### Testimony of Vice Chancellor Reine T. Sarmiento City University of New York – Enrollment Management The New York City Council | April 29, 2025

Good morning, Chair Dinowitz and distinguished Council Members. My name is Reine Sarmiento, and I serve as Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Management at the City University of New York. Thank you for the opportunity to testify about how removing small financial barriers can transform student outcomes and, in turn, strengthen the social and economic vitality of New York City.

Across our city, over 640,000 working-age adults have some college credit but no degree. These students started strong but had to stop out—often due to a few hundred dollars owed, or a missed financial aid deadline. Behind every number is a New Yorker with a dream—a real life that can change dramatically with just a little help.

The return would be extraordinary if even half of these New Yorkers completed their degrees. We know that most of our graduates stay in their community; this would mean \$6 billion more in annual earnings, \$2.8 billion in new tax revenue, more than 57,000 people lifted out of poverty, and tens of thousands fewer relying on Medicaid, SNAP, or housing assistance.

Thanks to your leadership, we already have a model that works. CUNY Reconnect, launched in 2022 with your support, proves that when we reach out to adult learners, remove small financial hurdles, and offer personalized support, students return—and they succeed. More than 47,000 New Yorkers have returned to CUNY through Reconnect in just a few years, and over 8,500 have already completed their degrees.

Our Reconnect students come from every corner of the city: 27% live in Queens, 26% in Brooklyn, 22% in the Bronx, 10% in Manhattan, and 6% in Staten Island. They are overwhelmingly women and people of color. Many are working parents and first-generation college students. They represent the richness, resilience, and potential of New York City.

Let me share one story that brings this home. Danys Valdez, a 24-year-old Bronx resident, dropped out of Lehman College in 2020 when she became a single mother and lost her job during the pandemic. She thought her college dream was over. But through Reconnect, with support around childcare and flexible class scheduling, Danys re-enrolled and is now on her way to earning her degree in accounting. That is what Reconnect provides: a bridge between aspiration and opportunity.

And yet, the need remains enormous. In the 2024 aid year, over 15,000 CUNY students have unpaid balances, preventing them from registering. Among these students, more than 8,200 undergraduates owe \$2,000 or less. More than 12,000 students facing these barriers

are Black or Latino—that's about 75 percent of the impacted population. Over 500 students with disabilities are also locked out, with the majority owing less than \$2,000.

When we look across our boroughs, it is unsurprising that the communities most economically challenged are those where student debt is most concentrated. The Bronx, which faces the highest poverty rates in the city, has nearly 4,000 students with balances. Brooklyn has 4,386 students with outstanding balances, Queens has 3,863, Manhattan has 1,652, and Staten Island has 603. These New Yorkers have already made the effort to enroll, study, and persist—and they are now stalled by relatively small debts that, for them, are real and often insurmountable barriers.

This work is not new for CUNY. For 175 years, CUNY has been the engine of upward mobility for New Yorkers, especially for immigrants, low-income students, and communities of color. Today, while over half live below poverty, 44 % are the first to attend college. We are proud of that legacy—and Reconnect is extending it for a new generation.

In closing, this work is critical to CUNY's Lifting New York Strategic Roadmap, which promises to improve access and create greater social mobility for our citizens. We have the infrastructure, the experience, and the commitment to scale these programs and serve as a national model for how cities can reclaim their untapped talent. That is why we respectfully ask for your continued partnership. We ask that you provide baseline funding for CUNY Reconnect to ensure it can continue changing lives at scale. Together, we can help thousands more New Yorkers become graduates, taxpayers, homeowners, and community leaders. Together, we can show that no barrier is too small to fix when the payoff is so great—for the student, their family, and the future of New York City.

At this time, I would like to invite my colleague, University Director for Strategy Operations, Dzelika Daniel, to share additional information about metro card relief and fee waivers -- two initiatives that are part of our comprehensive strategy to remove barriers and ensure that every New Yorker has the opportunity to succeed.

New York City Council

Higher Education Committee

April 29, 2025

Testimony of Dzelika Daniel

Good afternoon, Chair Dinowitz and esteemed members of the Higher Education Committee and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

My name is Dzelika Daniel, and I serve as the University Director for Strategy and Operations for CUNY Reconnect at the City University of New York. We are proud to have launched and implemented the Council's Reconnect initiative, which has—within just a few years—successfully re-engaged more than 47,500 adult learners. These are New Yorkers who have returned to college to complete their degrees and build brighter, more secure futures for themselves and their families. With such significant impact comes an equally significant responsibility: to ensure that students are welcome to apply—but also meaningfully supported. Because behind every data point is a person. A real life. A real story. And above all, human dignity must guide our work.

The most initial hurdle in applying to college begins with the application fee. The cost of the CUNY Undergraduate first-year application is \$65, Transfer application \$70 with Graduate application costs ranging from \$75 to \$135, based on program. Application fee waivers are especially important in New York City, a city with the federal Title I designation, which has received comparatively a lower share of federal education funding in recent years. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, during the 2021–22 school year, New York

City public schools received only 7.3% of their funding from the federal government—amounting to approximately \$2,489 per K–12 student—compared to the national average of 13.7%. This is particularly concerning, as many NYC students come from low-income households and attend under-resourced schools<sup>1</sup>. These waivers help level the playing field by promoting equity and giving students from all backgrounds a fair chance to apply to college. In a city where education funding often has to stretch across large, diverse student populations, waivers are a key tool in supporting first-generation college applicants and those who may not have access to the same guidance or resources. They remove a major barrier and empower students to pursue more opportunities without being limited by cost.

For Fall 2024, there were 94, 469 first-year applicants of which 77,000 were residents of the five boroughs, with 47% being Pell eligible. Fee waivers expand possibilities creating real pathways to higher education. Similarly, fee waivers for graduate school can continue ensuring equity for both recent graduates with limited income and working professionals who are supporting their families. By further equitizing the playing field, financial hardship will not stop qualified candidates from pursuing advanced degrees. An educated pool of workers brings innovation, economic growth, and a stronger, more adaptable workforce. It leads to higher productivity, better problem-solving, and a greater capacity for NYC industries to evolve with technology and global trends. Educated workers also contribute to healthier communities, higher civic engagement, and a more competitive NYC economy overall.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> USA Facts. (2023). What percentage of public school funding comes from the federal government? Retrieved from <a href="https://usafacts.org/answers/what-percentage-of-public-school-funding-comes-from-the-federal-government/state/new-york/">https://usafacts.org/answers/what-percentage-of-public-school-funding-comes-from-the-federal-government/state/new-york/</a>

Another financial barrier often overlooked is transportation. Considered a hidden cost when attending college, it may not be factored into the direct cost of education since it is not included on a tuition bill. But in New York City, the cost of commuting is \$1768 per year, for a 7-day weekly OMNY full fare card of \$34. Despite the Fair Fares program's expansion of income eligibility to 145% of the federal poverty level, a family of four earning \$50,000 per year, would not qualify. 145% of the 2025 Federal Poverty level is \$46,617 for a family of four. If all four family members work or attend college, their transportation cost exceeds \$7000 per year. Commuting cost places an overwhelming strain on already limited household budgets but are essential to a student's ability to persist. For many low-income students, this gap is not theoretical.

As the University continues to gain deeper insight into the persistent barriers' learners face, we remain steadfast in our commitment to eliminating them. We know that uplifting individuals and families uplifts entire communities.

Our students are balancing full-time jobs, part-time work, parenting responsibilities, caregiving duties, or periods of unemployment. And yet, they continue to show up—because they are not just pursuing a degree. They are trying to survive, support their families, and disrupt generational cycles of poverty.

This work is not only about accessibility. It is about recognizing that to build an equitable and educated city, we must first be kind, be human, and meet people where they are.

That means investing in the resources that enable students to begin enrolling, with application fee waivers and remain enrolled with the coverage of commuter costs. A single missed paycheck should never be the reason someone has to give up their education.

To fully reaffirm New York City's leadership in equitable education and advance its mission of access for all, we recommend the following targeted actions to remove small yet impactful barriers:

- 1. Expand application fee waivers for low-income New York City residents seeking to enroll, ensuring cost is never a deterrent to opportunity.
- 2. **Provide transportation assistance**, so that travel expenses do not hinder students' ability to attend and engage fully in their education.

With the right support, CUNY students not only graduate—they transform lives, elevate communities, and strengthen New York. Thank you for your time, your partnership, and your belief in what is possible when we center people—when we choose access, equity, and kindness.

# New York City Council Higher Education Committee April 29, 2025

#### Testimony of Jacqueline Higginson George

#### Impact of the CUNY Reconnect Initiative

Good afternoon, members of the Higher Education Committee. My name is Jacqueline Higginson George, and I am a proud student at Baruch College, embarking on my journey as an adult learner thanks to the invaluable support and spirit of the CUNY Reconnect Initiative.

Just a few short years ago, I considered myself well-established in my career, having spent years climbing the ladder in the airline industry, ultimately serving as a General Manager of airline operations at major hubs like JFK and Newark. I have dedicated myself to my work and achieved significant success. However, the unforeseen restructuring of my company in 2022 left me unexpectedly unemployed and facing the daunting reality of supporting my three children, two of whom were in college themselves.

Suddenly, my years of experience, while significant, were not enough. I quickly discovered that comparable leadership roles overwhelmingly required a college degree. Despite my persistent efforts, interview opportunities were scarce, highlighting a barrier I had never anticipated.

It was during this challenging period that I made the pivotal decision to return to school full-time while continuing my job search. The CUNY Reconnect Initiative became a beacon of hope for me. Knowing that there was a program specifically designed to support adult learners like me, who often face unique obstacles, provided a crucial sense of encouragement and direction.

Reconnect wasn't just a name; it was a lifeline. It acknowledged the reality that returning to education after years away can be daunting. It offered resources and a framework that made the prospect of navigating college as an adult feel less overwhelming. The very existence of the initiative signaled that CUNY understood and valued the experiences and potential of returning students. I was compelled to apply for a Reconnect grant, sharing my story of career disruption and my determination to pursue higher education. The process itself was incredibly valuable. It compelled me to articulate my journey, my challenges, and my aspirations in a way that solidified my commitment to education. It made me feel seen and understood by the institution. I was awarded a grant which arrived at a critical juncture. This funding was a profound relief, a lifeline

#### New York City Council

#### Higher Education Committee

April 29, 2025

#### Testimony of Peter Dachille Jr.

Good afternoon members of the Higher Education Committee,

I am Peter Dachille Jr, an academic advisor at Baruch College, and advisor to Reconnect Students like Jacqueline George. I appreciate this opportunity to be here today and attest to the academic and financial support that Reconnect brings to students.

Though we strive to have the pursuit of a college degree a focused goal, many factors- supporting a family, employment, rents and cost of living, then placing tuition on top of it all, it's not surprising that academic pursuits frequently get put aside. Now, I say put aside, not abandoned. For students that we work with at ReConnect, their degree has not disappeared from their life goals; and from the responses that we have had, our outreach was the catalyst for returning, and the benefits are what bring them to completion.

With over two hundred thirty thousand students in CUNY colleges, there is a fear of getting lost in the mix, and if you take even one semester off for any reason, you fall through the cracks. I incorporate into my daily goal in advisement that every student knows their individual goals are shared, that I will meet them wherever they are, and see them through to graduation. But what about when that support isn't enough to prevent those pauses? Two factors I see every day are, academic and financial. They are the bases for decision making in the best of times, and deal-breakers in the uncertain ones.

During our first reconnect meetings in 2023, Jacqueline and I reviewed new requirements for an updated curriculum, a potential factor in discouraging anyone's return: however, Jacqueline's approach in navigating this with her other responsibilities was intentional and successful. As she progressed, subsequent conversations shifted to the intangibles - overall and major GPA's, course outcome planning, and throughout knowing advisors were there, for an answer or clarity at any level.

When reconnecting, students bring their real world strengths. Time management and patience; Reconnect students understand measured course schedules. Many times, they change their original major, their jobs being the foundation of their career, with the degree being the supplement to that next level. There is a seasoned stake holding in what they bring to -and expect from-their academics. But most of all they bring a new found appreciation and love for the college environment, they join clubs, collaborate on initiatives, and embrace their Bearcat pride - with that enthusiasm towards their 'traditional' classmates reciprocated. These are the tenets of Reconnect

students- resilience, grit, the ability to make experience based decisions, and finding solutions to inhibiting factors towards their academic pursuits.

As I have alluded to though, academic obstacles are a direct line to financial contexts which are themselves aligned with academic timelines and curricular guidelines- if there is an issue with completing even just one prerequisite course at or by a certain time, that likely prevents getting a full time schedule the next semester, compounded by no longer qualifying for state/federal aid or scholarships, spiraling further towards a bursar hold, not being able to pay that existing balance, and the specter of incurring that debt right back the next semester becomes the breaking point. I have a quote from writer Henry Wheeler Shaw "Debt is like any other trap, easy enough to get into, but hard enough to get out of."

Having Completion and Forgiveness grants is vital to lifting that burden, breaking that spiral, so that students can focus on their coursework, while planning, with renewed vigor, the next and final steps to their degree.

These grants, aligned with Reconnect as a whole, together create direct impactful solutions of academic and financial support for those at risk, with students who recognize and value this outreach, the opportunity, the sincerity and backing we have to their goal. With each student we bring back, and see off with a degree in hand, we increase the reputation of the impact of a CUNY education into the workforce and community.

Thank you.

#### **Testimony of Eli Dvorkin**

#### Knocking Down the Nontuition Financial Barriers to College Access and Success at CUNY

Editorial and Policy Director, Center for an Urban Future
Before the New York City Council Committee on Higher Education
Oversight Hearing on Removing Small Financial Barriers for CUNY Students
April 29, 2025

Good morning. I'm Eli Dvorkin, editorial and policy director at the Center for an Urban Future, an independent think tank focused on creating a stronger and more inclusive economy in New York. Thank you to Chair Dinowitz and members of the Committee for the opportunity to testify.

CUNY is already New York City's most powerful engine of economic mobility. But with the right investments, it can help thousands more New Yorkers earn a college credential and move into the middle class.

One of the best recent examples is **CUNY Reconnect**, which has already helped **more than 47,000 New Yorkers**—the majority women and people of color—return to CUNY and resume their education, with **over 6,400 students** earning a credential so far. That's an incredible achievement. But there is still a long way to go: more than **640,000 working-age New Yorkers** today have some college credits but no degree.

Our research shows that one of the biggest barriers preventing more New Yorkers from reenrolling is **unpaid balances**—often less than \$1,000. Even small debts can block students from coming back or cause them to stop out before finishing. As one nonprofit leader told us, even an unpaid balance of \$250 "can be an incredible burden" that derails working adults from returning to college.

To help thousands more New Yorkers take advantage of Reconnect, we recommend launching a **CUNY Fresh Start** initiative to clear unpaid balances up to \$1,000 for students who started but have not completed their degree. Fresh Start would build on the success of Reconnect and open the door for thousands more working adults to rejoin CUNY and reenter the economy stronger.

But getting students back is only part of the challenge. Once they return, they need the right supports to persist and succeed.

That's why we urge the Council to support the launch of **CUNY Flex**: a model of wraparound support—including free MetroCards, hands-on advising, and technology access—for part-time students. Many adult learners, balancing work and family, simply cannot attend college full-time—and it shows: just **51 percent** of adult learners who transfer to a CUNY senior college earn a bachelor's degree within six years, compared to **65 percent** of younger transfer students. Unlike ASAP and ACE, which are only for full-time students, CUNY Flex would meet students where they are.

In addition, we encourage support for a **free MetroCard pilot** for CUNY students. Our research has found that transportation costs are one of the biggest non-tuition barriers to college success—especially for the 90 percent of CUNY community college students who rely on public transit to get to class.

By knocking down these barriers, this Council can help thousands more New Yorkers enroll in CUNY, complete a credential, and get on the path to economic mobility, while building a stronger future for New York.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.



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### NYC Council Committee on Higher Education Hearing Subject: Removing Financial Barriers for CUNY Students

Testimony of Daniel Reden, Chairperson of the CUNY University Student Senate & CUNY Trustee

Apr 29, 2025

Good Afternoon, Chair Dinowitz and the esteemed members of the New York City Council Committee on Higher Education.

My name is Daniel Reden, and I have the honor of serving as the Chairperson of the University Student Senate (USS) and as a Student Trustee on the City University of New York (CUNY) Board of Trustees. Today, I stand before you, representing over 245,000 CUNY students across our 25 campuses—students who, despite facing numerous challenges, are unwavering in their pursuit of higher education.

We are living through unprecedented times. I am part of a generation of young people who are struggling to afford housing, food, education, and transportation—in short, I am surrounded by young people who are struggling to live. On top of that, our communities have been besieged by budget cuts at the state and federal levels for some decades now. But we all see that the pace at which things are changing is accelerating. We see how quickly things can change in just 100 days.

I know that it is difficult to ignore all of the noise coming from outside of New York City. And I am not suggesting that we should downplay the seriousness of our national struggles. But I am suggesting that we remember something I heard many legislators say, which is that "all politics is local" or to "think globally and act locally." And so, in the spirit of that old and sage advice, I come before my local government to ask that we do more to support our students.

In recent years, CUNY has made great strides in addressing student needs as the level of need continues to rise. Every campus hosts a food pantry open to any CUNY student, and in 2024 alone, CUNY saw over 200,000 visits. Our resource centers remain a critical touchpoint for emergency support. With the growth of Open Educational Resources, students can access zero-cost course materials from the first day of class.

Over the past couple of years the University Student Senate has taken the lead in advocating for free public transportation for CUNY students. You see, we recognize that you cannot begin to learn until you get to your destination. And this is part of our much wider advocacy to fully fund the educational experience that made CUNY the institution it is today. Of course we are still





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fighting for lower tuition rates and better facilities and full-time faculty. We are committed to fighting for our students on all fronts.

Providing free MetroCards to CUNY students would remove a quiet but persistent barrier to college completion. It's not a luxury, it's a bridge to the classroom, to opportunity, and to staying in CUNY.

Thank you for your continued support of CUNY and for considering ways to ensure students don't just enroll but stay, succeed, and thrive.





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### NYC Council Committee on Higher Education Hearing Subject: Removing Financial Barries for CUNY Students

Testimony of Akkeem Polack, Vice Chairperson for Legislative Affairs of the CUNY University Student Senate

Apr 29, 2025

Good afternoon, Members of the New York City Council Committee on Higher Education,

My name is Akkeem Polack. I'm a student at York College and serve as Vice Chair for Legislative Affairs for the University Student Senate, representing more than 245,000 students across the CUNY system. I want to talk about the real financial barriers students face every day—barriers that may seem small from the outside, but are significant enough to impact whether we can continue our education.

I recently reviewed a report from the Center for an Urban Future. This report was concerned with the subject of this hearing and it found that nontuition expenses like MetroCards, textbooks, technology and childcare are barriers to CUNY community college students and contribute to the thousands of students that drop out each year without a degree. I suspect that everyone here intuitively understands and is not surprised by the findings of this report. Indeed, the rising cost of living functions as a barrier to higher education.

At the top of that list is transportation. Most rely heavily on public transit to attend class, work, internships, and support their families. A MetroCard or OMNY card is just as important as a textbook for our students. But with fares rising, that daily cost is becoming too much for many students to carry. We're calling on the City to fund free MetroCards and OMNY cards for all CUNY students.

This would make an immediate difference. When a student chooses between commuting to class and picking up a shift to pay rent, education loses. Reliable, free transit would help keep students in school, on time, and on track to graduate. Another cost that's becoming harder to manage is textbooks. There's been talk for years about Open Educational Resources (OER)—free or low-cost course materials—but in my experience, they're not widely used across the system. This semester, I had to spend over \$200 to do my homework for one class because the required textbook came with a one-time-use code. You can't borrow it, share it, or buy it used. That's a real burden.

If CUNY is serious about affordability, we need to see real investment in expanding OER—across more departments, courses, and campuses. No student should have to choose





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between paying bills and buying access to class assignments. These are not major overhauls. They're practical, targeted changes that would ease the pressure on students and make it easier to succeed.

Thank you for your time and for continuing to support CUNY students. We hope to work together to remove the barriers that get in the way of our education.

From: <u>Harold Forsythe</u>
To: <u>Testimony</u>

Subject: [EXTERNAL] CUNY Budget for new FY Date: Wednesday, April 23, 2025 2:48:16 PM



I wrote this City Council Committee during the budget process last year. I write again to urge that you give special consideration to CUNY's community colleges.

I am an Adjunct Lecturer in History at CCNY. I spent 26 years at a community college on the West Coast before moving to a Senior College here in the Northeast. (I am now semi-retired but still teaching.)

If anything, the situation in public higher education is more serious than it was last year. We have approximately one million young people in public K-12. The current financial attacks on a set of wealthy private universities will almost certainly cause them to depend more on tuition and perhaps cut back on scholarships. CUNY, which has always been the main choice of our high school graduates, will be even more in demand in the coming few years.

My experience in education tells me that these younger generations are required to know more math and be more technology sophisticated than my generation ever was. They also must be equally as skilled at written English as those who came before them.

Many will be prepared in secondary school for the challenges of freshman year at Colleges like Hunter, Brooklyn, or Lehman. Others, perhaps 100,000+ a year will benefit from the focused training at our community colleges. I do not think we as a society have a choice but to make sure that as many as possible earn a B.A. or B.S.

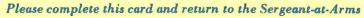
Young New Yorkers will leave secondary school this decade to study and work. If our Government provides them with a range of resources to achieve an education for skilled positions, they will build families, pay taxes, and participate in the American experiment of democratic self-government. If our Government does not do this, these young people will remain New Yorkers: on near minimum-wage, pressed by the high cost of housing, food, and medical care. You members of our Council know more fully than I do what these two contending fates mean for New York City in the 2030s.

Many of the elected leaders in PSC and many of my colleagues will testify in person or in writing on specific programs and budget items. I feel best qualified to testify about what I think is the larger picture. The largest generation in US History is withdrawing from work at every level and the US in general, and New York City in particular, needs more teachers, engineers, and a range of highly skilled workers to keep society functioning. This will not be mere expense, it is an investment that I am certain will pay for itself. Please plan for the future now!

Respectfully, Harold Forsythe CCNY, Department of History and PSC-CUNY

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