

PSC TESTIMONY ON CUNY'S PROPOSED BUDGET REQUEST FISCAL YEAR 2021

*Delivered by Dr. Barbara Bowen, PSC President
December 9, 2019*

Good afternoon. Given the limited time to testify, I will submit written comments urging your approval of the contract for our members and thanking the chancellor and the Board for your support. I will concentrate now on the budget request. But before I do, I call on you again to rethink the approach the Board takes to security at these meetings. The security is so clearly excessive that we have to conclude that it's not about providing protection; it's about asserting power and pre-criminalizing speakers. It needs to change.

CUNY's public funding is at crisis levels. The new contract is expected to drive millions of dollars into college budgets to pay for adjunct office hours. That is a major shared achievement and a turning-point for CUNY. But that funding alone is not enough to address the growing crisis on the campuses: sections cut, library hours reduced, student support staff reduced, class size increased, adjunct budgets cut. While the budget request takes an important step in calling for mandatory increases to be publicly funded, it misses the opportunity to advance a more ambitious agenda for CUNY and it accepts the dangerous premise that economic austerity is the best we can hope for.

The PSC urges you to stake out a different position: full public funding of both mandatory costs and programmatic enhancements, no increases in tuition and no new wellness fee, structural elimination of the entire TAP Gap, and a plan for adding the number of full-time faculty and counselors we actually need. The union is proposing just such an agenda, including *free* tuition, and the proposal is gaining support precisely *because* it is ambitious: A New Deal for CUNY. You will hear more about the plan from my colleagues.

The biggest part of CUNY's operating request is for mandatory cost increases, and the union commends you for seeking the full \$179 million. But the request is meaningless unless you as trustees are serious about getting it publicly funded. Public funding for the normal costs of doing business, including collective bargaining increases, should be a baseline, a given.

Members of the Board, except student and faculty trustees, you are appointees of the governor or the mayor. You have political capital: *use* it. Go to the mayor and the governor who appointed you and demand that all mandatory costs be funded. Failure to fund such costs represents a *policy decision* to wreck the University, cut by cut by cut. Do not acquiesce to that policy.

In addition, the entire TAP gap, another \$72 million, should be closed. The TAP gap is the result of a funding structure that uniquely punishes public universities for admitting students on financial aid. It's bad policy and it should be changed.

With a new chancellor in office, an innovative contract in place and a national conversation focused on making *all* public college free, this is the moment to stop normalizing austerity for CUNY. The PSC shares the students' sense of urgency about providing more mental health and wellness counselors, but the way to address that need is not to impose a new fee on students already struggling with arguably the biggest cause of health problems: poverty. The union also supports many of the programmatic enhancements you propose, but needs as basic as an adequate ratio of students to full-time faculty should not depend on ever-increasing tuition.

The damage of more than a decade of underfunding by New York State, partly because of budgets not adjusted for enrollment, must be undone by public investment, not by shifting more of the costs onto students and their families. The strategy of privatizing costs reinforces the class and race oppression CUNY at its best claims to challenge.

The PSC recognizes that much more funding is also needed at the federal level, and we are pursuing aggressive proposals for increased federal funding and support for free tuition from the federal government. Pell grants are not enough.

We join you in your request for critical maintenance money, increased community college base aid, a capital plan and at least an inflation-level increase in New York City's contribution to the senior colleges. Mayor de Blasio recently announced that a record-high number of NYC high school graduates from the class of 2018 have enrolled in college. More than half of the graduates who enrolled in college enrolled in CUNY. In the last six years the City has dreamed big and invested strongly in Pre-K-12 education. We applaud those investments, but it's time for greater City investment in the *four-year* colleges of CUNY.

The 30,000 members of the PSC make sacrifices to work at CUNY, and CUNY students make tremendous sacrifices, putting everything on the line for a college education. The PSC urges you to submit a budget request worthy of the urgency students, staff and faculty feel about CUNY, one that has the courage to demand—and secure—the *public* investment CUNY needs.