



Testimony for the New New York Education Reform Commission on behalf of Sheila Cooley, Director of Cooperative Education at SUNY Oswego

Good afternoon. Thank you commission members and guests for allowing me the opportunity to participate today. My name is Sheila Cooley, Director of Cooperative Education at the State University of New York at Oswego.

SUNY Oswego's founder revolutionized education more than 150 years ago by bringing the real world into public school classrooms with the object-teaching method. Oswego has carried that tradition forward across a range of liberal and professional disciplines with an emphasis on internships, study abroad and service learning that connect our students with the world far beyond the classroom and the college campus to show them where they are needed and how they can use their education, energy and talent to make a difference.

We're excited about our latest initiative along these lines, and we think it has the potential for much wider application in our public education system. This initiative is SUNY Oswego's recently launched college-wide cooperative education program. Cooperative education is a form of experiential learning, sometimes referred to as work-integrated learning. Through "co-op," students engage in a paid work experience related to their field of study. Students "learn by doing." Students integrate classroom learning with "real-world" career-oriented experiences where they build marketable skills and develop professional relationships critical for job placement and early career success.

At SUNY Oswego, our pursuit of strategies for student success yielded 10 years of data showing that students who work on campus are more successful academically: they stay in school and they graduate on time. SUNY Oswego President Deborah F. Stanley seized on co-op education to build on this work/success model. Oswego's Co-op Program is now the first multiple-discipline co-op program in SUNY that offers students career-related paid learning experiences. It embeds essential student success components that can both be easily replicated at other levels of the public education system and be broadened in scope to make the learning experience available to larger numbers of students.

We have been profiling our incoming freshmen for more than a decade. Part of this profile includes employment on campus. The data consistently show that students who work on campus have higher retention rates — 10 percentage points higher or more. The higher retention rates hold true for all students employed on campus, including federally supported work-study students, in spite of all attrition risk factors — lower income, underrepresented minority status, lower high school academic record, and first-generation to attend college. The Oswego Co-op Program builds on this mass of evidence. We found that the work environment defines responsibilities and expectations for students and allows them to make connections with individuals who provide important guidance, support and assistance that help them succeed both as employees and as students.

In designing the Oswego Co-op Program, we met with and studied national leaders in co-op education including Northeastern University, Drexel University and Rochester Institute of Technology. Guided by their combined 300-plus-year history in co-op education, we built a program that meets the evolving needs of students and employers for career-oriented skills and captures new learning opportunities based on shifts in

industry and emerging technology. Our Co-op Program has a special focus on job needs in the region and state, and directly connects students' work experience to their field of study, helping to ensure students have the best opportunities after graduation.

Oswego's Co-op Program offers a six-month paid work experience integrated into the major curriculum as early as the end of the sophomore year where students are expected to have acquired specific skills and competencies that are mutually set by faculty and employers. This practice guarantees employers that students are well prepared for the work assignments, and it helps our faculty stay aware of professional innovations and practices and anticipate how disciplines are changing so we can adapt our academic programs accordingly. All co-op students receive pre-professional preparedness training that offers personal guidance and resources to assist them with résumé writing, interviewing, and understanding of professional behavior standards in the workplace.

Our regional industry and business partners have enthusiastically come forward to support the Oswego Co-op Program. We have developed close relationships with our Central New York co-op partners — Welch-Allyn, O'Brien and Gere, Novelis, Saab-Sensis, Bristol Myers Squibb, the Landmark Theatre, and many others, including small start-ups. This wide range of associations helps ensure our students have the best opportunities for job placement in the region and exposure to professional expectations and practices. According to NACE, the National Association of Colleges and Employers, 60% of graduating college seniors with co-op experience are being offered positions with an employer. At RIT and the University of Waterloo, the job placement rate is 90% one year after graduation, and 50% of their graduates begin their careers working full-time with one

of their co-op employers. Co-ops provide students the experience that employers expect of recent graduates and entry-level employees.

This dynamic pathway for learning proactively helps students manage their total educational expenses and loan debt. On average, students at four-year public colleges graduate with a total indebtedness of \$27,000. Total educational expenses and loan indebtedness can be made more reasonable through co-op programs where students earn on average \$16,000 per co-op experience, with potential co-op earnings of \$16,000 to \$36,000. Co-op students generally borrow less than other students to fund their education, because co-op earnings help pay for it.

Based on the success of our data-driven campus initiatives — including campus work programs and our newly introduced Co-op Program — we propose that similar work-based learning models be expanded at the collegiate level and adopted at the secondary school level. Such programs could also include job shadowing, mentoring, service learning, school-based enterprise and high school internship programs. These early work-based learning experiences outline expectations and responsibilities and offer mentorships to students while also providing them an opportunity to explore different fields of interest. Early identification of a career path, particularly when it translates into a declared academic major where a clear academic pathway can be developed to support the student, leads to greater student success and can also help reduce overall educational expenses and time to degree.

College- and high school-level work-based learning programs have many advantages. They help connect academic work to future career paths; improve retention and graduation rates; provide students with skills, attitudes and habits required to be

successful on the job such as time management, problem solving, interpersonal communication, and leadership skills; and they contribute to economic development and community-building by fostering meaningful partnerships between educational institutions and business and industry in a manner that helps each sector meet its mission.

Governor Cuomo has led with vision and resolve in fostering new ideas and approaches for improving our state's public education system and putting students first. At SUNY Oswego, we are focusing our expert insights and creative energies to achieving to these critical goals. Our co-op programs will stand as a model of how to move forward as the outcomes we generate and assess will help hone the benefits to current and future students and graduates. We believe that replicating and expanding the type of work-based learning modality I have outlined today will lead to improved retention, graduation, and job placement rates of students both at the high school and collegiate levels.

It is an approach that puts students and their success first and, by doing that, builds a stronger more successful society for us all.