

IMPLICATIONS OF A NEW MODEL FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES: THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

WHEREAS, in the context of increased national attention to community colleges—sparked by President Obama’s July 2009 announcement of a graduation initiative focused on Associate’s degrees—new models for community colleges that are being developed for specific communities can have profound national implications; and

WHEREAS, in 2008, the central administration of the City University of New York (CUNY) proposed a new community college, whose stated primary purpose is to increase graduation rates, and which has been described by CUNY Chancellor Matthew Goldstein as an effort “to reimagine the community college from the ground up,” and as a college that will overcome policy obstacles “that prevent community college educators from doing their best work”; and

WHEREAS, the initial phase of development of the proposed new community college attracted funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and from The Carnegie Corporation of New York; and whereas Chancellor Goldstein announced that the Gates Foundation funding would “help low-income students complete degrees that can immediately lead to jobs”; and

WHEREAS, the proposed new community college will include only twelve majors, including terminal degrees in nursing, surgical technology, medical informatics, supply chain management and information technology; and transfer programs in business administration, teacher education, urban studies, environmental studies and liberal arts; and

WHEREAS, the American Federation of Teachers strongly supports expansion of public higher education and welcomes opportunities for genuine academic innovation. The AFT is deeply committed to the principle that education is a right, and recognizes that the faculty and staff of the City University of New York have a distinguished history of developing innovative curriculum and pedagogy in collaboration with a unique population of students; and

WHEREAS, innovation in service of helping students to engage with and even change the world continues to flourish at CUNY’s colleges, as it does at colleges nationally. It flourishes in a particular way in the community colleges, which include many students from groups that have traditionally been excluded from college education. While the AFT is open to the possibilities of a new CUNY community college, CUNY’s current colleges already contain a rich vein of innovation. Testimony to that fact is offered by the reliance of the CUNY central administration on CUNY’s current faculty and staff for ideas about the proposed new college’s curriculum.

WHEREAS, the AFT vigorously supports not just innovation in education, but also expansion of public higher education itself. We believe that mass access to higher education is deeply compatible with intellectually ambitious education. New York City, as a population center and a hub of immigration, should have a public university system that offers both. The AFT joins the local AFT union at CUNY in being committed to CUNY’s historic mission of providing a broad liberal arts education to “the children of the people, the children of the whole people”; and

WHEREAS, at a moment when enrollment at CUNY's community colleges is at its highest-ever level, however, the AFT joins the Professional Staff Congress/CUNY (PSC) in questioning the strategy of proposing a new community college that is not designed to offer significant relief to overcrowding. The proposed new college will increase its enrollment gradually, from a very small initial class, and will reach only 5,000 students at its peak. The AFT also joins the PSC in questioning the strategy of devoting internal and external resources to a small, boutique college at a time when the State and City budgets are in crisis and when CUNY's existing colleges are suffering from years of under-funding:

RESOLVED, that the AFT welcome the opportunity the proposal of a new community college at CUNY provides for public discussion, and that the AFT commend the CUNY faculty and staff who have worked to enrich the proposal; and

RESOLVED, that the AFT not support CUNY's proposal for a new community college in its current form and urge that the proposal not be accepted by the City University of New York, the New York State Department of Education, or taken up as a model by the United States Department of Education, until the following issues are resolved:

- 1) **Quality of education.** The proposed new college must offer students a rich liberal arts education, not a diminished version of college. CUNY's proposed new community college offers only 12 majors, all of them designed to speed students to graduation. Important as student success is, a college curriculum should be driven by an academic, pedagogic and intellectual imperatives, not by the needs of the market. To start with the instrumental goal of maximizing graduation rates and then design a curriculum to fit that goal is to work backwards. Such a college, especially one marketed as a national model, would offer a dangerous precedent for community colleges public higher education generally, especially at a time when educational "reform" is being driven by a regime of testing rather than teaching.
- 2) **Permanent, tenured or tenure-track faculty.** The new college must have permanent, tenured/tenure-track faculty whose appointments reside at the proposed newly chartered institution. A faculty comprised mainly of adjuncts or of faculty whose primary appointments are at other colleges is unacceptable. Without a permanent faculty whose academic home is the proposed new college, students lose an essential component of a college education—sustained contact with a permanent faculty—and educational quality is compromised. Research capacity is also compromised in an institution with few or no permanent full-time faculty, and academic freedom is put at risk.
- 3) **Full-time/part-time ratio.** The new college must meet CUNY's own "Performance Goals" for the ratio of full-time to part-time faculty. Past CUNY Master Plans have stated a goal of 70 per cent full-time to 30 percent part-time faculty. For a college that proposes to model exemplary teaching

and learning conditions, a 70/30 ratio should be the minimum standard, as strongly reinforced by the AFT's FACE campaign. Ideally, the proposed new college should also pioneer equity in compensation, benefits and working conditions for the part-time faculty it does employ; the empirical evidence shows that part-time faculty who enjoy such support are better able to provide a rich, full educational experience for students.

- 4) **Faculty governance.** The governance plan for the new community college should reflect the general parameters of the plans in place at the six standing community colleges of CUNY. This should include, at a minimum, faculty control over admissions, degree requirements, curriculum development, and assessment.
- 5) **Academic departments and elected department chairs.** Faculty governance and professional autonomy are essential to any new college: they ensure academic integrity. As part of the governance plan, the proposed new college should be organized into academic departments and must include elected faculty chairs and personnel and budget committees. Faculty should hold primary responsibility for hiring, reappointment, tenure and promotion.
- 6) **Academic freedom.** The governance plan for the new community college must affirm, in the strongest terms, its commitment to academic freedom. As the community college proposal presently stands, without a plan for academic departments, faculty governance and full-time, permanent, "resident" faculty, it places academic freedom in jeopardy.
- 7) **Open admissions and access.** The proposed new community college should adhere to CUNY's open admissions policy, the historic and innovative policy that guarantees all New York City high school graduates a place in college. The new college proposal, as it now stands, practices economic discrimination by admitting only students who are able to attend full time in their first year, and by not offering stipends to replace earnings that students would otherwise achieve from part-time or even full-time employment while in college. That economic discrimination, and the requirement that entering students be remediation-free, violates CUNY's policy of open admissions at the community colleges.
- 8) **Unequal resources.** The superficial attraction of a new college should not be allowed to divert attention from the real problem facing all of CUNY's colleges—the political decision by New York City and New York State to starve CUNY of the resources it needs. The death-by-a-thousand-cuts suffered by CUNY ever since the New York City fiscal crisis of 1975 cannot be reversed by the creation of one small new college. The proposed new community college must not be allowed to divert resources from other CUNY colleges or to establish a tiered system of resources for the existing community colleges. At a time when the six standing community colleges are

experiencing record applications for admissions, and when all 17 CUNY colleges are withstanding budget cuts, securing adequate funds for CUNY's existing colleges should be CUNY's priority.