

**Testimony of Robert Kahn**  
**College Senate Chair, LaGuardia Community College**  
**Before the Board of Trustees of the City University of New York**

**Concerning the Pathways Initiative**

**June 18, 2012**

My name is Bob Kahn and I'm the Chair of the College Senate at LaGuardia Community College. Students transferring from CUNY community colleges to CUNY senior colleges regularly lose credits, wasting their time, their money, and their eligibility for financial aid. The taxpayers lose the money that subsidizes these wasted credits—both in the financial aid that comes from federal and state coffers, and the FTE reimbursement that comes from state and city sources. Eventually, CUNY will face a revolt by taxpayers and legislators, which will harm CUNY unless we view the loss of credits as a central problem and solve it for ourselves. I will be making a bold proposal that rests on three premises:

*Premise #1* – LaGuardia graduates are not inferior to students who begin on 4-year campuses. The truth is that a great number of the students who will graduate this year from CUNY 4-year colleges began at a community college. They make it because we do good work and our standards are high. We take low-income, first-generation college students, who often are unmotivated or underserved in high school or recent immigrants with poor English skills, and place them on a path toward success. Our students succeed because our classes are small; our support systems are effective, our honors program large and strong, and our faculty talented, passionate, and focused on effective pedagogy. We wish that our graduation rate were higher—we're working on it. But, let's not forget the flip side: Our

graduation rate is low, in part, because we maintain high standards. In the end, the 4-year colleges accept our engineering students into City, our business students into Baruch, and our liberal arts graduates into Hunter, Queens, and Brooklyn.

*Premise #2* – The previous CUNY policy regarding a transfer guarantee, adopted by the Board of Trustees in 1999, has not been enforced. It is current CUNY policy that, for any CUNY student earning an AA or AS degree, all 60 credits will transfer to a CUNY senior college. Yet, the senior colleges regularly reject a sizeable number of credits when students transfer as not meeting their specific requirements. These credits are then “accepted” (I say in quotes) as free electives, satisfying no degree requirements and often well in excess of the number of free electives permitted in any 4-year degree. In effect, these free elective credits are swept into a garbage pail where they are lost for all practical purposes. The transfer students who are aware of the Board policy feel both misled by CUNY and cheated out of time and money.

*Premise #3* – While the previous guarantee has generated wasted credits, unfortunately the Pathways initiative fails to solve the same problem. Chancellor Goldstein has long supported a seamless transition between CUNY campuses. He recognizes that credits are wasted and sides with the students and taxpayers who rightfully complain. But, to repeat, Pathways does not solve the problems it was trying to solve.

Suppose a student has earned a 60-credit AA or AS degree from LaGuardia and has followed the requirements of the Pathways proposal, assuring that 30 credits transfer. Here's the true nub of the problem for transfer under Pathways: The first 30 credits have never been the real problem for transfer. When students take an introductory psychology or history or laboratory science course, the courses have routinely transferred with few exceptions. One need only check TIPPS—CUNY's Transfer Information and Program Planning System. The ugly secret—though not a secret if one thinks about it—is that it's not the first 30 credits that are rejected by the senior colleges, but the credits that number between 30 and 60. Under Pathways, the senior colleges can continue to sweep these credits into the garbage pail, wasting them by declaring them free electives. We ask the Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, and Board of Trustees to solve that problem—the real problem and the problem that the Chancellor and Vice Chancellor initiated Pathways in order to solve.

Conceptually, the solution is simple. It eliminates the need for the Pathways initiative and all the controversy that it has generated. The solution is to enforce the Board's policy that students earning 60-credit AA or AS degrees at CUNY community colleges receive full credit for the first two years of coursework when they transfer. As it was intended and should be, the community colleges would provide the first two years of a 4-year education and their college-level credits would be accepted, no questions asked. For transfer students, then, the senior colleges would offer the 60 credits of the junior and senior years, including the academic major. Since a major

generally consists of considerably fewer than 60 credits, the senior colleges would be free to specify a sizeable number of prerequisite credits in the major to be taken at the senior college, should they choose. Frankly, we would expect the senior colleges to accept the same introductory courses that they accept now in transfer. We suspect that they have better uses for their 60 junior-level and senior-level credits than having students repeat first-year and second-year courses. Yet, they would be free to require their own lower-level courses within their 60 credits if they choose and if they do not mind teaching more introductory sections and fewer upper-level sections. But, 60 credits are all they could require of a CUNY transfer student with an AA or AS degree, under my proposal.

Other complex university systems have simplified transfer in a somewhat similar fashion. The gold standard is probably Florida. Its state system covers 11 senior colleges—including the University of Florida and Florida State—and 28 community colleges. The Florida Department of Education has developed a statewide course numbering system and says: “If a course is recognized by the statewide course numbering system, the course shall transfer.” Moreover, “Common Prerequisites are standardized across all public universities and community colleges in Florida to facilitate efficient transfer of lower-level academic credits into the State University System.” There are statewide transfer agreements in place in California and Texas as well. For example, Texas plainly states: “If you complete all your core curriculum classes at a community college, this core curriculum will substitute for the core curriculum at any public college, university, and health science center in Texas. That means you don’t have to take it twice.”

In sum, let me implore you to solve the real problem by adding substance to the existing 60-credit guarantee. The Pathways proposal has already created a firestorm. If imposed, there will be additional problems during implementation. Your troubles have just begun, and yet the real problem of wasted credits will not be solved. Please solve the real problem and allow our 60-credit degree to transfer as the first two years of a CUNY education. We are one university.