

CUNY Board of Trustees Hearing
October 21, 2024
Testimony, Carole Harris

My name is Carole Harris, and I'm the PSC Chapter Chair at City Tech. I always know it's the start of the semester because of all the emails that flood my in-box with photos of mold on campus. Recently the photos have come from classrooms (Namm 522, L-633, the two music rooms on the 6th floor of the library building), and various places on both floors of the library.

I didn't set out to be a mold specialist, but here I am.

Our library archive has closed its doors due to mold, and three librarians with offices adjacent to the archive have had to flee and find other offices because of a thick grey fuzz coating every chair. The Provost and head of facilities have visited this windowless space and in confident tones have pronounced that the grey fuzz is not mold but dust or dirt. They strongly suggest that the library staff learn how to keep their quarters clean and ask them to remove the books themselves. I've accompanied librarians on two walkthroughs this semester, one on September 5 and another on October 15. In those intervening weeks I've observed the thick grey fuzz coating these chairs grow exponentially. Some dust.

So far our dean is the only one from our administration to agree that the spots and fuzz are indeed mold. He proposed that one of our biology professors engage his students in experiments to learn how mold grows. Fittingly, a sign has appeared on the outside of the library that reads "Autonomous Incubator. The Archives Are Alive and They're Growing."

The archive includes a unique science fiction collection donated by my colleague in the English Department. This collection is the centerpiece of a yearly Science Fiction symposium that attracts scholars from far and wide. In 2023 the science fiction writer Samuel Delaney was the guest speaker. When given a tour of our library archive, he was asked to wear a mask, and his visit was cut short when one of the librarians leading the tour started itching.

The good news in all this? The three librarians who were evicted from their offices due to moldy conditions were easily relocated to other spaces in the library. During one of the walk throughs I asked: in a campus so short on space, how was this possible? The answer: The library is extremely under staffed, and there are plenty of empty offices available. Let's not forget: Back in the summer the library had recommended two candidates for hire but for reasons of austerity the City Tech administration nixed them. That means, for the first time since the 1970s, no library orientation sessions will be offered as part of English 1101. This change takes my breath away. City Tech has a long history of library instruction and as part of open admissions lead the way for CUNY in instituting library orientation sessions.

Excuse me if I keep digressing. It's hard to stay on track when every mold story leads to another story of neglect and decay.

Another reason I know it's the start of the semester? In our fall Labor Management meetings, we always present on Health and Safety issues, and we're routinely told that the mold is not mold.

Trustees, I didn't sign up to be a mold specialist and I don't want to do your job. We've nearly exhausted ourselves in requesting the documentation that would reassure us that the mold on campus is not mold, that what is mold has been remediated, that the sources of moisture be discovered and repaired, that the air is clean to breathe. We've nearly exhausted ourselves in trying to make our campus spaces healthy for workers. What's left for us to do? What's next, CUNY Trustees?

Stay tuned.