City University students are winning more competitive and prestigious awards than ever — from national math and science fellowships to Truman and Rhodes Scholarships.

Two CUNY seniors have won $140,000 in Math for America Fellowships to pursue careers teaching math in New York City’s public schools, while one graduating senior and two CUNY graduates won coveted National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowships and outstanding students secured other leading academic awards, making this a banner spring for award winners.

The other top awards include two $30,000 Harry S. Truman Scholarships for graduate study leading to careers in government or the next four years, when fellows also earn a regular teacher’s salary.

Katherine St. John: “I’m ecstatic,” said winner Ann Marie Alcocer, a Lehman College senior. “I was encouraged by the fact that other Lehman students from other organizations that encourage people to go into public service.”

Said Lehman mathematics and computer science professor Katherine St. John: “Ann Marie really wants to teach, and she has the skills they need to succeed in high school,” she said.

CUNY’s other MfA winner, Jian Liu of The City College, will study spacecraft propulsion at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Four CUNY students won National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowships, which are geared to assuring the vitality and diversity of America’s scientific and engineering workforce: Lina Mercedes Gonzalez (Hunter College, 2009) is earning a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering at Carnegie Mellon University; mathematician Arthur Jacob Parzygnat (Macaulay Honors College at Queens College, 2010), now at the CUNY Graduate Center, explores topological quantum field theory; Evangeleen Pattison (City College 2010), will study spacecraf propulsion at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The Truman scholars are Ayodele Oti of Macaulay Honors College at The City College of New York, and Gareth Rhodes of City College of New York — MfA’s two collaborating math education master’s programs — starting this summer. He has been a teaching assistant at Thurgood Marshall Academy for Learning and Social Change, The City College Academy of the Arts, the Mott Hall School and A. Philip Randolph Campus High School.

Four CUNY students won National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowships, which are geared to assuring the vitality and diversity of America’s scientific and engineering workforce: Lina Mercedes Gonzalez (Hunter College, 2009) is earning a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering at Carnegie Mellon University; mathematician Arthur Jacob Parzygnat (Macaulay Honors College at Queens College, 2010), now at the CUNY Graduate Center, explores topological quantum field theory; Evangeleen Pattison (City College 2010), will study spacecraft propulsion at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The Truman scholars are Ayodele Oti of Macaulay Honors College at The City College of New York, and Gareth Rhodes of City College of New York — MfA’s two collaborating math education master’s programs — starting this summer. He has been a teaching assistant at Thurgood Marshall Academy for Learning and Social Change, The City College Academy of the Arts, the Mott Hall School and A. Philip Randolph Campus High School.

Four CUNY students won National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowships, which are geared to assuring the vitality and diversity of America’s scientific and engineering workforce: Lina Mercedes Gonzalez (Hunter College, 2009) is earning a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering at Carnegie Mellon University; mathematician Arthur Jacob Parzygnat (Macaulay Honors College at Queens College, 2010), now at the CUNY Graduate Center, explores topological quantum field theory; Evangeleen Pattison (City College 2010), will study spacecraft propulsion at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The Truman scholars are Ayodele Oti of Macaulay Honors College at The City College of New York, and Gareth Rhodes of City College of New York — MfA’s two collaborating math education master’s programs — starting this summer. He has been a teaching assistant at Thurgood Marshall Academy for Learning and Social Change, The City College Academy of the Arts, the Mott Hall School and A. Philip Randolph Campus High School.

Four CUNY students won National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowships, which are geared to assuring the vitality and diversity of America’s scientific and engineering workforce: Lina Mercedes Gonzalez (Hunter College, 2009) is earning a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering at Carnegie Mellon University; mathematician Arthur Jacob Parzygnat (Macaulay Honors College at Queens College, 2010), now at the CUNY Graduate Center, explores topological quantum field theory; Evangeleen Pattison (City College 2010), will study spacecraft propulsion at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The Truman scholars are Ayodele Oti of Macaulay Honors College at The City College of New York, and Gareth Rhodes of City College of New York — MfA’s two collaborating math education master’s programs — starting this summer. He has been a teaching assistant at Thurgood Marshall Academy for Learning and Social Change, The City College Academy of the Arts, the Mott Hall School and A. Philip Randolph Campus High School.

Four CUNY students won National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowships, which are geared to assuring the vitality and diversity of America’s scientific and engineering workforce: Lina Mercedes Gonzalez (Hunter College, 2009) is earning a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering at Carnegie Mellon University; mathematician Arthur Jacob Parzygnat (Macaulay Honors College at Queens College, 2010), now at the CUNY Graduate Center, explores topological quantum field theory; Evangeleen Pattison (City College 2010), will study spacecraft propulsion at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The Truman scholars are Ayodele Oti of Macaulay Honors College at The City College of New York, and Gareth Rhodes of City College of New York — MfA’s two collaborating math education master’s programs — starting this summer. He has been a teaching assistant at Thurgood Marshall Academy for Learning and Social Change, The City College Academy of the Arts, the Mott Hall School and A. Philip Randolph Campus High School.

Four CUNY students won National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowships, which are geared to assuring the vitality and diversity of America’s scientific and engineering workforce: Lina Mercedes Gonzalez (Hunter College, 2009) is earning a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering at Carnegie Mellon University; mathematician Arthur Jacob Parzygnat (Macaulay Honors College at Queens College, 2010), now at the CUNY Graduate Center, explores topological quantum field theory; Evangeleen Pattison (City College 2010), will study spacecraft propulsion at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
THE CHANCELLOR’S DESK

Marking Milestones, Leading Onward

THIS YEAR marks a significant milestone in CUNY’s history. Fifty years ago, New York City’s higher-education landscape experienced a milestone in CUNY’s history. Fifty years ago, New York City’s higher-education landscape experienced a

...preserving the past,” or “helping freshmen”...

.

Helping Freshmen

NSEL LALLA was discouraged when he tried to go to college some 20 years after finishing high school in Trinidad. “When I failed the CUNY competence tests, they told me it would take at least three semesters to go through remedial class,” said Lalla.

Everything changed with the University’s new, effective and low-cost remediation program, which prepares first-time freshmen for college-level work before they matriculate.

“IT’s the best thing that ever happened,” the instructor was amazed,” he said, adding that staff assisted “with any problem, not only schoolwork.”

Coming to colleges in fall 2011 in all five boroughs, the program, now called CUNY Start, is one of three novel approaches to address the flood of underprepared freshmen, all are rooted in a curriculum piloted in 2009-2010 after several years of experimentation by the Office of Academic Affairs.

The other two are innovative hybrid courses at the forthcoming new community college and intervention in high school classrooms.

“Students trust that we’ll get them ready for college-level work, but traditional remedial classes don’t work for everyone,” said Alexandra W. Logue, executive vice chancellor and University provost. “Students become frustrated if they have to repeat remedial classes, to take remedial classes over several semesters, and they may then drop out. The collegenette financial aid on classes that don’t move them toward a degree. So we’ve been working on alternatives.”

These innovations come amid national concern about remediation demands ever higher-capable college graduates. President Obama has highlighted the critical role that community colleges need to play in assuring America’s economic future.

In New York, the state Education Department says that less than half of high school graduates are ready for college or high-paying careers; in New York City, only 23 percent of high school graduates are ready, despite a 64 percent graduation rate, according to a Feb. 7 New York Times article.

Statewide, just 41 percent of high school graduates attained at least a 75 on the English Regents or an 80 on a math Regents in 2011—scores that predict at least a college-level C in the same subject. Students scoring below these levels need remediation. Two-thirds of New York City students attending SUNY community colleges need remedial help.

The pilot for CUNY Start yielded promising results. Of 113 LaGuardia and Kingsborough Community College students who completed it, 71 percent were exempted from all further remediation. More specifically, 92 percent passed math 2 (algebra), 82 percent passed math 1 (arithmetic), 80 percent passed reading and 79 percent passed writing. Statewide and national pass rates are significantly lower.

In fall 2000, 85 percent of CUNY first-time community college freshmen — some 4,000 students — needed at least one remedial class. In fall 2010, following several years of significant enrollment growth at CUNY, 79 percent for 13,585 students, needed at least one remedial class. One-quarter needed remediation in all three areas (reading, writing and math) last fall. And since 2005, the number of low scores on all three skills tests more than doubled, from 447 to 959. Such students account for 5.5 percent of community college freshmen last fall.

Students who need remediation generally enroll in an associate degree program, taking and paying for noncredit remedial classes along with credit-bearing ones. But some lack the classroom skills needed to flourish in academic courses. CUNY Start is designed to solve those problems. It charges a nominal $75 for a comprehensive full-time or part-time immersion program. Before students put their dollars on the line with an academic course, CUNY Start aims to bring them up to speed in reading, writing and math, making the skills and attitudes needed to succeed.

Lalla dispatched his remedial work during Kingsborough’s initial 12-week segment.
In the subsequent six-week segment, he and 18 other pilot participants took a credit-bearing introductory psychology class. Others in the pilot continued immersion in remedial courses.

“I loved the students,” said psychology assistant professor Lisa K. Paler. “They were motivated and engaged. When one test did not go well, we went over multiple-choice and short-answer questions, and I asked how could I present material in a way that would be easier to comprehend. They said, ‘You didn’t do anything wrong. We didn’t study well.’ I was blown away.”

Said Lalla: “If you do not succeed in her class, it’s you, not her.” With an A-minus in Paler’s class, this husband and father of a 22-month-old son is now a full-time student at Kingsborough. Hoping for a career in nursing, he also works more than 40 hours a week as a home health aide.

University math staff developer Steve Hinds traced the pilot’s success to far more time per semester than the typical 45 to 60 hours, more in-depth coverage of fewer topics and avoidance of teacher-centered presentations. “Our instructors use an enormous number of questions, not statements, to provoke conversations among students.” The students, he said, “make connections, generalize and figure out the rules.”

Another highly promising innovation is to prepare students for college work before they enter the school. Called “At Home in College,” this initiative aims at making high school students feel comfortable with higher education. Now in its third year, the program is supported by a $1.3 million Robin Hood Foundation grant.

Among the results: Seventy-three percent of participants in 2009 and 2010 enrolled in higher education, versus 58 percent of all the city’s Department of Education graduates; enrollment rates for African-Americans (74 percent) and Latinos (71 percent) exceeded national averages (56 percent and 64 percent, respectively); participants scored 11 to 20 percentage points higher on CUNY placement tests than their peers in associate degree programs in 2009, and 70.9 percent of the 2009 students were still enrolled full time in associate degree programs in a third semester — 7.1 percentage points higher than the comparable CUNY-wide retention rate.

Currently serving 1,000 students in city high schools, At Home in College is to expand to more than 2,000 in 78 high schools next year and to 5,000 the year after. The need is great, according to Eric Hofmann, University director for collaborative programs. “Each year, there are between 20,000 and 30,000 seniors who are on track to graduate, but need help and academic support...to become college-ready.”

CUNY’s New Community College, to open in fall 2012, will infuse remedial work in required credit-bearing, first-year courses that, if not quite immersion, give students more time on task than the usual classes.

“There will be a common curriculum, but differentiated instruction, since students come with different degrees of preparedness,” said associate math professor Bill Rosenthal. Every student will take statistics, which will dovetail with a City Seminar running 72 hours of classroom time over two semesters. The seminar will integrate reading, writing, critical thinking and quantitative analysis as it explores immigration; homelessness and housing; and consumption, waste and recycling.

The Robin Hood Foundation has awarded $320,000 to Elizabeth Payamps-Rodriguez of Bronx Community College for an “Education Collaborative.” "Bridges to Raccourcioune,” a project directed by John P. Bihn, chair of natural sciences, and Hendrick Delicham of the mathematics, engineering and computer science department at LaGuardia Community College, has received $246,187 from the National Institutes of Health.

Associate professor of biology Juergen Polle and professor of chemistry Roberto Sanchez-Delgado of Brooklyn College have received $559,081 from the U.S. Department of Energy for a “Development of Pollution Prevention Technologies” project. The College of Staten Island has been awarded $354,798 from the New York State Department of Education for the “New York State Spinal Cord Injury Research Program,” directed by Maria Riikka.
Continued from page 3 and Mental Hygiene has awarded $183,282 in grant funding to Stephen Markowitz and Holger Eid of Queens College for a “New York City Community Air Survey Program.” Hunter College has received $25,600 from New York City’s Department of Health & Mental Hygiene to support of an “English Language/Civics” project. The New York State Department of Education: $243,417 under the Perkins Career and Technical Education Act—“GEAR-UP.” The U.S. Department of Defense has awarded $51,983 to Hunter College’s Procurement Technical Assistance Center, a $165,841 grant to LaGuardia Community College, and $93,145 to the City University Law School.

**ACUNY LIFE**

**Bringing Black History Home**

The name James McCune Smith

in her family Bible, above, led Greta Blau to find he was the eminent 19th century black leader at left — and more.

Orphan Asylum... I just wanted you to know how taking your class literally changed my life... I just wanted to give you my heartfelt thanks for teaching that class, introducing me to this great man, and for being so enthusiastic about the subject.

“I read it and burst into tears,” Edey-Rhodes said. “Her paper was so outstanding. I cried because it was uncovered history, which is so important to me. I felt it was very spiritual. I’ve had situations where students will tell me that the learning they came from a class had an effect on their life, but to be in a situation where a course became a conduit for someone to find out about their past, it was overwhelming.”

From her own research, Edey-Rhodes believes Smith’s mother was a former slave, but “his father’s race is in question. Some writings say white. As for his mother, that, too, isn’t absolute. African-Americans were often listed as mulatto on census records simply based on a lighter complexion. Smith did say that she was self-emancipated.”

James McCune Smith was part of the black community, Edey-Rhodes said. “The thing that was so extraordinary is that before the 1870 census he and his family were mulatto, but after 1870 they were no longer listed as mulatto or colored; all were listed as white. This man was so distinguished he’s somebody that anybody would want to claim.”

Blau plans to further research her ancestor’s life and keep finding fascinating tidbits. “He was amazing!” she said. “He ran for the state Senate and got about five votes. He was involved in the Underground Railroad.”

And now that she has renewed her acquaintance with Edey-Rhodes, Blau said: “I would love to take another one of her classes... She was passionate about it. She wanted us to know about obscure people. I think she’s a really special person.”
Pilot e-Text Program Launched at Stuyvesant

CUNY has joined forces with IBM and the New York City Department of Education (DOE) in a pilot e-textbook initiative at Stuyvesant High School aimed at better equipping students to succeed in higher education and then in a global workforce. In the trial program—which runs through the spring semester—a group of 102 ninth graders will test Kindle DX e-book readers to download text and supplemental materials for geometry, biology and social studies classes.

“This partnership with CUNY, IBM and the DOE takes students tools to better prepare them for college-level work,” said Allan H. Dobrin, executive vice chancellor and chief operating officer of CUNY. “We want to work wisely with existing technology and leverage its use so that our students will benefit in the future.”

The cost of e-texts generally is about one-third that of traditional texts. The University also intends to generate revenue by developing K-12 e-texts plus supplemental materials that can be marketed to schools nationwide.

Students will be regularly surveyed to evaluate the initiative, which could be expanded to other schools.

New Focus on Documentaries

International filmmakers brought “The World Through Women’s Eyes” into focus at the Graduate School of Journalism in April with a global documentary festival launched to recognize the importance of such films in covering world events in a time of decline in international news coverage. “It was all that we envisioned at the start and more… not just filmmakers talking about films,” said film board founder and chairman Lorrie Isabel.

Isabel said the University’s journalism school recently has also started a documentary film class and he expects that student films projects and discussions will be part of the next documentary festival. He also hopes to keep attracting a wider group of diverse contributors and audiences of high school as well as college students, said Isabel, who is also a reporter, editor and director of the International Reporting Program at the J-school.

The focus of the documentary festival may or may not change from women’s rights next year, he said, because “women’s issues are so pressing” and this year’s festival films relate to global concerns affecting women, such as child marriage and rape as a weapon of war.

This year’s festival lineup included films demonstrating global struggles focused on women’s subjugation, worker exploitation, poverty and resistance in Haiti; six women’s courageous efforts to shape Nepal’s future in the midst of an escalating civil war against insurgents and the king’s crackdown on civil liberties; and a group of brave and visionary women who demanded peace for Liberia, a nation torn by a decades old civil war.

Law School AwardsHonorary Doctorate To South African Activist Musician

THE CUNY SCHOOL OF LAW bestowed an honorary Doctor of Laws degree on Jonathan “Johnny” Clegg, the renowned South African musician, human rights activist and anthropologist, in a ceremony at University offices April 5.

Best known for songs such as “Asimbonanga” (“We have not seen him”)—a tribute to Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko, Victoria Masenge, Neil Aggett and other anti-apartheid heroes and martyrs—Clegg and his bands Juluka (the first mixed-race band in South Africa, formed with the Zulu musician Sipho Mchunu), and Savuka defied apartheid laws by performing for racially mixed audiences, resulting in numerous arrests for Clegg and his band members.

Earlier in his career, Clegg studied Zulu dance—which he would later incorporate exuberantly in his live performances—and lectured on anthropology at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.

The University has joined forces with IBM and the DOE takes its use so that our students will benefit in the future.

Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Provost Alexandra Logue said that in combining Western and Zulu rhythms and stimulating audiences to think more deeply about racial identity and justice, Clegg embodied values similar to bedrock CUNY principles, such as the celebration of diversity and the equality of opportunity.

Michelle Anderson, dean of the CUNY School of Law, poignantly highlighted the school’s longstanding relationship to South Africa. She noted that the investiture ceremony for Clegg fell 15 years and a week after the school’s second dean, Haywood Burns, and faculty member Shana-ra Gilbert died in a car accident while working for post-apartheid judicial reform in South Africa.

Clegg said it was appropriate that his honorary degree was a doctor of laws, for he has spent a lifetime questioning “why the fence exists,” alluding to the plethora of laws and institutions (a “legal Lego set”) that legislated the separation of races and social spaces in South Africa. He said he felt it fitting that his journey to help dismantle the fence had led him to this honor at CUNY.

We’re a Hit! New Focus on Documentaries

CTroubleshooting the first anniversary of a new “5.0” redesign, the CUNY website—www.cuny.edu—has increased traffic by more than fifty percent to a record 1.64 million unique visitors per month. The CUNY website has now become the second most searched site on Google in the New York metropolitan area, according to Google Zeitgeist’s annual survey of web search trends. In March 2011, the site also produced a record 6.6 million page “hits” or pageviews. Among the most visited pages were the homepage, the portal log, admissions related pages and employment and job search pages. Along with providing vital services to faculty and students, the site, which is managed by the Office of University Relations, is also becoming a favorite for lifelong learners. Lectures and public discussions on the campuses, collected and edited via CUNY Radio, account for approximately 30,000 downloads a month from visitors. Recent fare have included “The Internet Road to Revolution,” first-hand accounts by CUNY Study Abroad students of the central role social media is playing in the Arab Spring; “An Evening With...” New York Times Executive Editor Bill Keller; and CUNY Lectures by CCNY physicist Michio Kaku and Louisa May Alcott biographer Susan Cheever.

CUNY Matters — May 2011 | 5
NORHAN BASUNI had finished her monthlong study-abroad program in Cairo and was set to fly home to New York. It was Jan. 25, the first day of nationwide demonstrations against a formidable dictator. To Basuni, boarding her flight that day seemed like the last thing she should do.

Basuni, a senior at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, was born in the United States to Egyptian parents and visits relatives in Cairo every year. In December, she flew to the Egyptian capital for a month of research of the country’s politics, government and international relations. So when the first stirrings of protest against President Hosni Mubarak erupted in Cairo on the very day she was to leave — and within a stone’s throw of her family’s home near Tahrir Square — Basuni had a decision to make. To her, there was no choice.

“We knew it was going to happen,” she said. “I saw it on Facebook, and my friends knew about it.” Basuni, 21, called her parents. “My mom said, ‘Don’t go.’ My father said, ‘I know you are going to go. Be careful.’ It was one of those things you felt you must do. The object was liberation, and that’s what we were fighting for. I joined the march.”

For the first time, it occurred to Schindler that he might be witnessing history. “I wanted to be part of the protest. I wanted to be part of history.”

What worried Basuni more than the threat of violence was the government’s shutdown of the Internet: Her family would have no way of knowing if she was safe. “I was devastated,” she said. “This was my only way of connecting with the outside world. I lost contact with [my family] for about four days. One day I was able to contact my older sister.”

At John Jay, Basuni is completing a double major in conflict resolution and international crime, justice and development. At Tahrir Square, conflict grew before her eyes. It started peacefully enough, she said. “It was just about marching in great numbers and shouting out slogans,” she said of that first day. “I thought it was going to end at that, but it started to escalate. I was there for about four days, coming and going. Each time I went I participated. I felt part of the Egyptians who had been there all their life. I felt empowered and inspired by what people my age were doing; how people my age were making a difference. I was energized. I wanted to be part of this. I felt if I’m here, there’s a reason I’m here.”

When the tear gassing began, she said, “My family advised me to stay home; they weren’t sure just how dangerous this was.” But Basuni ventured out again. “Tanks were everywhere,” she said, “but there wasn’t a time I felt fear for my life or endangered.” She photographed protesters carrying banners, children standing on tanks and families camping on the ground beside the tanks.
While Basuni had deep roots in Egypt and even a home near the rebellion, Alex Schindler was making his first visit to the country. It was a trip he’d long anticipated: A Macaulay honors student, Schindler is pursuing a double major in Middle East Studies and International Relations.

Landing in the capital, Schindler, 21, was picked up at the airport by an American friend of Egyptian heritage who was studying in Cairo. “As he drove around, pointing out interesting sights, he told me, ‘On January 25, you should probably lie low. Don’t come downtown.’ I didn’t heed it.”

That day, Schindler and another friend visiting him from Israel toured the pyramids. Then they took a taxi to Tahrir Square. “We see these serious-looking students, about our age,” he said, "and we were shocked to see lines and lines of police in riot gear.”

Schindler couldn’t envision the young protesters amassing the power to actually topple Mubarak. “For the most part, the protesters were just protesting,” he said. “I didn’t expect anything to come of it. The same military dictatorship had been in power 30 years. I figured it would be small, and if it got big they would start shooting protesters and that would be the end of it, like Tiananmen Square.”

He returned to the square with a roommate the next day. “I decided to check out the protest. Now there was actual police action. I could hear the firing of rubber bullets. We saw people wearing gas masks and policemen charging into protesters. I thought, ‘This went from inconsequential to very significant.’”

The next day, his roommate, the son of an Egyptian military official, told him there would be a revolution. For the first time, it occurred to Schindler that he might be witnessing history. “I wanted to be part of the protest. I wanted to be part of history.”

The protests became increasingly heated, but it wasn’t until the fifth day that Schindler became afraid. He heard there were looters near the building where he was staying. He said he patrolled the balcony all night with a steak knife.

Meanwhile, the Internet went black. “I couldn’t get through. I tried to make a phone call, nothing. I said, ‘Oh God, my parents!’” Finally, a call came through from them. They had been in touch with the American University’s New York office and arranged for Schindler to move to its campus in the suburbs ahead of schedule. But his semester abroad never happened. Classes were delayed a week, and then the U.S. Embassy ordered the evacuation of Americans. Schindler flew home.

Norhan Basuni flew home the same day, Feb. 2 — reluctantly. “I feel blessed to have been a part of this and to witness it firsthand,” she said. “It made me feel hopeful for the future.” Her heart, she said, was still in Tahrir Square. “My soul was there.”

CUNY MATTERS — May 2011
Click, Click You’re Done!

The new CUNYfirst online system is speeding up services from registration to record-keeping University-wide.

RADHINA PERSAUD and Ashley Grant, two Queensborough Community College students, made registering for classes with the new CUNYfirst online system appear downright easy. In fact, they told finance, human resources and enrollment officials at a conference at City College, it was just as easy as it appeared.

Standing before a projection of a laptop’s screen, Persaud described each step as Grant clicked tabs and prompts. They logged into the private “Aradhina’s Student Center,” checked her adviser-approved course plan, searched for classes and put two in her shopping cart. She signed up for one by clicking “enroll,” but hit a roadblock at Business 201, which had closed when it reached the maximum number of students. CUNYfirst asked if she wanted to join a waiting list. Instead, going to the “swap” tab, Persaud opted for an English course. Grant clicked “enroll” and a green check mark appeared. She was in. She looked at her bill and its due date.

The “view weekly calendar” link showed her summer schedule — or what it would be if this hadn’t been a demonstration. “I better remember to delete all that,” Persaud said, “because I’m graduating this spring” with an associate degree in business administration. Like Grant, she has applied to Baruch College. Queensborough and Queens College were the first campuses to adopt the student and faculty features of CUNYfirst, which stands for “fully integrated resources and services tool.” The system revolutionizes all of the University’s computer systems that serve students, faculty and staff. It streamlines operations from hiring to bill payments to transcripts.

Planning began in 2000 to replace a jumble of kludgy, campus-based computer systems, some of them dating to the 1970s. They didn’t communicate well, couldn’t handle users’ needs and lacked functions that had become familiar with the spread of the Internet. When CUNYfirst is fully deployed, the days of paper will finally be gone and every University information system will seamlessly mesh with every other.

“We needed an updated, integrated system that gives students, faculty and staff access to their information through one portal in real time,” explained Brian Cohen, Associate Vice Chancellor and Chief Information Officer. “Reducing administrative time and overhead will allow CUNY to focus more on its mission — the academic success of our students.”

In personnel, for example, the “talent acquisition management” system has accepted job applications, routed them to the proper hiring person and, after decisions are made, transferred essential data to payroll. In human resources since September 2009. No longer must someone repeatedly fill out the same information. And if an adjunct teaches at three campuses, the system knows it’s the same person.

Faculty will gain access not only to their personal information, like leave time, but also get lists of advisors, class rosters with e-mail addresses and phone numbers, course offerings and schedules, and the ability to mark attendance and post grades online.

Since the summer of 2008, the University has rolled out parts of the software suite to some 135 business units. Currently running University-wide are modules for general ledger, item-level budgeting, base human resources processes, recruiting, course catalogs and schedules, and the ability to mark attendance and post grades online.

Since the summer of 2008, the University has rolled out parts of the software suite to some 135 business units. Currently running University-wide are modules for general ledger, item-level budgeting, base human resources processes, recruiting, course catalogs and schedules, and the ability to mark attendance and post grades online.

The summer of 2008, the University has rolled out parts of the software suite to some 135 business units. Currently running University-wide are modules for general ledger, item-level budgeting, base human resources processes, recruiting, course catalogs and schedules, and the ability to mark attendance and post grades online.

Since the summer of 2008, the University has rolled out parts of the software suite to some 135 business units. Currently running University-wide are modules for general ledger, item-level budgeting, base human resources processes, recruiting, course catalogs and schedules, and the ability to mark attendance and post grades online.

Since the summer of 2008, the University has rolled out parts of the software suite to some 135 business units. Currently running University-wide are modules for general ledger, item-level budgeting, base human resources processes, recruiting, course catalogs and schedules, and the ability to mark attendance and post grades online.
By Gary Schmidgall

Zebrawat: The True Story of a Black Ex-Con and a White Single Mother in Small-Town America
By Greg Donaldson

The 2010 U.S. Census recently reported a steep rise in multiracial households across the nation, which makes particularly timely Greg Donaldson’s Zebrawat: The True Story of a Black Ex-Con and a White Single Mother in Small-Town America ( Scribner ). The title refers to a neighborhood in Elmira, one of New York’s many upstate cities noted for rusting factories and a big prison, where “mixed-race couples and their children abounded.”

Every year about 325,000 black convicts are released from prison. Donaldson, a professor of communications and theater arts at John Jay College, has chosen to follow one of them, Kevin Davis, a product of Brownsville in Brooklyn, who was released from Elmira’s prison. “The Hill,” in 2000 after seven years behind bars. His long rap sheet made him a celebrity on the inside and earned him the nickname KK, for Killa Ke (he was involved in a murder but evaded prosecution).

Donaldson spent eight years (and dozens of trips to Elmira) soaking up KK’s life story and that of his white single-mother girlfriend, interviewing many of the criminal justice officers who crossed his path, not to mention many relatives and bad dudes from his past and present.

To call the tale of Zebrawat gritty and forlorn is to put it mildly. Down and Out in Elmira would have been an apt alternate title, but Donaldson’s hope is that KK’s story will wake up “an American society at best uninterested” in the rehabilitation of black ex-cons and “at worst hostile to that possibility.” He also set out to offer “an authentic account of one recent trend of the African-American experience, the interplay of the big-city former gangster with small-town America.”

Why Kevin Davis? A bizarre story in itself. In 1993 Donaldson was finishing up his study “The Ville: Cops and Kids in Urban America” and trekked (with an armed escort) to Brownsville hoping to get a vivid photo.

A rough pack truculently denied permission to snap a photo, then a car backedfire, they scrambled, and the photographer got his shot of them. When detectives saw the book’s cover, they spotted a “person of interest,” used it like a wanted poster, and arrested Davis.

“The Ville” helped put him in prison, but when his release neared, he reached out to Donaldson, saying he had no hard feelings. When he first met the short, massively-muscled former boxer at a restaurant near Columbus Circle in 2002, Donaldson found this “über-thug” intriguing, and his narrative instincts kicked in. Perhaps in the beginning he imagined an inspirational tale of adversity overcome and a heart-warming re-entry into society.

That KK’s story will not have a Hollywood ending is indicated by the fact that Davis is the only real name in Zebrawat. All others need their privacy protected. Indeed, Donaldson acknowledges he has “recreated” some conversations recalled by his informants and often imitates splendiferous creative writing flourishes like this one in the final darkening pages: “Broad-backed gulls are skimming over the swollen Chemung [River], titling their white wings, searching the shadows.” Zebrawat is a novel of real, if persistently unfortunate, life.

Being a road manager for a white rapper named Johnny Blanco looks good for a while, but in a rage Davis decks a superior. Then he’s pushing a “bitch-ass cart” down the halls of a care facility, then pounding material for large vanity tops. Mostly he’s out of work, yet somehow driving a Lexus (confiscated by the police) or a 13-year-old Mercedes-Benz.

Home life with Karen, his girlfriend, involves her live-in mother, whose Social Security helps pay the rent, and her young daughter by an absent jerk of a father. Then Davis is arrested for being (he says) “in the wrong place at the wrong time” during a drug deal. It takes a year for the case prosecutor to fold his cards.

Karen, unemployed most of the time, is then arrested for possession of crack, which she was not very smartly holding for a third party. After months of omnious courtroom drags the judge sends her to prison.

Unfortunately, by then she is pregnant by Kevin, and sent to the only New York prison with a nursery, the maximum-security facility at Bedford Hills. The baby girl is 11 months old when Karen is released.

Attention to the landscape and sociology surrounding all this going-nowhere enlivens Zebrawat. We learn that Elmira’s name was changed from Newtown by a judge smitten by an innkeeper’s daughter, and that it was the site of one of the Civil War’s most notorious northern prison camps, nicknamed Hellmira. Davis visits a black fraternity party in Binghamton (his closest brush with higher learning), and Donaldson tells us he is amazed by the “step dancing, pure folk art, passed down from generations of black college men and based on rhythmic traditions of Africa.”

Davis remarks, “Those [expletive] have too much time on their hands.” (No expletives are deleted in Zebrawat.)

In the end, Davis plays the role of anti-hero all too well. He “believes that if a woman begins to feel too good about herself, she will be harmless.” For a guy with a short fuse, his life-long rule of abstaining “from both complaint and negotiation” proves severely disastrous. He is denied a visit with Karen and his baby at Bedford Hills when an ion scan reveals drug residue; he blows up, committing three misdemeanors. Then he begins to absent himself from his family to hang in Elmira’s projects, scant improvement from those he left in Brownsville.

We leave these hapless pilgrims in a slough of despond. Near the end Davis ignores an order of protection and assaults Karen while she is in the company of another man. He’s bailed out only when the grandmother of a local woman who has borne him a son is pregnant by him again steps in.

In the last paragraph of a final postscript, we learn, “On October 26, 2009 ... Kevin Davis was convicted of criminal contempt in the second degree for violating an order of protection and assault in the third degree.”

Several years earlier, Davis was attacked in a roadside bar hanging out with the wrong crowd. Suddenly he was attacked with a knife and a hammer. Most of his front teeth were shattered. Now, heading to prison one more time, those teeth are still missing.

One of the few moments in Zebrawat when “sweet” and “bitter” almost balance is when Kevin, himself a Brooklyn mother of three, is amazed by the “step dancing, pure folk art, passed down from generations of black college men and based on rhythmic traditions of Africa.” Davis remarks, “Those [expletive] have too much time on their hands.” (No expletives are deleted in Zebrawat.)

In the end, Davis plays the role of anti-hero all too well. He “believes that if a woman begins to feel too good about herself, she will be harmless.” For a guy with a short fuse, his life-long rule of abstaining “from both complaint and negotiation” proves severely disastrous. He is denied a visit with Karen and his baby at Bedford Hills when an ion scan reveals drug residue; he blows up, committing three misdemeanors. Then he begins to absent himself from his family to hang in Elmira’s projects, scant improvement from those he left in Brownsville.

We leave these hapless pilgrims in a slough of despond. Near the end Davis ignores an order of protection and assaults Karen while she is in the company of another man. He’s bailed out only when the grandmother of a local woman who has borne him a son is pregnant by him again steps in.

In the last paragraph of a final postscript, we learn, “On October 26, 2009 ... Kevin Davis was convicted of criminal contempt in the second degree for violating an order of protection and assault in the third degree.”

Several years earlier, Davis was attacked in a roadside bar hanging out with the wrong crowd. Suddenly he was attacked with a knife and a hammer. Most of his front teeth were shattered. Now, heading to prison one more time, those teeth are still missing.

One of the few moments in Zebrawat when “sweet” and “bitter” almost balance is when Kevin, himself a Brooklyn mother of three, is amazed by the “step dancing, pure folk art, passed down from generations of black college men and based on rhythmic traditions of Africa.” Davis remarks, “Those [expletive] have too much time on their hands.” (No expletives are deleted in Zebrawat.)

In the end, Davis plays the role of anti-hero all too well. He “believes that if a woman begins to feel too good about herself, she will be harmless.” For a guy with a short fuse, his life-long rule of abstaining “from both complaint and negotiation” proves severely disastrous. He is denied a visit with Karen and his baby at Bedford Hills when an ion scan reveals drug residue; he blows up, committing three misdemeanors. Then he begins to absent himself from his family to hang in Elmira’s projects, scant improvement from those he left in Brownsville.

We leave these hapless pilgrims in a slough of despond. Near the end Davis ignores an order of protection and assaults Karen while she is in the company of another man. He’s bailed out only when the grandmother of a local woman who has borne him a son is pregnant by him again steps in.

In the last paragraph of a final postscript, we learn, “On October 26, 2009 ... Kevin Davis was convicted of criminal contempt in the second degree for violating an order of protection and assault in the third degree.”

Several years earlier, Davis was attacked in a roadside bar hanging out with the wrong crowd. Suddenly he was attacked with a knife and a hammer. Most of his front teeth were shattered. Now, heading to prison one more time, those teeth are still missing.

One of the few moments in Zebrawat when “sweet” and “bitter” almost balance is when Kevin, himself a Brooklyn mother of three, is amazed by the “step dancing, pure folk art, passed down from generations of black college men and based on rhythmic traditions of Africa.” Davis remarks, “Those [expletive] have too much time on their hands.” (No expletives are deleted in Zebrawat.)

In the end, Davis plays the role of anti-hero all too well. He “believes that if a woman begins to feel too good about herself, she will be harmless.” For a guy with a short fuse, his life-long rule of abstaining “from both complaint and negotiation” proves severely disastrous. He is denied a visit with Karen and his baby at Bedford Hills when an ion scan reveals drug residue; he blows up, committing three misdemeanors. Then he begins to absent himself from his family to hang in Elmira’s projects, scant improvement from those he left in Brownsville.

We leave these hapless pilgrims in a slough of despond. Near the end Davis ignores an order of protection and assaults Karen while she is in the company of another man. He’s bailed out only when the grandmother of a local woman who has borne him a son is pregnant by him again steps in.

In the last paragraph of a final postscript, we learn, “On October 26, 2009 ... Kevin Davis was convicted of criminal contempt in the second degree for violating an order of protection and assault in the third degree.”

Several years earlier, Davis was attacked in a roadside bar hanging out with the wrong crowd. Suddenly he was attacked with a knife and a hammer. Most of his front teeth were shattered. Now, heading to prison one more time, those teeth are still missing.

One of the few moments in Zebrawat when “sweet” and “bitter” almost balance is when Kevin, himself a Brooklyn mother of three, is amazed by the “step dancing, pure folk art, passed down from generations of black college men and based on rhythmic traditions of Africa.”
Critical Maintenance a Top

NE DAY in 2007, soon after taking responsibility for the facilities on all 23 of CUNY’s campuses, Iris Weinshall was heading to Queens with Allan Dobrin, the University’s executive vice chancellor and chief operating officer. The day’s agenda: Have a look around York College and hear from college officials what shape their campus was in.

For Weinshall, the newly appointed vice chancellor for facilities planning, construction and management, it was just one stop in a months-long, five-borough tour of CUNY’s vast and well-worn infrastructure. But before she and Dobrin reached Queens that day, Weinshall got a frantic phone call from the Bronx. It was Mary Coleman, senior vice president of Bronx Community College.

“You need to get up here right away!” Coleman told Weinshall. “We’ve got a huge sinkhole! Right on the main road! It’s like an earthquake — there’s a geyser coming out of the ground!”

Weinshall and Dobrin made a U-turn for BCC, a campus of aged buildings designed by Stanford White more than a century ago for what was then New York University. When they arrived, they found Coleman and a crowd of people standing around a muddy pit the size of a small car where an underground steam-heat pipe had burst. The earth caved, steam flew into the air and the campus was heated by portable boilers until Weinshall and Dobrin reached Queens that day.

“We plugged in one too many computers and the electricity went out.”

That sinkhole and its geyser of steam were lucky it was 9 a.m. on a Friday morning, Weinshall said. “But it was all anecdotal, almost like the description of a bed bug from freshman biology. We knew we had roof problems, heating system problems, building facades in bad shape,” Weinshall said. “But it was all anecdotal, individual campuses coming to us and saying: ‘We have this boiler breaking down’ or ‘We plugged in too many computers and the electricity went out.’

Weinshall’s campus visits, meetings with college presidents and a report by her staff made clear that something large-scale had to be done. As it happened, the state university system had just begun a systematic assessment of conditions on its own campuses — to say nothing of finding a dedicated funding stream to pay for it. “We knew we had roof problems, heating system problems, building facades in bad shape.” Weinshall said. But it was all anecdotal, individual campuses coming to us and saying ‘We have this boiler breaking down’ or ‘We plugged in too many computers and the electricity went out.’

Weinshall’s campus visits, meetings with college presidents and a report by her staff made clear that something large-scale had to be done. As it happened, the state university system had just begun a systematic assessment of conditions on its own campuses — all 63 of them — and invited CUNY to join the process. The University used a survey assessment tool developed by SUNY’s construction agency that allowed each college to compile a detailed and up-to-date account of the state of all its facilities.

The result was an exhaustive catalog of disrepair stretching from Hostos Community College to the College of Staten Island. The consequences have been occasionally dramatic. There was the sinkhole at BCC, of course. And last year, a section of badly deteriorated façade fell of a building at Hostos. “We were lucky it was Good Friday and students were off," Weinshall said.

Queensborough Community College, meanwhile, has had major power outages each of the past two summers because its electrical capacity has never been upgraded through decades of expansion.

But like those buried steam pipes in the Bronx, much of the deterioration is unseen or barely noticed, at least until it becomes an emergency: Water seepage in a basement at the College of Staten Island, an aged roof at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, a tired escalator at Baruch College, leaky windows in the building at window replacement is under way at Hunter College’s historic Thomas Hunter Hall.

Big Fix on

Window replacement is under way at Hunter College’s historic Thomas Hunter Hall.

Million square feet of buildings and infrastructure. The average age of the University’s buildings is about 50 years, Weinshall says, and most have long suffered from neglect of “critical maintenance” — the kind of mundane upkeep that’s vital to a building’s functional life but has a way of getting squeezed out of tight operating budgets. For years, critical maintenance meant deferred and ignored maintenance — a Band-Aid approach that put off virtually all but the most urgent repairs.

But that has been changing fundamental-ly over the last four years. The sinkhole at BCC was a symbol of everyday neglect that helped pave the way for renewal on a grand scale. It’s a program officially known as the State of Good Repair initiative, or SOGR. But it might be called CUNY’s Big Fix: Nearly $1.5 billion worth of repairs, upgrades, renovation and rehab — projects small, medium and large that began on every CUNY campus three years ago and will likely continue for the better part of a decade. Indeed, one of the biggest, soon to begin, is a planned $120 million replacement of Bronx Community College’s antiquated heating, cooling and electrical systems.

CUNY through the years had periodically evaluated the declining state of its facilities, but there had never been anything like a master plan to address the perpetually growing list of deferred maintenance on each campus — to say nothing of finding a dedicated funding stream to pay for it. “We knew we had roof problems, heating system problems, building facades in bad shape,” Weinshall said. “But it was all anecdotal, individual campuses coming to us and saying ‘We have this boiler breaking down’ or ‘We plugged in too many computers and the electricity went out.’”

Weinshall’s campus visits, meetings with college presidents and a report by her staff made clear that something large-scale had to be done. As it happened, the state university system had just begun a systematic assessment of conditions on its own campuses — all 63 of them — and invited CUNY to join the process. The University used a survey assessment tool developed by SUNY’s construction agency that allowed each college to compile a detailed and up-to-date account of the state of all its facilities.

The result was an exhaustive catalog of disrepair stretching from Hostos Community College to the College of Staten Island. The consequences have been occasionally dramatic. There was the sinkhole at BCC, of course. And last year, a section of badly deteriorated façade fell off a building at Hostos. “We were lucky it was Good Friday and students were off,” Weinshall said.

Queensborough Community College, meanwhile, has had major power outages each of the past two summers because its electrical capacity has never been upgraded through decades of expansion.

But like those buried steam pipes in the Bronx, much of the deterioration is unseen or barely noticed, at least until it becomes an emergency: Water seepage in a basement at the College of Staten Island, an aged roof at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, a tired escalator at Baruch College, leaky windows in the building at

Critical Maintenance a Top

Window replacement is under way at Hunter College’s historic Thomas Hunter Hall.
The great majority of pressing projects was slated for CUNY’s 31 senior colleges, whose capital funding comes from New York State. That fact, and the timing, was fortunate. Two focal points of then-Gov. Eliot Spitzer’s new administration had been improving the state’s public higher education system and developing capital reinvestment strategies. His administration pledged to budget $284 million a year for five years — $1.42 billion total — for State of Good Repair projects at CUNY’s senior colleges.

The first installment came in the 2008-2009 budget. CUNY is now approaching the end of the third of the five years of appropriations, though it is less than 20 percent through all the anticipated work. There are two reasons for the lag. The pre-construction process — design, bidding, review and approvals — can typically last 18 months or more. And Spitzer’s departure as governor slowed the flow of money for a time. The succeeding administration of David Paterson inserted an extra step in the process, requiring each project to receive final approval from the governor’s budget office before funds could be released and the work began. “We had to educate them that this is critical maintenance,” Weinshall said. “And there are a lot of small construction firms involved so it’s keeping people working.”

From the program’s inception, 338 State of Good Repair projects have been initiated, totaling $220 million — ranging from a $150,000 retaining wall at Queens College to a multi-year $20 million rehabilitation of the exterior of City College’s Shepard Hall, one of the first projects funded and now nearing completion.

CUNY’s six community colleges certainly had their share of critical maintenance needs — but they hit a major funding snag that has only recently loosened. While capital funding for the senior colleges comes entirely from the state, by law the community colleges must be supported equally by the state and the city. To date, the state has approved $125 million, but it has held most of it back because the city has been slow to contribute its half. It wasn’t until last year — the third year of the capital program — that the city began to appropriate money for the community colleges, finally putting critical projects in the pipeline. This year, after many meetings between CUNY officials and City Council members and the borough presidents, the city included $31 million for the local colleges in its budget for the next fiscal year.

“We’re making headway,” Weinshall said. “We’re getting recognition by city officials that we desperately need those funds.”

No one is happier than Bronx Community College’s Mary Coleman, whose task is to keep CUNY’s neediest buildings running. She remembers all too well the portable boilers that heated the campus after the great steam pipe collapse of 2007. She has never relished summer, for that matter: Only two of the college’s 26 buildings have central air conditioning, for now. “I would dare say that ours has been a trial by fire,” Coleman said.

“But it has put us, and CUNY, on a forward path of progress the likes of which the college has never seen.”

search.cuny.edu “campus maintenance” or snap the square with your smartphone.