

TESTIMONY OF THE PROFESSIONAL STAFF CONGRESS/CUNY
BEFORE THE JOINT SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE AND
ASSEMBLY WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE
January 30, 2008

Delivered by Dr. Barbara Bowen, President

Good afternoon, Chairpersons Johnson and Farrell, distinguished legislators, colleagues and friends. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak to you on behalf of the 20,000 faculty and professional staff who are proud to work at the City University of New York. Thank you also for your sustained commitment to increasing CUNY funds. In the past, in the toughest years for CUNY funding, the Legislature has responded to our call for support and has often been the key to keeping the University afloat. We thank you especially for your willingness to fight for restoration of proposed budget cuts in the leanest years for public higher education in this state.

This year, however, should not be a lean year for higher education. The 2009 fiscal year budget for CUNY represents the best opportunity we have had in a generation to build the premier public university system New York should have. On January 9, Governor Spitzer signaled a new direction for public support of public higher education in New York by making higher education the centerpiece of his State of the State address. “Without world-class education,” the governor commented, “we cannot have a world-class economy.” Investment in public higher education is directly linked to the economic future of the state—especially in difficult economic times. Governor Spitzer called for massive new investment in the public sphere, including funds for new full-time faculty, enhanced research capacity and increased affordability for students. New York should have a *great* public university system, the governor suggested, not just a good one, and great universities cost money.

The governor’s message is amplified by the New York State Commission on Higher Education. The Commission’s preliminary report breaks years of official silence about the State’s failure to provide full funding to CUNY and SUNY—despite the best efforts of many people in this room. It includes an unsparing analysis of the toll the failure of investment has taken, particularly in the loss of thousands of full-time faculty positions. But more important, the Commission’s report shows that the damage can be undone. With a major infusion of public funds, CUNY and SUNY can reach their full potential as engines of research, discovery, culture and critique. Despite the decades of underfunding, the Commission concluded, both university systems have resources that allow for a resurgence. At CUNY, which has been doubly hit by underfunding—by both New York City and New York State—the faculty, staff and students have spent the last twenty years doing more and more with less. With adequate funding, CUNY is in a position to redefine greatness in urban public education for the twenty-first century, just as it did for the twentieth and the nineteenth.

A Once-in-a-Generation Opportunity

We cannot let the opportunity of this year be missed. The PSC calls on the Legislature to work with the governor *this year* to fulfill his powerful vision for public higher education in New York. This is the year of higher education in New York State. If the State does not act to transform higher education funding now, we may not have another opportunity again for a decade or more. As the Commission rightly recognizes, investment in higher education is not a luxury; it is essential to the vitality of the state. The Commission's report shows that the policy of repeated underfunding of public higher education did not serve New York well. Our state suffered in lost opportunity for economic development, cultural advancement, intellectual opportunity, and attractiveness as a place to work and live. Dollar for dollar, no investment repays the state as generously as investment in public higher education. And the value of college education goes far beyond what can be measured in dollars: higher education, quite simply, changes your life. As a representative of the people who participate in and witness that change every day, I call on you to make this truly the higher education year.

The Professional Staff Congress asks the Legislature to make a real start this year on addressing the needs for CUNY identified by the Commission on Higher Education. The entire education community has high expectations for college and university funding for fiscal year 2009, but the Executive Budget falls short of the need. We recognize that the Executive Budget is the beginning of a conversation, and we welcome this opportunity to suggest ways in which the final budget could be made more effective for CUNY. While the Executive Budget funds many of the mandatory cost increases, it allows only for steady-state funding for the CUNY senior colleges and makes serious reductions to funding for the CUNY community colleges. The PSC asks you, first, to work with the governor to close the holes left by the Executive Budget proposal. If New York is to begin a transformation of the higher education sector, our first conversation should not be about a budget cut, even one as relatively modest as 2.5%. The discussion in K-12 education this year is about whether the proposed *increases* come up to expectations, while in higher education the discussion is, once again, about how much will be cut. That is not how we had hoped to begin.

Full-Time Faculty Positions

Without the full funding requested by CUNY's budget, there will be no money for the transformation Governor Spitzer imagined, no money for new programs, none for expansion of knowledge and capacity at CUNY, and above all, none for solving the debilitating shortage of full-time faculty. The kind of preeminence for CUNY the governor invokes is out of the question unless the complement of full-time faculty is restored. Both the governor and the Commission identified an increase in full-time faculty as a primary need, yet the Executive Budget provides no funds to address that need. In 1975, the last time CUNY enrollment was at its current level, the University employed 11,500 full-time faculty. Today, the number of full-time faculty is about 6,600. CUNY is 5,000 faculty short. It will take designated funds—above and beyond the usual operating increases—to fill that need.

Without substantial funding to increase full-time faculty hiring, CUNY will continue to make only marginal progress. Consider the history of the last seven years. On average since 2000, CUNY has seen a net increase of 144 full-time faculty per year. Over the same period, however, enrollment shot up by 35,000. CUNY is adding students much faster than it is adding full-time faculty. The ratio of full-time faculty to students is getting worse, not better. And nothing—absolutely nothing—makes more difference to student success than time with full-time faculty. The student/faculty ratio is to higher education what “class size” is in K-12. It is what makes the biggest difference in the quality of education for students and what reveals the history of underfunding by the State. The question of funding for CUNY comes down to the political question of whether New York wants our students to succeed or not. At the current rate of funding, it will take CUNY 34 years to achieve the student/faculty ratio it enjoyed in the mid-1970s. Does New York want to wait 34 years until CUNY students receive the kind of one-on-one attention that produces student success? If not, money must be found this year to create at least 500 net new full-time faculty positions.

CUNY survived during the decades of fiscal starvation primarily because it was willing to use cheap labor for its most important job of teaching, and because thousands of dedicated professionals—many with Ph.D.’s—were willing to do academic piece-work at a fraction of full-time pay. CUNY’s adjuncts are not a small group, nor are they a transient group. Many have been at CUNY longer than the full-time faculty, and quite a few teach more classes per week than a full-time faculty member. A “part-timer” in my own department just marked her twentieth anniversary in the Queens College Department of English. That is twenty years of teaching the basic writing courses that are the prerequisite for every other college course, twenty years of carrying a full course load at part-time wages—all for less than \$30,000 in annual income. Working together, the PSC and the University developed a highly successful program last year to select 100 of the most experienced part-time faculty to fill full-time faculty lines. A similar program this year would provide a smart and cost-effective way to add full-time faculty and would allow the University to benefit from some of its most dedicated—and frankly, abused—employees.

Budget Restorations

There are other gaps in the proposed Executive Budget which we look forward to working with the legislature to fill. The Executive Budget does not include the important addition made by the legislature last year to community college base aid. That funding is crucial if CUNY’s community colleges are to continue their sometimes miraculous work with the diverse first-generation college students of New York City. The Commission on Higher Education paid special attention to community colleges, rightly citing their importance to students’ life-chances and the economic development of the state as a whole. Especially at a time of economic downturn, community college education is essential. We can expect more, not fewer, students to seek a community college education if New York experiences a loss of jobs. Community colleges are the first place working people turn if they need to equip themselves to seek new employment. We ask the legislature not to accept the proposed cut but to increase community college by \$50

beyond CUNY's request—a total of \$250 net new funding per full-time equivalent student.

The other proposed cuts to legislative additions to the CUNY budget should also be restored. The Joseph S. Murphy Institute plays an increasingly important role in the economic life of New York State. Every year, it educates thousands of working people, allowing them to fulfill one of the most basic human dreams—for learning—and to advance their own lives. Whole families are lifted into economic solvency because of the worker education provided by the Murphy Institute. The \$500,000 added by the legislature should be restored.

The legislature's additional funding for SEEK—\$652,000—should also be restored. The SEEK program receives special mention from the Commission for its ability to change students' lives; this is not a program that should be cut. Relatively small amounts of money invested in programs like the Murphy Institute and SEEK can change everything in the lives of some of the hardest-working New Yorkers. Part of what makes CUNY great is its embrace of programs as diverse as cutting-edge biomedical engineering research and developmental instruction for students who have suffered from poverty and racism. Not infrequently, the students who needed developmental education are exactly the ones who go on to excel in the most advanced degree programs. That's what CUNY is about. We commend the legislature on your support of CUNY's unique mission and ask you to press for restoration of the funding you have added in the past.

Capital Budget

On the capital budget, we thank the governor for proposing \$2.8 billion for CUNY over the next five years. We also join the University in appreciating the stability provided by a five-year capital plan. While the proposed allocation is substantial, it still represents less than full funding, and we ask the legislature to work with CUNY and the executive branch to provide full funds. As the Commission noted, "facilities at CUNY and SUNY have suffered the negative effects of more than a decade of underinvestment, with a devastating effect." The PSC is concerned that there be sufficient funds to cover long-deferred maintenance, as well as new construction. Far too many of us at CUNY teach in buildings that actively impede our work. It is not unusual to see make-shift buckets to catch the water pouring in from leaky roofs or to teach in classrooms where the heating system is so inadequate that students wear coats and hats to class or try to work in labs where the temperature climbs so high in summer that concentration is impossible. The hollowing-out of CUNY's budget played havoc with the physical plant, and the faculty, staff and students have become far too good at tolerating intolerable conditions. I worry about our health, and I also worry about the message these conditions send to our students.

A colleague at the CUNY Law School—not the worst of our buildings, by far—told me of a student who had studied and worked and struggled so that one day she could go to law school. An African-American woman, a returning student, she finally achieved her dream and was admitted to the CUNY School of Law. She told her professor that when

she saw the building on her first day, she cried. Our students should not cry when they see the buildings where they will go to college.

Student Assistance

The families of CUNY students—and the students themselves—make great sacrifices to attend college and pay CUNY tuition. We commend the governor on not proposing yet another tuition increase as a way to fund his vision for higher education. And we differ sharply with Chancellor Goldstein’s proposed increases to tuition. Students have already been forced to make up for the lack of public investment. The portion of the CUNY budget supplied by student tuition has risen steadily during the years of fiscal starvation. In 1990, it was 20%; today it is 36%. This is simply privatization—a shift in cost from the public, where the expense can be shared, to the private. The crisis at CUNY is not a result of inadequate tuition; it is the result of inadequate public investment. Let’s fix the problem with investment before we turn to students.

The history of tuition increases also argues against using them as a way to rebuild CUNY’s budget. The extent of the underfunding is so large that it would take astronomical tuition to fix it. There is no substitute for public investment.

This year’s Executive Budget also proposes a reduction in TAP, partly through implementing stricter minimum academic standards and more stringent application of the Ability to Benefit test. While the PSC strongly supports the highest possible academic and fiscal standards, we have concerns that with our non-traditional student population, some deserving students in the public systems might be harmed by these measures. In the coming weeks we hope to work with you to ensure that the proposed reforms accomplish their purpose and do not deny the chance for an education to students who should receive additional support.

We are disappointed, however, that the reforms proposed for the TAP program are focused on restricting access to aid, rather than expanding it in the ways recommended by the Commission. TAP was designed with the Ozzie and Harriet model in mind—a nuclear family where Dad works, Mom stays home and the 2.2 children go away to private colleges. That is no longer the reality in New York State. For TAP to accomplish its purpose of supporting all New Yorkers in their pursuit of college education, it must be reshaped to cover part-time students, independent students without dependents and other categories of students overlooked in the original plan. We thank the legislature for their pioneering work in rethinking TAP and look forward to working together on this project.

Revenue

There is no shortcut to a great university. New York is right to aspire to have premier public universities, but for that aspiration to be meaningful it must be supported by investment. Unfortunately, after decades of failure to invest, substantial funding will be required. We applaud the Governor’s effort to identify new sources of funds for higher education and to provide money to undertake the bold new initiatives CUNY and SUNY need. The PSC is still analyzing the proposal to create an endowment through securitizing the lottery, and we look forward to discussing with you both the promise and

the potential difficulty of this approach. It is essential, however, that new sources of public funds be devoted to the public universities. New York has vastly underfunded the *public* sector in higher education, not the private sector. While both sectors play a vital role in the future of the state, it is the public sector that should be the focus of new funding now.

The Legislature has offered visionary leadership in years past, increasing funding for CUNY. We ask you to aim high this crucial year. The choice to invest in public higher education is the choice to ensure that the middle class in New York, the working class and the poor, the people of color, the new immigrant and the first-generation college students have a chance at a good life. It's the choice to ensure that New York is not left behind in a new economy based on research, information and discovery. This year presents you with an unprecedented opportunity. The PSC urges you to make the choice for CUNY.