

Testimony before the CGA Appropriations Committee  
Public Hearing on Higher Education Funding  
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Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Hartley, Representatives Dathan and Nolan, and members of the Appropriations Committee, thank you for the opportunity to address you today. I am Colena Sesanker. I teach philosophy at Gateway community college and I am the current chair of the Faculty Advisory Committee to the Board of Regents for Higher Education.

In the last ten years, the state has cut per-student funding at the state colleges and universities by about 20 percent. Compared with the late 80s, it has [reduced by 50 percent](#). Now, as we struggle to maintain our footing with the challenges of COVID we have even less support than we had just last year:

\$20 million dollars that went toward unfunded pension liabilities for the last two years has not been renewed.

The debt-free college (PACT) program that our system floated last semester doesn't have a stable funding source and its costs are rising as new students enroll. It should be expanded.

One-time pandemic funding was helpful, and truly appreciated, but sustained funding is needed to compensate for the fact that we don't know when enrollment levels will return to normal.

The system was already short-funded and on a path toward eliminating all twelve community colleges to replace them with a single mega-college to reduce costs—an effort to make good on the pledge Mr. Ojakian made to the Higher Education Committee a couple of years ago that he would not close any college locations. And yet, the system's December Finance and Infrastructure report indicated that, without increased funding, the cost of the very restructure justified by preserving locations put those locations at risk once again.

*"This request for additional, recurring support through the General Fund block grant, would enable CSCU to continue its reform efforts leading to community college consolidation by Fall 2023, without simultaneously having to curtail offerings, locations and services to students."*  
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We have gotten to the point that our best efforts, no matter how dramatic, can compensate for inadequate support of our public higher education system.

As state funding levels have steadily decreased, students of color compose a larger and larger portion of our student body. The number of black and brown students [more than doubled](#) between 2003 and 2013 and now, at the community colleges, [more than half](#) of students identify as non-white. The majority of our students qualify for Pell grants. Is the absence of alarm over the dire situation the system faces, and the acceptance of dramatic disruption to compensate, connected to the shift in our student population?

It doesn't matter why those two trends coincide. What matters is that we haven't noticed, or that we've noticed but we haven't chosen to act. In a state like this one, the claim that we cannot afford it is not an empirical claim- it is a moral statement.

The fact that enrollment affects us so much is a function of the fact that we rely more and more on tuition to sustain us. Increased reliance on tuition coupled with the way we cover unfunded pension liability means that we don't just pass more of our current costs on to students these days, we pass along the cost of our past unfulfilled promises. Our students, who are largely of the demographic who bear the heaviest tax burden in our state, are not only underserved by our institutions, but are then effectively taxed again by us when they bear the cost of those enjoying the fruits of the lives to which they aspire.

Over-reliance on tuition is reflected in our priorities of necessity- the very first position filled for the consolidated college was a vice president of enrollment management and more and more we see policies centered around maximizing 'credit attempts' and incentivizing full time enrollment. A college that builds aspirational 'credit attempts' into its financial projection is one that has created an incentive structure that risks passing students along for the sake of its very survival. Colleges at which the majority of our students don't have the privilege of attending full time should not invest more in those with that privilege.

We cannot fulfil our mission if we don't start moving in the other direction. Our financial constraints change the very nature of our schools.

At the community colleges, our mission is complex. It is tempting to believe that the narrative of failure that has surrounded our system justifies a withdrawal of commitment to our schools. It is the opposite. Our narrative of failure is due to a combination of the absence of adequate measures of success for community colleges and the fact that we have been operating on way too little for way too long.

It is clear to see that we are not valuing these institutions the way that we should. We are not reckoning with the failures of the past in the way that justice requires. We are not valuing our future the way we must.