Emotions Flare as Students and Faculty Deliver Powerful Testimonies to CUNY BoT

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City University of New York (CUNY) students and faculty members were given the opportunity to voice their concerns towards the CUNY Board of Trustees (BoT) at a public hearing on Monday evening, in the Gold Room of the Brooklyn College Student Center.

Speaking into a microphone to a panel of 24 CUNY officials, which included the 17 BoT members and BC President Michelle Anderson, students and faculty from the CUNY system delivered their testimonies that focused on a wide range of issues within CUNY.

The hearing took place a few weeks after students protested against a BoT proposal that would put all student activity fee (SAF) decisions into the hands of college associations, which are mostly comprised of administrators and faculty members.

Under the current CUNY bylaws, the SAF is distributed to the various referendum student organizations. According to BC College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS) student government president Nissim Said, this “guarantees every student organization their funding and keeps stability.”

Queens College student and New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG) chairperson Smitha Vargese passionately defended the current method of SAF distribution, and attacked the BoT and its proposal during her testimony early in the hearing.

“Nothing short of full engagement with the student body is appropriate,” Vargese said. “As a result of this process and its undemocratic plan to seize students’ assets and redirect them without adequate student input, students are justified in arms.”

NYPIRG is a student-run organization that receives much of its funding from the SAF. The BoT’s new proposal would allow the college associations to decide where the SAF goes, which removes power from students.

It also means that every student organization, including student governments, is not guaranteed funding. “Earned funding,” which allows students to vote towards funding for specific organizations, would be eliminated. Voting would only be required to determine if the SAF should be raised or not.

Other NYPIRG members were present to support or testify as well, including BC students Milan Matthew and Khiliola Vahosova. Vahosova spoke about the lack of transparency that the BoT showed while coming up with the proposal.

CLAS member David Schykerne also delivered a scathing testimony to the BoT, providing a breakdown of the SAF. “Twenty cents from the SAF are used to fund the Rivercam Journal. Mr. Chairperson, how many times have you read the Rivercam this semester?” Schykerne asked the silent panel.

“So it would seem that the Board has no use for the SAF,” he continued. “In fact, the Board has so little connection to campus life that I’m surprised they’ve put so much thought into our SAF. Maybe we would all be better off if we left student fees in the hands of the students who actually use them.”

CLAS president Said also spoke out against the BoT, and especially criticized its interference in student affairs.

“How are we considering the inability for students to name where their referendum money should go towards? What service or product exists anywhere in the world where the consumer is not allowed to understand what they are buying? Why do we need to advocate for organizations like USS & NYPIRG to maintain their endowment, the last avenues for students’ advocacy?” Said asked the panel.

Said continued, even criticizing New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo. “Ten of the trustees are appointed directly by Cuomo; many students have questioned whether the governor cares for CUNY and its student body.”

“I’m tired,” Said continued. “I’m tired of the overarching arm of the CUNY BoT and by extension Governor Cuomo.”

Students and faculty members were gathered outside of the Student Center before and during the hearing. They held signs that read “Trustees can we trust you?” and “CUNY First or Cuomo First?” which further showed the growing distrust that many students have felt towards CUNY administration and the NYS government.

Other issues that were brought up during the hearing included adjunct professors’ rights, which has garnered extensive coverage during the past two years. Adjunct professors are limited-term professors who are often graduate students at the same time. Many adjuncts have complained to CUNY about their low wages, claiming that they are too low in comparison to their workload while also leaving them unable to pay their CUNY graduate school tuition or support their families.

CUNY’s Professional Staff Congress (PSC) labor union has voiced its demands for adjuncts to be paid a minimum of $7,000.

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"Every time I provide what you might think of as the professor experience, every time I go beyond the bare minimum of meeting my class and grading papers, I am actively impoverishing myself," BC adjunct English professor and ASC member Thomas Walters said to the BoT.

Watters discussed the constant student requests he receives to go beyond the bare minimum, including questions about course material and requests for letters of recommendation for graduate school and scholarship applications. He then read out a hypothetical response to a student's email that requested clarification on course material "at 10 p.m. the night before a midterm."

"Dear student, I made $25,000 last year; it does not make economic sense for me to spend the time it would take to help you with this," Walters said. "Just come to class, write the papers, and take the test. That's the extent of our relationship."

"If what you were expecting was some kind of deeper intellectual engagement...I'm afraid you should have gone to a school that pays its instructors a living wage," Walters continued, inciting a raucous round of applause from the present audience.

Another adjunct professor at BC, who went by the name of Connor, went up to the podium and turned the mic around so that he had his back to the panel of trustees and was facing the audience of faculty and students. He referenced the crowd of people that were chanting and waiting outside the Student Center in the cold weather, calling the hearing a "sham" because those waiting outside were not allowed in despite the empty seats in the room.

"According to the BoT bylaws, they're supposed to have a hearing in a space that can accommodate all those of the public who wish to enter, or else the following voting meeting is nullified," he said. "So any decision made next week at the board meeting at John Jay College can, and will, be legally challenged."

As students waiting to enter outside continued to chant "Let us in!" Connor criticized the trustees' indifference and apathy, especially Chairman William Thompson, who left the hearing early.

In addition to the adjuncts and students, many faculty workers, including cafeteria workers, brought up the mistreatment and racism they dealt with while working in CUNY cafeterias. Two Spanish-speaking workers, delivering their testimonies through a translator, discussed how they were mistreated by their superiors at Brooklyn College and Lehman College.

Both schools' cafeterias are managed by Metropolitan Food Services.

Despite their distrust in the BoT, many students and faculty members are hoping that the hearing influenced the trustees to reconsider their proposals and work for the betterment of CUNY.

"It's your chance to decide; do you work for Cuomo, or do you work for CUNY?" one CUNY student asked during her testimony.