

# **PSCcuny/** Professional Staff Congress / City University of New York

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May 18, 2020

William C. Thompson, Jr.  
Chairperson, Board of Trustees  
The City University of New York

Félix V. Matos Rodríguez  
Chancellor, The City University of New York  
205 East 42nd Street  
New York, NY 10017

Dear Chairperson Thompson and Chancellor Matos Rodríguez:

As the CUNY Board of Trustees meets today, the Professional Staff Congress calls on you to rescind all non-reappointments of faculty and staff made for budgetary reasons this spring and to call an immediate halt to all existing college or University plans for mass non-reappointments of personnel.

We are sharing this letter with legislative and community leaders because keeping CUNY whole and keeping vulnerable employees on payroll during a pandemic are issues of vital public interest.

There is no justification for the terminations of employment and, in many cases, of health insurance that CUNY colleges have announced. Taking such actions at any time would be alarming; doing so in the midst of a pandemic is inexcusable. Brooklyn College has announced plans to slash course offerings by 25 percent; The College of Staten Island called for reductions of 35 percent; and John Jay College announced plans to lay off more than 400 adjunct faculty. The University has allowed these plans to go forward without budgetary justification, without a public accounting of how federal stimulus money will offer relief, and without fiscal transparency. CUNY must do better.

At this moment of economic and health crisis, the CUNY administration should be defending the University and advocating for an expansion of CUNY to meet the needs of working people—not assisting in the University's destruction. In its rush to cut budgets and instill fear into employees and students alike, CUNY management appears to be turning its back on potential resources that could offset any need for cuts. The University's strategy is bad policy, dangerous for the institution and shockingly inhumane.

- The CARES Act, signed into law on March 27, allocated \$237 million to CUNY, half of which is to be dedicated to direct aid to students and half to institutional needs arising from the pandemic. One of the specific goals of the CARES Act is to maintain employees on payroll. To date, CUNY has

provided no public accounting of that money: when the funds will be received, how they will be spent, what priorities will be observed.

- The HEROES Act, passed on May 15 by the U.S. House of Representatives, is a \$3 trillion stimulus bill that provides \$500 billion in state funding, eliminates the limitation on the state and local taxes (SALT) deduction for the next two years, and adds \$37 billion specifically for higher education. Negotiations with the Senate are now under way, but a final bill is likely to include substantial funding for states as well as dedicated funding for higher education. New York State and City budget gaps could well be narrowed by these funds, eliminating demands for cuts to CUNY.
- New York State legislative leaders have increasingly expressed openness to proposals to increase the state's revenue base by implementing fairer taxes on the ultra-rich. Several bills for such increases have already been introduced, including one that dedicated new revenue specifically to CUNY. Passage of such bills would change the budgetary landscape and provide new funding for CUNY.
- CUNY's own FY2020 Mid-Year Financial Report states: "The colleges are estimated to end the year with \$54 million in reserves." The PSC has not been able to find any public accounting for those funds or any explanation of how they might be used to avoid budget cuts.
- While CUNY enrollment could decline in the fall because of the extreme nature of the current crisis, college enrollment is well known to be counter-cyclical. Many analysts project an increase in enrollment in the University in the fall as more students seek to live at home and turn to CUNY to continue their college education. Before even considering budget cuts and layoffs, CUNY management must make public its enrollment projections and the assumptions on which they rest.
- There has yet to be a public accounting for any cost-savings realized during the campus shut-down, which has now lasted more than two months and is projected to continue for at least part of the summer and into the fall. Although college revenue may also be lost during this period because of cancellation of public events, colleges should see considerable savings. Where is the public report on those savings?
- Finally, CUNY management has failed to report on any reductions that could be made elsewhere in the budget. All other reductions must be considered before colleges resort to layoffs and course reductions. At many other universities nationally, top management has voluntarily taken a temporary pay-cut. A temporary reduction in Executive Compensation Plan salaries would not solve the budget crisis, but it must be undertaken before the University countenances layoffs of adjuncts earning \$25,000 a year.

Mass layoffs violate a first principle of both the federal stimulus legislation and Governor Cuomo's recent proposal for national legislation: keep employees on payroll. CUNY's actions will mean that hundreds or even thousands of adjunct faculty will lose their jobs at the end of this month. Adjuncts must be notified of fall semester appointments by May 29. Many have sacrificed to teach at CUNY and have worked at the University for a decade or

more. They are not disposable. CUNY is exploiting a shameful system of contingent labor at the moment of greatest vulnerability for the workforce.

If ever there were a moment when the trustees and chancellor of a public university needed to stand up for the university with whose future they are entrusted, this is the moment. The communities hardest hit by coronavirus are exactly the communities that will need CUNY the most as thousands of displaced workers seek to earn college degrees and learn new skills. CUNY is uniquely positioned to be a central part of an economic recovery that aims to address injustices of race and class exposed by this crisis. CUNY built new colleges during the Depression. Such vision is sorely lacking now.

Like all New Yorkers, the members of the CUNY community have had our lives upended by the COVID-19 pandemic. We have seen the inequities of our society laid bare, as the rates of illness and death have risen disproportionately in the low-income communities of color and immigrant communities served by our university. We have witnessed unbearable loss of life in our city, including among our colleagues and our families.

We recognize that the economic crisis we face is profound, but the University's rush to impose cuts and layoffs represents a staggering failure of imagination, as well as of policy.

The PSC calls on the Board of Trustees and the Office of the Chancellor to reject any budget strategy that includes layoffs and hurts students as well as faculty and staff; to rescind budgetary non-reappointments made since March; to embrace the principle of sustaining the workforce and the University during a pandemic; and to press for a fully funded CUNY to meet the challenges ahead.

New York will be forever changed by COVID-19. But the city will not be able to overcome the deepening recession with a hollowed-out public university. The job of University management is to protect and enhance CUNY, not manage its destruction. The 30,000 members of the PSC demand that you do your job.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Barbara Bowen". The ink is dark and the signature is fluid and legible.

Barbara Bowen  
President, PSC

cc: Professional Staff Congress/CUNY  
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