

Dreams Stall as CUNY, New York City's Engine of Mobility, Sputters

By David W. Chen

May 28, 2016

On the City College of New York's handsome Gothic campus, leaking ceilings have turned hallways into obstacle courses of buckets. The bathrooms sometimes run out of toilet paper. The lectures are becoming uncomfortably overcrowded, and course selections are dwindling, because of steep budget cuts.

The faculty of the college's well-regarded engineering school is so "disengaged and beaten," an assessment last year warned, that if "serious shortcomings" were not rectified, the school could fail to earn reaccreditation.

On Friday, Michelle Obama will deliver a commencement address at the college, the flagship school of the City University of New York system, which is the largest urban public university in the country. She is likely to celebrate its proud legacy of creating opportunity for New York's striving class.

Established in 1847 as the Free Academy of New York to educate "the children of the whole people," as its founder Townsend Harris said, City College has been called "the poor man's Harvard." Tuition-free until 1976, it has produced 10 Nobel Prize winners. It was a hotbed of Jewish intellectuals in the 1930s, and today it welcomes the ambitious children of families from around the world, many of them poor and working class.

But any evocation of the past by Ms. Obama will mask a troubled present.

"We have gone backwards," said Frederick R. Brodzinski, a senior administrator and adjunct professor in computer science who plans to retire in September after 30 years at the university. "Morale is horrible on campus. There are too many highly paid administrators, and there's a lack of clear leadership. We have stepped down on the ladder that we were climbing for about 10 years."

The troubles at City College, and throughout the entire CUNY system, are representative of a funding crisis that has been building at public universities across the country. Even as the role of higher education as an engine of economic mobility has become increasingly vital, governments have been pulling back their support.

Since the 2008 recession, states have reduced spending on public higher education by 17 percent per student, while tuition has risen by 33 percent, according to a recent report by the nonpartisan Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Arizona is spending 56 percent less, while students are paying 88 percent more. In Louisiana, students are spending 80 percent more on tuition, while state funding has been cut by 39 percent.



Buckets collecting dripping water in a campus hallway in April. Ángel Franco/The New York Times

The University of California system relied on state funding for almost a quarter of its budget as recently as 2002, according to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Now, that figure is 9 percent, after \$1 billion in cuts.

Students Forced to Pay More

CUNY, a collection of 24 community, undergraduate and graduate schools, where 45,000 employees help to educate 274,000 students annually, has been caught in the political feud between Mayor Bill de Blasio and Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, both Democrats.

The governor proposed shifting some \$485 million in costs to New York City from the state, which has paid for the bulk of the senior colleges since a fiscal crisis in the 1970s. The city eventually won, but the governor's \$1.6 billion appropriation did little to stem the chronic underfunding of the system.

While enrollment has climbed by more than 12 percent over the last eight years, Albany's funding of operating costs — the main source of public money for the 11 four-year colleges, where two-thirds of students are enrolled — has dropped by 17 percent adjusted for inflation, according to Stephen Brier, a CUNY professor of urban education and co-author of the forthcoming book "Austerity Blues: Fighting for the Soul of Public Higher Education."

The 25,000 faculty and staff members represented by CUNY's biggest union, the Professional Staff Congress, have not had a raise in six years. They have vowed to walk out in the fall if the contract dispute is not resolved — knowing that a strike could lead to arrests and fines.

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And students are paying more. The share of CUNY's \$3.2 billion budget that comes from tuition has climbed to 45 percent from 20 percent in 1989. In the last five years, tuition at its four-year colleges has risen by \$300 per year, to \$6,330 for New York State residents. Undergraduates must also pay an extra \$280 a year, at least, in fees. It is a daunting burden to students, more than half of whom report family incomes below \$30,000, according to school data.

"This is the kind of crisis that's been brewing for a while," said Mr. Brier. "We were a tad complacent in New York getting by, and now we're not. But this is also part of a much larger set of developments nationally where public universities are in severe crisis."

State officials have argued that support from Albany, when including items such as debt service, employee benefits and tuition assistance, has risen by 20 percent since 2011. They also contend that CUNY has too much administrative bloat. Yet the system's overhead costs have increased at a slower pace since 2007 than other area public institutions, according to Howard J. Bunsis, a professor of accounting at Eastern Michigan University, who has researched government and nonprofit accounting.



Anais McAllister, a senior English major, had intended to earn her education certification before graduating from City College, but some of her required classes were canceled. Ángel Franco/The New York Times

More than anything, though, it has been the compounding nature of the fiscal pressures, year after year, with this year being the worst, that has eaten away at the experience of CUNY's students and faculty, from canceled electives to instructors improvising in the face of shortages.

Some even fret that the university may lose the momentum it has gained in the last two decades, after it ended an open-admissions policy for its four-year colleges, and successfully raised academic standards and launched new programs.

‘Like Two Different Worlds’

Joseph Awadjie, an immigrant from Ghana, earned a bachelor’s degree at Brooklyn College in 2007. After working for a while at a physical therapy practice, he returned to the college in 2013 to pursue a master’s degree in kinesiology. He said he was struck by a rapidly deteriorating campus — some call it “Brokelyn College” — where students were often unable to get into the courses they needed to meet requirements. One of his courses, cardiac rehabilitation, lacked essential materials such as inhalers and carbon dioxide masks.

“It’s like two different worlds,” he said.

Mr. Awadjie has become even more aware of the systemwide problems from his perch as chairman of the CUNY University Student Senate. He fielded no more than five complaints a month when his term began in 2014, but this year, he said, he has gotten more than 60 a month, many about overcrowded classes.

At City College, Anais McAllister, 22, a senior from Yonkers, said she had planned to major in English with a concentration in education, which would have allowed her to become a teacher after graduation. When some of her required education classes were canceled, she realized she would need another year — and another \$6,000, at least — to graduate with the education credential.

With her scholarship expiring at the end of this academic year, and a younger brother entering trade school in the fall to obtain his plumber certification, she dropped the education concentration.

“The fact that this can happen, where your department can be cut financially where you have to think about dropping it, is ridiculous,” she said.

Technical problems are common, with elevators, escalators and copy machines frequently out of order. Computers and other equipment often do not work in classrooms. Wi-Fi signals are a tease.



Library shelves at Lehman College, part of the CUNY system, have been covered with plastic since a leak three years ago. Edwin J. Torres for The New York Times

At Lehman College in the Bronx, Robert Farrell, an associate professor in the library department, said the library's entire book budget this academic year was \$13,000, down from about \$60,000 a decade ago. Because the roof has been chronically leaky, about 200 books were damaged during a rainstorm three years ago; a tarp still covers some volumes.

Mr. Farrell also said that the library has had to reduce its spending on academic journals and database subscriptions. "We can't be a serious institution of higher learning without providing our faculty and students with access to these kinds of things," he said.

Senior professors said CUNY's woes have hampered its ability to retain and recruit faculty. So the university has relied increasingly on adjuncts: while the number of full-time faculty at CUNY's four-year colleges has been flat since 2009, the number of adjuncts has climbed by 23 percent.

The bigger class sizes have made it harder to grade papers. Three-page papers are now more common, students and instructors said, versus the once-standard five or six pages. Classes, overstuffed, have become more impersonal.

Michael Batson, an adjunct lecturer who has taught history at the College of Staten Island since 2000, said that he traditionally gave his freshmen, many from immigrant families, "low-risk assignments" at first, in order to offer intensive instruction.

But his classes have steadily increased in size, while staying in the same cramped classrooms. Group projects — which he favors, as a way to get small clusters of students to work together — have also become impossible.

"It's a workload issue, and it does affect the kind of things you can do," he said.

'Poor Man's Harvard' Hit Hard

Nowhere has the frustration been more keenly felt than at City College, which has had five provosts in the last six years, since the arrival of Lisa S. Coico, the first CUNY alumna to serve as college president. A former provost at Temple University with a background in microbiology and immunology, she was chosen to lead an ambitious expansion of the college's science programs. She has also polarized the campus.

Last fall, with Albany's budget uncertain, the CUNY administration asked its colleges to cut their budgets by at least 3 percent. City College, citing increased personnel costs and declining enrollment, particularly in graduate programs, imposed a 10 percent cut, or \$14.6 million. Programs with the steepest enrollment declines suffered the most, with the humanities and education departments cut by more than 40 percent each.



Robert Farrell, an associate professor in the library department at Lehman College, said the library's entire book budget this year was \$13,000.
Edwin J. Torres for The New York Times

"It is a good budget model, and it's better than the way we used to do it for the past 40 years, which was arbitrary, very political and you had to go and beg for everything," said Gordon A. Gebert, the interim dean of the architecture school.

Many others disagreed. In October, nearly two dozen department leaders and faculty members active in governance, in a letter to CUNY's chancellor, James B. Milliken, warned that "these cuts could mean the closing of programs for undergraduate majors and graduate students, forcing students to transfer in order to complete their degrees and producing a consequent decline in City College's graduation rate."

Not long after, a group of senior staff members urged the chancellor to investigate "generous bonuses, unusually high starting salaries and disproportionate salary increases" to unnamed employees, according to a letter obtained by The Times.

According to public data analyzed by The Times, the college paid administrators classified as "executives" a total of \$7.25 million in the last year, up 45 percent from 2009. Eleven of the 18 biggest salary increases, by percentage, came in 2015, even as the college was slashing its budget. The provost's office and government relations

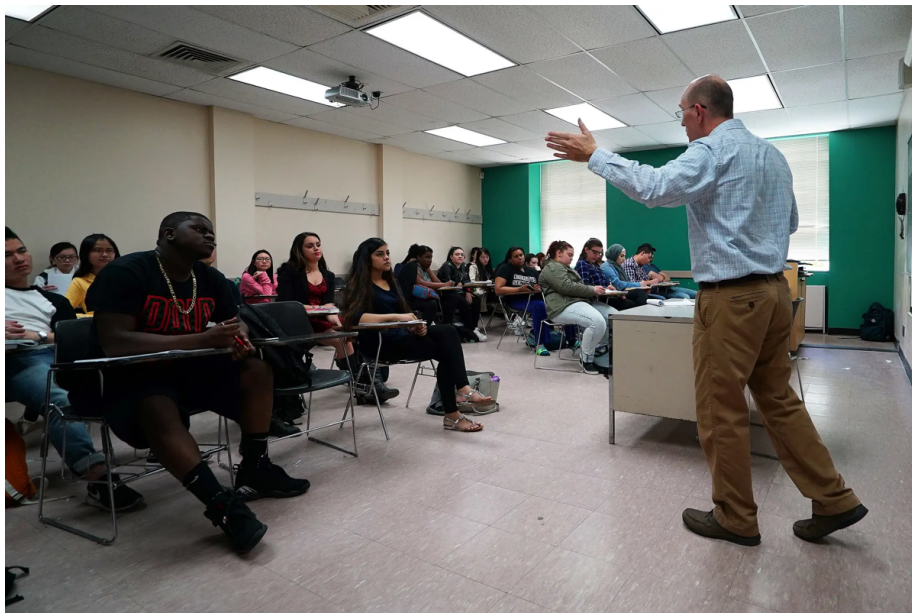
operations, in particular, have expanded.

When asked about the personnel moves, the college, in a statement, said it had “invested in hiring new faculty and staff as well as moving existing staff to the executive level consistent with increased responsibilities for these areas.”

The school’s use of foundation money has also been questioned. Documents obtained by The Times indicated that the college’s 21st Century Foundation paid for some of Ms. Coico’s personal expenses, such as fruit baskets, housekeeping services and rugs, when she took office in 2010. The foundation was then reimbursed for more than \$150,000 from CUNY’s Research Foundation. That has raised eyebrows among governance experts, because such funds are typically earmarked for research.

The college did not make Ms. Coico available for an interview. In response to written questions, the college said that Ms. Coico “does not owe monies” to either foundation.

One thing that Ms. Coico has accomplished, according to the college, is repairing campus facilities and starting new projects, such as a 200,000 square-foot Center for Discovery and Innovation, which was finished in 2015, to facilitate research in fields such as nanotechnology, neuroscience and photonics.



Michael Batson, an adjunct lecturer at the College of Staten Island, said that as class sizes have grown, the group projects that he favors have become impossible. Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

Still, during a recent visit to the college’s North Academic Center, water tumbled from the ceiling, because of an apparent plumbing leak, into 10 buckets on the first floor.

Christine Li, a biology professor, recalled a genetics class in a lecture hall notorious for water leaks, where she has been “worried about plugging my computer” when it rains. One day, she was surprised when she heard students gasp. “All these enormous water bugs were coming at me,” she said. “Another professor sitting in on the

lecture got up on stage and started stomping on them. Not a very conducive learning environment.”

Even as enrollments in the college’s more technical programs grow, they have endured problems. The engineering school is set to have its accreditation renewed this fall. To get an assessment, the school in October invited in national experts in various engineering fields.

While the experts praised the students, they found “poor” and unsafe lab conditions “not conducive to good learning,” according to reports obtained by The Times.

Computers used outdated technologies, such as floppy disks and archaic operating systems. Public places teemed with “rodents, roaches, bedbugs and other vermin,” and the computer science department reported “experiencing a water leak for over 18 years.”

In its response, the college said it welcomed “constructive and valuable suggestions,” such as “upgrades for laboratory, computer and equipment and renovation of teaching spaces.” It also said that “the curriculum remains strong and many aspects have been strengthened since the last visit.”

But just a few weeks ago, the college proposed — then scrapped, after student protests — a new \$300 “excellence” fee for full-time engineering undergraduates to help defray lab costs.

“It is not possible to meet the needs of the undergraduate program,” the proposal read, “without a reliable new income stream as a means to address the shortfall.”

A correction was made on June 12, 2016: An article on May 29 about a funding crisis at the City University of New York misstated the academic discipline of Stephen Brier, a CUNY professor who spoke about the system’s financial straits. He specializes in urban education, not education. The article also omitted a word from the title of Mr. Brier’s forthcoming book. It is “Austerity Blues: Fighting for the Soul of Public Higher Education” (not merely “Public Education”).

A correction was made on June 22, 2016: An article on May 29 about a funding crisis at the City University of New York described imprecisely the makeup of the Professional Staff Congress, the system’s largest union, which was in contract talks at the time. While it represents 25,000 faculty members and employees, not all of them belong to the union.

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Dreams Stall as City’s Engine of Mobility Sputters