

Testimony by Andrew Stettner

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Single Stop commends the City Council Higher Education committee for drawing its attention to President Obama's America Promise proposal to provide free community college tuition. In this increasingly technical and information-rich era, a college education is the minimum most of us need to find a decent, middle-class occupation. About half of all college students today attend community college. The vast majority of minorities in higher education choose community college—and 83 percent of all CUNY students are people of color. It's their stepping-stone to stability and achievement.

That's why President Obama's proposal to make the first two years community college free for full-time students should be seen as a historic moment -- both from the viewpoint of educational progress and of civil rights. It is a critical first step towards a more just country. It is the necessary baseline to maintain a vibrant democracy. Free community college today is what universal public education meant to our nation a century ago.

We can't stop at free tuition. Low-income students will still need additional social and financial supports to succeed in school and graduate tuition. To maximize the potential of America's College Promise, New York must be ready to meet the other needs of their students: Books. Housing. Food. Transportation. Childcare. And more. The other real costs of a college education quickly add up, particularly for low-income New Yorkers and those with children.

A student who does not have a place to live can't learn. A student who is hungry can't focus. Without childcare, a student parent cannot attend class. This reality can be seen in community college graduation rates. On average, less than 20% of students who enroll at a CUNY community college complete their degree even after 6 years. Many others drop out because they simply can't afford to stay in school. Making tuition free will help, but not solve, this problem.

The good news is that Single Stop is changing the equation. At all seven CUNY community colleges, Single Stop provides a unique one-stop shop that helps students to access food assistance, free tax preparation services, financial counseling, health insurance, legal assistance, and other resources. The average Single stop client receives \$5,400 in existing safety net resources that were previously under-utilized. It's a total of 58,000 students and drawn down \$136 million in resources. Research has shown that CUNY community college students receiving Single Stop services stay in school at a rate that is 17% higher than those who do not.

As America considers President Obama's plan, community colleges must be prepared to provide the necessary wraparound services that are needed to keep students in school. As a first step, we encourage the Council to support the continued provision and expansion of Single Stop services at CUNY.