

CUNY BOT Testimony 4-1-24

My name is Jeanne Theoharis and I am a distinguished professor at Brooklyn College. I have only spoken here one other time—the day ten years ago when you made me a distinguished professor. I told you that day what an honor it is to get to teach Brooklyn College students—as I travelled around the country, speaking at so many universities, I was always so glad to get back to my CUNY students. The kinds of conversations we have in class across boundaries of religion, race, ethnicity, and experience, the tenderness and care students show with each other and me, the ways they articulate the power of education model the best of what this society can be.

Ten years later, I feel that more than ever. While I have spoken hundreds more places, there is probably no place I feel more optimistic about the possibilities for this country than in class at Brooklyn College. I have watched my students become lawyers and activists, teachers and committed public servants.

But I am here today because I fear that you have stopped seeing our students as the future leaders of this country. CUNY Administration has put forward changes to the bylaws that seek to move control over which courses are scheduled and which professors are hired from departments and chairs to deans and provosts. This would imperil the kind of rich and wide-ranging education our students deserve. Various explanations have been offered for these changes: this would make CUNY more “efficient”, respond to “student demand”, help consolidate CUNY’s resources, and prioritize what students need to “get jobs” and away from “boutique courses.”

I got my undergraduate degree at Harvard and my doctorate at the University of Michigan. You don’t hear those students described in terms of efficiencies and education to get jobs. Those students get to shop in the boutique. They get to have education for education’s sake, decided by faculty in the departments who are the experts in their fields, because it is understood that they warrant a wide, un-bounded education to be able to excel in whatever they put their mind to.

So should our students. They don’t deserve a ceiling and what those bylaw changes do is lower the ceiling over our students’ heads.

Last year, when the Supreme Court came back with its wrong-headed decision against Harvard’s race-conscious affirmative action & scores of articles were published about the importance & fate of diversity on college campuses, I kept thinking: surely CUNY’s chancellor, vice chancellor, or Board of Trustees will step up and write a powerful piece in the Times or the Chronicle saying that one of the most important things people who care about diversity in the university can do is fully fund public universities like CUNY.

I am still waiting for that article. Instead, you are contemplating changes to the bylaws that will make CUNY worse, more vocational, give students even less of what they deserve while further corporatizing the university. Ten years ago, I told you how proud I am to teach at CUNY. Now I come here today to demand that you be as proud of our students and their potential as I am, and push for full funding and a new deal for CUNY, and reject these bylaw changes.