

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: Norman Siegel

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New York, NY 10016

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Email Address:
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Political Party Affiliation: Democratic

Occupation: Civil Rights Attorney

Current Employment / Employer: Private Practice

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: New Utrecht High School

College: Brooklyn College

Graduate / Professional: NYU School of Law

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 _____

*Brooklyn College was a no-tuition school when I attended in 1961-1965.

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?

While the Public Advocate doesn't have a direct legislative or executive role in deciding these budgetary matters, I would use the office to its full dynamic potential to play a very robust role in shaping political discussion. Of course, more public investment is the key to assisting CUNY, and what I would offer is a Public Advocate's office that serves as a nerve center for unified advocacy. That's the way to make elected officials and other decision-makers realize the moral and political necessity of such investment. I will not only continue to speak out personally on this issue, but also actively organize and link-up stakeholders such as students' advocacy groups as well as interested groups like yours. Even in the process of campaigning we have formed a Students for Norman Siegel group who have held a Students for Norman Siegel party and fundraiser, and some of whom have been active on their campuses in protesting the tuition hike. As Public Advocate I will be prepared to hit the ground running in the struggle to get our government's priorities right on higher education.

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? Oppose
- 4b. Do you support or oppose the CUNY Compact's call for annual tuition increases? Oppose
- 4c. What would you do to relieve the burden on students and families to pay for CUNY?

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

I was recently honored to speak out against the tuition hike at a rally of 400 students at my alma mater, Brooklyn College. When I attended Brooklyn College in the 1960s, I did not have to pay tuition; that's why I recognize that even though a return to the former system of complete public support of CUNY may not be politically feasible at this juncture, we need to recast the conversation. We shouldn't be asking *how much* to raise tuition this year, and we certainly shouldn't be contemplating something so insidious as *annual* tuition increases; we should instead be investigating the long-term benefits of making higher education *more affordable* for working-class New Yorkers. If our most promising young people are saddled with debt, or, even worse, not able to attend college in the first place, then how is New York is going to compete in the cutting-edge industries of the 21st century, particularly the green-collar industries that Mayor Bloomberg purports to be so invested in? Therefore, I believe that increasing public investment in CUNY is the most important approach; it is, after all, a public institution. However, the Public Advocate's office could also play a role in educating and communicating with high school students about opportunities and strategies in applying for federal and state grants or loans for higher education.

- 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?

I disagree with this rather myopic understanding of higher education. For starters, it's simply not healthy policy to engender debt and desperation in the lives of recent graduates. Just look at the studies predicting that employers will hire 22% fewer recent college graduates this year than they did last year, creating an unenviable situation for anyone now having to pay off loans. It's also just foolish to expect every individual with a college degree to pursue a lucrative career. Many CUNY students will put their education towards becoming social workers, community organizers, teachers and other vocations that might pay no better than jobs they could have landed without a college degree, but which are essential for the betterment of our society.

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?

I agree that this reality compromises the quality of education and the structure of the institution; it's impossible to accommodate so many adjuncts with office space and other necessary resources. A similar trend is compromising services in many city agencies, though not at the same drastic ratio. I have already committed to DC37 to undertake as Public Advocate an agency-by-agency analysis to ascertain where we can add full-time, better-paid, and always unionized workers. On a related note, I also feel that the shortage of affordable housing in New York makes it increasingly difficult to retain talented professionals at salaries that would be normal in other cities. I strongly advocate repealing the Urstadt law, which has done more to tie the city's hands with respect to affordable housing than any other law on the books. There's no reason we should have to go to Albany every time we want to improve the law for tenants, especially because Albany is a playing field progressives will very rarely win on. To further relieve affordable housing shortages I will support zoning plans which include the creation of 35% affordable housing in all new developments; we should not be a city where civil servants can't afford to live in the very neighborhoods they work in.

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?

While we need a better ratio of full-time to part-time staff, we need to improve conditions for adjuncts. We must recognize how exceedingly difficult it is to prepare lessons when you don't receive a living wage, don't have an office to call your own, nor necessary resources such as computers or technologically up-to-date equipment. Again, I feel that increased public investment is the key, and that advocacy broadcasting these realities is the best way to make powerful officials realize the moral and political necessity of such investment.

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?

I generally support the principle of progressive taxation of higher income brackets. Other revenue-raising tactics such as tolls or sales taxes would not be my priority for the Public Advocate's office. More productive fiscal uses of the office I will discuss in question 7 below.

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

I would use the Public Advocate's oversight role to ferret out waste, and to identify where the city and its residents are eligible for state or federal funding. I should explain how I would make much more robust use of the office's oversight function. First, I would recruit and train a citywide network of volunteers to do biweekly intake in community centers all over the city to collect complaints about city services, then identify the recurring complaints that are likely to reveal systemic issues. Additionally, New York law allows the Public Advocate to petition for judicial public hearings when there has been any showing of government impropriety, which allows the public to hear the acts in a court of law. As a civil rights attorney representing taxpayers I used this process to bring public attention to the City Council "slush fund" that had been funneling city money to fictitious organizations. That case is currently on appeal in the New York Appellate Division. The incumbent has never asked for judicial hearings, but I will show no such reluctance in exposing government improprieties such as fraud and corruption.

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

We should view CUNY as a cornerstone of our economic planning. New York's economic future depends upon its ability to compete in a new economy and new industries. I believe Mayor Bloomberg recognizes as much with the emphasis he has put on green-collar and clean-tech expansion. Which is why it makes no sense to me that he seems willing to allow CUNY to suffer amidst these sweeping budget cuts. If that happens, New York stands little chance. Rather than count on attracting talented individuals to move to the city, we should make a firm commitment to producing that talent in-house through public higher education.

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?

You can rest assured that I will never demonize a professor for exercising his/her first-amendment right to free speech, and in fact as a civil rights attorney I have represented CUNY faculty and public employees who were threatened with punishment for making politically unpopular statements. In an academic context such free expression/academic freedom is not just constitutionally-protected, but crucial to the intellectual wellbeing of the institution. Of course I agree not to take unfair political advantage of unpopular speech on campuses, and if need be I will actively defend it.

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?

I have been critical of mayoral control of public schools for the reason that it seals off parents, faculty and other stakeholders from having proper input in the education process. As a result standardized testing has been over-emphasized, which may improve the appearance of city schools by boosting students' scores without achieving the ultimate goal of teaching our children how to think critically. This understanding extends to higher education; elected officials should certainly not dictate curriculum as they may not be qualified and may have political motives in doing so. Ultimately I believe faculty are the most qualified to make these academic decisions and should have more leeway and less external pressure in doing so.

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

Yes. I support amending the Taylor Law so that when any public employer refuses to bargain in good faith, the affected public employee union would be relieved of the onerous penalties.

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.

They should certainly not be reduced; this line of thinking neither recognizes nor values the quality of services we rely on from public employees and often stems from ideological disagreements with the very concept of public services. When it comes to maintaining vs. enhancing benefits, I would have to look at them on a case-by-case basis. The fact that CUNY currently employs so many adjuncts without health benefits is a particularly worrisome and unsustainable case that must be addressed. As a broader principle, I believe that health care is a right, and that New York City should deliver affordable, quality health care to all of its residents. Currently we are awaiting President Obama's launch of his own health care overhaul, and I'm optimistic that I would be one of his lieutenants in New York pushing for a long overdue universal health care system, which every major democratic nation in the world has except for ours. One solution that I have long advocated is funding a "universal" health care system in a few test neighborhoods. As Public Advocate I would implement a three-year study, after which we would analyze both health data and economic data from the test neighborhoods and similarly situated neighborhoods that did not have such health care access. What we will likely find is that preventative care not only makes people healthier, reducing burdens on the health care system in the long run, but that being healthy translates into a greater chance for economic success. Lest anyone think this project is farfetched, there is a precedent. The Ryan-NENA Center, begun in the late 1960s on a grant by the bank of New York, administers free health care to all visitors, mostly members of its Lower East Side neighborhood. I will fight each day to stress that preventative medicine should not be a luxury only some can afford, because when uninsured people lack the benefits of regular check-ups and screenings, it is ultimately the city that suffers a greater financial cost.

12. Incumbents, please list your committee and subcommittee memberships and indicate if you are chair:
I have not held prior elected office.

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:
I have not held prior elected office.

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

I have not held prior elected office.

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

When I was executive director of the NYCLU from 1985-2000, I had a good working relationship with the union (UAW) representing the staff. I have also served as an attorney and legal observer at numerous union rallies and pickets, (e.g. SEIU 1199 and TWU). I have filed an amicus curiae brief on behalf of TWU in a first amendment case, and currently represent UFT in a first amendment federal lawsuit. I'm also very honored to have been endorsed by PSC-CUNY in 2001 and 2005 when I ran for Public Advocate. I'm hoping PSC will endorse me one more time.

Return completed questionnaire and brief personal biography to:

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

Brief Biography of Norman Siegel:

Norman Siegel was raised in Brooklyn, and graduated from Brooklyn College and New York University Law School. He began his legal career in 1968, accepting a position with the American Civil Liberties Union's Southern Justice & Voting Law Project. It was this immersion in voting rights and civil liberties that helped forge Norman's abiding commitment to insure the rights guaranteed in the United States Constitution extend to all Americans, regardless of race, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender. He served as Executive Director of the New York Civil Liberties Union from 1985-2000, putting him on the frontline in some of the city's most critical struggles, such as the fight for citizens' access to the steps of City Hall and the struggle for improved community-police relations and greater accountability on the part of the NYPD. Norman's work in civil liberties law has continued in private practice since 2002. He is counsel to Tuck-It-Away in their fight against the use of eminent domain in Columbia University's expansion plan. He has also advocated and represented 9/11 Families, the Skyscraper Safety Campaign and Firefighters Families, African American and Latino Police Officers in a racial discrimination lawsuits against NYC and the MTA, New Yorkers against the extension of term limits, Critical Mass bicyclists and many other groups and individuals. Norman filed an amicus curiae brief on behalf of the TWU and is co-counsel on behalf of the UFT in first amendment lawsuits. He and his wife live on Manhattan's Upper West side and he is a proud grandfather.