



NEW YORK CITY COMPTROLLER  
**BRAD LANDER**

Spotlight —————  
**CUNY and the  
New York City  
Economy**

April 9, 2024

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# Introduction

The City University of New York (CUNY) is a foundational component of New York City and State’s commitment to quality, affordable higher education. Comprising 25 campuses—eleven senior colleges, seven community colleges, and seven graduate and professional schools—CUNY is the largest urban university system in the United States. It serves over 225,000 students and employs approximately 40,000 staff, including 18,000 full-time and part-time faculty. [Research](#) has shown that CUNY’s schools are among the best in the country at helping low- and moderate-income families move up the socioeconomic ladder.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, CUNY has faced notable budget and operational constraints. Enrollment has declined nearly 15 percent since fall 2019—though it increased slightly from the 2023 to 2024 academic years—impacting tuition revenue and funding. In addition, under the City’s successive Programs to Eliminate the Gap (PEGs) since January 2022, CUNY faces a cumulative \$95 million of recurring annual cuts. Finally, federal COVID stimulus funds—whose allocation to CUNY amounted to \$112 million in fiscal year 2024 and \$1.6 billion in total since 2020—will have fully expired by July 2024.<sup>1</sup> These constraints are further discussed in Section IV of this Spotlight.

In this Spotlight, we explore CUNY’s role in the New York economy. Our analysis highlights CUNY’s vital role as an engine of economic mobility and as a major contributor to economic growth in both the city and state. We look at the university’s student body, a racially and socioeconomically diverse group of scholars who graduate with significantly less debt than they would at comparable universities. We examine earnings and employment among CUNY graduates, finding that alumni have a strong propensity for economic mobility, overwhelmingly remain in New York State, and contribute billions in local and state income tax revenue. We also review CUNY’s workforce, a group of over 40,000 faculty, instructors, and operational staff. We end with an overview of CUNY’s current budget challenges.

Our findings underscore the tremendous benefit CUNY offers New York City’s families and its economy, and the critical importance of investing in the CUNY system.

# I. CUNY Students

CUNY had over 225,000 total enrolled students as of fall 2022, approximately 67,000 of whom are in the system’s community colleges. Table 1 breaks out CUNY’s student body by degree pursued. While the bulk of students pursue a bachelor’s or associate degree, over ten percent take courses or enroll in continuing education programs without intending to complete a degree.

**Table 1. CUNY Enrollment by Degree Type, Fall 2022**

	Number enrolled	Percent
Associate	61,399	27%
Baccalaureate	112,820	50%
Master's	22,311	10%
Doctoral or Professional	4,235	2%
Certificate	2,431	1%
Non-degree	22,685	10%
<b>Total</b>	<b>225,881</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: CUNY fall 2022 enrollment data

CUNY’s enrollment demographics, as shown in Table 2, reveal a student body with a wide range of racial, national, familial, and socioeconomic backgrounds—reflecting the vibrant diversity of the city itself.

**Table 2. CUNY Enrollment by the Numbers**

Demographics:
➤ 76% students of color
➤ 60% first generation college students
➤ 58% women <sup>1</sup>
➤ 38% speak a native language other than English
➤ 34% born outside the U.S. mainland
➤ 22% of undergraduates are age 25 or older
➤ 13% parents of dependent children
New York City residency:
➤ 95% NYC residents
➤ 82% went to NYC public high school
Socioeconomic status & work:
➤ 57% Pell Grant recipients
➤ 49% work for pay while students

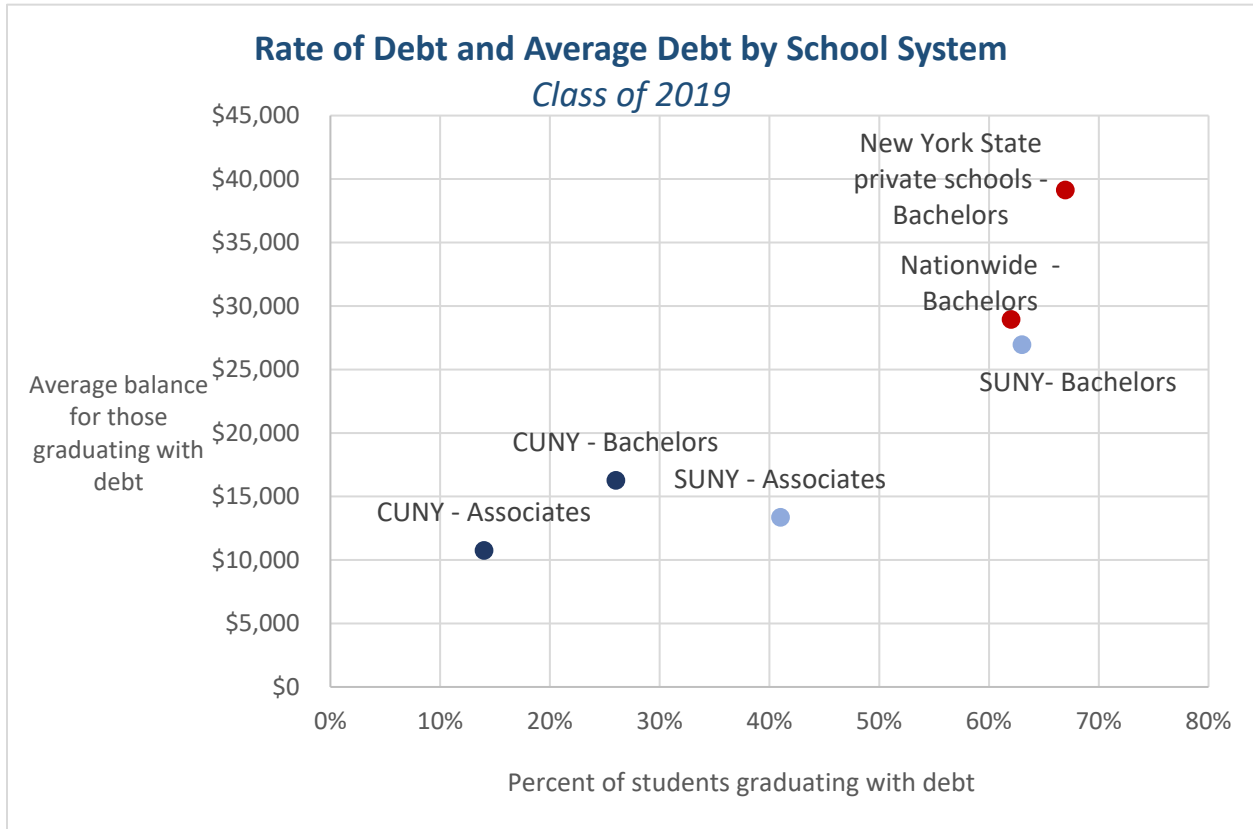
Sources: CUNY fall 2022 enrollment data; fall 2021 undergraduate profile; 2022 Student Experience Survey

Some CUNY students experience housing insecurity. According to the university system's 2022 Student Experience Survey, 18 percent of its four-year college students have not been able to make a rent or mortgage payment in full in the last 12 months. Nationally, this figure stands around 16 percent.<sup>2</sup> Most CUNY campuses do not have student housing options, and even the six colleges that do have far fewer units available than students, presenting challenges for the housing insecure.<sup>3</sup>

CUNY students, on average, take longer to complete their degrees than other students nationwide. According to CUNY's Student Data Book, 55 percent of students from the 2016 baccalaureate cohort graduated within six years (by the end of 2022). Across all colleges in New York State, the 2016 cohort's six-year baccalaureate graduation rate stood at 70 percent, while nationwide the figure was 65 percent.<sup>4</sup> Part of the discrepancy may come from the fact that, relative to state and national benchmarks, a greater proportion of CUNY students come from low-income backgrounds or need to work to support their families, both of which can adversely affect time to graduation.<sup>5</sup>

Chart 1 indicates CUNY's students fare far better at avoiding excessive student debt compared to their counterparts across the country, at private schools in New York State, and even at SUNY, the state's public university system. Only 26 percent of CUNY's 2019 baccalaureate recipients graduated with any student debt, and for those that did, their outstanding balance averaged around \$16,000. This is compared to New York State's private schools, from which 67 percent of baccalaureate students graduated with student debt in 2019, with an average outstanding balance of almost \$40,000 among them.

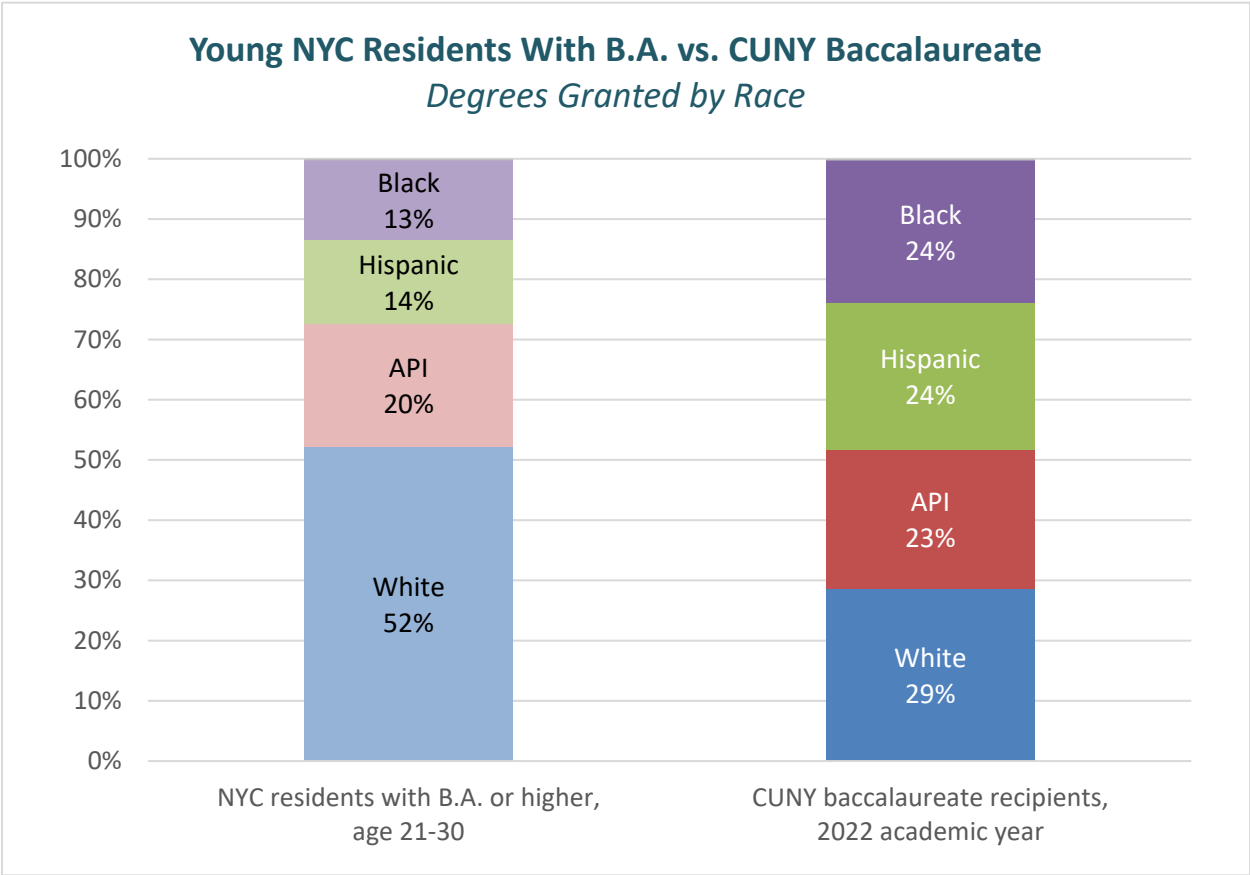
# Chart 1



Sources: Institute for College Access and Success - Student Debt and the Class of 2019; SUNY Fast Facts; National Center for Education Statistics

CUNY serves a more racially and ethnically diverse student body than many other New Yorkers' alma maters. Chart 2.A shows that while the full set of young New Yorkers with a B.A. or higher is 52 percent white, and just over a quarter are Black and Hispanic combined, CUNY's baccalaureate recipients are nearly evenly split among white, Black, Hispanic, and Asian and Pacific Islander individuals.

# Chart 2.A

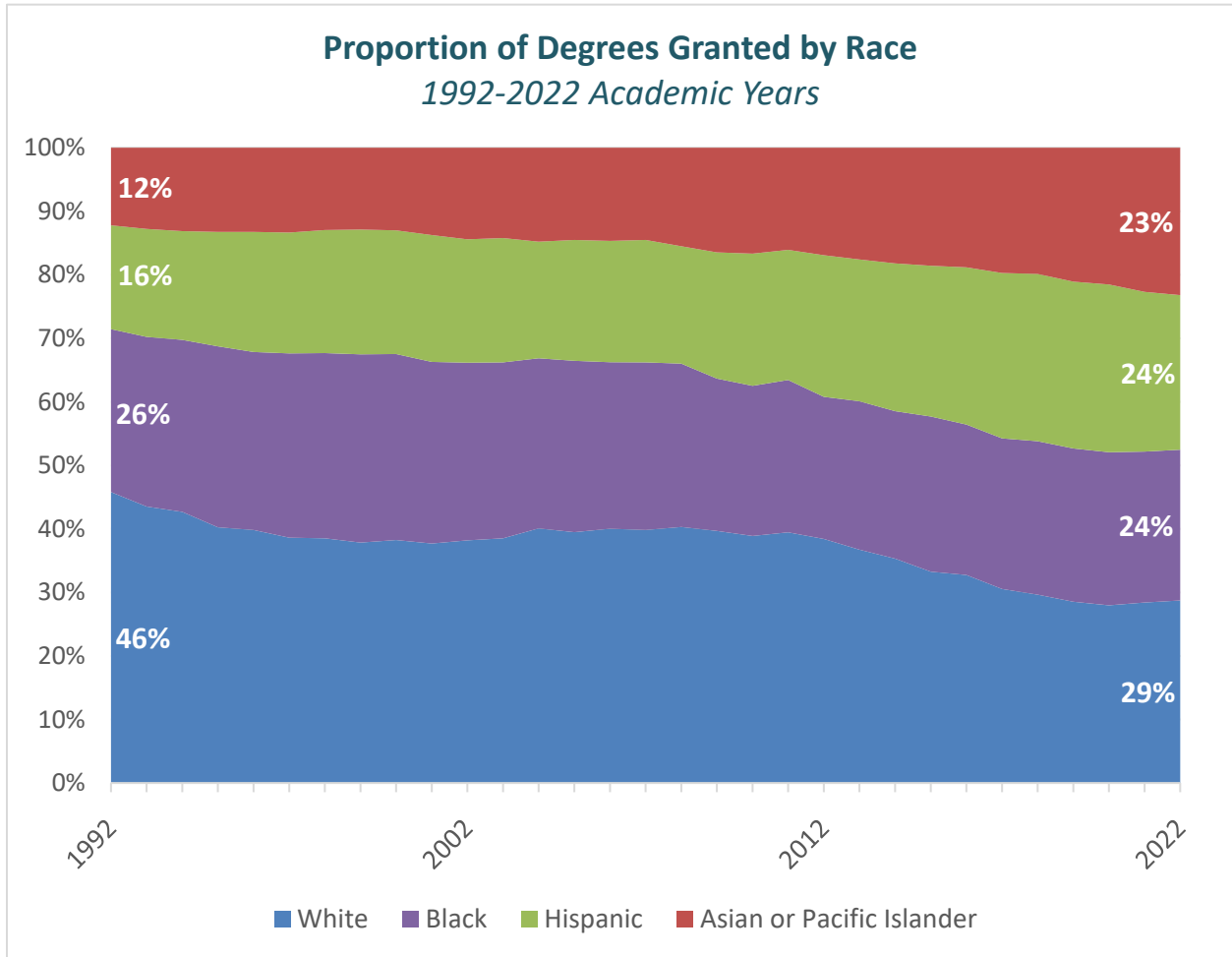


Source: ACS 2022 1-year survey; CUNY Student Data Book

Chart 2.B depicts the change over time in the student body’s racial composition, revealing that over the past three decades CUNY has significantly increased its share of Hispanic and API graduates.



## Chart 2.B



Source: CUNY Student Data Book

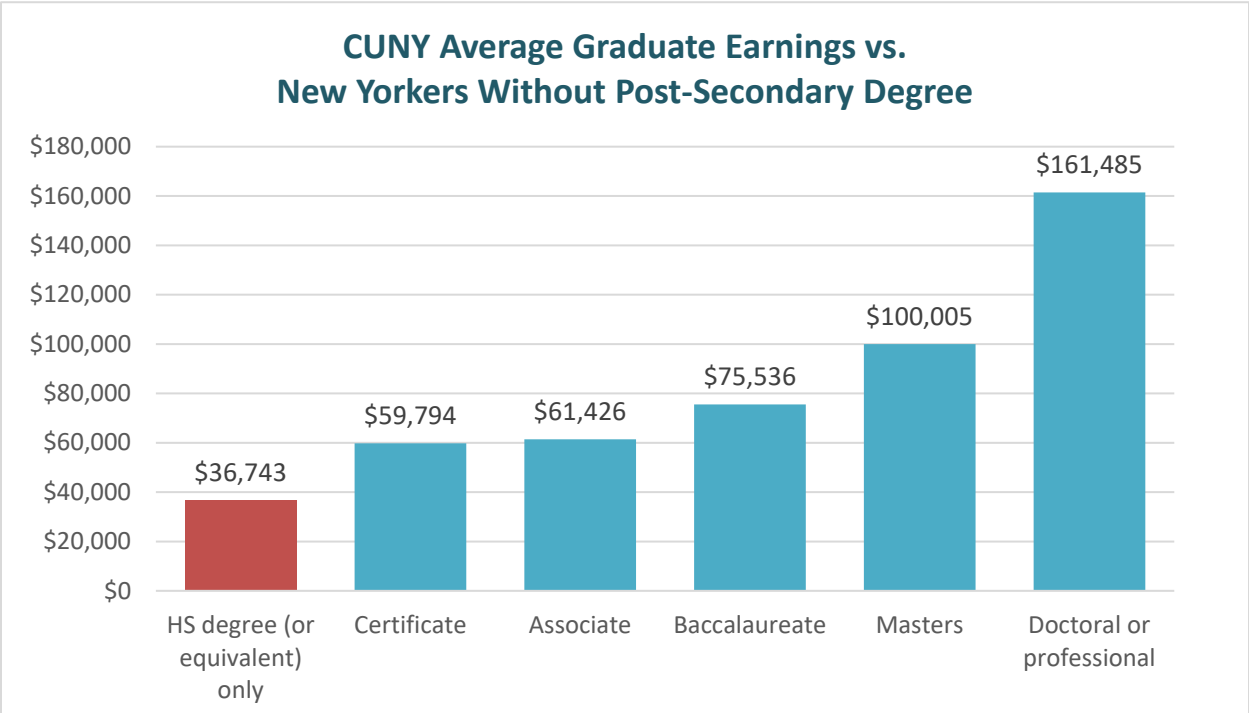
NOTE: American Indian and Native Alaskan students make up less than 0.3% of the student body.

# II. CUNY Graduates

Among the CUNY system’s most notable characteristics is its ability to help low- and moderate-income households move up the socioeconomic ladder. According to a [Brookings Institute](#) study, *six of the top ten colleges nationwide* for bottom-to-top economic mobility are CUNY colleges.<sup>6</sup> Public policy think tank [Third Way](#) ranks CUNY schools among the best in the nation for both enrolling a high proportion of students from low- and moderate-income backgrounds and providing a strong return on their educational investment.<sup>7</sup>

The earnings data in Chart 3 lend support to these studies. A CUNY associate degree alone yields, on average, 67 percent higher earnings than those of prime-age New Yorkers with only a high school degree. That figure jumps to 106 percent for CUNY’s baccalaureates, 172 percent for its master’s graduates, and 340 percent for its doctoral and professional graduates.<sup>8</sup>

Chart 3

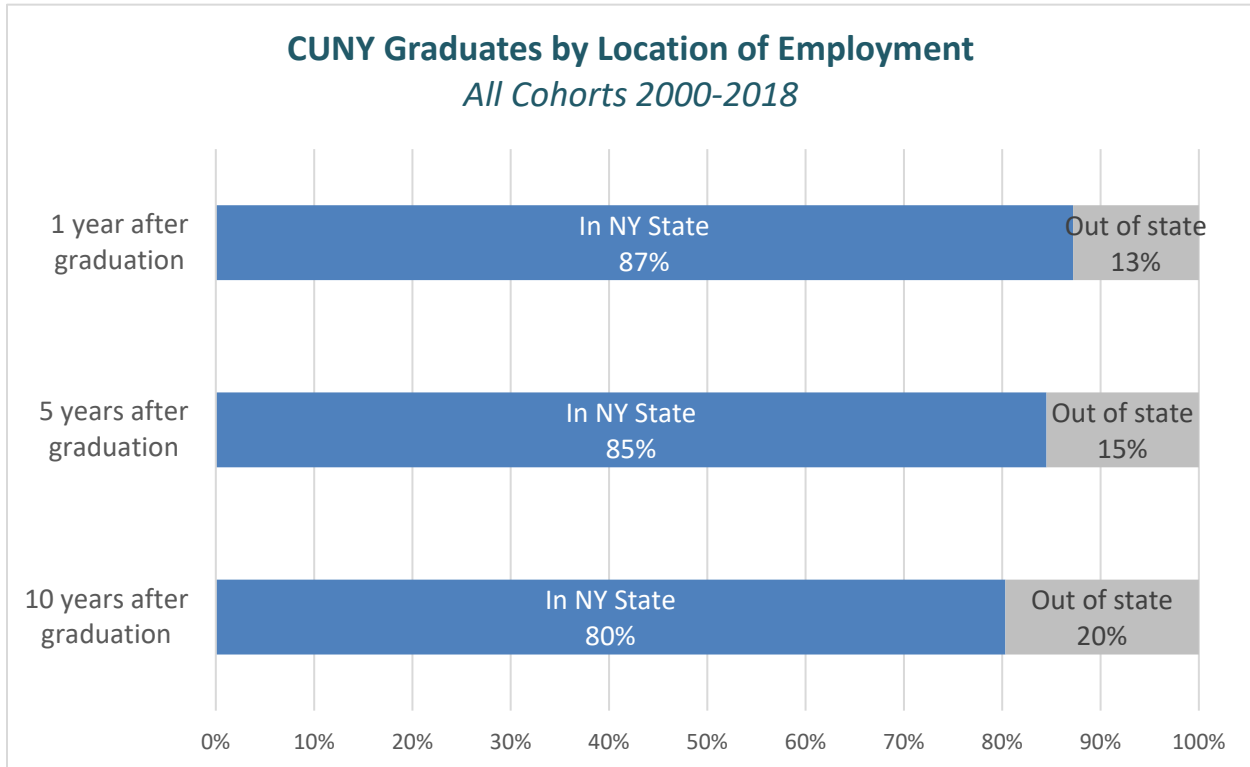


Source: ACS 2018-2022 five-year survey; U.S. Census Post Secondary Employment Outcomes

Note: Average earnings are calculated for employed workers only.

Furthermore, CUNY alumni overwhelmingly remain in New York State, contributing to the state’s economic growth and tax base. Chart 4 describes CUNY graduates by location of employment, revealing 85 percent remain in-state five years after graduation, a number which diminishes only five percentage points by the tenth year after graduation.<sup>9</sup> While city-level data is not available, there is no doubt that many graduates remain in New York City proper.

## Chart 4



Source: U.S. Census Post Secondary Employment Outcomes

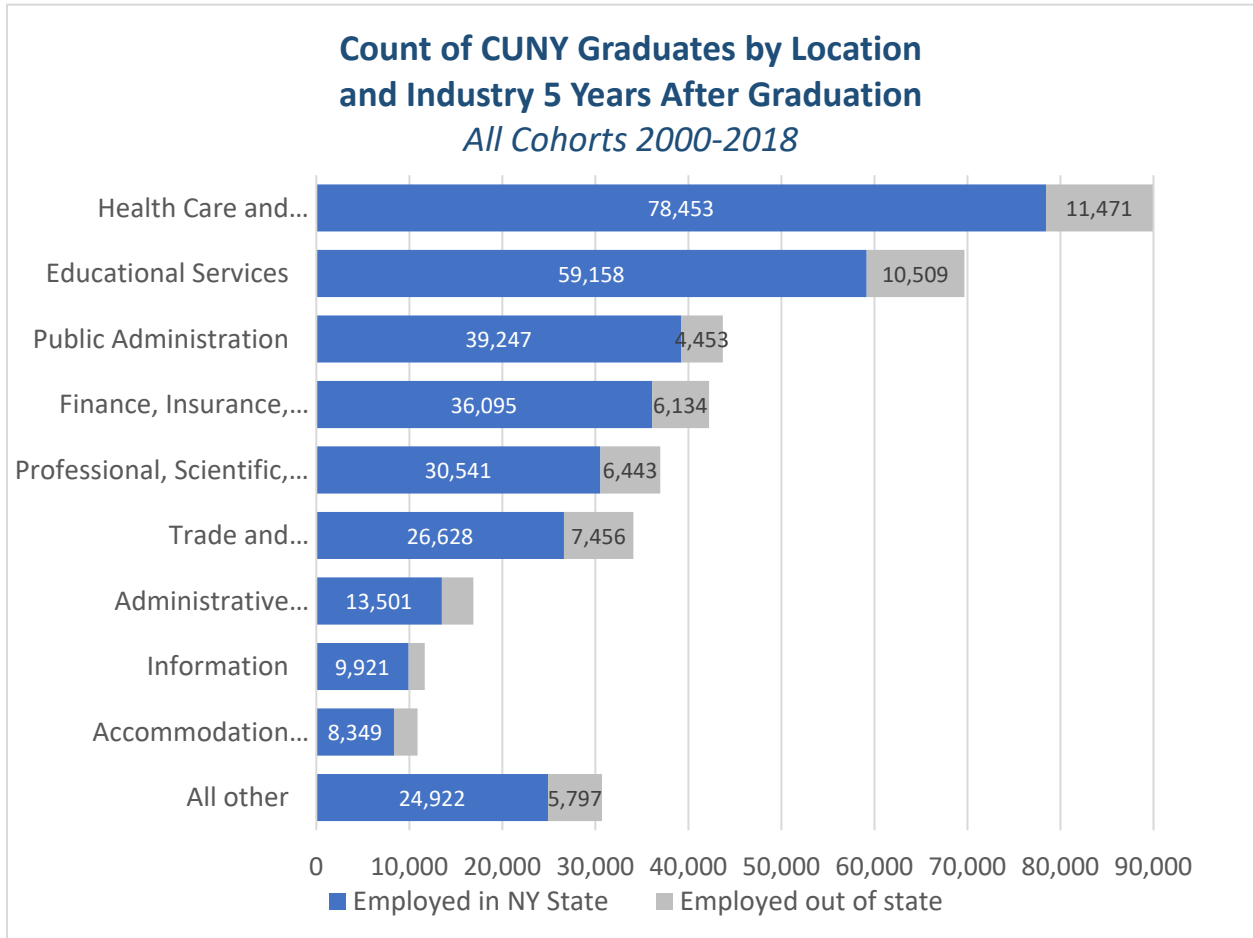
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*According to a Brookings Institute study, six of the top ten colleges nationwide for bottom-to-top economic mobility are CUNY colleges.*

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Over half of CUNY graduates go on to work in health care, social assistance, education, and public administration, as illustrated in Chart 5, providing many of New York’s teachers, nurses, social workers, and other essential workers. Given CUNY’s sheer size, even among the slightly less common tier of CUNY graduates’ industries—finance, information technology, and scientific jobs—alumni comprise a notable proportion New York State workers in these fields.

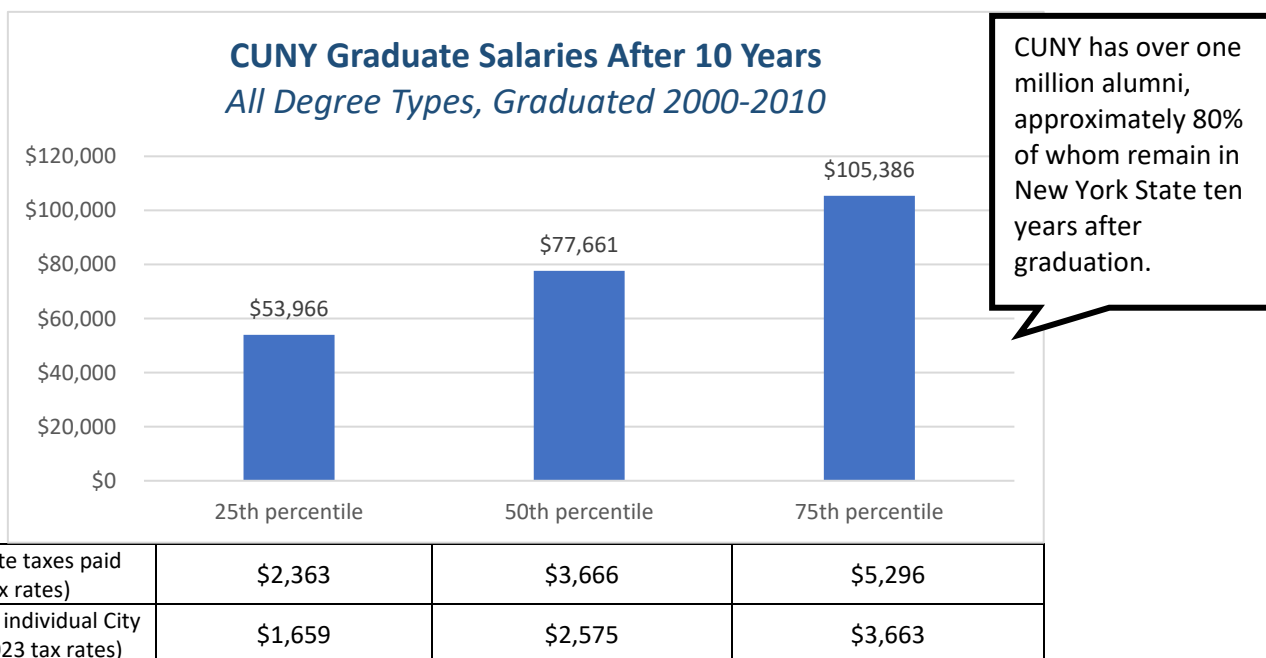
## Chart 5



Source: U.S. Census Post Secondary Employment Outcomes

CUNY graduates contribute billions in State and City tax revenue each year. Chart 6 estimates how much a CUNY alum living in New York City would have paid in state and local income tax in 2023. At the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile of earnings among CUNY graduates ten years out of school, she would have contributed \$2,363 to the State and \$1,659 to the City—a combined total of \$4,022. At the median and 75<sup>th</sup> percentile earnings level, the total would increase to \$6,241 and \$8,959, respectively. CUNY has produced one million graduates since 1991<sup>10</sup>—the vast majority of whom go on to work in-state—making its alumni a sizable part of the city’s and state’s labor force and tax base.

## Chart 6



Sources: U.S. Census Post Secondary Employment Outcomes; CUNY website

Note: Tax obligations are an approximation, assuming the individual takes no deductions beyond the standard deduction. For example, no tax-advantaged contributions a traditional 401k or IRA, no mortgage interest deduction, and so on.

## III. CUNY's Workforce

Between executives, faculty, non-teaching instructional staff (those who provide professional or technical support to academic and professional departments), and classified (operational) staff, CUNY employs over 40,000 people. <sup>11</sup>

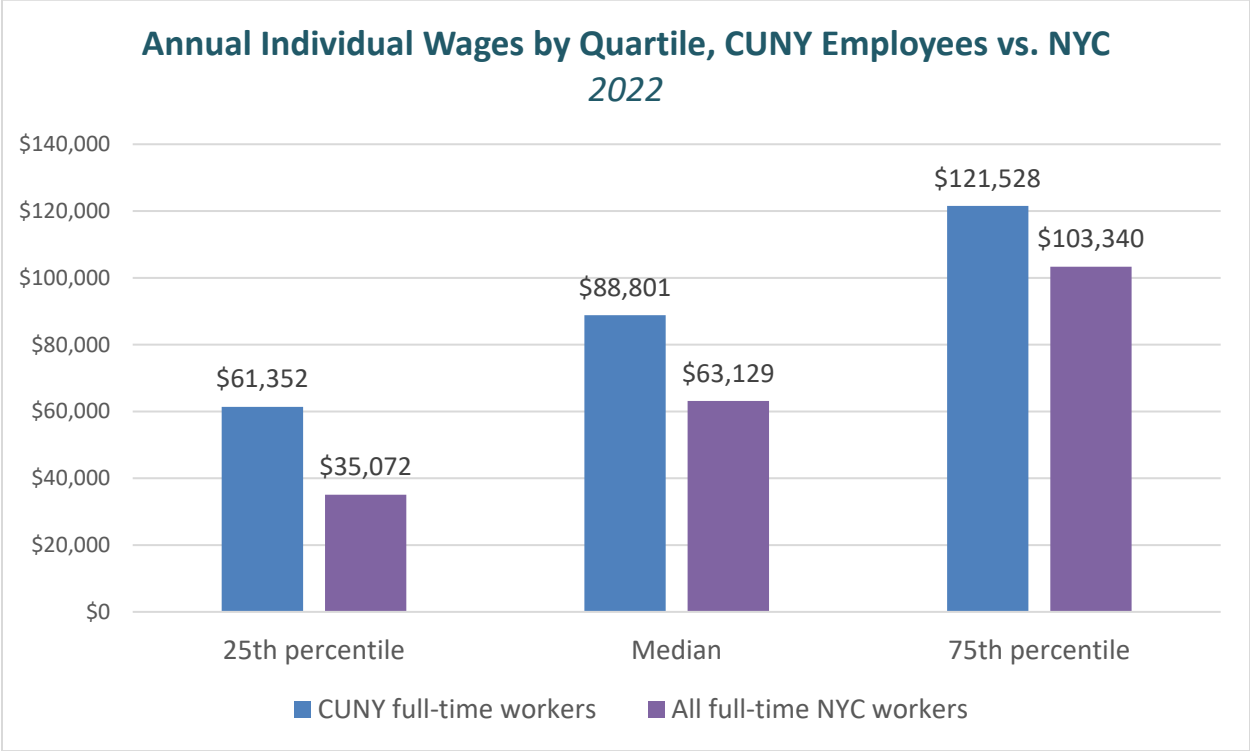
**Table 3. CUNY Workers by Function and Work Status, Fall 2023**

	Full-time employees	Part-time employees	Total
<b>Executive</b>	575	0	<b>575</b>
<b>Faculty</b>	7,132	10,767	<b>17,899</b>
<b>Non-Teaching Instructional Staff</b>	6,595	3,915	<b>10,510</b>
<b>Classified Staff</b>	5,025	6,031	<b>11,056</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>19,327</b>	<b>20,713</b>	<b>40,040</b>

Source: CUNY Staff Facts

The CUNY system offers New Yorkers well-paying, career-path jobs. Its full-time workforce earns wages that are 41 percent higher (at the median) than the New York City average.

### Chart 7



Source: CUNY Staff Facts; 2022 ACS 1-year survey

Note: 25<sup>th</sup> percentile, median, and 75<sup>th</sup> percentile wages are imputed based on CUNY’s published wage distribution. We use 2022 CUNY data for comparability with the most recent available ACS data.

CUNY’s classified staff are 96% unionized, with 10,602 of 11,056 classified workers represented by a blue collar, white collar, or skilled trade union.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, women represent the majority of CUNY’s workforce across all functions, including its faculty and executives.

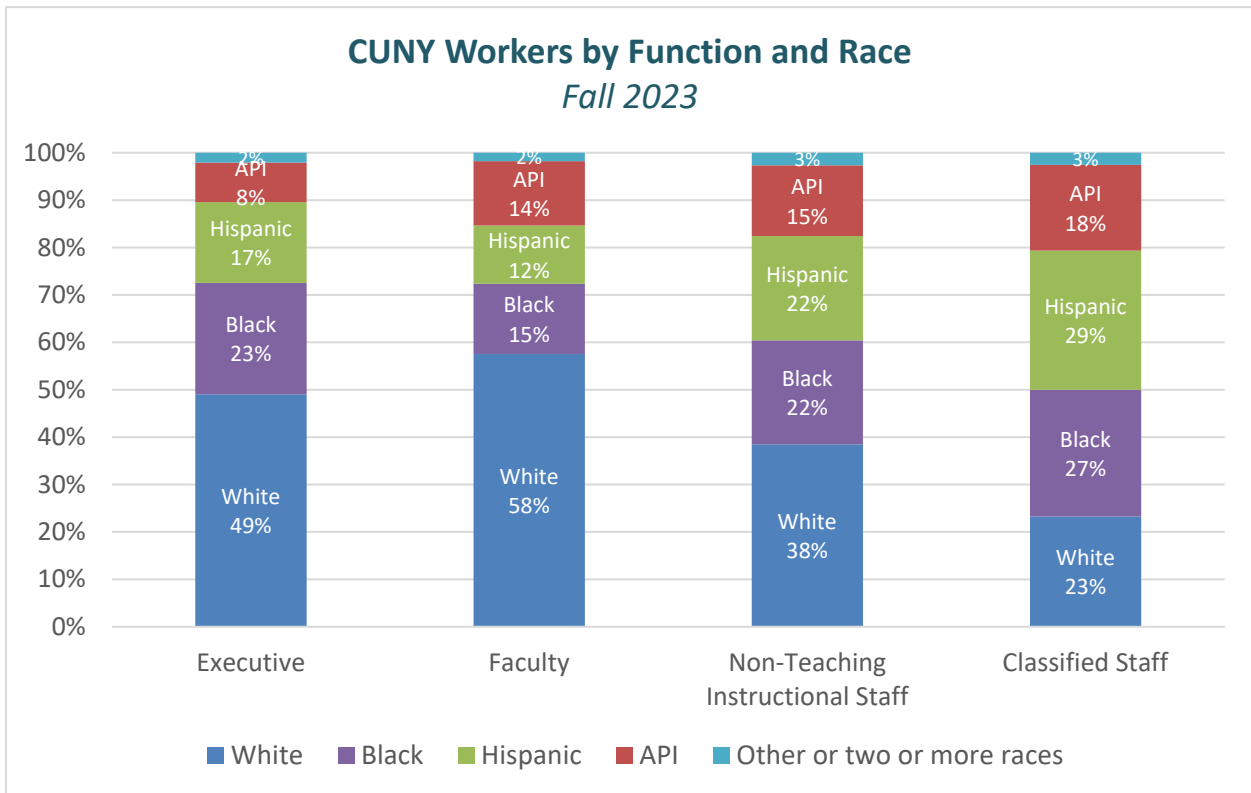
**Table 4. CUNY Workforce by Function and Gender, Fall 2023**

Function	Percent female
Executive	56%
Faculty	52%
Non-teaching instructional staff	63%
Classified staff	52%
<b>Total</b>	<b>55%</b>

Source: CUNY Staff Facts

Chart 8 depicts the racial composition of CUNY’s workforce by function. Nationwide, people of color have made up 32 percent of master’s graduates and 31 percent of doctoral graduates since 2008.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, people of color comprise 42 percent of CUNY’s faculty (most of whom likely hold a master’s or doctoral degree). They also comprise 51 percent of the system’s executive suite.

**Chart 8**

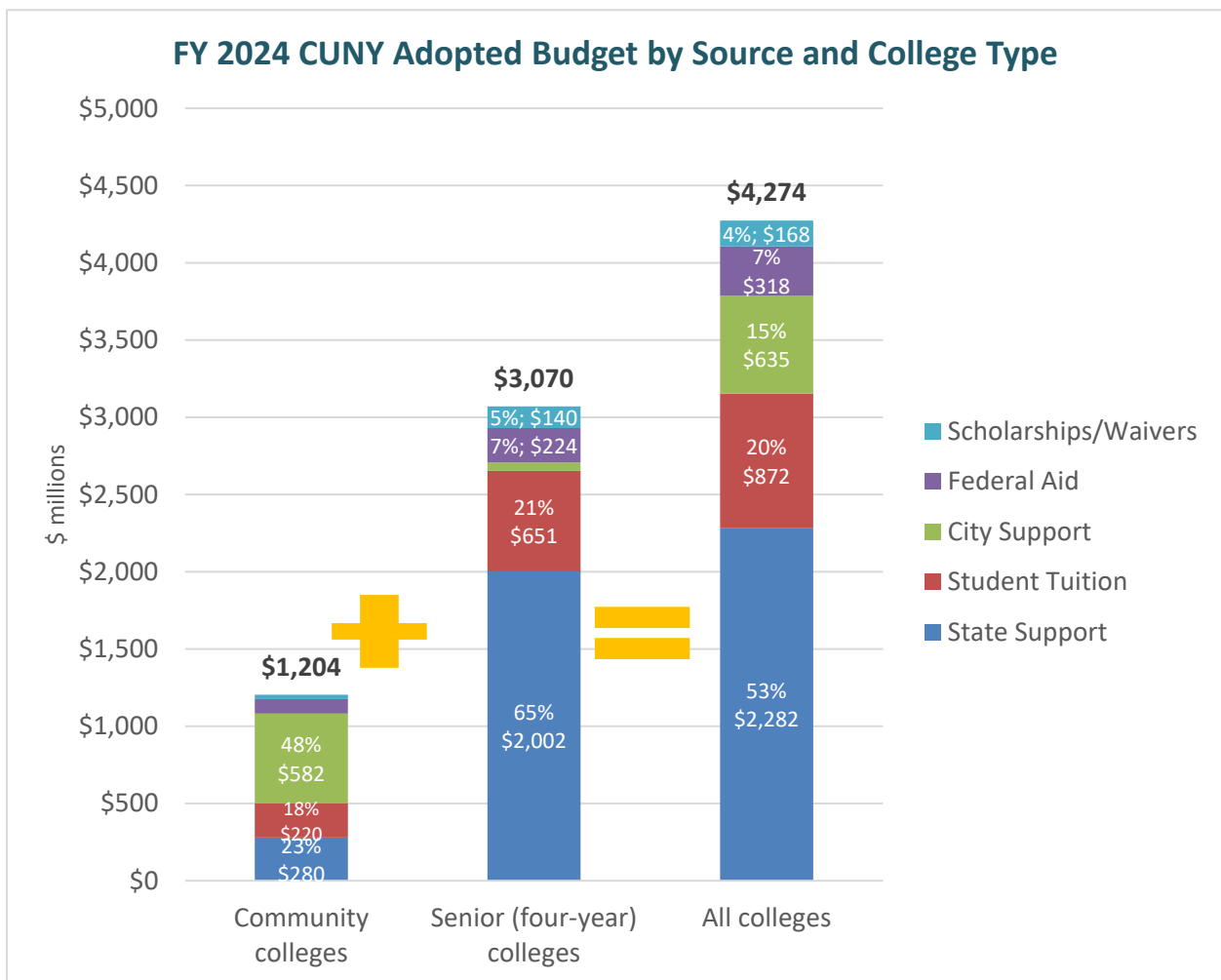


Source: CUNY Staff Facts

# IV. CUNY's Current Budget Challenges

CUNY's Adopted Budget for fiscal year 2024 totaled \$4.27 billion. New York State provided \$2.28 billion, over half of the system's budget. City funds, amounting to 15 percent of the total budget, went primarily to community colleges and covered nearly half of annual community college expenses. Tuition generated an additional \$872 million, or 20 percent of CUNY's budget. Federal aid, scholarships, and waivers<sup>14</sup> rounded out the budget.<sup>15</sup>

Chart 9



Source: CUNY FY2025 Budget Request



## A Brief History of CUNY's Governance, Funding, and Admissions Policies

The first municipal higher education institution in New York City, the Free Academy (forerunner of City College) was founded by Townsend Harris, president of the NYC Board of Education, in 1847. Hunter College—founded as the Female Normal College, to prepare young women to become teachers—was founded in 1869, Brooklyn College in 1930, Lehman College (as Hunter's Bronx campus) in 1931, and Queens College in 1937, each as separate institutions. In 1938, Mayor La Guardia requested that the Board of Higher Education establish a two-year course of study to train fire and police department personnel, leading to the creation of Baruch and John Jay Colleges. Funding was largely provided by the City of New York.

The end of World War II and passage of the G.I. Bill fueled an enrollment boom at CUNY. The first community colleges were formed throughout the city, under a shared founding agreement between New York City and State. In 1961, the New York State Legislature established the City University of New York, uniting what were then the City's seven municipal colleges and creating a unified Board of Trustees with a Chancellor as well a University Faculty Senate. The university system also began to offer Ph.D. and other graduate programs.

During this time, most students attended the four-year colleges tuition-free, though some paid modest tuition (\$300 per year in 1957). Initially, all community college students paid tuition. In 1957, student tuition and fees comprised 17% of the colleges' revenues.

In the 1960s, students and political leaders pushed for open admissions to confront the exclusion of Black and Puerto Rican students. In 1969, whites had comprised 87 percent of senior college students and 91 percent of students at City College, even as Harlem had become overwhelmingly Black and Latino. The students also sought free tuition across the board, including at CUNY's community colleges. In 1970, CUNY established "open admissions," offering a free education to any NYC resident with a high school diploma or GED. This led to an admissions surge, and a dramatic demographic transformation toward the diverse CUNY student body of today.

In 1976, during New York City's fiscal crisis, CUNY's tuition-free policy was ended under pressure from the federal government and financial community. Tuition was implemented across all CUNY colleges, and admissions standards were tightened at the senior colleges. New York State took over responsibility from the City for funding four-year colleges (as it already did for SUNY), with the City retaining some responsibility to fund community colleges. New York State's need-based Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) was extended to CUNY. As part of this deal, the Governor gained authority to appoint a majority of CUNY's Board of Trustees.

Since that time, both State and City funding have fluctuated with budget cycles, and governors and mayors have imposed cuts on CUNY when facing budget deficits. For example, Governor Pataki implemented significant cuts when New York State was facing deficits in 1995, while today the City's Programs to Eliminate the Gap have cut hundreds of millions in CUNY funding in light of projected City deficits.

Sources: CUNY – "The CUNY Story, A Brief History;" CUNY Digital History Archive; PSC CUNY – "Revisiting Open Admissions at CUNY."

Enrollment declines since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic have put CUNY under pressure. Fall 2023 enrollment has rebounded from post-pandemic lows, but at 231,978 students, remains 14.5 percent lower than in fall 2019.<sup>16</sup> CUNY’s community colleges have borne the brunt of the enrollment decline, from 91,715 in fall 2019 to 67,584 in fall 2023, a 26 percent decline. Senior college enrollment fell from 179,527 to 158,297, or 12 percent, during the same period.<sup>17</sup>

New York City’s Program to Eliminate the Gap (PEG) budgetary savings initiative remains a major area of concern. In the City’s latest Preliminary Budget released in January, the Mayor proposed cutting CUNY’s budget by \$20 million per fiscal year as part of the citywide PEG. CUNY has faced a cumulative \$95 million in cuts per fiscal year due to City PEGs since January 2022. Table 5 breaks down the successive impact of each financial plan on CUNY’s budget in fiscal years 2024 through 2027.

**Table 5. Baselined Peg Impacts on CUNY by Financial Plan and Fiscal Year of Implementation**

	FY 2024	FY 2025	FY 2026	FY 2027
January 2022 Financial Plan	(\$14,642,000)	(\$14,642,000)	(\$14,642,000)	(\$14,642,000)
November 2022 Financial Plan	(\$19,650,000)	(\$19,650,000)	(\$19,650,000)	(\$19,650,000)
January 2023 Financial Plan	(\$9,565,000)	(\$9,565,000)	(\$9,565,000)	(\$9,565,000)
April 2023 Financial Plan	(\$12,115,000)	(\$12,091,000)	(\$12,119,000)	(\$12,148,000)
June 2023 Financial Plan	\$5,900,000	\$0	\$0	\$0
November 2023 Financial Plan	(\$23,167,000)	(\$19,973,000)	(\$20,025,000)	(\$20,074,000)
January 2024 Financial Plan	(\$21,334,000)	(\$19,922,000)	(\$19,974,000)	(\$20,024,000)
<b>Total reduction in annual budget</b>	<b>(\$94,573,000)</b>	<b>(\$95,843,000)</b>	<b>(\$95,975,000)</b>	<b>(\$96,103,000)</b>

Source: NYC Office of Management and Budget

Because of the system’s funding structure—the City primarily funds community colleges—junior colleges bear the brunt of PEG cuts. But concurrent enrollment declines signal the need for greater, not diminished, investment in CUNY’s junior colleges. Funds to increase class offerings, hire more full-time faculty, and improve facilities could help draw students back by improving the experience and opportunities CUNY provides.

State funding, meanwhile, has remained relatively consistent through Governor Hochul’s tenure. From CUNY’s 2022 to its 2024 fiscal years, total state support for the CUNY system grew an average 6.5 percent per year.<sup>18</sup>

Lastly, federal stimulus funding, an important source of revenue in the post-pandemic years, is expiring. The City’s federal funding allocation for CUNY stands at \$112.4 million in fiscal year 2024 but drops to \$0 for the next fiscal year, which begins on July 1, 2024. This revenue will have to be

replaced by other sources of funding or budgetary reductions. Overall, CUNY is projected to utilize of all its federal emergency funding by the end of fiscal year 2024.

In addition to operating challenges, CUNY's campuses face multi-billion-dollar capital needs, to maintain and modernize aging infrastructure on campuses over or nearing a century old, to address sustainability and resilience in the face of climate change, and to provide new labs, modern training facilities, and technology needed to prepare students for the contemporary workplace and academy.

To address CUNY's fiscal challenges, New York State legislators have proposed two significant pieces of legislation:

The "New Deal for CUNY," ([S2146A/A4425](#)), sponsored by Senator Andrew Gounardes and Assembly Member Karines Reyes, would mandate State funding to restore free tuition; lift faculty-student ratios; increase adjunct faculty pay; enhance mental health, remediation, and other students services; and renovate CUNY campuses.

Assembly Member Zohran Mamdani and State Senator John Liu have introduced the *Repeal Egregious Property Accumulation and Invest it Right!* (REPAIR) campaign ([S7797](#) & [S7798/A8478](#) & [A8479](#)) to extend much-needed funds to the university system. Specifically, the legislation would amend the State constitution to remove the property tax exemption for higher education institutions with a minimum threshold of \$100 million in property tax obligations, which both Columbia and NYU exceed, and direct the resulting revenue to CUNY. The Comptroller's Office estimates the two private universities' combined property tax exemptions cost the City \$342 million in fiscal year 2024.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

The CUNY system is an essential component of New York City and New York State's economy—generating growth, economic mobility, and tax revenue. It serves a more demographically and socioeconomically diverse student body than many private colleges and allows students to graduate with significantly less debt than they would elsewhere. It is one of the strongest engines of economic mobility in the country. Its graduates overwhelmingly remain in New York State, paying billions in City and State income tax. And it provides over 40,000 well-paying jobs, many of which benefit from collective bargaining.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, CUNY has encountered multiple budget challenges which have yet to be resolved. In light of these challenges, and in light of the difficult economic circumstances many New York families face, it is critical that the City and State work together to reinvest in CUNY, and therefore reinvest in our workers, in economic mobility, and in a thriving New York City economy.

# Acknowledgements

This report was prepared by Andre Vasilyev, Principal Economic Development Analyst, with assistance from Krzysztof Haranczyk, Director of Budget Analysis and Research, and Lara Lai, Sr. Policy Analyst & Strategic Organizer. Archer Hutchinson, Creative Director, led the design.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See U.S. Department of Education, [Education Stabilization Fund](#)

<sup>2</sup> Per the Hope Center’s 2021 [Student Basic Needs Survey](#), administered to over 500,000 students across 500 colleges nationwide

<sup>3</sup> Campus Sponsored Residence Halls are available at Baruch College, City College, the College of Staten Island, Hunter College, Queens College, and the Graduate Center. For more information, see CUNY [Residence Life](#).

<sup>4</sup> See the [National Center for Education Statistics](#).

<sup>5</sup> According to NCES data, 32 percent of undergraduate students nationwide are Pell Grant recipients, compared with 57 percent of CUNY students—underscoring a greater proportion of CUNY students who come from low-income backgrounds. Similarly, nationwide 42 percent of undergraduates work for pay, while at CUNY the figure is 49 percent.

<sup>6</sup> Bottom-to-top mobility (BTM) is defined as the percent of a school's students whose parents were in the lowest earnings quintile, but who moved to the highest earnings quintile as an adult. Data comes from Chetty et al.'s Opportunity Insights database, which comes from federal tax records and Department of Education records from 1999 to 2013. The six CUNY schools among the top 10 colleges for BTM nationwide were Baruch College, City College, Lehman College, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Brooklyn College, and the New York City College of Technology (City Tech).

<sup>7</sup> See Third Way’s [Economic Mobility Index](#).

<sup>8</sup> Average graduate earnings were calculated by taking the mean of each CUNY school’s 10-year post-graduation median income, weighted by each school’s size. The median income for New Yorkers without a post-secondary degree is based on ACS data for employed city residents aged 30-54.

<sup>9</sup> Census Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO) data provides graduate location data only at the state level, not the city level.

<sup>10</sup> See CUNY [Student Data Book](#).

<sup>11</sup> “Classified staff” include accountants, building and construction workers, information systems and technology workers, and other professions not directly involved in the education of CUNY students.

<sup>12</sup> See CUNY [Staff Facts](#): Full-Time and Part-Time Classified Staff Union Representation (Nov 2023).

<sup>13</sup> See the [National Center for Education Statistics](#).

<sup>14</sup> As a revenue source, CUNY defines scholarships and waivers as funds “received by the University or an individual college from private, State or City sources specifically to cover instructional and other costs for a special program of study or for a clearly defined special group of students.” Waivers also include the College Now program, in which NYC public school students take CUNY college-level courses. See the University Tuition & Fee Manual, [Section VII](#).

<sup>15</sup> Adopted Budget figures come from CUNY’s annual University Budget Requests. For example, see the [FY 2024 University Budget Request](#) for CUNY’s FY 2023 Adopted Budget.

<sup>16</sup> While 2023 enrollment details are not yet available in the CUNY Student Data Book, fall 2023 total enrollment was reported in CUNY’s [FY2024 Mid-Year Financial Update](#).

<sup>17</sup> See CUNY Student Data Book.

<sup>18</sup> Adopted Budget figures come from CUNY’s annual University Budget Requests. For example, see the [FY 2024 University Budget Request](#) for CUNY’s FY 2023 Adopted Budget.

<sup>19</sup> Data was sourced from the FY 2024 Department of Finance Tax Exemption Database. The Comptroller’s Office filtered for ownership titles related to Columbia or NYU and then further filtered by exemption category.





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