

Testimony of Chancellor Félix V. Matos Rodríguez
The City University of New York
New York City Council Finance and Higher Education Committees
Hearing on the Fiscal Year 2027 Executive Budget
June 8, 2026

Good morning, Chair Lee and Chair Joseph, and members of the City Council Committees on Finance and Higher Education. I am Félix V. Matos Rodríguez, Chancellor of The City University of New York. I am joined today by University Provost Alicia Alvero, Chief Operating Officer Hector Batista, and Chief Financial Officer Kenneth Godiner.

I want to thank the City Council for your steadfast commitment to CUNY. Your investments sustain what has long defined this university: broad access to affordable, high-quality education for one of the most diverse student bodies in the nation and a pathway to social and economic mobility for generations of New Yorkers. Your support has been essential to delivering strong returns for our students, families, and the more than 400,000 degree-seeking and continuing education students we serve – allowing 72 percent of CUNY students to attend tuition-free and 77 percent to graduate without debt.

Enrollment Growth

Our affordable tuition and diverse offerings and support systems have helped fuel enrollment gains. This fall, enrollment grew nearly 4 percent over last fall, the third consecutive year of growth. Since Fall 2022, enrollment has jumped nine percent — nearly 21,000 additional students.

This increase is most evident in our community colleges, which serve as the front door to higher education for more than 60,000 students. Enrollment at CUNY's seven community colleges has rebounded strongly from the pandemic, with an additional 9,500 students welcomed over the last three years — an 18% increase. Notably, during the same period, part-time enrollment surged 37% at our community colleges. This growth is driven by the landmark expansion of the New York State Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) and by the signature Reconnect initiative, a program first launched with City Council support to bring adult learners back to college. The state's expansion now provides free tuition, fees, books and supplies for eligible adults pursuing degrees in high-demand fields at community colleges.

This growth has also been fueled by our ongoing efforts to actively recruit the next generation of CUNY students from New York City Public Schools. For the past three years, we have partnered with the public schools in sending personalized letters to all graduating seniors, and more recently to their caregivers, offering admission and waiving application fees.

Beyond enrollment, we are seeing historic success in retention. CUNY recently achieved its highest rate of first-year retention in associate degree programs since tracking began in 1990. This seven-percentage-point increase for the Fall 2024 cohort is a direct result of our efforts to pair access with the deep support students need to persist and succeed.

Workforce Development & CUNY Beyond

Once students earn that degree, we are committed to making sure it opens doors to a career. Last fall, we launched CUNY Beyond, an ambitious plan that embeds career readiness into every aspect of the undergraduate experience and smooths the transition from classroom to workplace. The program aims to triple the number of students in paid internships and increase employer recruitment by 20% – ultimately driving a projected \$3.3 billion in future wage growth that translates into increased tax revenue and greater economic mobility.

We started CUNY Beyond with four campuses. With \$6.8 million in State support in next year's budget, we are expanding it to five more this summer. We are looking to the Council for support in expanding to two more community colleges in the next phase. Ultimately, our goal is to implement CUNY Beyond on all 19 undergraduate campuses and connect 180,000 New Yorkers to careers annually by 2030.

Complementing this work is Power Your Business with CUNY, a new industry-facing campaign encouraging employers to hire CUNY students and partner with the University. CUNY is already a major pipeline to New York City's workforce, with 30,000 employers actively recruiting our students and graduates. The new campaign connects industry partners to CUNY talent, faculty and campus resources, and addresses workforce needs in health care, technology.

These efforts build on one of CUNY's defining roles: serving as New York's primary talent engine for many of the essential sectors that keep the city running and shape its future.

We prepare more than one-third of all new NYC public school teachers each year and more than 40% of the teachers of color in New York State. I'm proud that city teachers who graduated from CUNY colleges have a 17% higher five-year retention rate than those from other institutions. This CUNY teacher pipeline is essential to addressing the statewide teacher shortage, and we are actively growing it, in partnership with New York City Public Schools. This year, we tripled the number of CUNY students in the NYC Teaching Fellows program. More than 15,000 CUNY students have participated in the program since its inception, including the current Schools' chancellor, Kamar Samuels.

On another key front, CUNY is positioning its students and graduates to be at the forefront of the evolving AI and tech economy. With the CUNY AI Innovation Fund supporting more than 200 AI-related initiatives across our campuses — along with new AI postdoctoral fellowships and a highly competitive Google-funded faculty institute — we are building one of the most robust AI ecosystems in public higher education. We

are also recruiting and hiring the first of 25 new faculty AI researchers for the New York State Empire AI consortium.

Expanding the Early Childhood Education Pipeline

A critical priority for Governor Hochul, Mayor Mamdani, Speaker Menin and this Council is the shared goals of universal child care for two-year-olds. CUNY is uniquely positioned to meet the moment.

The University already enrolls more than 3,600 early childhood education students across 50 programs at every degree level at 13 colleges, making us the primary engine for training, credentialing, and retaining the educators needed to make these efforts successful. And we are expanding that pipeline through the CUNY New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute, a statewide public-private partnership that operates 10 career development centers to support prospective early childhood teachers as they pursue higher education and earn teaching credentials. We are also launching new programs in early childhood leadership and administration to prepare the next generation of childcare center directors, addressing a critical shortage in the field.

We know from first-hand experience how transformational these supports are for working families. Our 17 campus child care centers help thousands of student-parents complete their degrees.

Research for the Public Good

Turning to another vital area, CUNY's research enterprise does not simply advance knowledge — it has a real impact on the quality of life for millions of New Yorkers. For example, faculty researchers at City College, working with Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, have developed a groundbreaking AI model that can detect breast cancer earlier and more accurately. And projects like the NYC Urban Heat Portal at Hunter College, and our partnership with the city and NYU on the FloodNet real-time flood monitoring program, are helping address climate emergencies.

Fostering Safety and Inclusivity

As a university whose mission has always been grounded in the public good, CUNY's responsibility extends beyond preparing students for careers and advancing research. At a time of increasing polarization and division, we are helping students develop the skills to engage across differences with respect, empathy and understanding. Through our trailblazing collaboration with the Constructive Dialogue Institute – largely funded by the Council – we are building a culture of constructive engagement across all 26 campuses. Faculty, staff, students and campus leaders are participating in training and workshops that help them navigate difficult conversations, consider differing perspectives and address conflict constructively. This ambitious partnership represents the largest deployment of CDI's model and the first initiative of its kind at a university system of CUNY's size and diversity. We thank the Council for its support.

Complementing this work is our Center for Inclusivity and Equal Opportunity, which ensures that reports of discrimination and harassment are addressed promptly and fairly and that all members of our community have access to the support they need.

That commitment to safety, dignity and inclusion extends beyond our campuses and into the communities CUNY serves. At a time of heightened uncertainty for immigrant communities, the Council's support for CUNY Citizenship Now! is more important than ever so that we can continue serving the thousands of New Yorkers who depend on us.

Student Success

Our proven models of student success continue to set national standards. The ASAP program more than doubles three-year completion rates for associate-degree students, while ACE participants have achieved four-year graduation rates 12.4% higher than non-participating peers.

We are also leveraging technology to improve accessibility. CUNY Accommodate has streamlined disability services, leading to a 25 percent increase in enrollment for these services, now reaching a record 13,800 students. For students with intellectual disabilities, the CUNY Unlimited program provides pathways to employment.

Additionally, the CUNY CARES model in the Bronx is proving the link between basic needs and academic success. In its first two years, it helped over 1,000 Bronx students enroll in SNAP, collectively bringing an estimated \$2.96 million into their household budgets to combat food insecurity. Building on that success, CUNY recently partnered with the City's Human Resources Administration on a data-sharing initiative that helped prevent more than a thousand students from losing SNAP benefits. This work is complemented by CUNY's systemwide network of resource centers and 22 campus food pantries, supported in part by the City Council's Food Insecurity Program, which ensures that students across campuses have access to consistent, culturally responsive food support and connections to public benefits.

We continue to put a priority on supporting mental health and emotional well-being across our campuses through expanded counseling, wellness programming and early intervention services that help students thrive both inside and outside the classroom.

We are also committed to strengthening pathways for current and former foster youth, an area where Chair Joseph has shown deep and sustained leadership. Through a comprehensive system of support that includes the state's Foster Youth College Success Initiative, CUNY helps students with foster care backgrounds navigate college costs, housing insecurity, academic planning and the transition to independence. The importance of this work was powerfully captured at a Council hearing last month by Hunter College graduating senior McKeema Wallace. "School became my safe place," she said. "These are not simply programs, they are lifelines."

Capital Projects

Over the past year, the University brought 42 capital projects to total completion. We have also spent a total of \$555 million toward both completed and ongoing projects representing meaningful progress in the ongoing effort to modernize and preserve critical infrastructure across the University system.

Notable projects brought to completion this year include:

- Baruch College – 17 Lexington Building, ADA Phase 2 Renovation - \$35.1M
- College of Staten Island – Campus-Wide Fire Alarm, Phase 2 - \$31.1M
- Queens College – Gertz Hall Renovation - \$9.1M
- Bronx CC – Advanced Transportation Technology Center - \$8.4M
- Graduate Center – Grand Kitchen Equipment Upgrade - \$5.6M
- Hostos CC – Technology Services Computing Center Emergency Generator - \$5.4M
- Queensborough CC – Library Bathroom ADA Upgrade - \$4.3M
- City College – NAC building Solar Canopy - \$2.8M
- York College – Track & Field Upgrades, Phase 2 - \$2M

Mayor's FY2027 Executive Budget

I will now turn to the Mayor's Executive Budget for Fiscal Year 2027. Let me begin by thanking Mayor Mamdani for fully funding the cost of the PSC-CUNY labor contract and completing the funding for health insurance in the Preliminary Budget.

Additionally, I'd like to thank the Mayor for providing baseline funding for the \$15 million that was first in last year's Executive Budget as a one-time increase. There was also additional funding of \$1 million for ACE. On the capital side, we are thankful for the \$50.8 million toward needed state-of-good-repair work, in addition to the \$7.1 million from the borough presidents.

We ask that you support the inclusion of the following priorities in the adopted budget: baseline funding for CUNY Reconnect (\$7.8M), ACE (\$10.1M) and ASAP (\$4.6M); early childhood workforce pipeline and childcare centers (\$6.6M); CUNY Citizenship Now! (\$5.4M); mental health services (\$2.8M); CUNY Beyond (\$2.7M); disability services (\$2.6M); food insecurity (\$2.5M); application fee waivers and college readiness (\$1.8M); efforts to combat discrimination and support constructive dialogue (\$750K) and CUNY Cares (\$400K). We also seek funding for a free OMNY card pilot program (\$700K), a top priority for our student senate to remove transportation barriers to education.

Lastly, let me turn to our capital and facilities maintenance needs.

Community colleges continue to face significant and growing capital infrastructure challenges that directly impact student learning environments, operational continuity and long-term institutional sustainability. The FY 2026-27 capital request reflected the urgency of these needs and the necessity of sustained investment in aging facilities across the system.

The \$1.7 billion request in the FY 2026-27 capital plan included approximately \$384 million for community colleges to support critical asset preservation initiatives and strategic growth and modernization projects. These investments are essential to maintaining facilities capable of meeting the evolving needs of students, faculty and workforce programs. We also ask for your support with the remaining amount from our \$100 million ask for capital funds for the community colleges.

Continued underinvestment in facilities preservation and state-of-good-repair initiatives increases the risk of accelerated infrastructure deterioration, higher long-term repair costs, operational disruptions, and reduced capacity to provide students with modern and accessible learning environments. Deferred maintenance also places additional strain on institutional operating budgets as emergency repairs and reactive maintenance become more frequent and costly.

Conclusion

To conclude, CUNY's success is New York City's success. We have seen the impact that targeted investment has on enrollment, student success and career readiness. With your continued support, CUNY will remain the nation's greatest engine of social mobility and a national model for public higher education.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to your questions.

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