

Building New York's Workforce: The Case for Sustainable Community College Funding

SUNY Board of Trustees — Public Comment Session

George W. Cushman, Chair

New York Community College Trustees Association

May 26, 2026

Good morning Chair Tisch, and members of the Board. I am George Cushman, Chair of NYCCT. I am here today on behalf of the students, faculty, staff, and trustees of all thirty SUNY community colleges — and I want to begin with gratitude.

The \$8 million allocated in 2023–24 for mental health support and high-need workforce programs, and the additional \$8 million in 2024–25 to expand those programs further, have made a real and tangible difference. Colleges across the state are launching new pathways, hiring instructors, and serving students who need us. We are grateful for that investment, and proud of what has been built.

I do want to be candid with this Board about something. These funds are restricted. They require applications, compliance documentation, and ongoing reporting — and for institutions of our size, that administrative burden is real. Our teams carry it willingly, because the mission is worth it. But restricted funds are not the same as general operating funds, and this Board should understand that distinction clearly.

The operating picture at SUNY community colleges has become genuinely serious. A decade of base aid that has not kept pace with inflation has created a compounding structural deficit. Pandemic relief reserves are nearly exhausted. Personnel and facilities costs continue to climb. And the “floor” funding, quietly and over time, has shifted an ever-larger share of operating costs onto students and counties. The students we serve — working parents, GED graduates,

low-income New Yorkers trying to change the trajectory of their lives — can absorb very little more.

We are not asking for a rescue. We are asking for a partnership. Our first and strongest ask is this: where additional state funds can flow to community colleges, we ask that they come as flexible operating support — dollars that college leadership can direct where the need is greatest, without the overhead of a restricted funds application cycle.

If that is not possible, we offer a focused alternative — and we believe in it deeply. The Governor’s commitment and SUNY’s leadership have helped drive real enrollment growth, particularly in high-need and STEM-related programs. That momentum is worth protecting. But enrollment without completion is an incomplete promise.

High-need programs are expensive to support well. STEM students need tutors. Students with disabilities need assistive technology. First-generation students and working parents need retention programming and wrap-around support. Faculty and staff need professional development to move the needle on completion, not just enrollment. We ask that any additional funds be structured to support our academic momentum and completion agendas — with the flexibility for each college to deploy them where they will have the greatest local impact. Done well, this puts more students on meaningful career pathways, and more on the road to transfer to SUNY four-year universities.

SUNY community colleges are where New York’s workforce is built, and where second chances become first-rate careers. We are grateful for your support, and we ask you to carry this message forward.

Thank you.

Testimony Before the SUNY Board of Trustees

Public Hearing — May 26, 2026

Grant Valentine, Trustee, Rockland Community College

Chair, Governance Committee, New York Community College Trustees

Good morning, Chairman Tisch and members of the Board.

My name is Grant Valentine. I serve as a Trustee of Rockland Community College and as Chair of the Governance Committee of the New York Community College Trustees. I come before you today as a partner and grateful for this Board's continued commitment to community colleges across our state.

Community Colleges represent 45% of all students in the SUNY system. They are predominantly women, first-generation college students, and parents. Individuals for whom higher education is not a traditional pathway but a hard-won opportunity. SUNY's support for these institutions is support for the students who need this system most. For that, we are genuinely grateful.

These students are not at the end of the educational pipeline; they are at its foundation. Community Colleges prepare them to transfer to four-year institutions, many within the SUNY system itself, and to enter a workforce with urgent demand for skilled talent in healthcare, cybersecurity, advanced manufacturing, and other critical fields. When a community college student graduates, everybody wins; the student, the university system, the regional economy, and a state that has invested in keeping its talent home.

But gratitude compels honesty. And honest partnership asks us to examine not just whether we are investing, but whether we are investing wisely.

When allocations arrive at our colleges with conditions attached, they reflect a uniformity that simply does not exist. The needs of Rockland Community College are not the needs of North Country or Suffolk Community College. Each institution carries a distinct student population, distinct workforce landscape, and distinct set of completion barriers. No centralized framework fully captures that reality.

The presidents of our community colleges do. They see it daily; in their enrollment data, in their student services offices, in the faces of students who are one childcare disruption or one emergency expense away from dropping out.

Our ask to this Board is straightforward: place the disbursement of allocated funds in the hands of our college presidents. The discretion afforded to presidents across this university system reflects a trust that has been earned and our community college presidents have earned it too. Not without accountability but with the trust and flexibility that institutional expertise deserves.

Because the measure of our investment should not be how many students walk through the door. It should be how many walk across the stage.

Enrollment gets them in. Empowered presidents with the resources and flexibility to respond to real needs in real time will get them to graduation.

That is the investment this Board can make today. And we are confident you will.

Thank you.

SUNY Board of Trustees – Public Comment Session

Josh Barr

Onondaga Community College 2026 Graduate

May 26, 2026

Good morning and thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak at this public hearing. My name is Josh Barr. I'm a 42-year-old single father and recovering heroin addict. I began a life of sobriety on October 6, 2023, then I decided to set an example for my son by pursuing an education at Onondaga Community College. I had a great first semester, was welcomed into the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society, and kept going. Earlier this month, I'm proud to say I completed my Computer Information Systems degree. While I worked harder than I've ever worked to get to the finish line, I want you to know I didn't get here by myself. There was support for me in every corner of this campus. That support included my wonderful student navigator who was always available to answer any questions I had, our on-campus tutoring center where I could go for help with my coursework, and my great professors who worked with me both inside and outside of class. And now, even though I am no longer a student at O-C-C, the doors of the college's Career Center are still open to me. They are helping me write my resume and begin my job search. I want each of you to know how critically important the support we receive is... whether we plan to go into the workforce next, or transfer to another school. There is always someone willing to help. Having so much support around me made an invaluable difference in the course of my education and my life. I know the cost of everything is rising, and I hope you will be able to continue to support future students just like myself. Your support truly makes the difference between success and failure. Thank you for your time.

Relationship Building

SUNY Board of Trustees – Public Comment Session

Wendy W. Waters

Chair-Elect, New York Community College Trustees Association

Chair, Mohawk Valley Community College

May 26, 2026

Good morning, Chair Tisch; and members of the SUNY Board. My name is Wendy Waters, Chair-Elect of NYCCT, and I am speaking with you today on behalf of the students, faculty, staff, and trustees of all thirty SUNY community colleges.

As noted in my submission, the theme of my comments is “Relationship Building.”

First, please be aware how grateful we are that George Cushman, Chair of NYCCT, and I, have had the opportunity to meet monthly with Vice Chancellor Valerie Dent and Vice Chancellor Will Schwartz. Our discussions have been amiable, frank and forthright, and have led to a deeper understanding of the entities we represent. As we learn from each other, we are confident that our trusting relationship will benefit our community colleges and SUNY Central. As was said at a recent conference, “When you meet one community college, you meet one community college.” Our needs, our struggles, our successes, and our communities, are quite unique. And the more we can share that uniqueness and how our fiduciarily-responsible Boards and Presidents respond to those needs, struggles, and successes, the more we hope to gain the support of all whom we rely on to fulfill our missions.

And as we continue to build trusting relationships, we would like to respond to Trustee Duffy’s offer to meet with him and the SUNY Board’s Community College committee. When Chair Duffy attended our state conference last fall, we engaged

in fruitful conversations regarding the community college sector, and we would like to have additional opportunities to meet – trustees to trustees – to continue those conversations. We hope that we can schedule that initial meeting in the very near future.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the multiple opportunities we have had to engage with Trustee Vacin. Thank you, Trustee Vacin, for keeping the door open for continued courageous conversations that benefit us all.

As we continue to build trusting relationships with all those interested in the success of New York's Community Colleges, we understand that some topics will be more difficult to reach agreement about than others. For example, to echo Chair Cushman's remarks, we hope the trusting partnership we are creating will influence SUNY to do the following: where any additional state funds can flow to community colleges, we ask that they come as flexible operating support – dollars that college leadership can direct where the need is greatest, without the overhead of restricted funds and a grant-application cycle that burdens often short-staffed departments.

In closing, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this morning. We are pleased that Chair Tisch, and Trustees Duffy and Vacin have attended our conferences, and we invite all of you to Saratoga September 16th to the 18th. I look forward to seeing you all at the June 2nd SUNY Board Meeting and at the State of the University event the following day.

The more we can build and deepen these relationships, the stronger our colleges and our communities will be.