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Planning for City University's New Community College

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Toward a New Community College at the City University of New York

Talk given at the Steinhardt Institute of New York University--October 15, 2009

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Good morning and thank you very much for being here this morning. Let me start by thanking Ann Marcus for hosting this event. About a year ago, I was at BMCC leading one of our public forums on the new community college. I was surprised and delighted to see Ann at the event. Here was one of New York City's leading educational thinkers, who also was part of the original team that created LaGuardia Community College acknowledging the importance of our work. I also want to say how appreciative I am that Gussie Kappner and Tom Bailey agreed to be part of this forum. They are two of New York's most accomplished educators and thinkers.

The Chancellor's Vision & My Experience

In fall of 2007, I met with CUNY Chancellor Matthew Goldstein about a proposal I submitted to a major Foundation to fund what we called the CUNY Community Academy. What I was proposing was to pilot a project on one of our community college campuses that would reimagine the first year of study. Before I could even begin describing the program in any detail, the Chancellor interrupted and said he was not really interested in a pilot program, but was interested in creating a new community college, and asked that I let the Foundation know that this was his ambition. We reworked the proposal accordingly, and although it was very well regarded by the Foundation, another proposal was chosen for funding. When I reported to the Chancellor in January 2008 that our proposal would not be funded, the Chancellor stood by his idea that CUNY needed a bold and imaginative plan for a new community college, and asked me to lead the effort. The Chancellor mentioned projected enrollment growth at all the CUNY colleges, but he made it clear that he was more interested in whether a community college structured differently might better address the persistent challenges of improving graduation rates. With my mind going at a rapid rate, trying to digest the implications of what he was saying, I quickly said how exciting it would be to do this, which is generally the way I respond to

the Chancellor, while wondering at the same time, how is this going to be possible, who can I get to help, and will it really happen.

In the next half hour, I will share with you how a small group of staff went about developing the concept paper for the new college, as well as the tension, sensitivity and excitement surrounding the project, and why I believe it has captured the attention of so many people, both here in NYC and around the country. I also will share what we plan to do between now and the time that we open our doors for our first class of students.

To explain how I began to approach the task, I think it would be helpful to talk a little bit about my CUNY history. I say that because while obviously this project is not about me, my work at CUNY has greatly influenced my thinking about the new college and helped determine who would be part of the development process. I began my CUNY career in 1972 at what then was NYC Community College, now NYC College of Technology. I was a graduate student in social work, majoring in community organizing, and was given a fieldwork assignment at the college because the Dean of Continuing Education, an amazing woman by the name of Fannie Eisentstein, was a fellow MSW and community organizer. I began work there developing a precollege prison education program at the Brooklyn House of Detention and spent the next 13 years developing and administering literacy, GED, ESL, and non-credit training programs for low-income adults. It was during this period that I met such talented educators as John Garvey, Bonne August, Regina Peruggi, and Gussie Kappner, all Continuing Education professionals at the time. In 1986, I moved to the CUNY Central Office at the invitation of Regina Peruggi, then University Dean for ACE. I have now been at CUNY Central for 23 years.

What began in 1986 as a small office with a handful of staff has expanded to its present size of 300 or so professionals, almost all on soft money through grants and programs that we have generated. For the past 10 years, a large part of our work has focused on issues related to the preparation of students for college-level work prior to matriculation and their transition to college. In that regard, we have been responsible for the oversight and development of collaborative programs between CUNY and the NYC Public Schools, CUNY Prep Transitional High School, the CUNY Language Immersion Program and the Adult Literacy and GED preparation programs, as well as a host of non-credit training programs presently serving over 250,000 students per year.

The staff administering these programs, and many are in the audience today, are among the best in the University. They are passionate, smart and committed individuals who take great pride in the programs we have developed and are rarely satisfied with the status quo. In many respects, my staff and I have been rehearsing for this project for years. So it was no surprise to people who have worked with me that I looked very close to home to create our planning committee. Working closely with then Executive Vice Chancellor Selma Botman, a wonderful educator, and

John Garvey, my 30-year colleague, exceptional educator and partner at CUNY, we first turned to Tracy Meade to direct the project. Tracy, then University Director for Collaborative Programs, combined all of the characteristics that I just mentioned with a toughness and tenacity that I believed would serve us well. Joining Tracy was a group of educators largely from our pre-college programs who were doing really interesting educational work and were recognized beyond the University as talented educators.

From the outset of the planning process, it was clear that the message that we gave out as to why there was a need for a new community college had to be consistent and truthful. While enrollment at community colleges at CUNY was growing at a rapid pace, a new college of 3,000 or so students would not make much of a dent in relieving overcrowding and space limitations. The fact was that we would be developing a new college, not to alleviate space problems, but rather to try to determine whether a new model, nothing like anything presently at CUNY, would deliver better results. CUNY's community colleges do a good job of providing career opportunities to their students-but too few of them graduate and many of those who do graduate take six or more years to earn their associate degrees.

This was a hard message to deliver and an even harder one for the many dedicated CUNY community college faculty, staff and administrators to accept. Implicit in the message is a criticism of the belief-common at community colleges nationwide-that low graduation rates are to be expected and are therefore acceptable.

Foremost in getting our message out was the need for humility from all members of our team. While we would be proposing a new model, there was no certainty that it would be successful. There was a need, however, to try something new.

Let me now transition into what we have done this past year and a half, where we are at present in the planning process, and what the next two years will look like.

Developing the Concept Paper

The planning team, as I indicated, was full of creative educators, and over the past 7 years, they had become increasingly focused on identifying the trouble spots—or “potholes” to use Melissa Roderick’s phrase—that seemed to signal if not predict student failure to show up for college or get through the first year. But there were many other voices to hear from, and so we established a structure and process to gather and include the ideas, perspectives, advice and cautionary tales from those immersed in the day-to-day life of higher education as well as those who study it. We set up meetings with the CUNY community college presidents and separately with their provosts and faculty; we established a CUNY Steering Committee; we distributed a University-wide survey, we held over 150 individual meetings with CUNY educators and administrators and

non-CUNY experts, we established an Advisory Board of national experts, and we read as much as we could on the transition to college and on community colleges.

The most common concern that surfaced in our initial meetings with the community college presidents, provosts and faculty was the concern that a new college would negatively impact existing community college budgets. I tried to reassure everyone that that would not be the case.

We heard frustrations about problems that common sense tells me should be fixable, like: Problems with articulation agreements between CUNY community colleges and the systems' senior colleges; the need for a lot more high quality and timely academic advising; and, the need to help students negotiate the financial aid maze.

We heard, as well, about the many students who beat the odds and how their successes reflected the pride many community college faculty take in their work. We also heard heated push back from faculty who felt that more support for students amounted to “handholding”. Overall, these conversations were incredibly helpful and full of important insights about the daily challenges faced by community college students, staff and faculty.

Our Steering Committee consisted of CUNY Vice Chancellors, Deans, community college presidents and a community college provost. All of the members embraced the Chancellor's charge to start from scratch and build a new community college model. Gail Mellow and Regina Peruggi, the two presidents, were and remain key supporters and offered invaluable guidance in the early stages of the project. They are both succeeding in transforming their existing colleges into significantly better performing ones—perhaps the hardest work in higher education.

When the time came to think about bringing together a group of non-CUNY folks, the first people who came to mind did so because we had been reading their research for years as a way to think about and improve our own programs. We couldn't imagine an Advisory Board without Tom Bailey and the important work of the Community College Research Center. Melissa Roderick was basically required reading for all pre-college program staff and offered us timely research on the efforts to improve the Chicago Public Schools, much of which confirmed our sense of the enormity of the challenges we faced in NYC. Norton Grubb has been a favorite thinker of John Garvey's, and Randy Bass came to us by way of Eric Hofmann, a key planning team member who made his way to CUNY from Georgetown years ago. James Rosenbaum shook us up with his thinking about successful proprietary colleges—places that we would have quickly dismissed if not for his research. While I am highlighting only five of the Advisory Board members, the entire board has been very generous with their time and knowledge.

After 5 months of meetings, research, interviews, attention to CUNY student data provided by the University's Office of Institutional Research, we set about writing the concept paper. A

month later, it was completed and distributed to the Chancellor, the Steering Committee and the Advisory Board.

The Concept Paper and the Features of the College

Let me share with you some of the most prominent features of the proposed design of the college as outlined in the concept paper.

First, pre-college engagement with the college will be required of all students. We say in the concept paper that “open access” describes community college admissions and that it should not translate into reduced expectations for high schools to support students in the college application and financial aid process. However, from our work in the schools, we know that community colleges are not on the radar of teachers, counselors or students, and that for the most part they serve as the default college choice for students for many reasons. We’ve picked three important ways in which the college will engage students in advance of the first-year program:

- Each student will be interviewed as a way for us to begin to gather information on student needs and their understanding of college requirements.
- We will work with eligible students to be sure they complete the FAFSA and TAP applications.
- And, we will design a summer program that begins to prepare students for the learning objectives of the first-year core curriculum and acquaint students with the resources of the college.

Second, full-time enrollment, at least in the first year, will be required of all students. Community college students are by and large significantly underprepared for college-level study. The full-time requirement is shaped by the belief that underprepared students require more sustained time to develop, practice, and demonstrate *beyond the level of minimum proficiency* the skills and knowledge they will need for associate degree completion, baccalaureate transfer and/or workplace readiness. We believe that expecting full-time enrollment at the new college for the first year is one important way to say to students: if you commit to full time enrollment, you significantly increase the likelihood that you will graduate. This is, as well, about being transparent. CUNY data make clear that students enrolled part-time earn far fewer degrees than those enrolled full-time.

The new college will have a common first-year core-curriculum. I consider our proposed approach to the first-year educational program to be among the most creative aspects of the model. As I mentioned earlier, my staff in the University’s pre-college and Adult Literacy/GED programs have been for years immersed in questions about the college transition and college

success for underprepared students. Their experiences, combined with some really interesting work being done on CUNY campuses, as well as research about promising programs across the country, produced a first-year that has the following features:

- The signature course of the college will be the City Seminar, a case study structured course that uses the complex physical, social, environmental and political realities of New York City as the course content. The City Seminar has 3 integrated units: a reading and writing unit, a quantitative reasoning unit and what we are calling a group workspace unit. The reading and writing and quantitative reasoning units of the City Seminar will allow faculty to provide connected coursework in these skill areas in the context of the City Seminar's case study; the idea is to create parallel and integrated, not separate, basic skill and disciplinary knowledge for students. The group workspace of the City Seminar is really the provision for required time for students to work together, or individually, on seminar assignments and on acquiring college-level study habits and strategies. Student advisement also will take place during the Group Workspace.
- The second course in the common core is the Math Topics Course. We propose significant instructional intensity in mathematics over the first year of study—at least 135 hours/semester—200% more time—of math and quantitative reasoning than are presently required of first-year students. Nationally, only 8% of students taking the lowest level of developmental math have a chance of passing the course within 3 years, and so the Math Topics Course and combined quantitative reasoning unit reflect the time we think will be needed for successful achievement of college-level math competencies. AND, we still anticipate that most students will require a second semester of math topics coursework in order to enable them to demonstrate that level of proficiency.
- The third course in the core is what we are calling Professional Studies. This course will look closely at the role of the majors specific to the college in addressing the problems presented by the case study and the role of these majors in society. Furthermore, this course will make work-based learning an integral part of the college's mission through visits to work-sites connected to the case studies, which will provide opportunities to witness first-hand how experts in the field address the real-world problems of the case-studies.

Several important strategies will also be used in the first year; I will name a few of those that depart from or extend existing CUNY community college practices quite significantly.

- The educational program will merge the developmental and disciplinary expertise of the college's faculty and staff, most compellingly in the first-year core curriculum, but throughout the development of the curriculum in the majors as well.

- The semesters will be restructured into shorter modules;
- Student development and work-place education will be integrated into the first-year program structure, and
- The college model proposes the full-scale implementation of learning communities.

Another important feature of the college, based on James Rosenbaum’s research, will be that it has a limited number of programs of study. The planning team proposes that the college offer no more than ten to twelve programs of study. For each of those majors, articulations or joint programs with baccalaureate programs will be established prior to opening the college.

The new community college will develop a culture that rewards faculty collaboration. For instance, we imagine faculty collaboration that involves reading and writing faculty working with disciplinary experts to design engaging city seminar curricula that include opportunities to learn successful reading and writing strategies. Teaching and learning need to be the heart of what we do.

We propose an Office of Partnerships that will establish and sustain employer relationships. It will create the conditions needed for college faculty to work with employers on issues related to the professional skills students need and the kinds of curricula and hands-on training that will help build those skills. This office will develop internships, work with students to place them and work with supervising faculty and staff to ensure that the students are successful.

The college will have a Center for College Effectiveness. We have a good deal of work ahead figuring out how to structure this center in ways that redefine and enlarge the role of the traditional Office of Institutional Research, particularly as it relates to the college’s ability to establish the importance of using data to improve student outcomes.

Finally, the college will have a theme—creating and sustaining a thriving New York City. We want the new college to help meet the needs of New York City and its people. The college’s theme will serve to integrate various aspects of the college.

The reaction to the Concept Paper was overwhelmingly positive. Most importantly, the Chancellor liked it a lot, praising it for being, as he had requested, bold and imaginative. Steering Committee members were equally enthusiastic and we were most gratified by the generous comments by Gail Mellow and Regina Peruggi. As for the Advisory Board members, almost to a one, they praised us for our creativity and vision, while also offering important critical feedback.

The next task was to distribute the paper more widely, starting with the CUNY community. As part of that process, our team decided to hold public forums at each of the CUNY community colleges.

The forums were well attended, ranging from over 200 participants at BMCC to perhaps 50 at Hostos, where faculty and staff from Hostos and BCC attended. Overall we probably spoke to close to 500 people. The vast majority of attendees were faculty. Each of the forums started with a short introduction by me, where I reviewed the key aspects of the paper and the process for developing it. The rest of the time was spent answering questions from the audience.

In general, all of the forums were civil in tone and nothing like the recent town hall health care meetings. Over the 5 visits, we heard variations of similar questions: Why is a new college necessary? Won't it drain resources from existing schools? How can you require full time study? Where will it be? What makes you think that you can get better results?

We had our share of hostile questions, most attacking us for not understanding the community college population, pointing out the low-income nature of the student body and the many problems of their lives that keep them from completing a degree. We were told that our new model resembled high school, that it was unethical to engage students in an untried experiment, and that the college was not going to be an open admissions institution. And, we were reminded that students come to community colleges for reasons other than wishing to graduate.

In responding to the questions, we tried to answer respectfully, but also to point out why we believe that a new community college would be a good thing and how this college might help us see if we could do things differently and achieve greater success around what the Chancellor was concerned about: increasing student graduation rates at CUNY's community colleges. We presented data on retention and graduation, showing that 87 percent of first time freshman began their studies at CUNY's community colleges as full time students, and pointed out that the longer a student took to graduate, the less likely that he or she ever got there.

These forums were, I would say, an important moment at CUNY. For so many members of the CUNY community, this was the first time that they had seen retention and graduation figures for their own colleges and for the system. Some faculty reacted with shock and disappointment, others provided the commonly offered explanations as to why the rates were so low, and some became angry with the team and me, criticizing us for our inexperience and for not understanding why students attend community colleges and the multiple functions they serve.

Even if the college did not come to pass, I felt that we had started an important conversation across the system about community college performance.

The leaders of the University Faculty Senate have also raised concerns. On a number of occasions, Tracy and I have met with or talked to leaders of the Faculty Senate about the new college. We have addressed both the Executive Committee of the Senate and the Senate's Community College Caucus. I also have had an ongoing dialogue with the Chair of the Senate, and two members of his Executive Committee are members of the Steering Committee. The Senate has concerns about the new college, most related to faculty participation in the design of the programs of study and issues of governance. We have tried to reassure the Senate that their leadership will certainly be consulted as a governance plan is developed, and that the actual design of the majors and development of the curriculum would be done by faculty, but that we would not promise that the governance plan would be similar to any presently in place at our existing colleges.

So, we spent the fall 2008 making the rounds to the colleges and other stakeholders, receiving feedback, and preparing for Phase 2 of the planning process—the actual development of the college.

What We Call Phase II

Phase 2 officially began in January 2009, with the continued encouragement of the Chancellor. In March, we received funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. As well as providing some planning money, it demonstrated that the Concept Paper and NCC idea was generating interest beyond CUNY and New York and that the most well known Foundation in the country, which had just announced a new major initiative geared to improving success at community colleges, felt this idea was worthy of support. It also put us in touch with a network of people around the country who were working on similar issues.

We have since been funded for planning by the Josiah Macy, Jr. Foundation and most recently by the Carnegie Corporation. And, as I imagine you are all aware, part of Mayor Bloomberg's recently announced Gateway to the Middle Class plan specifically endorses CUNY's efforts to build a new model for community college education.

With the new funding, we were able to quickly hire four new full-time staff to join the planning team. The team has developed a detailed timeline for a summer 2011 opening of the college and a committee structure. In August, a University-wide invitation to participate in building the college was distributed. Over 300 faculty and staff from across the University responded, and after a lengthy review process, we now have faculty and staff from 15 of CUNY's undergraduate institutions, the Graduate Center and the Graduate School of Journalism involved in creating the college's innovative first-year program, developing its library and technology plan, and imagining how its facilities can best reflect the educational and graduation goals of the college. We have included experts from outside CUNY on the committees developing the college, as

early on we committed to hearing from professionals working in youth development agencies, the education departments of the city's cultural institutions, the NYC Department of Education, among others.

The progress that the thirteen working committees make over the next six months will largely determine whether the school opens in 2011 or 2012. Our goal remains 2011, but for that to happen, much has to go right in the planning process and critical decisions must be made. Degree program choices need to be finalized, an initial facility identified, a budget needs to be agreed upon and funding identified, and a time frame and process for hiring our first full-time faculty, a President, senior administrators and so on.

Let me offer a few closing thoughts. I have been involved in any number of large projects over a long CUNY career, but none more significant than this one. We have made considerable progress and attracted more attention than we would have imagined. What is clear, however, is that we still have much to do and that the work ahead will be difficult. While I like challenges, I remain a worrier at heart, and will only be satisfied if some time in the future we not only open this college, but also that it is the success that all of us involved in the planning expect it to be.

Finally and perhaps most gratifying for me, looking back on a 37 year CUNY career, is how the planning for this new community college builds on so many earlier efforts where talented and passionate educators have challenged the status quo and influenced the thinking about what is important for a great urban University. To have some of that thinking become mainstream both here and beyond is pretty special.

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