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Testimony - November 2023

Supercharging CUNY Reconnect to Support Returning Students

In this testimony before the NYC Council Committee on Higher Education, CUF Senior Fellow John Surico, on behalf of CUF Policy Director Eli Dvorkin, makes the case to further support the CUNY Reconnect program to help ensure that far more returning students succeed the second time around in postsecondary education.

by Eli Dvorkin

Testimony of John Surico
Senior Fellow, Center for an Urban Future
Before the New York City Council
Committee on Higher Education
on the CUNY Reconnect Program
November 30, 2023

Good morning. I'm John Surico, senior fellow at the Center for an Urban Future, an independent think thank focused on creating a stronger and more inclusive economy in New York. I'm testifying today on behalf of CUF's editorial and policy director, Eli Dvorkin. Thank you to Chair Dinowitz and members of the committee for the opportunity.

To help more New Yorkers get ahead in today's fast-changing economy, there are few efforts more worthwhile than boosting college attainment.

Most well-paying jobs growing in the city typically require some form of postsecondary credential. That has only become more apparent as accessible industries like retail, hospitality, and manufacturing continue to struggle in the wake of the pandemic, even as tech, healthcare, professional services, and finance have all exceeded their pre-pandemic jobs totals.

At the same time, an estimated 642,529 working-age New Yorkers have some college credits but no degree. Helping more of these New Yorkers get to the college finish line is one of the most effective steps that city government can take to boost economic mobility—and that's exactly what the CUNY Reconnect initiative is doing.

We commend the City Council for its leadership in sparking and supporting CUNY Reconnect, which has grown in less than two years to become one of the largest and most inclusive college comeback initiatives in the nation.

Today, more than 26,000 students have reenrolled in CUNY thanks to Reconnect. The majority of these students are Black and Hispanic, and women, and most are over the age of 24.

Among those students who participated in the first cohort of CUNY Reconnect last year, more than 1,900 have already earned credentials. This is a powerful achievement and underscores the value of CUNY Reconnect as an investment in the city's future.

New Yorkers with bachelor's degrees can expect to earn about $1.6 million more over a lifetime than workers with some college but no degree. For every 500 students who earn bachelor's degrees thanks to CUNY Reconnect, an additional $800 million is generated in lifetime earnings. And with most CUNY graduates choosing to remain in New York, the benefits for the city's economy and communities are enormous.

But there is still work to be done. Even as CUNY Reconnect has exceeded expectations in its first year and a half of operation, there are tens of thousands more New Yorkers who have yet to benefit. At the same time, while CUNY has seen a welcome uptick in overall enrollment this fall, the system remains nearly 50,000 students below the pre-pandemic level and will need additional support to rebound.

First, the City Council should continue supporting CUNY Reconnect and work with the administration to renew funding in the upcoming budget. This program has been a resounding success and deserves to continue and grow in the years ahead.

Second, the Council should consider targeted new investments that can supercharge the effectiveness of CUNY Reconnect and help ensure that far more returning students succeed the second time around.

Our research finds that many of the biggest barriers to college completion are the non-tuition costs, including a MetroCard, childcare, technology, and books. As the Council explores ways to strengthen the CUNY Reconnect program, new supports to tackle these non-tuition costs should be a top priority.

One simple idea is to give every returning student—or every community college student—a free MetroCard from day one.

Other options include additional resources to settle unpaid student balances, which prevent many prospective students from reenrolling at CUNY; expanded evening and weekend hours for on-campus childcare, libraries, and other services; and additional investment in pre-screening for benefits so that returning students have access to the full range of supports to which they are entitled.

CUNY Reconnect has become a vital new onramp into CUNY, the city's most effective economic mobility engine. With renewed support from the Council, this program can become even more inclusive and effective in the years to come.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

The Center for an Urban Future initially proposed the creation of the CUNY Reconnect program in a2022 policy brief, "Reengaging Adult Learners to Complete College Degrees: Learning From Tennessee."



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