

Bernie Sanders, Tuition-Free Higher Education, and New York Natalie Reisman

Part of his popularity amongst young voters is Senator Bernie Sanders' commitment to tuition-free higher education and the cancellation of student debt. Sanders himself is the product of both public and private higher education institutions, having attended Brooklyn College and then the University of Chicago. In response to the skyrocketing cost of higher education, he has proposed to cancel student debt for 45 million Americans. Sanders' [introduced a bill](#) just this year, along with Congresswoman Jayapal, which would make community college and trade school tuition-free for students, and have "Wall Street pay for it". Under the proposed plan, Americans who make less than \$125k a year would pay no tuition at public universities and at all HBCUs. The bill outlines the "[Tax on Wall Street Speculation Act](#)", which would raise \$2.4 trillion dollars in 10 years, which in turn would be used for canceling debt, and widening educational opportunities. In support of his proposal, [Sanders has noted](#) that "some 40 countries throughout the world have imposed a similar tax, including Britain, South Korea, Hong Kong, Brazil, Germany, France, Switzerland and China".

As a native New Yorker, like Sanders, I want to use the issue of tuition-free education in New York City as a case study to dive further into the issue of free public education. The City University of New York (CUNY) is New York's public university system, the largest urban higher education system in the country. There are 25 CUNY campuses, with tuition costing just shy of \$7,000 per year for full-time, New York state residents. The major policy decision that has amplified the debate involving tuition-free CUNY has been former Governor Cuomo's 2018 Excelsior Program, which provides, in essence, a full scholarship for low- and middle-income students (i.e. family income of \$125,000 or less).

I have seen some gaping holes in Cuomo's program which has resulted in already struggling students falling through. First, to qualify for the Excelsior Program, students need to be residents of New York state for at least 12 months before the semester starts. This eliminates immigrant students and students whose families have recently moved. Undocumented students, who are statistically more likely to be low-income or living in poverty, are also [not eligible for the Excelsior Program](#).

The program is problematic because it also requires that students commit to enrolling in at least 30 credits per year. Two-thirds of applicants in the first round of Excelsior Program [applications were rejected](#), mostly because they didn't meet this bar. Already [struggling groups](#) like working moms, students from nontraditional families with little social support, and first-generation college students (a group that represents over 40% of current CUNY students) are more likely to be part-time. Under the Excelsior program, a working mother who needs to work a minimum number of hours to receive healthcare benefits from her job, and therefore cannot attend school full-time, would be ineligible to receive a tuition-free education.

Finally, the Excelsior Program [fails to consider extra costs](#) that may prohibit students from attending college, like transportation, housing, and textbooks. Because states have balanced budget requirements, and because New York state has been hit so hard by the pandemic, many people fear that the governor will tighten [Excelsior Program](#) requirements even more in the coming months. This would be a mistake. Low- and middle-income people have been hurt the most, financially, by the pandemic, and [70% of families](#) in a recent survey worried that they could not afford tuition for school.

Many members of my own family attended CUNY, including my mom. My mom spoke to me about the difficulty of attending school while working to pay for rent, transportation, and textbooks. She told me stories about skipping the fare when taking the subway and stealing food

from the CUNY cafeterias in order to offset the cost of what she needed in tuition that semester. She said that although she received some financial aid, the cost was still prohibitive, and she was forced to take semesters off in order to work before finally graduating with her bachelor’s degree.

I believe that the CUNY system is a crucial component of New York City’s anti-poverty program, and that because it’s a public school system, tuition should be completely free for everyone. Furthermore, given its role in the City, it should also offer greater mental health support to its students, many of whom face the pressure of combining schooling with the need to work.

New York City began charging students tuition as a result of a [fiscal crisis in 1976](#). This is also the year, interestingly, when a [majority of students](#) in the CUNY system were found to be people of color. In essence, New York City used to give free educational opportunities to students when those students were predominantly white. When taking historical lack of opportunity and systemic racism into account, it only makes sense that New York grant free CUNY again.

If New York City public high schools are free, then by the same logic, New York City public colleges should also be free. A basic undergraduate education, especially in today’s economy, should be a right and not a privilege. Graduation rates would increase if tuition were free, and society would reap benefits accordingly. The [student retention rate](#) among Excelsior Program students, who do not pay tuition, is over 8 percent higher than non-Excelsior Program students, who do pay tuition. Currently, [CUNY dropout rates are incredibly high](#), with over 50% of students in bachelor’s degree programs and over 70% of students in associate’s degree programs failing to graduate. Since more than half of CUNY students work more than 20 hours a week, [free tuition](#) would reduce student stress and increase their productivity.

A [City Council bill](#) has recently been introduced that would establish a task force to “propose ways to eliminate tuition”. Critics of the bill claim that the city does not have enough money to support paying for such a program. While proponents of the bill argue that a tuition-free CUNY system can be funded simply by redistributing the budget and cutting funds to things like the NYPD or the Department of Correction.

In my opinion, New York City should be a role model for the rest of the country. With wealth inequality increasing, an upward mobility crisis, and the stringent requirements of the Excelsior Program, a free CUNY system helps to reduce the difference in civic capabilities that arise on account of low socioeconomic status and lack of educational opportunities in childhood. Senator Sanders and I share some basic attitudes about access to, and benefits of, a solid education.