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Before the Board of Trustees of the City University of New York

Concerning the Pathways Initiative

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I have, in my twenty-odd years at John Jay, been involved in the development of two majors—the Humanities & Justice major, developed at the turn of the millennium, and the Philosophy major, developed ten years after that. Both are challenging and rigorous majors, and both focus on the development of reading, writing, and reasoning skills that are at the heart of humanistic inquiry and research. Both majors were developed in large part as curricula designed to prepare students for the demands of law school, to which a sizable number of John Jay students feel themselves drawn.

On the basis of my experience teaching in these programs, I can say that there are two main sources of difficulty students have in these majors: The first has to do with their deficits in abilities essential to working with complex texts; the second, and related difficulty, is the absence of a general knowledge base that allows for the development of skills of critical appreciation, judgment, and synthesis. The two intertwined difficulties can be successfully addressed, I believe, only by engaging students in a generous and *structured* General Education curriculum that introduces them to a broad array of courses across the arts, sciences, and humanities. It is for this reason that there is a consensus among pre-law educators, and many others concerned with preparation for graduate studies generally, that the most successful preparation for such study involves a detailed familiarity with the wide array of approaches to knowledge-production and cultural creation, over and above any major disciplinary choice the undergraduate student makes. This is indeed what the law schools themselves advise. Many of us

at John Jay felt that cutting our General Education curriculum to 47 credits was already jeopardizing our students' cultural knowledge; being forced to shoehorn all general cultural learning into 42 credits seems nothing short of disastrous. They are already struggling to complete our majors as it is.

But the problems with the design of Pathways don't end there. It's not simply that the Common Core, even supplemented by the College Option, is too skimpy to do the job. The basic idea of the initiative—that instruction can somehow be improved, and learning enhanced, by identifying measurable outcomes and then structuring the development of curricula around these—is flawed. This approach seems like a higher ed version of “teaching to the test,” spoken of with justifiable disdain by school teachers. This initiative substitutes a grab-bag of courses for a structured, reasoned approach to General Education. It panders to the idea that students should get to choose to study what interests them while gutting their access to the core knowledge base they need to tackle the complexities of advanced study and research. Finally, it seems to discount—or distract from—the crucial matters of what actually happens in the classroom, the possibility of real interaction between individual students and the classroom instructor, the degree to which academic resources are available for students who need them, the way their progress through the curriculum is assisted by timely advising, and other parameters of real support for student learning.

It is for these reasons that we urge you to reconsider this hasty move toward a weaker, less-viable General Education program.