

**Testimony before the  
New York City Council Committee on Higher Education  
by  
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**Introduction**

Chairperson Inez Barron and members of the Committee on Higher Education, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony before you to offer an update on mental health services for City University of New York (CUNY) students.

My name is Denise Maybank and I am honored to serve as the Interim Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management for the City University of New York. I began my tenure at the City University of New York with the opportunity to come before you on October 14, 2020 as you and the Committee on Mental Health Disabilities and Addiction received testimony on mental health services at the City University of New York.

From that experience, I know you are keenly aware of the need for mental health services among college students, of all ages, from all racial and ethnic backgrounds, at all socio-economic levels, and participating in all levels of study. You are also clearly aware of the impact this pandemic has had on the socioemotional wellbeing and mental health of our students.

I am accompanied today by Ryan Camire who serves as the University Director for Mental Health and Wellness; he is also best prepared to offer perspective on University-wide mental health services and data.

My focus today is on providing you with updates on mental health needs, resources and services across CUNY since we last came together for this purpose. I will not repeat previous testimony, as I know you have the written version from last year, but I may make reference to some previous information for purposes of context.

## **What We Heard and Knew**

As students testified last year, I learned of their pain and concerns first hand. I heard experiences that left me concerned about our ability to meet the needs of students stressed by life circumstances, compounded by the unprecedented factors of the pandemic. I had to accept mental health issues and services as a critical area on which I would need to focus effort and attention.

The voice of Juvanie let us know of the significant impact being inflicted by the pandemic on students in the presence of limited resources across the university.

Amber emphasized the urgent need for mental health services and her personal experience with long wait times and time limited services.

Neha drew attention to the lack of awareness of services, insufficient services, and the need for better marketing, communication and coordination to increase access for students.

Anna confronted us with the reality of seeking continuity of services to manage anxiety as she transferred to CUNY and the difficulty she experienced in connecting with services despite having insurance.

The top three presenting problems identified by students through CUNY counseling services and through the technology based support services were, and continue to be, anxiety, depression, and academics.

Counseling Center directors advocate the need for additional practitioners to meet the burgeoning demand for services. Students come to the place they know, to find help with the illusive and unknown experiences of remote learning challenges, displacement, loss of friends and family, general anxiety, and intensified mental health and emotional distress. Already stressed counseling centers and practitioners were, and are, being challenged to respond to an increased demand for services.

## **What We Did**

Juvanie, Amber, Neha and Anna along with the others who testified last year, we heard you and your voices continue to resound.

As you may recall, \$5 million of the funds received by the university through the federal CARES Act was allocated to expand mental health related tools and services. Funds were distributed to campuses and a portion of the funds was designated centrally to support the procurement of university-wide tools.

We had the opportunity to procure tools and resources to support access to quality mental health services addressing the needs we know are paramount for our population of students and practitioners.

Crisis Text Line has been operational for six months and over 600 students have utilized the crisis texting service to discuss issues such as academics, anxiety, and depression. Crisis Text Line is free, 24/7 support with trained counselors, for those in crisis, accessible from anywhere in the US.

Over 200 faculty and staff have completed training with Kognito Software to respond to students with mental health needs and to provide appropriate resources. This suite of real time simulation products helps to educate faculty and staff about mental health and suicide prevention, which supports improved academic performance, student retention, and campus safety.

Nearly 5000 international and out of state students have access to Talkspace, with enrolled users reporting anxiety and depression as the two top issues of concern. Talkspace is the most convenient and affordable way to connect with a licensed therapist — all from the privacy of one's device. Students can send their therapist a text, audio, picture, or video messages at any time, and they will respond daily, 5 days/week. Talkspace will remain available at least throughout the next two semesters to supplement services for students using the virtual learning environment or preferring this option.

Over 20% of the faculty and staff across the University have completed the Grief and Bereavement and Self-Care and Resilience Blackboard courses offered since Fall 2020. These courses were offered to support employees in their own care and to aid them in better understanding the experiences being shared in the pandemic.

The 10 Minute Mind Mindfulness Course has 34,972 registered CUNY users with over 80% of the users being students using the course more than three times weekly. This online, guided mindfulness meditation program focusing on reducing stress and anxiety via a 10 minute daily mindfulness exercise is available to all students, faculty, and staff for daily mindfulness meditation practice.

Tele-counseling has been successful at CUNY with usage numbers and requests for services remaining steady throughout the 2020-2021 academic year, while adherence with counseling services has risen dramatically. Specific figures for the academic year are still being tabulated and results will be provided to the City Council when calculations are complete.

Marketing and communication has increased with the support of the Central Office communications team. This includes a revamped website, [www.cuny.edu/mentalhealth](http://www.cuny.edu/mentalhealth), a larger social media presence, communications sent directly to students regarding mental health support, and press briefings on major initiatives.

We have monitored a number of marketing and communications metrics following the feedback during the last hearing. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, CUNY social media accounts have posted about mental health more than 200 times, reaching more than 700,000 unique users. In that timespan, we have posted about mental health on Twitter 94 times, yielding 459,288 impressions and 7,290 engagements. On Facebook, we have posted about mental health 49 times, reaching 114,194 users and yielding 122,810 impressions and 2,964 engagements. On Instagram, we have posted about mental health 57 times, reaching 138,099 users and yielding 151,955 impressions.

To announce the new Crisis Text Line service, a press release was published that received 9,945 page views and 4,501 unique visitors. We also created a social media toolkit with various graphics and language shared by social media channels across CUNY's 25 colleges. Our CUNY Brief newsletter from February 2021, announced the Crisis Text Line service and other mental health resources, and was opened by 79,425 members of the CUNY community, including 69,253 students. Since the summer, we have added a "Mental Health" resources footer to each CUNY Brief newsletter, helping students access our resource hub quickly and easily.

Our mental health resource hub webpage received 45,639 page views and 30,125 unique visitors. Our CUNY Student Continuity page, now known as the CUNY Student Survival Guide, was launched in April 2020 to host an abundance of mental health tips and resources, has since received 59,416 page views and 50,615 unique visitors.

When I came before you last year, the FTE number of mental health practitioners available across the university was at 108. As we begin this academic year, there has been an increase in the FTE number of practitioners providing mental health services across the university. We have more substantially increased the number of clinicians available to CUNY students through the stimulus funding described below. The counselor to student ratio at CUNY was 1:2550 in Fall 2019. The same ratio improved in Fall 2020 to 1:2374. For Spring 2021 the ratio was 1:2151. Campuses have made the decision to invest in staffing to provide more direct services, resulting in this reduction in the ratio. We acknowledge the International Accreditation of Counseling Services (IACS) standard of 1 clinician to every 1500 students, and aspire to get much closer to that level as additional resources are identified and committed for mental health services.

### **What Investments Have Been Made**

As Chairperson Baron emphasized during the last related hearing, the commitment of funds to address these issues is critical. The investment in CUNY is necessary in order to assure reasonable levels of service to meet student mental health needs. The federal stimulus dollars provided to colleges and universities have helped to meet some of these needs.

CUNY committed the original \$5 million from the first allocation of funds under the CARES Act. Comparable amounts have been designated from the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRSSA) and the latest American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds as well. These resources along with the \$1 million allocation from the state, specifically for mental health services, provide a recent allotment of funds totaling \$14,400,000 to enhance mental health services, which is supplemented by increased funding and support from the individual colleges.

These resources certainly make a difference, but additional investment and commitment are required to address the need for more practitioners, reduction in wait time, and enhanced services in response to increased demand due to pandemic related stressors.

### **And, There is More to be Done**

You are probably aware of the initiatives to alleviate some of the stressors that exist for CUNY students. I highlight two initiatives in particular: the CUNY Comeback Program coupled with the release of transcript

and diploma holds for those with outstanding debt to the university. The CUNY Comeback Program was launched by Chancellor Matos Rodriguez to relieve the tuition and fees debt of approximately 50,000 CUNY students, using up to \$125 million in federal stimulus funds. This debt forgiveness initiative is complemented by a policy change lifting transcript and diploma holds for students with outstanding debt to the university. These initiatives created the opportunity for students to reenroll starting this semester and to advance their educational and career goals.

This semester, we have heard students express the added anxiety of having to socialize in-person again. Our Marketing and Communications team is rolling out a “Here for You” mental health campaign to showcase the best of CUNY’s mental health resources. We will have new graphics of these resources, graphics of 40 new mental health tips, welcoming video messages from Counseling Center staff members, and a revamped Mental Health webpage. We are also launching CUNY’s very first student podcast, with the inaugural episode featuring CUNY Trustee Juvanie Piquant discussing the importance of mental health and her personal experiences. By making CUNY’s commitment to students’ mental health a clear priority, we hope to support their success during this unprecedented and transitional semester.

Our colleagues at Healthy CUNY survey students regarding their wellbeing from a variety of perspectives. The data and analyses help us to have a good sense of what is happening in this regard among CUNY students. Recently, these researchers surveyed students regarding their health insurance status and use of health services. Preliminary analysis indicates 10.2% of survey respondents lacked health insurance. Referral for services to address the mental health needs of CUNY students will remain a reality – health care insurance is essential for this purpose. This is a reality deserving attention and response in order to assure access to necessary mental health services.

According to a preliminary analysis of the recent Student-Parents Survey conducted by CUNY, 81% of students utilizing counseling report it being “very helpful” and 96% of students utilizing counseling reported it being “somewhat helpful” or “very helpful”. We are gratified to know this segment of students is highly satisfied with the counseling services they have received and we recognize the need to extend this experience for other students who do not express this level of satisfaction.

I hope, should I have the privileged of coming before you again on this topic, that I will be able to bring you news of greater investment in mental health services resulting in an even more improved clinician to

student ratio, along with data and information about the effective use of resources and services being made available. The City Council has been incredibly supportive of CUNY and we would certainly welcome additional recurrent City Council funding directly targeted at increasing mental health staffing capacity.

I will not blow smoke or pretend we will be able to immediately conquer it all or fully meet all the mental health needs of our students. What we will do is continue to track our improvement in doing so. We will work to create mechanisms for accountability and to gather the creative responses of 25 unique colleges and schools in addressing the mental health needs of more than 234,000 students who entrust the partnership in their destiny to us.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide an update on where we are and to remain accountable to you as city leaders, to the people of the city of New York whom we all serve, and most importantly to the students of the City University of New who deserve our support, our commitment and responsiveness to their mental health needs.

We are available for your questions.

September 19, 2021

Council Member Inez Barron  
Chair, NYC Council Higher Education Committee

Dear Council Member Barron:

Thank you for your leadership and support of faculty, staff, and students in the City University of New York. We write to you on behalf of the CUNY Association of Black Faculty and Staff. The Association consists of a range of faculty and staff across CUNY who work in various disciplines, departments and programs. This hearing on mental health resources for CUNY students in view of the reopening of campuses in the midst of a pandemic is very timely.

Members of our Association reviewed the status of how CUNY students have been affected by the reopening. Although classes began on August 25, 2021, we found that there are a number of issues which are affecting student enrollment and success because the readiness for the reopening of campuses has been left up to individual campuses. This has resulted in marked differences across campuses and an unevenness regarding the implementation of these plans. Research on the dire impact of COVID on the Black and Brown community is well-documented. These race-related and economic factors should be taken into account to ensure the success of BIPOC students who often face financial hardship and serious challenges in maintaining social distance in their homes and community and who have not been adequately supported in CUNY.

#### Instructional Modes

In-person instruction varies widely with 1% in-person instruction at New York City Tech to 28% in person instruction at Hunter College.

Hybrid instruction varies from 6% at Medgar Evers College to 38% at Hunter College.

- In an online survey on the current climate around COVID and their experience with remote learning, 124 of 227 SEEK students said that they preferred fully online classes. 52 of 227 students sated that they preferred hybrid courses, a mix of online and in-person courses. Only 27 students preferred in-person only.
- When asked how much they were concerned about the Delta variant, 115 of 227 students said that they were very concerned and 55 of 227 students said that they were somewhat concerned.

Student comment.

In-person courses are not only about the social distancing in the classroom but also how students travel to campus. Some students take trains, subways and buses to get to campus; there are risks of getting COVID-19 and Delta. We are not only students or staff, but also someone's children, partner, parent, sibling, grandchild, and friend. Not all college students live by themselves; many of us live with parents and grandparents and children who are not vaccinated. Education is super important to everyone, but if I can get the same knowledge online as going to school, why should I risk my life?

The recommendation that instructional modes increase in the Spring semester should be revisited.

### Ventilation

Although campuses were reviewed to ensure that proper ventilation protocols were being used, there are some campuses that still have ventilation problems. For example, at Queens and Hunter College, some windows cannot be opened.

All areas that have evidence of ventilation problems should be closed to faculty, staff and students until there is an independent verification that these areas are properly ventilated.

### Contact Tracing Protocols

There are no clear contact tracing protocols for students. In one college, after being told that they were exposed to COVID 19, students were asked to sit in the last row.

Some colleges are relying on an honor system with respect to student vaccinations.

Student Comment.

I've been exposed to a person who had a positive COVID although he was vaccinated. This has put my entire family on high alert because although most of us are vaccinated, my youngest of 13 months isn't. This is making it VERY stressful for everyone in the household. This can happen inside a campus even if precautionary actions are being taken into consideration. I suggest going back to fully online classes until everyone, of all ages, has been vaccinated or there is no trace that this disease will be a menace to our homes.

Student Comment.

The vaccination is not the solution because we can still get COVID and transmit them to people who can't access the vaccine. . . I have a 9-year-old sister and if I bring COVID home, she will most likely get it too since we share a bedroom. I can't quarantine myself from my sister because I have nowhere else to go.

### Student Performance

The rush to return students to campus without protocols that allowed for all students to return without interruption in their instruction will have a disparate impact. We are very concerned about the October 7<sup>th</sup> deadline for students taking in-person or hybrid classes to be fully vaccinated. It is our understanding that students who fail to meet this deadline will be dropped from classes without refunds. If so, we fear this policy will have a disproportionate adverse effect on Black and Brown students who come from communities with the lowest vaccinations and rampant misinformation about the vaccine. They stand the possibility of losing not only this semester but perhaps a significant interruption in their educational careers. We hope that the administration is sensitive to these concerns and develops strategies to mitigate the impact on these vulnerable populations. Even more troubling, it appears that there is no appeals process for students who do not meet the October 7<sup>th</sup> vaccine deadline.

## Student Comment.

I think forcing students to withdraw from classes because they will not or cannot get vaccinated is unfair to them. They are basically being denied an education because of a vaccine that they do not feel comfortable putting into their body as yet or cannot do so because of their beliefs.

## Summary

CUNY must go beyond strong words and move to strong and decisive action to address issues of equity, racial justice, and antiblackness. The pandemic has exacerbated these issues. CUNY must delve deeper into the structure, funding, policies, and unofficial practices that continue to sustain the inhospitable community that BIPOC students, faculty and staff experience at CUNY. We fear that without serious intervention these continued actions will lead to a precipitous decline in BIPOC student, faculty, and staff engagement at CUNY. This would be a grave miscarriage of racial justice

BIPOC students have been negatively impacted by COVID. There should have been a uniform plan and timeframe that accounted for and gave weight to maximum proof of vaccinations for returning students and faculty to campus.

It appears that the accelerated reopening was driven by budgetary needs rather than the health of the students.

We recommend that the Chancellery revisit its reopening plans and consult with medical professionals, faculty, campus advisors, staff and student leaders so that the views of all stakeholders are given full consideration. Given the health and safety concerns we must act as one university and not 25 separate campuses.

Respectfully,

The CUNY Association of Black Faculty and Staff



**New York City Council Committee on Higher Education  
Preliminary Budget Hearing  
Submitted by Lisa Nishimura, Engagement Coordinator, Young Invincibles  
Monday, September 20, 2021**

Good Afternoon. My name is Lisa Nishimura, and I am the Engagement Coordinator at Young Invincibles. Young Invincibles is a policy and advocacy non-profit dedicated to elevating young adults in the political process and expanding economic opportunities for our generation. We work with young adults to ensure that our voices are at the table when it comes to higher education, health care, workforce development, and civic engagement. I want to thank the New York City Council and the Committee on Higher Education for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing.

Today's hearing for the Committee on Higher Education is held at a crucial time for New York's college students. We have seen how the COVID-19 pandemic has enormously impacted college students' mental health. According to Active Minds, more than eighty percent of college students reported that COVID-19 had negatively affected their mental health.<sup>1</sup> For CUNY students, more than half reported experiencing anxiety and/or depression, with half stating that they needed mental health support as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup> However, even though half felt they needed mental health support, it does not mean that they actually received services or quality care given limited capacity. According to a national survey from *Inside Higher Ed* and *College Pulse*, after a year into the pandemic, more than sixty percent of college students nationwide reported having fair or poor mental health and out of those students, about sixty percent graded their campus' mental health services a 'C' or lower.<sup>3</sup> This particular statistic is not surprising as CUNY students have expressed similar sentiments in regards to their campus' mental health services such as the waiting time to see a counselor.

Some of our advocates at Young Invincibles, stated there were counselor waitlists with no guarantee. Some students reported that they were told that they would be able to see a campus counselor within three to four weeks but ended up ultimately waiting more than six months with no updates on when they would be seen. To highlight this issue, about 86 percent of CUNY students who have anxiety, depression or serious psychological distress have not visited a campus mental health center within the last twelve months, according to Healthy CUNY.<sup>4</sup> This could be due to various factors such as inaccessibility to these centers, doubt of being able to

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<sup>1</sup> Active Minds (2020). Student Mental Health Survey (September 2020). Retrieved from: <https://www.activeminds.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Student-Mental-Health-Data-Sheet-Fall-2020-1.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Jones, et al. (2021). The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on College Students' Health and Financial Stability in New York City: Findings from a Population-Based Sample of City University of New York (CUNY) Students. Retrieved from: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11524-020-00506-x>

<sup>3</sup> Ezarik, Melissa (2021). Students Struggle but Don't Seek Colleges' Help. Retrieved from: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/04/14/students-struggling-not-seeking-campus-mental-health-support>

<sup>4</sup> Healthy CUNY. Mental health (n.d.). Retrieved September 18, 2021, from <https://www.healthycuny.org/mental-health>

# YOUNG INVINCIBLES

see a counselor, or even stigma. In addition, students have expressed the lack of diversity of mental health professionals on their campus, vocalizing how they do not feel represented, which can affect a students' ability to connect with their counselor and ultimately, continue seeking services.

The urgency to resolve the core issues of mental health services expressed by students is even more critical, given this could be a matter of life and death. According to Active Minds, suicide is the second leading cause of death among young adults.<sup>5</sup> Among CUNY students, about ten percent, ages 18-25, had serious thoughts of suicide while about six percent, ages 26 and older, had the same thoughts according to Healthy CUNY.<sup>6</sup>

Given the city's commitment to its public higher education system, supporting CUNY must be elevated as a priority, so that all students who seek services receive them. I am asking the city to increase investments in on campus mental health resources that would help increase capacity, such as a teletherapy partnership that would ensure that students that needed services could access them immediately. Investing in a peer-to-peer mentoring program that would supplement services students are receiving. This would both increase capacity while also giving students a job. In addition, it would also help build a pipeline to a more diverse pool of counselors. Given the urgency of this matter, I strongly urge the city to help fund hiring more counselors for CUNY to meet the ever increasing demand of students seeking support. Lastly, I recommend that the city support Senate Bill S844, which requires CUNY & SUNY campuses to have at least a ratio of one mental health professional to 1,000 students.

I urge the Committee on Higher Education to consider the concerns and solutions of other students and student-led organizations speaking today. Thank you for your time.

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<sup>5</sup> Active Minds (2020). Changing the Culture Around Mental Health: 2020 Impact Report. Retrieved from: [https://www.activeminds.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ActiveMinds\\_ImpactReportFY20.pdf](https://www.activeminds.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ActiveMinds_ImpactReportFY20.pdf)

<sup>6</sup>Healthy CUNY. Mental health (n.d.). Retrieved September 18, 2021, from <https://www.healthycuny.org/mental-health>



**New York City Council Committee on Higher Education  
Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY  
Submitted by Hafsah Ansar, Senior, Hunter College  
Monday, September 20, 2021**

Good morning. My name is Hafsah Ansar, and I am a senior at Hunter College studying Psychology. I want to thank the New York City Council for the opportunity to testify today.

I am testifying today to discuss the mental health services available on my campus. As an Asian American woman, I understand how culturally responsive counseling services can play a role in help-seeking behaviors of Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs). Asian American students have long since had to endure many difficulties such as bicultural issues, family difficulties due to cultural differences, and marginality while trying to attain their college degree. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, additional stressors have plagued the lives of Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs), such as rising anti-Asian sentiments, discrimination against Asians, social isolation and exclusion, and rising unemployment rates. A CUNY School of Public Health survey that assessed the mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on CUNY students found that Asian American and Latino students had the highest rates of depression and anxiety during the pandemic, showing how these two ethnic and racial groups needed the most mental health services. However, while the amount of mental health problems that minorities are enduring have increased, the utilization of mental health resources on campus is not proportionate to the amount of problems that they endure.

Even when minority students do seek help from campus counselors, they may not receive help that is responsive to their unique needs. For example, my Chinese-American friend once sought help from a school counselor on campus because she was having difficulty overcoming the cultural and linguistic barriers between her and her parents. She turned to the counseling center on her campus for support, but after her first appointment, she felt that the counselor did not understand the cultural norms and values that her parents held as Chinese immigrants, and thus, she stopped seeking help from the counseling center. This experience my friend had with her counselor highlights that the counselors present on campus were not well-equipped to deal with issues that minority and immigrant students face.

Therefore, I ask the New York City Council to take action by acknowledging the needs of minorities by making mental health resources on campus more inclusive and reflective of the diverse student body. In order to support more students in need and encourage them to seek help, the resources in place need to be tailored to the needs of the student body. The city can

take action by investing in on-going training for all campus counselors to learn culturally responsive practices and interventions. This will not only bolster the wellbeing of a diverse range of students, but it will also lead to improved academic outcomes and resource utilization. By investing in culturally responsive-sustained training for counselors, this will create a space in higher education for minority students to work through their problems and be better fit to persist through college. Thank you for your time and consideration.



**New York City Council Committee on Higher Education  
Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY  
Submitted by Stefan Green, Junior, the New York City College of Technology  
Monday September 20, 2021**

Good morning members of the City Council, my name is Stefan Green. I am a transfer student from the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) and am now pursuing my Bachelor's Degree in Communication Design at the New York City College of Technology (City Tech) and I would like to take this time to thank you for giving me the opportunity to submit my testimony.

Taking care of your mental wellbeing is important especially during this time as we are in a global pandemic that is forcing many of us to be confined to our homes and to our computer screens, especially if you are a young adult working towards your degree in your field of study. Some of us may have lost loved ones in the process, and it may have taken a significant toll on our mental health. Many of the common mental health problems that college students face include depression, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide, according to a 2018 and 2019 student survey from the [American College Health Association](#), 60% of students felt overwhelming anxiety, whereas 40% of students described experiencing "depression so severe that they had difficulty functioning." Mental health experts used words such as "epidemic" or "crisis" when describing the challenge that many students face in regards to their mental wellbeing. I can say, with personal experience, that I have suffered from these problems. My mental health issues became so severe to the point where I ended up dropping out of BMCC in 2014 and did not return until three years later. However, before I left BMCC, the mental health counselor at the college helped me be admitted into a counseling center that specializes in helping children and young adults with issues I mentioned earlier, which is why I am sharing with you my story today.

We all need someone to talk to, especially when we are moving to college, many of us go through our whole academic careers without speaking to a mental health professional about problems we may be facing, for the many of us who do want to take advantage of these services, colleges such as BMCC and City Tech, offer one-on-one counseling to students to talk about issues regarding their academics or, in many cases, personal life problems ranging from depression, interpersonal relationships, and anxiety. The beauty about this is that anyone could take advantage of this free resource available to currently enrolled students, and connections to other resources, in case students need additional help, such as the suicide hotline. These resources are essential for the wellbeing of us as students, and I feel that more can be done to reach as many students as possible.

Therefore, I urge more investment on hiring and training more mental health professionals, specifically therapists, because one major issue in the United States is the over prescription of medication such as antidepressants, most commonly given in hospitals. Some of these medications come with strong side effects and are given to those who may not need these medications. Medication should only be given out to those individuals as a last resort, if the situation is dire. I believe that with these simple suggestions that more young adults will get the help that they need in order to lead a more fulfilling life after college and when they finally enter the workforce in their chosen profession. Thank you.



**New York City Council Committee on Higher Education  
Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY  
Submitted by Lia Guzman Genao, Junior, John Jay College of Criminal Justice  
Monday, September 20, 2021**

Good afternoon. My name is Lia Guzman Genao. I am a Junior at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Law & Society. I want to thank the New York City Council, the Committee on Higher Education and Councilwoman Inez Barron for the opportunity to provide testimony on this important topic.

I am here today to demand that the City Council increase the number of mental health counselors on CUNY campuses and to increase mental health counselors from marginalized communities. College itself brings many stressors, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only deteriorated the mental state of many CUNY students. Even before COVID, [a report](#) by Healthy CUNY and CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy, found the following: one out of every six CUNY students experienced depression; one out of five CUNY students experienced anxiety disorders, and one in six experienced moderate or severe psychological distress. I, personally, have dealt with severe anxiety on multiple occasions while in college and throughout my life. My anxiety is, and has been, interfering with every aspect of my life and has had serious consequences on my physical health. For a very long time, I debated whether to reach out for assistance on my campus, because I had heard many stories from other students of how inaccessible and overwhelming it was to even seek help. I felt that even reaching out for help would be a trigger for me, and I did not want to become another student who sought help and then whose needs were not met.

Unfortunately, this story is sadly not unique to me--a [2016 report](#) on SUNY mental health services found that campus mental health services have long wait times, and referrals to mental health services off-campus are "not sensitive to the needs of college students." The issue of excessively long wait times must be addressed now as students deserve to have effective and safe spaces in order to address any mental health illnesses they might be going through. When a student receives the support they need, they will be able to succeed. I ask that the City Council actively work towards creating a system in which every student has equal access to mental health counseling and resources. One way to work towards equal access to mental health supports is by ensuring that there is at least one counselor per 1,000 students as outlined in Senate Bill S844. We must also ensure that counselors at CUNY reflect the student body and their identities. We need counselors who truly understand the individual experiences of students by hiring more counselors of different communities who will effectively target various traumas. If we want our students to thrive, we need to take action and start investing in their well being. Thank you for your time.



**New York City Council Committee on Higher Education  
Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY  
Submitted by Carrie Liang, Junior, Hunter College  
Monday, September 20, 2021**

Good morning. My name is Carrie Liang, and I'm a junior studying Childhood Education and Psychology at Hunter College. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today before the New York Council.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the existing mental health crisis. With over a year and a half of remote learning, students are forced to blindly accept the cycle of not being heard, not being understood, and not being given the resources they need. As a student who had spent a significant amount of time learning material online, my teachers had used remote learning as an opportunity to triple the amount of work we were given and hold greater standards to our grades. We were given little support during the pandemic, and assignments continuously piled up for the sake of inputting a grade. It was challenging enough to teach ourselves through remote instruction, but as a transfer student, it was difficult to make friends and connect with other students. A big part of college is working with students together as this influences the quality of our education. I continuously felt that I was to complete assignments to get through the semester and that hopefully, next semester would be different. However, students should not be merely getting by, but thriving in college. My college campus lacks the mental health services we need, and we do not have enough professionals who are available to us. Mental health services are critical to our educational success. Our teachers also need training and knowledge of the importance of mental health. It should be a priority in giving the support we need especially because we are still in a pandemic.

In my experiences, I have never seen a therapist because of the stigma surrounding seeking help for our mental health and emotions. Being Asian-American, mental health is not talked enough about at home. It had discouraged me to talk freely about my feelings and my parents often did not justify my feelings but brushed them off as "temporary," and that I had nothing to be sad about. While I felt like a burden and also unheard, my college campus did little to provide me with information about services and oftentimes, I had received no response. I know I am not the only student who struggles with mental health, especially during the pandemic. A [weekly COVID-19 tracking survey](#) was conducted in March to track how New Yorkers were responding to the pandemic. Anxiety and depression were the top risk factors and by the following week, 44% of students and 35% respectively reported feelings of anxiety and depression. Data from these surveys also suggest that rates of anxiety and depression were highest in Latino and

Asian-American communities. Many Asian-American communities suffered losses financially along with harassment for being the “cause” of the virus. This had taken a toll on me because Asian Hate crimes rose and targeted a community that was not to blame for the virus.

I urge that the New York City Council steps up to prioritize college students’ mental health. The pandemic is a wake up call to the alarming numbers that are tripling in anxiety and depression. We must invest in more counselors who will validate students’ feelings and also offer a range of professionals who are culturally competent. Professors and staff also need training in mental health to fully understand how students can be better supported online instead of being blindly piled on more assignments given the challenges of remote learning. Thank you.



**New York City Council Committee on Higher Education  
Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY  
Submitted by Iradatulah Sulayman, Junior, Lehman College  
Monday, September 20, 2021**

Good morning. My name is Iradatulah Sulayman, and I am a Junior at Lehman College studying Biology. I want to thank the New York City Council and the Committee on Higher Education for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing.

Mental health is a rising and undervalued problem among college students. Many college students suffer from mental health disorders, some of which go unnoticed, misdiagnosed, or untreated. Students' future careers, salaries, and long-term health may be harmed as a result of these difficulties. Unfortunately, this has a significant detrimental impact on fellow students and their academic performance. According to [research](#), depression is linked to lower grade point averages, and consistent distress and anxiety can aggravate this correlation. In addition, dropping out of school has also been related to depression.

An issue I have noticed being a CUNY student for the past several years is the disproportionate ratio of students to assigned counselors, whether for educational or wellness counseling. Counselors meet with too many students, making it difficult for other students to also meet with counselors, due to a backlog of waitlisted students. Even though counselors are giving their best, even when they are overworked, they may consistently experience burnout and also feel overwhelmed, which may not allow them to help students to the best of their abilities. In addition, although there are individual counseling groups and other events at Lehman college, which is home to approximately 13,000 students, most of this programming has moved online due to the pandemic, losing their personal touch. Another issue I see is the alarming amount of community colleges lacking residence life personnel to assist professors and staff in spotting possible indications of mental illness in students, such as breaking off communication with friends or skipping courses on a regular basis. Therefore, if a student is struggling with their mental health, they cannot do anything but continue on with their lives--the consequences of this can be dire. These problems were especially evident during this epidemic, since it put greater pressure on individuals who were already struggling. Lastly, when discussing with some friends about Mindfulness Practice, a free daily guided meditation app, sponsored by Lehman, most of them did not know about this free resource. Because resources are not consistently promoted, students are unaware of them, and do not make use of them, such as the example with my friends.

Given these issues, I urge the City Council that more counseling staff be hired and assigned to give space for other counselors to create a good work-life balance. Although the campus is yet to completely re-open, my friends attending some in-person classes noticed that there were no community based mental health programs that Lehman college was affiliated with to make use of. CUNY colleges, not just Lehman college should hold more webinars and information sessions about the programs that they offer and take suggestions from students about what they think these programs are lacking and what they can do to improve. There is no better person to ask these questions than the students utilizing these programs and resources. CUNY campuses should also assemble and host events that cater to the wellness and promote well-being among students while acknowledging their struggles. Thank you for your time.



**New York City Council Committee on Higher Education  
Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY  
Submitted by Anthony Vancol, Senior, Queens College  
Monday September 20, 2021**

Good morning members of the City Council, my name is Anthony Vancol, and I am a twenty-two year old senior at Queens College pursuing my bachelor's degree in Psychology. I would first like to take this time to thank you for giving me the opportunity to provide a written testimony for you today.

Before I became a student at Queens College, I was a student at Queensborough Community College, where I was able to successfully obtain my associates degree in two years. I was also able to utilize the counseling center my first week of the fall semester as a freshman and then all the way up til my last semester before I graduated. Having access to unlimited counseling services really helped alleviate the anxieties and stressors I was dealing with as I was pursuing my studies. However, when I transferred to my current campus, the stability and accessibility of the counseling center was not the same in comparison to Queensborough Community College. As a transfer student, I was really anxious about adjusting to a new environment, especially since I was not going to be a part of an Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) that would give me proper tuitional support like my former college did. I was vulnerable and lacked the sense of security I needed to be successful as a student and as a member of this new community. I was fortunate enough to gain access to a therapist after filling out an intake form, and saw him consistently my first two semesters. During my initial sessions with my first counselor, he confirmed the reputation of the counseling center being overbooked and not being able to accommodate all the students who sought an appointment. "Students are often waitlisted," he said to me. As a black student, with an invisible disability, we make up the minority of the student population at my campus, making it harder for me to get the specific necessary support that I need. I often have to navigate and overcome constant barriers with rope tied around my ankles that other students do not have to go through. If I did not have access to a consistent therapist my first year, let alone my first semester, I would have done tremendously poorly mentally and academically.

After my first year, my campus counseling centers staff decreased significantly due to budget cuts and counselors transferring to other CUNY colleges. This was extremely disappointing because some of them were counselors of color that really reflected and came from similar backgrounds as the students they were supporting. As a result, getting an appointment was even more difficult with a lower limit to the amount of sessions a student can receive. Then, when the pandemic hit

and all mental health services transitioned to telehealth, this made students meeting with counselors more accessible. However, meeting with counselors was difficult for students who were not safe at home and sharing spaces with certain family members. In addition to teletherapy, I was also fortunate enough to be a part of a student group therapy session during the summer of 2020 where my peers and I were collectively experiencing the same mental and emotional turmoil from school or beyond. COVID-19 exacerbated various mental health struggles CUNY students have been facing. Yet, due to lack of funding and comprehensive services, the counseling center could not reach out to the most vulnerable of students who need it the most.

I am asking that CUNY mental health services not only be expanded, but restructured to where it accurately reflects the various identities of the CUNY student body. Additionally, hire alumni counselors who came from the CUNY system themselves. I urge the city to invest in comprehensive mental health programs for CUNY and partner with external programs in the city so that the well-being of its students who have, and continue, to contribute so much to this already fragile economy lead a better life and future. I call on the leadership of the City Council and CUNY to advocate for more funding for our institutions' mental health programs. Thank you.



**New York City Council Committee on Higher Education  
Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY  
Submitted by Hafsah Ansar, Senior, Hunter College  
Monday, September 20, 2021**

Good morning. My name is Hafsah Ansar, and I am a senior at Hunter College studying Psychology. I want to thank the New York City Council for the opportunity to testify today.

I am testifying today to discuss the mental health services available on my campus. As an Asian American woman, I understand how culturally responsive counseling services can play a role in help-seeking behaviors of Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs). Asian American students have long since had to endure many difficulties such as bicultural issues, family difficulties due to cultural differences, and marginality while trying to attain their college degree. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, additional stressors have plagued the lives of Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs), such as rising anti-Asian sentiments, discrimination against Asians, social isolation and exclusion, and rising unemployment rates. A CUNY School of Public Health survey that assessed the mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on CUNY students found that Asian American and Latino students had the highest rates of depression and anxiety during the pandemic, showing how these two ethnic and racial groups needed the most mental health services. However, while the amount of mental health problems that minorities are enduring have increased, the utilization of mental health resources on campus is not proportionate to the amount of problems that they endure.

Even when minority students do seek help from campus counselors, they may not receive help that is responsive to their unique needs. For example, my Chinese-American friend once sought help from a school counselor on campus because she was having difficulty overcoming the cultural and linguistic barriers between her and her parents. She turned to the counseling center on her campus for support, but after her first appointment, she felt that the counselor did not understand the cultural norms and values that her parents held as Chinese immigrants, and thus, she stopped seeking help from the counseling center. This experience my friend had with her counselor highlights that the counselors present on campus were not well-equipped to deal with issues that minority and immigrant students face.

Therefore, I ask the New York City Council to take action by acknowledging the needs of minorities by making mental health resources on campus more inclusive and reflective of the diverse student body. In order to support more students in need and encourage them to seek help, the resources in place need to be tailored to the needs of the student body. The city can

take action by investing in on-going training for all campus counselors to learn culturally responsive practices and interventions. This will not only bolster the wellbeing of a diverse range of students, but it will also lead to improved academic outcomes and resource utilization. By investing in culturally responsive-sustained training for counselors, this will create a space in higher education for minority students to work through their problems and be better fit to persist through college. Thank you for your time and consideration.



**New York City Council Committee on Higher Education  
Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY  
Submitted by Stefan Green, Junior, the New York City College of Technology  
Monday September 20, 2021**

Good morning members of the City Council, my name is Stefan Green. I am a transfer student from the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) and am now pursuing my Bachelor's Degree in Communication Design at the New York City College of Technology (City Tech) and I would like to take this time to thank you for giving me the opportunity to submit my testimony.

Taking care of your mental wellbeing is important especially during this time as we are in a global pandemic that is forcing many of us to be confined to our homes and to our computer screens, especially if you are a young adult working towards your degree in your field of study. Some of us may have lost loved ones in the process, and it may have taken a significant toll on our mental health. Many of the common mental health problems that college students face include depression, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide, according to a 2018 and 2019 student survey from the [American College Health Association](#), 60% of students felt overwhelming anxiety, whereas 40% of students described experiencing "depression so severe that they had difficulty functioning." Mental health experts used words such as "epidemic" or "crisis" when describing the challenge that many students face in regards to their mental wellbeing. I can say, with personal experience, that I have suffered from these problems. My mental health issues became so severe to the point where I ended up dropping out of BMCC in 2014 and did not return until three years later. However, before I left BMCC, the mental health counselor at the college helped me be admitted into a counseling center that specializes in helping children and young adults with issues I mentioned earlier, which is why I am sharing with you my story today.

We all need someone to talk to, especially when we are moving to college, many of us go through our whole academic careers without speaking to a mental health professional about problems we may be facing, for the many of us who do want to take advantage of these services, colleges such as BMCC and City Tech, offer one-on-one counseling to students to talk about issues regarding their academics or, in many cases, personal life problems ranging from depression, interpersonal relationships, and anxiety. The beauty about this is that anyone could take advantage of this free resource available to currently enrolled students, and connections to other resources, in case students need additional help, such as the suicide hotline. These resources are essential for the wellbeing of us as students, and I feel that more can be done to reach as many students as possible.

Therefore, I urge more investment on hiring and training more mental health professionals, specifically therapists, because one major issue in the United States is the over prescription of medication such as antidepressants, most commonly given in hospitals. Some of these medications come with strong side effects and are given to those who may not need these medications. Medication should only be given out to those individuals as a last resort, if the situation is dire. I believe that with these simple suggestions that more young adults will get the help that they need in order to lead a more fulfilling life after college and when they finally enter the workforce in their chosen profession. Thank you.



**New York City Council Committee on Higher Education  
Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY  
Submitted by Lia Guzman Genao, Junior, John Jay College of Criminal Justice  
Monday, September 20, 2021**

Good afternoon. My name is Lia Guzman Genao. I am a Junior at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Law & Society. I want to thank the New York City Council, the Committee on Higher Education and Councilwoman Inez Barron for the opportunity to provide testimony on this important topic.

I am here today to demand that the City Council increase the number of mental health counselors on CUNY campuses and to increase mental health counselors from marginalized communities. College itself brings many stressors, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only deteriorated the mental state of many CUNY students. Even before COVID, [a report](#) by Healthy CUNY and CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy, found the following: one out of every six CUNY students experienced depression; one out of five CUNY students experienced anxiety disorders, and one in six experienced moderate or severe psychological distress. I, personally, have dealt with severe anxiety on multiple occasions while in college and throughout my life. My anxiety is, and has been, interfering with every aspect of my life and has had serious consequences on my physical health. For a very long time, I debated whether to reach out for assistance on my campus, because I had heard many stories from other students of how inaccessible and overwhelming it was to even seek help. I felt that even reaching out for help would be a trigger for me, and I did not want to become another student who sought help and then whose needs were not met.

Unfortunately, this story is sadly not unique to me--a [2016 report](#) on SUNY mental health services found that campus mental health services have long wait times, and referrals to mental health services off-campus are "not sensitive to the needs of college students." The issue of excessively long wait times must be addressed now as students deserve to have effective and safe spaces in order to address any mental health illnesses they might be going through. When a student receives the support they need, they will be able to succeed. I ask that the City Council actively work towards creating a system in which every student has equal access to mental health counseling and resources. One way to work towards equal access to mental health supports is by ensuring that there is at least one counselor per 1,000 students as outlined in Senate Bill S844. We must also ensure that counselors at CUNY reflect the student body and their identities. We need counselors who truly understand the individual experiences of students by hiring more counselors of different communities who will effectively target various traumas. If we want our students to thrive, we need to take action and start investing in their well being. Thank you for your time.



**New York City Council Committee on Higher Education  
Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY  
Submitted by Carrie Liang, Junior, Hunter College  
Monday, September 20, 2021**

Good morning. My name is Carrie Liang, and I'm a junior studying Childhood Education and Psychology at Hunter College. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today before the New York Council.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the existing mental health crisis. With over a year and a half of remote learning, students are forced to blindly accept the cycle of not being heard, not being understood, and not being given the resources they need. As a student who had spent a significant amount of time learning material online, my teachers had used remote learning as an opportunity to triple the amount of work we were given and hold greater standards to our grades. We were given little support during the pandemic, and assignments continuously piled up for the sake of inputting a grade. It was challenging enough to teach ourselves through remote instruction, but as a transfer student, it was difficult to make friends and connect with other students. A big part of college is working with students together as this influences the quality of our education. I continuously felt that I was to complete assignments to get through the semester and that hopefully, next semester would be different. However, students should not be merely getting by, but thriving in college. My college campus lacks the mental health services we need, and we do not have enough professionals who are available to us. Mental health services are critical to our educational success. Our teachers also need training and knowledge of the importance of mental health. It should be a priority in giving the support we need especially because we are still in a pandemic.

In my experiences, I have never seen a therapist because of the stigma surrounding seeking help for our mental health and emotions. Being Asian-American, mental health is not talked enough about at home. It had discouraged me to talk freely about my feelings and my parents often did not justify my feelings but brushed them off as "temporary," and that I had nothing to be sad about. While I felt like a burden and also unheard, my college campus did little to provide me with information about services and oftentimes, I had received no response. I know I am not the only student who struggles with mental health, especially during the pandemic. A [weekly COVID-19 tracking survey](#) was conducted in March to track how New Yorkers were responding to the pandemic. Anxiety and depression were the top risk factors and by the following week, 44% of students and 35% respectively reported feelings of anxiety and depression. Data from these surveys also suggest that rates of anxiety and depression were highest in Latino and

Asian-American communities. Many Asian-American communities suffered losses financially along with harassment for being the “cause” of the virus. This had taken a toll on me because Asian Hate crimes rose and targeted a community that was not to blame for the virus.

I urge that the New York City Council steps up to prioritize college students’ mental health. The pandemic is a wake up call to the alarming numbers that are tripling in anxiety and depression. We must invest in more counselors who will validate students’ feelings and also offer a range of professionals who are culturally competent. Professors and staff also need training in mental health to fully understand how students can be better supported online instead of being blindly piled on more assignments given the challenges of remote learning. Thank you.



**New York City Council Committee on Higher Education  
Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY  
Submitted by Iradatulah Sulayman, Junior, Lehman College  
Monday, September 20, 2021**

Good morning. My name is Iradatulah Sulayman, and I am a Junior at Lehman College studying Biology. I want to thank the New York City Council and the Committee on Higher Education for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing.

Mental health is a rising and undervalued problem among college students. Many college students suffer from mental health disorders, some of which go unnoticed, misdiagnosed, or untreated. Students' future careers, salaries, and long-term health may be harmed as a result of these difficulties. Unfortunately, this has a significant detrimental impact on fellow students and their academic performance. According to [research](#), depression is linked to lower grade point averages, and consistent distress and anxiety can aggravate this correlation. In addition, dropping out of school has also been related to depression.

An issue I have noticed being a CUNY student for the past several years is the disproportionate ratio of students to assigned counselors, whether for educational or wellness counseling. Counselors meet with too many students, making it difficult for other students to also meet with counselors, due to a backlog of waitlisted students. Even though counselors are giving their best, even when they are overworked, they may consistently experience burnout and also feel overwhelmed, which may not allow them to help students to the best of their abilities. In addition, although there are individual counseling groups and other events at Lehman college, which is home to approximately 13,000 students, most of this programming has moved online due to the pandemic, losing their personal touch. Another issue I see is the alarming amount of community colleges lacking residence life personnel to assist professors and staff in spotting possible indications of mental illness in students, such as breaking off communication with friends or skipping courses on a regular basis. Therefore, if a student is struggling with their mental health, they cannot do anything but continue on with their lives--the consequences of this can be dire. These problems were especially evident during this epidemic, since it put greater pressure on individuals who were already struggling. Lastly, when discussing with some friends about Mindfulness Practice, a free daily guided meditation app, sponsored by Lehman, most of them did not know about this free resource. Because resources are not consistently promoted, students are unaware of them, and do not make use of them, such as the example with my friends.

Given these issues, I urge the City Council that more counseling staff be hired and assigned to give space for other counselors to create a good work-life balance. Although the campus is yet to completely re-open, my friends attending some in-person classes noticed that there were no community based mental health programs that Lehman college was affiliated with to make use of. CUNY colleges, not just Lehman college should hold more webinars and information sessions about the programs that they offer and take suggestions from students about what they think these programs are lacking and what they can do to improve. There is no better person to ask these questions than the students utilizing these programs and resources. CUNY campuses should also assemble and host events that cater to the wellness and promote well-being among students while acknowledging their struggles. Thank you for your time.



**New York City Council Committee on Higher Education  
Oversight Hearing on Mental Health Resources for Students at CUNY  
Submitted by Anthony Vancol, Senior, Queens College  
Monday September 20, 2021**

Good morning members of the City Council, my name is Anthony Vancol, and I am a twenty-two year old senior at Queens College pursuing my bachelor's degree in Psychology. I would first like to take this time to thank you for giving me the opportunity to provide a written testimony for you today.

Before I became a student at Queens College, I was a student at Queensborough Community College, where I was able to successfully obtain my associates degree in two years. I was also able to utilize the counseling center my first week of the fall semester as a freshman and then all the way up til my last semester before I graduated. Having access to unlimited counseling services really helped alleviate the anxieties and stressors I was dealing with as I was pursuing my studies. However, when I transferred to my current campus, the stability and accessibility of the counseling center was not the same in comparison to Queensborough Community College. As a transfer student, I was really anxious about adjusting to a new environment, especially since I was not going to be a part of an Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) that would give me proper tuitional support like my former college did. I was vulnerable and lacked the sense of security I needed to be successful as a student and as a member of this new community. I was fortunate enough to gain access to a therapist after filling out an intake form, and saw him consistently my first two semesters. During my initial sessions with my first counselor, he confirmed the reputation of the counseling center being overbooked and not being able to accommodate all the students who sought an appointment. "Students are often waitlisted," he said to me. As a black student, with an invisible disability, we make up the minority of the student population at my campus, making it harder for me to get the specific necessary support that I need. I often have to navigate and overcome constant barriers with rope tied around my ankles that other students do not have to go through. If I did not have access to a consistent therapist my first year, let alone my first semester, I would have done tremendously poorly mentally and academically.

After my first year, my campus counseling centers staff decreased significantly due to budget cuts and counselors transferring to other CUNY colleges. This was extremely disappointing because some of them were counselors of color that really reflected and came from similar backgrounds as the students they were supporting. As a result, getting an appointment was even more difficult with a lower limit to the amount of sessions a student can receive. Then, when the pandemic hit

and all mental health services transitioned to telehealth, this made students meeting with counselors more accessible. However, meeting with counselors was difficult for students who were not safe at home and sharing spaces with certain family members. In addition to teletherapy, I was also fortunate enough to be a part of a student group therapy session during the summer of 2020 where my peers and I were collectively experiencing the same mental and emotional turmoil from school or beyond. COVID-19 exacerbated various mental health struggles CUNY students have been facing. Yet, due to lack of funding and comprehensive services, the counseling center could not reach out to the most vulnerable of students who need it the most.

I am asking that CUNY mental health services not only be expanded, but restructured to where it accurately reflects the various identities of the CUNY student body. Additionally, hire alumni counselors who came from the CUNY system themselves. I urge the city to invest in comprehensive mental health programs for CUNY and partner with external programs in the city so that the well-being of its students who have, and continue, to contribute so much to this already fragile economy lead a better life and future. I call on the leadership of the City Council and CUNY to advocate for more funding for our institutions' mental health programs. Thank you.

**Azania Sammie Maitland**

**City Council Mental Health Testimony**

We are enduring trying times in which the very fabric of our society, and notions of who we are as Americans has been stretched nearly to the breaking point, so it's no surprise that the psychological resilience of many has been rendered threadbare.

College students inhabit a precarious mile marker on the road that is life. It is a journey of judgment, obstacles, and becoming. It is a process of professionalizing personhood to be sorted and siloed into the career in which your literal survival in society is tied to. Even in the most privileged of circumstances it can trigger an existential crisis.

So what is the trajectory for students who are facing poverty, food insecurity, housing insecurity, and the myriad of challenges that working class New Yorker's must overcome every single day to successfully navigate the road of life?

As an aside, yet of equal consideration, I implore all decision makers and agenda setters to take into account the need for culturally competent mental health services. There are difficult dialogues to be unpacked within discussions about racism in America, and if the objective is mending and healing in the service of wellness and healthy personhood to best navigate the road of life – then asking Black students to cross racial lines on that journey to inner peace may be quite tumultuous. Let's ensure ample access to LCSW's and counselors of color.

With the help and support of the City Council by ensuring adequate funding for mental health services we can repave potholes, reduce gridlock, and widen lanes to enable more people to have safe and successful journeys down the road of life.

New York City Council  
Committee on Higher Education  
City Hall Park  
New York, NY 10007

Dear Council Members,

My name is Hugo Fernandez, and I am a professor of Photography and Fine Arts in the Humanities Department at LaGuardia Community College. I am also a senator representing LaGuardia at CUNY's University Faculty Senate (UFS). For the UFS I serve as an At-large Member of its Executive Committee and as such am a representative at the CUNY Board of Trustees Committee on Student Affairs and Special Programs.

CUNY has counseling and wellness centers at every college, yet they are historically understaffed. In some cases, it is the same office that advises students on what classes to take as addresses their mental health issues. COVID has exacerbated the need for mental health services. While government funds such as the CARES Act have afforded the hiring of additional licensed clinicians, they tend to be part-time and will unlikely survive the inevitable funding cuts at the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Students are, on average, unaware that mental health counseling services, including multiple sessions per semester with a licensed psychotherapist, are available to them. To make that information known is something most CUNY staff would concede is woefully needed. Adding to the challenge, many students come from backgrounds with no historical precedence for receiving mental health counseling. The stigma associated with those services must be combated at every level: individual, family and student body. Meanwhile, those students who do seek mental health services, whether through private insurance, government funded programs, or through CUNY, encounter long waiting lists.

Most faculty experience student mental health issues when they manifest as struggles in the classroom. On rare occasions we can see the deeper issues behind problematic behavior and recommend students to take advantage of mental health services. But students cannot be mandated to attend, they must do so willingly. More often, symptoms go undiagnosed by faculty, who are not mental health professionals. Students struggle and, too often, either drop the course or fail, wasting valuable financial aid dollars.

Our students come to us with complicated histories. Most have suffered some form of trauma by virtue of living in communities of socioeconomic distress, exposure to domestic violence in the home, or even having escaped war and violence in their countries of origin. We also, of course, have a large population of veterans coming back from foreign wars who suffer from PTSD and other challenges. Other communities, such as our Asian students, are experiencing heightened xenophobia, and our LGBTQIA+ students are no strangers to the stress of intolerance. Then there is our population of students that are formally incarcerated who need all the support they can get.

Additionally, students are reeling from the stressors brought on by the pandemic, including the loss of family members and friends to COVID 19 illness, compounded by economic concerns, the pressures of adapting to online education, and the uncertainty of today's domestic and global environment. What we have is a perfect storm of need and a lack of services for the very folks who are, in many cases, already paying for those services through student fees and taxes.

In my research for this presentation, I discovered many programs throughout CUNY attempting to provide services that include suicide prevention, something our population is particularly susceptible to, as well as training for students to be mental health professionals in our community. One of the few rewards for surviving trauma are lessons learned that can be shared with others who are struggling. We have an opportunity—a responsibility—to take the needs of our students seriously, to help them to cope, to heal, to thrive. Perhaps some may even become the mental health leaders of our future city.

In my research for this presentation, I solicited feedback from faculty throughout the University. Many responded with specifics about their own experience and the work being done at their campuses. The folks at my own Wellness Center at LaGuardia have shared data from their work using CARES funds which to date has been quite successful, but it is subject to future funding. If you would like me to share this information with you and possibly continue this discussion through a dialogue, I am available.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Hugo Fernandez  
Professor  
LaGuardia Community College  
646-250-8318  
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