
Committee Meeting

of

SENATE HIGHER EDUCATION COMMITTEE

“The Committee will meet to receive testimony from invited guests on the post-COVID-19 pandemic trends within the State’s institutions of higher education”

LOCATION: Committee Room 1
State House Annex
Trenton, New Jersey

DATE: March 4, 2024
10:00 a.m.

MEMBERS OF COMMITTEE PRESENT:

Senator Joseph P. Cryan, Chair
Senator Andrew Zwicker, Vice Chair
Senator John J. McKeon
Senator Carmen F. Amato, Jr.
Senator Robert W. Singer



ALSO PRESENT:

Sarah B. Haimowitz
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*Office of Legislative Services
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*Senate Majority
Committee Aide*

Matthew Martins
*Senate Republican
Committee Aide*

*Meeting Recorded and Transcribed by
The Office of Legislative Services, Public Information Office,
Hearing Unit, State House Annex, PO 068, Trenton, New Jersey*

Joseph P. Cryan
Chair

Andrew Zwicker
Vice-Chair

Carmen F. Amato, Jr.
Paul D. Moriarty
Robert W. Singer



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NEW JERSEY STATE LEGISLATURE

SENATE HIGHER EDUCATION COMMITTEE

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COMMITTEE NOTICE

TO: MEMBERS OF THE SENATE HIGHER EDUCATION COMMITTEE
FROM: SENATOR JOSEPH P. CRYAN, CHAIRMAN
SUBJECT: COMMITTEE MEETING - MARCH 4, 2024

The public may address comments and questions to Sarah B. Haimowitz, Committee Aide, or make bill status and scheduling inquiries to Nadine Loretucci, Secretary, at (609)847-3850, fax (609)984-9808, or e-mail: OLSAideSHI@njleg.org. Written and electronic comments, questions and testimony submitted to the committee by the public, as well as recordings and transcripts, if any, of oral testimony, are government records and will be available to the public upon request.

The Senate Higher Education Committee will meet on Monday, March 4, 2024 at 10:00 AM in Committee Room 1, 1st Floor, State House Annex, Trenton, New Jersey.

The Senate Higher Education Committee will meet to receive testimony from invited guests on the post-COVID-19 pandemic trends within the State's institutions of higher education.

The following bill(s) will be considered:

S1519 Turner	Requires post-secondary educational institutions to collect and report employment data for certain graduates.
S1625 Zwicker	Requires annual report on New Jersey College Loans to Assist State Students (NJCLASS) Loan Program to include information on borrower delinquency and administrative wage garnishments.
S2208 Ruiz	Requires Secretary of Higher Education to create and maintain database of Educational Opportunity Fund student admissions.
S2611 Ruiz	Requires public institutions of higher education to provide menstrual products in all campus buildings.

(OVER)

Senate Higher Education Committee
Page 2
March 4, 2024

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Suzanne McCotter, Ph.D. Interim Provost The College of New Jersey	8
Christopher C. Catching, Ph.D. Vice President of Student Affairs Stockton University	9
Michael Middleton, Ph.D. Provost Ramapo College of New Jersey	11
David Goldman, Ph.D. Director of Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Office of Undergraduate Education Rutgers University	29
Salvador Mena, Ph.D. Senior Vice Chancellor for the Student Experience Rutgers University	30
Rory O'Brien McElwee, Ph.D. Vice President for Student Affairs Rowan University	35
Margaret McMenamin, Ph.D. President Union College of Union County	53
Anthony Iacono, Ph.D. President County College of Morris	57
Demond Hargrove, Ph.D. Vice President for Student Development Union College of Union County	62
Ariella Panek, Ph.D. Dean of Student Success County College of Morris	64

APPENDIX:

Testimony, and Twelve Facts About TCNJ That Might Surprise You submitted by Suzanne McCotter, Ph.D.	1x
Testimony submitted by Christopher Catching, Ph.D.	7x
Testimony submitted by Rory McElwee, Ph.D.	11x
Testimony, and New Jersey's Opportunity Agenda: Building Pathways to Equity and Economic Prosperity submitted by Aaron R. Fichtner, Ph.D. President New Jersey Council of County Colleges	19x
mej: 1-73	

SENATOR JOSEPH P. CRYAN (Chair): Very glad to have a loud room. So, I very much appreciate everybody coming in.

Thank you all for your time today.

Folks, if you are here for S1519, we are holding that bill today. So, S1519 is off your agenda.

Folks have asked-- We're going to do the three bills, I think we're in pretty good shape, Sarah, in a moment or two before I turn this over to you.

MS. HAIMOWITZ: OK.

SENATOR CRYAN: And, I also want to take a moment -- there will be a lot of introductions today. But, where are the speech pathology folks? Are they here? Let's give them a nice round of applause. Thanks for coming today.

(applause)

I am hearing rumors that they're from Montclair and Stockton and William Paterson. We appreciate you taking the time. Around here, we often wonder what people say when they give a speech, so maybe you guys can interpret that for us along the way.

Kidding aside, thanks so much. We appreciate it.

And, with that, I'll turn it over to Sarah.

MS. HAIMOWITZ: I'll take roll call.

Senator Singer.

SENATOR SINGER: Here.

MS. HAIMOWITZ: Senator Amato.

SENATOR AMATO: Present.

MS. HAIMOWITZ: Senator McKeon here for Senator Moriarty--

SENATOR CRYAN: Yes, and I should have noted that--

MS. HAIMOWITZ: He had stepped in earlier--

SENATOR CRYAN: And, I apologize.

Everyone should note Senator McKeon is here today on behalf of Senator Moriarty. My apologies.

MS. HAIMOWITZ: Senator Zwicker.

SENATOR ANDREW ZWICKER (Vice Chair): Present.

MS. HAIMOWITZ: And, Senator Cryan.

SENATOR CRYAN: Here.

MS. HAIMOWITZ: Thank you.

SENATOR CRYAN: OK, let's do some bills and be on our way.

MS. HAIMOWITZ: OK.

Senate Bill 1625 requires annual report on the NJCLASS loan program to include information on borrower delinquency and administrative wage garnishments.

Please note, Committee amendments are included in your packet. Those amendments remove the requirement that certain information reported by (indiscernible) on the NJCLASS loan program be reported for each income level; clarify delinquency to mean loans that reach 90 days of delinquency for the bill's purposes; and, make other minor technical corrections.

We don't have anybody here for that one, sir.

SENATOR CRYAN: So, no one is here from the public to comment.

Members, any comment?

SENATOR SINGER: Move the bill, Senator.

SENATOR CRYAN: We have a motion from Senator Singer.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Second.

SENATOR CRYAN: Second from Senator Zwicker.

MS. HAIMOWITZ: This is a motion to move the Bill S1625 with Senate Committee amendments.

Senator Singer.

SENATOR SINGER: Yes.

MS. HAIMOWITZ: Senator Amato.

SENATOR AMATO: Yes.

MS. HAIMOWITZ: Senator McKeon has left a vote in the affirmative.

Senator Zwicker.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Yes, and thank you for posting, Chairman.

MS. HAIMOWITZ: Senator Cryan.

SENATOR CRYAN: Yes.

MS. HAIMOWITZ: All right.

Senate Bill 2208 requires Secretary of Higher Education to create and maintain a database of Educational Opportunity Fund student admissions.

There are no amendments on this bill.

Sir?

SENATOR CRYAN: I thought there were.

(Indiscernible)

Sorry about that.

MS. HAIMOWITZ: That's OK.

SENATOR CRYAN: OK, S2208. David Rousseau is in favor -- no need to testify. And, Jennifer--

MS. HAIMOWITZ: Keyes-Maloney

SENATOR CRYAN: Jennifer Keyes-Maloney is in favor -- no need to testify.

Members, any comments?

SENATOR SINGER: So moved, Mr. Chairman.

SENATOR CRYAN: Motion.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Second.

SENATOR CRYAN: And, a second.

MS. HAIMOWITZ: This is a vote to move the Bill S2208.

Senator Singer.

SENATOR SINGER: Yes.

MS. HAIMOWITZ: Senator Amato.

SENATOR AMATO: Yes.

MS. HAIMOWITZ: Senator McKeon has left a vote in the affirmative.

Senator Zwicker.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Yes.

MS. HAIMOWITZ: Senator Cryan.

SENATOR CRYAN: Yes.

MS. HAIMOWITZ: Last bill on the agenda is Senate Bill 2611.

This bill requires public institutions of higher education to provide menstrual products in all campus buildings.

Please note, the Committee is proposing a substitute bill. This Committee substitute requires the president of each public institution to convene a menstrual equity taskforce. The purpose of the taskforce is to further advance the institution's efforts towards achieving menstrual equity. Members of the taskforce are to be appointed by the president of the institution, and shall include a cross-section of campus stakeholders, as listed in the substitute. No later than six months after the bill's effective date, the taskforce shall submit to the president a comprehensive and sustainable plan towards achieving menstrual equity on campus.

The substitute details what the plan shall include, which includes a timeline for implementation of the plan within 12 months of the substitute's effective date. The president shall forward the plan to the governing body of the institution, which shall then forward to the Governor and the Legislature. Full implementation shall occur within 12 months.

Menstrual equity is defined in the substitute. The taskforce shall expire 30 days after submission of the plan.

SENATOR CRYAN: Members, any questions on the amendments?

Thank you, members.

And, based on the amended bill, we have folks from Planned Parenthood Generation Action from Rutgers, TCNJ, and Montclair State -- in favor, no need to testify.

Kaitlyn Wojtowicz, Planned Parenthood, and she is in favor -- no need to testify. And, Jennifer Keyes-Maloney is from the College of New Jersey, and, as amended, she's in favor -- no need to testify.

Members, any questions?

SENATOR SINGER: Move the bill as amended.

SENATOR CRYAN: Second.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Second.

MS. HAIMOWITZ: This is the motion on the substitute for Senate Bill 2611.

Senator Singer.

SENATOR SINGER: Yes.

MS. HAIMOWITZ: Senator Amato.

SENATOR AMATO: Yes.

MS. HAIMOWITZ: Senator McKeon has left a vote in the affirmative.

Senator Zwicker.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Yes.

MS. HAIMOWITZ: Senator Cryan.

SENATOR CRYAN: Yes.

Sarah, thank you.

We're going to move to the portion of the hearing that we've come to have a discussion about. And, I've had an opportunity to speak to some folks. If I haven't, I want to make sure -- and, the members of the Committee know -- we're looking forward to having the panels come up and educate us on literally the impact of COVID and the pandemic; what it means; what you see moving forward.

Don't be shy. This is a conversational type of discussion. We're looking forward to folks being able to give us input and to educate the Committee as we move forward in our work.

I want to take a moment, in case I forget later, to thank *everybody* who helped organize this. I know there was a lot of staff work involved in this. I thank everybody who coordinated from the universities and from the colleges and every other place. We appreciate your time and your trouble for being here today, and to everybody for their work.

With that said, we're going to do three panels. The first panel is going to be state colleges and universities. Is this the order?

OK, the first will be state colleges and universities. So, I am going to ask them to come up. I think we're going to need another chair -- and some WD-40.

(laughter)

I think we're going to need another chair. So, from the College of New Jersey, I want to ask Dr. McCotter to come up, the Interim Provost. From Ramapo College, I want to ask Dr. Middleton to come up-- A lot of doctors. By the way, there's more doctors here today than a hospital, all right. And, our third is from Stockton University, Dr. Catching, Vice President of Student Affairs.

So, if we can -- and, I think we spoke about this, and we'll go right to left, if that's OK. So, we will have Dr. McCotter speak first. My right to left.

SENATOR SINGER: That's very Jewish of you, right to left.

SENATOR CRYAN: Very Jewish of me. Thanks, Bob.

The idea is to just, please, give us some insight, give us the thought process, and then we'll open it up to the members for questions.

I will ask all of you to comment first, and then we'll do that.

So, please, Dr. McCotter.

S U Z A N N E M c C O T T E R, Ph.D.: Good morning.

I am Suzanne McCotter. I am the Interim Provost at the College of New Jersey. I just want to start out by saying overall that what you're going to hear today from one place is going to be true for all of us. We have experienced losses among students, in terms of their development of all kinds that is not going to end quickly.

So, I am going to -- you have -- we provided written testimony, but I am just going to give you some quick data points from TCNJ, from The College of New Jersey.

We've got a 76% four-year graduation rate. And, that has not declined. It includes 74% of our underrepresented and economically disadvantaged students who graduate within four years. And, our six-year graduation rate is 86%. So, we have not suffered in terms of our graduation rate. We are still an excellent institution of higher education. We've got about 7,000 students, and what we've seen is an increased need for technology, mental-health services, financial aid, and academic advising.

In one of those areas, between 2021 and 2023, we've had over 3,000 increased-need students who have a need for tutoring. So, in 2021 there were 5,439 appointments, and, in 2023, it was 8,862. So, it is not only their classes, but their need for supplemental support. And, we've got an obligation to make sure that we are meeting students' needs where they are.

We have a very high one-year retention rate from students' first year to the second year, but in 2022 it went down 4%. So, our one-year retention rate was 94% in 2019, and it's gone down to 90%. That's a hit for us. It's still among the highest in the state and in the country, but it's a hit.

When we transitioned to COVID, we had to spend \$800,000 immediately in increasing technology access. So, that included adapting all of our classrooms; making sure that students had the appropriate technology at home; and training our faculty. That need hasn't gone away. We got the initial investments, but there are continued costs associated with subscriptions for the foreseeable future.

Students have also taken a hit with their mental health. So, in the past year, in 2023, we had 900 unique clients go to our counseling center. The Number 1 presenting issue among students is anxiety, and we expect this trend to continue. We've seen it among high school students, and we see it continuing among college students. We also had 1,400 urgent referrals through our Cares program, with the majority being for mental-health services. Our Cares program connects students with critical resources from health services to housing and food security, and this was a 33% from before the pandemic.

So, I am going to let my colleagues elaborate on some other points now, but I want to just reiterate that what we see in one institution we're seeing in every institution.

SENATOR CRYAN: Thanks.

I think we're going to let everybody chat, the three, and then we'll go. If that's OK.

Please, Dr. Catching. Thank you.

CHRISTOPHER C. CATCHING, Ph.D.: Good morning, Chairman Cryan, members of the Senate Higher Education Committee.

My name is Dr. Christopher Catching. I am the Vice President for Student Affairs at Stockton University.

Thank you for giving us a few moments to talk a little bit about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on our students.

Stockton, as you know, is in the southeastern portion of the state. We provide social mobility to primarily New Jersey State residents. In fact, 96% of our students hail from the State of New Jersey -- of our 8,800 students. Then, 50% of our students are first-generation students, so they have some unique challenges that they face because of that. Forty percent are classified as low-income, and 40% identify as Black, indigenous, people of color.

Like learners throughout our state, Stockton students have experienced a significant amount of challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic and thereafter. Academic preparedness and mental-health challenges are among the most serious. Through some of our strategic investments at our university, we've tried to ameliorate those challenges. Our freshman seminars -- our first-year studies programs -- are intentional connection of first-year students to career-development services, and certainly our mental-health services that I'll talk a little bit more about.

As most of our sister institutions, the amount of students needing mental-health services has increased significantly. We conducted a survey using the National Healthy Minds survey two years ago. Our students primarily are dealing with anxiety and depression -- not dissimilar from our other institutions. We've provided a significant amount of support for our students beyond the clinical services. So, you cannot serve all of the challenges of students with your clinical services, it just simply is not the bandwidth. We have a Stockton Cares Program, which is our case management initiative. We connect students to basic-needs resources,

community resources, and the like. We saw 4,300 students utilize those services in the past year. And, that's provided a significant resource for our students in addition to our mental-health resources.

And, we've also seen challenges in terms of housing occupancy. So, for example, prior to the pandemic, our housing occupancy was at 97%; it is now at 86%. So, that tells us some students -- less students are coming to college; less students are living on campus. But, we also know that students living in housing are more likely to persist, and they have greater access to all of the resources that we know that they need in and out of the classroom.

So, this is-- Our institutions, like all of our other sister institutions, we're continuing to look for strategies to help, particularly our most vulnerable students. And, certainly, continued State support will help us do that in terms of providing an educational opportunity for New Jersey's residents.

Thank you.

SENATOR CRYAN: Thank you. Dr. Middleton.

MICHAEL MIDDLETON, Ph.D.: Thank you, Chair, thank you, Committee, for taking the time to hear our thoughts about this important subject.

Just to tell you a little bit about the Ramapo context, as the public liberal arts college of New Jersey, we have a little more than 5,000 undergraduate students and 600 graduate students. Ninety percent of our students are from New Jersey, and our student body reflects the diversity of New Jersey with about 40% of our students from underrepresented racial groups, and 47% first-generation college-goers in our fall 2023 incoming class.

One of the good news of this pandemic is that we see families and students looking toward our public education, higher ed., for options for their students. This year, we have over 8,500 applicants, which is a record for our college. And, we enrolled the second-highest class ever this past fall. So, we see people wanting to return and wanting to engage in the public higher education system.

I can confirm what my colleagues said -- that the impact was profound and slightly different for each institution, but with a lot of similarities. And, while higher ed. hasn't had the seismic changes we all had anticipated during the pandemic, we've returned to a lot of normal operations. But, it's come with a concerted effort to offer high quality teaching support for our most vulnerable students and to provide faculty development.

Specifically for us, there are a few things that we are facing as challenges post-pandemic. One is the need to re-engage faculty and students on campus to facilitate relationship support and learning. The next is to strengthen the academic preparation of our students. We're seeing students who are differently prepared than prior to the pandemic. So, for example, from fall 2019 to fall 2022, the number of our first-year students placed in basic writing courses went from 13% to 31%, and into basic math from 24% to 45%. The percentage of our students successfully completing a college math course in their first year dropped from 77% to 71%. We're seeing the emotional and mental-health challenges that my colleagues have mentioned, with an increased number of students seeking support. And, that actually peaked in '21, 2022. The most common issues they are mentioning are academic concerns, loneliness, motivation, and mental-health issues.

And, finally, we're facing these challenges of integrating the lessons learned from the pandemic of embedding technology in the classroom while facing a new wave of challenges, including AI and gamification, the growth of those technology movements. So, trying to adapt from what we've learned as we're facing those new challenges.

At Ramapo, we've tried to adjust to these challenges in a few different ways. We've returned 75% of our classes fully in-person, with only 5% fully online, and about 20% hybrid, in which some classes are in-person and others are online. Our faculty who teach online and hybrid have been supported through our instructional design center. And, that's one thing that we didn't talk about, but, I think an important thing, as well as supporting our students, we also need to support our faculty. During the pandemic, they also reported struggles with trying to adapt to new modes of teaching, as well as feeling disconnected from their colleagues and students. So, we're trying to re-engage faculty. We've created a virtual hub of self-paced courses for faculty, and created course templates for online learning platforms, and we're currently conducting a review of all courses that have an online component to make sure those are the best ways to engage our students.

We've extended support for our students in their learning experiences by doubling the number of sections of our critical reading and writing classes, and our basic-skills math course. From fall 2019 to '23, the percent of first-year students enrolled in those basic courses increased, as I mentioned before, from about 13% to 31% in writing, and 24% to 45% in math. We are adding supplemental instruction; I think it's important, as my colleague said, that it's not just classroom support but it's out-of-classroom support. So, we've added a supplemental instructor to our critical writing

courses so our students can begin college with a course in reading and writing with built-in academic support. We've hired a developmental writing specialist and basic math lecturer. We've created virtual versions of 15 reading and writing workshops that are offered on campus, and the participation has tripled in the last three years to over 1,700 students looking for out-of-class supplemental support, and including increases in our tutoring visits. And, as my colleagues have said, we've seen our numbers about triple in the number of students seeking tutoring.

And, also, just to say: We're also trying to change our advising. You said that our advising systems need updating, need to meet students where they are. We've implemented an AI chatbot called Rocky the Roadrunner, based on our mascot, and Rocky delivers weekly information to support our students both academically, financially, personally. Ninety-six percent of our students have opted in for texts with our AI chatbot, and the average student sends six messages per semester to the chatbot to get responses and help and support.

In addition to our mental-health services, we've created a wellness room that can be accessed into the evening with resources. We've created an online, anonymous community to support well-being called Together All. And, we've created a "Welcome to Wellness" program for our first-year students, required for all first-year students.

I also just want to mention briefly that we see that this is particularly important for our students. The impact of the pandemic has been disproportional on our more vulnerable students, like our first-generation students. And, with our student body becoming more diverse, we've had to take a lot of steps to support those students who are in more

vulnerable situations. We've created a STEM center for support for minority students focusing on STEM, and the tutoring there has increased double over the last year. We've created emotional support in the form of a first-generation student center. We've realized that about 30% of our first-gen students were accessing counseling support, so we've created this center with a first-gen student counselor specifically to help and support them.

And, the results from all these efforts have been strong. Our retention rates rebounded. They dropped slightly during the pandemic, and have rebounded to 87%. And, our first-gen student retention rates have climbed to match our overall population, so we're very proud of that. Our overall retention did drop a couple of points in the 2021 cohort, but rebounded back to 87%. Our graduation rate seemed to decline slightly from about 60% to about 56%, so, a slight decrease in graduation rates, but we haven't seen the latest cohort yet; we're trying to gauge those data.

And, our achievement data shows that the course failure rate initially rose but then rebounded to its previous levels. And, surprisingly, we've seen a slight increase in students' overall GPA. So, those efforts that we're trying to put forth have been successful in supporting our students.

Thank you.

SENATOR CRYAN: Thank you, all.

Senator Singer is going to lead us off.

SENATOR SINGER: Thank you; thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you for the-- And, I don't know who really wants to answer some of these questions through our Committee.

First of all, in students who are seeking mental-health services, are these available to be prescribed medication through this, or strictly just counseling?

DR. CATCHING: So, in our case, we provide both. So, we provide psychiatrists for our students, although there, the college level, they're primarily medication management. But, the students have to come through our counseling and psychological office first and get referred to our psychiatrists who we also provide for students.

So, they have typical therapy, and then they also have the medical piece in terms of psychiatry.

SENATOR SINGER: OK, because I tend to think we over-medicate a lot of our students.

The other issue that I wanted to ask about is: Are you changing some of your curriculums in general, so that when students graduate, there is a job at the end of their efforts? Because, we see that a number of the large schools are without additional degrees in master's or doctorates. A lot of those degrees really have no place in the workforce. And, therefore, many students-- For example, we had a bill today that was being held, asking are students working in their field and what is their pay scale. And, we found in the past in this type of legislation that many students are embarrassed that they're not working in their field, and their pay scales are not up to par with where they should be, spending all the money for their degree.

So, are you thinking in general, in your institutions, eliminating certain degrees that have very little aptitude into the private sector? And, that maybe many students understand that certain degrees, that if you don't go for additional degrees in that, that there really isn't a lot for you there?

DR. McCOTTER: I can start there.

So, we have a concerted effort to make sure that we're thinking about career readiness in all of our degree programs. I'll do a little pitch as a proud mom that my son was a 2022 graduate of TCNJ in the field of philosophy. There are not a lot of professional philosophers out there, but, he had no problem finding jobs. So, he is really gainfully employed.

And, some of the things that corporations and employers tell us they need the most are from the liberal arts kind of backgrounds. They need to know how to think critically, they need to know how to write, how to communicate, how to construct an argument. So, we're trying to pair those skills with the actual technical career-ready skills. We have an excellent-- We have a follow-up survey, a one-year-out survey, where we track all of our students, and virtually all of them are employed or in graduate school within one year. We have a vibrant career services who helps students make the tangible connection between what they're doing and what their next step is going to be. So, we have-- It's, again, another place where those support services outside the classroom are essential to make those kinds of connections.

But, the short answer is yes, career readiness is a critical part of every degree.

DR. MIDDLETON: Similarly, as a public liberal arts college, we are forcefully moving ahead and defending the liberal arts as strong career preparation for our students. We know that some students choose to go into more technical careers and sometimes the research shows that they may start with a slightly higher salary, but our students in liberal arts degrees actually

persist longer in careers; get hired into more managerial positions; and, over time, their salaries match or surpass folks in other careers.

So, in our liberal arts, we certainly are doing some of the things-
- We map career readiness onto all of our degree programs. And, we have strong internship programs that students can supplement their liberal arts degree with practical experience. We are expanding our digital humanities efforts so that, if you're in history, if you're in English, also learning technology skills that often support data modeling, database management, and very specific career technical skills that, even for a liberal arts degree, they'll allow you to progress into the job market.

So, it is very much on our minds, and we think that this actually allows us to double down on the liberal arts.

DR. CATCHING: I just want to say, we partner with our academic colleagues for the same reason: knowing that there's a certain level of transience in terms of students changing their major, particularly in their first year.

So, from the career education and development standpoint, philosophically, we've taken the approach to begin to have these conversations with students and expose them to the conversation about the importance of experiential education during their first year. We know 50% of our students being first-gen, and also you can't forget about the families who are there with them when they come to college. Beginning to help demystify the whole process in terms of identifying the major, but knowing that even if you change your major, there are a number of different majors that are in the same family, so to speak, or same field, so there is some mobility there. And, what we found is that that helps students begin to map their

strategy during the first year; beginning to think about researching with faculty; studying abroad; getting involved in clubs and organizations and leadership experiences and other types of activities that will serve them well when they go on their first job interview.

So, we've taken the approach to begin to do that process in the first year and continue it systematically throughout their four or five years with us at the institution. We hope that it's going to help.

SENATOR CRYAN: Thanks.

I want to give Senator Zwicker--

SENATOR ZWICKER: Yes, sure.

Thank you so much. I appreciate, also, your comments now about liberal arts as a proud liberal arts graduate.

And, good to hear that you have a son who is a philosophy major. I think philosophy, English majors, so many others in liberal arts are just critical to the fabric of our overall society. So, congratulations to your son.

I wanted to come back and ask some questions sort of tying together both mental health and some of the very sobering statistics that each of you shared.

So, I guess the first one would be -- and, I don't remember who said this -- but someone talked about hybrid classes, online classes. And, so, I would ask any or all of you: Have you transitioned -- or are you continuing to transition -- away from hybrid and Zoom and online learning? Or, if not, why?

And, I'm thinking about that both from a pedagogical perspective and just effectiveness, but also from a loneliness perspective, in terms of having a student sit in his or her dorm room -- or at home -- but alone. So,

I'm just curious how you're thinking about that as you tie in all the various factors that you've discussed over the last few minutes?

DR. McCOTTER: TCNJ does not aspire to be Capella University; we have no desire to be fully online. So, we are transitioning where appropriate, especially for our on-campus new undergraduate students who look like traditional undergraduate students; they're in that 18- to 22-year-old range.

That said, we are also trying to look at audiences who are adult learners who may need more flexibility.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Sure.

DR. McCOTTER: So, we're trying to look at degree completers, graduate students, people who are continuing education or professional development who cannot step out of their life to come to a 1 p.m. class on Tuesday and Thursday on campus. So, we're trying to make sure that we're meeting their needs, as well as the needs of our undergraduate on-campus students, and recognizing that many more of those traditional on-campus undergraduate students have to work two days a week in order to put themselves through college. So, one of their four or five classes being online is really helpful to them.

So, we are trying not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. We're coming back -- we're back -- and we want to make sure that everything that we've learned about the benefits of high-quality online education, we're keeping in reasoned ways.

SENATOR ZWICKER: I don't know if that was good enough, or you want to add to-- Is it similar at both your institutions?

DR. MIDDLETON: Yes, as I said, 75% of our classes are back on campus fully; only 5% are fully online and we are intentionally keeping that number low. And, it's really only for classes where there's a strong teaching and learning purpose for doing that.

So, for example, we have a communications course that talks about online strategies for the communications field. And, of course, it's fully online, because it fits the nature of the content and the teaching. So, we are really targeting that. And, for our hybrid courses, where they usually meet in person twice a week, once online, we see that as a way to provide students with some flexibility about working.

But, again, those classes that are held online need to have a teaching and learning approach that fits the online context. It isn't just taking a syllabus and putting it online and Zoom. You have to adjust the way you teach. And, so, we've spent a lot of our resources in supporting our faculty and understanding the best ways to teach online where that's appropriate.

SENATOR ZWICKER: And, then, as a follow-up question: So, the statistics you gave are, obviously, very sobering and troubling. Some of them are a little conflicting, and I think you mentioned that at the end -- where GPAs are bouncing back, you're looking at graduation rates.

So, this is somewhat subjective, but I'm curious your thoughts on-- Are we seeing a hit to learning from the pandemic? And, then an expected return to pre-pandemic rates -- maybe not as quickly as we all would like. Do you think we're in a new realm that's going to stay that way for quite some time? You talked about remedial English, remedial math. You know, I'm just curious your thoughts on the next couple of years moving forward.

DR. CATCHING: I'll speak on that.

I think it's certainly where we are currently, for the next several years. We've seen our current, most recent high schoolers coming to us more academically unprepared. We know right behind them are the middle schoolers. And, so, our institutions have had to prepare for that, whether it's an investment in more academic support resources.

The mental-health challenges and academic under-preparedness issues go hand in hand for our students. And, some of the data that's out there speaks more broadly to it. Being academically under-prepared creates stress in the classroom and outside the classroom. So, the increase in mental-health needs have not happened in a vacuum; they've also coincided with students coming to us with greater academic need.

So, we anticipate having to continue to provide the types of resources for students, and it can only happen in the classroom or in clinical spaces. Creating a sense of belonging and community for students outside of the classroom is critically important, and many of the things that our institutions already provide for our students have taken on a heightened significance, such as clubs and organizations; living on campus; and other ways to find community, if not for anything else, to help ameliorate some of the isolation and some of the challenges.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Thank you, Chairman.

SENATOR CRYAN: Senator Amato.

SENATOR AMATO: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Just, Dr. Middleton, can you provide your testimony to us in writing?

DR. MIDDLETON: Yes.

SENATOR AMATO: The other two speakers did.

Thank you very much, that's helpful because there's a lot to digest in a short period of time.

DR. MIDDLETON: Of course.

SENATOR AMATO: My question is, you had mentioned mental-- All of you had mentioned mental health. And, what concerns me is the enrollment has dropped significantly. It's starting to come back, as Senator Zwicker had mentioned.

Is there a push for the students who have anxiety or to push to do more online? I know the idea is to try to get the students back into school, but there may be students who might not be able to do that, who may need the online component.

I know we're trying to go that way, is there a way that you guys can talk about that? Because that's concerning to me, coming out of the pandemic, the parents that I talked to, children have a lot of anxiety and they're working that out, and they do want to participate in college-level courses post-high school. And, I know there is some options out there, but I think, to make sure that option is there, maybe try to enhance it a little bit.

So, I would like to hear your thoughts on that a little bit.

DR. MIDDLETON: Sure. I think we're seeing more students question whether they should be living on campus in their first year. Our on-campus residence life members dropped slightly, and I think that's the option for students who want that support from family. So, we are seeing that as a way that some students engage in college and in their first year, but in a way that feels like it's supportive of them.

But, I also think that the services that we're all providing on our campuses, in the context of teaching and learning, are the best way for students to navigate both their mental health and their learning challenges, because we're able to provide that supportive community rather than online.

DR. CATCHING: I think the piece around working with the families is really important. About 50% of our students indicate that they use their family as a resource on a daily basis. So, for students experiencing anxiety and pressure, their parents are often in communication with us, and we work closely with them to try to -- whether it's providing the resources some students may need, may have a diagnosed document of disability, so we have an extensive learning access program to help students as well.

So, we try to provide the resources to meet the students' unique needs where they are. Through primarily -- in my end, in student affairs -- through the supportive services piece.

SENATOR AMATO: Thank you.

DR. McCOTTER: And, I'll just add that it's really a mixed bag, because some students express that need for community, and that's where the anxiety comes out. And, for other students, it looks more like depression, where they tend to become more withdrawn. And, we have to make sure that we're all working across the siloed boundaries, making sure that student affairs and academic affairs are working together on those needs, because the student who wants to stay in their room by themselves and to do online classes, that may not be what that student needs.

So, we have to think really carefully about the difference between wanting and needing.

DR. MIDDLETON: Just to say one other thing that we've had to do -- and, I assume you all, too -- is more work with our faculty, and understanding the emotional challenges of their students. So, we send out regular updates (indiscernible) things to look for in their students and how to intervene early when we see a student not attending class early on; when we see a student that may be presenting with some mental-health challenges.

So, our faculty -- who really are the primary relationship for many students -- know how to handle that; know how to refer well; know how to support those students to the right people that they should.

SENATOR AMATO: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Chair.

SENATOR CRYAN: Thank you.

Let me just ask a couple others, then we're going to ask the next panel. I think it's safe to say we could be here quite a bit, and we're very appreciative of the time.

First, I've got to say, Dr. McCotter, thanks for the signs.

(laughter)

OK, good stuff. A little social--

DR. McCOTTER: In my heart, I'm a sixth-grade teacher.

(laughter)

SENATOR CRYAN: In my heart, I'm still in sixth grade, so I appreciate that.

(laughter)

I do-- Can you just explain, Dr. Middleton, gamification?

DR. MIDDLETON: Sure.

SENATOR CRYAN: You mentioned it, and I thought it might be a topic that maybe you can educate us a little bit on.

DR. MIDDLETON: It's an area of growth in technology where both-- We know a lot of our students in this generation engage in gaming, and, so, we want to provide both academic platforms that use elements of gaming to help support teaching and learning--

SENATOR CRYAN: OK--

DR. MIDDLETON: --and, so that many of them may pursue careers in technology related to that field.

So, it's both a way to approach how we teach, and it's an academic field in its own. But, we see it growing, and we see a lot of our faculty wanting to use elements of gaming in their classroom as a way to motivate and engage students, get them to collaborate more deeply, and meet them where they are.

SENATOR CRYAN: A lot of heads nodding yes to that.

Can you explain, as well -- and, anybody -- the move to online. Is that class accessible to that student if they can't make the Tuesday 6 p.m. class? Can they pull that class up on Wednesday morning, or do we utilize online only for the student as the one time, or is it an archive type of situation?

DR. McCOTTER: It really depends on the way that it's set up. But, I would say my general answer is no, we're not recording and archiving those classes unless they're specifically designed as asynchronous classes that students can do anywhere and, typically, at their own pace.

SENATOR CRYAN: Is that kind of everybody else's?

DR. MIDDLETON: Yes.

DR. CATCHING: Yes.

SENATOR CRYAN: OK.

Last for me is can you -- just for a moment, and then we'll move to the next panel -- you all mentioned the additional staff. The comments, folks you brought on, additional supports. We didn't do it in a financial context. And, I understand that you're all not the CFO, so to speak.

So, if you can talk about that, and then just a little bit about, is there any impact with space? Have you seen less demand for space -- those sort of things. If you can give a comment or not, and then I'll close out our discussion today, if that's all right, to the next panel.

DR. McCOTTER: My CFO would be thrilled to come and talk to you. (laughter)

If you want to hear from the CFO perspective.

But, we have-- One of the things that we've seen with staff, all of these things have such a trickle effect. So, I just want to-- One of the things that Dr. Middleton mentioned was we make sure that faculty know the student is not coming to class, that they need to reach out, that here's what-- You can only do that if you've got a small enough class that you can recognize when a student is not coming.

So, first of all, you need a small student-to-faculty ratio. And, then you need resources to direct those students out to whether it's tutoring, counseling, health services. So, all of it -- and, career services -- so, we can make sure that there's a place for these students and a direction afterwards. So, every single thing that we're doing has been magnified with some of these crises.

Space -- it's kind of a mixed bag. We also have fewer students who are seeking living on campus, so we have more space in our residence halls that's available. But, our classroom space-- All of our classroom spaces had to be retrofitted to be high-tech. And, so, we have fewer classrooms that have this capacity to be able to do some of these really interesting technological things.

DR. CATCHING: I would speak on -- similarly, with our residence halls, being at less occupancy. There's been more space. There's always a demand for classroom space and other administrative offices at our university, that hasn't changed.

One of the things -- from a staffing standpoint and a fiscal lens - - we've had to do is rethink how we use existing staff knowing that there's not an overabundance of more staff that we can hire from a budgetary standpoint, and, strategically aligning those staff to support the greatest needs of students. So, we talked a lot about mental health. We strategically devoted staff to case management, to non-clinical student support services, while also still trying to meet other demands. So, that's been the balancing act that we've had to do from a resource standpoint.

SENATOR CRYAN: Thank you.

DR. MIDDLETON: Similarly, we've had to do that balance on our faculty lines. If we see an area that we need extra support and, like our lecturer we've hired in basic writing, that comes from another faculty line that we could have used for something else.

So, we're readjusting the way we use the existing resources we have, and trying to bring on new resources, which is a challenge. I mentioned we have a first-gen student center that, right now, is carried by private funding

and we need to think about how to make that sustainable. Especially with regard to your question, “Do we see this as a long-term challenge to us?” And, I think all of us *do* see this as a generational challenge.

SENATOR CRYAN: Thank you all for your insight. Thank you so very much; we appreciate your time today.

We have three panels. I am going to ask the second panel to come forward, which is our research institutions. We’re going to have the county colleges bat cleanup today.

So, I want to ask from Rutgers University in New Brunswick, David Goldman. Do we say Dr. David? Because you do have a Ph.D. Do we say doctor? Is that proper?

DAVID GOLDMAN, Ph.D.: It’s up to you.

SENATOR CRYAN: Dr. Goldman.

I’m going to ask Dr. Mena.

Dr. Goldman is the Director of Teaching, Learning, and Assessment with the Office of Undergraduate Education. Dr. Mena is the Senior Vice Chancellor for the Student Experience. So, I bet you both have stories.

And, finally, from Rowan University, I want to ask Rory McElwee, Vice President for Student Affairs. Rory, as well. Thank you.

So, as you saw in the last-- Similar comments, feel free to echo where it’s important, feel free to manage anything you’ll obviously hear from the Committee as well.

And, we’ll do the same, Dr. Mena, I apologize. We’ll go right to left. In your case, it’s whatever. My left.

Thank you.

SALVADOR MENA, Ph.D.: Well, good morning, and thank you, Chairman Cryan, for having us here today. And, thank you for the opportunity.

I think part of what we're going to share is going to match what was reported earlier by the first panel.

You know, Rutgers New Brunswick is an institution of 45,000 students. We experienced the institution pre-pandemic, during the pandemic, and post-pandemic. We're finally getting to a place where it's starting to feel like normal again, whatever that means. But, the campus is vibrant and everyone is back.

And, so, we've got some observations that we've gathered over the several years since we've been back on campus. So, we do know that students are coming, are still dealing with the impact of the pandemic. I think you heard about mental-health needs before. We've got some data points here to share with you. We administered a survey in 2019 and again in 2022, and we learned that, from an overall depression, from moderate to major, that it increased from 38% to 44% from 2019 to 2022. In terms of anxiety disorders, from 30% to 34%. Suicidal ideation sort of stayed the time, around 12%. Psychiatric medication in the past year, from 16% to 23%. And, then, have you received some form of counseling or therapy -- that went from 25% in 2019 to 44% in 2022. So, again, we continue to see an increase in the demand for mental-health support.

On the good side of that is that students are asking for help without being concerned about the stigma that's associated with mental health. And, so, that's a good thing to see (indiscernible) a testament to our

community and how we have made ourselves available to support our students.

Similarly, we are seeing increases in the number of events and programs that students are attending. And, so, in 2022-2023, it rose 15.5% from 2021-2022. Again, an increase in the number of events and programs that students are attending. They were pretty hesitant when they first got back to be in audiences, to be in crowds, those types of things. But, we're seeing that starting to normalize. And, then, also, an increase of almost 14% in 2023-2024. So, again, we continue to see an increase in the number of students that are getting out, attending events, and being present.

Since the full return of students to campus, there are some observations that we have. And, so, we see students struggling with social skills and conflict management, that has led to a lot of avoidance and interpersonal relationships and conflict management, for example. We have seen an increase in roommate conflicts and vandalism -- again, the students not knowing how to interact with others. Again, it's not a blanket statement across the board. Again, I said we have 45,000 students. But, we do have an on-campus population of around 15,000 students, and, so, we have staff on-site. So, they have some very keen observations of how students are showing up on campus and how they're beginning to live and associate with others.

In addition, we've also observed students having a hard time with understanding the boundaries -- personal boundaries -- of people. And, students being challenged by establishing those boundaries. So, we get a lot of conflict related to whether it be harassment or interpersonal conflict, because students don't understand what boundaries are and not to cross those boundaries.

Similarly, in a leadership position, we've observed students lacking confidence in their leadership abilities. We advise over 500 student organizations, and, so, one of the observations that my team has had is that, again, students are not as confident serving in leadership roles. Many of them maybe didn't get the chance to do that while in high school because they were receiving remote instruction in high school, so they didn't get to participate in student organizations and those types of things.

We also learned from our mental-health counselors that students have been longing for how things used to be. Again, as you know, in some cases, students lost family members because of COVID-19; family members lost their jobs because of COVID-19. And, so, there's sort of this longing of going back to how things were before, but also struggling with how to move forward. So, again, these are insights coming from our counselors.

And, so, we also learned that students want to have flexibility, I think from what you heard earlier. They want to be able to be present when they want to be in-person, but they also want remote options when possible, and they sort of choose, even at the last second, to switch between those. And, so, many of our counselors appointments -- which were in person before -- now are happening remote. And, so, a student may have a counseling appointment scheduled to be in-person but at the last second they'll choose to do that remotely. And, again, that's becoming normal.

And, now, a few years removed from the pandemic, we're sort of as normal as normal can be. The campus feels vibrant; there are all signs of student life. But, under that, students are still struggling by virtue of the utilization of the services that we have. But, like my colleagues before us, we're working to support them as best we can.

SENATOR CRYAN: Thank you.

DR. GOLDMAN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and members of the Committee for inviting us here today.

I am here to share some additional detail and context about teaching modes in this kind of post-pandemic environment that we're in. And, the first thing that I want to say, the kind of dominant thing that we've been seeing on the academic side after the pandemic is a big increase in student interest in taking online courses. And, I think these are for the reasons that Dr. Mena and other people have mentioned. Online courses provide students with flexibility, and our students are working; our students have family responsibilities in New Brunswick; our students are on the bus going from Piscataway to College Avenue. They have a lot going on.

And, the specific sort of increase that we've seen, there's been some increase in fully online enrollments, but the big increase we've seen is in students wanting to enroll in one or two online courses while also taking two or three or four in-person courses. So, they want to be able to make a mix like that.

We've seen this in some institutional data. So, before the pandemic, we saw about 19% of our students were taking *some* but not all online courses. So, again, enrolling in some while also having some in-person classes. Now, after the pandemic, that number is about 36%. So, roughly doubling. And, that's at Rutgers -- that matches with what we're hearing nationally, what I'm hearing from colleges and other institutions.

Also, anecdotally, when departments offer a course in multiple sections of both online and in-person formats, I hear from departments all the time -- and, this seems to be across the board in all disciplines -- those

online sections fill very quickly, and the in-person sections take much longer to fill. So, students are flocking into those online sections first.

That's on the student side, and that reflects the student demand and interest in these online courses. On the faculty side, we're also seeing faculty having an increased interest in comfort level and experience using -- openness to using -- online teaching after the pandemic. And, this is happening -- faculty are more interested in teaching fully online courses, but it's also happening across the board in our in-person courses as well. Our faculty are really treating online tools and the online course environment as a component of their teaching alongside the lecture hall; alongside the seminar room or the recitation; alongside the laboratory. They understand, after having used these tools for a few years, what their strengths and weaknesses are, and they're using them even in their in-person courses to supplement and to build student skills; to provide additional opportunities for students to get engaged with the material, before or after class. I can give some specific examples if people are interested, but we're really seeing this interest in online learning as a component of what's happening, even in in-person classes across the board.

I also want to emphasize that the fully online teaching that's happening now is very different from the emergency remote instruction that we did at the beginning of the pandemic where everyone was flocking into Zoom, or for a while it was Webex rooms, and trying to replicate what they were doing on the fly in that online environment. A lot of online teaching now is guided by what we call a "community of inquiry" model, where faculty spend a lot of time trying to build structured opportunities for students in that online space to interact with each other; to do problem sets together

collaboratively and practice for an exam; to work on group projects; things like that. And, also, faculty work very hard to provide lots of structured opportunities for feedback from the instructor. All of this takes a lot of planning and preparation up front, but it creates a situation where these online courses don't feel like I'm alone, solitary in my room trying to figure out this material. But, I'm part of a community in the same way I would be in an in-person classroom trying to understand this material and work with peers.

The final thing that I want to say, echoing what Dr. Mena and many other people have said, the Number 1 concern that I hear from faculty in their pedagogy, in their teaching across in-person and online formats, is student disengagement; students feeling overwhelmed; students feeling stressed out; and disappearing or stopping attending or stopping completing work during the semester. This is happening to our faculty in all kinds of courses in all formats at a rate that is higher than what they had experienced before the pandemic. And, we're working with faculty on a lot of different strategies to try to address this in the classroom to keep students engaged in small-stakes ways that keep them from falling off the map and adopting other sorts of strategies around incentivizing students to attend class; to participate in class; to build relationships with their peers in class. There's no one magic bullet to address this issue, but it's a real issue that faculty and departments are working on across Rutgers.

I'll leave it at that. Thank you very much for the time, and I am happy to answer any questions you have.

SENATOR CRYAN: Thank you very much.

R O R Y O ' B R I E N M c E L W E E, Ph.D: Good morning, everyone.

Thank you, Chairman Cryan and all of the Committee members for the honor of speaking with you today on behalf of Rowan University.

My name is Rory McElwee. I am the Vice President for Student Affairs. I've been at Rowan for more than 20 years, initially as a member of the Psychology Department as a faculty member, and for the last 12 years supporting student success initiatives and services under the leadership of President Ali Houshmand.

It's very timely to examine the effect of the pandemic on higher ed. Four years ago, our institutions pivoted rapidly to respond to emergent conditions. And, that agility and commitment to change cannot stop now. So, since 2011, President Houshmand has led Rowan with a commitment to DEI in pursuit of four strategic pillars: access, affordability, quality, and serving as an economic engine. Post-pandemic, Rowan continues to try to innovate and challenges the status quo in higher ed. in light of these core values.

Higher education cannot function in a business-as-usual manner and expect to achieve better outcomes for students, particularly given institutional equity gaps that have long been observed at Rowan and nationally. We're moving to make the university more student-ready, as championed by Dr. Tia Brown McNair and others in their book *Becoming a Student-Ready College*. This changes the question typically asked about student success from, "Is the student ready for college?" to, "Is the college ready for the student?" Our obligation and privilege is to ensure that our institutions meet students' needs. Too many students stop out prior to graduating, often with debt, and these negative outcomes affect more

students of color as well as low-income and first-gen students. So, change is needed.

I'll touch briefly on five arenas of the college student experience showing notable changes since the pandemic. The first is academic preparedness. Pandemic learning loss has followed students from high school into college. At Rowan, we see this in a few ways.

Enrollments in developmental courses have doubled or tripled since fall 2019. More anecdotally, some faculty have noted that students seem less prepared; less ready to learn autonomously; or even lacking basic classroom skills like taking notes. In response, we're strengthening our orientation and welcome-week processes, as well as holistic support for the first year and beyond. We've redesigned outreach about services, and we're happy to see a 40% increase in tutoring and success-coaching appointments just since last year -- meaning students are responding and using our services.

The second arena is mental health. We've heard a lot about it today, and related issues like resilience and social connection. Statements such as, "I just couldn't get out of bed" due to depression or anxiety are very common. Compared to before the pandemic, our students are almost 40% more (indiscernible) of our counseling services, as well as heavy use of the 'You Will' platform provided by OSHE. We strengthened our non-clinical well-being support, including peer-connection programs and substance-use alternatives via a State grant. Also underway is our first Rowan University Strategic Wellness Plan to boost well-being in all members of our community.

The third arena is affordability. The pandemic's economic challenges to families continue to show impact on students. The Garden State Guarantee helps many students who attend college full time, and we

have several micro-grant programs that assist students with emergent needs. Recently, our work has been assisted by OSHE's "No College, Some Degree Program" and a \$200,000 grant -- most of which is dedicated to direct student support.

Fourth is continued growth in so-called non-traditional students who now actually make up the majority. Very rapid changes in our student body since 2019 include almost doubling the proportion of students with disabilities and a 16% increase in undergraduates from under-represented racial and ethnic groups. During the pandemic, we accelerated flexible models for learning to enable more students to fit college into their heavy work schedules and family responsibilities. Online course enrollment is now a quarter of all of our undergrad seats -- which is up two and a half times since 2019 -- with most of the online seats taken by face-to-face students, echoing my colleagues that it is, in many cases, students are taking say three or four face-to-face courses and one or two online. It helps them to complete more courses in a way with needed flexibility.

Post-pandemic, Rowan's community college partnerships are increasingly important for college access. For example, our "Three Plus One" program enrollment has more than doubled since 2019, and 75% of those students do in fact graduate in one year.

The fifth arena is career readiness. Students' primary reason for going to college is to improve their career and earning prospects, so they're highly attuned to return on investment. At Rowan, hands-on experiential education and internships, research, and more build students' professional skills while deepening their learning. Knowing that many students will never visit a career center, we're bringing the services to them, in class, in residence

halls, and beyond. Students from any major -- to echo an earlier theme -- can be well prepared for careers when they have these experiences and can articulate the transferrable skills that they've acquired. Also important is aligning programs with workforce-development needs in the region. Work with employers such as Lockheed and Virtua shows how higher ed. institutions can partner with employers to prepare graduates with the skills they need for in-demand jobs.

In some, the pandemic brought to light remarkable agility in higher ed. to be responsive to student needs. But, still, today the status quo does not work for so many students, reinforcing the need for our institutions -- and, indeed, our system of higher education -- to become more student-ready. This includes, especially, focus on affordability, including more funding for costs like room and board, and on high-quality on-ramps to college, such as expanded summer bridge programs like are available through an EOF program.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to share this perspective.

SENATOR CRYAN: First of all, thank you all for your incredible insight.

Members?

Senator Singer, and then Senator Zwicker.

SENATOR SINGER: Thank you -- just, thank you for your presentation.

I'm a little bit-- Help me understand. Are students either fudging or getting grades they don't belong getting in high school coming into your institutions? Or, are you lowering your standards? It has to be one or

the other if so many are taking basic English and math, because those are standards to get into your institutions.

So, have you lowered your scores on SATS? Have you lowered your standards on class ranking? You've had to do something, or the high schools are fudging it. I mean, it's one or the other.

DR. McELWEE: So, at Rowan, I would see a different perspective on that.

First of all, we have about a six-fold increase in the number of students who are applying test-optional now. So, that was-- We had a test-optional application process available pre-pandemic, but during the pandemic, with halts in offering SATs, etc., that's really accelerated. So, we have many students who apply test-optional, and, so, the admissions process itself has adjusted because of that. So, we don't have apples to compare to apples in terms of SAT scores from before the pandemic.

Developmental-- Although I've mentioned we've had significant increases in enrollment in developmental courses at Rowan, our percentages are actually quite low. I still think it's less than 10% of our students. And, that's in part because about eight years ago, we engaged in significant developmental education reform. We have very few students who actually enroll in non-credit basic-skills courses. Sometimes a student may need such a basic-skills course in both reading and math; however, in many cases, it's one or the other. The students may have many strengths academically, and, yet, show that they need some support in one of the areas or the other.

So, I think that's a little bit more context to it. I think when we talk about standards, also, I think we must have high standards for our

students. No one is doing anyone any service by lowering any standards, and that's our position at Rowan.

DR. GOLDMAN: So, I think I second everything that my colleague shared.

I don't have specific information about placement and developmental coursework at Rutgers, but I know there have been similar efforts made. And, this is national best practice that emerged I think over the last 10 years or so in terms of the use of developmental education and placement.

SENATOR CRYAN: Thank you. Thanks.

Anything else?

DR. MENA: And, I would say that it becomes hard to get into Rutgers, so we have a lot of high-achieving students who unfortunately don't get in. But, it just happens that, once you get in, it's a whole new journey, and depending on how you've been exposed to that journey, you may have the capital to get off to a great start although it may take you a little bit longer. But, for the most part, we haven't lowered standards. Again, it's pretty difficult now to get into Rutgers and many institutions.

SENATOR SINGER: A follow up on that: What percentage of Rutgers students are from New Jersey?

SENATOR CRYAN: Sixty-five, I think.

DR. MENA: The majority. We have a very small international student population, and a small -- but growing -- out-of-state student population. And, so, the majority of our students are coming from Rutgers -- sorry, coming from New Jersey.

SENATOR SINGER: OK, so that's like, 75-80%?

DR. MENA: Yes, I don't have the exact number, but a majority of our students.

SENATOR CRYAN: I had an opportunity to chat with the President last week; it may not be as high as 75%, but it's high. And, there's certainly the proper mix, I think, for those of us who care about New Jersey students first.

SENATOR SINGER: Well, I do.

SENATOR CRYAN: I do, too.

SENATOR SINGER: But, I think-- We're hearing a cross section. Everyone is saying there's more students going to remedial, but we're not lowering our standards. It doesn't equate a little bit, but we're going to-- I'm not going to press the issue.

SENATOR CRYAN: Well, the purpose of the Committee is to find out the challenges, right?

Thank you.

Senator Zwicker.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Thank you, Chairman.

I want to come back to talking about online versus in-person instruction.

I'll be honest, I found the testimony a little discouraging and disheartening. And, the reason is that what I heard a lot of was discussion of what students want and a little bit of what faculty want, but not so much about the quality of the instruction. And, so, it's a bit of a chicken-and-an-egg perspective. I heard things like, "Students are struggling to even know how to take notes." We heard earlier, before, about the importance of

thinking critically. That there was, someone said quickly, “Oh, we can do group learning,” like a group study, “but we should just do it online.”

And, so, fold that back into my earlier comments about mental health, loneliness, etc., I fully understand what students want. I think my first question is: Is that what’s best for their educational needs?

DR. GOLDMAN: So, I led with the framing of what student demand is really emerging at Rutgers. I didn’t intend for that to frame everything that I was sharing.

A lot of the work that we’re doing, both in online and in-person classes, is guided by research that’s emerged especially over the past 15 years or so about what students really need in *any* form of classroom -- whether it’s an in-person 300-person lecture classroom or an online classroom. We know that students learn far better when they form connections with their peers; when they interact with their peers over the material and beyond that in the setting where you’re working on a group project together. Our faculty are developing these sorts of online group projects for online courses -- *and* they’re adopting active learning strategies to get students engaged with the material in the in-person classroom as well, and engaging with each other. All of those are designed to address the loneliness, the disengagement that can happen to students, whether they’re in in-person or online classes, especially at a large institution.

So, I think I’d want to frame some of those patterns that I was describing in the pedagogy both online and in person as really trying to address those student needs, and trying to ensure that students do form connections with each other.

I'm not saying that our students are going to be totally fine if they're only connecting with other peers online. But, if they're taking some online classes while also taking some in-person classes while also living with other students, living in the community-- And, one thing that we've heard from students a lot -- I don't know if you'd second this -- but students really want to have the campus experience. They want to have that experience of being in person in that way.

So, I frame the efforts that our faculty are making as trying to build those connections in the classroom as well as having the connection existing outside of the classroom. I hope that addresses some of that.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Sure. That's some of it. The idea that a large lecture class is not the ideal way to teach, and how can you break that down into smaller groups, or have other ways to have active learning that's been around, as you just said, for decades.

But, this is specific now to post-pandemic. So, I'm still hearing that there's this movement towards doing *more* online, not less. That somehow, doing more online, that the convenience of it is more important than the quality of the education. And, I'm speaking very subjectively, and I'm showing my age, I fully understand that. But, it's a deep concern of mine because the learning experience -- the on-campus experience you just mentioned -- includes that ability to struggle with material and then get into a small group and work together on problem solving, for example. We can debate whether or not you can have that same experience fully online or not.

But, anyway, I know someone else wants to respond. But, I'm expressing, I think, a similar concern.

DR. GOLDMAN: So, one other thing I would add, there's at least some students for whom that sort of interaction with their peers will sometimes come easier in an online setting than an in-person setting. There are some personality types and some people and some students who will tend to dominate conversations. And, we have heard from students, especially students with social anxiety, that they feel more comfortable participating and asserting themselves in that online setting.

I'm not saying-- I think what I'm trying to get across is that all of these different formats have strengths *and* weaknesses, and we try to emphasize the strengths and address the weaknesses in each of those formats.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Can I just push a little bit more there, too?

Agreed-- I mean, introverts have been around forever. But, Senator Singer had a question to the previous panel about job readiness. And, young people can't stay online forever. I mean, I suppose there are some professions now where you can, of course. But, the rest of the world that's out there-- I mean, I'm just pushing because I'm feeling this sense of discomfort right now over this line between giving students what they want and educating and preparing them for living the rest of their lives.

DR. GOLDMAN: So, I want to emphasize, it's not all or nothing. Most of our students are interested in a mix and having both of those experiences. That's been my experience professionally since the pandemic, working with my team online; sometimes I'm working with my team in-person-- I'm sorry.

DR. McELWEE: Not at all.

Just to echo a little -- a few themes that I think introduce some other thoughts as well.

I think when we think about 18- to 22-year-olds -- traditional college-age students -- I think at Rowan we are seeing most of them continue to weigh the in-person learning more heavily. However, we have many students who are outside of that traditional age range. We also have students who may commute from quite a distance and who are, in many cases, working full time or close to it and have additional family responsibilities. And, to echo a colleague from the previous panel, for many students, it's not feasible for them to attend college if it means that they have to be on campus at 1p.m. Tuesday and Thursday. And, so, having evening classes, having weekend, having hybrid -- even a blend -- I think all of those are very important.

I do see that-- I absolutely take your comments to heart in that it's extremely important for the institutions to make sure that we have equivalent learning experiences and that we are being mindful of so much beyond simply academic content when we think about the pedagogy, whether it's online or in person as well.

SENATOR ZWICKER: And, just to be clear, I applaud the efforts for lower-income students; for adult learners; for those who you're talking about who, in the past, have been a small percentage of the total student body but whose numbers are increasing. And, the fact that you and other institutions are doing everything possible to ensure they can get a high quality undergraduate degree or graduate degree. I completely applaud.

In the framing of my questions, I am thinking about the 18-year-old, 19-year-old, who has come out of high school, experienced the pandemic,

experienced the learning loss in their K-12 setting, and are now going into each of your institutions.

DR. McELWEE: And, I think we can-- At Rowan, we bake that into the system. So, for all our first-time in-college undergraduates right out of high school, we create their first semester schedules for them through the advising process, and, as a rule, they do not get online courses in that first semester. So, after that, when they're choosing their own courses, they are then in a position where they can be learning about those options. Typically, they would start by testing it out, and some of them find that is not a positive learning environment for them online.

Others can; and I'll share an anecdote from a student I spoke with one time. Needed to take calculus and was very intimidated by it, and actually mentioned -- this was a new perspective for me -- mentioned that he wanted to take calculus online, and the reason for that is because it would enable him to repeatedly rewind the lectures and rewatch lectures for enhanced practice with the material. So, not to avoid the subject or resist engaging in the subject, but in fact to be able to repeat the information more often.

So, I think that there can be some different perspectives that our students might bring to it as well.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Can I just ask on that anecdote?

In that class -- and, I love the idea of being able to see the lecture and rewind it, and obviously people work at their own pace and that's wonderful -- did that particular class have in-person small tutorial groups, or other ways to try to actually interact? Or was it fully online?

DR. McELWEE: That particular one was a fully online course. But, in our face-to-face courses, one thing that I think is distinctive about Rowan is, even though we're now about 20,000 students, we really have no classes larger than 40 students, and most of our classes are smaller than that. And, so, I think that that is where the more individual and smaller groups-- We have a lot of separate of those academic support opportunities that are available.

And, for our students, the addition, actually, of virtual services for tutoring and things like that as well are important. Because, again, it makes it more accessible to students. So, I think students having options sometimes helps them to stay enrolled and to be able to complete courses in a timely manner for graduating on time.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Last question, and then I'll move on.

Do you have any sense of-- You talked about what I would refer to as non-traditional students, but that may not be the right word here. Do you have any sense that if you had no online classes -- and, I'm not suggesting that for the reasons you're saying -- what sort of hit to enrollment you might see?

DR. McELWEE: At Rowan, our-- In terms of age, at the undergraduate level, it is still the majority of our students are below the age of 25. So, I don't know that I would be able to provide for you today an estimate of the proportion of our students who are really outside of that range and those who would attend online. But, it would definitely be a factor.

And, one of the things I was excited about this year is New Jersey's partnership with Complete College America, which is an organization I've respected for a long time. And, they had a publication several years ago

that was entitled, *Time is the Enemy*. And, what that really is about in a higher ed. context is that the longer that a student stays enrolled in college beyond, say, the traditional four years, the more likely that life will get in the way; that something will happen. They will move; they will have a child; they will have a health event; they will have a financial crisis that will make them stop out of going to college. And, so, that ability for students to stay continuously enrolled I think is very important, especially when we're looking at timely graduation.

But, I agree that it's a blend, and, so, what works for one student is not necessarily something that is going to work for another. And, to my colleague's point here that the responsibility for high quality learning and intentional assessment and pedagogy there is important no matter the mode.

SENATOR CRYAN: Thanks.

I'm going to just ask a couple other questions, and then we're going to move to our third panel, if that's OK. I want to be respectful of some folks' time, too.

Just quickly, I just have to ask. One of the educational pieces we've learned here is that students want an online component, that it's not the only-- As a result to that, is it reasonable to expect that, over time, time to degree could potentially either lessen, or we could achieve back to four-year rates because of the idea of accessibility to classes? Is this a way to get to-- It's the cheapest way to reduce college cost, is time to degree, right? Is it a fair way to take that from this hearing?

DR. GOLDMAN: So, that's absolutely one of the impacts that I think this is -- the added flexibility is going to provide.

So, students have courses that they need to take for their major, and oftentimes, if they're more advanced courses, those tend to be offered more in person than online. If they can supplement those with working on some degree or elective or minor courses that don't conflict, they can do what they need to do in a shorter amount of time.

And, we know at Rutgers there's a lot of pressure and students have a lot of stress around getting into the courses that they need. So, I think this is absolutely the flexibility that online courses provide in terms of scheduling makes a big difference there. I can't quantify that--

SENATOR CRYAN: No worries, just a thought for the Committee.

Just, real quick, you mentioned the student who can pull back. Do Rowan-- Does Rowan archive classes, or is the idea that you tape it while you're taking it?

DR. McELWEE: So, typically for face-to-face courses, there could be some faculty that are recording, but that would be--

SENATOR CRYAN: Are they online, specific question.

DR. McELWEE: Online, does the student retain access to it in the future? I think for a period of time past a semester, and then, oftentimes, if a student needs it longer, they can--

SENATOR CRYAN: OK, so, the calculus example that you referred to where that student is going back in time. That student can pull up something affiliated with Rowan that shows the class? That's good, I thought I asked that the last time.

DR. McELWEE: Just shortly after the semester ends. I'm sorry, I hope I'm answering that question.

SENATOR CRYAN: When the semester ends, OK.

All right, thank you. Thank you, sorry.

Just real quick, a couple other things and we'll move on.

Dr. Mena, I've got to tell you, the numbers that you brought up -- the 44% on depression -- there's 45,000 students. Fast math, approximately 20,000 have some sort of depression?

DR. MENA: Well, again, that doesn't reflect onto our entire student body. It reflects on those students utilizing services--

SENATOR CRYAN: OK, so we're talking about that smaller component?

DR. MENA: Correct. And, those who filled out the survey.

SENATOR CRYAN: OK, same thing on--

DR. MENA: So, in that 2022 year, that was only 3,000 students who filled out that survey.

SENATOR CRYAN: OK. And, you don't project that campus-wide? Or, you do?

DR. MENA: I think, generally speaking -- again, I don't want to draw a wide blanket onto everybody -- but we are seeing an increase in the utilization of services, more utilization both in-person and online, and students are still dealing with the fallout of the pandemic.

SENATOR CRYAN: Right. Twenty-three percent, psychiatric meds?

DR. MENA: Yes.

SENATOR CRYAN: I mean, I've got to tell you, I was floored by that number.

SENATOR SINGER: That's frightening.

SENATOR CRYAN: Can you just give us your insight or thought process in there? And, if you don't mind -- because it's my last question because of time -- the boundary discussion that you had. I found that fascinating, you talked about students not knowing boundaries and things like that.

If you could just expand on those two points and then we'll go to our third panel.

DR. MENA: Sure. Again, let's be mindful that students do come to us already with mental-health diagnoses, already on medication. Students also develop mental-health challenges during their time with us then maybe are ultimately prescribed medication. So, that was the data point, so I don't want to read too much into it. But, certainly there was an increase between 2019 and 2022.

And, so-- But, again, we do provide managed care to students who are receiving medication, usually typical for anxiety. So, that's not surprising with the other increases that we saw in the utilization of mental-health services.

With regard to boundaries, especially those first couple years coming back from the pandemic, we did experience an increasing number of -- again, as I said -- roommate conflicts, interpersonal conflicts, where students seem to not know what it means to be in a social space with other students. And, so, that sometimes resulted in, you know, somebody touching and the person not being able to say, "Don't touch me." But, they reported it. For an example. So, that was one of our earlier observations with the return of our students to campus.

And, to some degree, it made a little bit of sense because students weren't with their peers in high school. They were at home learning remotely. And, so, middle school students, obviously that's a very developmental time period in peoples' lives. And, so, to be missing out on junior high school and to be home learning remotely, students *did* miss out on something. So, we did find ourselves doing education and work around personal space and boundaries kind of a thing.

SENATOR CRYAN: I will just tell you -- speaking for myself, but I have a feeling for the Committee -- I've got another dozen questions just in your comments that I can go through. I want to be respectful of time.

I cannot say thanks enough. Incredibly, incredibly helpful.

Thank you all for your time.

And, I just want to ask the third panel to come up, if I can.

Dr. McMEnamin and Dr. Hargrove, and Dr. Iacono, and Dr. Panek. Dr. Iacono and Dr. Panek are from County College of Morris; Dr. McMEnamin and Dr. Hargrove are from Union College of Union County, which I am very proud I announced correctly.

So, with that said, you've seen kind of the format we're taking here. I cannot say thanks enough, as we can to the other panels. I think it's safe to say we've all grown an insight today.

Can you talk to us about, obviously, the county college experience, what you're seeing? And, help the Committee learn a little bit along the way.

We'll go left to right, if that's OK again -- or right to left.

MARGARET McMENAMIN, Ph.D.: Good morning, I am Dr. Maggie McMEnamin, President of UCNJ -- Union College of Union County,

New Jersey, where our mission is transforming our community one student at a time.

Today I am here representing not only my college, but also the New Jersey Council of County Colleges and the other 17 community colleges in New Jersey.

Thank you for your time and for your interest and for your support of our colleges and our precious students.

Community colleges in New Jersey are *essential* institutions for economic mobility. Our collective mission at every community college, at all of New Jersey's community colleges, is about access to higher education for communities who have been excluded in the past. It's about excellence, providing great higher education. But, we're also about affordability.

New Jersey's community colleges are known as democracy's colleges, because, for the thousands of students we serve each year, we are their only opportunity for economic mobility. Your county colleges are their only shot at a better life, and, often, we are their only safety net. Every one of our 18 community colleges in New Jersey is transforming our communities one student at a time.

But, our transformational work is threatened by inadequate State support and the proposed \$20 million cut in the Governor's Fiscal '25 budget would be devastating to our students, our colleges, and our community and employer partners.

So, what's happening on our campuses since COVID? Well, the good news is our enrollments are going up again. While we all took a hit during COVID, and it was our students in the community colleges, our most needy students, who stepped away from higher education, our enrollments

are now increasing, and we're seeing a particular increase in part-time enrollment. Our students -- you've heard from the other panelists -- they are a little different than they were pre-COVID.

Let's face it: They spent a big part of their high school years in COVID lockdown. Their physical health has been challenged, but also -- you've heard it -- their mental health; their social health. Their psychological well-being has been impacted to one degree or another by the isolation, inactivity, and anxiety that most people experienced during COVID. Our students today are more serious; they're more goal-oriented; but they're also more anxious and they're more needy. They *need* education; they need training. But, as you've heard from the other panelists, they also need some guidance and some direction. And, often, they need basic things like food, clothing, and shelter.

AT UCNJ, and at your other New Jersey community colleges, we're doing everything to help our students overcome these obstacles that they're facing now. We've expanded our professional social work staff to better serve our students' immediate issues surrounding basic needs, and we're trying to connect them to existing community resources. We've expanded our food insecurity program that we started during COVID. We now offer free lunches through a grub pass. We have an Owl pantry for students to take a bag of food home with them when they leave if they need it; non-perishable foods in the Owl pantry. Once a semester, and on each campus, we also run a free farmers market for students -- fresh fruits and vegetables and other perishable food products.

But, beyond just food insecurity, we also run an Owl clothing bank or a boutique now. We initially started running that with professional

interview clothes for career students who needed clothing to wear for an interview. But, that's expanded now. We do random casual clothing giveaways to our students -- clothing and shoes. You wouldn't think that our students would need them, but one by one of our women's leadership programs, we always get rid of every bit of clothing that we're giving away. I'm proud to announce that we're also launching a new program under Dr. Hargrove's leadership called Suit Up, where we will be buying a new suit for a select group of young men upon graduation from the college.

Recognizing that technology is now a basic need for a college student today, we started a laptop loaner program during COVID, and we've continued an optional laptop program for students post-COVID.

At UCNJ, we opened up as soon as we were able to after the start of COVID because we recognized our role as an oasis of safety for so many of our impoverished students. In the fall of 2020, at the height of COVID, we had only about 13% of our classes were face to face; most of them were health science classes. This semester, about 70% of our classes are face to face, and, similar to your previous speakers, most of our online students are taking one or two online classes as a compliment to their full load of face-to-face classes.

We are finding -- I mentioned earlier -- students more focused, but we are also finding they are seeking contact with other people. Students have been coming to campus outside of class time, being drawn to active learning opportunities. They appear to *want* to meet new people; to experience new things; they appear to be looking for opportunities to make connections with other students and pursue their dreams. We are creating what we're calling "destination venues" on our campuses to create spaces for our students to gather around their majors outside of class. Things like a

science research lab, or the radio station, or even the e-sports gaming room gives students an opportunity to get together with others of like interest outside of class. Making those connections on campus impacts student success and completion.

Speaking of student success -- and, I know this is something that is important to our Senator, Senator Cryan -- New Jersey's community colleges are deeply committed to student success and improving our graduation rates. At UCNJ, we've quintupled our graduation rate pre-COVID and have been able to maintain that increase *during* COVID. Additionally, our Black male graduation rate continues to increase, rising from a low of 5% to now a new high, without a decrease, to 32%.

Our State operating aid is historically low, and we rely on that to help fund our student success and social justice initiatives. Proposed cuts in the Fiscal '25 budget are devastating.

Senators, thank you for this opportunity, and I look forward to hearing your questions.

SENATOR CRYAN: Thanks, Dr. McMEnamin.

ANTHONY IACONO, Ph.D.: Thank you.

You can see why I have so much appreciation for my colleague, and there's been extraordinary work there, and a lot of that work is duplicative, so I won't repeat what she has shared.

I will emphasize, however, that the 18 community colleges work very closely with one another. We share our ideas; we share programs; we share curriculum; and a variety of resources. And, that is one of the newest things we call NJ Pathways. So, we're able to mobilize very, very quickly in

support of our students -- also in support of businesses and industries throughout New Jersey as well.

I have the good fortune to be the President of County College of Morris, and, in that capacity, I thank you for taking the time to talk with us today. I am also the Chair of the New Jersey President's Council, and, in that capacity, I thank you for taking the time to listen to the various sectors and just how much higher ed. has changed. And, it has changed absolutely profoundly.

Before I share a few pieces of that with you, I want to thank you. Last year, this body supported us and the Legislature supported us in a \$20 million increase. You heard President McMnamin talk about that as now threatened. At our college -- and, I know every college has its own examples -- that meant for the first time in well over 10 years, we did not have to do a tuition increase. Your Sergeant-at-arms is my Vice Chair for our Board of Trustees; we've been working very hard on that, we're proud about that. Because, while the pandemic itself may be over, the impact is pronounced, and we are seeing a disproportionately high number of students who are still struggling economically. They're struggling with food insecurities; they are struggling with housing insecurities. So, keeping tuition as low as we possibly can matters greatly.

We also were able to use some of that money at our school to expand our tutoring services -- extended hours; more tutors; put some of the tutoring online; because our students are different. They are not the students that you might be envisioning at 18 years old. We certainly have no shortage of those right out of high school, but our students also are the 34, 40, and 50-year-olds who were displaced in the pandemic. And, I will tell you why

our academic programs, our enrollment has been increasing steadily. We were 10% up last summer, 5% -- which is more than twice the national average -- in the fall, and continues to move -- academics are moving in the right direction. The workforce enrollment has literally exploded. That is an area we self-fund. New Jersey is one of the few states that does not provide any funding for workforce development, so we have a unique model we've built. They've got to pay their own bills and generate a profit; they made their numbers by November, more than a half a year ahead of time. We were running those programs six days a week from 8 a.m. until into the evenings, and looking at opening up the seventh day of the week as well. The demand is absolutely insatiable.

President McMenamain is right: Our students are much more serious than we saw pre-pandemic. Not that they weren't, but they have really become intensely focused on, "I need a secure career." And, so, sometimes we say workforce, people think, "What does that mean, is that a dead end?" No, we don't put any of our students in any of these fields if they don't have tremendous long-term futures at family-sustaining wages. A lot of individuals are coming out of high school saying, "I don't want to be in school for four years, but, I know I have to do something that is meaningful," and we offer that alternative for those individuals. Sometimes they're 18, but, again, that pandemic changed a lot of businesses and industries.

There's also just a heavy amount of retraining. We are seeing in unprecedented numbers manufacturers sending their employees back and while donating the machinery so they're current and they can produce in today's world. I had a call with one of my hospital CO's recently saying, "Tony, we're going to need you to produce over 2,000 more nurses in the next

couple of years.” We can do this through partnerships, but a \$20 million cut -- that’s impossible. And, our hospitals, manufacturers, and other industries will suffer mightily because of that.

So, the students are more focused. Those who want to go into the four-year transfer programs -- we’re seeing graduation rates continue to grow. We all were extremely adaptive and added a lot of support so we didn’t lose them in the pandemic, but, there’s also a growing number who at least kept the idea that a high school diploma is not enough, and they’ve got to do something. We applaud them. And, the ROI is massive. So, I’ll have a student who may go through an eight-week apprenticeship program and they’ll come out starting between \$25 and \$30 an hour; we have students who come out of our RN programs for an investment of \$10-12,000, but they’re going to start close to \$100,000 today. That’s a powerful ROI. And, I would say at my school, 67% of our revenue is tuition-based. We receive about \$8 million from the State, but we have a \$484 million economic impact on Morris County. That’s profound.

So, whether we’re moving them and they’re successfully completing their four-year programs, or it’s a two-year program or less, they are -- and we are -- intensely career-focused. Our whole focus in the past few years has been a greater integration of academic and workforce programs. We want the historians, like myself, to come out and have a firm mastery and ability to work in data science and technology fields, so they can compliment the core skills that are taught there and access those. I’ve been spending a good bit of time with the NSF and the NEH about a further integration.

So, Senator Zwicker, we know we need our businesses to have that understanding, but also need our humanists to have an understanding of physics, and biology, and anatomy.

The question has come up about online learning -- we do see that particularly with older students. I have about 800 full-time only online students right now, but they're working. They're working two jobs; three jobs; they're caring for families. That's their only shot at an education. Our younger students, they want to be on the campus, and they've returned robustly. But, the nicety is there are things that we can do online for these students and make them available 24 hours a day. You've heard some examples of that; when instructors record their lectures or provide supplemental resources and a student who is working two, three jobs, they may not start their homework until two in the morning. They may have forgotten how to do that mathematical equation, or how a scientific formula works. The ability to go back on and say, "That's right; I saw that; I remember that; I can do that" keeps them in our classrooms; keeps them in the seats. That's critically important to us.

But, we continue to face huge challenges. On the biggest end, we remain the second worst-funded system in the nation. We are the Number 1 exit state, with 39% of our students walking across a high school stage right out of the state. We are challenged with state, after state, after state saying, "We'll win the talent war," and moving unprecedented amounts of money into their colleges and their universities, and being very attractive to students has made our situation much tougher.

And, then, we face pronounced, substantially beyond pre-pandemic levels, students who are grappling with mental-health issues;

housing insecurity; family issues. Remember, again, many of our students are the parents who are caring for students on the spectrum. They're caring for students on the spectrum with limited knowledge. They're financially challenged; their insurance might not cover what it needs to. So, we build in a lot of support so that, as President McMenemy described -- and, I think these two individuals who work on the front lines with students every day can expand upon -- but we are seeing the challenges only increasing. It is becoming more and more difficult to get our students to the finish line.

Your help last year was profound. It's one of the key reasons that our graduation rates are not being banded up and decreasing -- they're increasing. When Dr. McMenemy talks about access, we don't just mean *to* the institution, we mean *through* the institution, to the point of completion and securing a family-sustaining career.

Thank you.

SENATOR CRYAN: Thank you, thank you.

DEMOND HARGROVE, Ph.D.: Thank you Chairman Cryan and Committee members for having us today. This is such an important conversation that we're having.

I want to place a couple of things into context. Our four-year institution partners -- everything that they discussed, we experience that as well. However, we've been experiencing this at our community colleges pre-pandemic. We have had some of the highest mental-health, basic-needs issues in our state. And, we're dealing with the neediest -- *your* neediest students from your districts. At our institution, we are 60% Pell-eligible. So, 60% of our population receive 80% of our population are either on scholarship or some sort of Pell eligibility. So, these are the neediest students.

What we've experienced so far at Union -- and, President McMenamain mentioned it -- is a 30% increase in visits to our food pantry. And, so, along with our meal cards, we increased that through the Hunger-Free Campus Grant. And, giving those meal cards to our students, we've increased it to 160 students receiving those meal cards. We gave those out within an hour, they were gone. And, so, the students are in need -- desperate need -- since the pandemic as well.

What we saw, what we're experiencing in mental-health services and the support that we need -- they have skyrocketed. And, so, what we've seen so far in using the grants, utilizing the grants through Uwill; significant increases in that population as well.

And, just going back quickly to the pantry. We keep in mind that it's food that individuals need, but it's also hygiene products; basic-need products that individuals don't have access to in their communities.

Finally, we've made some changes to our behavioral intervention teams and how we deal with students in crisis. So, again, we've experienced at our institutions the highest levels of mental-health issues. And, so, now we're experiencing more crisis on our campuses, whereby we would take a student who's in crisis and when they're acting out that it may impact the code of conduct, that student traditionally has been suspended. Now, we've pulled back and we had a DEI mindset to support the student. Instead of being punitive, we're being more supportive. And, so, we're getting them the mental-health services that they need to be successful on our campuses.

And, so, we just thank you for everything that you've done for us. The grants, they are significant, but they're not sustainable. So, with the cut, it is going to hurt. We want to keep giving the services that we have to

our students, but to sustain those without the funding is going to be particularly difficult.

So, thank you for today.

ARIELLA PANEK, Ph.D.: Good morning.

Hi, thank you, Chairman Cryan and the Committee for taking the time to hear us today.

My name is Dr. Ariella Panek, and I have the privilege and honor of being the Dean of Student Success at County College of Morris. With that honor, I am able to see our students continue to grow and explore and expand their careers and opportunities throughout their lifetime.

Also, I have the acknowledgment of seeing firsthand the trials and difficulties that they're experiencing firsthand. As we know, and as my colleagues have shared today, we see an increase in mental health tenfold. Specifically, since 2019, they say one in three college students have experienced a mental-health concern -- that was prior to the pandemic. And, now, specifically in community colleges where the complexities seem to be more drastic for our student body, we see about 50% of our students experiencing well-being issues. And, when I say well-being, I don't just mean mental health. I mean financial; occupational; social; students feel lonely on campus. However, I am confident -- and, I know firsthand -- that our community colleges are doing what we can to increase engagement.

We have come a long way to help our students, especially since the pandemic, to feel acknowledged and seen and heard. However, we still need support in providing that support to our students. Specifically because one case can increase the amount of time each person works with our students. So, in the past, you can say that there is one student who may be

experiencing homelessness, but now they're experiencing homelessness; depression; they're having difficulty with finding funding; they're being a caretaker. So, that adds all into the difficulties that our students are experiencing.

My dissertation was on the relationship between well-being and retention. And, I see firsthand that our students really need that comprehensive, inclusive support to help them get the time and effort they need into completing their academic and educational goals.

If we provide and we continue to get the support, we know that we can see great things from our students -- we already have wonderful things, but we need to continue that. Currently, we have social services on our campus; we have mobile vans coming on our campus; we have Titan's Table, which is a food bank for our students. The misconception is that Morris County is affluent, but in reality we have 64% of our students stating that they need more help financially in paying for books and paying for food and in paying for their education.

And, so, I thank you for your time today, and I appreciate all that you have done and hopefully continue to do for us.

SENATOR CRYAN: Let me just thank you all for eye-opening comments, and then I'll -- wow.

Do you have anything?

SENATOR SINGER: Only just that, again, \$20 million coming out of funding for community colleges, which is access to all of New Jersey, is criminal. Not just to the fact is-- I know that the bank that I work for gives out grants to the food banks. I was shocked at how many students need that

and use that availability of food to survive. And, I know the counties-- If the money is not there, you'll turn to the counties, and they're cutting back.

So, it's critical that the influence of our esteemed chairman to maybe restore some of that money is very important.

SENATOR CRYAN: Well, it's our turn. The Governor had his turn; we have ours.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Thank you.

Senator Singer, Senator Amato and I are on the Budget Committee as well, and certainly will take this back to the Budget Committee hearings.

I did have a question, but I just wanted to say quickly that I am fortunate enough to sit in the Senate seat that former State Senator Ray Bateman sat in, who in -- I see you all nodding -- in 1962 created and sponsored the legislation that created the county system, county college system.

And, so, thank you for all the work that you are doing right now for your students.

I have a similar question, related to what Senator Singer was talking about, which is -- maybe we could burrow down a little bit more. So, we heard food insecurity; clothing insecurity; mental-health issues; all these wrap-around services that, at least when I think about higher education, it's not the first thing I think about, but as all four of you talked about it's really becoming a critically important part of what you have to offer to your students to ensure that they succeed, not just at your institutions but wherever they may go on after that.

So, I'm curious -- quite frankly, I'm going to throw you softball questions -- is \$20 million even going to be enough? And, where do you really see the financial pressure growing over the next couple of years when it comes to these wrap-around services?

DR. McMENAMIN: We don't expect things to change in terms of the student needs. Our greatest challenge is trying to leverage existing community resources. We are not trying to replicate everything out-- In our county, we have -- in Union County -- we are the home of the Community Food Bank of New Jersey. So, for our pantry, we partner with the Community Food Bank. We're using the social work model at Union. It's not sustainable for us to create, replicate every community resource at our college just for our students, so, that's how we've been attacking the challenges, by using social workers -- professional social workers -- whose expertise is identifying an issue and then connecting our students to a community solution.

Yes, we have some immediate interventions that we offer on campus, but we're trying to stay in our wheelhouse of higher education while doing a better job of connecting people on the periphery. And, that way, that can help to minimize the financial impact on us. If we had to replicate county-wide social services agency at our colleges, it wouldn't be possible and it wouldn't be sustainable beyond a year or two. So, that's the way we're managing it.

DR. IACONO: Absolutely.

I'll be very direct: \$20 million is *not* enough. We are so far behind. Had we kept up with inflation, I think that number in annual funding would be closer to \$300 million. However, if we lose that, as much as I said we were able to not increase tuition -- we know, our students, it is a

very tight situation for them that we were able to open and expand tutoring, which they need. Our goal isn't registration, it's education. That we were able to-- By the way, those libraries we're talking -- that's where our students who don't have computers go to use computers. We have a loaner program, but some need more than that. They need a (indiscernible) with them showing them how to use it, and so forth. So, it rolls back all of that, which is very, very challenging.

I think Dr. McMenamain and I would not find a president anywhere who wouldn't say added challenges are, plain and simple, payroll. We have people who have to come to work and we're competing in a brutal world right now. We may go six to 12 months before we can find someone for positions that we have open, particularly if those are in technology. Our faculty can be lured away, and are easily. These are the people who make these institutions move forward, so we want to keep tuition as low as possible, but we can't afford to lose all of our employees either. It is a very, very difficult balancing act for us.

At the end of the day, we're also coming into AI, and we are working very hard because we know that the workforce today -- but most certainly tomorrow -- is going to require they come out with those skills. So, we're working on integrating all of that.

We've got to send our people out to different national conferences for that kind of training. It is very, very difficult. But, again, we're always in that very fragile position of, "But, if I spend this money, it puts me at risk of raising the cost for students. But, if I don't spend that money, and the quality of education tumbles, and it's not relevant, that's a problem, also." So, we try to balance everything as near we can.

I had mentioned earlier, we are the only state that does not receive workforce funding, but we're really here fighting just for plain academic funding, even.

SENATOR CRYAN: Please, go ahead.

DR. PANEK: We have data that shows with an increase of counselors, the ROI would increase dramatically. However, we know that may not be possible.

So, what we really are doing is putting our resources toward educating faculty and staff on campus so that they can be the gatekeepers on campus and holistically support our students. So, because a lot of times they are the first people to see those warning signs within the classroom, so we're really working with that on that holistic support.

SENATOR CRYAN: Thank you for that.

And, if I can, if you have the data, can you do me a favor -- share it with the Committee. I'll give you a card after this.

I just have a couple, and, I'll tell you, this has been incredibly eye-opening. And, again, thank you.

I wanted to talk a little bit about-- I certainly understand the student challenges, you certainly have made that clear. And, the \$20 million. But, I want to talk a little about-- Have you had, have either of you or community colleges as a whole, experienced anything in terms of higher ed. institutions? Any sort of change, acceptance, and transfer programs? Credits? Anything like that? Post-pandemic? Has there been any sort of indications in that way?

DR. McMENAMIN: Sure, they want our students now.

SENATOR CRYAN: They want you now.

DR. McMENAMIN: They want us, yes. They want our students. They're all scurrying to come to our college fairs on campus. Colleges that would never have even looked at community college transfers before are now suddenly interested in community college transfers, because we're all facing a demographic cliff in terms of enrollment. So, we've seen that for sure. I don't know, President Iacono--

DR. IACONO: Yes, definitely.

But, here's the nicety also, what we are seeing in the data is our students have graduation rates that are equal to or in excess of native university students. I think quality and -- again, we pour our hearts into that, we want to make sure that education is high-quality and that it's relevant, so that when they transfer, they're prepared to be successful, not transfer, and get washed out.

DR. McMENAMIN: But, we're -- I mean, in the testimony you heard today, the dramatic increases in the numbers of the four-year college students who need developmental work. Those are community colleges, students who have historically come to community colleges in the past, since the demographics have changed and there's a lower number of graduating seniors. That's why you're seeing them lowering their standards to accept more of the students they wouldn't have looked at in the past.

SENATOR CRYAN: OK.

And, you haven't seen any disruption in policies or anything like that, just -- for lack of a better way to put it -- being more wanted?

DR. McMENAMIN: Absolutely. But, we've had four-year publics come to us recently who are interested in things like three-plus-one that were never interested in three-plus-one in the past.

SENATOR CRYAN: OK.

And, when you talk about a demographic cliff, we're talking about that lower birth rate post-2008, 2009, when we all--

DR. McMENAMIN: Yes, the 2026 cliff--

SENATOR CRYAN: --when we all went broke.

And, how long is that anticipated to be, is it five years?

DR. IACONO: How long is the cliff anticipated to last?

SENATOR CRYAN: Yes.

DR. IACONO: I would say what we really need to be talking about is *cliffs*, plural. Because that birth rate that we're really focused on in '25-'26 is the first of one of the major ones, but we expect to see those continue. In fact, we know populations in the pandemic dropped 4.6%, and there's a few in the middle, so we're going to be going cliff, cliff, cliff, is what we're really looking at.

Now, the--

SENATOR CRYAN: So, the pandemic was *really* lonely, huh?

DR. IACONO: It really-- You know they were all home, I don't know.

But, I would say this though -- and, this is where your community colleges become more valuable than ever. Because what we're seeing is we may see fewer high school graduates, but businesses, industries -- whether it's hospitals, manufacturers, whomever it may be -- are sending those people back to us for currency training over, and over, and over again. We're the ones who do that. Those are local careers; they live in the community; they come back to their community colleges. They're past the, "I'm 18, I want a

big university experience.” They are now in the, “I’ve got three kids, I’ve got to work, but if I don’t get my skillset updated, I may not have a job.”

SENATOR CRYAN: We’ve got a lot of work to explore, even with Department of Labor and the rest.

I need to thank you and to every other panel, and just say this ran a little longer than I’d hoped in terms of management, but each and every speaker just opened up another set of eyes and another set of education for the Committee.

I want to thank you all for your trouble, no matter what panel you were on. Thank you for allowing us the opportunity to learn from you today, and I assure you it’s knowledge we’ll use moving forward.

Thank you very much.

Members -- oh, I’m sorry, Senator, I apologize.

SENATOR AMATO: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, this was definitely enlightening.

Those of you who spoke today who did not provide any written testimony, I would appreciate it if you provide that written testimony. You can email it to me at my email address. Because there’s a lot of information -- I made notes as quickly as I can.

And, those who provided written testimony, thank you. And, those who have not, please provide written testimony because it’ll help. As Senator Zwicker said, when we go to our budget deliberations, we’ll make sure that community colleges have an advocate.

DR. McMENAMIN: Thank you.

DR. PANEK: Thank you.

SENATOR CRYAN: Great way to close.

Thank you all very much.

DR. HARGOVE: Thank you.

DR. IACONO: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

SENATOR CRYAN: Thank you.

(MEETING CONCLUDED)