

Testimony of Katherine Culkin, Associate Professor

Bronx Community College

Before the Board of Trustees at

Queens Public Hearing

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My name is Katherine Culkin. I am an associate professor at Bronx Community College, where I have taught for 10 years. At BCC, history classes are 3 credits and can have up to 30 students. This means that, with our 5/4 load, history professors can have well over 100 students a semester, and in the fall the number can reach 150. This workload makes it difficult to forge meaningful connections with students, as well as pursue a research agenda that will give CUNY students the engaged professors they deserve.

Research suggests that developing a personal connection with a faculty member is a critical element in student success, particularly for first generation college students like many of those who attend BCC. In a new environment, with rules with which they are familiarizing themselves, having a person they trust and can turn to for advice and encouragement can make the difference between committing themselves to their education and drifting away. As many BCC students have other demands on their time—including family responsibilities and jobs—forging bonds to college is even more important. Even with the current teaching load, I try to build these bonds. I encourage students to meet with me about drafts, chat with students before class, approach them if I fear they are at risk, and email students as soon as they have missed a class or an assignment. I am relieved and rewarded when these efforts pay off. Last semester, for instance, I had a student who, after a strong start, started falling asleep in class and acting disinterested. Speaking

to her, I learned she had unexpected health issues that were leaving her exhausted and overwhelmed, and we worked on plan to help her finish the class. She passed, and even more importantly, enrolled for this semester, keeping herself on track to graduate. This student's change in behavior was dramatic, so I was able to notice it and act. With a reduced teaching load, I would have a better sense of my students, allowing me to recognize when they might need help even with less overt signs.

Students also benefit when faculty have the time and encouragement to focus on their academic research. We bring our enthusiasm to the classroom, as well as ensuring we are on top of new developments. Community college students, in addition, often take pride in knowing their faculty members are active scholars. While teaching at BCC I have published a biography of the sculptor Harriet Hosmer and have received grants from the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Houghton Archive at Harvard, the PSC-CUNY Research Fund, and the Chancellor's office to support my current project, on women and Transcendentalism. Students often note that my enthusiasm for history helps transform a subject they assumed was boring into one they care about. As one student wrote to me, "I think your teaching style is dynamite . . . and you seem so passionate about it, which makes it that much more fun and interesting for us. Well, I just would like to say Thank You!" But balancing my scholarship and teaching has often been an exhausting process, a state that benefits neither me nor my students.

I love teaching at BCC, finding the students intelligent, curious, and enthusiastic. As we know, though, the students at CUNY, particularly at the community colleges, are also often unprepared and have to balance school with many other demands. The CUNY faculty's request for a reduction in teaching load is not based on a desire to work less with students, but to serve them better.