

SUNY Student Assembly President Marc J. Cohen's Testimony to Higher Education Committee and Subcommittee on the Tuition Assistance Program

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“Good morning. I would like to reiterate my SUNY colleagues thanks to the distinguished officers here today. It is always an incredible opportunity to come before officials such as yourselves to discuss critical issues in higher education. Truly, few issues are as pressing as the affordability crisis faced by so many in our state.

“As you know, the SUNY Student Assembly represents over 600,000 students from across the State of New York with students from every single senate and assembly district, and campuses from Long Island and New York City all the way to Rochester and Buffalo.

“It is no secret that students have borne the brunt of rising costs in higher education. For five consecutive years we saw our tuition raised. When at long last we found respite this past year, many of my peers were excluded from the deal including the tens of thousands of graduate students that produce world class research across the state, and out of state undergraduates. We do recognize that in order to improve academic quality, revenue and expenditures must steadily increase. However a college education is both a private and a public good. In fact, our research shows that every dollar invested in public higher education in New York yields five dollars of economic activity. Students with baccalaureate degrees make on average \$1 million dollars more during their lifetime, rely less on social assistance programs post-graduation, live healthier lives (thus reducing healthcare costs), and contribute higher shares of tax revenues.

“We would like to give credit where credit is due. Students are appreciative of marginal increases to community college base aid, increased enrollment in the tuition assistance program, and a string of increases to vital programs like EOP. With that in mind, it is also important for us to be frank in recognizing the factors that have resulted in an increased burden on students. While the share of college cost paid for by us has steadily risen, the state share has steadily and

substantially declined since 2008. I would like to be clear: It is not the fault of the Board of Trustees that tuition increased so dramatically, so quickly. Rather it is a lack of investment from the state that forced the Board's hand just to pay professors, keep the lights on, and maintain the level of quality that students have come to expect from the State University of New York. I would like to discuss a few methods through which the state can help balance this lopsided funding mechanism.

"I don't need to reiterate the data points to show that SUNY students rely on the Tuition Assistance Program in order to recognize their dream of completing a degree. I have some additional figures regarding that program that I would like to share with you today. Of the roughly 40,000 graduate students that study and research at SUNY institutions, not one receives a single penny from the Tuition Assistance Program. Of the tens of thousands of students whose household income is above \$80,000 per year, none receive grants from the tuition assistance program. While that figure, \$80,000, seems generous, it is crucial to remember that our state has great geographic and financial diversity. A report from the New York Times shows that someone making \$70,000 a year in other parts of the state would need to make \$166,000 in Manhattan to enjoy the same purchasing power. And yet, our financial aid metrics don't accurately reflect these varying needs. It is right and just that students at the most vulnerable end of the socioeconomic spectrum receive vital support to ensure their success. However, we cannot leave the middle class behind. In abdicating responsibility and blaming some other state office, that is exactly what happens: The middle class gets left behind.

"This year, the student assembly created a tri-lateral plan to put SUNY on the path toward debt free higher education. There are three primary aspects to affordability: base funding, need based aid, and re-payment reform.

"We are dedicated to continue working with the legislature to secure a commitment to full maintenance of effort, and we are appreciative of this body's efforts to secure such. Over the course of the next 4 years, it appears as though state systems will be forced to reform internally without expectation of significant federal investment. As such we are looking to ally with the legislature to secure a matched commitment from the state for every additional dollar that students pay in tuition.

"On the subject of the Tuition Assistance Program itself: While generous, this program has long been in need of both expansion and reform. It is easy to be comforted by figures that show SUNY students below national student debt averages but that should not desensitize us to the fact that these graduates are facing more than a decade of being saddled by inescapable high interest debt. We must modernize financial aid metrics. The system in place currently gives us

only a warped perception of a family's ability to afford a college education. We need a more sophisticated approach to financial aid; to consider purchasing power and regional cost of living and reflect those in determining eligibility for financial aid awards.

“We also need to smooth the financial speed bumps preventing many students from pursuing advanced degrees which compound many of the same benefits I discussed before. We need to reinstate TAP for graduate students if we are to have any hope of competing with other public research universities in size and prestige.

“Research across the country and right here in New York show that the system is trending toward non-traditional part time students. Often, these students are left with little to no financial aid which can slow or completely eliminate any hope of completion.

“Students are not without common sense. We are keenly aware of difficult fiscal realities, in fact, likely more so than any other constituency in the state. We appreciate the fact that expanding TAP eligibility comes with a sizable price tag. But to everyone who says “New York State simply cannot afford this increase” I reply “That’s what the Students of SUNY have been saying for the past half decade”.

“I thank you all for your time and I urge you to stand with the students and the families of New York in your deliberations.”