

2009 Professional Staff Congress/CUNY Questionnaire for NYC Candidates

Candidate for **Public Advocate**

(Borough President, City Council, Comptroller, District Attorney, Mayor, Public Advocate,)

City Council District: _____

Borough: _____

Name: **Alex Zablocki**

Campaign Address: **103 Surfside Plaza**
Staten Island, NY 10307

Telephone #s: **347-885-1200; 718-734-1093**

Email Address: **alex@alex2009.com**

Political Party Affiliation: **Republican (does it matter?)**

Occupation: **District Director for State Senator Andrew Lanza; small business owner**

Current Employment / Employer: **NYS Senate**

Are you an incumbent: Yes _____ No Number of years in office _____

Under the current term limits law, how many more additional terms, after this one, will you be able to serve? _____

Education:

High School: **Susan E. Wagner High School, Staten Island**

College: **Baruch College CUNY, Manhattan**

Graduate / Professional: **n/a**

1. I received support to pay for college from:
(Please check all that apply)

- Pell Grant
- NYS Tuition Assistance Program
- Scholarship
- Student Loans
- Family
- Self
- Other Source _____

2. In my view, paying for public higher education (CUNY) should primarily be the responsibility of:
(check only one)

- Students
- Parents / Family
- Government
- Employers
- All of the above

(Please attach additional sheets as necessary to answer the following questions.)

3. Public funding to public higher education has fallen sharply over the last two decades. Since 1991, NY State funding per student for CUNY senior colleges fell 14% and, for CUNY community colleges, it fell by 25.6%.¹ Though NY City began to restore funding to CUNY community colleges five years ago, proposed budget cuts this year will eliminate this advance.
What would you do to increase public investment in CUNY?

The Public Advocate is not chartered to secure any type of funding, but as a CUNY graduate and the son of the CUNY professor, I would be a strong voice in calling for more funding for CUNY schools. As Public Advocate, I would also try to secure more private funding to help run programs that aren't currently covered because of budget restraints.

4. More than 50% of CUNY students come from households with annual income below \$40,000, but students will pay 15% more on average next year to attend a CUNY senior college and 14% more to attend a community college if tuition hikes go through. Overall, student tuition makes up 40% of CUNY's total operating revenue and the CUNY Master Plan ("CUNY Compact") calls for regular, annual tuition hikes.

4a. Do you support or oppose the current tuition increases? **No**

4b. Do you support or oppose the CUNY Compact's call for annual tuition increases? **Yes**

4c. What would you do to relieve the burden on students and families to pay for CUNY?

Tuition increases for any public or private school is inevitable, but it should be done fairly and equitably. When our Governor and State Legislature was calling to increase tuition at CUNY, I opposed it, and announced a plan called "Tuition Lock". I believe, as a CUNY graduate, that sometimes paying for college can be difficult, especially during hard economic times. "Tuition Lock" would allow a full-time student to lock in a set tuition rate for up to four years. Many students who can barely afford tuition costs will be adversely affected by the proposal to increase tuition by such a large amount this year and this is exactly what CUNY was setup to prevent.

4d. Some economists argue that earning a college degree enables a student to get a good-paying job upon graduation, and, therefore, government policy should be structured around an expectation of students to finance their education by taking out loans. Do you agree or disagree with a higher education financing policy that is structured around students taking out loans to finance tuition increases? Why or why not?

Evidence by the recent credit market meltdown we have all been facing here in the United States, publically funded and supported higher education institutions should not rely on students loans to fund tuition increases. It is difficult enough for students, especially minority and low income individuals to secure a school loan; it is even more difficult to handle tuition increases, such as the 14-15% tuition increases, in one year. That is why I believe students should be able to lock in their tuition for a four year period and government should not place the burden of budget shortfalls on the backs of students.

¹ Fiscal Policy Institute Report: "New York State's Underinvestment in Public Higher Education," January 15, 2009

5. CUNY enrollments are higher than at any other time in its history, but in 1975 (the last enrollment peak), CUNY had 11,500 full-time faculty and now it has 6,800. Similarly, there has been a decline in the number of professional and support staff. CUNY now has 9,000 adjunct faculty and 1,000 adjunct professional staff who are part-time and low-paid. The dramatic decline of the full-time workforce and reliance on an exploited and over-stretched part-time workforce compromises the quality of education and the University's ability to deliver educational services to students.

5a. What specific policies would you advocate to provide CUNY with the resources to hire more full-time faculty, counselors, professional and other staff?

Without adequate funding, CUNY will never be properly staffed. More of our city/state budget has to be allocated to CUNY to help provide full-time staff positions. For some positions that aren't related to professors, private money could be used for grants – something I would advocate for as Public Advocate. As Public Advocate, I would also advocate to bring city resources into CUNY campuses to relive a burden of the lack of staff at schools. Mandating, through legislation, certain positions, could force CUNY to hire more staff, but funding would need to be in place to ensure the burden wasn't place on students. Again, as Public Advocate, I will push for more public funding for our schools.

5b. What specific policies would you advocate to improve the wages and working conditions of part-time adjunct faculty and staff that currently provide half the instruction at CUNY?

Part-time adjunct faculty is very important to the college community because these professors are usually professionals in the field that they are teaching in. CUNY should recognize this fact and in order to retain and recruit well qualified part-time faculty, CUNY will have to pay wages comparable to private universities. Once again, as Public Advocate, I will push for more funding for our schools (CUNY).

6. What are your views on New York City's current tax structure? If you are elected, what specific tax and revenue policies would you advocate?

Budget shortfalls cannot be taken out on homeowners through the form of property tax increases and water rate increases. Businesses find it difficult to compete with New Jersey's lower sales tax and friendlier corporate tax climate. Freelancer's that do business in New York City are double taxed by the unincorporated business tax and then by the NYC income tax. We also need to help diversify what industries do business in New York City and not depend solely on Wall Street.

As Public Advocate I would fight vigorously any real property tax increases, as I believe real property tax increases are felt not only by homeowners but renters as well (evidence by the recent approval to increase rent stabilized rents by 3-6% over the next two years because of increases in property taxes). As Public Advocate I would help small businesses cut the "red tape" when it comes to starting and operating a business in New York City. As Public Advocate, I would fight to eliminate the unincorporated business tax which is hurting freelancer's citywide [my campaign has a petition to eliminate the tax on my website]. As Public Advocate, I would like to work with the City Council and State Legislature to develop new economic incentives to lure businesses to our city, such as "green" businesses, which will generate tax revenue and create jobs.

As Public Advocate I would like to find business partners with nearly every CUNY school so that those businesses can draw off of the new talent graduating from these schools. For example, the College of Staten Island has a phenomenal computer sciences program and this talent could be tapped into by hi-tech firms moving into New York City. As Public Advocate, I would work with CUNY to develop new areas of concentration in fields that will drive our City's economy in the future, such as *green* industries.

7. What fiscal policies would you advocate to help New York City maintain public services during the current recession?

Government is bloated and the City Council and State Legislature has to looking at ways to cut spending and save taxpayers money. New fees and taxes are not always the answer to budget shortfalls. I believe involving the private sector to make government work more efficiently is a step in the right direction. For instance, on Staten Island, a two stall bathroom at a park cost the city nearly \$1 million, when the private sector could have built the same bathroom for \$100,000. In the latest City Council budget, 51 Councilmember's received large amounts of money to dole out to organizations in their community, with little or no accountability. As Public Advocate I would suggest innovative ways to raise revenue, like I have during my campaign, such as selling more advertising space to corporations to fund maintenance operations in subway stations. I would also suggest ways to lure new businesses here, through tax incentives and protect current incentives for businesses, such as my successful fight to fund the Empire State Film and TV Production Tax credit program, which pays for itself and creates tens of thousands of jobs. Finally, I would also suggest ways to cut government spending. New taxes should be a last resort measure to raise revenue, especially during recessions.

8. In your view, where does CUNY stand, as a priority, in New York's economic development and economic recovery?

Yes, making CUNY stronger through funding and higher standards should be near the top of the list in relation to other initiatives taken to improve New York's economy.

Many New Yorker's who are unemployed or come from poor communities may not be able to afford CUNY tuition to get educated or re-educated (learn a new skill). As an advocate, I am aware of this and if elected, would do everything in my power to ensure CUNY upholds its mission of being a place where everyone can get a solid education. During a recession, demand for schooling at the highest level continues to rise. CUNY must receive proper funding to meet these needs and more needs to be done to make CUNY affordable.

Community Colleges also play a key role in New York's economic recovery. Recently laid off workers who hold a high school diploma or GED may find it difficult to meet the high standards of many CUNY colleges. Community Colleges must fill this gap and resources need to be in place to meet the new demand. As Public Advocate I would also fight for a new community college on Staten Island, where only one senior college exists, the College of Staten Island. There is great demand for a community college on Staten Island.

9. Academic freedom is important because adherence to it allows colleges and universities to best serve the public interest. For this reason, the university must be a place where all ideas, even those that are unpopular, may be freely expressed and debated without interference from management, trustees or public officials. Yet, for short-term political advantage, politicians have undermined academic freedom by publicly attacking unpopular speech by faculty and calling for punitive action by college or university managements. Such public calls go beyond simple disagreement.

9a. Do you agree that it is necessary to uphold academic freedom at CUNY and other colleges and universities? Will you agree to avoid taking unfair political advantage of unpopular speech on campuses?

Academic freedom at CUNY should be up to the administrators, faculty and students, not elected officials. I would not involve myself in what is said or done on a CUNY campus, since it is not my place.

9b. Academic freedom also extends to pedagogical practices, academic standards and curriculum and program decisions. Who do you believe is best placed to make determinations about these matters: faculty, college administrators, community organizations, private businesses, or public officials?

The college presidents, faculty and student body should make these decisions.

10. Do you believe that public employees should have the same right to strike as private employees?
Please explain?

Yes, if striking doesn't harm public safety, such as a strike by firemen, police officers, public hospital employee's and transit workers.

11. In general, public employees have had more generous health and pension benefits than private employees. Some politicians have used this disparity to argue for a diminution of public employee benefits and blamed New York's fiscal problems on such benefits. Do you believe public employees' health and pension benefits should be maintained, reduced, or enhanced? Please be as specific as possible.

As a public employee for six years, I know that a career in public service can be rewarding, personally but sometimes not financially. Due to this fact, certain things must be maintained for public employee's, including benefits. From a personal point of view, my health care benefits are not up to par with private sector employee's and often times I am finding myself pay for dental visits or prescriptions and my salary is under \$50,000 a year. This is happening to many public employees. I'm a strong believer that many positions in the public sector have to pay well in order to get well qualified employees or benefits have to outweigh the lost salary in the private sector. As Public Advocate I would fight for fair wages and wage increases for public employees. Knowing that the state and city are going through difficult fiscal times, we could look at increasing benefits for the lowest salary workers and keeping benefits constant (or slightly decreasing) at the highest salary. This would make public benefits more equitable to all employees.

12. Incumbents, please list your committee and subcommittee memberships and indicate if you are chair:

n/a

13. Please list the bills you have introduced or co-sponsored in support of CUNY and higher education, or other actions you have taken in this cause:

n/a

14. Please list other legislation that you have introduced or co-sponsored in the last two legislative sessions:

n/a

15. Please describe other actions you have taken in support of union-related initiatives:

n/a

Return completed questionnaire and brief personal biography to:

Professional Staff Congress / CUNY
61 Broadway, Suite 1500
New York, New York 10006
(212) 354-1252
Fax: (212) 302-7815
Attention: Amanda Magalhaes
amagalhaes@pscmail.org

We encourage you to send the questionnaire and attachments via email or by fax.