

Testimony of CWA District One - Graduate Student Employees Union

Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Higher Education

Thursday, February 8, 2024

CWA District One represents approximately 5,000 graduate student employees at the State University of New York. SUNY employs our graduate students as instructors, teaching, graduate, and research assistants. Our duties range from teaching courses, grading exams, and papers, to conducting laboratory research.

We urge the legislature to support additional investment into the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP). We must emphasize both the impact of the Tuition Assistance Program on New York State's college students, as well as the evolution of the program since its start. At its start in 1974, TAP covered *more* than both SUNY and CUNY's maximum public tuition, allowing all low-income students to attend university tuition-free. Now, as tuition has increased but TAP funding has stagnated, the program does not cover full public college tuition, nor does it cover additional required fees like books or housing.

Additionally, up until 2010, the state offered TAP assistance for graduate programs. Even with tuition stipends, graduate employees often take extraordinary measures to make ends meet due to low pay and compulsory fees. Without assistance, the cost of graduate school is prohibitive for too many, despite the increasing need for those entering the workforce to have graduate degrees.

TAP's maximum income threshold was last increased in 2000 to just \$80,000. At this threshold, many low and middle-income families are still unable to afford tuition at our SUNYs and CUNYs.

We applaud the state for increasing funding for TAP in the 2023 Executive Budget. Closing the TAP gap was crucial for both student affordability and SUNY and CUNY budgets, and expanding TAP to cover part-time student tuition will allow many more students to work while working towards their degree.

We also want to thank the legislature for committing to phase out fees for SUNY graduate school workers, and we're looking forward to the relief to come from the second year of the phase-out.

However, the cost of college is still increasingly unaffordable. Over half of undergraduate students graduate with student debt, and graduate students and employees struggle to make ends meet. We all face a rising cost of living and other needs and the state can and should do more to ensure New Yorkers can afford a college education. For example, expanding TAP to include graduate eligibility, raising the maximum income eligibility threshold, raising award amounts, and expanding eligibility to all educational programs offered are just a few ways in which state support can directly influence student success and academic excellence.

Investments such as these listed and others will strengthen enrollment on our campuses. With increased enrollment the state will yield a great return on its investment as the academic and professional success of our members and their families promotes a healthy economy across our state.