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Excelsior Scholarship Serving Very Few New York Students

The Excelsior Scholarship program promises free tuition at CUNY and SUNY colleges. But only 3 percent of public college students are able to take advantage of Excelsior, and students in New York City are especially neglected.

by Tom Hilliard

Governor Cuomo and the State Legislature established New York's Excelsior Scholarship program with the admirable goal of providing free tuition to a large number of low- and middle-income New Yorkers, but our analysis of data from the state's Higher Education Services Corporation shows that the program is serving very few of the students who could benefit the most from free tuition. According to our analysis, barely 4,000 of the 242,000 students attending public colleges and community colleges in New York City have benefited from New York's Excelsior Scholarship program.

Only 20,086 students statewide received an award from the Excelsior program—or just 3.2 percent of the 633,543 undergraduates statewide. But our analysis shows that significantly fewer students in New York City have benefited. Of all students statewide who received an Excelsior Scholarship, only 20.7 percent attend CUNY institutions—even though CUNY students make up 38 percent of all undergraduate enrollment in the state.

Overall, 3,335 students attending CUNY's senior colleges received awards from the Excelsior program—or just 2.3 percent of all those enrolled at CUNY's senior colleges. Meanwhile, 820 students attending CUNY's community colleges benefited from the program—just 0.9 percent of the 95,951 community college students enrolled at CUNY.

At four of New York City's community colleges, 100 or fewer students have received an Excelsior award: Hostos Community College (34 students receiving an award) Guttman Community College (36 students), Bronx Community College (61 students), and Kingsborough Community College (100 students). At all seven community colleges in New York City combined, just 820 students received an Excelsior Scholarship. In fact, four senior colleges in upstate New York each obtained more Excelsior Scholarships than the entire community college system in New York City.

Meanwhile, only two of CUNY's senior colleges—Hunter College and John Jay—saw more than 3 percent of enrolled students obtain an Excelsior award. At ten CUNY schools, fewer than 2 percent of enrolled students received funds.

A disproportionate share of the state's low-income college students attend schools in the five boroughs. Indeed, 60 percent of CUNY students report household income below $30,000, including 71 percent of community college students.

Data on rejected applications reveals that the Excelsior program's heavy credit requirements were the main obstacle for most students. Almost twice as many applicants were rejected for "not sufficient credits" as received Excelsior awards this year. The requirement that all students earn at least 30 credits in every year of enrollment is screening out the majority of applicants for the Excelsior Scholarship.

Governor Cuomo and legislative leaders should make critical reforms to the Excelsior Scholarship Program to ensure that more students who need financial assistance to attend college and earn a credential are able to qualify for this well-intended but flawed program. They should also take other steps to support student success at colleges and community colleges across the state—including helping low-income students overcome non-tuition related financial barriers. Currently, far too few of the students who enroll at SUNY and CUNY end up getting a credential. They should also take other steps to support student success at colleges and community colleges across the state—including helping low-income students overcome non-tuition related financial barriers. Currently, far too few of the students who enroll at SUNY and CUNY end up getting a credential.

The Center for an Urban Future has written extensively about the increasing importance of a college credential in New York State and the barriers that prevent students from achieving college success. Our recent work has documented both the tuition and non-tuition costs of college, and examined strategies that can ensure more students enrolled in college can graduate with a degree.

Excelsior Across New York

- The Excelsior Scholarship program awarded 20,086 scholarships in 2017-18, 3.2 percent of the 633,543 undergraduate students in New York.[1]
- Just 20.7 percent of all scholarship recipients statewide are enrolled at CUNY, even though CUNY students make up 38 percent of all undergraduate enrollment in the state.
- Students at senior colleges were far more likely to obtain Excelsior Scholarships than community college students. Community colleges account for 48 percent of all undergraduate students in New York, but only 27 percent of Excelsior Scholarships.
- Only two of CUNY's senior colleges—Hunter College and John Jay—saw more than 3 percent of enrolled students obtain an Excelsior award.
- At ten CUNY schools, fewer than 2 percent of enrolled students received funds.
- At three CUNY community colleges, fewer than 61 students obtained an award.
- Overall, of the seven community colleges in New York City, just 820 students received an Excelsior Scholarship this year.

Excelsior Scholarships and Undergraduate Enrollment at SUNY and CUNY Institutions, 2017–2018 School Year

Sector	Excelsior Awards	Undergraduate Enrollment	% of Total Enrollment
SUNY			
Community Colleges	4,603	209,233	2.2%
Senior (State Op.) Colleges	11,328	181,956	6.2%
SUNY Total	15,931	391,189	4.1%
CUNY			
Community Colleges	820	95,951	0.9%
Senior Colleges	3,335	146,403	2.3%
CUNY Total	4,155	242,354	1.7%
Community Colleges	5,423	305,184	1.8%
Senior Colleges	14,663	328,359	4.5%
New York Total	20,086	633,543	3.2%

Sources: NYS Higher Education Services Corporation; City University of New York Office of Institutional Research; State University of New York.2

Excelsior at Individual Colleges

- The college with the highest rate of Excelsior Scholarship awards was SUNY-Fredonia (12 percent), followed by SUNY's Geneseo, Cobleskill, Oswego, and Cortland campuses, all with 9 percent.
- The college with the lowest rate of Excelsior Scholarship awards was Hostos Community College (0.5 percent), followed by SUNY-Empire State College and Bronx Community College, both with 0.6 percent.
- The college with the highest number of Excelsior Scholarship awards was SUNY-Buffalo (1,400).

Rejected Applications

- The state received 63,599 applications for Excelsior Scholarships, of which 43,513 were denied, a denial rate of 68 percent.
- By far the most commonly cited reason for denial was "not sufficient credits," which accounted for 36,095 denials, 83 percent of all rejected applications.
- Other cited reasons for denial include exceeding the income limit (6 percent), TAP application missing (5 percent), and non-NY resident (3 percent).

SUNY Excelsior Scholarships

Sector	College	Excelsior Awards	Enrollment	% of Total Enrollment
Community Colleges	Adirondack	136	3,892	3.5%
Community Colleges	Broome	215	5,624	3.8%
Community Colleges	Cayuga County	70	3,784	1.8%
Community Colleges	Clinton	34	1,583	2.1%
Community Colleges	Columbia-Greene	29	1,623	1.8%
Community Colleges	Corning	95	3,834	2.5%
Community Colleges	Dutchess	132	9,061	1.5%
Community Colleges	Erie	289	11,135	2.6%
Community Colleges	Fashion Institute	290	8,661	3.3%
Community Colleges	Finger Lakes	224	6,353	3.5%
Community Colleges	Fulton-Montgomery	60	2,403	2.5%
Community Colleges	Genesee	127	5,906	2.2%
Community Colleges	Herkimer County	89	2,632	3.4%
Community Colleges	Hudson Valley	320	11,020	2.9%
Community Colleges	Jamestown	95	4,463	2.1%
Community Colleges	Jefferson	93	3,460	2.7%
Community Colleges	Mohawk Valley	144	6,506	2.2%
Community Colleges	Monroe	361	12,907	2.8%
Community Colleges	Nassau	240	19,059	1.3%
Community Colleges	Niagara County	165	5,439	3.0%
Community Colleges	North Country	21	2,006	1.0%
Community Colleges	Onondaga	278	10,659	2.6%
Community Colleges	Orange County	153	6,601	2.3%
Community Colleges	Rockland	125	6,950	1.8%
Community Colleges	Schenectady County	68	6,588	1.0%
Community Colleges	Suffolk County	456	26,756	1.7%
Community Colleges	Sullivan County	26	1,565	1.7%
Community Colleges	Tompkins Cortland	77	2,632	2.9%
Community Colleges	Ulster County	60	3,560	1.7%
Community Colleges	Westchester	131	12,571	1.0%
State-Operated Colleges	Albany	995	13,508	7.4%
State-Operated Colleges	Alfred State	357	4,188	8.5%
State-Operated Colleges	Binghamton	935	13,724	6.8%
State-Operated Colleges	Brockport	594	7,180	8.3%
State-Operated Colleges	Buffalo State	525	8,527	6.2%
State-Operated Colleges	Buffalo Univ	1,400	21,020	6.7%
State-Operated Colleges	Canton	167	3,183	5.2%

Sector	College	Excelsior Awards	Enrollment	% of Total Enrollment
State-Operated Colleges	Cobleskill	212	2,297	9.2%
State-Operated Colleges	Cornell Stat	27	5,852	0.5%
State-Operated Colleges	Cortland	552	6,346	8.7%
State-Operated Colleges	Delhi	243	3,467	7.0%
State-Operated Colleges	Empire State	63	9,810	0.6%
State-Operated Colleges	Envir Sci & Forestry	89	1,791	5.0%
State-Operated Colleges	Farmingdale	319	9,552	3.3%
State-Operated Colleges	Fredonia	521	4,393	11.9%
State-Operated Colleges	Geneseo	516	5,524	9.3%
State-Operated Colleges	Maritime	53	1,641	3.2%
State-Operated Colleges	Morrisville	216	3,063	7.1%
State-Operated Colleges	New Paltz	453	6,733	6.7%
State-Operated Colleges	Old Westbury	205	4,635	4.4%
State-Operated Colleges	Oneonta	486	5,940	8.2%
State-Operated Colleges	Oswego	632	7,125	8.9%
State-Operated Colleges	Plattsburgh	338	5,351	6.3%
State-Operated Colleges	Potsdam	210	3,321	6.3%
State-Operated Colleges	Purchase	264	4,063	6.5%
State-Operated Colleges	Stony Brook	830	17,293	4.8%
State-Operated Colleges	SUNY Poly	126	2,179	5.8%

CUNY Excelsior Scholarships

Sector	College	Excelsior Awards	CUNY Enroll	% of Total Enrollment
Community Colleges	BMCC	231	26,932	0.9%

Sector	College	Excelsior Awards	CUNY Enroll	% of Total Enrollment
Community Colleges	Bronx	61	10,935	0.6%
Community Colleges	Guttman	36	1,066	3.4%
Community Colleges	Hostos	34	7,211	0.5%
Community Colleges	Kingsborough	100	15,034	0.7%
Community Colleges	LaGuardia	173	19,373	0.9%
Community Colleges	Queensborough	185	15,400	1.2%
Senior Colleges	Baruch	362	15,253	2.4%
Senior Colleges	Brooklyn	348	14,689	2.4%
Senior Colleges	City	343	13,210	2.6%
Senior Colleges	Hunter	567	16,844	3.4%
Senior Colleges	John Jay	404	12,916	3.1%
Senior Colleges	Lehman	168	11,978	1.4%
Senior Colleges	Medgar Evans	81	6,652	1.2%
Senior Colleges	NYCCT	244	17,279	1.4%
Senior Colleges	Queens	374	16,680	2.2%
Senior Colleges	Staten Island	290	12,509	2.3%
Senior Colleges	York	154	8,393	1.8%

Sources: NYS Higher Education Services Corporation; City University of New York Office of Institutional Research.

[1.] Note that this total excludes two colleges at which fewer than ten students received grants. The precise number of awards was therefore suppressed for reasons of student privacy.
2. For SUNY enrollment data, click here. For 2017-18 CUNY enrollment data click here.

For more on this topic, check out:

- *Degrees of Difficulty: Boosting College Success in New York City*, December 2017
- *Want to Expand Economic Opportunity, Governor Cuomo? Help NYC Tackle Student Success*, December 2017
- *Struggling to the Finish Line: Community College Completion in New York State*, December 2017

- *Completion Day*, June 2013

Photo Credit: Brad Clinesmith/Thought Catalog

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Center for an Urban Future (CUF) is an independent, nonprofit think tank that generates innovative policies to create jobs, reduce inequality and help lower income New Yorkers climb into the middle class. For 20 years, CUF has published accessible, data-driven reports on ways to grow and diversify the economy and expand opportunity that are anchored in rigorous research, not preconceived notions about outcome. Our work has been a powerful catalyst for policy change in New York City and serves as an invaluable resource for government officials, community groups, nonprofit practitioners and business leaders as they advocate for and implement policies to address some of New York's biggest challenges and opportunities.

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