Three days after his 16th birthday, Martin Cohen began classes at City College of New York. Now, at age 63, Mr. Cohen, the co-chairman and co-chief executive of New York investment company Cohen & Steers, is giving a landmark gift to his alma mater.

Mr. Cohen and his wife, Michele, are scheduled to announce Monday a $10 million gift to City College's Division of Science. It is the largest gift ever to the division and will create an endowed deanship for the college, provide for professorships and support students.

He is a 1970 graduate of City College, part of the City University of New York, and serves as chair of the college's 21st Century Foundation, the fundraising organization of the school. In an interview last week, Mr. Cohen said that the gift is more than just the gesture of a proud alumnus, but one that builds upon the recent advances in the school's science and engineering programs and complements the college's new science building which will open in 2014.

Mr. and Mrs. Cohen, both born in Ellenville, N.Y., have been married for 39 years and have four children. They were introduced to each other through family members. At the time of their introduction, Mr. Cohen was serving in the Army Reserve. The couple corresponded by letter before meeting in person.

The Cohens say that education is their primary charitable interest and Mr. Cohen cites City College with sparking his passion for science and math. He graduated with a degree in biochemistry. "The quantitative and analytical skills helped me all my life, first working as a biochemist and then going to business school and being in the investment business," he says.

Mr. Cohen, who was raised in Brooklyn and graduated early from high school, recalls traveling over an hour each way to get to class. He comes from a working-class family and, back then, the school didn't charge tuition. It was one of the few places where he could take classes without going into debt and he says that was the case for most of his classmates at the time. The tuition that City College charges now is "a small fraction" of the cost of a private university education, he says.

Part of the gift will be set aside to help cover student internships, research fellowships for graduate students and other education expenses. Living in New York City is not an inexpensive proposition and many students have to work and attend classes at the same time, says Mr. Cohen. "Even though tuition is low, the cost of living is very high."

Mr. and Mrs. Cohen say that they initially wanted their gift to be anonymous, describing the experience of giving a named gift as both a "little embarrassing" and "overwhelming."

"We've always been under-the-radar," says Mrs. Cohen, "but making it public perhaps helps other alums to say this is worth giving to. We feel incredibly blessed and education is important to us. It tied into all of our values."
Mr. Cohen adds that there is a "lot of success in this city" and it's important to lead by example. "The merits of giving back and sharing what we're blessed with is something to be proud of."

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