

CUNY BOT Testimony 4-1-24

Good evening everyone.

It is my honor to be here today and testify as to why it is important for the Board of Trustees and management in the City University of New York about the need for greater investment in the University's student conduct apparatus and adjacent processes.

At Medgar Evers College I currently serve as its student conduct officer, academic integrity officer, and co-chair of its equivalent to a behavioral intervention team. I have held multiple roles in the college over the years, as athletic director I helped the college win a championship in Men's Basketball in 2011. I served as the Director of Communications for a year. I was able to craft stories about our valedictorians and other students who would go on to accomplish great things. The students I worked with in these roles quite often represent a much different segment of our university than the ones I currently work with as the college's Director of Community Standards. Many of the students I currently work with may never be featured in the new campaign, "A Degree For Every Dream," but they too demand your love and support.

Academia has been addressing matters related to student conduct as far back as 1822 when a group of University of Virginia students rioted on the quad of the university. In response to this incident Thomas Jefferson wrote: "The article of discipline is the most difficult in American education. Premature ideas of independence, too little repressed by parents, beget a spirit of insubordination, which is the greatest obstacle to science with us, and a principal cause of its decay since the revolution. I look to it with dismay in our institution, as a breaker ahead, which I am far from being confident we shall be able to weather."

Mercifully, we, as an industry, have been able to weather the episodes Jefferson weighed. However, the events following the pandemic have left us with new obstacles to science with. According to the Center on Reinventing Public Education, a research organization at Arizona State University, 16 million students missed more than 10% of school days during the 2021-22 school year, twice as many as in previous years. The CRPE continued in its "State of the American Student" report in September 2022 that more than eight in 10 public schools reported "stunted behavioral and social-emotional development" in students because of the pandemic, researchers note.

Going forward, a focus on student-centered policies and programs that improve access, completion, and equity in our higher education systems will be critical. And for all the many problems created by the pandemic, it also provided an opportunity to innovate and invest in approaches that are known to work.

In October 2022, during a daylong convention entitled "Beyond Recovery: Seizing Opportunities to Transform Education in a Post-COVID Era," the U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona shared, "One of my greatest fears is that we go back to how education was in 2020." Specifically, a system "that didn't work for too many students who look like me. Returning to the same system

would be failing our students.” He went on to note, “those who were vulnerable were hit the hardest.”

When challenged to name the changes he considered most critical, Cardona shared mental health support which went on to say, “has to be pervasive.”

It is with this ethos I encourage you to view our work and imbue such practices in our code of conduct.

We must strive to do more than to return to the way things used to be after the setbacks caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The main purpose of student conduct systems is education. The goal is to have each incident of misconduct create a learning opportunity for the student. In addition, conduct officers strive to repair any harm done to the community. People make mistakes. Our students are going through a pivotal developmental time in college. We want students to be successful and that includes providing support that helps them to learn from mistakes and more importantly with the goal of the holistic development of the student experience.

Charting many of our actions from the remnant that is the Rules and Regulations for the Maintenance of Public Order Pursuant to Article 129-A of the Educational Law will not meet this goal. It is time we as a university reimagine how we address and resolve behavioral concerns that may come through the student conduct process. One that focuses on a restorative, educational approach, and collaborative conflict resolution to empower students to make better decisions in the future. Imbedding restorative practices in student conduct is an approach adopted by many institutions of higher education. Across the nation, these practices have proved to be an effective method to address such behaviors and help participants better understand the root cause of behaviors that often surface as mere student conduct violations.

It is time we implement more contemporary practices with a new code of conduct where referred students engage in reflective exercises, attend workshops on decision-making, and learn conflict de-escalation. I look forward to your partnership as we embark on that journey as an institution.