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NEWS RELEASE

14,000 CUNY Students Urge Mayor Bloomberg and Speaker Quinn to Restore the Vallone Scholarship

New York City Councilmembers join NYPIRG to speak out to restore the Vallone Scholarship

(New York, NY) – CUNY students and advocacy groups are joined by NYC councilmembers to urge Mayor Bloomberg and Speaker Quinn to restore the recently eliminated Peter Vallone Scholarship.

“With CUNY tuition on an unreasonably steady rise, unfair changes to TAP and the Pell Grant, disproportionate budget cuts to CUNY, the threat of student loan interest rates doubling, and now the elimination of the Vallone Scholarship – access to an affordable quality education is becoming a distant dream for many,” said Kevin Stump, NYPIRG’s Higher Education Program Coordinator.

“We made a commitment to these kids that if they continued to excel, we would continue to do our part, and we need to honor our commitment to our best and brightest,” said Councilman Peter F. Vallone Jr.

“At a time where tuition across the CUNY system is set to be increased every few years, merit based scholarships such as this one need to be restored. Money should not be a factor when it comes to a student’s right to receive a quality education,” said councilman Ydanis Rborguez, chair of the Higher Education Committee.

Over the last three years, public higher education in NYS has been cut by \$1.7 billion. These cuts have placed a heavier burden on students who are filling the city and state aid gaps with their tuition dollars. To make matters worse, the Vallone Scholarship was once again zeroed out in the city budget for this year. The Scholarship was established in 1998 by the New York City Council

to honor Peter F. Vallone, former Chairperson of the City Council. It helped over 14,000 graduating NYC public high school seniors who maintained a “B” average or higher to attend CUNY each year with an award of up to \$1,250. The merit-based academic award has shrunk as low as \$250 per recipient in recent years before it was completely eliminated.

“As a full time student who receives no financial aid, I depended heavily on the Peter Vallone scholarship. The money I make from working two jobs goes largely towards tuition, textbooks, and other school related expenses. As a result, I have to live in a transitional home just so I can afford to stay in school,” said Shivani Jaikissoon, a student at Borough of Manhattan Community College.

“I understand that priorities within the budget change from year to year. However, what should never change – is access to public higher education in New York City. Please make our education a priority this year and restore the Vallone Scholarship,” said Ben Joson, incoming student body president at Hunter College and once recipient of the Vallone Scholarship.

“By creating the Vallone Scholarship, the City Council recognized that they can help undocumented students attend college. We urge the City Council to restore the Vallone Scholarship to continue New York’s tradition of recognizing that our city’s youth deserve a chance to go to school and follow their dreams, regardless of immigration status,” said Chung-Wha Hong, Executive Director at the New York Immigration Coalition. In March of 2012, the City Council passed Res.0803 calling upon the New York State Legislature to pass, and the Governor to sign, the New York Dream Act, which would expand the reach of TAP to include eligible undocumented immigrants. The Vallone Scholarship was the only funding available to undocumented students from the City Council.

“For thousands of students many of them undocumented, the Peter Vallone Scholarship has for years represented an invaluable resource in helping many reach their goal of obtaining their degrees and pursuing higher education,” said Councilman Ydanis Rodriguez.

“All too often we talk about being college and career ready, without addressing the financial realities facing so many students and families. This scholarship is an important piece to ensure all students have access to a college education, including our most financially vulnerable,” said Matt Stern, New York State Program Coordinator for Students For Education Reform.

As aid shrinks and costs rise, college completion becomes increasingly difficult. An average student graduates with roughly \$25,000 in student loan debt, only to enter into a discouraging job market. According to Demos, the United States has the best-educated older population in the world, but among 25-34 year olds, we move down to 10th place. Access to public higher education needs to become a major priority as the city, state, and nation move out of the 2008 economic downturn.

“While congressional leaders squabble over how to keep student loan interest rates low, and state-level lawmakers continue to raise tuition, we strongly urge the city council to take the lead and invest in programs like the Peter Vallone Scholarship that help already struggling New York City students who deserve the opportunity to attend college,” said Stump.

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