

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

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HELD AT: Committee Room - City Hall

B E F O R E: Eric Dinowitz
Chairperson

COUNCIL MEMBERS:
Charles Barron
Gale Brewer
Oswald Feliz
Inna Vernikov

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Reine Sarmiento
Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Management for
CUNY

Dr. Fernando Delgado
President of Lehman College Bronx

Dzelika Daniel
University Director for Enrollment Strategy for
Reconnect

Grace Hamler
Medgar Evers Brooklyn Student

John Surico
Center for an Urban Future

Penny Lewis
Secretary Professional Staff Congress

Heather James
PSC CUNY

COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

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CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: We will begin momentarily.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Good morning and welcome to today's New York City Council hearing for the Committee on Higher Education. At this time, please silence all electronic devices. If you wish to submit testimony you may at testimony@council.nyc.gov. Just a reminder, no one may approach the dais at any point during this hearing. Chair Dinowitz, we are ready to begin.

[gavel]

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Good morning. I'm Council Member Eric Dinowitz, Chair of the Committee on Higher Education and a proud CUNY graduate. Welcome to our oversight hearing on CUNY Reconnect. Oddly enough, the origins of CUNY Reconnect are in the state of Tennessee where Tennessee Reconnect was launched in 2017 as a way to bring adults back to community colleges to complete the degree or credential they had started but never finished. Thanks to the Center for an Urban Future here in New York City and its outstanding research report which looked at the Tennessee program and then recommended that New York City implement a similar program, CUNY

Reconnect was born. We are privileged to have John Surico from the Center of Urban Future with us to provide testimony this morning. John was the lead author of the report I have mentioned entitled, "Re-engaging Adult Learners to Complete College Degrees, Learning from Tennessee." The person who took up the challenge of that recommendation is our very own speaker Adrienne Adams who announced her support for a CUNY Reconnect initiative in March 2022. As a result of advocacy by the City Council, the City awarded CUNY 4.4 million dollars to pilot test a CUNY Reconnect program for the 2022-23 year. Again, as a result of City Council advocacy, the City awarded CUNY 5.8 million dollars to implement CUNY Reconnect during this 2023-24 academic year. At this hearing, we are looking forward to hearing the takeaways from the pilot test and to learn how the program is progressing. With the budget getting tighter and tighter, we want to make sure that this investment is paying off and we will continue to do so. I would like to thank a few people, Adam Sarapoli [sp?], my Legislative and Budget Director, Jenna Klaus [sp?], my Chief of Staff, Sahar Mozami [sp?], the Committee's Counsel, and Regina Paul [sp?] the

Committee's Policy Analyst. I would like to remind everyone who wishes to testify in person today that you must fill out a witness slip which is located on the desk of the Sergeant at Arms near the entrance of this room. Please fill out this slip even if you have already registered to testify in advance. To allow as many people as possible to testify, public testimony will be limited to three minutes per person. I'm also going to ask colleagues who arrive to limit their questions and comments to five minutes. Please note that witnesses who are here will testify before those on Zoom. Now in accordance with the rules of the Council, I will administer the affirmation to the witnesses from CUNY. Please raise your right hand. Do you affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth in your testimony before this committee and to respond honestly to Council Member questions? Thank you. As a reminder to all of our witnesses, please say your name prior to your testimony for the record. You may begin.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Good morning Chair Dinowitz and members of the Higher Ed Committee. My name is Reine Sarmiento. I serve as

the Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Management for the City University of New York. I'm joined with me today Doctor Fernando Delgado, President of Lehman College in the Bronx, Ms. Dzelika Daniel, University Director for Enrollment Strategy for Reconnect, and Grace Hamler [sp?] of Medgar Evers located in Brooklyn. We're grateful for the opportunity to share CUNY's progress which has been generously funded by Speaker Adams and the New York City Council. Reconnect is a transformative force within CUNY. It's dedicated to facilitating the enrollment of first-time adult students, as well as the re-enrollment of individuals who have some college and no degree. Our work began in 2022 where we identified 100,000 former CUNY students who accumulated credit with no degree over the last five years. Our Reconnect team has engaged learners and aspire to get them on the road with their educational and professional trajectories. With much determination, we have three essential outcomes to share. Outcome first, number one: Reconnect enrollment to-date is over 25,000 students over the CUNY campuses. outcome number two: in the first year of Reconnect, the University surpassed its

enrollment target by 70 percent, admitting 17,000 students, and what is most noteworthy is 59 percent are female, and 67 percent identify as Black or Hispanic, a testament to the initiatives unwavering commitment to diversity and exclusivity.

Geographically, the major distribution of these students are coming from the outer boroughs, and 9,000 of the students enrolled in the same college in which they started from. Impact number three: even after the first year of its inception, this program has graduated over 1,600 undergraduate students.

What does this mean for New York City? As most of our alumni stay after graduation, we estimated that Associate Degree holders over their lifetime make 2.4 million dollars, Bachelorette 2.9. And if we look at the degree's completion, that's an increase of 1.9 billion collective lifetime earnings over the same number of high school graduates. Now this is significant because a high school graduate in New York City would have a lifetime earning of 1.5.

Looking forward, early data shows we are 62 percent of our target, 15,000, and we have enrolled over 9,200 students in our fall semester. The Reconnect initiative supports students and assists campuses by

expanding resources at one-stop centers that previously lacked the facilities. We opened up a center in York, the welcome center, just this last week, and we are set to launch and open a center in the College of Staten Island in the Willowbrook campus in 2024. In support of CUNY lifting up New York, the University's strategic [inaudible] we are on the road to becoming a national leader in providing access and economic mobility for a diverse population of adult students. Esteemed members of the Higher Ed Committee, I know that financial cuts are coming and that difficult decisions will need to be made, but we have worked very hard to demonstrate the impact of CUNY Reconnect in our fine city, and we request your support in working with the Mayor's Office to baseline our funding so we can continue to reach out to the over 600,000 New Yorkers who have some college and no degree. Thank you for your time. I'd now like to introduce President Delgado of Lehman College.

PRESIDENT DELGADO: Thank you. Good morning Chairperson Dinowitz and members of the City Council Higher Education Committee. Thank you for giving me the chance to address you today regarding

CUNY's Reconnect initiative. I have the distinct honor and deep pleasure to serve as the President of Lehman College. I have been there for two and a half years, and as my colleague from CUNY Central pointed out, my name is Fernando Delgado. My goal here is to showcase and highlight the successful enrollment of college stop-outs and adult learners at Lehman College facilitated through the Reconnect program. The college has embraced the Reconnect initiative, initially focusing on stop-out students impacted by the COVID pandemic, and then expanding our efforts to students who stopped out over the past five years. In total, 1,849 students have returned to Lehman to complete their degrees. Targeted campaigns were developed for students who last attended good academic standing. Those who were not in good academic standing and those with outstanding financial liabilities to the college. Each campaign was supported by mail, email, text and phone communications to encourage new enrollment. Students who expressed interest in returning to the college are assigned an advisor to work with them to minimize challenges when seeking to restart their academic journey. All students over the age of 24 are offered

the opportunity to complete their studies as part of the college's adult degree program which allows the students greater flexibility in general education requirements and the ability to complete a life experience portfolio for credit to accelerate degree completion. Additionally, students who express interest in returning with financial obligations to the college are supportive of monetary awards of up to 1,000 dollars to satisfy outstanding balances. City Council funds supported over 100 students at Lehman this fall semester. For these students, the college has also been flexible in developing payment terms that allow students to complete their studies while paying off prior balances. Data regarding our summer and fall 2023 Reconnect efforts suggest that in total in addition to the 1,849 students continuing education either summer or fall as part of the initiative, 60 students returned to Lehman since the start of this initiative have graduated. We are launching our third campaign to reconnect with students to return to Lehman this spring. Postcards, letters and various electronic communications will go out soon. We want to help these students get their degree back on track. We can support these students

with 100,000 dollars in micro-scholarships thanks to the City Council funding. We anticipate being able to help 125 students return to Lehman with these funds. In addition, the supports provided to reconnect students include a dedicated academic advisor, assistance with FAFSA [sic] and TAP application completion. Work study-eligible students are able to apply for job on campus, again, the flexible payment terms, access to our food pantry, our career closet and childcare center, and robust students' services included enhanced career services, counseling and disability services. And I might add, at least in the Bronx, in addition these students are often times connected to our CUNY Cares program which is also impacting not just students in the Reconnect program, but students across the campus. Thank you.

DIRECTOR DANIEL: Good morning Chair

Dinowtiz, distinguished members of the Committee. I am Dzelika Daniel, currently serving as the University Director for Strategy and Operations at Reconnect. Previously, I held the role of the Financial Aid Compliance Officer for the University with added experience managing an enrollment center. Reconnect looks to address the challenges of adult

learners such as admission hurdles, academic demands and financial constraints. We know that adult learners have unique concerns such as juggling work and childcare in combination with taking classes. The combination of these factors contributes to high drop-out rates among the demographic. These unique challenges require multidimensional support to help adults navigate their way, removing the proverbial red tape to help enrollment, but also support with their life's task. We're doing this with our CUNY Reconnect team of cross-trained professionals known as CUNY Navigators, offering personalized counseling through various modalities. Our CUNY Navigators ease re-admission, conduct transcript evaluations, coordinate transfers among other duties to systemically remove obstacles to re-enrollment. Reconnect addresses administrative burdens to prevent operational barriers with such tasks as monthly borough-wide meetings of our College Navigator teams, a University chat bot to answer to admissions of financial aid inquiries, and by providing virtual counseling during off hours with the goal of enhancing the enrollment experience. We found that some returning students have prior balances barring

re-enrollment. To address this, Reconnect supplied a forgiveness grant to apply to earlier balances.

Another challenge for the adult learner in affording college is a possible loss of financial aid

eligibility based on poor prior academic performance, or having reached their maximum eligibility of

federal and state financial aid programs. Reconnect provided completion grants to help students with

tuition costs not otherwise covered by financial aid programs. As part of the Reconnect effort to

outreach to the five boroughs of New York City, we extended a marketing campaign to target adult

populations. We utilize college app, the adult pipeline prospect program, for predictive analytics

of heat maps of New York City residents by

neighborhood, county, and zip code most likely to

enroll in a college degree program. We extended our

advertising using digital, social and other forms of traditional media including radio and print ads

throughout the New York City Transit Authority

system. With the understanding that many adults are parents needing consistent and dependable childcare

options, we collaborated with CUNY Childcare and the revamp of their marketing materials, including

printed brochures, website re-design and the creation of a video commercial. For CUNY month in October, we held several information sessions for prospective transfer and students educated outside the United States who are looking to earn college credentials in America. Reconnect also hosted the first CUNY Adult Learner Fair at Medgar Evers College. We invite you to join our next fair in Midtown at the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies on December 7th, 2023.

There adults can meet with representatives from the CUNY Colleges to learn about their program offerings, as well as attend break-out sessions on the admissions application or financial aid processes. We understand that adult returning to school want workable career options upon graduation. Reconnect in connection with the University Office of Career and Industry Partnerships provided a comprehensive training curriculum accompanied by training seminars designed for admission officers to provide adults with top in-demand career fields and meta majors, equipping them with skillsets to demonstrate the correlation of academic programs with the most in-demand careers in New York City. To further support students, CUNY Reconnect aims to expand services,

continue incentivizing enrollment, forgiving unpaid balances, and supplying free and invaluable counseling and resources. Our plan includes continued career recruitment to acknowledging integration, and expanding on external marketing efforts. Expanding resources like childcare programs are crucial, requiring increased availability and extended hours for late nights and weekends, as some programs have limited space and availability. Based on these approaches, CUNY Reconnect's groundswell support increases the adult learner's probability of successful enrollment and completion of degrees, directly supporting CUNY's strategic roadmap to lift the people, communities and economies we serve. In conclusion, the CUNY Reconnect initiative has made significant strides in re-enrolling adult learners, addressing their unique challenges. We appreciate the ongoing support from the Higher Education Committee as we work towards increasing the enrollment persistence in graduation rates of adults. Thank you for your support and consideration.

GRACE HAMLER: good morning. My name is Grace Hamler, and I am a CUNY student. That's easy to say, but a few months ago this wasn't the case. I

was scrolling on my cell phone one day when CUNY Reconnect popped up on my feed. It said if you have credits and have ever thought of returning to college to complete your degree, CUNY might be the place. It went on to describe what CUNY Reconnect aims to do. Years earlier I had attended Hunter College briefly and accumulated a scarce few credits. Would that be enough? Still, I called the number and spoke with a gentleman there. His name was Josh he said-- his name was Joshua he said. I called him Josh. From our very first conversation, Josh was beyond helpful and approachable. I told him of my prior college experience, that I hardly felt supported, and that even so, life got in the way. We chatted about options and I told him that days earlier, on a Sunday morning television broadcast, I had seen the newly-appointed provost of Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn, a CUNY College. He said that while Medgar Eves is a CUNY College, it is also the closest equivalent to an HBCU in New York. Josh was encouraging as he assured me that a CUNY degree is a CUNY degree and that irrespective of college or campus, it would carry the same weight. Days later I took a ride out to Brooklyn to visit the college for

the very first time, and received some fliers and other information on the admissions process. Once I had assembled all that was required, I took my packet to the admissions department. There too I met the Admissions Director who was beyond supportive and helpful. As Josh had explained earlier, she told me exactly what to expect of the applications process. A couple of weeks later I was assigned an academic advisor and registered as a full-time students. Today, at age 72 I am on the road to completing my first full semester. [applause] I am excited to embark upon this journey which surely would not have happened if not for CUNY Reconnect and for Josh's clarity in helping me to navigate the system. Thank you, Josh, and thank you, City Council, for allowing me this opportunity to speak.

[applause]

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thank you. That was a great way to end the first part of the testimony. It's like a little take-in. I first want to mention we've been joined by Council Member Vernikov, and she'll begin with a few questions.

COUNCIL MEMBER VERNIKOV: Thank you. Just a few questions for the Admin. How many

students in total applied for the first year of the CUNY Reconnect program?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: We could get you that information. You just wanted to know-- did you want to know by degree type?

COUNCIL MEMBER VERNIKOV: Oh, just like approximately in total.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: We'll get you that data.

COUNCIL MEMBER VERNIKOV: Okay. And if you have-- or if you could just get us how many students participated in the first year of the program?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: How many participated?

COUNCIL MEMBER VERNIKOV: Yes.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: 17,000

COUNCIL MEMBER VERNIKOV: Oh, 17,000.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: yeah.

COUNCIL MEMBER VERNIKOV: Okay.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Those were the number of enrollees for the first year.

COUNCIL MEMBER VERNIKOV: Oh, okay, awesome. And does CUNY have a review process in place to gather information from participating

students, faculty and other staff involved in the program about how the program is going?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Yeah. So one of the hallmarks of our success is that this program doesn't live at the Central Office. It lives at the campuses. Sorry. Can you hear me now? Sorry. And as such, we meet with the campuses once a month to be able to review students and make sure that the pipeline is clear. So that in-- in these borough meetings are representatives from the campuses in all of their areas so that we could identify barriers along the way and start moving through them so that students coming behind them will have those-- will not encounter those barriers. So it's-- that's a monthly meeting since the inception of the program and really is probably the best way to be able to communicate to the campuses and give them the resources they need. Each campus has different challenges as we're finding.

COUNCIL MEMBER VERNIKOV: Thank you. And has CUNY identified any challenges or obstacles with the program?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: We identified in our first cohort, CUNY students that attended

1 previously-- due to our marketing campaign, we're
2 also getting more students who have attended private
3 colleges or other colleges, non-CUNY colleges, and so
4 part of it is really keeping up with the demand in
5 responding to students in a way that they are
6 accustomed to, which is face-to-face, a phone call.
7 This gener-- this particular generation as you'll see
8 needs the support and so what we're trying to do is
9 manage in leveraging our resources to make sure that
10 each student gets the help they need and is connected
11 to the right campus.

12
13 COUNCIL MEMBER VERNIKOV: thank you.

14 CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thank you. We've
15 been joined also by Council Member Brewer, and we
16 have Council Member Barron on Zoom. I have-- just to
17 talk a little more about the program. Grace, I love
18 to hear that you saw it on social media, because in
19 this committee that was about the first time I've
20 heard any program that CUNY provides being listed as--
21 - being advertised on social media, and we've spoken
22 a lot about advertisements. The answer is always,
23 "It's on the train." But that you are the prime
24 example of why it's so important to have other forms
25 of advertisement, and so I'm so glad to hear that the

Reconnect program is using multiple forms of advertisement. I just want to clarify a few things. So the CUNY Reconnect program reconnects students to any college-- any of the CUNY college campuses, is that correct?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: And are-- and the navigators, those are sort of like the advisors for this particular program, is that right?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: They serve the front line advisors. So, when you click on that social media and you link, you link to navigators, they'll do the first screenings, because many times-- out of the last year's numbers, the 17,000 students we enrolled, 9,000 were at their home campus, the rest went to a different college and sometimes even changed majors based on their life circumstances and based on the conversations they had with navigators.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: So, the navigators-- Josh-- your name again?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Joshua, yes.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Well, we call him josh. Josh is this navigator, and then so the students goes then to college, to a campus and

enrolls in classes. I saw students enrolling in classes a few months ago and visited, I think it was Hostos Community College, as students were applying for classes. But what sorts of structural supports are given to the students once they actually arrive to campus?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: So, in a time where we're just getting out of COVID, a lot of the students are-- as well as adult students-- are very shy about using our resources. The navigator, as you've heard from the testimony connects them very directly to the offices, and I'd like to be able to once we do that, we hand it off to the campuses, and they start to work as a cohort at the campuses. So, if President Delgado could talk about the Lehman experience?

FERNANDO DELGADO: So, at Lehman, we try to customize the services to where the students' needs to be met. Students have a divergent set of challenges, particularly the students that come from the Bronx, and particularly the returning students. The most obvious two, apart from academic advising, connecting them within the major are mental health counseling and career counseling, and so we have a

robust career counseling staff augmented by some contracted services that are provided by outside vendors that work with us, both on the curricular side but also on the professional development side. We try to get the students to understand whether adults or degree completion students that is doing some of the work and getting some of their support at CUNY on the Concourse, whether they're entirely on the main campus, that they know who the access point is, not the office but a person in the office that they can touch. Some of these students are also part of our CUNY Cares support structure as well, and we have a point person there. And so within our Student Life building we have a CUNY Cares program-- I think the easiest way to identify that is kind of a concierge-level service, once they here, to triage immediate needs, and sometimes immediate needs could be an emergency loan. Sometimes it's they really need to expedite getting into a personal counselor. Sometimes they need additional help with advising, particularly if they change the major, because they're not quite sure how the courses are going to translate if they change majors and change campuses, and we try to get them to the answers as quickly as

possible, and the advisor and the basic needs person helps them navigate that.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Do you have data to-- are you collecting data on why each of these individual students left college in the first place?

FERNANDO DELGADO: To the extent that they share it with us, yes.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Then it's-- as a-- is it a-- as part of the structure of CUNY Reconnect, are you at least asking the question? Because you know, there are a number of issues I think you brought up. There's financial, there's childcare, there's all sorts of things that happen, but as part of the program, are you collecting data on why students are dropping out to perhaps prevent students in the future from leaving college?

DZELIKA DANIEL: Often times when we counsel a student, we preliminary always have to ask what happened, right? If they formerly attended CUNY, we have access to their records to be able to view exactly what the constraint might have been, if it were academic, if it were a financial aid concern, if they left with a balance, if they were academically dismissed. If they're coming from an

outside institution, same thing. We're still trying to ascertain why they left, because we need to do that as a form of assessment to figure out where we would place them, the best program for them and where they're best suited.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Yeah, I mean, you have a wonderful-- CUNY has like a wonderful dashboard that's shared in the testimony. Everyone loves pie charts and bar graphs, but what I'm hearing is there's a lot of personal connection between the navigators and the advisors and whatever other supports and the students, but it doesn't sound like that data is being collected and utilized in a meaningful way. It's assessed, it sounds like, but it's not being collected and presented in a way to help perhaps address other underlying things. Is that accurate to say?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: So, in the form of the strict data, like we survey the students, we can continue to do that, but the most important thing for Reconnect and why we've been so successful is as-- as Dezlika's talking to students and identifying them, we're identifying challenges and meeting head-on. Let me give you a couple examples.

1 A particular student, a mother, wanted to come back
2 to the colleges, but found the process of applying
3 for daycare very cumbersome. We found out we had 12
4 different applications, right? And so immediately we
5 went into action and say we're going streamline it,
6 one application, one website, with testimonials.
7 Another example is the campuses in year one, we were
8 distributing funds based on what we knew what the
9 data was. The campuses said don't do that, we know
10 our students; give us the money. In year two-- yes,
11 you did. In year two, 50 percent of the allocation
12 went directly to the campuses so they can directly
13 feed to students who had balances, emergency loans or
14 near graduations. So if we waited for the data at
15 year one to be able to make changes, I don't think we
16 would be 62 percent of our target. So, at our next
17 council hearing we could-- we could do a very in-
18 depth analysis, but to suffice it to say, in this
19 environment right now, as we identify challenges,
20 we're hitting them head-on.

22 CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Right. I don't
23 think collecting more data precludes from addressing
24 those challenges head-on. It's to be informative of,
25 again, you know, looking back and to say we have this

dataset of students who left college for whatever reason and we should be able to look at data to say how can we look back and address them before they leave college. So I would encourage CUNY to do a little more data collection. You could add one more box to your nice little dashboard here. Do you have data yet-- because you're in your second year? Do you have data yet of how many students stayed in the program and how many students have not taken classes in a subsequent semester?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Go ahead.

UNIDENTIFIED: So, among all the students--

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: [interposing] One moment please.

UNIDENTIFIED: who were--

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: [interposing] One moment, please. Okay, I think I just have to do the affirmation for you since you're testifying.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Sorry.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: You need a massage too. You look very tense. I want to read it correctly. Okay, please raise your right hand. Do you affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth and

nothing but the truth in your testimony before this committee and to respond honestly to Council Member questions?

UNIDENTIFIED: Yes, I do.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thank you.

UNIDENTIFIED: So, among all of the student's enrolled in the first cohort, so last year's cohort, about 69 percent were retained or graduated in the subsequent fall term.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: And similar question. Do you have for the other 31 percent who were not retained or didn't graduate, do you have a sense-- exit survey data, entry survey data-- as to why they did not continue their studies?

UNIDENTIFIED: Dzelika, do you know if we have that?

DZELIKA DANIEL: No.

UNIDENTIFIED: We don't have that.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Do students who-- the 31 percent of students who did not graduate or do not continue their studies, do they get a subsequent call from the navigator or from Josh? Do they get more outreach to even ask, you know, why'd you leave us?

DZELIKA DANIEL: Yeah, so we monitor closely the students have come through the program and as a method for checking whether or not they've not re-enrolled, if they've not graduated, we do do outreach to those students seeking whether or not they are seeking to enroll and trying to reconnect them again back to the institution.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: And do you have a cohort of students who let's say in September took courses, didn't re-enroll for the spring semester, but re-enrolled in the subsequent year?

DZELIKA DANIEL: We do but tracing a cohort of adults in that fashion tends to be a bit difficult. They're not traditional students. So they're not consecutive often times in their enrollment, so tracing them as a cohort, the stop and the start, are so variously different that you really can't hold them to that. What we look at is the point at which they started back, and if they fail to graduate or fail to continue in that term, to then try to collect them back and get them re-enrolled for the future term.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: I mean, but do you view it as a sort of challenge, or do you view it as

1 sort of par for the course that the person who--
2 again, we don't know why they're-- we don't have the
3 data why they left school in the first place. But
4 are you comfortable with 31 percent and is your
5 feeling based on your conversations that they're
6 going to do one semester and then take off a
7 semester, maybe do summer courses, and go back and
8 forth?
9

10 DZELIKA DANIEL: so, our goal is always
11 to keep them enrolled in. so what we did was that
12 students who came back before they were looking to--
13 we had students from the spring of last year, who as
14 an incentive to keep them enrolled, we decided to
15 give them summer grant funding to keep them going
16 also. So that was one of the things we wanted to
17 proactively reach again, since having those students
18 drop off. So automatically if they had registered in
19 the spring of 23, we then did a summer program of
20 giving additional summer funding to cover at least
21 four credits' worth of coursework in the summer so we
22 could keep them enrolled.

23 CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: And how successful
24 was that?
25

DZELIKA DANIEL: Pretty successful actually. We did very well with it. We gave it the funding directly to the colleges, had an application form, sent it out to all the students, and so it was pretty successful. I think we had-- right now-- we had probably in that first year from the spring 284-- actually \$284,000 awarded to students in summer credit tuition based off of them continuing to enroll for the summer so that way they wouldn't drop out or stop.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: I want to turn it over to Council Member Brewer for questions.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Thank you. I remember Speaker Adrienne Adams' inauguration, that woman who spoke, she was a graduate and she was so enthusiastic about the program. It was the first time I knew about it, but I have to say, it certainly spoke volumes for what a great program this is. My question is-- and maybe this got answered. I am focused on this 31 percent also. So, is it childcare-- in other words, does every single campus-- I don't think this is true-- have childcare? I don't-- is childcare something that you hear as an impediment to continuing. And if so-- I know you're

DZELIKA DANIEL: So, what we first did to aim for childcare was to let students know about the opportunity. The other thing is that students do have to complete an application. It depends on space, and they have a limited amount spacing based off of age of the child going into care, and hours. In some cases, students weren't aware that childcare extended into the evening hours, or study hours, or Saturdays, but in some cases also, similarly, the schools lacked the space, right, or the sufficient number of staff to care for as many students. Some programs have, you know, babies to two. Others have two to five and school aged. What we're finding is we need a lot more space for young babies, children below the age of two and for aftercare for students who are elementary school age, the parents need after care into the evening hours?

DZELIKA DANIEL: Well, right now we're trying to access exactly how much space we need to

1
2 accommodate. We want to look at surveying those
3 students that we currently have. Using ISER [sic]
4 data or financial aid data, we can see how many
5 students registered as having dependents that they
6 claim on their taxes, right, and we do certain
7 outreach target that reach to those students. We
8 connect those students also to the childcare centers
9 to see what space they have.

10 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Yeah, but none of
11 them have zero to two. They're-- and hourly.

12 DZELIKA DANIEL: Some do have zero to
13 two.

14 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Yeah, but they
15 don't have a lot of space.

16 DZELIKA DANIEL: They don't have a lot of
17 space.

18 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I mean, they may
19 have the program--

20 DZELIKA DANIEL: [interposing] Exactly.

21 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: but it's packed.

22 DZELIKA DANIEL: Exactly.

23 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Alright, because
24 it seems to me that's going to be an ongoing issue if
25 you can't address it. So at every campus, I know

BMCC has, but it's packed. It overly subscribed. Do you have childcare on every campus, even if it's not across the board in terms of what's needed?

DZELIKA DANIEL: Yes, the majority of the undergrad campuses do have childcare, and student who are cross-enrolled can enroll their children at a childcare center closer to where they live as opposed to where they attend school. So you can be enrolled at BMCC and put your child in childcare at--

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: [interposing] If you can find childcare, yes, and affordable. That's the other problem.

DZELIKA DANIEL: Right, the affordable--

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: [interposing] Nice to have childcare at \$65,000 a year.

DZELIKA DANIEL: Yeah.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: You need it affordable. The other question I have is the-- ASAP-- now, are people in community college as well as four-year? Is it across the board?

DZELIKA DANIEL: Yes.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: So, I call it Magalusi [sic] program, John's program, meaning ASAP.

Does that apply to these students? Can they apply for it, ASAP.

DZELIKA DANIEL: Students are welcome to apply to ASAP. It's a program like any other, CDNC, College Discovery and C [sic]. It's a subprogram that will continue to support the students. Reconnect is our way to connecting the student to enrolling and the resources overall, regardless of CUNY programs. So it's universal.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Do you know if any of your students get ASAP at the community colleges?

DZELIKA DANIEL: I'm sure. I think Grace is actually a Reconnect students.

GRACE HAMLER: Hi, Council Member Brewer. Good to see you.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Nice to see you.

GRACE HAMLER: I happen to be an ASAP student. I wasn't connected to ASAP through CUNY Reconnect, but when I got to Medgar Evers I became aware that that was an option, a very good option for me as, a matter of fact, and so yes, you can move into ASAP from CUNY Connect, and I am proof that it can happen.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay. And it makes a big difference. That would help, you think, if the other students stay in the program if they had that opportunity?

GRACE HAMLER: I have found ASAP to be extremely supportive. I have said, as a matter of fact, that I am sorry, I pity the people who don't have an opportunity to an ASAP program if they're enrolled in college, especially as an older students or a returning student, because the support is focused more so than any other-- let's say, the other one, not ASAP.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: ACE.

GRACE HAMLER: I'm sorry?

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Is it ACE?
Whatever, any of--

GRACE HAMLER: Seek [sic]. Exactly, exactly. Yes, right. I think ASAP is more proactive.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: But I guess any--

GRACE HAMLER: [interposing] With respect to--

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: [interposing] Any of these cuts that are being suggested are outrageous for any of these programs.

GRACE HAMLER: So sorry, I cannot hear you.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I said any of these cuts that are suggested for these programs are outrageous in my opinion. And so it's a-- example, you're an example of why it should not-- these cuts that the Mayor's proposing should not be taking place for ASAP or anything else. Thank you very much. Oh, by the way, John's book is coming out. Are you aware of it? John Mosely's [sic] book is coming out on ASAP this week, FYI. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Can't wait to purchase it at my local book store. I don't think we have book stores in the Bronx. It's terrible.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: You can come to Manhattan and buy your book.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: I avoid Manhattan at all costs. Bronx pride. I just want to talk about money as Council Member Brewer brought up funding. What is-- so you mentioned that lifetime earnings programs like this of students-- of the

students in the Reconnect program is estimated to be 1.9 billion. Is that based on if they get their Associates and Bachelor's?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Part of your program is to help students apply for federal financial aid and state financial aid and other scholarships. Is that part of the program?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: How much money does-- federal and state, not city money, but how much other funding is that bringing in to the students and to the program?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: You mean on top of their Reconnect funds?

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: On top of the Reconnect funds.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Right. So-- when they apply for financial aid it's based on really what their income level is and how much TAP or PEL that they used. It suffices to say when they do apply, we do identify the maximum amount of awards, whether or not they qualify for things like Excelsior, the Dream Act, all of the different things

1 associated with additional funding. We use the
2 Reconnect funds as the lost dollar in so that the
3 students can-- if they have an identified balance,
4 that they'll be able to come to school without having
5 the need to identify the first-- the debt that would
6 be incurred in the first semester.

8 CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: There-- so
9 understanding that the goal is to have students
10 attend college if they have financial needs, for them
11 not-- that not to be a barrier. What I'm asking is
12 more of like a fiscal question. Is the program this
13 year was allocated \$5.8 million-- some of that goes
14 to direct dollars to students, but that money's also
15 being leveraged to bring in other federal and state
16 dollars for student tuition, and I'm just wondering
17 if you have that number of how much federal, state
18 financial aid is coming in for our students?

19 DZELIKA DANIEL: No, we don't have that
20 data specifically, but we can get that, of all the
21 Reconnect students who received any federal and state
22 funding and calculate and provide.

23 CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Okay. Thank you.
24 And that's-- you know, it's one of the-- again, as
25 Council Member Brewer mentioned, this program like

every single other program is on the chopping block, and as I say about the ASAP program, these are critically important programs for the future of our city, but very often they are fiscally responsible programs to invest in, because programs like this do bring in other dollars that are beneficial to our students and to our city. I want to turn it over-- Council Member Barron has joined us on Zoom, and I want to recognize Council Member Barron if he has any questions. We will come back to Council Member Barron. There was a report last year that a number of-- of the 17,000 students that were reconnecting using CUNY Reconnect, that a large portion of those were high school students. Does this sound-- this report sound familiar?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: I believe the population was three percent, and the money was focused to a program of high school students who didn't re-enroll in their-- as soon as they graduated, and we identified-- the specific funds went to be able to get them to connect them to the colleges. Since then that program still exists but is not funded through Reconnect.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: So, I just want to make sure, zero percent of the students coming into CUNY Reconnect are graduated let's say in June of 23. Zero percent of the students starting September 23 would have graduated in-- from high school in June?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: Zero percent.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: None of them?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: No, I'm trying to understand your question. You're asking in cohort two, are there any high school graduates.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Yeah.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: To our knowledge, no. Of the-- I think we have some data. Almost 70 percent of our students are over the age of 24, and then the other range was below that.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: On the dashboard.

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: That's the Lehman Dashboard.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: The Lehman Dash--

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: [interposing] That's the Lehman Dashboard. We'd be happy to give you-- do we have the data? Musical chairs.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: I like it.

UNIDENTIFIED: Hello again. So in cohort one, 54 percent of the students were 24 years old or older.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Okay. Thank you. So what are some of the major obstacles that you are facing? We can't just get another chair? Silly. What are some of the major obstacles in the first year of implementation that you corrected from, and what are some of the major obstacles you're seeing now in the second cohort?

DZELIKA DANIEL: So, in our first year cohort, I think just getting it off the ground we had, you know, the regular timeframe of getting release of funds. That happened a little bit later than we anticipated, and so we had to hit the ground running as soon as we could. When you're trying to recruit students for the fall term, it's important to start that as early in the year as possible. And so, you know, with the release of the budget for us, in our first year that was a concern, because we didn't really get the funding until-- or availability of the funds until closer to September. And so that had some challenges. The other challenge that we had obviously was also making the time frame of our

1 marketing. We had to really push aggressively for
2 the marketing in that first year, because you know,
3 there's ad buys and we're competing in a market and
4 we're trying to fit into the other plans. In our
5 second year we were able to not only get our budget
6 sooner. We were also able to grab students from that
7 first year cohort and advertise to them particularly
8 to ensure that they continue to enroll, and then also
9 start our marketing plan continuously through the
10 year. We had, you know, procurement timeframes for
11 getting technology in place. That was also a concern
12 off of cohort year one, but because we did it in the
13 middle of the academic year, it was pushing us beyond
14 the start of the new fiscal year which was great. So
15 that allowed us to not have any stoppages of work or
16 effort in preparation for 2024.

18 VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: I think the
19 other important thing here is that while the campuses
20 in year one were getting the funds, it was difficult
21 the timing-wise to connect. The first semester we
22 only had 3,000 students and we had to really ramp up.
23 We also found that the readmission fee after being
24 gone for a semester was problematic in year one, and
25 in year two we just eliminated that, and now the re-

admit is after three semesters, because on average when students take time off, they take a year off and come back. The other thing is the campuses struggle to really reach out to students because they wanted to reach out to their community and not just the students that stopped out. So in year two we provided the geo mapping technology that allowed them to identify the students, reach out to them through their social feed, and really connect with them in a more meaningful way than just kind of an ad campaign. So we developed our-- the sophistication in reaching out to students from year one and year two has drastically changed.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: I didn't want to cough in the mic. And then now going forward, for year three what changes do you anticipate making for the program to improve? It sounds like you made improvements to the program, that you're being reflective. What other changes are you making from year two to year three?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: I think that they're-- much like we did in year one and year two, we are identifying campuses that have large adult populations that don't have the type of one-stop

center and reconnect services to cultivate that students and have a welcoming environment. It's important to note that these resources are for all the students when we launched them, but when it comes to our adult students, they're often want to go to one place to get all the help that they need. So we're looking at hoping in year three to baseline the funds to be able to continue to help each of the campuses develop a center to help with adults. We also need to get more sophisticated in the funds that we do have for the campus to help them generate the data analytics to maximize the dollar for completion and retention, and not just paying off their balances and bringing them in. It's not enough to bring them in. Our goal in Reconnect is to graduate them.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: I'm going to refer you to, I think, this Committee's second hearing that I held as Chair, I'm going to say March 2022 where the topic was the one-stop centers or the one-stop successor programs. And I will note that one of the challenges that CUNY faced back then was, they weren't one-stops for everyone, that some of them had some programs. Others had other programs, and it was-- there wasn't a consistent support service, that

you couldn't go from campus to campus and find the same supports at each of the one-stop centers. I invite you to watch that hearing. It was great. No. So, I-- so just one more question about the budget. You're facing budget cuts due to the Mayor's proposed PEGs, budget cuts. Is this a program that's on the chopping block? And if so, what would that mean for the students that you serve?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: As we look at the budget cuts, I think the University is looking at all of the different programs and assessing impact and opportunity for each of them. Is Reconnect on that? We don't have baseline funding despite our outcomes. So that is being looked at. But I would submit that programs like ASAP and ACE and Reconnect helps students in a way that they need it now more than ever. So, which is why we're here today to be able to ask for the additional funding. This Reconnect program reaches all students and doesn't have a limitation on you have to be a certain economic status. You just need to be a person that's been in New York City that wants to finish their degree, and I think that the 600,000 people in New York City deserve that.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Couldn't agree more, and is there a dollar amount additional that would allow you to do the type of work you envision CUNY Reconnect doing?

VICE CHANCELLOR SARMIENTO: We got an additional million dollars this year from 4.4 to 5.4 and we'd like to be able to request \$7 million and those funds going directly again to the campuses that need it to be able to look at the one-stop centers, provide the additional support in daycare, to move them into our signature programs such as ACE and ASAP so that they could continue their studies with the appropriate sport.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thank you so much. Alright, I want to thank all four of you-- five of you-- so much for coming and for your testimony, and especially you, Grace. Every time we, you know, the work that they do, the work we try to support is really for you, and to hear your story and your experience is really why we do this work. So thank you so much for coming, and Grace, especially you, thank you so much for testifying today, and congratulations on re-enrolling in college, and I

look forward to you coming back when the-- upon degree completion.

GRACE HAMLER: Thank you very much.
Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: For our first panel, I'd like to call John Surico, from Center for an Urban Future. Good morning, John. You may begin when ready, just state your name for the record, please.

JOHN SURICO: Good morning.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Now it's on.

JOHN SURICO: Good morning. My name is John Surico. I'm a Senior Fellow at Center for an Urban Future, an independent think tank focused on creating a stronger and more equitable economy in New York City. I'm testifying today on behalf of CUF's Editorial and Policy Director Eli Dvorkin. Thank you to Chair Dinowitz and members of the committee for the opportunity and the kind words for the January 2022 report that we wrote. To help more New Yorkers get ahead in today's fast-changing economy there are few efforts more worthwhile than boosting college attainment. Most of today's well-paying jobs require a post-secondary credential. That has only become

more apparent as accessible industries like retail, hospitality and manufacturing continue to struggle post-pandemic, while tech, healthcare, professional services, and finance have all exceeded their 2019 job totals. At the same time close to 643,000 working-age New Yorkers have some college credits but no degree. Helping more of this population get across the college finish line is one of the most-effective steps that city government can take to expand economic mobility, and that's exactly what the CUNY Reconnect initiative does. We commend the City Council for its leadership in spearheading CUNY Reconnect which grown in less than two years to become one of America's largest and most-inclusive college come-back initiatives. Today, more than 26,000 students have re-enrolled thanks to CUNY Reconnect, most of whom are black and Hispanic, female and over the age of 24. Among the first cohort, more than 1,900 students have already earned credentials, and with them the potential for millions of dollars in additional lifetime earnings. This powerful achievement underscores the value of CUNY Reconnect as an investment in the City's future. But still there's work to be done. Although CUNY

Reconnect has already exceeded expectations, tens of thousands of more New Yorkers have yet to be reached. Meanwhile, as CUNY has seen a welcomed uptick in overall enrollment this fall, the system remains nearly 50,000 students below pre-pandemic levels, and will need additional resources to rebound. First, the City Council should work with the Administration to renew support for CUNY Reconnect in the upcoming budget. This resoundingly successful program deserves to growing the years ahead. Second, the council should consider targeted investments to supercharge the effectiveness of CUNY Reconnect and help ensure that far more returning students succeed next time around. Our research finds that the biggest barriers to college completion are non-tuition costs like transit, childcare, technology, and books. It's rarely academic. As the council explores ways to strengthen CUNY Reconnect, new supports to tackles these costs should be a top priority. One simple idea, give every returning student or every community college student a free Metro Card from day one. Other options include additional resources to settle unpaid students' balances, expanded evening and weekend hours for on-campus services, and additional

investment in pre-screening for benefits available to students, building on the promising new CUNY Cares pilot program in the Bronx announced this week. CUNY Reconnect has become a vital new onramp into CUNY, the City's most-effective economic mobility engine. With renewed support from the Council this program could become even more inclusive and effective in the years to come. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Of course. Thank you so much for coming today. I mean, one thing that stuck out to me was Metro Cards. Got some people cheering in the back. Seems almost like a no-brainer. We give our K12 students Metro Cards, you know, give them access. My student ID got me discounts on Microsoft Office, on Broadway ticket. It gets you all sorts of things, and if I can get money off that, I should be able to get money off my Metro Card. I want to touch on two things you said. You asked how do we reach more-- you said we need to reach more students. I'm interested to hear your thoughts on how we actually reach more students.

JOHN SURICO: Sure. I'll go back to existing research we've done on the issue. You know,

we know that college financial aid as it stands isn't set up for part-time adult learners. With competing demands at work, family responsibilities including childcare and elder care, and a mountain of non-tuition costs, as I mentioned, most working-age adults with some college but no degree could only consider returning to college in part-time capacity. TAP, the Tuition Assistance Program at the state level offers aid to part-time students, but strict eligibility requirements mean that very few students actually receive it. Likewise, just 4.7 percent of community college students receive any financial support under the Separate Aid for Part-time Students Program for an average of just \$743 per student. In addition, the state's last dollar Excelsior Scholarship which helps students from families earning up to \$125,000 annually to attend a public college tuition-free requires a fulltime course load. Federal PEL grants cannot be used on short-term degree programs which many working adults might find otherwise most attractive. And lastly, I should mention here, that adult learners may have burned through aid from previous period of enrollment or have outstanding debts represent an additional

barrier to re-enrolling. Various fee forgiveness initiatives in CUNY's Come-back program were great steps, but really providing that last dollar between what financial aid covers and the true cost of attendance specifically for part time students can be the crucial difference-maker and whether or not that adult learner even entertains the idea of coming back. So that's really one way, is setting up the -- the last dollar. The last two thing I'll mention is the lack of pre-enrollment counseling. The navigators are a great start in helping kind of before people even apply, having that conversation about what benefits. Oftentimes you have to apply, get accepted, and then you learn what benefits are available to you. We want to start that process earlier so you know that before you apply. And then the last thing I'll mention, and this is something that became very evident during the pandemic, adult learners need flexible scheduling and often struggle to get it. despite adult learners making up roughly a quarter of all CUNY students, most classes are scheduled at times that make them inaccessible to New Yorkers eager to return to school, juggling [sic] work and family responsibilities. And most of CUNY's

two-year college's classes overwhelmingly take place during the day, which may work for an 18-year-old enrolled fulltime. It is often tougher for an adult--for older adults with children at home. Many experts we spoke to suggests in order for a Reconnect-style program to truly succeed or to further succeed, students really need that array of degree-granting pathways that can be completed during a combination of evening, weekend, and online classes. Yeah.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: so, the Tennessee Reconnect program was the first in the nations, is that right?

JOHN SURICO: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: and then CUNY Reconnect. Are there other Reconnect programs in the nation besides those two that you have data on and research on?

JOHN SURICO: I do not have data on other programs. I am aware that a couple of other states have reached out to CUNY about the successful program. what's kind of remarkable to me is that New York City alone is home to nearly as many residents with some college but no degree as the entire state of Tennessee, and the City's annual budget is more

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: [interposing] And the suggestions of things like more funding for part-time learners, the fee forgiveness, the navigators sharing what's available to students before they even apply. Are those-- is there a model for that in Tennessee? Are they doing any of those things that-- and therefore they're successful and you know they work, or these are things you are recommending CUNY do?

JOHN SURICO: The one thing I'll mention there is I was really happy to hear the opening of the Welcome Center at CUNY this last week. Tennessee has a number of these Reconnect Centers which are physical spaces that adult learners can go-- you know, older adults can come back to and feel very welcome there and not feel like a burden on staff. Oftentimes we heard that older adults don't really know where to start when they show up on a CUNY campus. So hearing the opening of a physical space

which is very present throughout the Tennessee system is a real welcomed start.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: I'm going to turn it over to my colleague Council Member Brewer for a few questions as well.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Thank you very much. I'm so going to go back to the childcare issue because you mentioned it. So, do you find the zero to two-- do you find within maybe that 31 percent or just generally-- I know you've done reports on this in the past generally, so I'm looking at it for this particular population. I just didn't know if you have anything to add. To me, it's a huge impediment, but I just want to know what you think.

JOHN SURICO: Agreed. I'll refer to my colleagues who have done the childcare research and I can get back to you. What I will say is that we are embarking on a pretty big adult learner's research project right now in the next coming months to learn more about this, because it's something we hear constantly related to the non-tuition cost. I'll refer back to my colleagues and get back to you.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Just when you're doing it, there's another group-- I know it's not

part of this hearing, but over 50 percent of Correction Officers are now women at Rikers, and they have no childcare. So if you could add that to your list.

JOHN SURICO: Absolutely.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: It's next door but it's still childcare here. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Do you have research separate from CUNY to suggest why students are leaving college in the first place? Do you conduct separate survey data of students who have gone to Reconnect and then subsequently left that program? Any of the data I was asking CUNY about?

JOHN SURICO: At the moment I don't have data to share. The research we've done has been limited to CUNY and sometimes the SUNY system, and just overwhelmingly there it's non-tuition costs, but I can go back to my colleagues and send data to you.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Okay. I-- and there was one other things. You said target investments to supercharge-- can you just the number? It was the second thing you mentioned.

JOHN SURICO: To supercharge the effectiveness of CUNY Reconnect, yeah.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Alright, so the effectiveness. So talk a little more about that. Is it-- was that the non-tuition cost, or was there something else you were referring to in those targeted investments?

JOHN SURICO: I think that's really just a reference to build upon these things I've mentioned like that last dollar. This is the idea of the Metro Card. I should say it should be Omni now, not Metro Card, but you know, this--

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: [interposing] Still tokens to me, so I'm just--

JOHN SURICO: [interposing] Yeah, yeah. This is really just focusing more on the specific gaps that we find which are really these last dollar gaps, the pre-screening for benefits available to students, and this again is why this CUNY Cares pilot is exciting, to have students help other students. And also, the expanded evening and weekend hours for on campus services which goes back to this idea for more flexible scheduling. We find this to be such a huge thing when we talk to CUNY students that they can't come by from 9:00 to 5:00, right? And most times the campus is closed after that. So those-- to

us, those three things really would help just build this even-- you know, this already effective program and make it more effective.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: I want to thank you so much for your time and for your testimony today and for all the work you're doing to support CUNY Reconnect. Thank you.

JOHN SURICO: Thank you, Chair.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Penny Lewis?

PENNY LEWIS: Thank you. Good morning.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Good morning. Would you please state your name for the record and then you may begin.

PENNY LEWIS: Sure, Penny Lewis, the Secretary of the Professional Staff Congress. So good morning. Thank you very much for giving us the opportunity to testify about the successes of CUNY Reconnect. We are very happy to be here to promote a program that has exceeded expectations and brought thousands of students back into higher education at CUNY. The pandemic hit CUNY students particularly hard, and the many reasons students don't finish degrees persist as we've heard about, even as the worst of the pandemic is over, they care for children

and parents. They work jobs that don't pay enough or give them schedules or flexibility that they need for school, and the financial cost of tuition as well as non-tuition costs such as food, rent, books, and transportation remain difficult if not impossible to meet. This week at York College Speaker Adams and Council Member Williams announced the expansion of CUNY Reconnect, celebrating the 25,000 students that have come back to CUNY campuses through the program, doubling the goals as we heard about it, and this is clearly a remarkable success. Combined with changes that the Governor and CUNY that streamline the application process, there's reason to be optimistic that enrollment is moving back towards its pre-pandemic goals. Yet, the reality for many of our students is that to stay enrolled until graduation, other pieces of the higher education puzzle must still come together, and we were just talking about this. Will there be enough advisors to continue to help students through the labyrinth of a large university? Are there enough faculty to teach classes at the right times in the right subjects so that students can graduate on time? And what about the mental health counselors to help them readjust to

returning to school while balancing childcare, other jobs, and the lack of financial support? The PSC is elated about the prospect of enrollment growth, but less happy and concerned that CUNY is not structurally or financially ready to meet the needs of our students. And also, this makes the jobs of our members even more difficult than it is now. At some campuses we have one advisor per 1,000 students. The numbers of full-time faculty is stagnant due to attrition. The Mayor has cut CUNY at every turn. The CUNY Administration announces vacancy reduction plans. We know that another budget battle is upon us, and we will be fighting every day to see that our students and members get the support that we need, and we think that CUNY Reconnect and these kinds of programs deserves the kinds of investments we've been talking about all morning. We want to thank the Council for the strong support for CUNY in last year's fiscal budget and for fighting against the Mayor's proposed and former budget cuts. We have a long way to go before the investment in CUNY reflects what our students and members contribute to the economy and culture of our city, and we're grateful to have the Council on our side.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thank you so much.

I want to ask a little bit about the advisors. In our-- in the fiscal-- in the recent Fiscal Year 24, the recent budget, the Council secured funds specifically for advisors. Are those-- those are funds that are on the chopping block. Have those funds not been implemented to hire more advisors? Can you talk a little more about the advisors and the budget?

PENNY LEWIS: Unfortunately, I don't have the full information and I don't know if our legislative rep who is here might have more specific information but I-- about how it's been implemented.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: I think we just need you to fill out a slip and then you can come up.

PENNY LEWIS: I mean, I can on a quick level say that-- so I don't know the numbers, but I do know that despite any investments that we do have campus by campus there's really varying degrees of extent to which the students get the kind of advisor support that they need. So, you know, there are ratios that approach decent on some campuses, and there are ratios that are still like gargantuanly [sic] off, you know, on other campuses.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: And so yeah, we don't have the data, but for those 31 percent of students that do not graduate or continue on to the next semester, is it your sense from speaking to your members that some of those students do not return or graduate because they do not feel the support that an academic advisor would provide?

PENNY LEWIS: I mean, absolutely, and I'll turn it over to Heather in a second. We hear consistently from our union members and from our union leaders that retention, you know, that we can bring students in, and that's incredible to do so, and we need to continue to do so. We're really excited. Applications for CUNY are up 40,000-- up to 40,000 in October. I don't know if you saw this, but there were 40,000 applications to CUNY in the month of October which is something like 383 percent higher than it was a year ago. So that's fantastic, but to keep them at CUNY, to keep them retained there are just a myriad of services and opportunities that are going to be necessary to keep them and we need the resources for it, and certainly advisement is a major part of it, because at many points you have to make decisions along the road, and if you don't have a

regular person that you can be connecting with and who's familiar with, you know, you and familiar with not just your particular needs, but the institution that you are trying to navigate, it's very easy to fall out.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Thank you. And Heather, would you just state your name for the record?

HEATHER JAMES: I lost my voice.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: Good thing you have a microphone.

HEATHER JAMES: How annoying. I'm going to whisper into the microphone that my name is Heather James, PSC CUNY. The advising money that we got because of you, the 5.9, it was in the PEG cut under ASAP [sic]. So, we would love to figure that out. I think it was just something to set back. Yeah, can we hear me?

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: The 5.9 was--

HEATHER JAMES: [inaudible]

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: part of the PEG cut.

HEATHER JAMES: It went into the PEG cut from what we can tell. We're trying to figure it out, the ASAP and advising money.

PENNY LEWIS: Right, and we're using some of our advisors as Reconnect navigators.

HEATHER JAMES: So they all go together.

PENNY LEWIS: They all go together. So, if you couldn't hear what she was saying, the PEG cut that was made under ASAP, as far as we understand, that that affected the advisor intention, the goal.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: My only comment is that's totally outrageous, and the fact that that huge percentage of students is there in terms of increases in applications means even-- first of all, it means more money for CUNY, so therefore they could be considered and institution that is revenue-enhancing. Department of Transportation got no cut because they have, you know, red light cameras. I mean, I never heard of such of thing. Rather have them cut than you. So, my question is, I guess we all need to fight to say that retention is where we need to put our efforts.

PENNY LEWIS: Absolutely. I mean, it's fantastic again that the enrollment numbers look like

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COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Are you going to have a book party for John?

PENNY LEWIS: we did not know that his book was just coming out. We're all--

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: [interposing] Let me know.

PENNY LEWIS: We're all very excited about that.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Make sure you have a book party. Thank you.

PENNY LEWIS: Yeah, no, thank you for telling us.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: You know, Christmas is coming up, Gale. I expect a gift wrapped with a bow.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I got it.

HEATHER JAMES: [inaudible]

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: I'm now going to ask--

PENNY LEWIS: Thank you for the opportunity.

CHAIRPERSON DINOWITZ: if there are-- if anyone else in the room would like to sign up to testify? Okay, there's one person signed up on Zoom.

1 Tamine Oola [sp?] who is not with us, but-- I want to
2 thank everyone for attending today's hearing and for
3 testifying at today's hearing about CUNY Reconnect
4 which is very clearly a critically important but also
5 successful program that we need to ensure we are
6 investing and reinvesting in to make sure everyone in
7 our city has the opportunity to succeed regardless of
8 how many credits they have, regardless of what age
9 they are, regardless of why they stayed in or left
10 college. Thank you all again. This hearing's
11 adjourned.
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13 [gavel]

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COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

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C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage, and that there is interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date December 4, 2023