

**Testimony of Chancellor Félix V. Matos Rodríguez  
The City University of New York**

**Joint Finance and Higher Education Committee Hearing  
on the  
Fiscal Year 2023 Executive Budget Proposal**

**Wednesday, May 18, 2022**

Good afternoon, Chair Brannan, Chair Dinowitz, and members of the New York City Council committees on Finance and Higher Education, staff and guests. I am Félix Matos Rodríguez, Chancellor of The City University of New York. I am joined this morning by Executive Vice Chancellor and Chief Operating Officer Héctor Batista, Vice Chancellor for Facilities Planning, Construction and Management Dr. Mohamed Attalla, and Interim Vice Chancellor and Chief Financial Officer Christina Chiappa.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify this afternoon and for the City Council's steadfast support of CUNY.

I am extremely honored and humbled to lead the premier and largest urban public university in the United States serving approximately 260,000 degree-seeking students, 185,000 in adult and continuing education programs, 18,400 faculty and 21,500 staff at our 11 four-year colleges, seven community colleges and seven graduate and professional schools.

Since I began just over three years ago, I have assembled an executive cabinet and roster of college presidents of unprecedented diversity who reflect the City we live in and the students we serve. The Board of Trustees has appointed 12 new presidents during my tenure; these include the first three Asian Americans to ever serve as CUNY college presidents, 7 women, and 5 African Americans.

This is an especially auspicious time — we just kicked off what is going to be a year-long commemoration of CUNY's 175th anniversary. The mission of the University, to offer an accessible and high-quality education to all New Yorkers, was born on May 7, 1847, when the Free Academy received its charter from the New York State Legislature. The Free Academy would later be renamed The City College of New York. I am proud of all that has been accomplished and I'm optimistic about the future and CUNY's priorities, plans and goals for the coming fiscal year and beyond.

Before I speak to the future, allow me to recount some of CUNY's recent triumphs.

In the midst of a world-wide pandemic during the 2020-2021 academic year, CUNY awarded 59,295 degrees — the largest number of degrees in our history.

CUNY made history by launching the CUNY Comeback Program, erasing more than \$100 million in unpaid tuition and fees for more than 57,000 students through what is believed to be the country's largest debt-forgiveness initiative of its kind.

We expanded the University's mental health services to assist the increasing numbers of students at CUNY struggling with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

CUNY has helped our students maintain their academic momentum during the pandemic by ensuring the timely and equitable distribution of federal Higher Education Emergency Relief Funds directly to our students. This spring, we distributed \$151.4 million to nearly 218,000 students across the University from the latest round of federal stimulus funds - full-time students received an average award of \$967 (and non-full-time students received awards averaging \$300).

We are also beginning a new round of awards totaling just over \$3 million from the Chancellor's Emergency Relief Fund to student-parents who are registered for 2022 summer session to cover the cost of their tuition and other expenses.

And CUNY's excellence continues to be recognized:

- Two of our faculty members have been awarded prestigious 2022 Guggenheim Fellowships, one from Macaulay Honors College and another from Hunter College;
- Three of our own have earned \$90,000 awards from the competitive Soros Fellowships for New Americans;
- Seven community college students from Bronx Community College, Kingsborough Community College and LaGuardia Community College were selected as recipients of the prestigious Jack Kent Cooke Foundation Undergraduate Transfer Scholarship;
- Hostos Community College, Kingsborough Community College and LaGuardia Community College were named as semifinalists for the 2023 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence -- the only semifinalists from New York State. This is a prize that President Barack Obama once likened to the Oscars for great community colleges; and

- CUNY colleges continue to be lauded as top-performing public schools, best for social mobility with strong ethnic diversity.

Turning now to the State budget, we are very thankful to Governor Hochul and the State Senate and Assembly for significant investments in CUNY. The University received \$53 million in funding for 540 new full-time faculty at the senior and community colleges. Colleges are in the process of hiring 250 new lecturers, 85 at the community colleges, with a start date of this upcoming fall semester. Hiring will continue through next academic year. This initiative will put more full-time faculty in the classroom and provide for more faculty support for students outside of classroom, which studies have shown is a critical component of student success.

The State Enacted budget also includes \$40 million in one-time funds to support both the senior and community colleges, \$1.2 million in ‘start up’ funds for child care centers at the community colleges and \$3.6 million at the senior colleges, and an additional \$200,000 for the College Discovery program.

The State of New York provides funding for community colleges on a FTE basis. Due to declining enrollment, State base aid funding as well as tuition revenue have been decreasing. The University’s FY2023 budget request asked for a funding floor in order to maintain budget stability and we are appreciative that the State enacted budget includes a 100% funding floor against the fiscal year 2022 level.

In addition, the State enacted budget contains welcome improvements to the TAP program including \$59.6 million to cover the so called ‘tap gap’ at the senior colleges; and the inclusion of TAP awards for part-time students enrolled in degree programs and in non-degree workforce credential programs. We have advocated for similar changes in the past and thank the Governor and Legislature for this support.

Now let me turn to the Mayor’s Executive Budget proposal.

We are grateful for receiving another year of funding for the Juneteenth initiatives. For CUNY, these include the Accelerate, Complete and Engage program (ACE), which is the senior college version of the ASAP program, and the Brooklyn Recovery Corps at Medgar Evers College.

Total ACE City funding in FY23 is \$8 million. All ACE students receive a full suite of comprehensive supports that have been found to significantly increase timely baccalaureate graduation rates for participating students entering as first-time freshmen and as transfer students with an associate degree. These supports include financial

resources, structured pathways to sustain academic momentum, and individualized direct support services.

ACE graduation rates continue to demonstrate strong, unprecedented results. The ACE freshmen cohort admitted to John Jay College in fall 2017 realized a four-year graduation rate of 60% versus 42% for a matched comparison group of similar non-ACE students. The first transfer cohort at Lehman College, admitted in fall 2019, realized a two-year graduation rate of 61% versus 30% for the matched comparison group.

In the fall of 2021, Medgar Evers launched the Brooklyn Recovery Corps (BRC) paid internship program designed to spur economic growth and recovery in Central Brooklyn. The FY2023 City funding level is \$1 million. The BRC is a direct response to the pandemic's impact on small businesses, particularly in the Central Brooklyn area, and works to place student interns with small businesses and non-profit organizations based in Brooklyn. The BRC internship program serves as a "living-learning classroom," and will provide 150 interns over three semesters in the 2022-23 academic year with hands-on learning experience while giving back to the community.

We ask that the funding for the ACE and Brooklyn Recovery Corps be baselined so that we can plan for the continuation of these programs that are so beneficial to student completion and provide internship experiences that facilitate transition to career pathways.

Also included in the Executive Budget is the CUNY Career Launch internship program. It will provide 2,000 career-connected internships this summer to CUNY students with an emphasis on students from Community Colleges and those who have no previous internship experience. Employment and job sites will be focused on helping with recovery efforts in the education, healthcare, community/nonprofit, and small business areas. We thank Mayor Adams for including baselined funding for this program.

Creating career pathways for students is one of my top priorities. Both the BRC Internships and the CUNY Career Launch Program will assist in achieving this goal.

While we are appreciative for funding of mandatory cost increases, the Executive budget also includes a \$14.6 million baselined efficiencies target. We are hopeful that this \$14.6 million will be fully restored so that community colleges can continue to provide the instructional and support services that students need to complete their courses of study, advance to careers or further their educational pursuits.

This reduction is especially challenging given the additional stress community colleges are facing and the unprecedented impact COVID has had on community college enrollment. While CUNY is not unique in facing these challenges and we are taking targeted steps to reverse this trend, declining CUNY community college enrollment has led to a \$113 million decrease in tuition revenue since FY2019.

The University has frozen tuition rates at its community colleges for six consecutive years, and it is critical that other sources, including increased City funding, cover foregone revenue that is so vitally needed to help support our students.

We also seek the Council's help in restoring and continuing funding for several initiatives and programs. These include remediation, the Food Insecurity initiative, community college child care centers, various centers and institutes, technology incubators, which help promote growth of the technology sector in the Bronx, Queens and Staten Island, and the CUNY Citizenship Now! Program, which has provided citizenship and immigration legal services in 39 City Council districts throughout the five boroughs.

The executive budget did not provide funding for the Vallone Scholarships. In Fall 2021, awards of \$350 per semester were granted to over 22,000 CUNY students at community and senior colleges. The Committees have secured resources for the Vallone Scholarships in the past, and we ask for your advocacy in funding this essential student support program.

We are also excited to work in partnership Speaker Adrienne Adams on CUNY Reconnect. This sweeping plan will focus on adult students who wish to come to CUNY and finish their degree, as well as those who want to adjust their educational and career track. While the initiative is not currently part of the Executive Budget, we believe this program will assist in NY's recovery.

CUNY's Budget Request for Fiscal Year 2023 takes into account the University's needs as well as the current fiscal environment. Our focus is on jumpstarting New York's economic resurgence. Some of the initiatives for which we are seeking support include prioritizing student mental health, creating a nursing pipeline program, forging connections with private-industry partners to create career pathways for our students, expanding the successful CUNY Corps internship program, and enhancing diversity within our full-time faculty ranks. We are also seeking crucial capital budget support to enhance our IT systems, the needs of which have come to the forefront due to our transition to online learning.

Now I will turn to the capital budget. In response to the pandemic and the return to campus, CUNY engaged consultants who visited our buildings to determine whether they met appropriate air quality standards. Where possible, immediate remediation work -- such as replacing air filters and air conditioning units -- was completed. Since then, additional projects have been completed and HVAC and air-quality work continues to be a priority for CUNY. We have several projects that are being prioritized as a result of these efforts. Designs for capital renewal projects include new criteria to improve the indoor air quality for our buildings and to ensure the continued health and safety of our community.

As you know, senior college capital projects in general are 100% state funded, except for discretionary funding from some elected officials. Community college funding throughout New York State requires a local entity to provide local matching funds of 50%. The state requires that the City provide the first funding for capital projects for CUNY community colleges, which the state matches in its next budget nine months later. The state was very generous this year and we will be able to address many more projects at the senior colleges.

The City's Executive Budget proposes \$590 million in capital funds for CUNY over the five-year plan through Fiscal Year 2026, including \$5.1 million in capital funding proposed by the borough presidents. We have worked collaboratively with the Mayor's Office of Management and Budget to more accurately realign the five-year plan with expected start and completion dates of capital projects.

One of the most critical issues affecting CUNY's capital program is the age of its facilities. The University's facilities portfolio consists of 29 million square feet in 300 buildings across our 25 campuses. The average building at CUNY is more than 50 years old; most are over 30 and some exceed 100.

The capital renewal program to address this university-wide issue is the number one priority for our facilities. Included in the city five-year capital plan are five new high priority projects that are part of the concerted effort to expedite our capital renewal work: A fire alarm project at Borough of Manhattan Community College for \$12 million; Piping and Distribution Upgrades at Kingsborough CC, \$20 million; HVAC Upgrades at 7 buildings at Bronx Community College, \$80 million; Seawall Exterior Lighting at Kingsborough Community College, \$2.54 million; and a boiler at Queensborough Community College, \$1.5 million.

This is a good start but there is so much more to do. The additional new needs projects are presented in our capital request book, which you should all have a copy of. Your staff and college and central office staff are discussing these needs as we work towards budget adoption.

Thanks to the continued support of our New York State and City partners, the future of this great University is bright in spite of the challenges we have collectively faced from the coronavirus. I have seen our administration, faculty, students and staff pull together and lift one another, even as families and communities were buffeted by profound difficulty and loss. This shows me that CUNY, like New York itself, will always persevere. I have never been prouder to be a member of the CUNY community, or more certain of the integral role this University plays in the lifeblood of New York.

That concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions.