

**New York City Council
Hearing on New York State's Budget Deficit Reduction Plan
Testimony of President Ricardo R. Fernández, President
Lehman College, City University of New York
November 18, 2009**

Thank you, Mr. Sapienza. Chairperson Barron and Members of the Higher Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on New York State's Budget Deficit Reduction Plan. I am Ricardo R. Fernández, President of Lehman College.

Lehman College is grateful for New York City Council's enduring commitment to CUNY and its senior and community colleges. We look forward to continuing to work with you in helping provide our students with the knowledge and skills they need to live, work, and prosper in the 21st century.

For many of Lehman College's students, higher education would be out of reach were it not for federal and state financial aid programs. Receipt of a financial aid award helps the City's neediest students gain access to higher education. A dependable stream of financial aid makes it possible for these students in good academic standing to progress with their coursework and graduate with their baccalaureate degree.

Lehman College has a student body of just over 12,200 students. Of that number, 9,700 are undergraduate students. Just over 60% of Lehman College's students are Bronx residents. As one would expect, with the Bronx having a median family income of just 60% of the national average and a poverty rate that is twice the national average, a disproportionate share of Lehman College's students comes from lower-income families.

The most recent survey of incoming freshmen is representative of Lehman's overall student body. The data is instructive of the financial challenges faced by Lehman College's students. In that survey, nearly 50% stated that their families would provide no resources to cover their educational expenses during their first year at Lehman College.

In terms of family income, the contrast is even starker. 38% of our students reported annual family income of less than \$20,000 per year vs. 11% at all public four-year schools. 73% had family income of less than \$50,000 in contrast to only 35% of the students at all public four-year colleges. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that just 26% of Lehman College's incoming students were confident that they would have sufficient funds to finance their education. From an institutional perspective, that lack of confidence is worrisome.

New York State's Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) plays an important role in making it possible for Lehman College's students to pursue higher education. Presently, Lehman College has 3,540 TAP recipients. 82% receive \$1,000 or more per semester. 47% receive \$2,000 or more each semester. For many of Lehman College's students, every dollar in aid truly makes a difference. Neither they nor their families have the financial ability to absorb the proposed cut.

Already, many of Lehman College's students spend considerable time working off-campus. One-third of Lehman College's students work more than 20 hours per week. Nearly 20% work 35 or more hours each week. A partial loss of TAP assistance may confront a student from a low-income family with the need to work longer hours to continue his or her studies—if he or she can find a part-time job in the recession-swept labor market.

In short, the proposed reduction in TAP assistance is likely to have a negative impact on college retention and graduation rates. Additional time spent earning money to finance the cost of higher education could lead to reduced time available for academic activities. Reduced time spent in classes, on homework, or in lab could undermine a student's academic performance. In our experience, a student's running out of funds often leads to his or her temporarily "stopping out" from college. Either outcome would reduce his or her chances of graduating.

In today's demanding global business environment, a college degree is increasingly becoming the minimum foundation for job security and a meaningful income. Higher education is vital to helping today's neediest students realize tomorrow's career and life opportunities.

In closing, while acknowledging the difficult financial condition of our State, we must not lose perspective of the value of investment in higher education and the impact reductions in such investment can have on today's students, particularly those from lower-income families. A failure to understand the value of higher education will certainly have real implications for tomorrow's labor force and tax base.