CUNY’s First Fifty Years: Triumphs and Ordeals of a People’s University

CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

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The purpose of this book is to present the story of the City University of New York, which was established officially in 1961 and went through a series of ups and downs or triumphs and ordeals.

From its inception to the present, it has been a pawn in New York politics with mayors, governors, legislators, and community groups using it for social, political and economic objectives. Chancellors, presidents, and governing boards balanced as best they could these outside pressures with the education goals and objectives of their colleges and their university.

The interaction of the political and educational influences represent multifaceted dimensions and entwinements that have come to characterize much of the history of the City University of New York.
The CUNY story has multiple themes related to:

- external influences and internal decision making,
- meritocracy and higher education access,
- centralization,
- expansion and contraction;

all of the above play a part in the overall analysis and interpretation.
Upton Sinclair was a student at CCNY between 1892 and 1897. In his sendup of American higher education, *The Goose Step*, he wrote:

“Our educational system is not a public service, but an instrument of special privilege; its purpose is not to further the welfare of mankind, but merely to keep America capitalist”

He also described his experiences at CCNY vividly, especially the faculty:

“…we came into the classrooms of these old men, and each in turn did what he could for us...

- the professor of Greek, a white-whiskered old terror…
- the professor of German, lovable, genial, highly cultured…
- the professor of Latin, also a terror though his whiskers were brown…
- the professor of chemistry, an extremely irascible old gentleman with only one arm…
- my little Catholic professor of literature did one thing for me; he let me know of the existence of a poet by the name of Shelley.”
CUNY Arrives (1961) and the Expansion Begins

On April 24, 1961, a “great gathering” was held in the Assembly Hall at Hunter College on 68th Street and Park Avenue, to celebrate the creation of the City University of New York by the New York State Legislature earlier that month.

CUNY’s First Chancellor, Dr. John Rutherford Everett, a former philosophy professor, quoted Pericles as he likened New York City to ancient Athens and defined a university’s mission as the nurturing of great citizens.
CUNY Arrives (1961) and the Expansion Begins

On April 24, 1961…

New York City Mayor Robert F. Wagner declared:

”The names of the great centers of learning echo down the ages from the past: Oxford, Cambridge, Paris, Bologna. Our own American heritage contributes Harvard, Yale, Princeton … Now the four senior colleges Queens, Brooklyn, Hunter and City, and the three community colleges will be coordinated by the Chancellor to make them all part of one great university…”
CUNY Arrives (1961) and the Expansion Begins

On April 24, 1961…

Gustave Rosenberg, First Chairman of the Board of Higher Education invoked CUNY’s historic mission:

“that in a democratic society, the higher reaches of education are not the exclusive privilege of an elite, but an opportunity and a necessity for all qualified citizens who desire it, regardless of race, creed, or color.”

Growth:

1960 – 7 colleges enrolling 86,900 students -> 1970 – 19 colleges enrolling 185,998 students
“There City College sits, smack dab in the middle of the largest Black community in the country, and only 9 percent of its day time students are Black or Puerto Rican.” (Martha Biondi)

Buell Gallagher, the President of CCNY, drew the ire of faculty, students and the press. The student demonstrations and strikes, most of which were peaceful, were covered in the media every day for almost two months.

In April 1969, the situation deteriorated (fights, bloody fights between black and white students, and the involvement of many high-profile New York City political leaders.)

Gallagher called in the police after weeks of negotiations on May 5th, 1969, he offered his letter of resignation on May 9th, effective May 12th.
In his resignation letter, Gallagher wrote:

‘Men and events have made this earlier separation necessary. The frustrations spawned by a society which has inverted its values and reversed its priorities putting war ahead of human well-being and preferring privilege to justice – these frustrations have pushed the on-coming college generation into an activism which over-reaches immediately attainable goals. The resulting strains on the academic community are evident throughout the nation and at CCNY…My own functions as a reconciler of differences and a catalyst for constructive change have become increasingly difficult to carry out. And with the intrusion of politically motivated outside forces in recent days, it has become impossible to carry on the processes of reason and persuasion.’”
The 1970s - Open Admissions, Fiscal Collapse, and Tuition

CUNY Chancellor Al Bowker resigns to become chancellor of the University of California – Berkeley in 1971. Robert Kibbee appointed chancellor.

Open Admissions Commences in 1970.

New York City Fiscal Collapse (1975) – CUNY’s budget is reduced by 13 percent and retrenchment is ordered. 5,000 to 6,000 funded positions eliminated.

Faculty and staff furloughed for two weeks in June 1976.

Kibbee Plan to Close/Merge Six Colleges (Supported by several college presidents.)

Free Tuition Ends (1976)

State Takeover (1979)
Student Enrollment

1970 – 185,998
1975 – 250,784
1980 - 172,229

It would take 35 years (2010) for CUNY to reach its enrollment levels of 1975.

“Open admissions represented a watershed not only in the history of the young CUNY but in the entire history, going back to 1847. For most of that time, the institution was associated with selectivity and high quality, not least as exemplified by the record of its alumni. The senior colleges prided themselves on their teaching excellence, which eminently qualified its graduates for admission to choice law, medical, and graduate schools. Open admissions, rightly or wrongly, changed that reputation—in the public mind, in public support, and in enrollment trends. CUNY was never again the same” – Christoph Kimmich, President of Brooklyn College (2000-2009) and Interim Chancellor (1997-1999)
Robert Kibbee died on June 16, 1981. Gene Maeroff of the *New York Times* quoted Kibbee in his obituary:

“Dr. Kibbee was a pragmatist who resisted efforts to cast his role as chancellor in philosophical terms. "It's always nice to think of yourself as the academic chieftain of an intellectually oriented body," he said. "But it costs money and takes buildings and equipment to have a university. This is the responsibility of the chief executive, and if you're not willing to accept it, then you should stay out of this business.’

Joe Murphy, former president of Queens College named as Chancellor.
The Ups and Downs of the 1980s

CUNY Changes the New York City Landscape

CUNY receives “A” rating from Moody’s and Standard & Poor;

$1.3 billion in new construction bonds approved for new capital projects.
In April 1998, the lyrics of *We Shall Overcome* could be heard in the chamber as the Board of Trustees meeting got underway.

Opponents of Mayor Giuliani and longtime New York City politician Herman Badillo’s plan to end remedial programs at the senior colleges at CUNY dovetailed with the publication of *An Institution Adrift*, which detailed the ineffectiveness of the CUNY academic and fiscal apparatus and set a course for centralization and accountability.

The Board of Trustees, with the support of the New York City political establishment, appointed former Baruch College President Matthew Goldstein as Chancellor.
Chancellor Goldstein led a campaign to diversify the academic programs CUNY offered. Several new colleges were opened during the early years of the 21st Century:

- Macaulay Honors College
- The Graduate School of Journalism
- Guttman Community College
- CUNY School of Public Health

Initiatives like ASAP and CUNY Start targeted students with developmental skills needs and prepared them for long-term collegiate success.

Growth:
2000 – 195,402         2015 - 274,357
Main Components of Pathways
(established by Board Resolution June 2011)

• General Education Framework
  • Common Core (30 credits for associate’s- and bachelor’s-degree programs: 12 required core and 18 flexible core)
  • College Option (6-12 credits for bachelor’s-degree programs)
• Majors (10 most popular transfer majors)
• Electives (all other courses)
• Pathways was the target of intense faculty and union criticism and was involved in two court cases prior to its launch in 2013.
Under newly inaugurated Governor Andrew Cuomo’s administration, CUNY saw five years of predictable, or “rational”, tuition increases. Protesters lashed out at the central administration for relying on students to offset basic operating costs that should be covered by the city and state.

By 2016, those individuals served by the Professional Staff Congress had been without a contract for six years.

The PSC organized its ranks and threatened to strike if negotiations on a contract were not made.

Ultimately, the government, the university, and the PSC came to an agreement and called for wage increases before a strike was initiated.
Where We Are Today

The Fall 2018 Freshman Class at CUNY saw a 4 percent increase over the previous year for a total of 39,938 students.

New York State’s Excelsior Scholarship has provided last-dollar support to scores of students and widened access to the postsecondary system across the state.

CUNY is working to restructure developmental skills programs, providing co-requisite options, and revising the admissions process to ensure equitable access for students.
Questions & Comments