



**Testimony of the
New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG)
Regarding the
The Draft Statewide Plan for Higher Education
November 29, 2012**

Hello my name is Kevin Stump and I am the Higher Education Program Coordinator for the New York Public Interest Research Group. I am joined today by Kathleen Jordan, a Brooklyn College student and the chair of NYPIRG's student board of directors. We would like to thank the New York State Education Department for holding this hearing and putting together this draft plan.

The New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG) is the state's largest student-directed, non-partisan research and advocacy organization. Our Board of Directors consists of college and university students elected from campuses with NYPIRG chapters from across the state. NYPIRG students become well-trained powerful advocates by working on public policy issues, such as environmental protection, consumer rights, voter registration, and higher education affordability.

NYPIRG views the Statewide Plan for Higher Education as a vision-setting tool, which will play an instrumental role in future policy decisions affecting higher education in New York State over the next generation. This type of strategic planning and long-term thinking is critical to ensuring accountability across the sector.

Accordingly, we believe that access and affordability must be built in to the plan to ensure that New York preserves its historic commitment to providing higher education opportunities to all its residents. As the plan moves through the process of discussion and revision, we must keep in mind the plight of students—today and in the coming years—striving to attend college in New York and the increasingly difficult task of paying for higher education in the state.

I would like to begin by sharing the story of Casey from New York City who now attends SUNY Cortland:

Casey L., Cortland New York

Casey is a student who transferred from a CUNY community college to an upstate SUNY School because she recognizes the importance of higher education. Casey is the first in her immediate family to attend college, and is studying speech and hearing sciences with the hopes of helping children who were born with the same speech and hearing issue she deals with personally, everyday. With dreams to pursue her master's degree, Casey is extremely worried about her ability to pay her student loans when she graduates into a still bleak job market and challenging economy. She is seeing many of her peers unable to finish their education because of the debt

they have already accrued. Casey wants decision makers to understand that in order for her to do meaningful work in the field she can make a difference in, from community college to graduate school and thereafter, she needs to have access to an affordable higher education that does not chain her to massive debt.

This is one of many students who have a story involving both hardship and determination. This plan is being developed at a time when we've seen many years of disinvestment in higher education and the shifting of the costs of paying for college education on to the backs of students and their families.

Since 2008, higher education in New York State has been cut by over \$1.7 billion.ⁱ The state's Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) has remained stagnant for years. Textbook prices have risen at twice the rate of inflation over the last two decades.ⁱⁱ Tuition has skyrocketed and as a result, student loan debt has continued to grow with it. Nationally, college revenue generated by tuition recently surpassed that of public dollars, which means students are carrying more and more of the cost of attending college.ⁱⁱⁱ While the situation facing higher education presents tremendous challenges, we are positive that with the right type of planning – the future for New Yorkers looks promising.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide input to help create a balanced plan that recognizes the importance of prioritizing the advancement of both the institution and the needs of students.

The draft plan includes many important and relevant components of the higher education sector that we look forward to experiencing in the years to come. However, as a student organization, NYPIRG is here to provide perspective that must be front and center in the planning process.

This draft plan appropriately recognizes that there is a direct correlation between the amount of financial aid a student receives and whether higher learning is accessible to them. High academic inflation coupled with a weak economy has resulted in greater numbers of New Yorkers returning to college since the economic collapse, driving enrollment to record-breaking highs at all levels of academia, including community colleges, public universities, private, and proprietary institutions.

Setting Up CUNY & SUNY Students For Success

The draft plan appropriately addresses the growing need for remedial learning at the collegiate level. Although the costs associated with remedial programs have not been fully captured, SUNY spends more on remedial learning programs than they do on all of their campus technologies statewide. We are pleased to see an emphasis on adequately addressing the issue of remedial programs as it directly impacts financial aid and institutional resources that can be allocated elsewhere. **We look forward to working with the State Department of Education to developing fair “funding policies that promote success.”**

Promote Graduate Education in New York

The draft plan acknowledges that there is a growing need for an educated workforce with advanced degrees. It also points out that the number of master's degree students has declined 15 % at CUNY. Nationally, the trends demonstrate an overall drop in advanced degree enrollment as well.^{iv} Graduate TAP (Tuition Assistance Program) was fully eliminated as part of structural changes Governor Patterson made in 2008 and continued under Governor Cuomo for the past

two years. The economic downturn has forced many institutions to raise tuition and cutback on the level of support they provide to advanced degree students making it more difficult and less attractive for students to access and continue their academic studies. Ultimately this will result in less job security and diminished economic gains for graduates and the state's tax coffers. **We strongly urge that a comprehensive plan is included in the Statewide Plan for Higher Education addressing the lack of graduate financial aid.**

Plan Now to Attack the Student Debt Problem and Support a Tuition Freeze

Student loan debt rightly is among is the most hotly discussed issues in higher education. State budget deficits have resulted in devastating budget cuts to higher education. This has resulted in dramatic and burdensome tuition increases, threatening access for many New Yorkers and forcing many students to turn to loans. This vicious cycle has driven up student loan debt to historic levels. The tuition plan included in NY SUNY 2020, which raises tuition \$300 every year for five consecutive years, is set to expire in 2015, five years before the Statewide Plan for Higher Education concludes. **We strongly urge that the final Plan call for a tuition freeze beginning in the first year covered by the new plan, 2015, with the ultimate plan to decrease the tuition burden.**

Spur Colleges and Universities to Drive Down the Cost of Higher Education

Student loan debt has been at the forefront of conversations around the country and political leaders have recognized that the student loan debt crisis is impacting families across the nation. However, little has been done to help curb the growing crisis. According to the New York Federal Reserve Bank Bureau of Economic Analysis, student loan debt has risen 511% from 1999 to 2011, pointing us to rising tuition and fees, which are up 559% from 1985^v. Rising tuition and decreasing financial aid are obvious root-causes driving student loan debt past a record \$1 trillion in 2012, for the first time surpassing credit card debt^{vi}. Students in New York State are feeling the pinch. According to the Project on Student Debt, 60% of students in New York graduated with an average student loan debt of \$25,851 in 2011^{vii}.

Students desperately need help to afford to attend and graduate from college in New York. **We strongly urge that the Statewide Plan for Higher Education stipulate that colleges and universities develop comprehensive plans to immediately begin to address the student loan debt crisis by reducing college costs for students.**

Support Helping Students Shop Smart for Student Loans

The draft plan briefly mentions that the costs associated with going to college include much more than tuition, but also include, room and board, fees, textbooks, transportation, and other costs. While SUNY has recently outlined their Smart Track initiative as a first step, **we strongly urge that it be policy for all New York colleges to participate in the Financial Aid Shopping Sheet designed by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau^{viii}.**

Propose Boosting Opportunity Programs

Opportunity programs have long been an instrumental piece to providing access to higher education for some of the neediest New Yorkers. They continue to be a gateway to college and to a more prosperous social and economic future for many. Time tested programs like the Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP) and many more give people an opportunity they may

have not otherwise had to exit poverty and realize the American dream. **We strongly urge that this plan include using opportunity programs, which we know work, as a key tool to fight poverty.**

Make Sure TAP Keeps Pace with Student College Costs

The New York State Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) is one of the most under-discussed components of higher education and has been stagnant for over a decade. From 2000 to 2009, college enrollment nationwide increased from 15.3 million to 20.4 million, signaling a clear shift in the demand for a college degree to meet the needs of a more skilled workforce.^{ix} SUNY captured 40% of New York State high school graduates in 2011 and total enrollment grew 12% from 2006-07 to 2011-12.^x CUNY enrollment jumped from 243,000 to 259,000 in 2008, breaking the 253,000 record set in 1974 (the year before tuition was charged).^{xi}

We strongly urge that the Statewide Plan for Higher Education include a comprehensive guide to update and expand the reach and vision of TAP including undoing all of the changes made to TAP in 2008 and linking the maximum award with instate tuition.

Dare to DREAM for New York State

State level DREAM legislation is a critical step forward and should be made law immediately. NYPIRG has been working with a coalition of diverse stakeholders to pass legislation that would grant undocumented students access to TAP. We are pleased and thankful that the Board of Regents shares our sense of urgency and deliberation to act. **However, we strongly urge that the Plan supports state level DREAM legislation, regardless of the bill number, that commits to granting otherwise qualified undocumented youth access to TAP.**

Support Mitigating Student Expenses to Make College More Affordable

As the cost of college and associated living expenses continues to rise and state and federal student aid continue to decrease, students are looking to their universities to help them contain certain costs. For example, textbook prices have risen at twice the rate of inflation over the last two decades^{xii}. Information technology and more specifically, the open-source movement, has become more relevant in 21st century higher learning with a generation of students who use mobile devices, notebook computers, laptops, and tablets. **We strongly urge that the state develop a vision to guide the open-source textbooks movement with the mission to save students money.**

In Closing

Many tough choices have to be made to get the economy back on track. Investing in higher education can provide jobs and produce the educated labor pool that attracts businesses to our state. Helping New Yorkers to become qualified through higher education to get the jobs they need should be a top priority for the state.

NYPIRG is already seeing how the combination of a persistent recession, the rising cost of living, the sharp decrease in financial aid, and a steady climb in tuition is crushing already struggling students and those who would like to attend college but simply cannot afford to.

The Statewide Draft Plan for Higher Education provides an important discussion point to ensure that New York continues to be a place where all New Yorkers have the opportunity to succeed if given a fair chance to do so.

Thank you again for inviting us here today and we look forward to working with you to ensure that access to an affordable higher education remain a priority in New York State.

ⁱ New York State United Teachers, “Testimony on Financing Public Higher Education,” October 2011, http://www.nysut.org/legislation_17177.htm (16 August 2012).

ⁱⁱ United States Public Interest Research Group, “Affordable Textbooks,” <http://www.uspirg.org/higher-education/affordable-textbooks> (January 23, 2012)

ⁱⁱⁱ United States Department of the Treasury, “New Report from Treasury, Education Departments: The Economic Case for Higher Education,” Page 3, June 2012, http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Documents/The%20Economics%20of%20Higher%20Education_REPORT%20CLEAN.pdf (15 August 2012).

^{iv} <http://www.cgsnet.org/graduate-enrollment-and-degrees-2001-2011>

^v The Atlantic, Daniel Indiviglio, “Chart of the Day: Student Loans Have Grown 511% Since 1999,” August 18, 2011, May 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2011/08/chart-of-the-day-student-loans-have-grown-511-since-1999/243821/>, (15 August 2012).

^{vi} Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, “Too Big To Fail: Student debt hits a trillion,” March 2012, <http://www.consumerfinance.gov/blog/too-big-to-fail-student-debt-hits-a-trillion/> (16 August 2012).

^{vii} Project on Student Debt, “Student Debt and the Class of 2012,” October 2012, Page 6, <http://projectonstudentdebt.org/files/pub/classof2011.pdf>, (28 November 2012).

^{viii} Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, <http://www.consumerfinance.gov/> (November 2012).

^{ix} College Board Advocacy & Policy Center, “Trends in Higher Education: Enrollment, Prices, Student Aid, Revenues, and Expenditures,” Page 1, May 2012,

http://advocacy.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/12b_5303_PubHighEd_AnalysisBrief_WEB_120530.pdf (15 August 2012).

^x State University of New York, “SUNY Fast Facts 2011,” http://www.suny.edu/about_suny/fastfacts/ (5 September 2012).

^{xi} City University of New York, “Record Enrollment Brings Top-Notch Students -- And Great Challenges” Winter 2010, <http://www.cuny.edu/news/publications/salute-to-scholars/november09/record-enrollment.html> (5 September 2012).

^{xii} Governmental Accountability Office, “College Textbooks: Enhanced Offerings Appear to Drive Recent Price,” Page 8 November 2012, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d05806.pdf>, (July 2005).