

**Testimony of Sharon Persinger  
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Before the Board of Trustees of the City University of New York**

**Concerning the Pathways Initiative**

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My name is Sharon Persinger. I am an associate professor of mathematics and computer science at Bronx Community College, where I teach both math and computer science. I'm here to express my opposition to the implementation of CUNY's Pathways initiative. My opposition cannot be characterized as selfish, since I teach in one of the favored disciplines, covered by the "STEM waiver." So far, Pathways has had no impact on the courses taught in my department.

Let me explain my opposition to the commodification of education that Pathways exemplifies. In economics, a commodity is any good that is bought and sold, or more specifically, an unspecialized good that is grown, mined, or mass produced, to be traded in large quantities, often on public exchanges. Standards are established and made public for different grades of commodities—USDA Hard Red Spring Wheat has grades 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, crude oil has grades of light, medium, heavy, and extra heavy. Sampling and grading policies are set. All this facilitates buying and selling commodities by the boatload, the boxcar load, or the tanker-full.

But to me "commodity" has a personal significance, more important than the conventional economic meaning. I grew up in West Virginia, in a high-poverty area, in public schools up to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Our elementary school lunch program was supplied with USDA surplus commodity foods. So to me, "commodity" means the processed commodity cheese used to make our school lunches—five pound blocks of cheese with a uniform orange-yellow color, smooth

texture, no lumps, no individuality. The best thing you can say about it is that it melts well. It's cheese, or made from cheese, has a cheese-like taste and texture, provides some nutrition but too much fat, salt, calories. This is not cheese to a cheesemaker. It doesn't have the individual character of a real cheese—like the milk-made-solid taste of fresh mozzarella, the rich caramel smell of aged Gouda, or the biting taste and crumbly texture of a good cheddar. But it does meet standards.

Commodity standards result in a stratification of goods. The better quality, higher grade, is reserved for higher paying customers. No one sells grade 1 wheat as grade 2 wheat, even though it meets the standards. Cheesemakers don't put their distinctive cheeses into commodity cheese.

I've read the outcomes for mathematics given in the Pathways Common Core structure document. They lack specificity, enough so that high school courses meet these standards. I fear a move to accept high school level courses as meeting these standards, to ask less math study of our students, to award our students a college degree even though they have not studied any mathematics at the college level.

Commodities are products that can be mass produced, but education is not mass-producible. A high-quality education comes about from an interaction between individuals. A learner must struggle to decode the professor's instruction, to incorporate new concepts and correct methods into her understanding of the subject and the larger world. Quality institutions of education know this; they boast about their low student-teacher ratios, and they support students in their struggle to learn. CUNY chooses to boast that its curriculum meets general standards.

This generic, commodity-cheese Pathways approach to education insults the abilities of CUNY students. When given appropriate support, they succeed. It expresses a lack of confidence in CUNY faculty, insults our specialized knowledge, our ability to create, and modify the curriculum when needed and our ability to negotiate articulation agreements.

I'm a mathematician, yet I chose to explain my opposition to Pathways through the metaphor of commodity cheese. I understand the value of metaphors because I got an excellent general education, even though my degrees are in math and computer science. The college administration was not worried that I would take too many general education courses or accumulate excess credits before graduating. I want my students to experience that quality education, developed by practitioners of academic disciplines, true to the methodology of those disciplines. CUNY students deserve Asiago, and Brie, and Camembert, and Derby and more, not just commodity cheese.