Testimony of Cecil Scheib  
Assistant Vice President for Sustainability, New York University  
before  
New York State Assembly Committee on Environmental Conservation  

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Good morning Chairman Englebright, and fellow Assemblymembers. My name is Cecil Scheib and I am the Assistant Vice President for Sustainability at New York University (NYU). I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today as you consider the impact of climate change on the state, specifically the impact on our workforce.

At NYU, we are committed to making the University one of the nation’s greenest campuses at an operational level, but we also encourage sustainable practices at an individual level throughout our community. Since 2007, NYU has reduced its emissions by 30%. That’s an amount equivalent to planting enough trees to cover all of Manhattan and Brooklyn in forest, or if you prefer, more than 4 times all of Albany. We have voluntarily further pledged to achieve a 50% reduction from the baseline by 2025 and carbon neutrality by 2040.

But these emissions reductions are not just because NYU saves money on energy by reducing its carbon output. They’re not even just due to our commitment to combat global climate change. We also believe it is part of NYU’s role as an anchor institution in New York and because it positively impacts our community.

For instance, it’s NYU’s goal to convert to a 100% electric vehicle fleet over time. In addition to the carbon reductions and operational savings, this has a direct impact on NYU and the surrounding communities in terms of pollution from the combustion of diesel fuel. To underscore this close relationship, on Earth Day last month the University Senate passed a resolution that NYU should “plan local stakeholder consultations and invite local environmental justice community organizations to help envision NYU’s role in climate justice through concrete restorative justice partnerships and projects that employ NYU’s research, health, volunteering, technological, and other capacities; and to inform the planning and evaluation of NYU’s climate commitments”.

Further, medical studies show that cognitive function doubles in offices with better indoor air quality. The things we will do to save energy in these buildings will also help people think more clearly. Our message is that we will enhance NYU’s academic mission by providing comfortable and healthy spaces that enhance NYU’s excellence, and that the energy savings will help pay for it – and we’ll achieve our carbon goals, too.
NYU also realizes that in order to achieve our goals, we need a talented and adequately trained workforce. The climate change narrative often focuses on the new and exciting technologies that will be part of our transition to a low-carbon future. For instance, this summer we will be carpeting Bobst Library, our central library building, with solar panels. But that easy narrative ignores the fact that a trained workforce is required not only to implement these physical changes, but also to maintain and operate highly technical renovated buildings in the most efficient manner possible. That’s why NYU is embarking on an ambitious workforce training program that will reach over 1,000 on-campus workers. Through this program, NYU employees from a range of units, from energy management to recycling to residence hall staff, will undergo a portfolio-wide training program that will not only increase building performance and operations but add to the sustainability and comfort of our buildings. We will develop standardized procedures for building operations and management, conduct hands on classroom and field training, and a mentorship program, so that our employees can achieve their goals for personal advancement. I’d like to acknowledge NYSERDA’s leadership through the Workforce Training: Building Operations and Maintenance Grant as they are supporting us on this project. You can’t just buy high-tech, energy saving equipment, dump it in a building, and expect it to operate correctly. You must also invest in the men and women that will operate it, day in and day out, from now until 2050 and beyond. NYU is proud to be part of this initiative on workforce training in building operations and maintenance and we hope that similar statewide initiatives continue to further encourage training programs for new technologies and operations.

I would also like to take a moment to speak to the role carbon offsets may play in addressing climate change in a manner that protects disadvantaged communities most at risk from adverse impacts. Understandably, there will be some areas where it may be difficult to convert from fossil fuels, and so some amount of carbon offsets may be necessary. However, NYU’s general approach is that reliance on offsets increases environmental harm, especially locally, and leaves many other co-benefits on the table. For instance, burning fossil fuels, be it for stationary combustion as a heating source or in vehicles, creates local pollutants that aggravate illnesses from asthma to diabetes. Offsets have a clear role to play, but should be seen as a last resort, not a first resort.

Beyond our specific emissions reduction goals, NYU is focused on engaging our community to champion innovative and entrepreneurial ideas so that we are all working towards a healthier and more sustainability community. We support a program called Green Grants which provides funding for inventive projects that have the potential to improve the university’s operational environmental performance, foster environmental literacy and community engagement, advance research, or demonstrate the viability of best practices and technologies for sustainability. For instance, Urban Food Labs is a course offered at the Tandon School of Engineering in downtown Brooklyn that gives students the opportunity to lead independent projects related to an aquaponics system and incentivize community engagement to create a future generation of professionals interested in community development. We hope to encourage our students, and our community at large, to approach their work with a sustainable mindset.
As a leading research university, NYU contributes to cutting edge research that helps address the impact of fossil fuels on our workforce. NYU published the first research that showed the association between fine particulate matter (PM2.5) and mortality. NYU faculty began the frequently cited “Backpack Study” of the effect of diesel air pollution on children with asthma in the South Bronx. NYU’s scholars also work on solving challenges that are resulting from climate changes in urban areas as our researchers have previously been called upon to assist lawmakers in analyzing the appropriate framework for pricing carbon emissions and in assessing the impact of policies designed to reduce energy use in New York City’s buildings. We look forward to continuing to offer our expertise to policymakers.

We are pleased to see the New York State Assembly take a leadership role in addressing the ways climate change will impact industry and workforce throughout the state. NYU hopes to continue to partner with New York to make the State more sustainable and reduce the impacts of climate change for our citizens. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify and I welcome any questions you have.