Commission on Higher Education Report:
Right Diagnosis, Wrong Prescription

PSC Statement -- 12/17/07

The Professional Staff Congress/CUNY (PSC) applauds Governor Spitzer for taking the position that New York State could—and should—have a premier system of public higher education. The preliminary report of the New York State Commission on Higher Education, released today, takes a first, powerful step toward making that vision a reality by identifying the underlying structural problem for public higher education in New York: CUNY and SUNY are underfunded, and have been underfunded for a long time. The chronic underfunding endangers the quality of education New York’s public universities can offer and undermines the state’s capacity to be a leader in research and the creation of knowledge.

At this preliminary stage, however, the recommendations contained in the report fall short of both its vision and its analysis. The PSC, as the union that represents the 20,000 faculty and professional staff at CUNY, looks forward to working with the Commission to address these issues before the final report is issued.

The Commission recommends addressing the structural problem of underfunding which it clearly identifies by asking students to carry much of the financial burden of programmatic innovation through increased tuition and enrollments. What New York State needs, rather, is public investment in public higher education; increased state funding is essential if New York is to remedy decades of underfunding. Shifting the burden onto students will inevitably restrict access to higher education for precisely those students who need it most. This is especially true for CUNY students, most of whom are people of color and come from low-income families, and many of whom are the first in their families to go to college.

The PSC commends the Commission for focusing on the loss of full-time faculty in New York’s public universities, but asks the Commission to reconsider the recommendation for only 2,000 new full-time faculty (for CUNY and SUNY together) over five years. CUNY has 5,000 fewer full-time faculty now than it did in 1975, despite record enrollments. At the rate the Commission is suggesting CUNY add faculty, it would take a quarter of a century to regain our full faculty strength. CUNY needs more than incremental increases; CUNY needs a historic reinvestment to reverse the effects of the historic disinvestment and to be part of a premier public higher education system.

The Commission report is silent on one of the key factors in creating a top-quality public university system. The report acknowledges that competitive salaries are essential in recruiting the high-caliber faculty our universities need. But CUNY salaries are currently far from competitive. To recruit—and retain—faculty, New York must invest in making competitive compensation at CUNY a priority. CUNY salaries have lost between 27% and 51% of their value since 1971; professors at Rutgers now make 24% more than their peers at CUNY, and at the University of Connecticut, they make 23% more. Uncompetitive compensation has led to a recruitment and retention crisis at CUNY. Just as CUNY is seeking to hire significant numbers of new faculty, its salaries have reached a crisis point. Students suffer and research opportunities are lost when CUNY cannot recruit and retain the faculty it needs.

The PSC thanks the Commission on Higher Education for its work and looks forward to continuing discussion with the Commission as it moves from this preliminary report towards its final report in June 2008.