

**Testimony of Howard Steven Meltzer, PhD  
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Before the Board of Trustees of the City University of New York**

**Concerning the Pathways Initiative**

**June 18, 2012**

I am the Chair of the Department of Music and Art at BMCC. My departmental colleagues and I are currently engaged in writing Pathways' mandated outcomes for our General Education classes. We are fitting our courses into one of the five categories in the Flexible Core – “Creative Expression.” It is a painful experience.

Diane Ravitch has called state standards in history “windy rhetoric, devoid of concrete descriptions of what students were expected to know and should be able to do.”<sup>1</sup> Her critique fits the Creative Expressions outcome quite well. The outcomes speak of “exploring creative expression” and articulating “how meaning is created in the arts or communications ... how experience is interpreted and conveyed,” and asks that the student “Demonstrate knowledge of the skills involved in the creative process.” These are empty generalizations—applicable to everything and nothing.

Music is one of the seven liberal arts; the original curriculum of the first universities. Through its history, music has been studied as God's ordering of the Universe – the Music of the Spheres, as arousing emotions for moral and ethical education – the Doctrine of Affections, as

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<sup>1</sup> Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 19.

self contained beauty one of the “fine arts.” Art as “creative expression” is not a universal, but a time- and culture-bound concept, a reflection of early 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic theorizing.

Students can be taught music notation, they can be taught to play an instrument or to sing, they can experiment with musical improvisation or master a formal composition, they can be introduced to core concepts in aesthetics and history through reading and discussion. These activities take place within a discipline. The Flexible Core is not a bold rethinking of undergraduate education. To paraphrase Diane Ravitch, it contains “no ... content that students might analyze, debate or reflect on,” but merely enshrines narrowly Eurocentric and conventional notions. Pathways is a hastily and carelessly conceived patchwork. A true education is many outcomes from each discipline considered in its own many faceted aspects, not a single outcome from multiple disciplines.