

Testimony of Executive Vice Chancellor and Chief Operating Officer Hector Batista
The City University of New York
New York City Council Higher Education Committee Hearing:
Returning to CUNY Campuses in the Wake of COVID-19
June 23, 2021

Good morning Chairperson Barron and other members of the City Council Higher Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify about CUNY's fall 2021 return to more in-person activities. I am Hector Batista and I am the Executive Vice Chancellor and Chief Operating Officer at the City University of New York.

With the end of our spring semester and academic year, we are proud of the CUNY community for rising to the challenge and, in the middle of a global pandemic, delivering on the University's mission to provide a high quality, accessible education to our diverse student body. But while our mission remained the same, many of the ways in which we approached our work – both academically and operationally – were very different from how we have ever approached it in the past.

From the onset of the pandemic, CUNY developed a phased approach to its reopening strategy. This allowed us to be nimble and responsive to the rapidly changing guidance and public health conditions. Since the fall of 2020, all campuses have been in Phase I of CUNY's staged reopening, which represented occupancy levels of up to 25%. CUNY operated in a largely virtual modality to maintain minimum density levels on campuses, in the interest of public health as the conditions then demanded. In preparation for the fall 2020 semester, we directed our campuses to develop reopening plans in collaboration their stakeholders for our review and approval. We provided them with the CUNY Guidelines for Safe Campus Reopening, along with a checklist of New York State requirements, to inform their plans. Our guidance offered campuses a detailed description of the steps that were required for a safe, mostly remote, fall 2020 reopening. The Chancellery then reviewed those plans to ensure compliance and consistency with required public health safety measures. Once we approved the plans, we served in an advisory capacity for any implementation issues that the campuses encountered. Additionally, we completed, and today continue to complete, on-site inspections of CUNY campuses to make sure that they adhere to our COVID safety policies and procedures. Now, as the City and State head into a full reopening, we are preparing for a more in-person fall semester with higher occupancy levels on our campuses and at our Central Office locations. In January, our Chancellor Félix Matos Rodríguez announced his vision for a more in-person fall 2021 semester. Several months later, as public health conditions improved and more New Yorkers got vaccinated, we made the careful decision to mark the week of August 2nd as the date for staff to return to their workplaces. We announced this decision in May to give our faculty

and staff time to plan for this transition back to on-site work and to determine the logistical details surrounding their return.

To prepare for reoccupancy, and consistent with the University's safety-first approach that we have employed all along, we again have guidelines that govern the fall reopening of the entire CUNY system including all 25 campuses and all Central Office locations. The guidelines embody the current CDC guidance for higher education and office-base work, as well as best practice recommendations from other regulatory sources. Because CUNY colleges differ in size, location, type of campus and number of students, faculty and staff, individual campuses use the CUNY guidelines to customize elements of its reopening plan to ensure the safe resumption and continuation of campus operations, in-person instruction and work. While the State has significantly relaxed COVID protocols, and we will, of course, support the City's reopening efforts, CUNY is committed to continuing to increase our in-person activities in a gradual and strategic manner that will ensure the continued health and safety of our community.

Each campus plan will continue to be accessible to stakeholders online via campus and CUNY websites. To foster meaningful community participation with reopening efforts, the campuses have been advised that stakeholder groups, such as labor unions, must again be engaged, and each campus will work with labor unions to conduct safety walk-throughs of our facilities that will be open for use. In fact, in the spirit of transparency and partnership, two weeks ago I convened a meeting where representatives from all labor unions were invited to ask questions and express concerns about reopening. The meeting covered a wide range of topics such as on-site occupancy levels, Flexible Work Guidelines, ventilation and HVAC work, health screening and COVID-testing.

From a facilities perspective, we have also been working diligently to prepare for higher rates of re-occupancy across the University. Ventilation was – and continues to be – a key component of our efforts, and we have engaged an independent third-party to conduct a review of ventilation in CUNY buildings. Our goal in working with this consultant is to ensure that CUNY buildings meet CDC building ventilation guidelines and recommendations. To meet this goal, our approach includes data collection from campuses about their facilities, verification of data through interviews, on-site visits to inspect building performance, and taking appropriate needed remedial actions such as upgrades or repairs of facilities that are essential for the start of the fall semester.

Another core principle in our reopening efforts has been supporting and encouraging our CUNY community to get vaccinated. CUNY has been at the forefront of the State and City's vaccination efforts, with five CUNY campuses serving as vaccination sites. These five sites vaccinated nearly a million New Yorkers. To continue doing our part, each of our campus plans for the fall also include a communications strategy for increasing vaccinations among students, faculty and staff.

As we get closer to fall reopening, we are carefully consulting with our key stakeholders regarding our vaccination and testing protocols for campuses and offices. In this area, as in all facets of our reopening plans, safety is paramount in our approach. We expect everyone on a CUNY campus or working in a CUNY office will be vaccinated or subject to a mandatory testing protocol. More detailed testimony regarding these protocols will be offered by my colleague Daniel Lemons, Interim Executive Vice Chancellor and University Provost,

Our reopening efforts for the upcoming academic year will be greatly assisted by federal stimulus funding allocated to our campuses. On June 7th, the Board of Trustees Fiscal Committee approved our Fiscal Year 2022 budget proposal, including federal stimulus funding from the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSAA) and the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). Our budget plan will now be considered by the full Board at its meeting on Monday, June 28th.

For our community colleges, there is about \$242 million in available federal stimulus funds for institutional needs. For the upcoming fiscal year, our plan is to utilize these resources for the following needs: \$47.5 for student support and retention, \$5.7 million for reopening costs, \$105.8 million to cover projected revenue losses, \$1.9 million for mental health services to our students, \$3.0 million for Online program development, and \$1.7 million for faculty professional development.

For the remaining \$77 million, colleges will be asked to include a stimulus spending plan as part of their multiyear financial plan submission, for use over the next two fiscal years.

There are two items in our federal stimulus spending plan that I would like to note. First, setting aside funds for reopening costs will help ensure a safe return to campus, as our colleges will be able to utilize these dollars for air quality testing, COVID testing, cleaning, the purchase of PPEs, and facility enhancements. The second component of our stimulus funding plan that I would like to note for the committee is the allocation for lost revenue, as those funds are currently being targeted to cover City budget reductions and revenue losses resulting from enrollment declines. We are hopeful that the City's adopted budget for Fiscal Year 2022 will provide some relief to CUNY's targeted reductions, so that we can redirect federal stimulus from the lost revenue category into more direct investments for our students.

I want to close my testimony today by emphasizing that our primary objective is to ensure that our system-wide reopening continues to prioritize the health and safety of all students, faculty and staff. We are very thankful to the entire Higher Education Committee for your strong support of the City University of New York and its students through this very challenging year. I hope you join me today in looking at the year behind us with much pride for our

collective resiliency, and the year ahead with much optimism and hope as we recover and rebuild.

I will now turn the floor over to Interim Executive Vice Chancellor and University Provost Daniel Lemons.

**Testimony of
Interim Executive Vice Chancellor and University Provost
Daniel E. Lemons**

**New York City Council Committee on Higher Education
The City University of New York**

June 23, 2021

Good Morning.

Chairperson Barron, and members of the Higher Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you on the important issue of CUNY's transformation into a post-pandemic university.

My name is Daniel Lemons and I have the privilege of serving as the Interim Executive Vice Chancellor and University Provost of The City University of New York.

In what we hope are the waning days of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has reshaped New York, the nation, and the world, we — as a society — find ourselves in a place where can once again be proactive and not merely reactive to the forces around us. Indeed, CUNY has emerged from the pandemic as a modern university that is well-positioned to not only weather the challenges ahead, but prepared to explore and take advantage of novel opportunities.

In many ways, the pandemic was not a deterrent to CUNY's mission as nationally renowned institution of higher education; instead, the COVID-19 crisis proved itself an accelerant to the university's mission to create a holistic, equitable, digitized university fit for the 21st century needs and demand of students and the New York community.

I was asked by the committee to address how higher education has been changed through the effects of the pandemic. As a university system comprised of 25 schools and nearly 600,000 students — many of whom come from the populations that were, and still are, the most affected by the pandemic, economically and personally — CUNY learned valuable lessons throughout the crisis that will continue to inform the university's transformation into an effective a post-pandemic university that could serve as a national model. First and foremost among these lessons is that student expectation, post-pandemic, has changed regarding course delivery options and overall flexibility in learning modalities. Simply put, our students are now much more tech-savvy and accustomed to a digital learning environment.

In the past, an emphasis on digital learning had the trappings of an environment that was atomized and emotionally disengaged. However, due to significant advancements in technology and a comprehensive shift in culture, digital learning has not only become more accessible for our students, it has become far more favorable for them. In fact, CUNY's most recent internal data reveal that the vast majority of our current student population now prefers digital learning environments to traditional in-person environments. At Lehman College, where I am still interim president until the end of the month, almost 25 percent of classes were taught in hybrid or online format before the pandemic, and that percentage will likely be higher post-pandemic.

This staggering shift in learning-environment preference is one that absolutely cannot be ignore by a post-pandemic university and must inform a university's response in retooling their courses and services for a post-pandemic world. For, in this era of recovery, a responsive university will be a competitive university.

It must also be noted that although CUNY students have been overwhelmingly perseverant and resilient during the pandemic, they have experienced a significant loss of learning — as have most students at all levels, nationwide. And so, it is imperative that CUNY redouble its already expansive digital learning efforts in order to provide students with tools to regain their academic momentum in the coming semester.

The disruption of the pandemic and the rapid shift to remote learning also changed the faculty of the university. Although as I mentioned, some colleges such as Lehman, already had many hybrid and online sections, now all instructors are experienced in the use of digital resources, and even if they are teaching in-person classes, those resources are key to improving the quality of the education we offer, and increasing its accessibility to a wider range of students.

This in mind, I am happy to stand here today before the committee and present several examples of how CUNY has adapted its courses and services while adhering to its historic charge, scope, and mission. I am confident that the initiatives I summarize here today will paint a picture of a compassionate and forward-thinking university that ensures university that ensures safety, health, equity — and especially, academic momentum.

In April 2020, CUNY made a quick pivot to digital learning, eventually converting an estimated 95 percent of its 1,400 academic courses to fully online. This massive, system-wide conversion effort is a testament to CUNY's nimbleness as an institution that values academic momentum and its responsiveness in the face of an historic crisis.

Aside from the university's swift conversion to digital learning, CUNY remained committed to retaining a sense of community among its more than 600,000 students, ensuring that their learning experience, although geographically distanced from one another, would not feel disjointed or atomized. And so, CUNY ensured that the student, faculty and staff experiences were enhanced by working with Cisco, Inc. to establish access for over 300,000 users, and subsequently by working to acquire an enterprise-wide license of Zoom's video conferencing solution, which now includes its new live transcription service to aid CUNY users who require assistive technology.

During the COVID-19 crisis, CUNY rose to the challenge as a 21st century institution of higher education that understands that, for its diverse student body, academic momentum means more than providing courses — it also entails affording students the resources they require in order to focus on their studies. As you know, the vast majority of CUNY's students come from African American, Latino, and immigrant communities — the very same communities that bore the brunt of the pandemic in New York City. The pandemic exacerbated longstanding inequities endured by these communities in general and CUNY students in particular. For instance, many CUNY students work either full-time or part-time in the service sector, which experienced unceremonious and industry-wide layoffs in spring of 2020. Such immediate and unexpected loss if income was devastating for our students, many of whom are supporting a family

while earning their degree. A survey last year revealed that over 40 percent had lost their jobs during the pandemic.

In response, CUNY worked assiduously to secure and equitably distribute close \$118 million to 198,000 of our students through emergency relief funds through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. It has just distributed another \$118 million through CRSSA, and in the coming fall term will distribute additional federal funds to the majority of CUNY's students. In addition, the university raised more than \$10 million and distributed emergency grants to over 12,000 students through the Chancellor's Emergency Relief Fund . That is in addition to groundbreaking fundraising by individual campuses in support of food pantries, emergency loans, and scholarships.

As part of CUNY's holistic mission to serve our students, many of whom are raising children while pursuing a degree, all 17 of the University's campus childcare centers will be open in Fall 2021, and all will be capable of serving 100 percent of their licensed capacity. Children of CUNY's student-parents will be enrolled regardless of whether their parents are opting for in-person, hybrid, or remote classes.

Work is also underway to address any challenges with regards to physical space that the centers occupy including ventilation, cleaning, and minor repairs. Meanwhile, CUNY childcare programs are recruiting and enrolling children now for the fall semester. Some programs will begin offering their services this summer. In an effort to streamline communication, the central office of Early Childhood Initiatives has established a phone line and email address for student-parents to use to further them as they seek childcare for their children.

The University Dean for Early Childhood Initiatives and her team meet with the center directors monthly, and individually when necessary to support the re-opening process. For programs that may need to hire new staff following the pandemic, the Office of Early Childhood Initiatives offer its employee network to enable center directors to find staff who meet New York City licensing requirements.

In addition to supporting centers through their site recoveries they became eligible to apply to participate in QUALITYstarsNY, New York's quality rating and improvement system, which provides onsite consultation and coaching, professional development, and a wide variety of resources including equipment and materials. Additional work continues to add infant classrooms to at least three centers in the coming year, with a target date of January 2022 for opening those new classrooms.

The pandemic also exacerbated the digital divide that existed among our student population. The conversion of courses to digital learning meant that, in order to maintain academic momentum, students would need the technology to connect with their classes. And so, as a further example of its role as responsive university, CUNY and its campuses launched an enormous effort to equip students, many of whom live in internet deserts and do not have laptop computers for their own use. It quickly acquired and equitably distributed more than 33,000 tablets and laptops to students, as well as 4,000

mobile broadband hotspots, to support their learning needs as part of the University's pivot to digital learning.

These devices are still available for student use, and are under the responsibility and management of the colleges to determine availability and to distribute the devices directly. These devices are intended to be loaner devices and are expected to be returned to the colleges when the student use ends.

Along with the distribution of aid and technology and the system-wide conversion to digital learning, CUNY understood that a 21st century university, pandemic or not, must provide streamlined administrative processes that enhance the student, faculty, and staff experience. A key example of this is Lehman College's successful effort to convert 20 vital administrative processes that had been performed manually to fully automated and online. First among these were the automation of declaration of major forms. Lehman, like many universities, requires students to declare a major before they have earned 60 credits. Historically, this process would be performed through a physical, paper form that needs to be signed by a student, their advisor and then the registrar, which can take lengthy amount of time to complete. However, Lehman's automated process allows for the forms to be completed and signed electronically, thereby significantly cutting the time the process takes and enhancing satisfaction.

A second example of Lehman's work on this front is its conversion of the credit-transfer evaluation process to fully online. Currently, over 60 percent of Lehman's students are students who have transferred from other colleges, including CUNY and non-CUNY community colleges. The smooth and seamless transfer of their previously earned credits is integral to maintaining their academic momentum and their ability to retain financial aid. Again, this process had been performed manually with students, the admissions office, and faculty exchanging and signing physical forms. This time-consuming process along with CUNY's social distancing measures precluded in-person meetings and Lehman's conversion to an online process was not only necessary, it was overdue. And so, the process is now fully digitized and ensures both transparency and expediency, where transfer credit evaluations are now completed in days not weeks.

The digitization of these key processes at Lehman have proven so successful that they now being replicated at other CUNY colleges

The COVID-19 pandemic also reinforced CUNY's mission as an institution of higher education that is dedicated to innovative approaches to our student career pathways. In short, CUNY has been and will continue to be university that focuses on career-building education that affords our students the pathway to meaningful, life-sustaining work and greater agency over their lives. A key example of CUNY's work on this front during the pandemic is its shifted focus to improve career pathways via the new CUNY Upskilling initiative. Through the initiative, thousands of students enrolled in free courses to gain marketable skills sought after in a new post-COVID-19 economy. In the last nine months, more than 74,000 visitors accessed the initiative.

In addition to CUNY's focus on digitized courses and services for its students, the university has redoubled its efforts to train its tens of thousands of faculty in digital learning environments. Even before the pandemic, CUNY was proactive on this front. Pre-pandemic, CUNY founded its Innovative Teaching Academy, a hub for professional development that we believe will become a national model. As part of this effort, roughly 450 faculty have participated in one of the Association of College and University Educators (ACUE) microcredentialing programs, and another 300 are participating in ACUE's full 25-week course.

During the pandemic, CUNY also developed and launched its award-winning School of Professional Studies Online Teaching Essentials Workshop. As of Spring 2021, the program has been completed by 2,000 faculty, who since doing so have taught more than 11,000 classes with a combined enrollment of more than 268,000 students.

Furthermore, as part of the innovative teaching academy, a unique partnership with Western Governors University has led to the development of faculty training programs that nearly 250 faculty successfully completed. Additionally, more than 250 faculty completed a workshop on Open Pedagogy and Mindset, and another 200-faculty participated in a workshop on Learning Mindsets.

Finally, along with Dean Ayman El-Mohandes CUNY's Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy, I have had the privilege of co-chairing a task force to make recommendations regarding CUNY's official vaccination policy. This task force included voices from CUNY faculty, students, and administration, as well as leaders from the public health sphere. I must be clear that until CUNY's Board of Trustees approves the vaccination policy, I am unable provide you with the finalized policy; however, I can reiterate some things regarding the policy that we know for certain.

Governor Cuomo has mandated that CUNY and the State University of New York (SUNY) students be vaccinated. The mandate is contingent upon FDA approval of at least one of the vaccines now being given under emergency authorization; Pfizer applied in May for full licensure. At CUNY, the mandates will be activated only when that contingency occurs and after their respective boards approve a specific policy about how the mandate would be carried out.

Regardless of the activation of the vaccination mandate by FDA approval, there will be mandatory testing on every CUNY campus starting in the fall term. All unvaccinated students, faculty, and staff will be required to participate in testing according to a protocol that will be announced by CUNY in the coming weeks. Individuals may opt out of the testing if they share information that shows they are vaccinated.

In any case, we are strongly urging that everyone be vaccinated as soon as possible, as is still the safest course to preventing spread of COVID-19. Once CUNY's Board of Trustees approves the proposed vaccination policy, and the University deploys a swift and streamlined communications effort around it, University representatives will be able to speak much more specifically and on the record about the policy.

I firmly believe that CUNY's advancements on digitized learning, services, faculty training, and its redoubled commitment to career pathways, signal a university that is well-positioned to take on the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities that the post-pandemic world will offer. We are taking action to insure that our faculty, staff, and students are vaccinated or test negative if they are on a CUNY campus or in a CUNY office.

We will always be a university that values in-person instruction, advising and services, but in order to provide students with the flexibility they need to access courses of study and earn degrees in the midst of busy, complicated lives, the growing digital learning environment is essential. I am confident that CUNY, as the nation's largest and most reliable engine of economic mobility will continue to serve as a national model for what a 21st century institution of higher learning could and should be. For this and so many other reasons, I stand here today optimistic about what lies ahead.

Now you will hear from my colleague Interim Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management Denise Maybank.

**Testimony before the
New York City Council Committee on Higher Education
by
Denise B. Maybank, Ph.D.
Interim Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management
The City University of New York**

Introduction

Chairperson Inez Barron and members of the Committee on Higher Education, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony before you on the issue of Retuning to CUNY Campuses in the Wake of COVID-19.

My name is Denise Maybank and I am honored to serve as the Interim Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management for the City University of New York. I had the privilege of coming before you on prior occasions and I return to address what we are planning to do to support the success of CUNY students as we return for greater in-person experiences and continue to assure that CUNY students thrive through the next phase of transition.

Students Thriving through the Transition

As we prepare to return for in-person instruction and engagement in the fall, there are many strategies, programs, initiatives and activities being implemented to assure CUNY students thrive. To this end we want students to select CUNY as their destination for advancing their learning, we have implemented promising programs, and practices and we plan to keep students engaged.

Increasing student enrollment - We want students selecting CUNY as their destination

- Financial Aid Initiatives
 - Professional Judgement Appeal process – Students who file the FAFSA may qualify for a financial aid adjustment of their Federal financial aid. If there have been significant changes or circumstances that are impacting a student’s ability to pay for college, they may be able to submit a Professional Judgment appeal to the financial aid office.

Over 14,000 students were notified of this option on June 9 and immediately nearly 300 students responded.
 - Communication regarding resources available to eligible students – The benefits of the American Rescue Plan (ARP) include financial resources that will go directly to eligible students enrolled in CUNY during the 2021-2022 academic year. Messaging drawing attention to this opportunity may help those otherwise concerned about the cost of attendance to make a quality decision to enroll now. In Spring 2021, more than half of CUNY degree-seeking enrolled students received a grant on average between \$600 and \$1,000 from the previous round of stimulus funds.

- Black Male Initiative (BMI) Programs – being attentive to the decline in the enrollment of Black and Latinx men the programs of CUNY BMI are designed to provide additional layers of academic and social support for students from populations that are severely underrepresented in higher education, particularly African, African American/Black, Caribbean and Latino/Hispanic males. With initiatives such as high interest dialogues, collaboration with community based organizations and culturally competent peer to peer mentoring, BMI is highly effective in attracting students of color and engaging them for ultimate academic success.
- CUNY Admissions Welcome Back Campaign to attract Disconnected Youth – The University Admissions Office is partnering with ASAP to improve enrollment and retention of disconnected youth in New York through the CUNY Welcome Back Campaign. The campaign focuses on engaging two priority student populations for fall 2021 enrollment:
 1. CUNY ASAP students who are no longer enrolled
 2. Fall 20 and Spring 21 admitted first year students who are not enrolled at any college

As part of this campaign, students are invited to connect with a dedicated counselor and receive application fee waivers, support with enrollment and connection to programs and services to encourage retention.

Multiple ways of accessing services – We have started some new things that matter and have made a difference

- Counseling Services
 - Mental Health Counseling continues to offer online mental health services via teletherapy to students both on and off campus and we are planning a transition to in- person counseling services concomitant with the in person presence of students this Fall.
 - Online supportive mental health services have been made available to student faculty and staff.
 - Crisis Text Line: 500 conversations completed since launch in February 2021. Main issues discussed: School, Anxiety/Stress, Depression; 87% satisfaction rate with conversations.
 - 10 Minute Mind: Over 27,000 registered users of 10 Minute Mind. Most use the product 3-7 times weekly.
 - Talkspace: Currently 4,734 eligible users are registered with the product
 - Counseling will continue to maintain a virtual presence for students studying remotely. Services provided virtually include workshops, group therapy, and mental health events throughout each semester.
- Health Services
 - Health Services units are preparing for a return to in person or hybrid service provision, particularly as campuses move to increased student presence on campus. Clinical and wellness services will become available, as appropriate, based on staffing, supplies, and student need for services (depending on campus configuration).

- Health Services will provide online health events throughout the academic year to provide virtual resources and expand wellness education beyond traditional, in person conferences and events.
- Health Services will continue to manage immunization requirements, both existing (MMR and Meningitis) and new (COVID-19), and work closely with Enrollment Management for continuity of education and public health management.
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- “Virtual Counters” – Virtual service counters for the offices of Financial Aid and the Bursar were established as in-person service was curtailed. This model of meeting students’ needs through virtual advising and problem-solving has proven to be a model to keep. Students have responded to the more relaxed interactions facilitated through this space and advisors have expressed feeling more productive.

Creating and assuring a sense of belonging - We want to keep students engaged

Students are being kept informed about return-in-person expectations and protocols through campus websites and outreach efforts employing emails, text messages, and in some instances phone calls. Services and activities for students associated with returning include:

- Child Care Services

You have heard from Interim Executive Vice Chancellor Lemons about the critical role played in recruitment and retention by our 17 child care centers, with capacity to accommodate 1800 children.

- Residence Hall Engagement

Students in the residence halls are provided with a copy of COVID protocols and guidelines for living in the halls. The residence hall directors work closely with the students to ensure that these protocols and procedures are followed.

- Recovery Corps

I begin by saying thank you. Thank you to the Council for supporting the partnership between the Summer Youth Employment Program and CUNY to launch the CUNY Recovery Corps This initiative will provide paid work opportunities for 5000 CUNY students this summer, to join efforts in meeting the challenges faced by small businesses, public health organizations, community-based non-profits, schools, universities, and beyond during the COVID-19 pandemic. This initiative has attracted interest from 6400 students who submitted applications and are being considered for placement.

Of particular note, several hundred of the participating student interns will be dedicated to the CUNY Welcome Corps – a special program, utilizing the power of peer leadership, and aimed at directly addressing the needs of students transitioning to CUNY this summer.

- Orientation Programs

Across the University, Orientation Programming has continued throughout the pandemic and into the new modalities of learning we will experience in Fall 2021. The campuses remain committed to offering exciting programs to welcome new students, and prepare them for their collegiate experience.

For the new class enrolling in Fall 2021, additional programming has been added to help students transition to college during this unprecedented time. Since transitioning to an online platform, some campuses have reported increased participation in Orientation. For example, at Bronx Community College, 28% of students completed orientation in Fall 2019, while 51% of students completed Orientation

in Fall 2020. Additionally, BCC has collected data that demonstrates students who complete the online orientation program gain significantly higher GPAs by the mid-term and by the end of the semester, compared to their peers who do not complete the program.

Campuses have also added content to their Orientation programming to enhance students' preparation for college and for joining the diverse CUNY community. Some campuses have included a racial and social justice component. For example, John Jay College has included a session in which the values, diversity and identity of the college are discussed. Many campuses recognize that virtual and remote learning can be an isolating experience, and that students can become disengaged during the gaps between acceptance, registration, and formal orientation. At Guttman Community College, incoming students have the opportunity to join live weekly sessions throughout the summer to engage with the campus community. At the College of Staten Island, incoming students are assigned a peer mentor with whom they may connect throughout the summer until they begin coursework in the Fall. And, at Kingsborough Community College, a monthly FAQ session is held to answer questions and address concerns from the incoming class.

- Opportunity Programs – SEEK and College Discovery

CUNY's College Discovery and SEEK opportunity programs will provide a 4-5 week, virtual, developmental summer experience for incoming First-Year students. The program will provide participants with exposure to campus resources and preparation for a successful transition to college. Participants will learn about academic and community expectations, receive an in-depth explanation of degree requirements, and begin fall course planning.

- Meeting Essential Needs

- Campus Resource Centers – Located at all CUNY Community Colleges and John Jay College of Criminal Justice, the Resource Centers at CUNY provide students with in-person financial and legal counseling, public health benefits screening/health care enrollment, and free tax preparation. In addition to the standard offerings, CUNY resource centers also provide emergency funds services, food pantries, housing referrals, services targeting student parents, clothing assistance, case management, referrals, and outreach services.

In response to CUNY's Fall Re-opening, some of our resource centers have added other initiatives to enhance the support to students. The Access Resource Center (ARC) program at KBCC is increasing the value on their supermarket gift cards and the Guttman Connect Center will implement a Fresh Direct Program where they can send groceries directly to students' homes and they will reinstate their Fresh Produce Pick-Up program. The Guttman Connect Center will also provide gift cards and/or meal deliveries for Thanksgiving and the Winter Holidays.

- Food Insecurity – Policy changes have dramatically increased the number of CUNY students eligible to apply for SNAP benefits. To address food insecurity. To facilitate applications for SNAP benefits, CUNY has provided enrollment verification forms to all students who are enrolled in a qualifying career and technical program of study, are work-study eligible and/or who have an Estimated Family Contribution of \$0. We have conducted an education and outreach campaign by sending emails to more than 200,000 presumptively eligible students. CUNY's SNAP web site (cuny.edu/snap/) has been updated to include this new information, revised FAQs, and information about how to apply for SNAP.

CUNY is working with Swipe Out Hunger's CUNY Food Navigators who will assist students with completing SNAP applications. In addition, we have partnered with HRA in an effort to connect with and provide support to the thousands of CUNY students who are able to apply for SNAP as a result of the legislative changes.

Over 17,000 CUNY enrollment verification forms have been downloaded to date.

- Housing Instability – Where possible and appropriate, campus liaisons, through the Resource Centers, continue to support students facing housing instability by referring them for legal counseling, providing referrals to shelters and providing them with emergency funds.
- Student Inclusion Initiatives
 - Students with Disabilities - The CUNY Office of Disability Programs has focused on training and development that builds college's readiness to accommodate and support students with disabilities in the remote learning environment.
 - LGBTQI+ Hub and Advocacy Academy - In April, CUNY launched its digital LGBTQI+ Hub, a virtual one-stop resource for information and services related to the inclusion of members of the LGBTQI+ community at CUNY. Also recently launched is the inaugural class of the LGBTQI+ Advocacy Academy, which focuses on building civic engagement, community organizing, and legislative advocacy skills among some of CUNY's most promising LGBTQI+ student leaders.
 - Office of Veterans Affairs – With the support of the Office of Academic Affairs, the Central Office of Veterans Affairs (COVA) established a tutor coordination project, designed to connect student veterans with existing college tutorial resources available during remote learning.

Conclusion

Thank you Chairperson Barron and members of the Higher Education Committee for your interest in and attention to the return to CUNY campuses in the wake of COVID-19. I trust we have provided information responsive to your inquiry and useful in your deliberations. We stand committed to assuring CUNY is the place of thriving for our students, while they are enrolled and beyond.

**Testimony of Diane P. Banks, Professional Staff Congress/CUNY
before the New York City Council Committee on Higher Education**

June 23, 2021

Oversight - Returning to CUNY Campuses in the Wake of COVID-19

Greetings Council Members, my name is Dr. Diane Price Banks. I come before you as a conduit of PSC members at Bronx Community College (BCC) who have communicated with me in my capacity as Chair for the Health and Safety Committee regarding health and safety concerns on campus.

Let me start by providing an example of problems pre-pandemic and during the pandemic that have created deep health and safety concerns on campus, specific to ventilation and COVID-19.

- In 2018, Havemeyer Annex was shut down prior to the pandemic after the union highlighted poor ventilation and poor air quality which led to employees getting sick. It was well documented by members of the administration that the air quality was poor in that building yet it took union involvement to get the building shut down.
- Colston Hall was shut down due to poor heating of the pipes which caused 68 pipes to burst and flood the building in January 2020. In addition, this building is also operating with a Univent system which brings in fresh air in that's mixed with the existing air, if working properly the mixed air is filtered, heated or cooled but is not the ventilation system recommended by ASHRAE for classroom capacities and thus can be a mixing ground for covid-19 transmission.
- Faculty who worked a full year on the reoccupancy committee were asked to volunteer during their 2021 contractual leave which commenced from June 1- August 23, 2021 yet all other non-faculty members of this committee continue to be compensated. BCC Administration claimed the total of \$2,000 needed to pay Faculty for services rendered during the summer was not available. Despite CARES Act funding being set aside for this very reason. This has caused a lack of representation of faculty on the reoccupancy committee as it relates to instructional stakeholders returning to work.
- Currently due to the 60% in-person mandate by the Chancellor, PSC members at BCC are being asked to return to work in buildings that do not have an HVAC system and

Testimony of Diane Banks, PSC/CUNY
June 23, 2021
Council Committee on Higher Education

asked to work with students in these very buildings. Poor ventilation is a breeding ground for the transmission of COVID as any viral particles in the air can linger for days and be a source of infection. An alleged incident at BCC involved an employee who was positive for COVID came to work in the absence of sick leave time, infected others and resulted in the South Hall building being closed for cleaning and disinfection. This building does not have an HVAC system but has been occupied by employees during the pandemic.

These safety concerns amongst others that my colleagues have cited and that which we cannot highlight in three minutes continue to pose a serious health and safety risk for students, Faculty and staff. Therefore, we collectively recommend the following:

- Funding provided to aid capital projects to install and update HVAC systems in poorly ventilated buildings and buildings that do not meet the ASHRAE standards by August 2, 2021 are not opened until they do.
- As Mr. Batista stated, CUNY has commenced an intensive survey of ventilation on campuses therefore we ask that these reports be made public to all CUNY employees especially those who occupy these spaces prior to reoccupancy.
- As the Chancellor mandated all campuses to push for a 60% in-person return for the fall and as Dr. Lemons stated CUNY will commence a testing initiative and we look forward to seeing this manifested into fruition at each College. We ask that students, faculty and staff are not asked to return until this testing initiative is fully in place.



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Testimony of Kymesha Edwards
On Behalf of the New York Civil Liberties Union
Before the New York City Council on Higher Education
Regarding Oversight: Returning to CUNY campuses in the Wake of COVID-19

June 24, 2021

The New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) is thankful for the opportunity to submit the following testimony regarding the oversight of returning to CUNY campuses this fall. The NYCLU, the New York state affiliate of the American Civil Liberties Union, is a not-for-profit, nonpartisan organization with eight offices across the state and over 180,000 members and supporters. The NYCLU defends and promotes the fundamental principles and values embodied in the Bill of Rights, the U.S. Constitution, and the New York Constitution through an integrated program of litigation, legislative advocacy, public education, and community organizing. Specifically, NYCLU's Education Policy Center is dedicated to protecting racial justice and civil rights in education settings. Among our projects, we facilitate the NYCLU Campus Organizing youth program with students from four campuses across the state, including at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Brooklyn College, Hunter College, and City College of New York. We want to ensure that CUNY welcomes its students back in an equitable way.

I. Vaccine Approvals

The Pfizer-BioNTech, Janssen, and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines are approved under the Emergency Use Authorization (EUA); for many, the end of the pandemic *seems*

near.¹ Businesses and schools are reopening, mask restrictions and social distance mandates are lessening, and COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths continue on a downward trend. On May 10, Governor Cuomo made an announcement requiring COVID-19 vaccinations for all CUNY and SUNY students attending on-campus and in-person learning during the fall.² The City University of New York's school network is actively encouraging students to get vaccinated; notably, five CUNY campuses serve as vaccination sites for New Yorkers. While vaccination mandates at CUNY schools depend on full Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval, no vaccine has received full FDA approval, affirming safety and efficacy. While two of the three EUA vaccines have applied for full FDA approval, the rigorous authorization process can take several months.³

Considering that the start of the Fall semester is a few short months away, CUNY schools must be more diligent in communicating a clear plan of flexibility and contingency regarding student vaccination mandates. Contingency plans must include guidance on the anticipated learning environments, should vaccines not be fully FDA approved by fall, and plans for delivering excellent remote education if needed. Plans must also detail the process for individuals to obtain medically contraindicated accommodations if they're unable to receive the vaccine. Finally, there must be clear guidance for international students that have been vaccinated with a non-EUA vaccine, as the effects of multiple COVID-19 vaccinations on individuals is understudied and needs to be considered when welcoming international students this fall.

II. Access & Hesitancy

Vaccines are now available for all New Yorkers 12 years of age and older, and assuredly, the state is progressively beginning to reopen. Over 70% of New Yorkers have received at least one vaccine dose. In addition, nearly 10 million New Yorkers over the age of 18

¹ *COVID-19 Vaccines*; <https://www.fda.gov/emergency-preparedness-and-response/coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19/covid-19-vaccines>

² *CUNY, SUNY to Require Vaccines, Contingent on FDA Approval*; <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2021/05/11/cuny-suny-require-vaccines-contingent-fda-approval>

³ *Full FDA approval could drive COVID-19 vaccinations, but experts advise against waiting*; <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/full-fda-approval-drive-covid-19-vaccinations-experts/story?id=78048166>

have received the entire vaccination series, studied as effective to reduce the symptoms and lethality of the coronavirus while also lessening the chances of transmitting the virus to others.⁴ Yet, there are stark disparities in the vaccinated population between ethnic groups. White New Yorkers account for 50% of vaccinated individuals compared to 34% of Black New Yorkers.⁵ Statewide campaigns tout accessibility to vaccination sites for New Yorkers, regardless of immigration, health insurance, and employment status, yet this stark racial gap persists. A study investigating vaccine accessibility in Brooklyn neighborhoods based on poverty rates demonstrates that poorer, Black and Brown communities have fewer vaccination sites, thus less access to vaccines.⁶ As we pursue a goal of vaccinating all New Yorkers, it is crucial that all New Yorkers, regardless of their race and zip codes, have equitable access to vaccination sites in their communities. Because CUNY serves many students from high-poverty neighborhoods and backgrounds, it is crucial that the institution truly considers the issue of access before adopting any vaccination requirements.

The pandemic continually highlights racial and economic disparities in our City, as low-income Black and Brown New Yorkers have been more likely to succumb to the deadly virus and have more significant challenges accessing the resources necessary to protect themselves. Therefore, there must be a more meaningful and concerted effort to engage New York communities in public education about vaccine effectiveness and truly make vaccines accessible to New Yorkers by addressing the gap and increasing vaccination sites in Black and Brown communities. We believe CUNY plays a vital role in getting out scientific information about vaccine safety and side effects to help drive down hesitancy among students and their families. We appreciate the efforts CUNY is already making in this regard with the #VaxUpCUNY campaign, but education can only go so far if there is limited local access.

⁴ *Ensuring COVID-19 Vaccines Work*; <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/effectiveness.html>

⁵ *Latest Data on COVID-19 Vaccinations by Race/Ethnicity*; <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/latest-data-on-covid-19-vaccinations-race-ethnicity/>

⁶ *Assessment of Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Access to COVID-19 Vaccination Sites in Brooklyn, New York*; JAMA Netw Open. 2021;4(6):e2113937. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.13937

We recommend that CUNY expand vaccination availability to all its campuses, in addition to those that already have vaccine sites, including Medgar Evers College, York College, City College, Lehman College, and Queensborough Community College, according to a May 10 letter to students⁷. Additionally, we recommend that CUNY work with vaccinated students as credible messengers to share information with their peers. Finally, we recommend that CUNY maintain a robust hybrid learning plan for students who cannot get vaccinated due to health reasons and for students with disabilities for whom coming to campus was challenging even *before* COVID-19. CUNY is an essential institution for economic and social mobility for New York’s young people; we hope the institution is doing everything it can to ensure a successful education for all its students.

The word “unprecedented” has been appropriately and repeatedly used to describe the COVID-19 virus and its global impact, claiming millions of lives. This disease hit us on a previously unforeseen scale, with over two million cases affecting New York families and claiming the lives of fifty-three thousand people.⁸ To meet this challenge, state and local governments are under enormous pressure to take innovative, thoughtful, and flexible actions when planning to reopen the state and preserve public safety. Local governments and governing bodies, such as the CUNY network, must not adopt unnecessarily punitive or exclusionary policies or policies driven by fear. CUNY schools must ensure New York students have fair and equitable education access, and that will be best accomplished through flexibility. We look forward to welcoming back our CUNY campus organizers this fall and to supporting the efforts at education and equity in any way we can.

The NYCLU is grateful for the opportunity to provide testimony *Committee on Higher Education* and for consideration of this critically important issue.

⁷ *COVID Vaccine Required for In-Person Fall Classes*, <https://www.cuny.edu/coronavirus/university-updates/covid-vaccine-required-for-in-person-fall-classes/>

⁸ *Tracking Coronavirus in New York: Latest Map and Case Count*; <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/us/new-york-covid-cases.html>

Oversight: Returning to CUNY Campuses in the Wake of COVID-19

“A healthy and safe working environment is a right and not a privilege (PSC-CUNY, 2021).”

Good Morning. I am Mojúbàolú Olufúnké Okome, Professor of Political Science at Brooklyn College, and a representative of the University Faculty Senate of the City University of New York, assigned to this committee. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak. I have also submitted my written comments for the record.

The COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented in magnitude, impact and long-term, yet to be fully known ramifications. It has challenged us in manifold ways, including the devastating number of infections and fatalities suffered in NYC, which quickly became an epicenter of the pandemic. by June 2020, 38 members of CUNY faculty and staff had lost their lives (Valbrun, 2020). Right now, we have lost 50. At least four students were named on the CUNY site (PSC-CUNY, 2021; CUNY, 2021). Many more were infected, and luckily, have survived. Given the circumstances, it is important to emphasize in solidarity with PSC-CUNY, our union, that we are all aware of the benefits of face to face interaction in a learning community. We would dearly love to return to the pre-pandemic normal. However, we know that we must reopen with utmost care, very mindful of the health and security of all members of our community. Safety is the top priority. We must do our best to make the return to campus as safe as possible while also still providing remote options until we can have 100% occupancy.

The pandemic revealed many of the structural and institutional fault-lines of our social, economic and political systems. The fatalities and infections disproportionately affected Black and Indigenous people of color (BIPOC) (Polyakova, et al., 2021). The harsh economic effects of the pandemic are also more devastating for BIPOC, increasing the degree of precarity and consequent anxiety. In our CUNY population, our students and adjunct faculty as well as some of our staff are among those bearing the brunt of the ill effects of this pandemic. Indeed, many of our students and their families are among the frontline workers whom we all have come to acknowledge as essential workers. They have done their work at great risk to their health and personal wellbeing, while also studying.

There should be transparency about the plans being made for campus reopening. There should be ongoing commitment to thoughtful, robust communication. The CUNY community should know plans for contact tracing in cases of infection, as well as have clear information on conditions that would precipitate a shutdown.

Despite the manifold uncertainties faced due to the unprecedented nature of this pandemic, it is important that we plan ahead. However, CUNY's approach on the "modality" of Fall 2021 courses has been confusing. Some of the colleges, and Brooklyn College is an example, somehow managed to insulate themselves from the extensive modification of online vs. in-person vs. hybrid courses that we are planning to teach in the Fall session. But the Chancellor continues to send messages to the college presidents to make more than half of Fall '21 course offerings either in-person or hybrid. In turn, many Presidents are telling Deans and Department Chairs they have to hit an arbitrary mark of 60 percent in-person and hybrid course offerings. Even though the Chancellor is using the term "encourage," it is being interpreted by some

Presidents as a directive. They are claiming that students are requesting more in-person instruction. While it may be true that our students are eager to come back on campus, there are educational, health & safety implications for establishing an arbitrary metric of 60 percent across the university.

We have space and material constraints. We are not wealthy institutions. In addition, not all campuses, and certainly not all departments, can make facilities safe for 60 percent in-person or hybrid instruction this Fall. Some may be able to reach that target just fine without risking anyone's health, some may not. There shouldn't be pressure to hit an arbitrary across-the-board metric when employee and student health and safety are of paramount concern. Moreover, teaching modality really matters to pedagogy and workload. When administrators mandate changes to the course modality, they are effectively telling instructors to revise their courses. For some this may be a relatively simple matter, but for others it is enormously time consuming.

We are on summer annual leave. The Fall schedule has been posted for student registration since March. Some faculty members may be thrilled and relieved to change their course modality from remote to in-person, but not all of them are, and such a choice should not be imposed on them from CUNY Chancellery. The changes in teaching modality should not continue through the Summer the way it has. Finally, students registered for courses in a particular modality. Some may have constructed their Fall schedule around an expectation of where they will need to be, physically, in order to take their courses, and as we know their lives are very complicated and often challenging. Continuing to modify course modality at this point to achieve an arbitrary metric of 60 percent really impedes our students' ability to plan ahead and manage their responsibilities. This is a hard thing for many of us to hear, perhaps, because we know that our students learn better in general in person than they do remotely. The point, however, is not that faculty are opposed categorically to teaching in-person but that our schedules have been established already, students have already registered, and the imposition of new arbitrary metrics is both a workload concern and a safety concern to us.

CUNY has not been sufficiently proactive. It was not until June 7, at a meeting of the Board of Trustees Fiscal Affairs Committee, that a guidance was issued on use of the institutional portion of Federal Pandemic relief funds. This is the \$890 million above and beyond what is available for disbursement to students. Given the flexibility of the guidelines, which are broader now than in the CARES Act (the first relief bill), it is unconscionable that CUNY has waited this long to determine how to spend this Federal stimulus money. Allocations by campus were already determined at the Federal level and it is not required for CUNY bureaucrats to do this. The needs of our system are so deep and so wide, that it should not take until this Summer to begin putting these funds to use. They can of course be used on facilities and maintenance so that campus spaces are safe from Covid-19 spread. But they can also be used to offset lost tuition revenue at colleges where enrollment has decreased; to re-hire adjuncts so the number of course offerings can be increased and the size of our classes kept at manageable pre-pandemic levels; and to keep people on payroll who might otherwise lose their jobs - anyone on a contingent (adjunct) appointment could be compensated out of this funding because they are not considered "recurring" costs, funded from the regular operating budget.

It is important for us all to be concerned about the job security of our contingent (adjunct) faculty and staff, and also about assistance for our indigent students to pay fees, and access affordable healthcare, including mental health assistance for anyone in the CUNY community that need such help. It is important that the funds from the federal government to be used for these purposes. These funds should also be used to facilitate the provision of smaller classes, and to assist with the delivery of better online education. Further, no one should be compelled to teach in person, particularly if they have underlying conditions that would endanger them more than the general population. Furthermore, we should maintain high levels of cleanliness, sanitation, and ventilation required to meet CDC health standards in all CUNY colleges. It is also a good idea for there to be COVID testing and vaccination centers in all CUNY colleges. This would make testing and vaccination readily available to all our students. It might also provide employment for some of them.

To reiterate, it is a matter of utmost urgency for CUNY to transparently, quickly and efficiently disburse the COVID relief fund that can be used to:

- a. rehire adjuncts who have been laid off amid the pandemic,
- b. provide mental health students to students, staff and faculty,
- c. to decrease class size, and d) to provide campus safety for the in-person return to the College, and
- d. to hire more BIPOC to diversify the campuses.

These things should be done as a matter of urgent necessity, and not in a manner that compels faculty, staff, and students to protest in order to have conditions that enable us to have learning communities where our health and safety as well as our capacity to do our work in dignity, under conditions that are conducive to delivering academic excellence (Ahmad, 2021).

These funds should also be used to facilitate smaller classes, assist with the delivery of better online education, we do not want people to be compelled to teach in person, particularly if they have underlying conditions that would endanger them more than the general population. The ideal situation is if we are all vaccinated. Although we cannot make categorical claims about COVID19, (CDC, 2021; Fine, Eames, & Heymann, 2011), some medical experts have said we should have 70-90 percent of the population vaccinated to achieve a measure of “herd immunity” (D’Souza & Dowdy, 2021; WHO, 2020). However, according to the NYC Department of Health, currently, only 48.6 percent of the population of NYC is fully vaccinated (NYC Health Department, 2021).

The COVID-19 virus is also mutating, and new, more deadly variants are emerging. Many colleagues are concerned about being forced to go back into face-to-face teaching, particularly if there might be another wave of the virus, or some unexpected mutation. In addition to the various unknowns that we face, the concern raised by one of my colleagues, which reflects some of our concerns draws from a news report on CNBC: "In April 2021, Dr. Fauci stated that we know that the vaccines may provide protection for 6 months, but we do not know exactly for how long. The vaccine has not been around that long to know. What happens if/when the effectiveness of the vaccines "wears off"? If the vaccines lose their effectiveness, people might not know, until they are sick and actively spreading the virus. What is CUNY’s plan if people who were vaccinated are no longer protected?" (Stieg, 2021).

A colleague said the following:

“I am wondering whether:

- CUNY can require both faculty, administration, staff and students to be vaccinated before they can come onto the premises;
- there would be equity implications, where the situation would privilege faculty based on tenure status.
- adjuncts bear the weight of teaching most of the in-person classes, jeopardizing their employment if they do not want to be vaccinated and/or putting them at risk?”

Furthermore, there should be COVID testing centers in all CUNY colleges, and we would like to know plans for contact tracing and notification of all concerned in cases of infection, as well as what conditions would precipitate a shutdown.

Given budget cuts by the state and city sources of funding, CUNY administration made budgetary cuts and extracted concessions from staff who were forced to work remotely. We are very interested in City Council negotiations with the Mayor's office on the city budget. The Mayor has proposed to cut CUNY's budget by \$67 million. This would be terrible, not only for the community colleges, which rely most directly on NYC support, but for the senior colleges too. PSC-CUNY, our union, is pushing the City Council and the Mayor for a full restoration of these cuts, plus additional funds to increase the ratio of mental health counselors and academic advisors to students.

Our CUNY Community Colleges are particularly affected by the budget cuts by the City. Most of the funding for Community Colleges comes from the City. Due to COVID-19 effects, enrollment at CUNY Community Colleges is down by double digits. For the 2022 budget year, the City is asking all Community Colleges to take a \$66 million budget cut. This will make it difficult for the colleges to successfully reopen campuses.

The protection and retention of BIPOC Faculty is a matter of high priority for us. We must hire more faculty. Retention is even more important. BIPOC Faculty need more equitable conditions in our various campuses that ensure that they know they are valued, respected and given the atmosphere that enables them to do their work in dignity.

Ethnic Studies units across CUNY need to be so much more than talking points for the university--money needs to be invested into anti-racist pedagogy and curriculum, which all of our students desperately need so we can learn about each other and how we all came to be in the US as well as unlearn the myths we have been taught which tend to undervalue or ignore minoritized groups and overvalue certain white Euro-centric groups. We need to hire faculty that reflect our student body in terms of race/ethnicity and background. If we are to have a society where people are treated with respect, dignity, and equity, we need to start in pre-K and we also need to model for, and teach our CUNY students that we uphold the value of all peoples. There must be a real transformative pivot in terms of priorities for higher education that is backed by an investment of funds.

Undergraduate and graduate research have also been adversely affected. The funds from the federal government, in part, should be considered for some sort of bridge funding for the faculty and/or students stipend, if possible. Some of the stimulus funds should cover the losses experienced by research laboratories in the experimental sciences at CUNY colleges. A number of colleagues who had federal grants could not be productive in over 5 months as laboratories were closed down. They still paid their full-time and part-time researchers (many of them POC and many also graduate students who teach courses in our undergraduate programs). Their salaries are from our faculty grants, so, the grantee faculty have effectively lost at least half a year in terms of salaries, as researchers could not really do much experimental work; and even after a few months, things have slowed down considerably. This is not money that agencies have accounted for in the grants, but rather money that was lost in order to keep people employed, and (in the case of full-timers) to provide health insurance. In better endowed, and highly competitive institutions, many decided to downsize by simply letting a number of postdoctoral scholars go. This imposes economic costs on such postdoctoral scholars and increases their level of anxiety and uncertainty. The lack of productivity will also affect upcoming grant submissions. Fewer papers will be published. It will also influence tenure and promotion even though extensions might be granted. Institutions like ours are already disadvantaged in terms of possibilities to get competitive grants, and further set-backs will only amount to wider gaps for BIPOC and women faculty members underrepresented in STEM. Our students will also be affected.

We are deeply concerned about faculty diversity - or lack thereof - in particular with the relative lack of Black faculty. Even though federal pandemic relief funds cannot be used toward the "recurring cost" of full-time faculty lines, it could be used toward some other areas of college expenses that would otherwise require regular operating funds, thereby freeing up operating funds to hire full-time faculty.

CUNY has so many students entering from the NYC DOE who are underprepared and then are led by a variety of means into a full 12 to 15 credit/semester load. Due to their under- preparation and life situations with work or family obligations, some stop attending or withdraw from a class and then from the college, and CUNY. They are mostly under-represented minorities.

The best response to be these student's needs is to change TAP requirements and make TAP awards per credit instead of basing it on full time loads. TAP was initiated at a time when CUNY had students in situations far different from today, and the students were overwhelmingly white. Over time, the demographics have changed, the level of preparation has declined, the economic conditions have changed, and yet TAP remained unchanged. If students who enter CUNY could take a lesser load to begin with and develop their skills, knowledge and become have excellent remediation that gives them the academic support needed to succeed, then CUNY would retain more students and more excel and would graduate. Given historical and contemporary evidence of the structural barriers to educational success, it is hard not to conclude that if the students who are currently disappearing from CUNY in the thousands every year due to the situation described above were not under-represented minorities, there would be more concern, attention, and action to introduce policies and strategies that support them.

Priority areas

- Health, security, and safety of all members of the CUNY community in a way that proactively plans and responds to the COVID19 challenges that we face.
- Job security for adjunct faculty and staff. Rehire Laid-off contingent (Adjunct) faculty.
- Restore full-time compensation for the CUNY Support Staff.
- Assistance for our indigent students. Help our students to pay fees, access education, healthcare, inclusive of mental healthcare, and give them the academic support that would enhance their chances of succeeding, exceling, and graduating.
- Maintaining levels of cleanliness and ventilation required to meet CDC health standards, Healthcare, including mental health assistance for anyone in the CUNY community that need such help.
- Fund and support our Ethnic Studies Departments and Programs.
- Hire and retain more BIPOC faculty and staff.

The funds from the federal government should be used for these purposes.

An investment in CUNY is an investment in not only knowledge creation educating our students and the community at large, it is a solid contribution to preparing our students to successfully engage and compete in a rapidly changing world. CUNY is involved in building human capital and is a powerful engine of socioeconomic mobility in our city, state, country (CUNY, 2020; US News and World Report; Reber & Sinclair, 2020), and world. Now more than ever, it should be adequately funded and given the material conditions that it needs to succeed in its mission, vision, and core values. How we organize our return to our various campuses is an important part of building back better. We must commit to intersectional equity, socially-conscious planning, anti-racist education in all aspects of the strategies and policies we embrace in this process.

PSC-CUNY, our union has done a lot of work on what we need to do to be prepared, and I share one of the relevant documents in the appendix.

I would also be delighted to answer questions.

Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,

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Appendix

The standards presented below represent the PSC’s position on the measures that must be in place before the University reopens on a larger scale in the Fall 2021 semester.

[Click here for a detailed table of the PSC Safety Standards.](#)

CUNY students, faculty and staff are eager to resume working and learning together on campus after a year of isolation—but only if we can do so safely. We are intensely conscious of the value of in-person learning and interaction at CUNY, especially because the communities CUNY serves have been pummeled by deaths from COVID, loss of income, and the intensifying effects of systemic poverty and racism.

But there must be no return without a safe return. As the employer, CUNY has a legal and contractual responsibility to provide a workplace that is free of recognized hazards that could cause serious illness or death. To date, the CUNY administration has failed to provide unified guidance or enforcement of the standards that must be met in order for colleges to reopen more broadly. Instead, responsibility for developing reopening plans has been delegated to the individual colleges, with the result that the University community is faced with a patchwork of plans and uneven enforcement.

Drawing on the latest research on safe reopening and the scientific expertise available within the University, the PSC has developed ten standards to promote a safe reopening of CUNY. While the union will continue to seek to negotiate over specific reopening provisions, we believe there is an urgent need for thoughtful, rigorous standards that prioritize the lives and the safety of the entire University community.

The standards below were developed in partnership with the union’s Health and Safety Watchdog Committee, which benefits from the leadership of faculty and staff with academic expertise in public health and environmental safety, and with reference to the [New York State Guidance](#) and [Supplemental Guidance](#) for safe reopening of higher education. The standards are rooted in the most recent and reliable scientific knowledge about the SARS-CoV-2 virus and what is needed to keep workers and students safe. They also reflect the requirements of the 1970 Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHAct), as enforced by the New York State Public Employees Safety and Health (PESH) plan.

The responsibility for providing a safe workplace rests with the employer, and the standards are not intended to be exhaustive. They will be updated frequently and supplemented by a technical

document specifying how CUNY can achieve each standard and providing references to authoritative sources.

Nothing in this document waives any right of the PSC or its members under the contract or the law.

1. Meaningful Participation in Reopening Plans: PSC representatives—designated by the PSC, not by management—as well as student governance representatives and designated representatives of other unions must participate as full decision-making members of each college reopening committee. The resulting plans, as required by the New York State Guidance, “should reflect engagement” with these representatives.

2. Maximize Vaccination: CUNY must take actions to maximize vaccination within the University community, including providing education, opening vaccination sites on campuses, facilitating community vaccination, and providing adequate time, not charged to annual leave, for receiving vaccinations and boosters. As a public university, CUNY should also take a leading role in making vaccination available to underserved communities. PSC-represented employees must be provided with sufficient time off to receive vaccination, and employees who do not accrue sick days must be afforded appropriate time off at full pay after being vaccinated if they experience symptoms or side-effects that interfere with their ability to work.

3. Minimize Introduction of Infection on Campus: CUNY must ensure that all colleges take the necessary measures to detect COVID-19 infection in symptomatic and asymptomatic people and prohibit individuals who have contracted the virus from entering CUNY campuses. For entrance onto campus, CUNY must require either proof of complete vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test within the timeframe established by the Centers for Disease Control. Detection through regular COVID testing of PSC-represented employees may be implemented only if such testing is negotiated with the union, if appropriate privacy measures are in place, and if testing is provided on campus and at other CUNY worksites.

4. Minimize Transmission of COVID-19 on Campus: CUNY must take all measures necessary to ensure that opportunities for transmission of COVID-19 on campus are minimized. Such measures include mandating wearing masks on campus, supplying PPE in clinical classes and other settings that require close contact, limiting occupancy of classrooms, offices, labs and other spaces to numbers that can maintain the required physical distance, maintaining a rigorous cleaning schedule, and employing a sufficient number of trained cleaning staff and protecting their safety.

5. Pandemic Ventilation: CUNY must permit occupancy of buildings, worksites, rooms and other spaces only if such spaces can be made to comply with authoritative ventilation guidelines designed to reduce transmission of COVID-19. CUNY must also adjust maximum occupancy limits to conform to distancing requirements and ventilation capacity.

6. Accommodations for Remote Work: In order to protect the safety and health of individuals and the public, CUNY must permit PSC-represented employees in the following categories to work remotely: employees who, for documented medical reasons, cannot be vaccinated or cannot gain immunity through vaccination; and employees whose households include an individual who cannot receive COVID-19 vaccination for documented medical reasons and who is at high risk of serious illness or death from COVID. In addition, CUNY must seek to accommodate requests for remote work from employees who have the co-morbidities currently identified by the CDC as incurring high risk of serious illness or death from COVID-19. CUNY must also be alert to the needs of employees covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act who may need additional accommodations because of changed worksite conditions.

7. Right to Inspect: PSC members and/or their representatives continue to have the right under the law and the contract to conduct walkthroughs and inspections of any workplace in which PSC-represented employees are required to work. Inspections may be conducted pre-occupancy and during occupancy.

8. Standards for Laboratories and Studios: CUNY must adhere to enhanced ventilation, occupancy, and PPE standards developed for laboratories, studios and other situations where distancing may not be feasible. The PSC will offer more detailed guidance on standards for labs and studios in a separate document.

9. Workload: The transition to in-person work and the continuation of remote work must in no way increase the contractual workload of PSC-represented employees or require out-of-title work. Changes to duties related to reopening that require additional work time must be compensated with appropriate overtime pay, compensatory time or contact teaching hour credit. The right of academic departments to determine appropriate teaching modalities for all classes offered by the department must be respected.

10. Comprehensive and Accessible Plans: CUNY college reopening plans for Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 must incorporate the above standards and be easily available for inspection by all CUNY students, staff and faculty. Colleges must also make available all relevant environmental inspection reports and records of compliance with approved reopening plans.

<https://www.psc-cuny.org/news-events/psc-standards-safe-opening-cuny>

**Testimony of Dr. James Davis, President Professional Staff Congress/CUNY
before the New York City Council Committee on Higher Education**

June 23, 2021

Oversight - Returning to CUNY Campuses in the Wake of COVID-19

Thank you, committee members. It's good to be with you. I'm James Davis, President of the Professional Staff Congress. We represent CUNY's 30,000 faculty and professional staff. I am joined by Andrea Vásquez, PSC First Vice President, Professor Jean Grassman from the School of Public Health, Professor Diane Price Banks from Bronx Community College, and Professor Roxanne Shirazi from the Graduate Center. We appreciate the opportunity to discuss some of the challenges facing our members.

Chair Barron, let me start by thanking you and the committee for your steadfast support for CUNY. Even as the Mayor proposes sharper budget cuts than any in recent memory, you have pushed for restorations and additional funding. You have consistently highlighted CUNY as an economic engine and advocated that CUNY will only overcome years of racist austerity with recurring investment that helps put the City on a path to recovery.

We would like to highlight the key challenges facing our workforce, and we seek your support.

To be safe, our transition back to in-person work needs to be gradual, and it needs to be handled with transparency. We love our students and our mission – that's what gets us going every morning – but we love our families too, so our own health is paramount. Transparency from our administration will not only build confidence among the faculty and staff in the safety of the workplace, it will make safety possible. We will be able to ask informed questions and request remediation of facilities that require it. We will not send our members into unsafe offices, labs, or classrooms.

We have taken steps to minimize risks to our members. We developed clear safety standards, so members can follow the science. We negotiated a Remote Work Agreement with CUNY so that staff who can perform their jobs effectively off-site may continue to do so. We negotiated a pre-occupancy walkthrough protocol, so that PSC representatives can accompany engineers and administrators, checking ventilation and other key indicators. Our Health & Safety Committee has trained nearly 150 members to conduct those walkthroughs with management. And we undertook a campaign to free Federal stimulus funds from bureaucracy at the state and university levels, so repairs and upgrades can be completed before we return in large numbers.

Nevertheless, we are concerned because many facilities have suffered from years of neglect and deferred maintenance. CUNY's record in this regard has been uneven and sometimes dismal or even dangerous. Many of us want to return to campus, but we need vigilance from the

administration, not here and there, but on each campus and in every facility. CUNY's target to return staff to in-person work is August 2. We do not know when each college's reopening plan will be approved, and although the process must not be rushed, delays to the approvals could also require delays to reopening to accommodate walkthroughs with union members present. CUNY must provide our members with accurate data and timely responses to questions and concerns.

Your support in the oversight process is deeply appreciated, and we thank you for your continued efforts on our behalf.

**Testimony of Jean Grassman, Professional Staff Congress/CUNY
before the New York City Council Committee on Higher Education**

June 23, 2021

Oversight - Returning to CUNY Campuses in the Wake of COVID-19

My name is Jean Grassman. I'm a coordinator for the PSC's Environmental Health and Safety Watchdogs, an associate professor at the CUNY School of Public Health and a CIH, a certified industrial hygienist.

As such, I'd like to call out three principles that should guide CUNY in protecting the university community.

The first is CUNY should employ multiple strategies aimed at minimizing the spread of COVID. The pandemic is not over as much as we would like that to be the case.

Continued precautions are necessary because the campus community will be a mixed population in terms of vaccination status due to individual choice, religious reasons and health condition.

New variants of the coronavirus continue to emerge and spread. Just yesterday, a spike in hospitalizations in Missouri was attributed to the delta variant.¹

Lastly, we do not know how long vaccinations will be effective. Those of us lucky enough to have been vaccinated in March may find ourselves susceptible once again in October, the middle of the fall semester.

Hence, since no single approach will offer complete protection, multiple strategies will continue to be needed. They include screening to prevent campus access by those who may be COVID positive, continuation of masking policies, and ventilation adequate to reduce airborne pathogens.

Despite this ongoing need to protect the CUNY community, our members are saying that at some campuses, plans are being made to fill classrooms to capacity and to discontinue the requirement for masks.

The second principle for a safe reopening is that CUNY policies need to be based on the best practices that reflect the state of the science. Authoritative sources have disseminated compelling evidence that COVID-19 is spread through aerosols which can

disperse through distances and accumulate over time.² College campuses are uniquely vulnerable because of the time spent in crowded classes where speakers can release large quantities of droplets and aerosols. Examples of situations where the science is not being considered include

- CUNY has asked campuses to develop plans for 3-foot distancing without a corresponding plan to determine whether the ventilation is sufficient.
- This spring, CUNY distributed a memo where they referred to the ASHRAE 62.1 as the authoritative standard for indoor ventilation. In fact, ASHRAE's own Epidemiologic Task Force urges abandonment of the use of 62.1 as it is intended for energy conservation and not adequate for reducing airborne virus.³
- We understand that CUNY has hired a consultant to do a ventilation audit. In order to be useful, the audit needs to verify adequate ventilation in all occupied spaces. We suspect that the ventilation audit is being done at the building level rather than the immediate environment used by our members and students. We are pleased to hear that the reports will be available for the July campus walkthroughs agreed to by CUNY earlier this spring.

Finally, we call on CUNY to develop a stance of pandemic readiness. In 2011 the World Health Organization said "The world is ill-prepared to respond to a severe influenza pandemic or to any similarly global, sustained and threatening public-health emergency."⁴ They add that pandemic preparedness is not a plan, it's a continuous process that adapts to evolving knowledge. CUNY will say they already have emergency *response* plans but this is different, they need to develop *preventive* strategies. As an institution of higher education, CUNY should apply the lessons learned during the past year to protect those who work and learn here at the nation's largest public university.

References

¹ Angela Barajas and Martin Savidge (June 24, 2021) Missouri becomes hot spot for Delta variant fueling hospitalizations while vaccination efforts lag. CNN. Accessed 6/25/21 <https://www.cnn.com/2021/06/24/us/missouri-covid-19-delta-variant-vaccine/index.html>

² Covid Rapid Response Working Group at Harvard. Accessed 06/25/21 <https://ethics.harvard.edu/covid-19-response>; Greenhalgh T, Jimenez JL, Prather KA, Tufekci Z, Fisman D, Schooley R. Ten scientific reasons in support of airborne transmission of SARS-CoV-2. *Lancet*. 2021 May 1;397(10285):1603-1605. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(21)00869-2. Epub 2021 Apr 15. Erratum in: *Lancet*. 2021 May 15;397(10287):1808. PMID: 33865497; PMCID: PMC8049599.

³ASHRAE Epidemic Task Force Releases Updated Building Readiness Guide. Accessed 6/25/21.

<https://www.ashrae.org/about/news/2021/ashrae-epidemic-task-force-releases-updated-building-readiness-guide>

⁴ Pandemic Preparedness. World Health Organization. Access 6/25/21 <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/communicable-diseases/influenza/pandemic-influenza/pandemic-preparedness>

Testimony re: 2021-2022 Returning to CUNY Campuses in the Wake of COVID-19

Submitted to
Committee on Higher Education

Submitted by
Diana E. Cruz, Director of Education Policy at Hispanic Federation
June 23rd, 2021

Thank you, Committee Chair Barron, and all other committee members for allowing me to present this testimony on behalf of the Hispanic Federation; a non-profit organization seeking to empower and advance the Hispanic community, support Hispanic families, and strengthen Latino institutions through direct service programs and legislative advocacy.

Latino Students and CUNY

The greatest number of undergraduate Latino students across New York State attend CUNY colleges, with the highest percentages in schools like Hostos (65%), Bronx CC (64%), Guttman (61%), and Lehman (59%).¹ As the largest urban public university offering many opportunities, such as affordable quality education, there is no doubt as to why many Latino students enroll in CUNY institutions. Moreover, while college enrollment has been on the decline for years across the U.S., Latinx students have been enrolling at exponential rates.² However, the coronavirus pandemic is forcing many of them to decide between staying in school and working to help their families survive the economic fallout from COVID-19.

In CUNY's case, enrollment dropped by more than 5% in the fall of 2020 and although the city is in full reopening mode, students and families continue to navigate uncertainty and lack of access to basic needs.³ Many students have had to put their education on the back burner as they worry about their jobs, finances, housing, and families. The recovery of New York depends on our students' future, and we must allocate the necessary supports to reopen strongly and fairly. The reopening of the city must include a true "Recovery for All."

Thus, **Hispanic Federation urges the council to advocate for the restoration of \$77 million for CUNY, ensure funding cuts for ASAP are rectified, stop tuition increases, and ensure federal funding is allocated equitably.** A full funding budget for CUNY is critical to reopen campuses effectively and in the best interests of students. The funding can offer food services, mental health supports, tutoring to reengage with academics, faculty support, and more. This is not the time to de-invest in our students' education. We request the council prioritizes funding that will provide better and prosperous opportunities for college students that are the key to a brighter New York City.

¹ [https://www1.cuny.edu/mu/forum/2021/02/25/cuny-leads-new-york-with-the-most-hispanic-serving-institutions-in-the-state-says-a-report-by-excelencia-in-education/#:~:text=CUNY%20colleges%20account%20for%20the,\(59%25%2C%205%2C738\).](https://www1.cuny.edu/mu/forum/2021/02/25/cuny-leads-new-york-with-the-most-hispanic-serving-institutions-in-the-state-says-a-report-by-excelencia-in-education/#:~:text=CUNY%20colleges%20account%20for%20the,(59%25%2C%205%2C738).)

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/01/31/latino-college-enrollment-pandemic/>

³ <https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/education/ny-cuny-enrollment-drops-pandemic-20201112-pee5hpupi5cihneg77hy3fy3fynoe-story.html>

CUNY Students Challenges During the Pandemic

CUNY students are among the populations that experienced and continue to face challenges during the pandemic. According to a survey conducted by the CUNY Department of Public Health, 80% of students lost their household income, 50% reported losing access to food, and overall, many showed signs of high anxiety and depression.⁴ An equitable and just reopening of the city must prioritize the immediate and long-term needs of all students. This includes hiring mental health experts that can assess and provide socio-emotional supports, continue to invest in college success programs that focus on the transition from high school to college and/or from community colleges to four-year institutions, increase financial aid opportunities, address tuition costs across CUNY, and increase access to basic needs such as food services, and more.

CUNY Accelerated Studies in Associate Programs (ASAP)

Restore CUNY ASAP Funding - \$10 million

The CUNY ASAP program is a national model and is effective in supporting students through graduation. With the COVID-19 crisis, many Latino students have been forced to drop out. Latino students make up 44% of CUNY ASAP, and 85% of all ASAP students are PELL or TAP recipients.⁵ The ASAP graduation rate is more than three times the national three-year graduation rate of 16% for urban community colleges.⁶ ASAP's current cross-cohort three-year graduation rate is 53% vs. 24% for non-ASAP comparison group students.⁷ Since 2009, ASAP has admitted students with some developmental needs who also graduate at significantly higher rates than non-ASAP comparison group students. After three years, 48% of ASAP students with developmental needs graduated vs. 21% of comparison group students with developmental needs.⁸ ASAP's effectiveness is evident as this empirical data shows, and it is the reason the ASAP program has been replicated across the country.

We urge the legislature to restore the \$10 million proposed cut to continue this impactful program that helps low-income minority students overcome systemic barriers. ASAP offers a proven strategy to increase graduation rates among educationally and economically disadvantaged populations.

CUNY Tuition

Stop Tuition Increases at CUNY Campuses – Provide \$23.8 million in revenue support to eliminate tuition increases

Hispanic Federation strongly opposes the increase of tuition at CUNY, and we need the City Council to respond to this need by allocating \$23.8 million in revenue support to compensate the loss of tuition due to decreased student enrollments at CUNY. Authorizing the advancement of a \$200 tuition increase and allowing CUNY to raise tuition will be detrimental for students, especially those from undeserved backgrounds who are already struggling to continue their higher education studies. We ask that the city moves toward more funding support for tuition affordability and not otherwise.

⁴ <https://sum.cuny.edu/the-pandemics-massive-impact-on-cuny-students/>

⁵ [CUNY-ASAP-Program-Overview-January-2021.pdf](#)

⁶ – [About CUNY ASAP](#)

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid

Federal Funding Allocations

Allocate Federal Funding Equitably across Higher Institutions— \$692 million for CUNY

As we continue to navigate reopening it is essential that federal allocations are distributed to students with the greatest needs, including those from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, students from mixed-status households, and students who experience homelessness. Programs that support students' mental health, increase access to quality technology supports, provide tutoring and academic supports, and address direct food, housing, and employment insecurities must be prioritized to receive funding.

I thank you for your time and reemphasize how critical it is to focus on these priorities for the benefit of many students and communities as we envision a stronger reopening for New York City.

**Testimony of Roxanne Shirazi, Professional Staff Congress/CUNY
before the New York City Council Committee on Higher Education**

June 23, 2021

Oversight - Returning to CUNY Campuses in the Wake of COVID-19

My name is Roxanne Shirazi and I'm a PSC delegate and member of the library faculty at the CUNY Graduate Center. Librarians understand the devastating impact Covid-19 has had on research and teaching and we know that reopening the libraries is an important step towards academic and intellectual normalcy. Yet we also know that before the pandemic, many of CUNY's campus libraries were in disrepair. When CUNY classes moved online in March 2020, the libraries were kept open and librarians reported having to bring their own hand soap to work to be able to practice proper hygiene as frontline workers. CUNY libraries are high-traffic spaces where students congregate -- often in groups -- for several hours at a time and library staff work in close contact with them at service desks.

CUNY library workers often have decades of experience working in these crumbling facilities; there is little faith left in general statements about a building being "safe" -- we have learned to ask for proof. We want details about how our spaces have been prepared for a mix of vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals to keep our communities safe. We believe that our students deserve the same precautionary measures already in place at other New York City libraries, and we want to ensure all CUNY students have equitable resource access regardless of campus affiliation. Some materials are simply not available as ebooks, and students often prefer to use print. We must not lose sight of the urgent need to provide safe access to our libraries' print collections.

At my own campus, the Graduate Center, the librarians have been working for six months to restart onsite services but CUNY will not provide the information we need to do it safely. We have asked specific questions about the ventilation several times and are told that data is unavailable because the library is closed. How are we supposed to prepare operations in spaces before we know they can be used safely? At every turn, the Graduate Center has told us to wait: to wait for policy from CUNY Central, to wait for new guidance, to wait because they just don't have any information to share.

Yet after months of denying us this basic information, the Graduate Center suddenly moved to open a student study space in the library and gave librarians just five working days' notice. When PSC health and safety was finally allowed to conduct a walkthrough

of the library we were not given access to any of the shared offices used by library staff. Further, CUNY's representative stated that they were not bound to any HVAC best practice recommendations, and we actually had to argue that Covid-19 is a recognized hazard and reducing indoor concentrations of the virus is achieved through improved ventilation. We should not have to fight over these simple facts. CUNY repeatedly assures workers that spaces have been checked and are "safe" but will block access to any details or proof that improvements have been made. Where there should be community engagement and transparency, CUNY has opted for secrecy and stalling.

It does not have to be this way. We are not here to catch CUNY failing: we want CUNY's reopening to succeed and to proceed with care for our community -- our students, faculty, and staff -- so that we can reopen stronger, together.

**Testimony of Andrea Vásquez, Professional Staff Congress/CUNY
before the New York City Council Committee on Higher Education**

June 23, 2021

Oversight - Returning to CUNY Campuses in the Wake of COVID-19.

I'm Andrea Vasquez, Professional Staff Congress First Vice President and a professional staff member at the Graduate Center. Thank you, Chairperson Barron and members of the committee for holding this hearing and for all of your work on behalf of CUNY students and on behalf of our union members throughout this difficult year.

It's difficult to adequately reply to many of the points we just heard from CUNY administrators so the PSC will very much appreciate further conversations with Chair Barron and other committee members and council members whose districts encompass CUNY colleges.

The main points I would like to pick up on are about transparency and timetable.

CUNY is calling back approximately 7,000 staff members on Aug 2. Mostly two day a week fulltime and face-to-face. Thousands more will show up when the semester starts. This is the moment that CUNY is obliged to ensure a safe return for us all and it is also an opportunity to BETTER serve our students. It's a time to ensure that our facilities are clean and safe, showing respect and gratitude for all that students and employees have done to keep this institution alive. We say to CUNY: tell us what your plans are.

Executive Vice Chancellor Batista said at this hearing that he gave guidelines to each campus regarding reopening. But we still have important outstanding questions:

- Is there a dialogue with colleges to make sure the buildings meet necessary health and safety standards?
- If they want this reopening plan to work, why have we not seen any of CUNY's guidelines?
- Why have we not seen what determinations have been made by companies hired by CUNY?
- Why has CUNY not told us when college reopening plans will be approved?
- WHEN will CUNY inform PSC which buildings will be used?
- Why isn't CUNY scheduling walkthroughs NOW if they want their plan to work?

The Executive Vice Chancellor told this committee that he has the info on how he will keep our colleges clean, in many instances this will be for the first time. Great! Why has he not given that plan to the stakeholders? To the PEOPLE who will inhabit those spaces?

So, we ask, how is withholding this information helpful and efficient if CUNY intends to open at 50-60% capacity on August 2? How is withholding information respectful to the employees who have worked their hearts out all year and held up the university for our students?

Finally, thank you, Chair Barron for asking about the mental health of our members at this hearing. Programs that help with relaxation and mindfulness techniques are wonderful, but those things do not help us when our contractual workload is ignored, when there is fear of job loss or retaliation and when professional development opportunities are few and far between. We are grateful for your steadfast support .

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.