

Assembly Budget Committee Testimony
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Thank you Chairwoman, Vice Chair, and Assembly Budget Committee members for the opportunity to speak with you all today.

New Jersey has a lot to be proud of when it comes to higher education. We have wonderful and historic institutions with rich legacies, premier research universities, and innovative community colleges. We have institutions who are expanding their footprint across the globe, as well as those reaching out to serve more lower-income and minority students right here in New Jersey. We have institutions who serve primarily adults, and those engaged in dual enrollment efforts with high schools.

What we don't have is a plan for how all of these efforts work together in a coordinated fashion for the common good of the state. Further, stagnant state investment has given way to increased student tuition, and allowed the onus of funding higher education to shift from the state to the student. Certainly, the state faces a challenging budget picture, yet within this environment, Governor Murphy has proposed an ambitious initiative in support of students going to college in the state.

Our initial steps in developing a path forward are marked by addressing gaps in student aid and introducing an innovative free community college proposal. That includes making a commitment to students attending community college in New Jersey that tuition and fees won't be a barrier to enrollment. Finances aren't the only barrier to going to college, but most students who don't complete list them as a top reason. Today's students are more likely to be older, work while enrolled, or be enrolled part-time. Students at many colleges, and particularly at community colleges, are juggling family responsibilities, including the care of children of their own. The state has over 1 million people who have some college, but never finished a degree. By 2025, it is projected that 68% of jobs in the state will demand some form of postsecondary education. Easing the tuition burden so that they can focus on being successful in school and earn a credential that helps them to get a good job is a win for the student and for the state of New Jersey.

Community colleges aren't the only ones doing good work; our public and independent colleges all have important roles to play as well. Our goal is that this proposal grows the number of students going to college in the state, and grows the potential number of transfer students in future years. More students will have the strong foundation of an associate's degree that gets them on a path to continue on to a four-year college, should they so choose.

I have seen how free community college efforts have been developed across the nation. We now have several years of data in seeing how this has played out in

places like Tennessee and Oregon. New Jersey has a unique opportunity to take what has worked well, and develop a first-in-the nation program that does not fall over some of the stumbling blocks that have faced other states. We have a chance to work collaboratively with the higher education community to get this right. That's why the budget includes a line item for \$5million in planning grants to work with institutions to develop the programs.

Let me say a bit about how we envision this program working. The beauty of Promise programs like this one is the clarity of messaging about affordability. One of the things that has been successful about these kinds of programs are how simple the message is for individuals. A clear message about being able to pay for college without barriers is a powerful tool in effectively structuring financial aid. We started with the students who need the help the most, and want to eventually expand for all students attending community college in the state. One critique of existing free community college programs has been that they are too restrictive, offer little aid to lower-income students, and don't plan for growth. The program proposed here was designed to meet the needs of New Jersey's residents as simply as possible – it will be available to both full and part time students, to both recent high school graduates and returning adults, and to all students who maintain satisfactory academic progress. To access the program, students would be required to fill out the FAFSA, including the additional New Jersey specific financial aid questions. This will ensure that our students are getting all the aid for which they are already eligible. This plan depends upon our students drawing upon all of the existing resources available to them—particularly federal grants. Then, the grants we propose would fill in any gaps.

This proposal would build upon the existing programs like TAG and STARS to guarantee that lower-income students' county college tuition bill would be fully covered. It would require students, once enrolled, to show that they are making progress toward their degree, but it would be more broadly available than what exists now. We propose starting with the students with the most need—those from families earning less than \$45,000—and then work toward covering the larger student population.

Our ultimate goal here—which I believe you all share—is to strengthen higher education opportunities within the state. This proposal is one step--a down payment toward a larger vision. But I want to stress that it is not the end. It is the beginning of what we hope can be a good partnership to develop meaningful opportunities for students across the state. This step builds upon existing investments and good work championed by this body.

To that end, I would be remiss if I did not mention the wonderful Educational Opportunity Fund program, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. The EOF program is a national treasure and has helped thousands of New Jersey residents enroll and be successful in college. The supports provided through this program include academic support and mentoring, paired with a financial stipend. The

Governor's budget builds on investments supported by the legislature, and increases funding for the EOF program by \$1.5million beyond that, to support students who are enrolled at all types of institutions across the state.

Over the past 10 years, investment in higher education in New Jersey has stagnated, and the state lacks a plan that could stake out a vision for moving forward. I know that developing a higher education plan has been a priority for the legislature, and we want to work with you in developing that unified approach to supporting the needs of students, communities, and our economy through higher education.

Affordability is a top concern among students and families, and I can understand why. I know that you all care about these issues as well, and I look forward to working with you to develop a budget proposal that paves the way for improved higher education opportunities for all students in the state.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.