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Strengthening CUNY's Vital Role as a Launchpad into Tech Careers

In this testimony before the NYC Council Committee on Economic Development & Committee on Higher Education, CUF policy director Eli Dvorkin highlights three specific recommendations for the Council to fully harness CUNY as a launchpad into tech careers.

by Eli Dvorkin

Testimony of Eli Dvorkin

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Before the NYC Council Committee on Economic Development & Committee on Higher Education

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Good afternoon.

My name is Eli Dvorkin and I'm the editorial and policy director at the Center for an Urban Future, an independent research organization focused on building a stronger and more equitable economy in New York.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I know much of today's hearing is focused on CUNY's offerings for adult and continuing education students. These programs provide an important set of opportunities for working New Yorkers to gain new skills, earn credentials aligned with real labor market needs, access promising career pathways, and boost their earnings. CUNY's continuing education programs also

face challenges with declining enrollment due to the pandemic, as well as the unique financial barriers that affect prospective continuing education students who have few options for financial aid—and which could be addressed with new scholarship programs specifically designed for short-term career training programs at CUNY.

However, I'm here today to talk about another aspect of CUNY's role in New York City's talent development ecosystem: as a launchpad into the city's fast-growing technology sector.

Over the past decade, New York City's tech sector has added 114,000 jobs, becoming the city's most consistent source of new middle- and high-wage jobs at a time when other leading industries such as hopsitals added just 4,000 jobs. But even as demand surges, New Yorkers of color and women remain strikingly underrepresented among the city's tech workforce. To create a more equitable economy, this will have to change.

Fortunately, no institution is better positioned to accelerate efforts to expand access to tech careers than CUNY. CUNY graduates more than 9,000 students annually with science, technology, engineering, and math degrees, including nearly 4,000 students with technology degrees. Approximately half of these students are Black and/or Hispanic, and roughly 71 percent of all CUNY students come from households earning less than $40,000 per year.

However, New York has only just begun to harness CUNY's remarkable potential to serve as the city's largest and most equitable springboard into technology careers.

Today, most tech companies in the city employ few if any CUNY grads. In fact, just half of all CUNY computer science graduates from 2017 to 2021 were employed in their field of study one year after graduation—and these graduates earn 31 percent less than the average entry-level worker in a computing occupation.

Our research suggests that one of the main drivers of these uneven outcomes is CUNY's internship gap. Even as more students are earning undergraduate computer science degrees at CUNY than at any other university in New York City, they find themselves in fierce competition for a limited supply of internships. Just 10 percent of all CUNY students report participating in a paid internship during their college careers—an especially serious problem for students aspiring to jobs in tech, where internships are practically essential.

To seize on these opportunities and address these persistent barriers to career success, city leaders will need to double down on what's already working. Fortunately, New York City has launched several successful programs that are helping CUNY students pursue technology degrees and break into careers, but these initiatives still serve only a fraction of the students who could benefit from them. For example, 75 percent of participants in CUNY's Tech Prep program report landing a job or internship within five months of completion. But Tech Prep serves just 170 students annually—less than 1 percent of all CUNY students pursuing technology degrees. The $20 million CUNY 2X Tech initiative has only reached 7 of 25 colleges so far, with no community colleges served to date, and is now up for renewal, or at risk of ending. And while CUNY students who participate in the city's Tech Talent Pipeline Residency internship program are more than three times as likely to secure a full-time job after graduation compared to their peers, the program has only served about 750 students over the past five years. Compounding these capacity challenges, our research finds that most CUNY colleges have no more than two or three career counselors per 10,000 students.

Creating a more equitable economy in New York City will require bold new efforts to expand access to the well-paying jobs in the city's ever-growing tech sector—and CUNY is the institution best positioned to help city leaders realize these goals at scale.

In the coming days, the Center for an Urban Future will be publishing a new report entirely focused on seizing this opportunity, including more than a dozen concrete recommendations for fully harnessing CUNY as a launchpad into tech careers.

For now, please allow me to mention three specific recommendations:

1. **Build on the track record of CUNY 2X Tech by launching a new CUNY Tech Success initiative to sustain and scale these efforts, including CUNY Tech Prep, the Tech-in-Residence Corps, and the Tech Talent Pipeline Residency internship program**. The most successful of these programs should be baselined in the city's annual budget, with additional funding allocated to expand these initiatives to the colleges that lack them today, including City Tech and most of CUNY's community colleges.
2. **Support a major expansion of career services and employer relations staff at every CUNY college**. There is a lot more that CUNY needs to do to strengthen career services and employer engagement across every college in the system, but CUNY cannot do this alone. City leaders should work together to specifically support a major expansion of career services and employer relations professionals on campus with the goal of bringing down the sky-high ratios of career counselors to students and making CUNY much more accessible to employers.
3. **Partner with tech industry leaders to launch 2,500 new paid tech industry internships by 2025, with a focus on recruiting from CUNY**. The City Council can help spearhead a major new expansion of paid internships in tech—including by helping to scale existing models like Break Through Tech's innovative Sprinternship program and Company Ventures' CUNY summer internship; investing in youth apprenticeship programs aligned with tech careers; and partnering on expanded participation from the tech sector in SYEP, among other opportunities.

For much more on these and other ideas, please check out our website at nycfuture.org, and thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

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