



The Commission on
INDEPENDENT
Colleges & Universities
in New York

**Testimony of
The Commission on Independent
Colleges and Universities**

**Assembly Standing Committee on
Higher Education**

Tuesday, November 28, 2023

Good afternoon, Chairperson Fahy, and members of the committee. My name is Lola Brabham, and I serve as President of the Commission on Independent Colleges and Universities. I appreciate the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Independent Sector regarding the New York State Tuition Assistance Program (TAP).

Higher education is critically important and must be accessible to individuals who want to pursue a college education. Studies^{1,2} have shown the significant economic, health, and social benefits that completing a four-year degree provides. This makes higher education one of the most proven and effective ways of breaking down barriers and building pathways to upward mobility for low-income individuals, people of color, and other marginalized groups who graduate high school, attend college, and complete their degrees at rates below the national average.

The recent U.S. Supreme Court decision banning affirmative action in college admissions is a major setback in the effort to provide access to higher education. This decision has the potential to erase a decade of progress in enrolling and advancing underrepresented students across the country. Fortunately, New York State remains committed to breaking down institutional and systemic barriers that have long denied underrepresented students access to higher education.

This year represents the 50th anniversary of New York's signature student aid program, one of the largest state-run programs in the country. TAP has been the major vehicle for student success in higher education, with over six million New Yorkers benefiting from it in their pursuit of a college degree. TAP is unmatched in its simplicity, efficacy, and reach. Unfortunately, the program has stagnated.

New York trails far behind California and New Jersey, states with equally robust higher education sectors. The maximum TAP award for students most in need is \$5,665, as compared to the maximum awards of approximately \$13,600 in New Jersey and \$14,000 in California. New York's TAP award is less than half of the maximum award in those two states, meaning that it covers a significantly smaller percentage of tuition and does not instill confidence in students that they can afford to attend college.

With almost 500,000 students on CICU member campuses, two-thirds of those students are from families who earn less than \$125,000 annually. Nearly 50,000 Independent Sector students are receiving TAP awards, and half have annual family incomes under \$20,000. TAP is crucial to ensuring that lower-income students have an opportunity to attend and graduate from college.

To ensure that TAP continues to be transformational for millions of New York's college students we propose the Legislature consider the following actions:

¹ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/accounting-for-the-widening-mortality-gap-between-american-adults-with-and-without-a-ba/>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/03/opinion/life-expectancy-college-degree.html>

Increase TAP Income Limit to \$110,000

Income limits should be increased to ensure that students in need are eligible for grant assistance. In addition, income limits should be scaled to family size, allowing for higher income limits for families with larger numbers of dependents. Estimates suggest that increasing the income limit from \$80,000 to \$110,000 would grant eligibility to over 25,000 additional students. If the income limit was increased to keep pace with inflation, it would be \$122,000, meaning that it currently falls short by one-third of its modern-day value.

Raise TAP Maximum and Minimum Award Amounts

CICU proposes raising the maximum award from \$5,665 to \$7,070 in the FY 2025 Budget with increases over the following two years to bring it to a level closer to New Jersey and California. Similarly, the minimum award should be increased from \$500 to \$1,000 to provide students with meaningful support.

Restore Graduate TAP

In 2010, Graduate TAP was eliminated leaving New York students without state assistance to pursue an advanced degree. New York, like the nation, is experiencing a serious workforce shortage that has impacted critically needed fields, particularly in healthcare, education, and STEM. CICU proposes the restoration of Grad TAP to provide support for eligible students pursuing graduate degrees in these impacted fields. Doing so would ensure that the state continues to produce the skilled workforce that New York's businesses need to remain competitive.

We know that higher education has the power to transform the future for our state and our country. That future is in the hands of today's college students, whether they attend a public or private college. They are the next generation of entrepreneurs, healthcare workers, and educators, and they need our support to realize their full potential.

Before I conclude, I want to thank HESC for working with us to understand the recently identified TAP overpayment issue. This issue impacts certain students whose grants were miscalculated by the department across three fiscal years – a period that notably includes two pandemic years. We are working closely with HESC's leadership to address this administrative error with the hope that a solution can be identified that holds impacted students and campuses harmless. We also believe that the Department should consider treating students who claim independent status the same as other students by providing full TAP benefits. These students are supporting themselves while attending college and need full state support to be successful.

We look forward to working with you in support of New York's college students. Thank you.

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