

**Testimony before the Assembly Standing Committee
On Higher Education
Public Hearing
From Access to Success: Closing the College Achievement Gap
December 14, 2010**

**Presented by
Thomas J. Hilliard, Senior Fellow
Center for an Urban Future**

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Good morning. My name is Thomas Hilliard, and I am a Senior Fellow at the Center for an Urban Future, an independent policy institute that conducts research on important issues concerning economic development, workforce development and social policy.

In January of this year, the Center published a study entitled “*Closing the Skills Gap: A Blueprint for Preparing New York City’s Workforce to Meet the Evolving Needs of Employers*” in collaboration with the Community Service Society. Our report made the case that human capital is the single most important determinant of a community’s economic success or failure, and that New York City urgently needs to develop and implement a human capital policy agenda.

What is true for New York City is true for the entire state. Most industrialized nations are investing in human capital, and so are other states with whom New York competes. New York is not in danger of become a less educated state. We are in danger of stagnating while our domestic and international competitors forge ahead.

Improving student success in public higher education is not only an important issue to address – it is the most important issue to address, especially at the community colleges that train the people of New York State for middle-skill jobs in the economy. New York’s employers need more skilled workers. But the state cannot afford to dramatically increase state funding to enroll more students in community colleges. The only way to affordably increase educational attainment in New York is to graduate more of the students who already enroll in community colleges. Since fewer than half of all community college students graduate after ten years, there should be considerable room for improvement.

Consider the following data points:

- New York State needs to significantly increase its production of college students to compete with other industrialized nations and with other states. According to the most reliable projections, six out of ten job openings in New York State by the year 2018 will require a postsecondary credential.¹
- As of 2008, more than half of all working-age New Yorkers (55%) had no postsecondary credential.²
- Data from the New York State Education Department suggests that community college graduation rates – including transfers – range from about one in four to one in two. Even community colleges at the high end of this range have room for improvement.³
- The organization Public Agenda conducted a series of focus groups with college dropouts. They found that conventional ideas of why college students leave college may be misinformed. “I needed to go to work and make money” was the reason cited by more than half of all dropouts.⁴ This finding is mirrored

by a survey of community college presidents in New York State. When asked “what are the most significant barriers to completion?” the presidents chose “work schedules” more than any other response category, followed by “lack of initial academic preparation.”⁵

Other states and college systems are taking decisive action to improve student success while New York treads water. High-performance states include Texas, Illinois, Tennessee, Oregon, Washington State, Kentucky, Arkansas and Minnesota. Multi-state institutional initiatives, most notably Achieving the Dream and Breaking Through, specifically target student success with innovative strategies that have shown impressive results. Only one community college in New York State, LaGuardia, participates in these initiatives. Twenty-four states have joined the organization “Complete College America” in pledging to adopt common standards for reporting college graduation. New York is not one of those 24 states. The National Governors Association has launched the “Complete to Compete” initiative to encourage every state to strengthen student success. But New York is not on the “Complete to Compete” task force.

At an institutional level, key reforms to improve student success include:

- Providing students a clear pathway from enrollment to graduation, using career pathways or connecting every course to a program of study that the student must choose;
- Contextualizing developmental education to a course of study and providing it at the point in time when the student needs it;
- Offering pre-collegiate bridge programs to strengthen foundational skills and “college knowledge” before the student begins credit-bearing coursework;
- Expanding non-credit certificate programs that can provide a shorter route to achieving a family-sustaining wage;
- Creating a system of early intervention and intrusive counseling so that every student who falls behind in a class or stops showing up gets a phone call and encouragement to attend a tutoring lab;
- Organizing freshmen into learning communities in which students take all their classes with peers and learn to support one another.

What these interventions – by no means an exhaustive list – have in common is that each one has already been tested at community colleges around the country and found to be effective in improving student outcomes. They are all the responsibility of individual institutions, though, and state policymakers cannot make them happen by remote control. It is reasonable to ask: what can the State of New York do?

The most important role for the state is to create an environment that provides the right incentives to institutions of higher learning. There is no silver bullet, certainly not at the state level. But New York sends signals to each institution by the way it finances, subsidizes and regulates postsecondary education, and those signals should be the right ones. Policymakers should also visualize each college as embedded in a web of educational institutions in which low-income students participate. Building the bridges from postsecondary education to workforce development, adult education, the P-12 system, and social services will strengthen both access and student success.

First, the state should require SUNY and CUNY to agree on a uniform protocol for reporting graduation and retention rates at the community college level, and to report those rates for each

college and university in the state annually. This does not have to wait for the launch of the HEDS database – each system has the available data now, and state policymakers are overdue to receive it. The National Governors Association has published metrics for college completion, and New York State should adopt those metrics.⁶

Second, the state should provide the SUNY system a measure of authority over its 30 community colleges. A report commissioned by the Association of Presidents of Public Community Colleges in 1999 – and well worth reading today – concluded: “What is lacking is a sense of coherence and dynamic system strategy to marshal diverse college strengths to meet a statewide public agenda that characterizes widely respected community college systems such as those in North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, and Washington.”⁷ That assessment is still accurate a decade later. The CUNY system has used centralized authority over its community college system to make quantum leaps in student success innovation, as have other states such as Virginia and Washington State. SUNY’s community colleges, on the other hand, answer only to their local sponsors, who provide wildly varying funding levels. The state’s anachronistic funding and governance system obstructs the development of an effective policy agenda.

Third, the state should overhaul the Regents plan for higher education, transforming it into a collaborative multi-year plan for public higher education jointly owned by the Regents, the Governor and the State Legislature, with structured input from stakeholders. At present, Section 237 of the Education Law calls for the Board of Regents to produce a master plan for higher education every four years. In 2005, the Regents revived this process, which had been dormant for many years. That was a critically important step, because New York needs a vehicle for planning its state policy in the higher education field. But the law has clear weaknesses that need to be addressed.

Most importantly, the Regents do not control the state higher education budget, and they are not the sole policymakers on higher education. An effective master plan must include the Governor and the Legislature. In addition, the state should drop private institutions from the master plan, since they are responsible for their own strategies, and focus the master plan on public higher education. Finally, the state should reverse the current procedure, in which CUNY and SUNY develop their own multi-year plans and submit them to the Regents for approval. Instead, state leaders should set policy goals and communicate those goals to CUNY and SUNY for inclusion in their plans.

Fourth, the state should overhaul the base funding model for community colleges to reflect state policy goals. Those goals include college completion for disadvantaged students, producing graduates for in-demand fields, and adjusting reimbursement to support high-cost majors such as nursing and engineering. Other states have taken important strides in performance financing, notably Tennessee, Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

Fifth, the state should bring together leaders from multiple sectors to develop career pathways and identify gaps in college readiness and transitions. At the very least, the following sectors should be at the table: public higher education, workforce development, adult education and the P-12 system. The Midwestern states in the Shifting Gears initiative offer a good model for New York to adopt.⁸

Sixth, the state should work with SUNY and CUNY on legislation to eliminate gaps in transfer and articulation. Too often, a student who starts at a community college finds his or her credits are not accepted towards a Bachelor’s degree at a four-year college or university. In 2007, more than half of

community colleges in the state reported having “problems with transfer of courses” and “departmental control at 4-year colleges.” Dustin Swanger, President of Fulton-Montgomery Community College, stated: “Too many SUNY Universities still pick and choose the courses that they will accept from community colleges. It is my belief that NYS should mandate through law the transfer courses in ‘common’ programs.”⁹ The state should consider models used in other states to remedy this problem, such as common course numbering or mandated transferability of general education and AA/AS program courses.

Seventh, the state should eliminate the gaps in the Tuition Assistance Program. The state should provide additional support for students on the independent schedule and part-time students, and the state should develop a strategy for supporting non-tuition costs while ensuring that they do not become backdoor tuition hikes.

I appreciate that New York faces major multi-year budget deficits, so for the most part I have avoided appeals for additional funding, despite the clear necessity of such funding to achieve long-term gains in student success. While the State Legislature is not in a position to “spend big” next year, there’s nothing to keep you from thinking big about the structure by which the state finances and governs community colleges and other public institutions of higher education. If you take only one recommendation from today’s testimony, that should be the one.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

¹ Anthony Carnevale et al, *Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2018*, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, June 2010.

² American Community Survey 2008, U.S. Census Bureau.

³ Data compiled by the Office of Research & Information Services, New York State Education Department. The full data set is not reproduced here because of agency concerns that individual institutional data requires editing to assure accuracy.

⁴ Jean Johnson and Jon Rochkind, *With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them: Myths and Realities About Why So Many Students Fail to Finish College*, 2010.

⁵ “Report to the New York State Commission on Higher Education,” Association of Presidents of Public Community Colleges, August 2007.

⁶ Ryan Reyna, *Complete to Compete: Common College Completion Metrics*, NGA Center for Best Practices, June 2010.

⁷ “Community Colleges and the State University of New York: A Study of the Statewide Governance of the SUNY Community Colleges,” National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, August 11, 1999.

⁸ Julie Strawn, *Shifting Gears: State Innovation to Advance Workers and the Economy in the Midwest*, The Joyce Foundation, July 2010.

⁹ “Report to the New York State Commission on Higher Education,” Association of Presidents of Public Community Colleges, August 2007.