

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am Associate Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies in the Department of English at Queens College. I've been at QC for 14 years, and there is a consensus among our faculty that 2022 marks the worst collective mental health crisis among our students in recent memory. We have seen an unprecedented attrition rate in our courses, where 50% or more of students have simply stopped doing the work or attending class. When surveyed, they tell us that they are overwhelmed, struggling with constant anxiety, that they cannot envisage a successful future, that they crave connection with their peers but don't know how to make friends because clubs, activities, basic food services, and even comfortable places to sit have all but disappeared from campus. Many are struggling with upheaval at home, from housing insecurity to domestic violence, brought on by the cumulative effects of the pandemic. Dining facilities on campus have been shuttered, and what few options remain offer wizened and unappetizing fare that sends a dismal message of abandonment. The most prominent student resource on campus right now is the food pantry. One of my colleagues recently compared our return to in-person teaching and learning as an invitation to dinner, only to find on arrival that the oven is broken, the table is bare, and the guests are miserable and silent. It's an apt simile.

An immiserated student body affects faculty in any number of ways. We're heartbroken as witnesses to our students' struggle and loneliness, demoralized by teaching to half-empty classrooms and students who now routinely miss deadlines or abandon the coursework. We've seen an increase in aggression leveled at instructors - threats, physical altercations, racial hatred, and online harassment. We are increasingly playing the role of mental health counselor - a role for which we are not trained - but our students simply don't know where else to turn. Last semester I accompanied a suicidal student to the health offices where they had just one therapist on call that day for the entire college. Queens has since hired some part-time counselors, but to the best of my knowledge the funding for those positions is not permanent. Many students don't even know that counseling services are available. Many have internalized the belief that QC lacks the resources or even the willingness to help because from the moment they first walk through the campus gates, they encounter dysfunctional or confusing administrative support services that make every step on their path to graduation harder than it needs to be.

A commitment from CUNY to supporting students' mental health begins with making college a place of connection and community. Obviously, we need more mental health services, but we also need funding for resources that will help combat students' sense of isolation by making campus more vibrant: revitalized activities and clubs; better, varied, and subsidized food options; increased IT support; more orientation activities for freshman; a woman's resource center; workshops on the study skills lost during the pandemic; and comfortable community spaces. We need a commitment from CUNY that its trustees care enough about our students' welfare to ameliorate the ever-worsening effects of underfunding and neglect. Money to do so needs to come from the state, and not leveraged from students who are already paying for their education at the cost of their mental health.