

Testimony of Dr. Reine Sarmiento
Vice Chancellor of Enrollment Management
City University of New York

CUNY Reconnect
New York City Council
Higher Education Committee
Thursday, November 30, 2023

Good morning, Chair Dinowitz and esteemed members of the Higher Education Committee. I am Dr. Reine Sarmiento, Vice Chancellor of Enrollment Management at the City University of New York, and with me is Dr. Fernando Delgado, President of Lehman College located in the Bronx, Ms. Dzelika Daniel, University Reconnect Director for Enrollment Strategy and Operations, and Reconnect student Grace Hamler, of Medgar Evers situated in Brooklyn. We are truly grateful for the opportunity to share CUNY's progress of the CUNY Reconnect Initiative, which was generously funded by Speaker Adrienne Adams and the New York City Council.

The Reconnect Initiative is a transformative force within the City University of New York. It is dedicated to facilitating the enrollment of first-time adults and the re-enrollment of individuals in New York who possess college credits but still need to complete their degrees.

Our work began in the fall of 2022, in which we identified over 100,000 former CUNY students who accumulated credits without obtaining a degree in the last five years. The Reconnect team reached

out and actively engaged learners with aspirations to enhance their educational and professional trajectories. With much effort and determination, we have three essential outcomes to share:

Outcome 1: RECONNECT ENROLLMENT: CUNY is happy to report that approximately 25,000 students returned to our CUNY campuses!

Outcome #2: RECONNECT STUDENTS - In the first year of Reconnect, the University surpassed its enrollment target by 70%, admitting 17,065 students, with a noteworthy 59% of the cohort being female. Equally significant is the demographic composition, with 67% of the enrolled students identifying as Black or Hispanic—a testament to the initiative's unwavering commitment to diversity and inclusivity. Geographically, the majority distribution of enrolled students constitutes over 90% from the five boroughs. The borough with the highest percentage is Queens with about 30%. Impressively, 9,289 students re-enrolled at the same CUNY college in Fall 2023.

Outcome #3: OUR IMPACT: Approximately 1,600 undergraduate students have already completed a degree or certificate¹. What does this mean for New York City, as most of our alumni stay close to home after graduation? We estimate CUNY associate graduates to have a lifetime earnings of \$2,497,443 and CUNY baccalaureate graduates to have a lifetime earnings of \$2,929,825. Looking at the data by degree completion, 757 received associate degree and 903 their bachelor degree, contributing to an overall increase of \$1.9 billion compared to the collective lifetime earnings of the same number of high school graduates². This is significant as NYS high school graduates have an estimated to have lifetime earnings of \$1,583,067³.

¹ Preliminary data, Office of Applied Research, Evaluation and Data Analytics

² Based on data from the New York State Department of Labor

³ 2022 American Community Survey

Looking forward to FY 2024, early data shows that we are 62% of our 15,000-student target, enrolling 9,255 students in the Fall 2023 semester, with consistent demographic trends.

The Reconnect Initiative supports students and assists the campuses by expanding access to resources and establishing one-stop enrollment centers at CUNY colleges that previously lacked such facilities.

These centers serve as streamlined hubs for essential services (including financial aid, registration, and advisement) while also providing referrals for support services such as Veterans Services, Childcare, and Tutoring. In our first year, the Welcome Center at York College in Jamaica, Queens, launched on November 27th, 2023, and we hope to attend the opening of a center at the College of Staten Island's Willowbrook campus in 2024.

In support of CUNY Lifting New York, the University's Strategic Roadmap, we are on the road to becoming a national leader in providing access and economic mobility for diverse populations of adult students. Esteemed members of the Higher Education Committee - I know that financial cuts will be challenging for many, and difficult decisions must be made. But we have worked very hard to demonstrate the impact that CUNY Reconnect can have in our fine city and request your support in working with the mayor's office to baseline our funding so we can continue to reach out to over 600,000 New Yorkers who have some college and no degree. Thank you for your time. Let me introduce Dr. Fernando Delgado, President of Lehman College in the Bronx.

Testimony of Fernando Delgado, President of Lehman College

The City University of New York

New York City Council Higher Education Committee Hearing on CUNY Reconnect Initiative

November 30, 2023

Good morning, Chairperson Dinowitz and members of the City Council Higher Education Committee. Thank you for giving me the chance to address you today regarding CUNY's Reconnect Initiative. I am Fernando Delgado, President of Lehman College, and I am here to showcase the successful enrollment of college stop outs and adult learners at Lehman College through Reconnect.

CUNY Reconnect Initiative for City Council Hearing

The college has embraced the Reconnect Initiative, initially focusing on stop-out students impacted by the COVID pandemic and then expanding our efforts to students who stopped out over the past five years. In total, 1,849 students have returned to Lehman to complete their degrees.

Targeted campaigns were developed for students who last attended Good Academic Standing, those who were not in Good Academic Standing, and those with outstanding financial liabilities to the college. Each campaign was supported by mail, email, text, and phone communications to encourage re-enrollment.

Students who express interest in returning to the college are assigned an advisor to work with them to minimize challenges when seeking to restart their academic journey. All students over the age of 24 are offered the opportunity to complete their studies as part of the college's Adult Degree Program, which allows the student greater flexibility in General Education requirements and the ability to complete a Life Experience Portfolio for credit to accelerate degree completion.

Additionally, students who express interest in returning with financial obligations to the college are supported with monetary awards of up to \$1,000 to satisfy outstanding balances. City Council funds supported over 100 students at Lehman this Fall semester. For these students, the college has also been flexible in developing payment terms that allow students to complete their studies while paying off prior balances.

Data regarding our Summer and Fall 2023 Reconnect efforts. In total, we had 1,849 students continue their education in either Summer or Fall as part of this initiative.

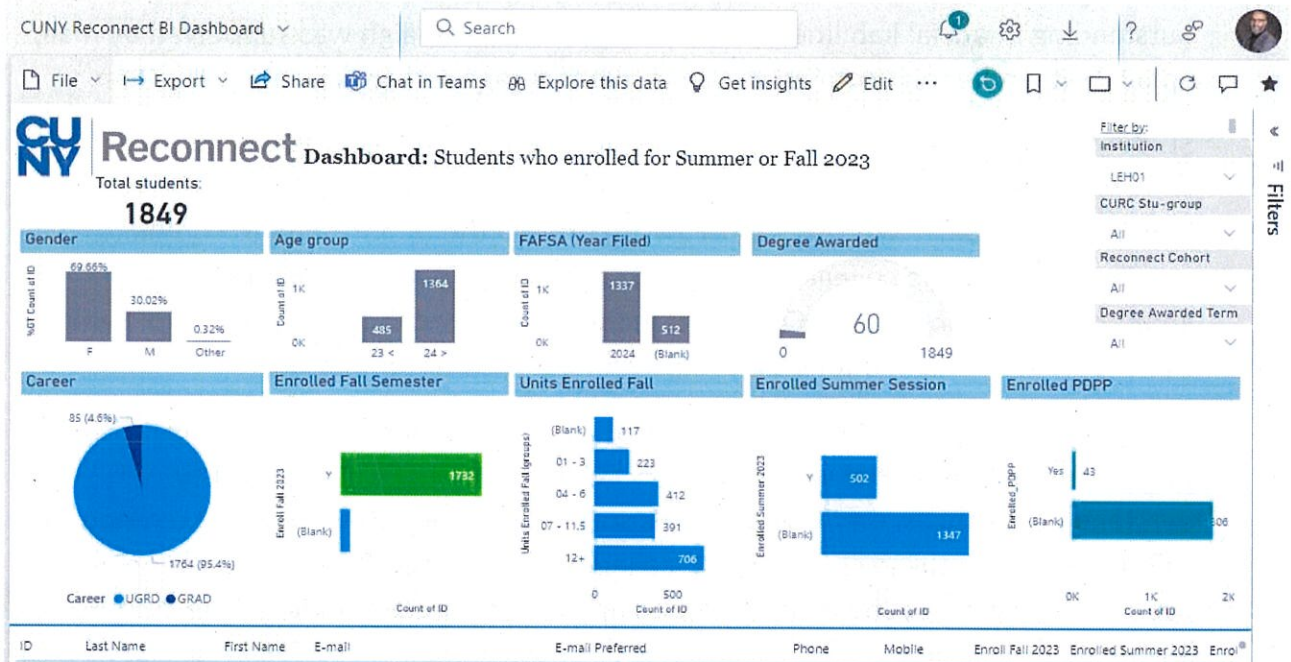
In addition to these re-enrollment numbers, 60 students who returned to Lehman since the start of this initiative have graduated.

We are launching our third campaign to reconnect with students to return to Lehman this Spring. Postcards, letters, and various electronic communications will go out soon. We want to help these students get their degree back on track. We can support these students with \$100,000 in micro-scholarships thanks to City Council funding. We anticipate being able to help 125 students return to Lehman with these funds.

Supports Provided to Reconnect Students:

- Dedicated Academic Advisor
- Assistance with FAFSA/TAP Application Completion.
- Work Study eligible students are able to apply for jobs on campus.
- Flexible payment terms.
- Access to Food Pantry, Career Closet, and Child Care Center
- Robus student services including Career Services, Counseling, and Disability Services.

[Lehman's Re-connect Dashboard]



Testimony of Dzelika Daniel
University Director of Strategy and Operations
City University of New York

CUNY Reconnect
New York City Council
Higher Education Committee
Thursday, November 30, 2023

Chair Dinowitz, distinguished members of the Committee, I am Dzelika Daniel, currently serving as University Director for Strategy and Operations at Reconnect. Previously, I held the role of Financial Aid Compliance Officer for the University with added experience managing an Enrollment Center.

Reconnect looks to address the challenges of adult learners such as admission hurdles, academic demands, and financial constraints. We know that adult learners have unique concerns such as juggling work and childcare in combination with taking classes. The combination of these factors contributes to high dropout rates among the demographic. These unique challenges required multi-dimensional support to help adults navigate their way, removing the proverbial “red tape” to help enrollment but also support for their life’s tasks. We are doing this with our CUNY Reconnect team of cross-trained professionals, known as CUNY Navigators, offering personalized counseling through various modalities.

Our CUNY Navigators ease readmission, conduct transcript evaluations, and coordinate transfers, among other duties, to systematically remove obstacles to re-enrollment. Reconnect addresses administrative burdens to prevent operational barriers with such tasks such as monthly Borough-

Wide meetings of college Navigator teams, a University Chatbot to answer to Admissions and Financial Aid inquiries, and by providing virtual counseling during off-hours, with the goal of enhancing the enrollment experience. We found that some returning students had prior balances barring re-enrollment. To address this, Reconnect supplied a Forgiveness grant to apply to earlier balances. Another challenge for the adult learner in affording college is the possible loss of financial aid eligibility based on poor, prior academic performance or having reached the maximum eligibility of federal and state financial aid awards. Reconnect provided the Completion Grant to help students with tuition costs not otherwise covered by financial aid programs.

As part of the Reconnect effort to outreach to the five boroughs of New York City, we extended a marketing campaign to target adult populations. We utilized *CollegeApp*, the Adult Prospect Pipeline program, for predictive analytics of heatmaps of New York City residents by neighborhood, county, and zip code, most likely to enroll in a college degree program. We extended our advertisements using digital, social and other forms of traditional media, including radio and print ads throughout the NYC Transit Authority system. With the understanding that many adults are parents needing consistent and dependable childcare options, we collaborated with CUNY Childcare in the revamp of their marketing materials, including printed brochures, website redesign and the creation of a video commercial.

For CUNY Month in October, we held several information sessions for prospective transfer and students educated outside of the United States who are looking to earn college credentials in America. Reconnect also hosted the first CUNY Adult Learner Fair at Medgar Evers College. We invite you to join us at our next fair in Midtown at the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies on December 7th, 2023. There, adults can meet with representatives from the CUNY colleges to

learn about their program offerings as well as attend break out sessions on the admissions application and financial aid processes.

We understand that adults returning to school want workable career options upon graduation. Reconnect in connection with the University Office of Careers and Industry Partnerships (OCIP) provided a comprehensive training curriculum accompanied by training seminars designed for admissions officers to provide adults with top-in-demand fields and related “meta-majors,” equipping them with skill set to demonstrate the correlation of academic programs with the most in-demand careers in New York.

To further support students, CUNY Reconnect aims to expand services, continue incentivizing enrollment, forgiving unpaid balances, and supplying free and invaluable counseling and resources. Our plan includes continued career recruitment, technology integration, and expanding on external marketing efforts. Expanding resources like childcare programs are crucial, requiring increased availability and extended hours for late nights and weekends, as some programs have limited spacing and availability. Building on these approaches, CUNY Reconnect’s groundswell support increases the adult learners’ probability of successful enrollment and completion of degrees, directly supporting CUNY’s strategic roadmap to lift the people, communities, and economies we serve.

In conclusion, the CUNY Reconnect Initiative has made significant strides in re-enrolling adult learners, addressing their unique challenges. We appreciate the ongoing support from the Higher Education Committee as we work towards increasing the enrollment, persistence and graduation rates of adults. Thank you for your support and consideration.

**Testimony of Grace Hamler
Student**

**CUNY Reconnect
New York City Council
Higher Education Committee
Thursday, November 30, 2023**

Good morning. My name is Grace Hamler, and I am a CUNY student.

That's easy to say but a few months ago, this wasn't the case....

I was scrolling on my cell phone one day when CUNY RECONNECT popped up with the message: If you have credits and have ever thought of returning to college to complete your degree, CUNY might be the place. It went on to describe what CUNY Reconnect aims to do.

Years earlier I had attended Hunter College briefly and accumulated a scarce few credit.... would that be enough? Still, I called the number and spoke with a gentleman there. His name, he said, was Joshua. I call him Josh!

From our very first conversation. Josh was beyond helpful and approachable. I told him in my prior college experience I hardly felt supported and that even so, life had gotten in the way!

We chatted about options, and I told him that days earlier on a Sunday Morning television show, I had seen the newly appointed Provost of Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn, a CUNY college. She said that while Medgar Evers is a CUNY college, it is also the closest equivalent of an HBCU in New York.

Josh was encouraging as he assured me that a CUNY degree is a CUNY degree and that irrespective of college or campus, it would carry the same weight.

Days later, took a ride over to Brooklyn to visit the college for the first time and took some flyers and other information on the admissions process.

Once I had assembled all that was required, I took my packet to the Admissions Department. There I met the Admissions Director who was also beyond supportive and helpful. As Josh had explained earlier, she told me exactly what to expect of the application process.

A couple of weeks later I was assigned an academic advisor and registered as a full-time student.

Today, at age 72 I am on the verge of completing my first full semester.

I am excited to embark upon this journey which surely would not have happened but for that CUNY Reconnect ad and Josh's clarity in helping me to navigate the system.

Thank you, Josh!

And thank you City Council for giving me this opportunity to speak.

CUNY Reconnect Ad Creatives

The Office of Communications & Marketing
November 27, 2023



Advertising Campaign



Applying to CUNY
is easier than ever.

Enroll now:
cuny.edu/reconnect

CUNY THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

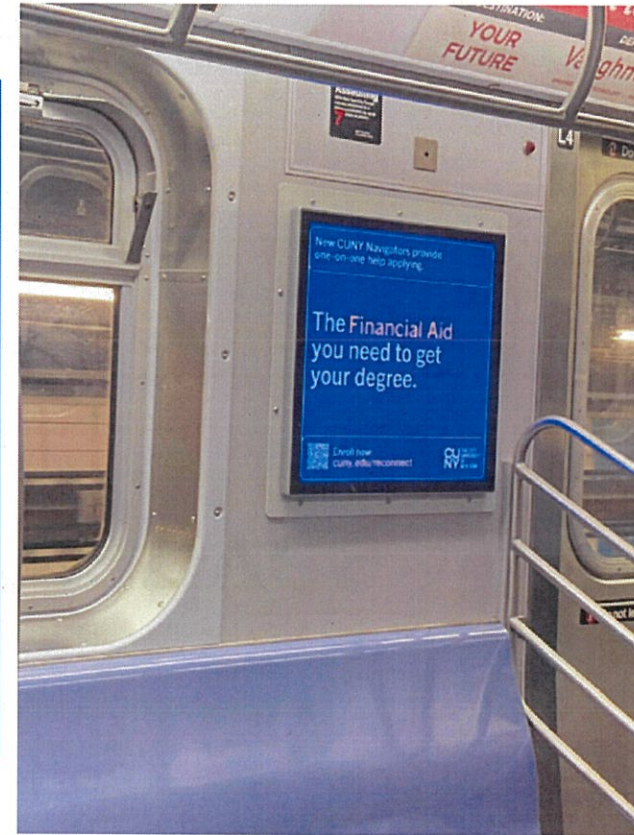


New CUNY Navigators provide one-on-one help applying.

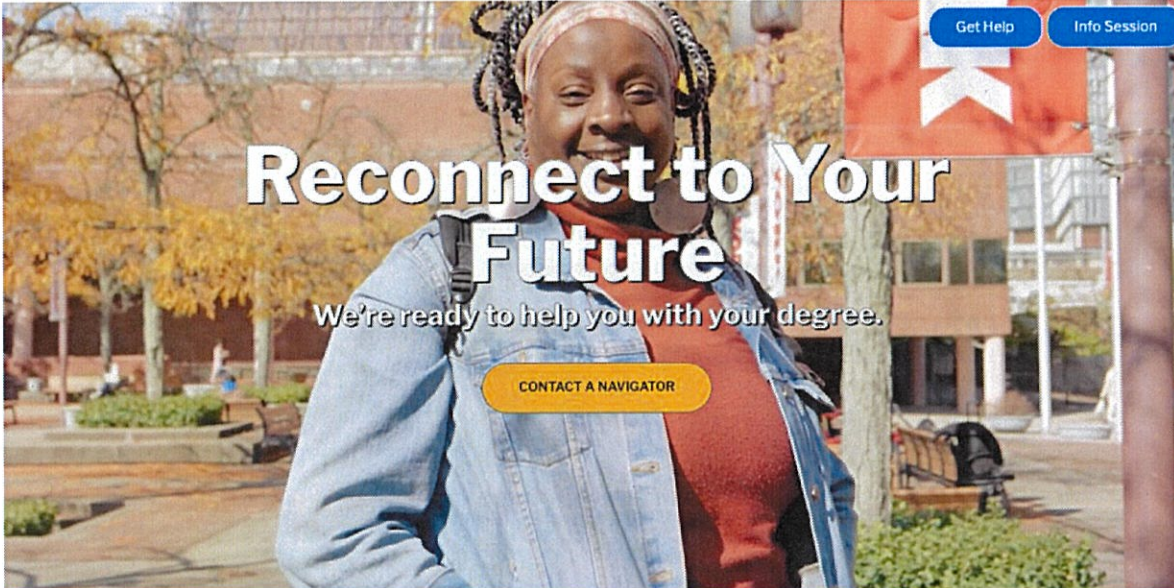
The Programs you need to get your degree.

Enroll now:
cuny.edu/reconnect

CUNY THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK



CUNY Reconnect Website



[Get Help](#) [Info Session](#)

Reconnect to Your Future

We're ready to help you with your degree.

[CONTACT A NAVIGATOR](#)

Reconnect is Different

Never attended college? Attended college at CUNY or elsewhere and didn't finish your degree? Looking to make a career change or earn a promotion? CUNY Reconnect is an initiative to help more adults return to higher education. Whether your goal is to learn new skills, boost your career, or complete a degree or certificate, Reconnect provides personalized support to help you navigate your next move.

The **Support** you need to get your degree.

CUNY Reconnect Website

Personalized Help

CUNY Reconnect will pair you with an advisor called a Navigator who will help you achieve your educational and career goals by:

- Choosing a new degree or certificate program
- Re-enrolling into a past program
- Understanding cost and financial aid options
- Sharing available services and resources
- Anything else you may need to meet your goals
- Providing financial aid grants

Reach out to a Reconnect Navigator today and take the first step!



CONTACT US

CALL US: (646) 664-3560



First-Time College Student?

Not to worry! We'll help you get started. We can walk you through your many options at CUNY and help you find your match!



Have Some College Credits?

Now's the time to come back to school. Restarting or transferring is an exciting journey. We're here to help you start planning your transition!



Affordable, High-Quality Child Care

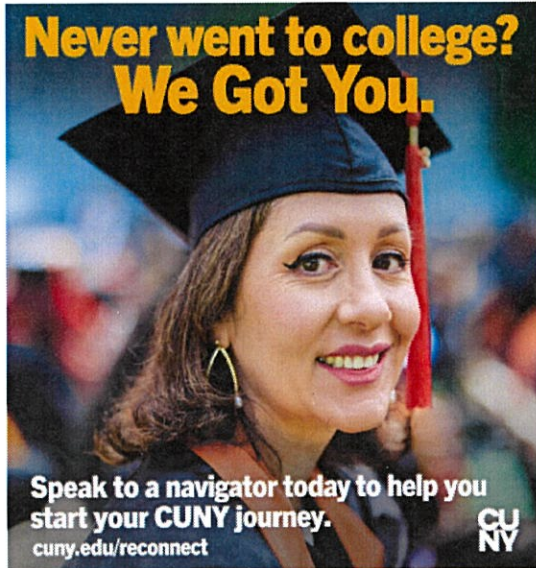
As a parent enrolled in CUNY, enjoy peace of mind knowing that while you study, your child is cared for in one of our 17 high-quality Early Childcare Centers. They offer a robust education for young children at an affordable price. [Complete an Interest Form here.](#)



Are You A Veteran?

We welcome veterans and their dependents who are all eligible to receive a CUNY Application fee waiver and are exempt from paying the commitment deposit.

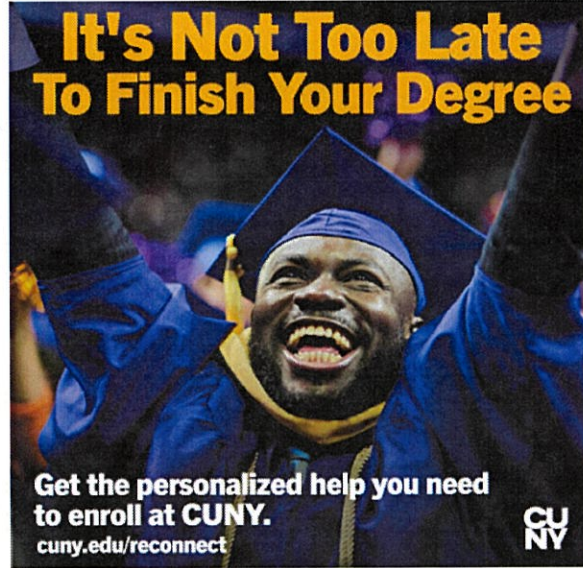
CUNY Reconnect Digital Ads



**Never went to college?
We Got You.**

Speak to a navigator today to help you start your CUNY journey.
cuny.edu/reconnect

CUNY



**It's Not Too Late
To Finish Your Degree**

Get the personalized help you need to enroll at CUNY.
cuny.edu/reconnect

CUNY



**Restart Your
Education**

Speak to a navigator now who will help you finish your degree.
cuny.edu/reconnect

CUNY



**CUNY Reconnect
Adult Learner Fair**

Learn how to start or continue your college education.

Register Today
December 7, 2023
5:00 - 7:30 pm
25 W 43rd St 18th floor,
New York, NY 10036
cuny.edu/AdultFair

CUNY THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

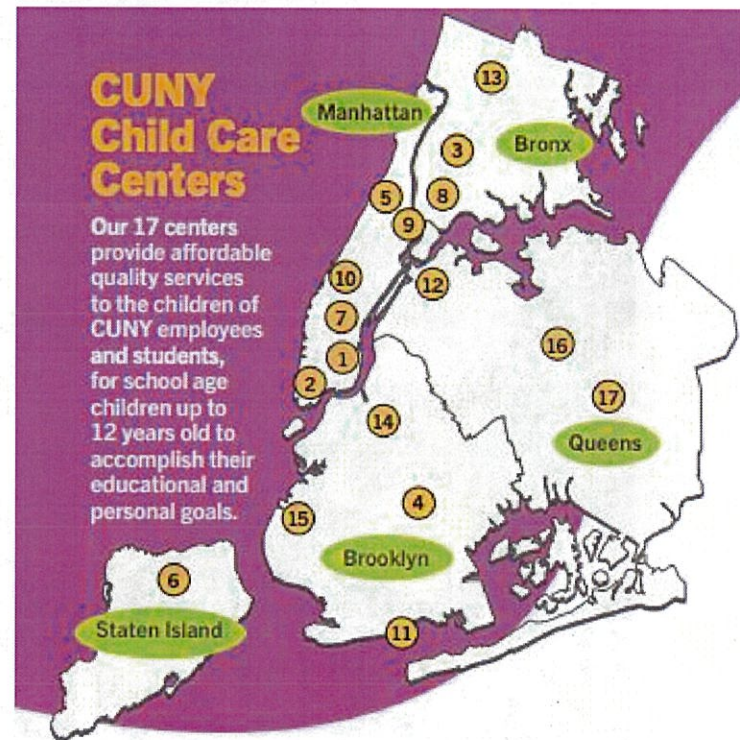


**Let's Start or Finish
Your College Degree**

Register Today
cuny.edu/AdultFair

CUNY THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

CUNY Child Care



Thank you!

The Office of Communications & Marketing



Testimony of Dr. Penny Lewis, Secretary
Professional Staff Congress/CUNY
Before the New York City Council Committee on Higher Education
Oversight: CUNY Reconnect
November 30, 2023

Good morning, I am Penny Lewis, Secretary of the Professional Staff Congress/CUNY and a faculty member at the School of Labor and Urban Studies. We represent 30,000 faculty and professional staff at CUNY. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about CUNY Reconnect.

We are happy to be testifying at a hearing that promotes a program that has exceeded expectations and brought thousands of students back into higher education at CUNY. The pandemic hit CUNY students particularly hard. And the many reasons students don't finish degrees persist, even after the worst of the pandemic is over: they care for children and parents; they work jobs that don't pay enough or give them the schedules and flexibility they need for school; and the financial costs of tuition as well as non-tuition expenses such as food, rent, books and transportation remain difficult if not impossible to meet.

This week at York College, Speaker Adams and Council Member Williams announced the expansion of a CUNY Reconnect Welcome Center celebrating that 25,000 students have come back to CUNY campuses through the program—doubling its original goal when it was launched in 2022.¹ This is clearly a remarkable success. And combined with changes by the Governor and CUNY that streamlines the application process, there is reason to be optimistic that enrollment is moving back towards its pre-pandemic levels.²

Yet, the reality for many of these students is that to stay enrolled until graduation, other pieces of the higher education puzzle must still come together. Are there enough faculty to teach classes so students can graduate on time? What about mental health counselors to help them adjust to returning to school while balancing childcare, other jobs or lack of financial support? Will their classrooms be well equipped?

¹ [Adrienne Adams on X: "Since the launch of @CUNY Reconnect last year, nearly 25,000 working-age New Yorkers have been re-enrolled in CUNY colleges. With the opening of @YorkCollegeCUNY's new Welcome Center, students will have a dedicated space to receive the support and guidance they need to succeed! https://t.co/Ugl8RoXbbe" / X \(twitter.com\)](https://t.co/Ugl8RoXbbe)

² [Governor Hochul Announces Transformation in Higher Education Enrollment Offering All New York High School Seniors a Place at SUNY and CUNY | Governor Kathy Hochul](#)

PSC is elated at the prospect of enrollment growth in new and returning students at CUNY. We're less happy that CUNY is not structurally or financially ready for this, making the job of members even more difficult than it is now. We have one advisor per over 1000 students at some campuses. The number of full time faculty is stagnant due to attrition. The Mayor has cut CUNY at every turn. CUNY administration again announces vacancy reduction plans. Governor Hochul has advised agencies to keep spending flat. We know another budget battle is upon us and our union will be fighting every day to see CUNY, our students and members get the support we need.

Finally, on behalf of our members, I want to thank the Council for its strong support of CUNY in the last Fiscal Year's budget and for fighting against the Mayor's budget cuts. We have a long way to go before the city's investment in CUNY reflects what our students and members contribute to the economy and culture of our city, and we're grateful to have the council on our side.

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____
 in favor in opposition

Date: 11/30/23

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Heather James
Address: 199 Chambers St. NY NY
I represent: PSC-CUNY 10007
Address: 25 Bway NY NY

**THE COUNCIL CUNY 11/30
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____
 in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Michael Shildy
Address: Wyckham Rd. Norwood, NJ 07648
I represent: CUNY - 205 East 42nd
Address: NY

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____
 in favor in opposition

Date: 11/30/2023

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: JOHN SORICO
Address: _____
I represent: CENTER FOR AN URBAN FUTURE
Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: 11/30/23

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Penny Lewis

Address: 28 Broadway Plaza 11 E

I represent: Professional Staff Congress

Address: 25 Broadway

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Grace Hamler

Address: Medgar Evers Student

I represent: CUNY

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Dzelika Daniel

Address: 205 East 42nd Street NYC

I represent: Director of Enrollment

Address: Strategy & Operations

THE COUNCIL 11/30-CUNY/
THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Dr. Reine Sarmiento

Address: 205 East 42nd Street NYC

I represent: CUNY

Address: Vice Chancellor of Enrollment

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

THE COUNCIL 11/30/23-CUNY
THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Dr. Edmundo Delgado

Address: President of Lehman College

I represent: CUNY

Address: _____

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms