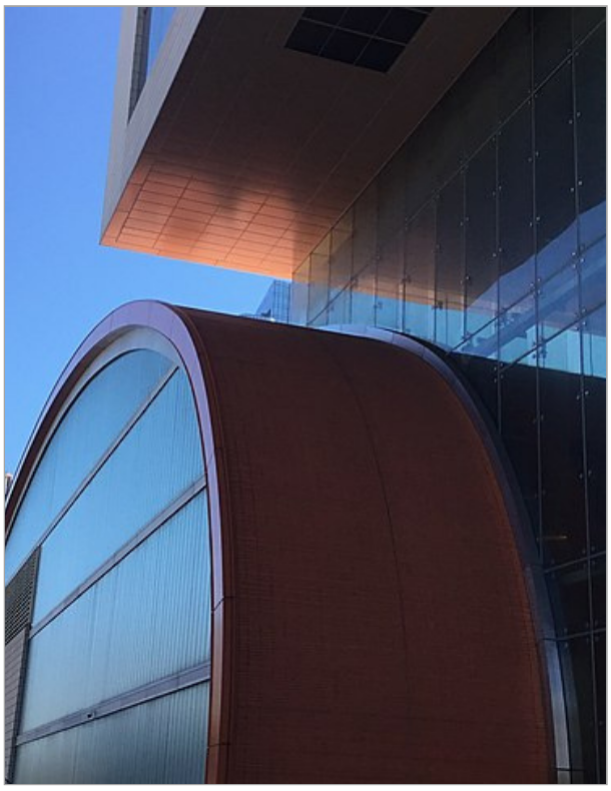
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Testimony - February 2026

Investing in CUNY to Expand Pathways to Careers

In this testimony before the NYC Council Committees on Higher Education and Workforce Development, Editorial & Policy Director Eli Dvorkin lays out the labor market challenges facing CUNY graduates, and proposes ways the City Council can invest in workforce development to ensure CUNY remains an engine of economic mobility for New Yorkers.

by Eli Dvorkin

Testimony of Eli Dvorkin
Editorial & Policy Director, Center for an Urban Future
Before the New York City Council Committees on Higher Education and Workforce Development
Oversight Hearing on Aligning Higher Education with Workforce Demand
February 27, 2026

Good morning Chair Joseph, Chair Won, and members of the Committees.

My name is Eli Dvorkin, and I'm the editorial and policy director at the Center for an Urban Future. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Let me start with some good news: CUNY remains the single largest and most effective engine of economic mobility in New York City.

Today, CUNY is doing more than ever to align education with workforce demand—from expanding work-based learning and employer partnerships to launching initiatives like CUNY 2X Tech, the Inclusive Economy Initiative, and now the broader CUNY Beyond effort.

But the labor market is changing faster than ever—and the scale of the challenge has grown.

Far too many students still struggle to translate academic achievement into strong career outcomes.

Just two-thirds of CUNY graduates are employed within a year. Many earn less than a living wage in New York City. One in ten alumni end up in retail or food service five years after graduation—rising to 13 percent for community college graduates. Even graduates who enter high-wage fields sometimes earn only half the median wage of peers in the same industry.

And they are graduating into the toughest entry-level job market in years. Since 2022, our research shows that entry-level postings requiring little or no experience have plunged 37.4 percent, and internships are down 37.1 percent compared to before the pandemic.

At the same time, only 12 percent of CUNY undergraduates complete a paid internship—far below the national average of 57 percent.

In this environment, career success should be embedded across the institution—or this economic mobility engine could stall.

To CUNY's credit, momentum is building.

Under Chancellor Félix Matos Rodríguez, career success has become a central priority. Last October, the university launched CUNY Beyond—a systemwide effort to make career-connected learning a core part of every student's experience. CUNY has embedded industry specialists in select departments, expanded paid internships, strengthened employer partnerships, and grown initiatives like 2X Tech and the Inclusive Economy Initiative.

Early results are promising. Participating departments report higher internship participation, stronger job placement, and higher starting wages.

But these efforts still reach only a fraction of students. The Inclusive Economy Initiative currently touches just 9 percent of CUNY's 450 academic departments.

If CUNY is to remain the city's most powerful engine of upward mobility, city policymakers should help scale what's working—and help the university adapt more quickly to a changing economy.

The Council can play a decisive role.

First, make a major public commitment—backed by funding—to scale career success efforts across CUNY.

That means:

- Expanding the Inclusive Economy Initiative to reach at least half of all departments.
- Building campus-level capacity by hiring more hybrid academic–career advisors and embedded industry specialists.
- Renewing and expanding proven efforts like CUNY 2X Tech—and replicating that model in additional sectors.
- Growing the Practitioners-in-Residence Corps into healthcare, business, and professional services.
- And setting a clear goal: ensuring at least 30 percent of students complete a paid internship or work-based learning experience before graduation.

Without a measurable target—and the resources to meet it—tens of thousands of graduates will continue leaving CUNY each year with degrees but limited work experience.

Second, invest in the infrastructure needed to manage employer partnerships at scale.

CUNY has begun piloting a systemwide CRM platform, but philanthropic dollars alone cannot bring it to full implementation. Today, separate campus systems lead to duplicative outreach and missed opportunities. A fully scaled CRM would allow undergraduate campuses to coordinate engagement, track outcomes, and present a seamless face to employers.

Third, expand paid internship capacity directly.

A Pay It Forward revolving internship fund—seeded with city dollars and repaid when employers hire interns full-time—could dramatically expand subsidized placements. Today, CUNY can fund only about 20 percent of campus requests. Demand far exceeds supply.

Fourth, lead by example.

City government is one of New York's largest employers, yet remains an underutilized launchpad for CUNY talent. Agencies should significantly expand CUNY internships and create clearer internship-to-employment pathways.

These are tangible steps the Council can advance through the budget and oversight.

But action should go beyond scaling career success efforts at CUNY alone.

To better align higher education with workforce demand, workforce development should be elevated as a core affordability strategy.

That includes:

- Making a bold new investment in workforce development—through a NYC Talent Development Fund, a Career Impact Bond, a Workforce AI Readiness Fund, or by tapping funds from rezonings—to scale what works.
- Establishing an Economic Mobility Cabinet and Workforce Czar to coordinate policy across agencies and hold the system accountable for measurable economic mobility gains.
- Recruiting the next 100 major employers into structured partnerships with CUNY and other providers—expanding skills-based hiring, paid internships, and clear pipelines into good jobs.
- Tackling the biggest nontuition barriers, including a free OMNY Card and childcare on day one, to improve access to higher education and evidence-based workforce development programs for low-income and working New Yorkers.

The stakes could not be higher.

City leaders have rightly made affordability the top priority. Strengthening career success for CUNY students should be central to that strategy—because boosting incomes is just as important as lowering costs.

CUNY is generating momentum. But without sustained city investment, infrastructure, and accountability, it will be difficult to meet the demands of this moment.

With bold action from the Council, CUNY can transform career outcomes for tens of thousands more New Yorkers each year—and remain the city's most powerful engine of economic mobility.

Thank you.

Read the full report, *5 Ideas for How Mayor Mamdani Can Bolster Workforce Development*, for more ideas for how the city can strengthen workforce development and expand access to middle wage careers.

The report was made possible thanks to The New York City Workforce Funders Collaborative. We are also grateful for general support from The Clark Foundation and the Altman Foundation, support from Fisher Brothers Foundation for CUF's Middle Class Jobs Project, and ongoing support from a number of other philanthropic funders.

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