New York State

Joint Legislative Budget Hearing

State Fiscal Year 2026-27

Higher Education

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Testimony Submitted by
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Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony for the New York State Fiscal Year (FY) 2026-27 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing for Higher Education. My name is Kirsten Keefe and I am the Senior Director of Policy and Advocacy - New York for The Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS).

TICAS is a trusted source of research, design, and advocacy for student-centered public policies that promote affordability, accountability, and equity in higher education. We advocate for every student, regardless of race, ethnicity, or family wealth, to have access to a quality higher education without the need to incur debt to realize their dreams of earning a college credential.

Our testimony provides comments on the Executive Budget and outlines priorities guiding our work in 2026, including access, affordability, accountability and consumer protection, basic needs, college completion, and data transparency. Our vision is an education system where New York students can successfully complete a postsecondary credential with confidence that their education will afford them a pathway toward economic mobility and financial sustainability.

I. INTRODUCTION

Governor Kathy Hochul's FY 2026-27 Executive Budget proposal includes increased foundational support for the State University of New York (SUNY) and the City University of New York (CUNY), which we strongly support. The proposal also includes expansion of the New York State Opportunity Promise Scholarship to advance workforce development in additional fields, including allowing students with prior degrees to return to school to pursue nursing credentials, which we also support.

Other proposals in the budget to increase education access and supports for veterans, foster youth, and students with disabilities also align with TICAS' priorities and will lead to more equitable access and stronger college completion rates.

I. ACCESS

New York must ensure students eligible for TAP and assistance under the Senator José Peralta New York State Dream Act receive adequate state aid to enable them to pursue higher education. TICAS supports state-level efforts to ensure that Universal FAFSA and HESC's Alternate Eligibility Path increase access to higher education for students who may not otherwise consider it. Efforts to safeguard and protect the personal information of students and families with mixed citizenship and members of the LGBTQIA+ community are to be lauded, such as included in legislation introduced in December by Assemblymember Romero, A9366.

TICAS strongly supports $6 million in funding for the Community Service Society of New York's **Education Debt Consumer Assistance Program (EDCAP)** that was included in the FY 2026-27 Executive Budget proposal and urges the Assembly and Senate to include at least this level of funding in their proposals. TICAS does not receive EDCAP funds, but we are strong supporters of their work as the only statewide network of services helping students to fill out the FAFSA, understand private education loans, and navigate federal repayment and loan forgiveness programs. EDCAP also plays a critical role in identifying issues and informing state regulators.

II. AFFORDABILITY

The Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) is New York's primary aid program, accounting for 80 percent of state financial aid awards. TAP is central to college affordability at New York's public and private higher

education institutions and has long reflected New York's commitment to higher education as a public good. Changes made to TAP in 2024–namely increasing income eligibility limits and increasing the base award from $500 to $1,000 were significant and largely helped students from middle-income families, but they did not increase aid for students from the lowest income levels.

In addition, TAP's structure reflects assumptions about college attendance that no longer match the realities of today's students. Many more students enrolled in public higher education in New York today are not "traditional" students who enroll full-time immediately after high school and complete within four years. Many students are independent and don't live with family. Many students work while enrolled. Many have children and other financial responsibilities. Many enroll part-time. Yet TAP eligibility rules, award calculations, and time limits were designed for a narrower student profile. As a result, the students with the greatest financial vulnerability often receive the least equitable support.

While there was no inclusion in the Governor's FY2026-27 Executive Budget proposal regarding changes to TAP, we urge the Assembly and Senate to consider the following policy proposals:

A. Eliminate inequities between dependent and independent students

TICAS research demonstrates that independent students—particularly single independent students without tax dependents—are disproportionately low-income and face greater financial strain than dependent students. Independent students are more likely to pay rent, support themselves entirely, and balance employment with coursework. They also borrow at higher rates when grant aid is insufficient.

TAP awards are calculated using a student's tax filing status, marital status, family size, and household income. Dependent students who live with family or a guardian and independent students with tax dependents are considered in the same category ("dependent").[1] Independent single and married students who do not have tax dependents ("independent") are treated differently than dependent students under TAP in three significant ways:

1. **Income eligibility limits for independent students are significantly lower than for dependent students.** The net taxable income (NTI) limit for TAP eligibility is $125,000 for dependent students, $60,000 for independent married students, and $30,000 for independent single students.
2. **Dependent students are eligible for more money.** Dependent students are eligible for up to $5,665 in annual assistance from TAP; independent students are eligible for up to $3,525.
3. **Income limits to receive a maximum TAP award differ by dependency status.** Dependent and independent married students with income up to $7,000 NTI are eligible to receive the maximum award for their category. Independent single students with NTI up to $3,000 are eligible for a maximum award for their category.

Yet, independent students receive disproportionately less TAP assistance. Unlike the Federal Pell Grant program which bases awards on family size TAP calculates awards for independent students differently than it does for dependent students. Coupled with the lower maximum award amount, the result is disproportionately lower awards particularly to independent single students (see Table 1).

[1] Students who qualify as an orphan, foster child, or ward of the court are classified as "dependent."

Table 1. Maximum TAP Award Estimates for Dependent and Independent Students Receiving Aid for the First Time in 2025-26 School Year

Net Taxable Income (NTI)	Dependent (Household of 3)	Independent Married (Household of 2)	Independent Single (Household of 1)
$0	$5,665	$3,525	$3,525
$5,000	$5,665	$3,525	$2,905
$15,000	$ 4,985	$2,845	$1,000
$30,000	$3,245	$1,105	$1,000
$45,000	$1,445	$1,000	**$0**
$60,000	$1,000	$1,000	**$0**
$125,000	$ 1,000	**$0**	**$0**

** The default birth date used for the independent student calculations is January 1, 1999.*
Source: TICAS analysis of the New York State Higher Education Services Corporation, NYS Grants & Scholarships, Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), "Tap Award Estimator," accessed February 2025, https://hesc.ny.gov/find-aid/nys-grants-scholarships/tuition-assistance-program-tap/tap-award-estimator/.

As a result, independent students have higher gaps in college affordability. Most independent students have annual incomes of less than $30,000 a year (see Figure 1). Lacking substantial family support, independent students typically have greater financial responsibilities having to cover housing, food, transportation, and other living costs in addition to tuition, fees, books, and supplies. For SUNY and CUNY students living off-campus and not with family, the total cost of attendance ranges from $21,200 to $32,600. At CUNY, this cost approaches the annual gross income of a full-time minimum wage worker in New York City ($34,320) and exceeds their estimated take-home pay of $27,767. The comparisons are only slightly better for SUNY students in the rest of the state. [2]

Figure 1. Percentage of dependent and independent students attending New York public two-year and four-year institutions, by income bracket.

Source: TICAS calculations using data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:20-AC).

[2] "Independently Unaffordable: The New York Tuition Assistance Program's Inequitable Treatment of Independent Students," TICAS, December 2025, https://ticas.org/new-york/tap-dependency-report-dec-2025/.

Not surprisingly, independent students rely on loans to fill college affordability gaps. While the maximum TAP award for dependent students is sufficient to cover full tuition at SUNY and CUNY community colleges, the maximum award for independent students covers just 75% of tuition. For four-year SUNY and CUNY tuition, the ratio of tuition covered by the maximum award for dependent and independent students is 80 percent to about 50 percent. As a result, debt levels for independent students in New York are generally around 62 percent higher than those of dependent students at two-year colleges and 17 percent higher for four-year college students.

Today's students are more likely to be independent. Independent students make up 43 percent of the student body at public two-year colleges and 27 percent of public four-year colleges in New York.[3] Independent students tend to be older with around 90 percent being 24 or older. By contrast, most Dependent students are under the age of 24.[4] The share of Black or African American students is higher among Independent students than among Dependent students in the state's public institutions: 17 percent compared to 13 percent at four-year colleges and 21 percent compared to 16 percent at two-year colleges. Lower TAP awards for independent students disproportionately impacts Black and African American New Yorkers.[5]

New York has a long-standing commitment to providing students access to a higher education. To maintain this level of commitment, TAP must evolve to meet the needs of New York students.

To address existing inequities in TAP's structure, TICAS recommends:

- Eliminating the distinction between dependent and independent students for purposes of calculating TAP awards.
- Offering the same level of assistance to independent students that is available for dependent students, particularly for students who are low-income.
- Raising income eligibility limits for independent married and for independent single students to instill greater parity.

B. Extend availability of TAP for college students from four to six years.

In New York, less than half (47 percent) of students in the Fall 2019 public four-year college cohort finished their college degrees in four years. Completion timelines at public institutions can extend beyond four years due to a number of factors: insufficient class offerings, transferring of credits, unpredictable financial hardships, or other interruptions due to personal or life circumstances. TAP is only available for students for four years, however.

The expectation that a student receiving TAP will complete college in four years does not match the reality of many of today's students. One in four CUNY students and nearly a quarter of SUNY community college students are 25 years or older.[6] Older students are more likely to be financially independent, juggling a number of responsibilities, and less likely to be able to complete in a consecutive four-year time period.

[3] TICAS calculations using data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:20-AC).
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] TICAS analysis of fall 2021 undergraduate enrollment data from IPEDS.

Limiting TAP to four years can also mean a student has to stop out or leave college entirely, perpetuating inequities. According to the National Cener for Education Statistics, 88 percent of Black students compared to 74 percent of White students relied on financial aid to fund their college education in 2015-16.[7] Black women in particular are more likely to rely on financial aid for reasons beyond the racial wealth gap, including having to juggle school with employment and caregiving responsibilities.[8]

Cutting off assistance when a modest additional investment could get students to completion is counterproductive and a lost opportunity for the state to add degreed individuals to its workforce. There are over 1.8 million New Yorkers under the age of 65 in the Some College and No Credential category, ranking third in the nation.[9] These individuals have invested significant time and money into their education, as has the state, yet they lack the credential needed to advance professionally. In today's fast-changing economy, a college degree has become increasingly vital for upward mobility and critical for individuals to move out of poverty and into the middle class.

TICAS urges the Legislature to consider extending TAP duration from four to six years for undergraduate bachelor degree students, and from two to three years for students pursuing associate's degrees, and from five to seven years for students in five-year programs, as proposed in legislation already introduced by Assemblymember Anderson and Senator Gounardes, A.508/S.3779.

C. Increase income thresholds for students to receive maximum TAP awards.

TAP awards max out at a family net taxable income (NTI) of $7,000 for dependent, independent with children, and independent married students and at $3,000 for independent single students—amounts below the 2025 Federal Poverty Guidelines, median income, and minimum wage income for the state.

Housing, utilities, food, transportation, childcare, healthcare, and virtually all living costs have risen substantially. When aid formulas do not keep pace with economic conditions, the impact of state aid awards on college affordability erodes. A5539 (Hyndman)/S1732 (Fahy) would increase the threshold to receive a maximum award from $7,000 to $18,000 for dependent and independent married students. TICAS urges the Legislature to increase the income threshold for maximum awards to at least $18,000 NTI for all students—a single independent student with $18,000 NTI is no less in need of the maximum financial award than an independent married or dependent student at the same income level.

III. ACCOUNTABILITY AND CONSUMER PROTECTION

With significant changes in federal lending and loan repayment, alongside the hollowing out of federal oversight over student loan servicing abuses, predatory schools, and online education providers, New York must create guardrails and strengthen consumer protections for students and borrowers.

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[7] " Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups, Indicator 22: Financial Aid," National Center for Education Statistics, February 2019, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator_rec.asp.

[8] Denise A. Smith and Tiara Moultrie, "Black Women's Experiences Financing Their College Education," The Century Foundation, September 24, 2024, https://tcf.org/content/report/black-womens-experiences-financing-their-college-education/.

[9] "*Some College, No Credential* Student Outcomes: 2024 Report for the Nation and States," National Student Resource Clearinghouse Center, June 6, 2024, https://nscresearchcenter.org/some-college-no-credential/.

A. Pass Workforce Pell legislation

Starting July 1, 2026, short-term (8 to 15 weeks) programs that meet criteria set forth by the U.S. Department of Education -- including completion and job placement rates of 70 percent and "median value-added earnings" that exceed tuition and fees—will be eligible for Workforce Pell grants. Governor Hochul will be required to certify that programs adequately prepare students and lead to recognized, stackable credentials. TICAS has developed model state legislation that would facilitate certification by July 1, 2026 and ensure only legitimate programs leading to upward economic mobility qualify. Since Workforce Pell dollars apply towards students' limited lifetime Pell eligibility, it will be critical to ensure that guardrails are in pace to prevent these funds from being squandered on valueless programs.

B. Implement borrower and cosigner private student loan protections

Included in the Transportation, Education and Development (TED), Article VII budget bill is a proposal for private student loan protections. TICAS is supportive of this legislation, but strongly recommends it be strengthened to include protections included in Assemblymember Levenberg and Senator May's legislation, A.4922A/S.5598.

New federal lending limits and caps that take effect this year will create financing gaps, driving many more students to private lenders and credit investors. Private education loans lack the safeguards of federal loans and leave borrowers in a more vulnerable position. Our recommendations include strengthening the disclosure requirements in the TED legislation, adding in additional borrower and cosigner protections including provisions that adopt a federal standard of releasing a borrower from liability when a medical professional determines they have a total and permanent disability, and adding in important safeguards and referrals to resources such as EDCAP when borrowers default and face being sued.

C. Protect students from unfair and abusive practices.

Although legislation has been signed into law that grants the Attorney General authority to prosecute unfair and abusive acts and practices against consumers in New York state, New York students and borrowers still lack the ability to seek redress for harms caused directly to them by the unfair and abusive conduct of lenders, loan servicers, or predatory schools. New York must give students and borrowers—and consumers generally—a private right of action for violations of NY General Business Law sec. 349.

IV. BASIC NEEDS

College success depends on a student's basic needs being met, yet too many students in New York attend college without adequate financial support. The average estimated costs of attending college beyond tuition are $18,327 for SUNY and $26,112 for CUNY students not living with family.

TICAS strongly supports the creation of a Higher Education Emergency Aid Program to increase emergency aid programs at SUNY and CUNY campuses that provide financial assistance to students for basic necessities and unexpected expenses that can undermine their ability to continue making educational progress. Currently these programs are largely if not entirely funded by philanthropic donations with the need outpacing the availability of assistance. Given how critical it is to student success and college completion for students to have their basic needs met, the state must start investing in these programs to make additional assistance available to more students.

We are grateful to Assemblymember Alvarez and Senator Gounardes for introducing legislation in 2025 to set the stage for a state-funded program, and to Governor Hochul for her recognition of the need for a state-funded program and more uniformity across campuses with the allocation in the Executive Budget proposal of $1 million. This amount is insufficient to meet student need, however, and TICAS joins other advocates is requesting a total of at least **$5 million** for this critical program in the final budget.

TICAS also supports passage of the SNAP for Students Act, A8757 (Forrest)/S8347 (Jackson), which requires the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) to create informational materials to be distributed by OTDA, the Higher Education Services Corporation (HESC), and higher education institutions instructing students on how to apply for SNAP, where to go for help, and information about other programs they may qualify for such as Double Up Food Bucks and SNAP-Ed. A separate proposal was vetoed by Governor Hochul in 2025, but we encourage both houses of the Legislature to again pass A4502B (Cunningham)/S4257A (Parker), which strengthens allowances for postsecondary education to count as a work activity for students receiving public assistance.

V. COLLEGE COMPLETION

Evidence shows that comprehensive approaches to student success programs improve persistence among students and lead to higher rates of college completion, which is critical to maintaining and boosting New York's college enrollment numbers and meeting the state's workforce needs.

TICAS recommends the Legislature adopt increases provided in the Executive Budget proposal to New York's largest opportunity programs: the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), Advancing Completion through Engagement (ACE), and Advancing Success in Associate Pathways (ASAP). Chancellor John B. King is to be commended for expanding CUNY's ACE/ASAP programs to SUNY campuses, which have a proven track record of leading to higher rates of college completion.

In addition to these increased funding levels, TICAS urges the Legislature to consider extending these opportunity programs to students attending college part-time. New York's public institutions have significant part-time enrollment numbers: 54 percent at SUNY two-year and 12 percent at SUNY four-year schools; 42 percent at CUNY two-year and 27 percent at CUNY four-year schools. The additional financial and academic supports provided under these programs are no less needed by part-time students.

Reform institutional debt policies. Institutional or "direct-to-school" debts are typically low-dollar (under $4,000) amounts owed by students to their college for unpaid tuition, fees, or fines that bar students who lack any safety net from continuing their education and cause them long-term financial harm. These debts impact students with the lowest incomes. TICAS advocates for alternative debt collection measures by SUNY and CUNY that don't hold students back from completing their degrees and don't add financial hardship. We recommend the following policy changes:

- Amend policies to ensure all institutions allow students readmission, even if they owe debt to the school;
- Prohibit the withholding of degrees and diplomas for unpaid debt;
- Promote alternatives to lawsuits that offer clearer, realistic, and more equitable pathways for students to resolve direct-to-school debt;

- Provide a pathway for debt forgiveness for students with low incomes; and
- Strengthen policies at the institutional level to prevent debt accrual.

VI. DATA TRANSPARENCY

TICAS supports continued funding allocations for the development of New York's Statewide Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) with a strong data governance body. Greater data transparency improves decision-making by both students and policymakers and safeguards taxpayer dollars by guiding the effective allocation of resources. TICAS stands ready to offer technical assistance and best practices from our experience working with other states.

VII. CONCLUSION

New York's higher education system remains one of the most powerful paths to advance the economic mobility of individuals and families while also meeting the State's critical workforce needs. To reach these goals, however, students must be able to access, afford, persist, and complete college, and they cannot be overburdened by debt as graduates entering the workforce. There must be greater alignment between the policy design of TAP, opportunity programs, and consumer protections so that they reflect the realities of today's students.

The New York State FY 2026–27 budget presents an opportunity not merely to maintain investment, but to modernize and strengthen our higher education programming by:

- Modernizing TAP,
- Investing in basic needs supports,
- Establishing strong consumer protection guardrails,
- Expanding college completion programs,
- Reforming institutional debt practices, and
- Continuing to focus on the development of a statewide data system.

TICAS appreciates the Legislature's commitment to higher education and the deep investments made in SUNY and CUNY. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. We stand ready to provide research, technical assistance, and policy expertise as negotiations proceed.