

Academe Online

A College Education? Or Diminished Expectations?

The new, "reimagined" CUNY community college marches students to terminal degrees in narrow fields.

By Lenore A. Beaky

You didn't know that "supply chain management" was an academic major? It will be, if the administrators planning [the City University of New York's new community college](#) have their way.

In sociologist Burton Clark's classic 1960 essay, "The 'Cooling-Out' Function in Higher Education," Clark demonstrates how an ambitious community college student can be persuaded by her institution to accept diminished aspirations. CUNY's new community college, planned almost entirely by administrators and slated to open in 2012, seems designed to shunt its student body into narrow, mostly terminal career-technical programs with the promise of an associate's degree at the end.

But to what purpose?

To "reimagine community college education from the ground up," according to CUNY's chancellor, Matthew Goldstein. The stated motivation for this reimagining was not to relieve the burdens of overenrollment and insufficient funding at CUNY's six existing community colleges but instead to improve CUNY's associate's-degree graduation rates and to reduce the time students spend acquiring their degrees. The chancellor also said he wanted to overcome policy obstacles "that prevent community college educators from doing their best work." A 2008 concept paper, developed by a planning team that included no faculty members, proposed the following features for the new community college:

- a narrow pathway to graduation with only twelve majors, most vocationally oriented
- a unifying theme of "New York City"
- a required first-year core curriculum
- an "Office of Partnerships," to coordinate curriculum development with the requirements of work and internships
- a "Center for College Effectiveness," to support an "evidencebased" culture in an environment of continual assessment

This new community college is a perfect synergy of objectionable elements of current higher education practice. It will not serve students, faculty members, or New York City. Its defining features will be a narrow, utilitarian curriculum and statistics-driven surveillance of both faculty and students. Finally, the top-down administrative management that has characterized the planning process disregards faculty rights and shared governance.

Early Planning

No members of the CUNY faculty were formally involved in the first phase of planning, except as invited attendees at brief group meetings or respondents to an online survey. Dean John Mogulescu chaired the planning team; team members included administrators from CUNY and New York City Department of Education precollege programs. Remarkably, the planning team did not include a single faculty member, either from CUNY or from outside of CUNY. Two community college presidents and various vice chancellors were on the steering committee, a separate advisory body. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York provided planning funds. CUNY reported that the Gates Foundation support would "help low-income students complete degrees that can immediately lead to jobs."

Faculty involvement, such as it was, came only in the second phase of planning. It was not until fall 2009—more than a year and a half after planning had begun—that the team finally invited CUNY faculty to apply for membership on working committees. But those committees were given two to three months to implement plans that were already mostly predetermined.

The structure and membership of the committees favor administrators and seem based on the principle of "democracy under proper supervision"—the Assessment and Portfolios Committee, for example, includes five

administrators and only one faculty member. The committee charges reveal what little scope the faculty members really have to create or invent. Here, for example, is the charge to the Committee for the City Seminar and Professional Studies. Course design, if not all content, is clearly stipulated:

This committee will develop two of the first-year courses that are key components of the educational model. The City Seminar and Professional Studies courses will provide engaging intellectual content using New York City as the context for learning, develop students' capacity to do college-level work, develop skills in reading, writing and quantitative reasoning and make connections between academic learning and the world of work. The charge for this committee is to be innovative in reimagining the integration of college-level work, developmental skills and experiential learning. The committee will develop the design principles for the City Seminar and Professional Studies courses, and address the connections between content and developmental skills and the integration of Professional Studies with the City Seminar. To illustrate their work the committee will also design a prototype module.

Majors and Curriculum

One key feature of the new CUNY community college is the limited number of majors that will be offered to students: there will be terminal degrees in nursing, surgical technology, medical informatics, energy services management, supply chain management, and information technology, and there will be transfer programs in business administration, teacher education, human services, urban studies, environmental sciences, and liberal arts. The required first-year core curriculum, "an integrated academic and occupational curriculum," will include a city seminar and professional studies.

City seminars will be built around case studies related to New York City and will focus on problem solving—an example given in the 2008 concept paper was "Managing New York City Transportation While Accounting for Long-Term Population Growth." The city seminar seems designed to create lower-level New York City bureaucrats, like an updated Dotheboys Hall from Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* (the academy, going in for "the practical mode of teaching," instructs the boys in cleaning the windows).

The professional studies course, according to the concept paper, "will make work-based learning an integral part of the college's mission." Students will solve problems identified by agencies or businesses. Even at the second-year level, the administrators "recommend the creation of prescribed pathways for each major that limit choice and exploration." A consultant is cited worrying over too much exploration and unexpected problems.

In the partnerships office, employers will "work with the community college faculty to develop curriculum." In a breathtaking violation of faculty autonomy, the concept paper states that "faculty who are recruited for the new community college should be committed, by contract or obligation, to help develop and sustain relationships that facilitate work-based learning and student internships and employment."

Students will be graded not just by their teachers but by teams that will include faculty members who did not actually teach the students being evaluated. The curriculum will be proposed, developed, and approved by teams composed of faculty, staff, and business representatives. Perhaps the role of such teams is what one CUNY vice chancellor was referring to when she stated approvingly, "All faculty participate with all syllabi, with academic freedom being expressed at the level of the group."

The PSC-CUNY Responds

In 2009, a new planning team was formed, replacing city personnel with CUNY administrators; like the earlier planning team, it includes not a single faculty member. Subsequent planning has followed the details of the faculty-free concept paper. Despite urgings from the university's faculty senate and the [Professional Staff Congress](#) (PSC-CUNY), Mogulescu has still not presented details of the college's governance, administrative, and organizational structures.

The separate steering committee now includes representatives from the faculty senate and each community college (seven faculty members, with eleven administrators). However, it is a nonvoting body that meets only quarterly, and while its feedback is invited (for example, faculty members on the steering committee were given nine days to respond by e-mail to the planning team's proposed committee structure and charges), those faculty members are unable to participate substantially in the planning process.

Until recently, faculty members have not even been engaged in developing the twelve preselected majors—a marginalization of the faculty that contravenes not only AAUP principles but also CUNY’s own bylaw 8.6, which places responsibility for “the formulation of policy” regarding curriculum and academic standards in the hands of the faculty. In February 2010, two years after administrators began planning the new community college, faculty members were finally invited to participate in a “highly structured” effort to build the college’s majors. The PSC-CUNY has expressed concerns over administrators’ continuing failure to indicate whether the courses would be taught by full- or part-time adjunct faculty; whether academic departments would have elected chairs or centrally appointed program administrators; how the design would square with contractual requirements and state regulations; and how faculty evaluation, instructional autonomy, and academic freedom would be affected.

The CUNY Proposal in Context

This new CUNY proposal is not the only one in the country to emphasize vocationalism and graduation rates in a reductive way. President Obama has referred to community colleges as job creators. The attention is overdue and welcome, but community colleges are more than engines for economic prosperity. Keith Kroll and Barry Alford, professors of English in Michigan community colleges, explain in an [article](#) in *Dissident Voice* that community colleges have a role to play in “providing a liberal arts education that teaches and encourages students to become informed and engaged citizens in a democratic society.” Community colleges, they note, “are perhaps the last bastion of democratic higher education in this country.”

CUNY community college students are usually the first in their families to attend college (as I was). Don’t they deserve more than a strict pathway that pushes them to declare a major at entrance and marches them straight through their courses to a diploma and a job, like so many pieces of chocolate in the *I Love Lucy* factory?

The Burton Clark essay cited at the beginning of this article adapts an idea developed by sociologist Erving Goffman in “On Cooling the Mark Out—Some Aspects of Adaptation to Failure.” The con man takes something from the “mark,” Goffman says, but consoles him with something of lesser value. Clark describes a process wherein the student is not dismissed from his true goals but diverted and provided with an alternative through a sequence of counseling and testing (in Burton Clark’s words, “If [the student] does not seek advice, advice will seek him”). At a meeting of the faculty senate in October 2009, I asked

Mogulescu about a hypothetical second-year student in this college who is interested in studying astronomy or Renaissance poetry or popular culture. “What should this student do?” I asked him.

“It’s conceivable,” Mogulescu replied, “we might say, ‘You’d be better off at another school.’”

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