

SUNY students face budget gap in Excelsior Scholarship program

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As budget shortfalls increase in New York state due to the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, students at the State University of New York (SUNY) schools in Potsdam and Canton are reporting that they have not received their Excelsior Scholarship credits. Schools all across SUNY have reported similar issues obtaining the funds required to provide the scholarship awards.

The total amount of money allocated for the Excelsior Scholarship for the 2020-2021 school year was \$131 million, promising funds to 30,000 students. Now the state government is claiming there is no money for a program that is already significantly underfunded.

The imposition of restrictions aimed at controlling the spread of the coronavirus—which have been significantly scaled back in recent weeks—has caused a 15 percent decline in economic activity, leading the New York state government to project a \$14.5 billion hole in the budget that will reach \$62 billion over four years.

The Higher Education Services Corporation has stated that scholarships will eventually be paid for this semester, but it is unclear if any funds will be available for the spring. At best, it appears current recipients will receive reduced scholarships and new applications will be halted.

The Excelsior Scholarship was the paltry effort by New York's Democratic Party to ride the wave of popular support for free public university tuition that developed during the 2016 election. Falsely described as a free tuition program, the final product was much less than promised.

The scholarship covers up to \$7,000 of a student's yearly tuition, about the average cost. However, it only covers what is not already covered through other scholarships and grants, including Pell Grants and New

York's Tuition Assistance Program. This means that the Excelsior Scholarship will not cover any of the additional expenses of higher education, such as books, housing and food, which make up about two-thirds of the cost of a SUNY education.

Additionally, in order to qualify for the scholarship, a student's combined family income must be below \$125,000 a year and they must remain in New York to work after graduation for the number of years they received the aid. Therefore, if a student moves out of state before their work period is completed, the scholarship converts into a loan that must be paid back to the state of New York.

The economic impact of the pandemic is certainly real, but the claim that there is no money for education is not. The average annual cost of tuition at SUNY and the state's community colleges is \$7,000 and \$5,000, respectively. With 373,000 full-time students attending four-year degree schools and 193,000 attending community colleges in fall 2019, the total cost of undergraduate tuition in New York was about \$3.5 billion. The total budget for all SUNY expenses, including housing, food and additional student services, was \$11.1 billion for fiscal year 2020.

This amount of money is mere pocket change for the ruling class. According to tax liability data from New York state, the top one percent of income earners—those who made more than \$634,244—raked in \$250.5 billion in adjusted gross income in 2017, 33 percent of all adjusted income in the state. The top five percent—making above \$212,805—made a total of \$372 billion, 49 percent of all state income.

If just the income of the one percent were to be touched, it would take only 0.05 percent to fund the Excelsior Scholarship, and it would take just 1.4 percent to offer free tuition for all undergraduate

degrees. The ruling elite in New York state could provide free college for all SUNY students with only 4.4 percent of their income. The entire budget problem in New York state could be solved with not even six percent of the elite's annual income.

In reality, hundreds of billions of dollars are stolen from the working class every year. This money is not a hoard of cash, squirreled away on a distant island, but a recurring payout to the rich, taken from the hands of workers. Such detestable inequality is the real reason behind the lack of funding for education.

Yet politicians like the Democratic governor of New York, Andrew Cuomo, refuse to touch the immense wealth of the ruling class. Cuomo has rejected all calls to increase taxes on the wealthy to cover the pandemic budget gap, and he has even boasted of his history of lowering high-income taxes.

No faith can be placed in the Democratic Party to resolve this crisis. The United States' wealthy have seen their wealth increase by \$637 billion since March, while politicians like Cuomo are demanding that schools and businesses reopen so that the profits of his capitalist handlers can continue to flow.

This has resulted in major COVID-19 outbreaks in the SUNY school system, requiring the closure SUNY campuses across the state at Oneonta, Oswego and Cortland.

In opposition to this murderous policy, the Socialist Equality Party and its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, are calling on educators, students and school workers to form rank-and-file safety committees. These committees will organize students and workers from across the country to fight for the protection of health and lives of all working class people.

To learn more and get involved, sign up for the Educators Newsletter today. If you have had your scholarships cut, or want to report unsafe conditions at your school, contact the author on Twitter and Facebook, or email educators@wsws.org.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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