or a third of SUNY's core operating budget. This is fact: no state agency has taken the

massive financial hits that SUNY has.

More than a half-dozen of our campuses, including SUNY Fredonia, the University at Albany and SUNY Buffalo State, reported multi-million dollar deficits in the months preceding the pandemic. The governor has said that the state could be facing a \$50 billion shortfall over the next 2 years without significant funding for states in the next federal coronavirus stimulus bill—if and when one is approved.

These are reasons why UUP has strongly advocated for other “revenue raisers”—including the passage of a state tax on multi-millionaires and billionaires and a reduction or elimination of the stock transfer tax rebate for Wall Street traders—to raise dollars for SUNY and make the system less dependent on state funding.

But that doesn’t mean that the state shouldn’t continue to fund SUNY. On the contrary, the state has an obligation to fund the University and UUP will continue to press legislators to ensure that SUNY gets its due. We call on the Board of Trustees to join us in this advocacy. We are the State University of New York, a public higher education system. These are the state’s campuses, these are their hospitals, and this is the people’s SUNY.

Pandemic pummels higher ed nationwide

SUNY isn’t the only higher education institution that’s been hurt by the pandemic. Colleges and universities across the country has been slammed by coronavirus, with some institutions faring much worse than others. Forbes, in a Sept. 29 story, reported that the American Council of Education estimates the financial impact of the pandemic on American colleges and universities will exceed \$120 billion.

The University of Delaware is facing a \$250 million budget deficit and is considering several measures, including layoffs, furloughs and retirement benefit reductions. Rutgers, the University of Colorado and the University of Maryland are also considering millions in budget reductions due to the pandemic, Forbes reported.

And the University of Alaska has attributed a nearly \$15 million loss in revenue to the pandemic, and that is expected to double by the end of the year, according to the Anchorage Daily News.

At SUNY, enrollment for the fall semester was down nearly 6 percent from a year ago. While that dip is to be noted, things could have certainly been worse.

A campaign call

The real story is the work of our dedicated academics and professionals on campus, who quickly made the huge adjustment to teach remotely when campuses were shut down in March.

Many of these same employees, from tenured professors and adjuncts to dormitory directors and those in student services, stepped up again to welcome students back to campus in August. Their stories, like those of our researchers and our essential workers at SUNY's hospitals, should be told.

What is needed is a collaborative public campaign to spotlight and support the SUNY system, its students, employees and the communities that host our campuses. This is a campaign that could be spearheaded by the Board of Trustees, with support from UUP and other unions.

Such a campaign would create much goodwill for SUNY and stress the importance of the University to New Yorkers who may not be aware of the major role SUNY has played during the pandemic.

Conclusion

On behalf of the entire UUP membership, I'd like to thank you for this opportunity to address you today. I know by working together, we can create the positive change necessary to sustain SUNY through the pandemic and into the future.