

Student Affairs

101 West 31st. 12th. Fl.
New York, NY 10001
(646) 344-7257
(646) 344-7249

**Testimony Presented by Wilfred Cotto
University Coordinator of Veterans Affairs, to Members of:**

**NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL HIGHER EDUCATION COMMITTEE
JOINTLY WITH THE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS**

October 27, 2009

Good afternoon, Chairman Barron, Chairman Sanders, members of the Higher Education and Veterans' Committee. I am Wilfred Cotto, university coordinator for veteran affairs at The City University of New York.

I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak with you today about the Post 9/11 GI Bill, and about what CUNY is doing to ensure that student veterans stay in school while awaiting payment of educational benefits. As a 28-year veteran of the U.S. Navy, and a combat veteran of the Persian Gulf, I take a very special interest in ensuring that veterans find at CUNY the specific resources they need to successfully meet their educational, career, and personal goals.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill became effective for training on August 1, 2009. This program pays:

- Tuition and fees directly to the school, not to exceed the maximum in-state tuition and fees at a public institution of higher learning
- A monthly housing/living allowance directly to the student based on the location of the school (i.e., students attending schools in Brooklyn, Manhattan, the Bronx, and Queens receive \$2,744.00 a month, while students attending school on Staten Island receive \$1,843.00 a month)

- An annual books and supplies stipend of \$1,000.00

Since the announcement of the new Post 9/11 GI Bill, CUNY has taken a proactive approach to facilitate the process and ensure that student veterans can apply, register, and enroll in desired classes, and can stay in school while awaiting tuition and fee payment from the Veterans Administration (VA).

- CUNY waives application fees for all veterans
- The University provides information and updates on the new educational benefits to current and prospective students, faculty, and staff via the CUNY veterans Web site: www.cuny.edu/veterans (a virtual one-stop source of information for returning military veterans and their families)
- The CUNY Office of Veterans' Affairs, in collaboration with the VA and the New York State Division of Veterans Affairs, has hosted a number of professional development sessions for students, faculty, and staff to discuss details, enhancements, and processing procedures of the Post 9/11 GI Bill
- University registrars, bursars, financial aid professionals, and certifying officials have been provided guidance on how to properly code student veterans utilizing Post 9/11 benefits to avoid unnecessary student billing of tuition and fees, or erroneous notification of course termination due to non-payment of tuition and fees
- This academic year the University allocated funding to all of its community and senior colleges for campus veterans services, including the hiring of full- and part-time staff and the enhancement of programs and services for student veterans
- Many of our campuses employ student veterans as peer advocates to assist other student veterans with their transition and readjustment to the college classroom. The Project for Return and Opportunity in Veterans Education (PROVE) at the Hunter School of Social Work employs graduate social-work student interns to

work with student veterans, assisting them with social, emotional, physical, and psychological readjustment needs.

We acknowledge that the implementation of this new benefit was, and continues to be, a "heavy-lift" for the VA. Under the best of circumstances, it would have been difficult to forecast the influx of veterans signing up for the new benefit. However, we also must acknowledge that the backlog in the processing of these payments does create unnecessary hardships for student veterans, in particular those attempting to attend school on a full-time basis, who rely heavily on the timely payment of benefits (living allowance and books) in order to support themselves as full-time students.

I am pleased to note that the VA recently announced the payment of emergency checks in the amount of \$3,000 to all student veterans enrolled in college awaiting payment of benefits. This was the right thing to do. I applaud the VA's efforts while cautioning that there is still much work to be done.

At this point I would like to turn the time over to Mr. Aubrey Arcangel, a CUNY student veteran attending The City College of New York, to share his experiences with the new benefits, and how it has affected his decision to stay in school.

Chairman Barron, Chairman Sanders, members of the committees, thank you for your continued support.

**Testimony Presented by Peter Grant Jordan
Interim Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs
The City University of New York**

**New York City Council's Joint Hearing
The Higher Education Committee and the Committee on Veterans
Tuesday, October 27, 2009**

Good afternoon, Chairperson Barron, Chairperson Sanders and members of the Higher Education and Veterans committees. I am Peter Jordan, newly appointed Interim Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs at The City University of New York. We are grateful to have the opportunity to speak with you this afternoon about CUNY student-veterans and the services provided for these students.

Testifying with me today is Wilfred Cotto, a veteran and the University Director of Veterans Affairs. He will offer detailed information about CUNY's veteran services and operations. In addition, you will hear testimony from two CUNY students who are veterans as well as a counselor and veterans' coordinator at one of our campuses. They will offer student and staff perspectives on CUNY veterans' services. They are: Mr. Aubrey Archangel, a junior at City College; and Ms. August Coleman who is a first year student at Hostos Community College. Also joining us on this panel is: Mr. Eric Glaude, who is a counselor and the Veterans Coordinator at the Borough of Manhattan Community College.

The faculty, staff and administrators at CUNY are profoundly grateful to our veterans for their service, sacrifice and many contributions to our country. In turn, we are proud to serve our student-veterans by helping them access educational opportunities and achieve their goals.

Our Office of Veterans Affairs is actively engaged in promoting access to higher education for student veterans. We also offer a comprehensive array of services to support their persistence and graduation. Though not a veteran myself, I take special interest and pride in ensuring that our student veterans find the resources and develop the skills they need to succeed at CUNY and beyond.

Currently, there are more than 2,000 student veterans enrolled at CUNY campuses around the city. This places the University in the top 10 for student-veteran enrollment among the country's higher education institutions, and has earned CUNY the distinction of being one of the country's most veteran-friendly institutions.

The CUNY student veteran population has been growing by approximately 10 percent every year since 2004. And we anticipate continued growth as service members return to the New York City area from serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. As our student veteran population grows, so does their demand for comprehensive student services.

The University and its campuses provide a range of academic and support services designed to ease the transition to college and civilian life for these students. These services include: academic advising; counseling--particularly around post-deployment issues; advice on financial aid and benefits; job placement counseling; accommodations for disabled veterans; and more.

In addition, recruitment efforts are an important part of our commitment to encourage veterans' participation in higher education. Assisting Veterans with gaining admission to the University and accessing available financial benefits is a priority—especially those benefits related to the enhanced Post-9/11 GI Bill and the New York State Veterans Tuition Award. Both the University's Central Office and its colleges work closely with the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs and community groups in all five boroughs.

In all of these activities, the University's central Office of Veterans Affairs works collaboratively with veterans' affairs offices on our campuses. Our goal is to ensure the quality and availability of student programs and services and to be a comprehensive resource for students, campuses, and the

community. Our comprehensive veterans' services are reaching more students than ever and constantly evolving to meet their specific needs.

My colleague, University Director of Veterans Affairs Wilfred Cotto, will offer the committee details about the funding process, initiatives and issues I have mentioned. He will also introduce the student veterans who are with us today.

Let me assure you once again, ladies and gentlemen, The City University of New York is fully committed to assisting the men and women who have served our country in achieving an excellent post-active-duty education. The City Council's ongoing assistance in helping us honor this commitment and meet this growing demand is critical. We deeply value our partnership with the Council in serving our student veterans, and I thank you for your continued support.

Good afternoon, Chairman Barron, Chairman Sanders, members of the Higher Education and Veterans' Committee. As Wilfred Cotto stated, my name is Aubrey Arcangel and I am a junior at The City College of New York studying Political Science and an Army Iraq War Veteran.

I am here to today not only as a student veteran receiving GI Bill benefits, but also as Student Veteran Leader at my college campus Veterans Club and New York City Director of the Student Veterans of America, which is a coalition of veterans groups on college campuses across the country, representing over 200 chapters nationwide.

Last year, I, along with other fellow Veterans from CUNY and various college campuses across the Northeast, sat before Congress urging them to pass the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Once it was signed into law, veterans and services members currently serving celebrated with high fives for this benefit we have rightfully earned for service to our nation. Finally, the Post 9/11 GI Bill would remove the long standing barriers to veterans in the classroom.

Once the Fall 2009 semester started, delay in processing applications and distributing payments to student veterans allowed these barriers to remain intact, and veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan attempting to enroll continued to struggle under the weight of financial burdens.

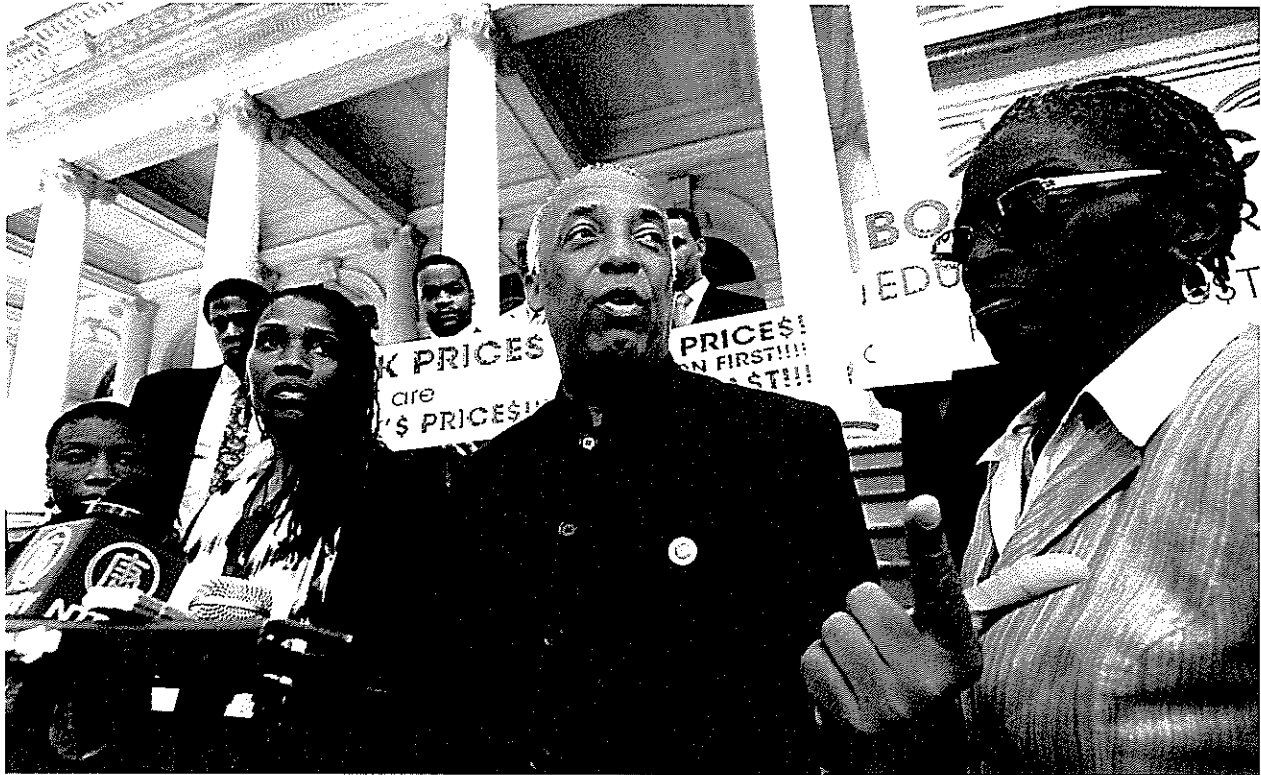
One of my fellow veterans at The City College of New York, Brian Oesterle, a former infantryman with the 101st Airborne Division who served two tours in Iraq, eagerly joined us at the beginning of the semester. Brian suffered multiple injuries during his two tours, including two ruptured discs in his spine, a moderate Traumatic Brain Injury and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Brian tried to attend school in 2004, but could not afford it. The enhanced benefits he was awaiting from the Post 9/11 GI Bill made the dream of finishing college seem within his reach. Brian lives with his girlfriend who has been supporting his transition from the military to civilian world. At the end of September, she was laid off, and because Brian, at the time, did not receive any GI Bill payments, he was in the position of being forced to drop out to make ends meet.

With the announcement of the VA's emergency payments, Brian did not have to put his dream of finishing college to the side and was able to stay in school. Also, with the help of the administration at The City College of New York, they were able to patch up some of the holes left by the VA. Veterans were invited to apply for an emergency loan through the school, which was processed swiftly to help pay some living expenses and books. Unfortunately, this meant

having to buy them from our bookstore, where the prices are significantly higher than other venues, like online bookstores.

For those of us who have been using the old GI Bill, we were awkwardly trying to convince our new student veterans that these delays are the norm. We were used to these late payments, and have typically planned accordingly. Army Veteran Joao Hwang, and International Studies student also at The City College, struck a deal with his landlord, allowing him extra time to pay his rent because delays in receiving his monthly disbursement. Other student veterans were watching the situation develop day-to-day, trying to figure out how long they would be able to hold on before they would have to drop out to pay bills. We made due with the system before, but the Post 9/11 GI Bill was suppose to change this.

With the efforts of the Student Veterans of America urging the VA to act swiftly on this problem, the emergency payment was released. While applauding their efforts with their action, we remain cautious, as tens of thousands of veterans nationwide are still awaiting their GI Bill payments.



Top row (L to R), Students: Gregory Lawson, Horace Henry, and Cory Provost. Bottom row (L to R), Joy Simmons (Councilman's Chief of Staff), Ndigo Washington (Councilman's CUNY Liaison), NYC Councilmember Charles Barron and NYS Assemblywoman Inez Barron.

TEXTBOOK PRICES HIT THE STEPS OF CITY HALL!!!

By *Horace Henry

"Book prices are crook's prices," were among the chants on the steps of City Hall, as CUNY Students joined Councilman Charles Barron, (Chair of the Higher Education Committee) to address the sky-rocketing prices of college textbooks.

On Friday, September 25, 2009, City Council Member Charles Barron organized a press conference immediately followed by a hearing, discussing the horrific impact book prices have had on students, especially from low and middle-income families in NYC.

"The cost of textbooks has reached a level that place the academic future of students at risk," said the Councilman declaring his "plan to examine the issue thoroughly and develop legislation to support policies that will allow our students access to textbooks and ensure their academic success." Also in attendance was NYS Assemblywoman, Inez Barron (member of the NYS Assembly's Higher Education Committee), who stated that "it is long overdue that we take action to correct this horrendous situation created by exorbitant textbook prices." CUNY's student leaders, administrators, faculty, PSC representatives, college textbook publishers, distributors and public advocacy group, were among the list of attendees at the press conference and some testified at the hearing.

"No student should have to pick whether to pay their rent or buy a book for class," said Brooklyn College student/USC Representative Cory Provost, urging the City Council's commitment to resolving this crisis. A study has shown that more than 60% of students attending CUNY's community colleges and half of all attending senior colleges live in households earning less than \$30,000 per year. College costs place a huge financial burden on these students and their families, the Councilman mentioned. "Combined with the

recession and the rising cost of tuition, there's no doubt that textbook prices are becoming a barrier to receiving a quality college education," added Dennis Kim, student leader of Lehman College.

During his address, the Councilman expressed his discontentment with the stranglehold within the textbook billion dollar publishing industry in which he mentioned, the five dominating firms (Thomson, McGraw- Hill, Wiley, Houghton Mifflin and Pearson), which account for about 80% of all college books published. In addition to the stranglehold, he asserted, there are four dominating wholesale/distributors (Follett, Nebraska, College bookstores of America and last but not least Barnes and Noble), together contractually owning and operating 1,550 bookstores nationwide.

During the 2007-2008 fiscal year, college bookstores in the U.S. have collected revenues amounting to \$9.8 billion in textbook sales only. "These are disturbing numbers," the Councilman insisted, and has committed to doing "everything possible in resolving this issue."

Some of the avenues outlined by Councilman Barron, that will be explored in this relentless campaign for affordable college textbooks will include:

- **Extending the shelf life of textbooks**, therefore, publishing new editions less frequently. "Changing a few paragraphs in a book does not constitute a new edition. If there are any changes since the last publication, they should be issued as a supplemental" said the Councilman.
- **Unbundling textbooks and learning packages**; therefore, decreasing the price of the actual textbook.
- **Permitting the reselling and re-importation of textbooks**; hence, allowing the same books to be imported and sold at a cheaper price than it is being offered to students in the United States.
- **Requiring colleges and universities to negotiate directly with the publishers in order to reduce prices**; an approach that will lesson or eliminate the "middle-man's" profit margin, resulting in a lower cost per book for students.
- **Promoting more textbook rental systems**; allowing student to affordably rent books, instead of paying full price.
- **Encouraging faculty to become more cognizant of textbook costs and issues**. "Faculty assigning text book should be aware of their prices and take that into consideration when requiring student to purchase books," said the councilman.

"Our goal is to organize the students and the college community to tackle this issue and right this wrong" added Ndigo Washington, CUNY Liaison for CM Barron. "Please alleviate the financial stress that textbooks place on the backs of students," was the cry of BMCC's student leader Jamell Henderson, pleading to the members of the Committee on Higher Education.

"These unbearable prices are driving students further into debt than ever before," said the councilman, declaring the immediate need for action. Textbook prices have risen 186 percent in the United States, slightly more that 6 percent per year, and twice the rate of inflation. "This must stop and stop now; education must be first and profits last," concluded Mr. Barron.

**Horace Henry is a student at Baruch College majoring in Public Affairs and an intern for Councilman Charles Barron.*

For more information or to join the AFFORDABLE TEXTBOOK CAMPAIGN, please contact Ndigo Washington, CUNY Liaison or Horace Henry at (212) 788- 6957.

CUNY
PANEL

THE COUNCIL THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Appearance Card

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

in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: VICE CHANCELLOR PETER JORDAN

Address: VETERANS DIRECTOR WILLFORD CATO

I represent: AUBREY ARCHANGEL - STUDENT

Address: AUGUST COLEMAN STUDENT

ERIC GLADDAIT - BMCC

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

THE COUNCIL THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Appearance Card

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

in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: ERIC CLAUDE

Address: 199 CHAMBERS STREET, 25 W 132ND ST
NY, NY 10037

I represent: Borough of Manhattan Comm. Coll.

Address: 199 CHAMBERS STREET Rm 353
10007

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

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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

in favor in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: ANDREW ROBERTS

Address: 55 Hanson Place, # 932, Brooklyn 11217

I represent: NEW YORK STATE DIVISION of VETERANS AFFAIRS

Address: _____

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

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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

in favor in opposition

Date: 10.27.09

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: WILFRED COTTO

Address: 101 W. 31st Street, 12th FL
NY, NY 10001

I represent: The City University of New York

Address: _____

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