

COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

1

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

----- X

TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

----- X

APRIL 29, 2025

Start: 1:42 p.m.

Recess: 3:35 p.m.

HELD AT: COMMITTEE ROOM - CITY HALL

B E F O R E: HON. ERIC DINOWITZ, CHAIR

COUNCIL MEMBERS: ERIK D. BOTTCHER
GALE A. BREWER
OSWALD FELIZ
CHRISTOPHER MARTE

COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Dr. Reine Sarmiento,
Vice Chancellor of Enrollment Management at City
University of New York (CUNY)

Dzelika Daniel
University Director for Strategy and Operation,
CUNY Reconnect at City University of New York
(CUNY)

Jacqueline Higgenson George,
Student Baruch College of City University of New
York (CUNY)

Peter Dachille, Junior
Academic Advisor at Baruch College of City
University of New York (CUNY)

Jeffrey Rodus,
Vice Chancellor for Government Affairs at City
University of New York (CUNY)

Michael Shields,
Deputy Director Institutional Research City
University of New York (CUNY)

Eli Dvorkin,
Editorial and Policy Director at the Center for
an Urban Future

Heather James,
Legislative Representative for PSC-CUNY

Daniel Reden,
CUNY Student Senate Chairperson and Student
Trustee at City University of New York (CUNY)

COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Akkeem Polack,
CUNY Student Senate Vice Chair for Legislative
Affairs at City University of New York (CUNY)

Sean Miller,
Northeast Regional Director at Young Invincibles,
New York

Lisa Nishimura,
The New York Engagement Coordinator at Young
Invincibles; CUNY Alum

Sharon Brown,
Rose of Sharon Enterprises

Christopher Leon Johnson,
Self

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Quiet down, please. Good afternoon, and welcome to today's New York City Council Hearing for the Committee on Higher Education. At this time, we ask that you please silence all electronic devices, and at no time are you to approach the dais.

If you would like to sign up for in person testimony, or have any questions throughout the hearing, please see one of the Sergeant at Arms.

Chair Dinowitz, we are ready to begin.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: [GAVEL] Good afternoon, I'm Council Member Eric Dinowitz, Chair of the Committee on Higher Education. Welcome to our oversight hearing on *Removing Small Financial Barriers for Cuny Students*.

And as I always remind everyone, I am a proud CUNY alum, and I am the son of a CUNY alum, the husband of a CUNY alum, and the brother of a CUNY alum. A proud, proud CUNY family.

The hearing today is entitled *Removing Small Financial Barriers for CUNY Students*. And I think for a lot of us in this room, and a lot of people in New York City, perhaps what are small financial barriers to us are not that small to other people. It may have

been a better title to call it "Removing *Relatively* Small Financial Barriers for CUNY Students", but we ran out of space.

So the barriers, some of these quote, unquote "small financial barriers", could be a \$65.00 application fee when you apply to CUNY; the balance of a couple of hundred dollars for a course you dropped or an outstanding balance for materials or a lab fee, for something else you did not finish paying, but that stays in your account and keeps you from re-enrolling for a new semester, sometimes years later, or even a MetroCard. Right? The \$5.80 round trip per day, again, is small, but that really adds up over the course of a week, a month, or a semester.

We're going to discuss all three of these barriers today. In her State of the City Address in March of 2025, City Council Speaker, Adrienne Adams, put forth a number of proposals that would increase initial and continued access to CUNY for current and prospective students. I've mentioned two of these proposals, CUNY Fresh Start, which would settle unpaid CUNY balances up to a thousand dollars for students so they're eligible to reenroll for classes,

and additional application fee waivers so low income prospective students can apply at no cost.

UNKNOWN: (BABY)

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: I know Alexander, that is a very exciting idea. You can continue to cheer for it. He's 11-months old.

So I just want to say CUNY Fresh Start was originally proposed in a report by the Center for an Urban Future, and we're pleased to have Eli Dvorkin here with us today, from Center for an Urban Future, to provide expert testimony.

On the topic of application fee waivers, I want to note that I would personally like to see all of those application fees go away for New York City residents.

And now to the MetroCards or OMNY Card or tokens depending how old you are. Subway tokens? What's *that*, you say? (LAUGHTER) I don't know either. They didn't... no one wrote tokens here. It's... So I just want to address to CUNY students who are here today. I know in, I think, every hearing we've had, not just the budget hearings, but in every hearing we've had on these critical issues, you've come and you've spoken about the importance of MetroCards or

OMNY Cards being a gateway to success for you or a barrier to your success, and I want to make clear that we heard you, which is why it is in this hearing today. We know the cost of commuting by public transportation can sometimes mean the difference between attending and not attending class on a given day or between accepting an internship off campus that requires an additional commute during the day. I would personally like to see every single CUNY student have free unlimited MetroCards.

And again, I want to acknowledge Center for an Urban Future, whose Executive Director, Jonathan Bowles, co-authored an op-ed piece in 2023 that calls for free MetroCards for all CUNY students – all CUNY community college students. He noted that in research on the topic, the cost of a MetroCard was the most often cited non-tuition reason for a student dropping out of CUNY.

I look forward to hearing some budget numbers from the CUNY administrators, who are here to talk about these issues that are so important to the students, the prospective students, and their families, and which might actually be solved by the

allocation of just a small fraction of New York City's annual budget.

I want to acknowledge my colleagues who are on the Committee on Higher Education, who are here with us today: Council Member Christopher Marte and Council Member Gale Brewer.

I also want to thank Adam Staropoli, my Legislative Director; Jenna Klaus, my Chief of Staff; Julia Goldsmith-Pinkham, the Committee's Senior Legislative Counsel; and Regina Paul, the Committee's Senior Legislative Policy Analyst.

I would like to remind everyone who wishes to testify in person today that you must fill out an appearance card, which is located on the desk of the Sergeant at Arms near the entrance of this room. Please fill it out, even if you have already registered to testify in advance.

To allow as many people to testify as possible, public testimony will be limited to two minutes per person. I am going to ask my colleagues to limit their questions and comments to five minutes.

Please note that witnesses who are here will testify before those on Zoom.

(PAUSE)

Okay, so I would like to call up the first panel to speak then from CUNY.

(PAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Now in accordance with the rules of the Council, I will administer the affirmation to the witnesses from CUNY.

Please raise your right hand.

Do you affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, in your testimony before this committee, and to respond honestly to council member questions?

PANEL AFFIRMS

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thank you.

As a reminder to all of our witnesses, please state your name, prior to the testimony, for the record.

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

the social student economic vitality of New York City.

Across our city, over 640,000 working age adults have some college but no degree. These students start strong but had to stop often for a few hundred dollars owed or missing financial aid deadline. Behind every member is a New Yorker with a dream and a real life that can change dramatically with just a little bit of help.

The return would be extraordinary if even half of those New Yorkers completed their degrees. We know that most of our graduates at CUNY stay within our community. So that would translate into \$6 million more annual earnings, \$2.8 billion in new tax revenue, and more than 57,000 people lifted out of poverty – and tens of thousands fewer relying on Medicaid, SNAP, housing assistance.

Thanks to your leadership we already have a model that works. CUNY Reconnect launched in 2022, with your support, and 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 I'm happy to report that over 8,500 have already graduated.

Our Reconnect students come from every corner of the city, primarily from Queens and Brooklyn, but hail from all of the boroughs. They are overwhelmingly women and people of color. Many are working parents, first gen college students, and they represent the richness, resilience and potential of New York City.

Let me just share one story that brings it home. Danys Valdez, a 24-year-old Bronx student, dropped out of Lehman College in 2020 — I believe that was when the pandemic happened — when she became a single mother and lost her job during the pandemic. She thought her dream was over, but through Reconnect, and with the support of childcare and flexible class scheduling, she enrolled and is now on her way to earning her degree in accounting. That's what Reconnect provides, a bridge between aspiration and opportunity.

And yet the need remains enormous. In 2024, uh, this year (sic), over 15,000 students, CUNY students, have unpaid balances preventing them from registering. Among these students, more than 8,200

undergrads owe \$2,000 or less. And more than 12,000 face barriers – that are Black or Latino – and that's 75% of our impacted population. Over 500 students with disabilities are locked out with the majority owing less than \$2,000.

When we look across the boroughs it is uninspiring that the communities most economically challenged are those with student debt is most concentrated. The Bronx, nearly 4,000 students; Brooklyn over 4,000; Queens, these New Yorkers have all made the effort to enroll, study, and persist. And now they are stalled by relatively small debts for them, often real, and insurmountable.

This is not new for CUNY. For over 175 years, CUNY has been an 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% attend... are the first to attend their college. 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 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 our cities and reclaim our untapped talent. That is why we respectfully ask for continued partnership. We ask that you provide baseline funding for CUNY Reconnect to ensure it can continue to change 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 Strategic Operations, Dzelika Daniel, to share additional information about MetroCard relief and fee waiver, two initiatives that are part of our comprehensive strategy to remove barriers and ensure that every New Yorker has an opportunity to succeed.

DIRECTOR DANIEL: Thank you, Reine.

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, I serve as the University

Director for Strategy and Operations at CUNY

Reconnect at the City University of New York. We're proud to have launched and implemented the Council's Reconnect Initiative, which has just in a few years successfully reengaged over 47,500 adult learners.

These are New Yorkers who've 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 the students are welcome to apply but also meaningfully supported.

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 applications \$70; with Graduate application costs ranging from \$75 to \$175.35 based on program.

Application fee waivers are especially important in New York City, a city with a federal Title I designation, which has received a comparatively lower share of federal education funding in recent years.

According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, during the 21-22 school year, New York City Public Schools received only 7.3% of their funding from the federal government – accounting for approximately \$2,489 per K through 12 student as compared to the national average of 13.7%. This is particularly concerning, as many New York City students come from very low income households and attend under resourced schools. These application waivers will help level the playing field, 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 the 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 Ed. 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 New York City industries to evolve with technology and global trends. Educated workers also contribute to healthier communities, higher civic engagement, and a more competitive New York City economy overall.

Another major financial barrier often overlooked is transportation. Considered a hidden cost when attending college, it may not be factored into direct cost of education since it's not included on a tuition bill. But in New York City, the cost of commuting is \$1,768 per year for a seven-day weekly OMNY full-fare card of \$34. Despite the Fair Fares Programs' expansion of income eligibility to a 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 actually \$46,617 for a family of four. If all four family members work or attend college, their transportation costs will exceed \$7,000 per year. Commuting costs places an overwhelming strain on already limited household budgets but are essential to a student's ability to persist.

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 requires uplifting entire communities. Our students are balancing full time jobs, part time work, parenting responsibilities, caregiving responsibilities, or periods of unemployment. And yet, they continue to show up, because they're not just pursuing a degree, they're trying to survive, support their families, and disrupt generational cycles of poverty. This work is not just about accessibility, it's about recognizing that to build an equitable and educated city, we must first be kind, be human, and meet people where they are.

This means investing in the resources that enable students to begin enrolling with application

fee waivers and remaining enrolled with the coverage of commuter costs. A single missed paycheck should never be the reason why someone has to give up their education.

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

One, expand application fee waivers for low income New York City residents seeking to enroll, ensuring that cost is never deterrent to opportunity.

And two, provide transportation assistance, so that travel expenses do not hinder a student's ability to attend and fully engage in their education.

With the right support, CUNY students not only graduate, they transform lives and 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.

I now defer to our student testimonial
Jacqueline Higgenson George.

JACQUELINE HIGGENSON GEORGE: Good afternoon, Members of the Higher Education Committee. My name is Jacqueline Higginson George, and I'm a proud student at Baruch College 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 Airport. I've 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 had who often face unique obstacles provided a crucial sense of encouragement and direction.

Reconnect wasn't just a name, it was a lifeline. It acknowledges that the reality of returning to education after years away can be daunting. It offers resources and a framework that make prospect of navigating college as an adult feel less overwhelming. The very existence of the initiative signaled that CUNY understood and valued my experiences and potential for 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, and I was awarded the grant which arrived at a critical juncture. This funding was a profound relief, a

lifeline that allowed me to cover the outstanding tuition that threatened to derail my studies, enabling me to continue my degree program without the constant weight of that uncertainty. This support came during a period when I was navigating not only underemployment, and the challenges of searching for a job, but also the complexities of a divorce and the responsibility of providing for my family as a single parent. The grant extended beyond tuition, providing crucial support for books, school supplies, and even transportation, easing the immense financial strain I was under. The unexpected generosity allowed me to truly focus on my studies, to immerse myself in learning, without the constant worry of basic necessities, ultimately contributing to my ability to achieve a 4.0 GPA by the summer of 2024.

The support I have received as a direct result of the Reconnect Initiative has been instrumental. Knowing that Baruch and CUNY have a dedicated focus on adult learners has fostered my sense of belonging and has motivated me to persevere through the significant financial and logistical challenges I face.

Returning to school has been a deeply rewarding experience. It has reignited my intellectual curiosity and provided me with invaluable knowledge in my Business major, knowledge that I know will make me a more effective leader in the future.

However, juggling part time employment to cover essential basic living expenses, navigating class schedules that often conflict with full time employment opportunities, and facing increasing costs for basic necessities like transportation, internet, and even textbooks are constant hurdles. The spirit of the Reconnect Program, the understanding and support it embodies is what keeps me going. It reminds me that my journey is valued and that CUNY is invested in my success.

Investing in initiatives like Reconnect is not just about providing financial aid, it's about creating a supportive ecosystem that empowers adult learners to overcome barriers, contributes to unique experiences, and ultimately enriches our communities and our workforce. The sheer number of applicants for the Reconnect Grant underscores the significant need and the immense potential within the adult learner population.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to the success of all CUNY students, including those of us who have taken a less traditional path to higher education. The Reconnect Initiative is a vital investment in our futures, and I urge you to consider the overwhelming demand and explore opportunities to expand its reach and funding, ensuring that more eligible students can benefit from its crucial support. My story, though still unfolding, is a testament to its profound impact, and I know countless others could thrive with the same opportunity.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thank you.

PETER DACHILLE, JR: Good afternoon, Members of the Higher Education Committee. I'm Peter Dachille, Jr., an Academic Advisor at Baruch College and advisor to Reconnect students like Jacqueline George.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Sir, could you speak into the microphone?

PETER DACHILLE, JR: Okay, yes.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: It's on, you just...

PETER DACHILLE, JR: I got it, there we go.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: You can move the mic, you don't have to move your chair. Yeah...

PETER DACHILLE, JR: Better?

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: There you go.

PETER DACHILLE, JR: There we go, all right.

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 the 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 we have had, our outreach was the catalyst for returning, and the benefits are what bring them to completion.

With over 230,000 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 and 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 GPAs, 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's a seasoned stake holding in what they bring to and expect from their academics. But most of all, they bring a newfound appreciation and love for the college environment. They join clubs and

collaborate on initiatives and embrace their Bearcat pride with that enthusiasm towards their traditional classmates reciprocated. These are the tenants of Reconnect students, resilience, grit, the ability to make experience-based decisions, and finding solutions to inhibiting factors towards their academic pursuits.

As I've alluded to though, academic obstacles are a direct line to financial context, which are themselves aligned with academic timelines and curricular guidelines. If there's 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 recurring 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 the CUNY education into the workforce and community. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thank you.

You know, I get confused every time I hear the Baruch, uh, about the Baruch mascot, the Bearcat, because in addition to being a CUNY alum, I'm a SUNY Binghamton alum, and our mascot was the Bearcats. And I said, I think you're at the wrong hearing.

(LAUGHTER)

So thank you for your testimony. And miss Higginson George, I gotta say, I have kids, the idea of going to school, like, now to begin with, is daunting, let alone getting a 4.0 GPA. So amazing, amazing, thank you, thank you.

1 So it sounds, based on the testimony, it sounds
2 like we all agree that the fee waivers and the
3 MetroCards, and paying the unpaid balances would have
4 a significantly positive impact on our students. So I
5 think we all agree there. So let's talk just in a
6 little bit of detail.

7 Just go just to make sure our numbers align, Ms.
8 Sarmiento, you said 8,200 students have debts of
9 \$2,000 or less. That's current students?

10 VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Yes.

11 CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: And do you know how many
12 have debts of \$1,000 or less?

13 VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Do we have that data?

14 UNKNOWN: (INAUDIBLE)

15 VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: (UN-MIC'D) Yeah, we
16 only ran (INAUDIBLE) \$2,000, only because when we
17 looked at the major balances, that seemed to be the
18 one that would hit the most students.

19 CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Okay, so you...

20 VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: (UN-MIC'D) But we
21 could run it at \$1,000 if...

22 CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Okay, and... I mean, I'm
23 interested, because that was the Cuff Report was a
24 recommendation, interested to be talking sort of in
25

the same language, and also the numbers are helpful. I mean, so we're talking \$17.4 million, if every student had the \$2,000, now some of those would be less. Right?

Do you have the cost, what would it be to pay off all the debts of kids, or students rather, with (LAUGHS) two of debts of \$2,000 or less?

(PAUSE)

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: (INAUDIBLE) have the number of students, which is (INAUDIBLE) but we could get the total (INAUDIBLE).

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: I think these numbers are important in having a robust conversation about, like, what it would take, what does it look like to fund any initiative like this? So I would hope during the hearing... are those numbers we can find during the hearing?

UNKNOWN: (UN-MIC'D) (INAUDIBLE)

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Yes? Okay. Because that allows us to have the real conversation about what it looks like, what does it actually look like on the ground to say, let's make sure every kid who owes a \$1,000 or less isn't prevented, \$2,000 or less. Uh...

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: (UN-MIC'D) Just to clarify, this...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Is your mic on? Are you...

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Just to clarify, the data that you want are for students that are currently enrolled now and not past debts.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: That's... Okay...

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Is that...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Good...

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Is that correction...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Yes.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Okay.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Yes.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Okay.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: But separately, I assume you have past debts of other former students? I'll just assume you have that.

But, administer... we've spoken about three things. Administratively, for the administrative offices, forgetting about numbers, which of these three do you think would probably be the easiest to administer?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Between the MetroCards...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: MetroCards, the fee waivers...

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Fee waivers...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: And the unpaid balances.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: We have a mechanism now that's automatic for the fee waivers.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Okay.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: So that is ongoing. In terms of the MetroCards, that is something that some of our other special programs like (INAUDIBLE) and (INAUDIBLE) have. So there is a vehicle there. And unpaid balances, we also have a mechanism to do that into scale pretty quickly. Because we did that during the pandemic.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Mm-hmm. So none of these initiatives are administratively challenging; it sound like the question is ,you know, where... is the amount of money and the impact. Is that right?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Any administrative costs that CUNY has to bear to administer the programs, is well worth the investment of getting these students across. So we have a model to do it, and if we did it to scale, I think we're ready to do that.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Yeah, and I always point out, when we use the word "costs" we really mean investment. Because, as you pointed out in your testimony, when we provide the supports so students can get an education, fewer students are on public assistance, they are doing better for themselves and their families, and they are contributing more to the economy. So these really are investments.

So since they are all easy to implement, there wouldn't be significant challenges to implanting any of these three initiatives?

UNKNOWN: (INAUDIBLE)

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: No? Okay.

(CHILD CRYING)

And if... I know, student debt is upsetting, and student's not getting into school is upsetting, I get it, I get it.

For those watching at home, and can only hear my voice, we have an 11-month-old here who, these hearings are very interesting and important, and this child cares about his future. (LAUGHS) As do we all.

Can you imagine doing any or all of these three initiatives for the 25-26 school year?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: We are doing the fee waivers now for the 25-26 school year.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: For who?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: For all NYCPS (New York City Public Schools) students. We did the fee waiver last in November and gave waivers to not only the New York City Public Schools but also throughout New York State.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: And what was the investment in that? What was the financial investment in that program?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: This is actually the second year... For 94,000 applicants for freshmen was \$6.1 million.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: And that's what we did this November?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Yes. And then...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: And then you also did it last year?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Then, when you did this program, what was... How did that impact the number of students who applied to CUNY?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: So the first year we got a 386% increase in applications. And this year we got 13%.

Now we were really hoping to be able to have a marked difference in enrollment. But, as you know, that was the year in which the FAFSA had some challenges and affected our new student enrollment.

The impetus behind the fee waivers is so that students could act early enough and to be able to get to their college of choice. Previous to the fee waivers, students were notified of their application in March and April. Now they get their response in November and December which allows them to apply for financial aid and be ready. So we consider this not only a benefit for students to be able to know more about the college process and select but also better be prepared for their studies in the fall.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Good. And how much is CUNY requesting from the Administration for fee waivers for the upcoming fiscal year?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: If we were to only do freshmen, it would be \$6.1 million. If we did transfer, it would be \$3.4 million. And I could get these numbers to you.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: So \$3.4 million additional...

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: for transfer. Okay.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: And if we did graduate, it would be a little over half-a-million dollars for total, if we did fee waivers across the board for every student – transfer, freshman, and graduate of \$10 million.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Ten million dollars for a lot kids to graduate college, doesn't seem that bad to me.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: It doesn't. And, like you said, it's the investment.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: It is an investment.

And the same question for CUNY Reconnect, how much did CUNY request from the Administration to baseline, as you requested, based on CUNY Reconnect, which it should be baselined.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Yeah, we asked for a total of \$8.8 million with a \$5.9 million restoration and a \$2.9 million enhancement.

We understand that the Council may be adding more if we were to implement the Fresh Start and pay off balances over... or at a \$1,000 or less.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Mm-hmm. So about the application fee. Okay? Ideally, receiving a waiver for an application fee would not add a task for high school students when submitting an application, because that risks the students not knowing how to use the waiver, thus deterring a student from completing the application.

The same administrative roadblock can be true for high school counselors who are juggling a lot of waivers for a lot of students in public high schools.

So what's the process for a student using a CUNY fee waiver now, and can it be streamlined to ensure that more students use it?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Since the fee waiver began two years ago, we've worked to implement and streamline that. So a counselor could go on a counselor portal and hit "fee waiver" and it would automatically be granted.

For students who apply to the program, they would ask for a waiver, the counselor would say, "yes", so of that has been automated.

Previous to that, they had long sheets and checked off, and they had vouchers they had to carry, and all of that has been automated.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Good, who likes paper? I mean, you do, you're in that binder, but...

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: No one, but certainly not the trees... Yes.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: (LAUGHS) I always find it interesting, we talk about all this technology, everyone who comes to testify brings these thick binders. I happen to like paper as you could tell. It's very interesting.

So, just going back to Fresh Start for a moment, you know, I asked how many students currently have these balances, and I know you're getting back to me with other numbers. How have you calculated, year after year, how many students actually stopped taking classes due to these unpaid balances?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: We have not. You mean at the undergrad or at all of them?

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Let's talk undergrad.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: We have not. But we could get you that.

So the number that stop out because of balances,
or?

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: How many people can't
apply for classes, who would have otherwise been
applying for classes, because they have a balance,
and have now left CUNY, because they have a balance?

(PAUSE)

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Okay. In the 2025
financial aid year 13,687 students had balances and
were unable to enroll.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: What?! There were 13,687
in the single year were unable to enroll because of
balances?

Let me ask you, what's the lowest amount balance
amount?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Most of the colleges
have a threshold between \$300 and \$500 to allow the
student to enroll. So none of them are at \$5.00...
the small amounts, and each college sets their own
limit.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Three-thousand-six-
hundred-eighty-seven...

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: It was 13,687...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thirteen... Sorry, yes.

SENIOR VICE CHANCELLOR SOLIMAN: (LAUGHS)

Sorry...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Yeah, thank you for correcting me with the higher number. Very good, very good — 13,687. Wow.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: It's also important to note that these are the very students that we are reaching back out to with the Reconnect Program, who are helping students, like the student that we have here, pay off balances and be back to school.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Has there been consideration or requests to, within the Reconnect Program, you know, instead of waiting for someone to drop out of school, have there been discussions about utilizing some of that to make sure they don't leave in the first place, or utilizing some of the ASAP money to target the students to recognize that if they if they have a balance of \$600, and they can't pay that, there are probably other needs, and they probably need those wraparound services.

Like, what does it look like when it comes across someone's desk? Someone has a \$600 balance, they're gonna drop out. What kind of phone call, what kind of outreach does that student get?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: The individual campaigns for the colleges are all different. But what I could say, at the system level, is that we're looking at predictive analytics and using Artificial Intelligence to let us know whether or not a student is in trouble.

We have adopted technology for early alerts, and what we need to do is do a better job of getting to students before they actually drop out.

It's been one of the tenements of CUNY Uplifting New York, is to be able to do that type of work to scale. Because right now the colleges are doing it on their own. And what we want to be able to do is provide a playbook.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Okay, I have some questions about those analytics, but I want to turn it over now to Council Member Brewer.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I just have one question that maybe come later. I'm losing my voice. I'm sorry.

The 13,687, have they... do you know how many of them have already been contacted by Reconnect, or is this a group that has not been contacted at all?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: This is for the 25, uh, 24-25 school year. So most, if they stopped out in the '24, they have already been contacted.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: They have already been contacted? So this group has already been contacted, probably by Reconnect, and they haven't reconnected yet?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: They haven't. And the students that we contact on a regular basis, sometimes it takes a year for them to get to a situation where they can enroll. So, most of the contact is ongoing. And Jackie is one of them. How long did...

JACQUELINE HIGGENSON GEORGE: (UN-MIC'D) I actually had had, uh...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Please make sure you're speaking in to the microphone and that the red light is on.

JACQUELINE HIGGENSON GEORGE: Yes, I was one of the students, I was actually in the middle of my semester at Baruch; I had a summer balance of \$998.00, which was going to prevent me from enrolling for the fall semester, and didn't know how I was going to pay that. But ,you know, I'm in the middle

of classes, and I get an email from the Reconnect Program, saying, "Hey, we realize that you have an outstanding balance, we know that registration is going on, please reach out to us, we have a grant for you."

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: So, the 13,000 have gotten a similar contact email to the student?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Yes, most... Over 50% of the Reconnect money goes to directly to the colleges in support of retention and finishing.

So the money is distributed to them, and they have lists of students who have balances, and they are addressed before they even register.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Good. Okay. It's a large number, but it's...it seems to me, that if people aren't responding like you did, they have other things going on in their life, and it's hard to respond. But, so you'd have to do more of a wraparound, like the Chair said, in order to get them to come back.

DIRECTOR DANIEL: It's also twofold, in that in the current semester, as a student is going through and has an existing balance that prevents them from registering during open enrollment time, we do have

the Reconnect teams at the colleges that will reach out to use Reconnect Completion Grant within the semester to remove the ability of the hold. So oftentimes we're not adding to that 13,000. That number is actually being reduced, as the numbers were higher in previous years; it's actually reducing because we're using the funds, while they're actively enrolled, to be able to allow them to register for the forthcoming term.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I mean, it sounds like you are doing everything you can. Is there some other support that you would need for this number? Because you are doing a lot.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: MetroCards, waivers, and the (LAUGHS) (INAUDIBLE)

The wraparound services we're working on, but the direct financial support to students, to them is priceless. So I think that that would go a long way in helping the adult students, but Fresh Start could have an impact on all students.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thank you, Council Member Brewer.

So to clarify, you are using some of the Reconnect Grant to prevent students from dropping out because of unpaid balances? And still 13,687 students.

To what degree is the ASAP Program helping with unpaid balances?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Well, that particular program, if there are any gap funding, it's covered.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Mm-hmm?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Books are covered, MetroCards, supplies. It is the model that we are discussing here, but scaling it to 200,000 students.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: And you requested ASAP for All to the Administration?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: We were...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: And part time CUNY Flex and part time ASAP?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: And what is the price tag on that that you requested from the Administration?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Let me get back to you on that.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: (LAUGHS) It's budget season, everyone! Let's, uh, we're trying to work

together to make sure our students, the faculty, have what they need to support the students, and we want to make sure we're partners in that. To do that, we need to... kinda need to know.

I want to talk about met...

(PAUSE)

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: I've been told at the very least we're asking for \$4.5 million as restoration for the ASAP program. And we'll get you more details.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: (LAUGHS) Okay, thank you.

I want to talk about the MetroCards for a second. Because you just mentioned now a number of times, and I think it was in two of your testimonies, how critical these MetroCards are.

Do you have a price tag for what it would be to have every student have a MetroCard or OMNY Card -- but no tokens?

The students in the back said again, what's a token? I'll give you my number later and you can put it in your Rolodex and call me on your rotary phones.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: One quick calculation...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: (LAUGHS) Okay.

(PAUSE)

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: MetroCards for all students is \$323 million.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Okay, thank you, \$323 million for all students.

And to what degree are your advisors in the ASAP Program leveraging programs like Fair Fares, where the City Council already invests millions, and millions of dollars? Given that, I think that 55% of your students are living at or below the poverty line, to what degree are counselors and ASAP advisors leveraging Fair Fares to provide students, at the very least, with low cost MetroCards?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: It is one of the major draws for students into the ASAP program.

So as a condition of them registering and meeting with their advisor, it's when they get those cards to be able to travel back and forth to school. So it is part of the fabric of the ongoing retention program for ASAP to be able to not only provide support for transportation but books and supplies.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Right, I understand. So I'm going to be a little more clear, the ASAP Program provides MetroCards for students.

For the students, whether or not they're in ASAP, if they are not in the program, if they're part time, to what degree are your the faculty at the school leveraging some of the other programs we have, and that we in the City Council have funded, like Fair Fares, which provides half-fare MetroCards to people. I think we're trying to expand it to a 145% of the poverty line. Or it's maybe it's at 145%, and we're trying to bring it up to 200%? Either way, it is a program that can help a number of students. Are your faculty members helping students at least enroll in that program?

DIRECTOR DANIEL: So currently at CUNY, we have CUNY EDGE that supports students that are on public assistance. So those students also overlap in terms of the income levels for Fair Fares and are being reviewed and assisted at that level. Whether it goes beyond that then, it may go to the academic programs such as CD/SEEK or with CUNY ASAP/ACE. That also builds it into their programs, whereas EDGE is actually ushering the students towards the application process separately. But that is outreaching to students on public assistance primarily.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Okay. So can you talk more about some of the targeted student groups that receive this support? So for example, let's just talk about the MetroCards. Let's talk about \$323 million for every single student to have a full-fare MetroCard.

If you said, alright, we can't do \$323 million, but we really want to target this particular group, what student populations would you choose for free MetroCard if you could not offer to all students?

(PAUSE)

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: If we had to prioritize...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: That's the right word, prioritize.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Sixty-five percent of our student population at the undergrad level receive Pell. So these are students who are at an income level that warrants the full grant. If we had to prioritize them, excluding the ones in already special populations, that would be what we would target. So that would be adult students, freshmen students...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Mm-hmm.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: But would target the ones who need it the most income wise.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Okay. Okay.

So you mentioned ASAP, CUNY EDGE, can you talk about some of the programs CUNY has to help people who are either on federal assistance, people below the poverty level, or people with small financial struggles currently enrolled at CUNY?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: So the... we do have a program called CUNY CARES. It's launched in the Bronx. You may be familiar with it. And what we do is we provide food, food vouchers for students and their families. And in the Bronx we serve the borough.

Each college has a food pantry to be able to help with students. There also are, at the various campus, emergency funds if they've depleted their Reconnect funds to be able to help them.

We have also worked with the bursar's office that if a student does have a balance, and they're unable to pay, or have exhausted their Reconnect funds, that there are more flexible payment plans for them to be able to still continue school while they're paying off in monthly payments.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Is that for only students in the CUNY CARES program or for all students?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: For all students.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Except for the 13,687 (LAUGHS) students who...

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Well, they may not be in a position to afford to even pay those payments. The payments could go on for a full 12-month period...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Mm-hmm?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: where before it used to be three-and-a-half, a full semester. That allowed the student to have those payments much lower. But when they accrue those types of balances, some of them are unable to even meet that. And some exhaust their cap.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: So what would be your next steps in considering the implementation of each of these three ideas?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: So the fee waivers would be an easy lift for us, because we have the mechanism already to do that. We would be working with our Office of Budget and Finance to be able to distribute those. The transportation cards, based on

any type of criteria, depending on how much we get, and prioritizing accordingly. So that is the... and then the Fresh Start, it will complement Reconnect, because that's what we currently do now is to pay off balances.

So probably the one that would be the most challenging, but not insurmountable, is the transportation. Because we currently do this for a small subset of students in ACE and ASAP and we would just need to scale that model up.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Are you suggesting that... I mean, we allocate funds, let's say, in the budget. Right? Any funding that goes towards Fresh Start would just be folded in to Reconnect? Is that kind of your vision for how that would work?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: I think they complement one another, because the new program doesn't have the age limitation. So what we would do is target the students that are not in that 25 to 55 so that we could reach as many students as we can.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: I want to turn it back to Council Member Brewer.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Thank you. Just quickly, on the MetroCard, that will be to go home and to come

to school, so it'll be round trip. How many trips are we getting on the MetroCard?

DIRECTOR DANIEL: It's the full 34 unlimited ride that covers the whole week, so it would cover seven days for students who have weekend classes or study periods... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Right. So it's like you can go back and forth for seven days?

DIRECTOR DANIEL: Yes.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay. The other question I have is, does it make more sense to push the half fare? I don't think a lot of people know about it. It's not that your students are unlike the general public because not a lot of people are signing up for it. It's not fully utilized by those who could be using it. So I just think that it would be something to push more — suggestion.

I'm also just one small little issue is child care as a barrier. Is that something that we're both fixated 13,687? But is there something that is also a barrier, lack of childcare?

DIRECTOR DANIEL: So at CUNY, we have childcare centers distributed.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: No, I know you do, but they're often booked. That's what I was asking.

DIRECTOR DANIEL: We're actively doing some recruitment with our child care centers to build enrollment, not only on the academic side to get students into the colleges, but also working with them to bridge the child care knowledge and make sure that they're aware that the child care centers exist. And we're doing some direct recruitment at the colleges, as well as a university based fair that is planned for the fall.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: So you don't find it's a barrier, then?

DIRECTOR DANIEL: No, not unless this child care center, particularly, is full of that age group, but I don't believe it to be a barrier.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay, thank you.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thank you.

And again, to repeat, Council Member Brewer and I have both said the Fair Fares program, it just sounds like a lot of students who may not be in CUNY EDGE, who may not be in a ASAP, who may not be in any of your thousands of other programs, and still benefit from this program if only given the guidance.

And so this has been a discussion before on this committee, uh, during the ASAP Hearing about folding that program in and making sure administrators are in fact — and advisers — are in fact trained on it.

Because in lieu of the ability to provide free MetroCards, which all students should have, we are funding this program which can help the majority of CUNY students.

Something I said in my opening, you know, for us maybe \$65 may not be that big a deal, but for our students it is.

And can you talk about the ways in which you collect data and feedback from students, current or prospective students, on their financial needs and if you've collected any data on these specific proposals?

(PAUSE)

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Data, data, data.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: And by the way, I asked that question in front of the queen of data. She, I don't know if you this, she invented data in New York City.

(LAUGHTER)

(PAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: I think you just have to be sworn in if you're going to say something. Okay.

Please raise your right hand.

VICE CHANCELLOR RODUS: (UN-MIC'D) Ex employees don't need to be sworn in, but (INAUDIBLE)...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: (LAUGHS)

Please raise your... Do you affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth in your testimony before this committee, and to respond honestly to council member questions?

VICE CHANCELLOR RODUS: I do, sir.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: (LAUGHS) Okay, come on up, Jeff. And just say your name for the record.

VICE CHANCELLOR RODUS: (UN-MIC'D) So I really didn't want to do this, but think I need to... because, I... I don't think Reine is well versed in this, in that she probably doesn't feel comfortable talking about it. And, honestly, I am not an expert on it either, but I do know some stuff, because I tried to help navigate the system. Right? And, honestly, I have been texting with other folks with other stuff, so I totally... I'm not sure where... what was exactly said. But I am going to share what I

know. And we could talk more about ,you know, and go through things.

So our interim provost has been very involved – Alicia Alvero, who testified (INAUDIBLE)... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Last month? Yes.

VICE CHANCELLOR RODUS: Right. So she's been very involved talking with MTA and with HRA, about Fair Fares, and about trying to use unused MetroCards for ASAP students for other students. Like, we're paying for it anyway as part of this program, so why shouldn't we be utilizing it for students that have the need and actually would qualify under Fair Fairs', you know, guidelines.

It's been... Sometimes there's bureaucracy in the City, believe it or not, and it's been hard to navigate that bureaucracy. So, you know, it is something that we'd love to do, and we'd actually love assistance to do it, and we could have a meeting on it and talk more about it. But I know from talking to our provost, she has been working on this for a while, and we tried to tackle it a few times, and it's a beast of an issue to tackle.

But, obviously, a lot of our students would qualify for Fair Fares. But, like others that don't use it, they don't want to sign up for it, because it's onerous to go through the process to, you know, to be able to get Fair Fares.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Right, and that's where I think even some might say that about signing up for courses in college. It could be very onerous, and that's the value of something like an adviser, which is why in, you know, past budgets we've pushed for funding for more advisers.

VICE CHANCELLOR RODUS: Right.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: So, just like advisors help students apply for classes, or counselors help students apply for classes, couldn't they be trained to help students apply for Fair Fares? Right? As sort of a step to get to Free MetroCards for All?

VICE CHANCELLOR RODUS: I hear you. I agree. But if we have any money for advisors, we are going to use it for academics not for MetroCards. Right? I mean... And we don't have enough advisors to really serve all of our students to begin with. So there's long lines, and I will leave this to the people that actually ,you know, I'm the government guy, right? So

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Yeah, and I think that is why we're sort of here at the hearing, to talk about those things. But I just... And I think the important thing a lot of us recognize is, yes, the advisors are there for academics - And I don't want to assign work or roles not knowing whatever their titles are, but it would behoove the institution, it behoove our city to make... to see that the people who are already there, the people who are already supporting our students, if they can recognize what we all recognize at every hearing...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Which is the value of CUNY the needs of our students aren't just within the walls of the classroom. It's all of the things outside. And if it weren't, we wouldn't have 13,687 students not returning due to unpaid balances. We wouldn't have students dropping out because they

couldn't afford a MetroCard. Things we all recognize, things...

VICE CHANCELLOR RODUS: Right. And I
(INAUDIBLE)...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Things we all recognize as our lovely person testifying has said, like, this Reconnect funding made it so that she can get that 4.0 GPA...

VICE CHANCELLOR RODUS: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: And get that degree.

VICE CHANCELLOR RODUS: Well, Vice Chancellor Sarmiento only talks to me because we get Reconnect funding.

(LAUGHTER)

VICE CHANCELLOR RODUS: But, anyway, a little side joke, but ,you know, we have our USS Chair and a USS, our government, our University Student Senate, they're going to be testifying, and they have been pushing the MetroCard issue, and we actually have... We will include it on our Green Sheet, which will be coming out after the Mayor releases his Executive Budget with some of the items you're discussing today, like fee waivers and Reconnect. Right? Which you have included in your response, as well as the

1 Speaker's State of the City, it was mentioned. You
2 know, and they have been pushing this for awhile, our
3 student senate, and we asked the State for money and
4 the City for money for this program. They will be
5 able to talk more about what their request is and
6 what they are looking for.

8 CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: See, students? The power
9 of advocacy? Thumbs up? All right.

10 So this actually leads to the previous question,
11 which is in what ways are you soliciting... thank
12 you, thank you, Mr. Rodus.

13 In what ways are you soliciting feedback from
14 students? In what ways are you collecting data from
15 students to inform your decisions about which of
16 these initiatives should or can be prioritized or
17 maybe initiatives we hadn't heard of?

18 VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: The surveys that
19 we've conducted in terms of retention have been more
20 school-based than anything else. So when Dzelika
21 works with the individual colleges about where
22 Reconnect funds should go, or where their students
23 are dropping out, it's from the colleges that get
24 feedback directly from the students because they're
25 the ones calling them.

We have not, as of yet, directly contacted the students who have separated, because the times when which we have done that, the response to those surveys are very poor.

But to address your questions regarding the MetroCard, I see this as an opportunity, and would very much like to come back and give you some data on the increase of the MetroCard usage by incorporating that into our Bridge Program. It doesn't have to be academic advisors. It could be students talking to students, because currently we have over 200 students helping students with the FAFSA. So you could imagine, if they just took one more step in applying for MetroCard assistance, it might be the game changer.

So, thank you for bringing it to our attention, and maybe the focus... the focal point would be them, as they come in – just like the FAFSA – once they do it once, they're able to do it again to be able to start that ball rolling and get that number up.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Yes. And, again, ideally, it's free MetroCards.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Correct.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: But, again, the City Council funds programs to the bare minimum to reduce the cost of MetroCards. And if it's not advisors, student ambassadors, uhm, I think could be...

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: (INAUDIBLE) ideal...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: sort of game changer for a lot of our students.

Council Member Brewer?

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I just want to say one thing. I know a lot of young people taking the GED program, Department of Education, they all get half-fare cards. And I know too many of them, some of them are okay, some of them not, if they can figure it out, definitely your students can figure it out. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Okay. I just have two more questions, just following on the same... the collecting data. You conduct student surveys every year for current students?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: I believe it is — Michael, I think it's every two years?

MICHAEL SHIELDS: (UN-MIC'D) (INAUDIBLE)

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Student surveys.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Student surveys?

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Student surveys.

MICHAEL SHIELDS: (UN-MIC'D) The Student Experience Survey are every two years, correct.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Every two years.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: And in that Student Experience Survey, are you asking questions about costs, fee waivers, MetroCards, and small amounts owed to CUNY, are any of those data points collected?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Those are nationally-norm surveys, and so they ask about concerns, but not specifically regarding MetroCards and so forth.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: You...

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: It talks about their evaluation of academic support, their ability to have a sense of belonging, and things that might be barriers, but not specifically... the last time I saw the survey asked about money.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: But, you don't... You said they are national surveys.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: (INAUDIBLE)
Surveys...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: So you are sort of just giving the questions to ask, you don't have any CUNY-specific surveys?

DEPUTY DIRECTOR SHIELDS: (UN-MIC'D) (INAUDIBLE)
to talk?

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: You raise you right
hand... VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: (INAUDIBLE)

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Do you affirm to tell the
truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth in
your testimony before this committee, and to respond
honestly to council member questions?

DEPUTY DIRECTOR SHIELDS: Yes, I do.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thank you.

DEPUTY DIRECTOR SHIELDS: So...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Please state your name for
the record?

DEPUTY DIRECTOR SHIELDS: So we...

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: State your name for
the record.

DEPUTY DIRECTOR SHIELDS: Oh, my name is Michael
Shields.

So we ask, uh...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Please state your name for
the record?

DEPUTY DIRECTOR SHIELDS: My name is Michael
Shields.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thank you.

DEPUTY DIRECTOR SHIELDS: We ask questions about some barriers. So for example, we ask about food pantries. We ask about, uh, I don't think we ask then about MetroCards, we do ask about like use of computer labs, if they have broadband access at home, if they have laptops at home, things like that.

But just like Reine said, I'm pretty sure we haven't asked specifically about MetroCards or specifically about fee waivers, things like that.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Uh, by the way, the topic of data and student experience has come up in previous hearings, maybe not with this panel, maybe not with you two, but it has come up. And I think hearing directly from the very students we serve is a really critical component to informing the work and informing our priorities.

And it is wonderful that the Student Senate has made their voices heard by coming to these hearings, having the meetings with you, and that their priorities are on your Green Sheets, the sheets of things you want funded. But, of course, there's more that could be done to hear from students. And so I would certainly encourage you to be collecting a little more data from them to hear from them.

And what help can we in the City Council be in making sure that these three ideas are implemented?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: The support in being able to fund those three initiatives would be a significant, uh, a significant advantage to the students. If we are able to do this, I would hope, Chair Dinowitz, that you would have us come back and say, "We want to hear the data. We want to hear the increase in retention. We want to hear the amount that's graduated," and so I'm hoping you hold us accountable, through data, to demonstrate that if the investment is made that it be a solid investment in New York City.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Yeah. It's sort of a little, uh, depressing that we have to fight for this, for funding for programs that we know actually work. I would love to have you back to tout the success of programs, even though we've had you here touting the success of the ASAP Program, which answers the questions what happens... the question of what happens when we provide students with Metrocards and supports? The question of CUNY Reconnect, what happens when we provide students with the support, financial or otherwise with that they need? They come

back, they get their degree, and they get those 4.0 GPAs.

And so I would love for you to come back. I would love to tell a story of what happens when the federal, state, and city government actually make the real investments that we know work, that we know lift people out of poverty, lift up families, lifted up my family, my parents' family, lifts up yours, so many New Yorkers, and also do better for the economy of New York City while we're at it.

So we would certainly love to have you back to tell the story of the data. And I look forward to continuing to fight for CUNY in our City Budget to make those *smart* and *morally just* investments.

I want to thank each and every one of you for your testimony today, thank you.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Thank you very much.

PANEL: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: We will be calling up the next panel in a moment.

(PAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Okay, for our next panel, I would like to call up our special guests, from the Center for an Urban Future, Eli Dvorkin.

(PAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: When you are ready, you may begin. Please state your name for the record.

ELI DVORKIN: Thank you, Chair Dinowitz. My name is Eli Dvorkin; I'm the Editorial and Policy Director at the Center for an Urban Future. Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify today.

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 of whom are women and people of color, return to CUNY and resume their education with over 8,500 students earning a credential so far, about half of those bachelor's degrees.

That is an incredible achievement. But there's 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 a \$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, quote, "Can be an incredible burden," end quote, 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 of at least \$1,000 for students who started but have not completed their degree. Fresh Start would build on the success of Reconnect, and it 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 cards, hands on advising, and technology access for part time students.

Many adult learners in particular, balancing work and family, simply cannot attend college full time. And it shows, just 51% of adult learners who

transfer to a CUNY senior college earn a bachelor's degree within six years. That's compared 65% 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% 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. Thanks for the opportunity to testify, Chair Dinowitz.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thank you. But before I ask a couple questions, I would encourage any nerds out there, like me, to go to the Center for an Urban Futures website. Because they do they do tons of research and have tons of reports, including these financial... including reports about these financial barriers. But not just about CUNY, about, I've read

one about housing and, you know, keeping more families in New York City, which is, you know, something important to me as well.

ELI DVORKIN: Well, thanks, Chair. Just if I may, plug nycfuture.org.

(LAUGHTER)

ELI DVORKIN: If anybody's interested, everything we ever publish is there and free for all. So...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: That's great. (LAUGHS) So, thank you, and thank you for your work.

I want to ask ,you know, during the testimony, CUNY gave numbers that said about 8.7 million people, 8.7 million (sic) people... I'm sorry, 8,700 students have, current students, have balances of \$2,000 or less. And so, like, at most, that would be, like, \$17.4 million.

You cite a \$1,000 as this sort of threshold of like, if it's less than a \$1,000, you know, let's relieve that that pressure on the students.

Do you have a cost estimate for that?

ELI DVORKIN: No. We weren't sure, in fact, we did ask CUNY for that data. We weren't able to get it in time for publication of our report. So I think

CUNY is in the best position to provide those estimates.

You know, we heard quite a lot from advisors, both at CUNY colleges and nonprofit, uh, CBO partners, about many examples of specific students who stopped out owing about a \$1,000 or a little less, as you actually just heard on that first panel. But certainly with additional funding, you know, the City could help more students. So, I mean, I was certainly struck by that 8,200, I believe, Vice Chancellor Sarmiento said that owed \$2,000 or less. Certainly, heard examples of thousands of students, anecdotally, that owe around a \$1,000 or less. But to get those exact figures, they would have to come from CUNY.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: I just looked up, 8,200, and they said \$2,000 or less, so that's \$16.4 million. But that's, you know, again, just for those students that owe \$2,000 or less.

Again, with your numbers or once they get us more data, the number's obviously less, because it's \$2,000 or less.

ELI DVORKIN: Right. Yeah. Exactly.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Reminds me of when I taught inequalities in algebra classes.

ELI DVORKIN: (LAUGHS)

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: This would have been a great one for them.

And then you also cite Free MetroCard Pilot for CUNY students. Can you talk more about what you are proposing when you mean a pilot program?

ELI DVORKIN: Yeah, thanks for that, Chair.

So, I mean, I would say our recommendation, I think, would very much align with what I heard from Vice Chancellor Sarmiento, which is focusing on those students that are Pell eligible, low income students who aren't already served by a program that offers a MetroCard today. I think that is the right target. Many of those students, but certainly not all of them, are enrolled in community colleges. Many of them are part time students. Many of them are adult learners.

I mentioned the pilot only because I did see in the Council's response budget this idea of funding specifically for a pilot just for MetroCards. And I would just echo — certainly, would say that's a fantastic idea. Our research has shown time and again

that a MetroCard is a significant financial burden that derails students from completion. But I would add that, you know, to echo our colleagues at CUNY, that enrolling in a program like Fair Fares has shown to be a pretty challenging barrier.

You know, our recommendation has always been that the MetroCard would be directly allocated through CUNY, so that students could get it more quickly, so that there's as little of a hoop to jump through as possible.

I mentioned a pilot, because I certainly believe that that's, you know, a starting point that would help, but I think the maximum benefit absolutely would be a program targeted to low income students that would serve everybody that isn't in one of those specialized programs today.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Yeah, you know, earlier I was talking about tokens. Like, kids don't know what tokens are. And you know what? In like ten years, we're gonna still be saying MetroCards?

ELI DVORKIN: OMNY, of course, (LAUGHS)...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: They'll say, what the heck are you talking about, what's a MetroCard? We're doing It's OMNY... (CROSS-TALK)

ELI DVORKIN: Absolutely, it would be... Yes, it would be an OMNY Card. Would be, would be the way to go...

(LAUGHTER)

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: You, old person.

(LAUGHTER)

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Then, have you calculated any numbers, you know, saying for the Pell Grant recipients, minus the number of students who are in ASAP, minus the number of students who are in Reconnect or some other program, have you sort of calculated what the cost would kind of look like sorry, what the investment cost would look like for that?

ELI DVORKIN: Right. Right. I'd have to get back to you about that. I believe we calculated that figure for all the community college students.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Mm-hmm.

ELI DVORKIN: For the full University, we'd have to get back to you about that.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Right.

Was there anything else that you wanted to add to your testimony today or any other important details from your report that you'd like to share?

ELI DVORKIN: Well, I guess one to add, I know this wasn't the focus of today's hearing, but I do think that the Council, you know, getting behind this idea of CUNY Flex is incredibly important.

And just to underscore what we're talking about there, you know, CUNY enrolls about 79,000 part time students. I mean, that's a huge population. And most of CUNY's adult learners, students over 25, are enrolled part time. So when we published our report last fall that looked at the specific and kind of disproportionate challenges that those adult learners are facing, and by the way, 41,000 undergrads at CUNY are over the age of 25. So that's more than the entire student body, for instance, at Columbia and NYU combined. We're talking about a significant share of those students who can't access the leading national models that we have in place today in CUNY ASAP and CUNY ACE, because understandably, those programs were designed for full time students. And I get it, the full time enrollment is correlated with better outcomes, but what our research showed so clearly was that so many of those adult learners in particular, who are more likely to be among the CUNY students who are parents, who are full time

caregivers for older adults, who are working one, two, three more jobs, for many of those students, full time enrollment just isn't possible.

So I just wanted to underscore that as effective and successful as ASAP and ACE have been, there's a real need to help more of those part time learners as well. And that's why we thought the idea of a CUNY Flex program that would take these evidence-based supports that we know work, as you mentioned earlier, and to help more of those 79,000 students access them, too, would be a significant boost for what we know already works.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Yeah. Of course, the very students who would need to work, or have to work and have no other... they don't have access to the very program that's designed for the very students who need that support.

So this, you know, the same with part time TAP (Part-Time Tuition Assistance Program), which we had discussed at a hearing previously, and now part time, ASAP for part time students, you know, are really critical components to supporting, in very many cases, the students who need the most help, which is what we should be doing at CUNY.

Mr. Dvorkin, I want to thank you, you know, again, for testifying today and of course for all of the research Center for an Urban Future does, and all of the support and help that it provides for us and the Council for important policy decisions we make.

ELI DVORKIN: And thank you so much, Chair Dinowitz. It's an honor.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thank you.

ELI DVORKIN: Thank you.

(PAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: For next panel we have Heather James, Akkeem Polack, Daniel Reden.

(INAUDIBLE) and if... (UN-MIC'D) We do have a childcare program (INAUDIBLE)

(LAUGHTER)

HEATHER JAMES: Aww...he would love that, he would love that. That would make your video so cute as well.

I do apologize for, uh...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Never apologize for your child, no. Never apologize for your child.

HEATHER JAMES: Here you go.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Oh, he has his own chair! Alexander, can you please your right hand?

(LAUGHTER)

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: I'm sorry, Sergeant, we have a hostile witness.

(LAUGHTER)

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: All right, so, uhm, you know, Alex, I will tell you, you can testify whenever you want. But, Heather, uh, Ms. James, we'll start with you. Please state your name for the record. And you may begin your testimony.

HEATHER JAMES: Hello, my name is Heather James, thank you so much for having me. This is Alexander.

I am here representing the PSC-CUNY, which is the faculty staff union of the City University of New York. I'm our legislative representative, and I'm representing my home campus of Borough of Manhattan Community College, proudly nearby City Hall. And unfortunately, my students did have to leave to work. As we were just saying, many of our students do work. But I wanted to share a little bit of what their testimony would have been, which will also be written testimony later.

You all know that I am very supportive as a faculty member and union member of free MetroCards — OMNY, so I'm happy to hear some of these questions.

And Chairman Dinowitz, I really appreciate all of your advocacy, and I appreciate you asking the Center for an Urban Future for that number on how much it will cost to do the rest of the students at our community colleges. I would love to have that number as well.

And I really appreciate the Council putting a MetroCard -- OMNY pilot into their budget letter, something we would love to see. And my students certainly talk to me about that all the time. Right? One actually plays the saxophone sometimes at Fulton Street in order to get to campus. So that's how she pays for the rides. That that is a true story.

But the other thing I want to share was from my student who left. And what he told me was that this is the fourth college that he's been to, BMCC, and one of the reasons why he's been to so many colleges is because he lost a financial aid package at one and then couldn't pay for the semester. So instead of trying to return to that campus, because they wouldn't let him go back without paying the bill, he just decided to enroll at a different college and ultimately came to BMCC. And this can really start a

pernicious cycle for (TIMER)... uh-oh, our students who...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: You can finish your last thoughts.

HEATHER JAMES: I apologize... who do want to continue. They can't always get the credits transferred and it creates quite a mess. So really appreciate what you're trying to do here.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thank you. And I do want to remind, before we continue, members of the public that this is a formal government proceeding and that decorum shall be observed at all times.

You're doing a great job. Don't worry.

But members of the public shall remain silent at all times. The witness table is reserved for people who wish to testify – and their children. (LAUGHS) No video recording or photography is allowed from the witness table.

Further, members of the public may not present audio or video recordings as testimony, but may submit transcripts of such recordings to the Sergeant at Arms for inclusion in the hearing record.

If you wish to speak at today's hearing, please fill out an appearance card with the Sergeant at Arms

and wait to be recognized. When recognized, you will have two minutes to speak on today's hearing topic: *Removing Small Financial Barriers for CUNY Students.*

If you have a written statement or additional testimony you wish to submit for the record, please provide a copy of that testimony to the Sergeant at Arms.

And now we will continue the panel, thank you.

DANIEL REDEN: Thank you, Chair Dinowitz. It's a pleasure to be here again in front of you, in front of the Higher Education Committee, in front of the supporters of CUNY here today.

My name is Daniel Reden, and I have the honor of serving as the Chairperson of the University Student Senate and as a student trustee at CUNY.

Today I stand before you representing over 245,000 CUNY students across our 25 campuses and students who are unwavering in their pursuit of higher education despite numerous challenges.

We are living through unprecedented times. I'm part of a generation of young people who are struggling to afford housing, food, education, transportation, in short. I'm also surrounded... just surrounded by young people who are just struggling to

live. On top of that, higher education has been besieged by budget cuts at the state and federal levels for some time, and we all see the pace at which things are changing and accelerating. We see how quickly things can change in a hundred days.

I know that it's difficult to ignore all the noise coming from outside New York City. I'm not suggesting that we just downplay the seriousness of our national struggles, but I'm suggesting that we remember something that I heard many legislators say, which is that "all politics is local" or "think globally and act locally". And so in spirit of that old and sage advice, I come before you today to ask that we do more to support our students, because if we all lift together, the load gets lighter.

In recent years, CUNY has made great strides in addressing students needs as a level of need continues to rise. Every campus hosts a food pantry. In 2024 alone, those food pantries saw over 200,000 visits. We have education resource centers, which remain a critical touch point for emergency support. And we also have open educational resources that have grown, which allows students to access zero cost course materials since day one of classes.

But over the past couple of years, University Student Senate has taken the lead in advocating for free public transportation for CUNY students. We recognize that you cannot begin to learn until you arrive at a CUNY campus. (TIMER) This is part of our much wider advocacy to fully fund the educational experience in CUNY, and providing free MetroCards to CUNY students would remove a quiet but persistent barrier to college completion.

Thank you for your continued support for CUNY students.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thank you.

AKKEEM POLACK: Hello, good day everyone. I'm Akkeem Polack; I'm the Vice Chair for Legislative Affairs for the University Student Senate where we represent over 2,045 students.

I just want to make some clarifications before I start, starting with the fact that CUNY made the comment that they don't have the numbers — Well we do. We have shared this for over a year, we have all the numbers surrounding the pilot program, the groups, the funding attached that would be necessary — as well as, uh, we've heard arguments about Fair Fares, and we push back on that saying that we

believe that we want full access, not half the access. This hearing is about removing financial barriers, not half of a barrier and that's what we're pushing for. So we considered all of that as well.

And we have petitions. We have the numbers; we started a petition in February when we went down to the caucus. We have over 5,000 students who signed on. We went back to Somos, we had a lot of students who stopped by and signed up for more updates, that's why it was included in the People's Budget to fund free MetroCards for all CUNY students.

So we have the numbers, and CUNY definitely, they can meet with us, and we'll meet with them.

But just continuing, I reviewed the report from the Center of Urban Future, and it was concerning a lot of things such as non-tuition expenses like free MetroCards, textbooks, and other barriers, such as childcare, that a member mentioned.

I suspect that everyone understands and is not surprised by the findings that the rising cost of living functions as a barrier to higher education. And at the top of that list, it's transportation. We are students, we definitely want to get to class, we want to get to our internships, we want to support

our families, and a free MetroCard or OMNY Card is just as important.

And we added other things like open educational resources such as textbooks. Textbooks (TIMER) are a very expensive thing — and if I could just finish on that note — just last week alone I had to pay \$200 to do homework from a textbook, because you have unique codes, and I will never use these textbooks ever again for this for future semesters. But this just shows you what we have to go through when we're trying to fund our lifestyle, we're trying to finish this degree.

So textbooks, free MetroCards, we're all for it, and we have the numbers. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thank you very much. I hope you will please, share those numbers.

Can you just talk a little bit, I assume you have friends who have unpaid balances. Have they got... or maybe you do, I don't know. Have you spoken to your friends about this particular issue?

AKKEEM POLACK: Unpaid balances?

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Unpaid balances, yeah.

AKKEEM POLACK: Oh, like school fees?

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Yeah.

AKKEEM POLACK: Tuition? Yeah, I know a lot. I go to York College, it's a predominantly Black and brown school. And a lot of them, you know, they're struggling, a lot of them sit out classes because they need to go to work. So they skip like every other class, so they can make the money in time to pay before the end of the semester, so they can start choosing classes. Because they start choosing their classes mid semester, for the next semester, and a lot of them haven't chosen. I'm even one of them. I haven't chosen my classes for next semester yet, because I need to clear the balances, and we have to work and everything. So it's really... it's something that is so common more than anything.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Have you or your friends ever been closed out of a class, because it would have applied...

AKKEEM POLACK: Mm-hmm.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: and you had to pay your balance...

AKKEEM POLACK: Mm-hmm.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: and by the time you paid your balance, the class was full. Does that ever happen?

AKKEEM POLACK: Many times! Come on... Chair, this is... that's my story. Every semester at CUNY (LAUGHS) that's the story of my life, where you're closed out because you selected, it's in the cart, but you cannot in enroll until you clear the balance. And, then, sometimes the best thing is when they cancel the classes randomly, because ,you know, under enrollment. And you're just in... the week before school, you are just trying to figure out what you are going to do for the rest of the semester. Some people have to do an extra semester, do an extra year. I know people personally at my school, and across the CUNY system, are going through that now. They have to do an extra year, because they were not able to enroll in time for their classes or the classes got cancelled.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: So I'd just like to paint a picture, even for the students...

AKKEEM POLACK: Mm-hmm

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: who do pay their unpaid balances or end up paying the unpaid balances – So even for these students who can enroll for the next semester are often left at a disadvantage, either because they can't enroll in the classes they want

to, or, in the long run, have to spend more money, because they have to stay an extra semester or two, because the unpaid balances prevented them from enrolling in the right class.

Is that a is that an accurate and fair statement?

AKKEEM POLACK: That is very true. Because ,you know, if they don't have enough students, they have to cancel the class overall.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Mm-hmm.

AKKEEM POLACK: Especially in some cases, major classes, classes that you need for your major, they end up canceling it overall for students because they never met the threshold needed.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: So unpaid balances, so we heard testified, 13,687 students who had unpaid balances didn't reenroll. But it seems that it's impacting these unpaid balances significantly more students, and it's impacting them beyond just not reenrolling. It's impacting their ability to take the right classes. And it's impacting their ability to graduate on time.

AKKEEM POLACK: And even to get to school because they need the free MetroCards.

(LAUGHTER)

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Right, (LAUGHS) well, yes, to get to school in the first place.

DANIEL REDEN: There's a silent epidemic going on. Right? And it's financial. We have people in general, not just students, just everyone, is hurting. They can't put their hands on \$1,000 if there's an unexpected expense. Right? So this is compounded when you have to strive towards a degree, and institution that ,you know, there could be more support. Right? And it's exasperated, so to speak, absolutely.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thank you. I want to correct you for one sec. You said it's a silent epidemic. The reason this topic of free MetroCards is included in today's hearing is because of your unwavering advocacy for this issue. So I want to make sure you know, you may feel something is a silent epidemic, but we in the City Council hear you. And that is why we are advocating for the MetroCards -- and removal of other financial barriers. And this hearing is happening, and that topic is here because of your advocacy. So I want to thank you for your advocacy. It is not a silent epidemic. And we hear

you. So thank you for your testimony today. And thank you for your continued advocacy.

AKKEEM POLACK: And I wanted to just express, thank you, as well, for actually adding this to the Committee. You know, I know you have seen us many times, and coming before us, you made comments about it, there could be voter awareness, and we are mentioning MetroCards, so we love that it's a top priority for this concern right now.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thank you.

DANIEL REDEN: And it's just a testament to your unwavering support for CUNY, and CUNY students in general, and we really appreciate that.

We're advocating but it also takes a person to hear and listen as well. So, thank you, Chair Dinowitz.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thank you, very much.

AKKEEM POLACK: We want to give him this... If it's okay with you, can we get the Sergeant at Arms this? These are the numbers that we have.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Yes, of course, yes. And you can submit, I believe, you can submit that electronically as well for official testimony on the record.

AKKEEM POLACK: Definitely, thank you.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Okay, thank you both,
again.

PANEL: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Okay, our last panel will
consist of Sharon Brown, and of Sean Miller.

(PAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: And in addition, we have
Lisa Nishimura. Good, all right, we will start with
Mr. Miller.

SEAN MILLER: There we go. Good afternoon, thank
you so much for holding this hearing, Chair Dinowitz,
also Councilwoman Brewer, I believe was here
earlier...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Council Member Marte was
here as well.

SEAN MILLER: Oh, gotcha, thank you.

So I'm Sean Miller; I'm Northeast Regional
Director of Young Invincibles. We're a national
nonprofit that works to uplift young adults.

We have lots of CUNY students in our Young
Advocates program. And we also organize and lead the
New York Post Secondary Basic Needs Coalition,
organizing across New York State on issues related to

basic needs, especially food, housing insecurity, and anything nonacademic that prevents students from being able to matriculate and complete their degree.

I'm here to express our support and thanks for investing further in free CUNY MetroCards and Fair Fares, Reconnect, and Fresh Start. These are really lifesaving programs, that we hear from students all the time, makes the difference in whether or not they're able to complete their degree.

And we want to advocate for more funding for these programs, because we know that, while they are incredible, there's a number of students that, there's a large number of students that don't know about these programs. Right?

One of the main issues that we see and hear from students all the time is that they find out about them late, or that they fall just outside of the eligibility criteria, especially once they start earning enough money. Sometimes there's a cliff where they fall off and no longer qualify. And so we wanted to be able to expand things like free MetroCards in particular.

There's a really pertinent piece of advocacy from one of our students in our blog, which I'll

share and submit later to the record, who mentioned that he's a senior at Baruch and just found out about Fair Fares this year. And we need to do a better job of educating (TIMER) students about these wonderful opportunities and expanding single point of entry programs like Medgar Evers College Transition Academy.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thank you. Ms. Nishimura?

LISA NISHIMURA: Hello, can you hear me? Okay, great.

So good afternoon. My name is Lisa Nishimura, and I am the New York Engagement Coordinator at Young Invincible. So I work directly with Sean.

I want to thank the New York City Council, especially the Committee on Higher Education, for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing...

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Can you pause for one moment?

LISA NISHIMURA: Oh, sorry.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: I want to read the rules again. "No video recording or photography is allowed from the witness table." Okay. thank you. Please continue.

LISA NISHIMURA: It's okay.

I'm here today to share my support for ensuring that all CUNY students have access to higher education and for eliminating financial barriers that may hinder their pursuit of it.

First off, I'm a proud CUNY alum, class of 2020, and although I am a bit removed, given how much time has passed, I still work with the majority of our base who are current or recent CUNY students.

To this day, I hear similar sentiments of ways in which CUNY is still inaccessible to students, especially to those it's supposed to serve – low income young adults of color.

There are hidden costs aside from tuition that students attending Higher Ed institutions still have to bear, from the cost of traveling to their campus to purchasing textbooks for their classes – like Akkeem had mentioned earlier.

While programs such as ACE or ASAP help to lift the burden of these costs – and I have witnessed folks from our organization greatly benefit from them – there are still significant gaps of students who are not eligible or who are not aware of the existence of these programs.

I was actually one of those students who had financial needs, yet I was not eligible for ACE at the time because I was an entering freshman and I was a part of the honors program. I've heard now that they don't have that criteria anymore, so honors program students can still apply.

However, had I had been eligible and accepted into the ACE program, it would have been a huge relief for me, as I had to pay for school out of pocket, and was also struggling with my basic needs, including affording monthly MetroCards, which I needed to travel to and from campus, to work, and back home.

For me, those gaps were filled through the accessibility of programs like Single Stop, which allowed me to focus on my education, rather than worry about how I would get to my classes, or how I would gain the energy to focus due to food rationing.

Even though this was almost half a decade ago, the same challenges I face still linger among current CUNY students who have expressed similar struggles. For example, a student who's studying biology at their CUNY campus stated that as an adult student, who cannot rely on parental or familial support,

(TIMER) wrote about how it would – let me finish this paragraph, because it's important – who cannot rely on parental or familial support, wrote about how their major was so demanding, with little to no room for a part time job, that it forced them to quote unquote, this is a quote, "skip meals or eat smaller portions to stretch their limited budget for other necessities like textbooks and transportation".

And, likewise, another student wrote about jumping the turnstile because they do not have a well paying job to cover those costs.

Again, there should be no reason why students have to make sacrifices between their essential needs and their education. In particular, no student should have to risk their life to ride a train to study in pursuit of a degree.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thank you so much.

Ms. Brown?

SHARON BROWN: Hello. My name is Sharon Brown. Before I begin, remember Israel release the hostages, let Yahweh's people go, defend Israel.

Okay. CUNY should make the unlimited MetroCard/ OMNY Card available and also unlimited cell phone data, text, and free textbooks until they can pay

1 before leaving college or it's free or something,
2 because some students have a problem with finances,
3 financial aid, and also getting the proper textbooks.
4 So they're failing classes, because they can't afford
5 the textbooks, and that's a part of the reason why
6 they're leaving.

7 The filing fees, of course, should be made free
8 and people applying versus people who have money are
9 able to get into the school. Some people who are
10 qualified can't get in, because they can't afford the
11 filing fee, so the filing fee should be waived.

12 Student housing and all fees should be taken
13 care of for them once they have enrolled. If they are
14 having problem with their housing, that also needs to
15 be covered, too, so that they don't leave school.

16 And paying off balances, they should do
17 something for them to make sure that they can stay in
18 school, regardless of their balances as it was
19 stated.

20 And it should be mandated, just like in public
21 schools and things like that, that the students in
22 college and university should have meals, every meal.
23 They need to check with the students to make sure
24 that they're eating properly. If they are not eating
25

properly, whatever food that they have on campus, it should be available to them, that should also be something free. A lot of students are failing because they can't think straight, they're not eating properly. It's very serious, and it's a big issue about students not being able to eat, (TIMER) so that's something that can be taken care of. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thank you, Ms. Brown.

I would like to thank... I would like to thank this panel for their testimony, and, of course, anything additional, you can submit in writing.

That is it for the public in person testimony. We will now move to remote testimony.

If you are testifying remotely, please listen for your name to be called. Once your name is called, a member of our staff will unmute you. You may then start your testimony, once the Sergeant at Arms sets the clock and cues you to begin.

Our first witness online is Christopher Leon Johnson.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Yo, yeah, hello, hello, hello. My name is Christopher Leon Johnson.

Thank you, Chair Dinowitz, for having this hearing today for *Removing Small Financial Barriers for CUNY Students*.

Let me keep it real. Right? I think that CUNY should be for free. CUNY need to be for free for everybody. CUNY shouldn't be just for free, just for the people that are gonna come out and vote in masses for you elected officials. I see this was going on here where, they... yeah, they say CUNY is free, CUNY is... CUNY is free. All these colleges wanna be free, but they only do it to appease the people that is going to vote for them on election day. And that shouldn't be the case. If y'all care about making CUNY for free and doing the right thing for students, you should not only remove, make CUNY free, give all FAFSA money to the students, make all school... all school books cheap, or hell, give them for free. Give all the school books for free. Why we gotta pay \$100 for a book that nobody reads? Or you gotta rent a book for \$80... for \$98. This is kinda stupid.

[LOST AUDIO] (INAUDIBLE)

I just (INAUDIBLE) free books, free books free tech, free MetroCards. It's should be free for

everybody. Not just for the photo... not for just for the photo (INAUDIBLE).

And and one more thing, we need to stop all antisemitism in the schools. We need to ban (INAUDIBLE) from all CUNY institutions. We need to ban (INAUDIBLE) from all CUNY institutions. We need to make a film in the City Council, starring you, Mr. Dinowitz, and (INAUDIBLE) to make a, introduce a bill to ban (INAUDIBLE) from all CUNY institutions. The reason we have antisemitism in CUNY is because of that woman called (INAUDIBLE) So like I said, we need to ban antisemitism in all schools. At the same time, we need to ban (INAUDIBLE) from all CUNY institutions. Put and ban restraining order on her. Order of protection. Get some lawyers or protection (INAUDIBLE) She's the reason antisemitism is where it's at (TIMER) at these schools, man. (INAUDIBLE)

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Thank you, Christopher, your time has expired.

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: (INAUDIBLE)

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thank you, so much, Mr. Leon Johnson. Thank you so much.

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: (INAUDIBLE)

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thank you so much for your testimony today at today's hearing.

(PAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Okay, if there is anyone else present in the room who has not had the opportunity to testify, but wishes to do so, please raise your hand.

Seeing no one else who wishes to testify, I just want to thank CUNY, all of the students, the student advocates, and everyone who testified today. I mean, it's pretty clear that for a small investment in our students, as is so often the case, we can get really incredible returns – from 13,687 students who drop out due to owing a small amount of money, to the other students who may not be able to apply for classes, to the issue of OMNY Cards, which students have been coming to this committee to testify about for as far back as I can remember, to fee waivers, which we know increases the number of students who apply for CUNY in the first place. Removing these financial barriers is the right thing to do, both for our students and for their pocketbooks, and for the future investment in the economy of New York City.

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25

And with that, I wish to adjourn this hearing,
thank you. [GAVEL]

C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage, and that there is interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date June 7, 2025