

The Struggle for CUNY

A History of the CUNY Student Movement,

1969 – 1999

By Christopher Gunderson

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In 1969, Black and Puerto Rican students at City College fought for and won an unprecedented opening of admissions at the City University of New York (CUNY) that resulted in a radical transformation of the university. The student body doubled within a year and within seven years the almost all-white student body had become majority students of color.

In 1999 the CUNY Board of Trustees voted to eliminate remedial classes at CUNY's Senior Colleges, thereby finally eliminating a central pillar of the policy of Open Admissions and effectively ending it. It remains to be seen whether their decision will ultimately be reversed after a review by the State Board of Education, but for the moment Open Admissions at CUNY is effectively dead.

This is a history of the CUNY student movement that in 1969 won and for the next thirty years defended expanded access to the university.

CUNY was not the first institution to establish an Open Admissions policy, but the precise characteristics of that policy as applied to such a large institution serving a city like New York had an extraordinary impact quite unlike its application at land-grant public state universities in the mid-west. Almost overnight CUNY became the single largest degree-granting institution for Black and Latino students in the United States.

Federal civil rights laws prohibited discrimination in employment based on race, and affirmative action policies promised the partial rectification of past injustices. Open Admissions at CUNY made the promise of greater equality of opportunity and an enlarged Black and Brown middle class a reality.

Open Admissions was won at the high-tide of the civil rights and liberation struggles of the 1960s. It was a radical concession offered to increasingly insurgent

communities in the hopes of preventing a full scale social explosion that many in power feared might result in more radical sorts of change. But before Open Admissions could even be implemented, the backlash was underway. The attack on access to CUNY has taken a variety of forms over the years – budget cuts and freezes; the imposition of and then increases in tuition; attempts to control, cut back or eliminate ethnic studies programs and departments; and changes in the admissions formula for senior colleges. The overall result was a running thirty year battle over the identity of the university.

There have been a number of studies of the effects and implications of Open Admissions at CUNY including several that have tracked the changes over time in the actual policy.¹ That is not the focus of this paper. While there is a general acknowledgement of the importance of student actions in bringing about Open Admissions through the 1969 Open Admissions Strike, there has been less appreciation of the importance of student activism in the defense and maintenance of the policy for almost 30 years. But to treat Open Admissions primarily as a matter to be debated by policy makers and experts on education is a denial of its political character. Open Admissions was won as the result of the political mobilization of several constituencies in the context of larger political struggles, and it was preserved for as long as it was as a consequence of the continuing organization and mobilization of those constituencies. Chief amongst these has been CUNY students themselves.

Open Admissions has had some courageous defenders among faculty and administrators. At times they have staked their professional careers on its defense. But since the mid-70s it has been CUNY students who have been the most energetic and reliable defenders of Open Admissions and it was their actions, often militant, that

repeatedly stopped or at least slowed down the roll back of Open Admissions.

Community support of student struggles has often been crucial, but it has been student initiated actions that have called forth the most forceful community mobilizations.

There should be little doubt that, if not for the efforts of CUNY student activists, the collection of policies that taken together constituted Open Admissions would have been dismantled much more quickly. Even if at present it seems that they ultimately lost the fight to preserve Open Admissions, the truth is that by making the fight a protracted one they enabled literally tens of thousands of poor and working class New Yorkers, primarily people of color, to enter, attend and graduate from an institution of higher learning and to pursue the life advantages that attach to those opportunities. By so doing they helped reshape the social character of New York City.

The purpose of this paper is simply to present a narrative account of the struggles of CUNY students from 1969 to 1999 in defense of access to the university and to draw out, where it seems appropriate, some of the lessons of those struggles. While I touch on events over the entire thirty years I focus on four periods of particularly intense struggle in which large numbers of students were drawn into action and became a force to be reckoned with. Student activism and protests of one sort or another were more or less continuous over the entire thirty years. But for most of that time, the bodies responsible for the fate of the university – the Governor, the Mayor, the State Legislature, the City council, and the Board of Higher Education (later the Board of Trustees) – could safely ignore student opinion and generally did. On occasions, issues might even be resolved in a way coincidental with student interests, as when particular proposed budget cuts or

tuition increases were defeated in spite of no significant organized student opposition. In these situations, other interests were always at play. But on four separate occasions the CUNY student body became a social force in its own right. Each of these instances involved a mass shift in the consciousness of CUNY students in which they became aware of themselves as a collective actor able to assert their own vision of the university and to fight for it.

The first period is the Open Admissions Strike itself which I attempt to frame in the context of the history of CUNY as an institution, the global context of particularly sharp social conflict in the late 1960s, and the particular atmosphere established by student activism preceding the strike, with special attention on the situation at City College.

The second period is the so-called “Fiscal Crisis” which began in 1975 and ultimately resulted in the implementation of tuition at CUNY and significant changes in the Open Admissions policy. Here I give special attention to the struggle to defend Hostos Community College which (along with others) was targeted for elimination.

The third period is the 1989 and 1991 CUNY-wide student strikes against proposed tuition hikes and budget cuts.

The fourth and final period covers the struggles starting with the 1995 protests against further proposed tuition increases and budget cuts and ending with the elimination of remedial classes in the Senior Colleges, effectively bringing the experiment with Open Admissions to a close.

A Brief History of CUNY

The City University of New York (CUNY) has its origins in the Free Academy founded in 1847. At the opening ceremonies of the Free Academy, its president defined its mission:

“The experiment is to be tried whether the highest education can be given to the masses; whether the children of the people, the children of the whole people, can be educated; and whether an institution of learning of the highest grade can be successfully controlled by the popular will, not by the privileged few, but by the privileged many.”²

In 1870 the Free Academy (which later became the City College of New York or CCNY) was joined by Hunter College, originally a normal school for women. Brooklyn College was established in 1930 and Queens College in 1937. In the late 1950s, Staten Island, Bronx, and Queensborough Community Colleges were established and in 1961, New York City’s public colleges were brought under a common central administration and designated as the City University of New York.³ The same year the Graduate Center was established and in 1964 Kingsborough Community College and the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) were established and New York City Technical College was separated from the State University and incorporated into CUNY. York College was founded two years later and Baruch and Lehman Colleges were established on former campuses of City and Hunter respectively.⁴ According to Allen Ballard, the founding director of the SEEK program, by 1968, “the City University of New York, the world’s largest municipal institution, consisted of nine senior colleges with a total enrollment of 46,800 undergraduates, six community colleges enrolling 15,000 students, and a graduate school with 1,000 doctoral candidates.”⁵

The Free Academy may have been intended to serve “the children of the whole people” but in truth access to the university has always been an object of social struggle. Standards for admissions to the university and mechanisms for limiting the access of different communities have changed over the years. But because access to higher education has been the primary means of upward class mobility for poor and working class New Yorkers, CUNY has always been a battleground, and CUNY students have frequently been the protagonists in intense fights over the future of their university.

Prior to 1882 admissions to City and Hunter (called the Normal School until 1914) were limited to graduates of public schools, effectively excluding Catholic high school graduates. Starting in the 1880s the student body became increasingly Jewish so that “by 1905 Jews constituted 75 per cent” of City College students. The public colleges remained predominantly Jewish until after the Second World War when increasing numbers of Irish and Italians began to enter them.⁶

“The only requirements for entrance” to the colleges before 1924 “were New York City residence and a high school diploma.” In that year a high school average of 72% was established as a condition for admission when, for the first time, there were more applicants than seats. It rose to 80% during the Depression with the increase in unemployed high school graduates. With the flood of students from the GI Bill and then the entrance of the Baby Boomers the average continued to climb, so that by 1963 an 87% average was necessary to gain admission to Brooklyn College and 85% at City, Hunter and Queens.⁷

CUNY Student Activism Before 1969

While the character of student activism at CUNY changed dramatically with the implementation of Open Admissions it is important to at least note the character of student activism at the university prior to 1969. Well before the 1969 Open Admissions strike CUNY had a reputation as a hotbed of radical student activism and this contributed not only to the success of the strike but also to the militant resistance to the attempts to roll back the gains it had secured.

In the 1930s and 40s the colleges that would become the CUNY system were major centers of socialist and communist student activism on the part of the children of Eastern and Southern European immigrants, especially among Jews. City College in particular produced a whole generation of leading figures of American radicalism. During the McCarthy era of the 1950s, New York City's public colleges were one of the few places where socialists and communists in the United States dared to organize openly.

This tradition of leftist student activism ensured that the City University would be a significant and early center of activity during the upheavals that swept U.S. campuses in the 1960s. CUNY students formed early chapters of the Friends of SNCC and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) long before the name of the latter organization became a household word. CUNY students went south to participate in Mississippi Freedom Summer and came back radicalized.

One of the earliest SDS chapters was established at Brooklyn College in 1960.⁸ By the Fall of 1963 there was a chapter at City College and a handful of members at Hunter (where Friends of SNCC was already active) who would constitute a chapter in the spring. A Queens College SDS chapter was formed in the fall of 1964.⁹ In the Spring

of 1965 an SDS chapter was established at Queensboro Community College.¹⁰ By the fall SDS chapters had also been set up at the Bronx campus of Hunter and at Kingsborough Community College.¹¹

The three years leading up to the Open Admissions struggle saw a steady intensification of on-campus activism at CUNY, especially at City College. As on many campuses, opposition to the U.S. war on Viet Nam was high at CUNY and protests against the war in general and various forms of campus complicity in the war in particular became increasingly militant. These actions, again based largely among white students, established both a mood and a series of tactical precedents for a style of militant action that contributed to the atmosphere in which the Open Admissions strikers were able to win.

In December 1966, students at City organized a sit-in at the placement office against the provision of class rankings to the Selective Service System. Class rankings were used in the determination of the draft status of male students and were therefore viewed literally as a matter of life and death. SDS organized nationwide actions against the rankings beginning in the spring of 1966. The anti-ranking actions were the first example of what would become a more general form of protest against specific examples of campus complicity in the Viet Nam War.¹² The anti-ranking sit-in at City College ultimately led to the suspension of 34 students.¹³

The following year a November 1 demonstration against construction on the City College campus organized by a radical counter-cultural group called the City College Commune led to suspension of 46 students for 2 to 5 weeks.¹⁴ The Commune would become one of the main sources of white student support for the Open Admissions strike

two years later. Two weeks later, on November 13, over 100 students held a sit-in in the corridor of Steinman Hall at City to protest the presence of employment recruiters from Dow Chemical on campus. Dow was already well known for its manufacture of napalm used in the Viet Nam War. Student protests were often reinforced by activism on the part of faculty. The day after the anti-Dow sit-in the City College faculty voted to strip classes conducted by the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) of their accreditation by the college. And when thirteen students were suspended for their participation in the sit-in, Assistant Professor of English James V. Hatch publicly resigned in protest.¹⁵ The drum beat of anti-war demonstrations helped set the stage for the coming Open Admissions strike. Ballard, for example, observes that “(s)tudent and faculty demonstrations against Dow Chemical and ROTC led to an unstable atmosphere” on the CCNY campus.¹⁶

Of course not all student protests took place on campus. CUNY students participated in all the national and city-wide protests against the war. And in December 1967 ten CCNY students joined other young men in turning in their draft cards at the Brooklyn Church of St. John the Evangelist.¹⁷ And not all protest was focused on the war. Fully a year before the Open Admissions Strike at CCNY, the Third World Coalition at Hunter College was demanding the creation of a Black and Puerto Rican Studies Department.¹⁸ Indeed similar demands were being raised on several campuses including CCNY, Lehman, and Brooklyn.

The Global Context

The atmosphere that existed at CUNY in the late 1960s was not simply the product of the activism of CUNY students themselves. Rather it reflected a worldwide

atmosphere of social upheaval. The rapid decolonization of Africa, the Cuban Revolution and the appearance of armed national liberation movements across Latin America, the upheavals taking place in China, and the heroic resistance of the Vietnamese to the aggression of the mightiest military power in human history all contributed to a situation in which oppressed people everywhere imagined that they could make great gains through struggle.

The international situation had a profound influence on the conditions for struggle inside the United States. The competition between the Soviet Union and the United States for the sympathies of the newly independent Third World countries made the system of legal white supremacy in the Southern U.S. particularly vulnerable to challenge. Once the fight for civil rights in the South was joined, all of the internal contradictions of U.S. society were brought forward. Domestic and international events fed on each other, each in turn raising up the general level of political consciousness and willingness to engage in struggle on the part of oppressed people inside the U.S.. Sit-ins and freedom rides were followed by urban rebellions which in turn were followed by the appearance of organized militant forces like the Black Panther Party and the Young Lords.¹⁹

1968 saw an acceleration of all these processes. Starting with the Tet offensive and followed by the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. which sparked urban revolts in over 100 U.S. cities, then the appearance of a revolutionary situation in France in May, and the demonstrations and police repression at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, by the fall the whole social order seemed extraordinarily fragile.

In New York City, the strike by the United Federation of Teachers against Black and Latino community control of the schools revealed the enormous social fault lines that

ran through the city. The political elite of New York City was terrified that any sort of intensified struggle might take things to yet a higher level and directly threaten their power. They further understood that any sort of major social explosion in New York City would have a profound impact on the rest of the country.

It is difficult today to really understand how precarious the situation seemed for those in power. And since they were ultimately able to maintain themselves it is tempting to regard such estimations in hindsight as exaggerations. Not surprisingly this is the interpretation favored by the powerful themselves if only because it reinforces the appearance of their invulnerability. But the truth leaves its traces. Among these were the sorts of concessions like Open Admissions that were made at the time in the hope of securing social peace.

This then was the larger context when students at CCNY returned to school in the fall of 1968. In October members of the City College Commune disrupted ROTC classes and employment recruiting by Hughes Aircraft. Five students were subsequently suspended.²⁰ In November, the New York Resistance (an anti-draft group) and the City College Commune offered sanctuary to Pvt. William Brakefield in the Finley Student Center ballroom. After an eight-day stand off CCNY President Buell Gallagher called in the police and 164 people were arrested.²¹ Faculty outrage at Gallagher's decision to call in the police would subsequently inform his response to the Open Admissions Strike.²² A month later members of the City College Commune forced their way into the office of Associate Dean of Students James Peace and rifled through disciplinary files. Five students were subsequently brought up on criminal charges.²³

The Open Admissions Strike

The Open Admissions Strike was a dramatic event that radically transformed CUNY as no other protest before or since has. It set a standard of militancy in the fight for access to education that informed subsequent struggles to defend what it conquered. In order to appreciate its significance it is necessary to understand the character of CUNY before Open Admissions. Ballard notes that before 1964 “(t)he university’s faculty and student body ... was almost totally white”²⁴ In that year “under the impetus of editorials by the *New York Amsterdam News* ... and pressure from Black state legislators, the (Board of Higher Education) initiated the College Discovery Program” under which 250 Black students were admitted to the community colleges.²⁵

In response to the advances of the civil rights movement it was increasingly politically impossible to keep CUNY an essentially all-white institution. Both the state legislature and the university saw the need to open up access to CUNY to some degree. In 1965 City College initiated the SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge) program with 105 Black and Puerto Rican students. The SEEK program placed students who did not meet normal admissions requirements in the University and gave them support in the form of remedial classes, tutoring, financial assistance and so on. The students initially selected for the SEEK program were chosen based on recommendations by teachers and counselors who saw in them talents that were not reflected in their grades or test score. In short they were naturally bright and talented young men and women who had been cheated by the New York City Public Schools. By 1966 SEEK was established CUNY-wide and by 1968 1500 students were enrolled in SEEK (600 of them at CCNY)²⁶

By the 1968-69 academic year New York City was a bomb waiting to explode and City College was a strategically located fuse in the heart of Harlem, the capital of Black America. The college had a deeply rooted tradition of radical and militant activism, and a small core of carefully selected Black and Puerto Rican students who had entered the college through the new SEEK program. Although they had been selected for participation in the program precisely because of their promise, the SEEK students were consistently treated as second-class students (they were even deprived of the right to vote in Student Government elections!) and had accumulated a series of particular grievances against their own treatment at CUNY. But far more importantly they had developed a sense of responsibility to the communities they came from to use their tenuous position inside the ivory tower to advance the liberations struggles of their peoples. Ballard explains, “(T)he Black and Puerto Rican students on the campus, although small in proportion to the total student body, were extremely well organized, well led, and supported by a group of Black and Puerto Rican faculty who had been recruited to teach and counsel in the SEEK program.”²⁷

City College was committed to the expansion of educational opportunities for Black and Latino students, but the school’s plans lacked any sense of the urgency felt by the Black and Puerto Rican student population. According to Ballard:

“The colleges’s master plan called for a total SEEK program size of 1,200 students by 1975, a growth rate that would have resulted in eight years, in a student body 10 per cent Black and 5 per cent Puerto Rican. While such an increase might have been appropriate for some colleges, it was inappropriate for an institution so near to Harlem.”²⁸

The go slow approach was not limited to the administration. Indeed, most radical white faculty opposed a proposal in 1968 to have a 25% Black and Puerto Rican entering class in the Fall of that year.²⁹

Student agitation for increased admissions of Black and Puerto Rican students began in the Fall of 1968. The W.E.B. DuBois Club, a student organization affiliated with the Communist Party, that at City College was predominantly Black, collected around 1,500 student signatures on a statement that it then placed as an advertisement in the City College newspaper, *The Campus*. The statement included six demands:

1. that the racial composition of all future entering classes reflect that of the high school graduating classes in New York City.
2. that the SEEK program be at least quadrupled by January 1969 and extended to include those without a high school diploma.
3. that enough new senior colleges be built within the next two years in New York City to accommodate all students who graduate from high school.
4. That stipends substantial enough to live on decently be given to all those students who can not afford to go to college.
5. community-student-faculty control of the City University
6. a. that Black, Puerto Rican and labor history be integrated into the curriculum at all levels.
b. that Black and Puerto Rican history courses and the Spanish language be requirement for education majors.³⁰

Several of the W.E.B. DuBois Club demands would later be echoed in the five demands raised by the Black and Puerto Rican Student Community.

In January, 1969, New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller poured fuel on the smoldering frustration of Black and Puerto Rican students with a budget proposal that called for slashing the SEEK program and reducing Fall admissions by 20%.³¹ Rather than moving forward with the tepid master plan, the Governor was calling for a roll back of the small foothold Black and Puerto Rican students had at CUNY!

On February 6, a meeting was called by the Committee of Ten, composed of leaders of Black and Puerto Rican student organizations that drafted the five demands that would be the focus of the struggle.³² On February 13, 1969, Black and Puerto Rican students occupied the office of CCNY President Gallagher for four hours and presented the five demands:

1. That a School of Black and Puerto Rican Studies be established.
2. That a separate orientation program for Black and Puerto Rican students be established.
3. That students be given a voice in the administration of the SEEK program.
4. The number of minority freshmen in the entering class reflect the 40-45 ratio of Blacks and Puerto Ricans in the total school system.
5. That Black and Puerto Rican history course be compulsory for education majors and that Spanish language courses be compulsory for education majors.³³

It is worth noting that Open Admissions was not among the demands. The fourth demand, for proportional representation of Blacks and Puerto Ricans in future entering classes, was in fact more focused than what actually came to pass.

The Black and Puerto Rican Student Community (BPRSC) avoided any direct confrontation with the administration for the next two months, essentially agitating amongst the student body in support of the five demands and preparing their forces for a more dramatic action. In late February a Black and Puerto Rican-led slate came in second place in student government elections on a platform of “universal free higher education.”³⁴ On March 7, SNCC leader Rap Brown spoke at CCNY’s Great Hall.³⁵ Similar events reflected a high degree of activity on the part of the student body, especially the Black and Puerto Rican students. On March 18, 13,000 students, including five busloads from CCNY alone, rallied in Albany to oppose the proposed budget cuts.³⁶

Shortly thereafter the State Legislature passed a budget incorporating most of Rockefeller's proposed cuts. In response, CCNY President Gallagher submitted his resignation to the Board of Higher Education in protest.³⁷ The resignation letter was pointed:

“... I have taken every honorable step – but one – within my power, as an effort to avert the threatened mutilation of the university. Among the measures necessary if we were to attempt to open our doors under such a budget next September would be these: 1. admit no freshman class; 2 admit no entrants to the SEEK program; 3. close the evening and summer sessions; 4. scrap our plans for black and Puerto Rican studies, and 5. terminate graduate work.”

Then invoking a powerful image from the Southern civil rights movement he continued:

“I am now asked by officers of government ... to stand in the door and keep students out. I shall not accede, I will not do it. I will not turn my back on the poor of all races. ... I will be unfaithful to none of my brothers, black or white.”

He goes on:

“Is this to be the final word from the richest city in the richest state in the richest country in the world? ... Instead of serving as a lackey of political expediency and fiscal timidity, I want to be free to fight the battles and for freedom and justice and brotherhood.”

Twenty-three out of twenty seven department chairs, joined Gallagher in offering their resignations as well. Gallagher's stunning action, the sharp words in his letter of resignation, and the solidarity of the department chairs undoubtedly gave encouragement to the BPRSC.

They did not wait long to act. On Monday, April 21, almost a thousand Black and Puerto Rican students marched through the campus in support of the five demands. A simultaneous boycott of classes was thirty per cent effective.

Events escalated the next day when more than a hundred members of the BPRSC closed the entrances to the CCNY South campus. This was the beginning of the Open Admissions strike. In solidarity with the BPRSC actions, members of the City College Commune locked themselves in Bowler Lounge. On faculty advice President Gallagher closed the campus on Wednesday.

In spite of the closure, radical white students were able to seize a second building, Klapper Hall, which they renamed after Black Panther leader Huey P. Newton. The same day the City College faculty met in the Great Hall to hear the demands of the BPRSC. Gallagher announced the beginning of negotiations with the BPRSC and cancelled classes through Monday.³⁸

On Thursday, April 24, CCNY faculty voted 221 to 1 to “oppose the employment of force or the resort to injunctive procedures in order to resolve this dispute as long as negotiations are going forward.”³⁹ This gave the strikers even greater leverage. Negotiations with the strikers continued over the weekend and into Monday, but faltered on Tuesday, April 29 after the BPRSC discovered and seized a police agent on the South Campus. The same day an attempted rally against the strike by students in the Engineering Department fizzled.⁴⁰

Actions were by no means confined to the CCNY campus. On Monday, April 21, 400 Students at Queensborough Community College sat-in at their administration building. The same day saw large rallies at Brooklyn College and Queens College. And the protests were not limited to CUNY either. Two high schools in Brooklyn had to be closed. Students set fires at Erasmus High in Brooklyn and De Witt Clinton in the Bronx. At Bushwick High School one hundred students held a sit-in.⁴¹

As the occupation at City College continued, increasing pressure was put on President Gallagher to call in the police to clear out the strikers. On May 1, two “orders to show cause” for closing the college were served on Gallagher respectively by Congressman Mario Biaggi and the Jewish Defense League.⁴² The next day Gallagher was served with a restraining order obtained by City Controller (and Mayoral candidate) Mario Procaccino ordering that the college be re-opened. Gallagher ignored the order and called for a faculty meeting on Sunday, May 4 where substantial agreement was supposedly reached on meeting the BPRSC demands.⁴³

As if to underline the precariousness of the situation, that same day Black and Puerto Rican students took over the main building at Bronx Community College (BCC), chaining shut four doors, and demanding Black, Puerto Rican and Asian faculty and greater student voice in operations of the college. Cuban and Vietnamese National Liberation Front (Viet Cong) flags were hung from the school. The BCC administration quickly announced that the college was to be closed in response.⁴⁴

On Monday, May 5, negotiations between the strikers and the administration were interrupted when the occupiers of the CCNY South Campus and Klapper Hall were served with injunctions issued at the request of the Board of Higher Education and the takeovers ended.⁴⁵ Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr. “urged the insurgents to defy the injunction.”⁴⁶ But when white student supporters decided to give up their buildings, the BPRSC followed suit.

Over the next several days “racial strife broke out between Black and white students when some white male students physically attacked a group of Black female

students.” With fights breaking out between groups of students across the campus the police were then called in to occupy the college.⁴⁷

On Thursday, May 8, the fighting between students continued with the police targeting Black and Puerto Rican students and their white allies for arrests. The same day the Finley Student Center was “severely damaged” by a fire, presumably set by supporters of the strike. Ten other smaller fires were also set at other locations around the campus.⁴⁸ The fires were an indication to university officials that if they did not act that the situation was about to go from bad to worse. The next day the CUNY Board of Higher Education effectively reversed its previous position and declared a commitment to meeting the demands of the strikers, including a policy of Open Admissions.

What led to this reversal? Ballard captures both the calculations and the spirit of the decision when he says

“it is no exaggeration to state that the atmosphere at the board in that spring of 1969 was akin in mood to that which must have prevailed in general Westmoreland’s headquarters as the reports of the impact of the Tet offensive came in.. For not only was City College in a state of siege, but almost every other institution in the university was being paralyzed by racial conflict, related both to admissions policies and to proposed Black studies programs. ... the chancellor and the board realized that there would be no peace in the university until some positive answers to the students demands were forthcoming ...”⁴⁹

University Deputy Chancellor Seymour H. Hyman confirms Ballard’s account, describing his own response to the burning of Finley “the only question in my mind was, How can we save City College? And the only answer was, Hell, let everybody in.”⁵⁰

President Gallagher was replaced at this point with Professor Joseph Copeland and negotiations with the Black and Puerto Rican faculty and the BPRSC were revived to determine the precise terms of the new policies. “An agreement among these parties was reached on the two major issues” Ballard recounts,

“there was to be a School of Urban and Third World Studies, and an admissions policy was devised that would have resulted by the fall semester of 1970 in a dual admissions system. Under the agreement, half of City College’s freshmen were to have been admitted on the basis of grades and the other half on the basis of graduating from schools that traditionally had sent few of their graduates to college. In short, the students had won their demands.”⁵¹

However,

“in early June, the faculty senate of CCNY rejected outright the negotiated agreement, using instead the time-honored device of appointing a committee to examine the ‘feasibility’ of establishing a Black and Puerto Rican studies program, and substituting a pallid admissions formula that would have brought in 400 Black and Puerto Rican students in addition to those already admitted under the SEEK program.”

It was then up to the Board of Higher Education to reverse the CCNY faculty in July.⁵²

The final policy would not be decided on by the Board of Higher Education until November. It guaranteed admission to the senior colleges to any student with an 80% average OR who graduated in the top 50% of their graduating class, giving preference in choice of schools to higher ranking students.⁵³ This formula would have some fateful and not entirely anticipated effects. The first was that an enormous number of white working class students were among the beneficiaries of the Open Admissions strike led by Black and Puerto Rican students. The second effect was to create a semi-segregated university in which some campuses became virtually all-Black and/or Latino while others remained predominantly white as a consequence of giving the (usually white) higher ranking students preference in choosing their school.

It should be remembered here that the BPRSC had not demanded Open Admissions, but rather the proportional representation of Black and Puerto Rican students in the entering freshman class. But had the BPRSC demand been the basis of the policy it

would have created a situation in which Black and Puerto Rican students would have gained admission while equally or more academically qualified whites would have been denied access. Such a policy would have ensured that the limited (and always under threat) resources of the university would be employed to correct the historical racial imbalance in access to the university. While that was the objective of the strike, fear of antagonizing working class white communities led to another policy: Open Admissions. This had two results. The first was the creation of a base of white support for the new policy as white working class youth who would never have gotten into CUNY under the old admissions standards were let in en masse. The second was to dramatically increase the costs and strains that the policy put on the university.

In spite of all this the Open Admissions Strike had was a tremendous victory for the Black and Puerto Rican communities of New York City. It is worth pausing here to attempt to draw out a few lessons from this battle. First, it tells us how desperate the powers that be felt in 1969. Ballard's description of the sense of being under siege characterized not just City College but practically every major institution in U.S. society at the time. That such a situation is possible is important to remember in the current period of relative quiescence. Second, it shows us how much can be accomplished by a relatively small number of dedicated people with an appreciation of larger social dynamics. The BPRSC was not a large organization. It had a compact leadership core (the Committee of Ten) and commanded the allegiance of a couple hundred students at CCNY. Ultimately it was able to seize the imaginations of many more, but this is not how it began. The BPRSC seized on a spirit of insurgency that had already gripped the campus around the war in Vietnam and returned the focus to the liberation struggles of

oppressed people in the United States. The BPRSC both understood the urgency of taking action quickly and the potential for winning real concessions. They acted in a bold and creative manner and captured the attention of the powers that be and the imaginations of other students. They transformed a situation of defeat – the passage of devastating budget cuts – into its opposite – the opening up of the university to huge numbers of previously excluded young people of all colors . Third and finally the Open Admissions strike demonstrated the power of students to bring about significant social change by taking militant direct action. While the BPRSC utilized a variety of tactics to build support for their demands, they recognized that their greatest power lay in their ability to disrupt the normal functioning of the university and to threaten even greater social disruption. They did not emphasize registering students as voters or calling or lobbying their elected representatives in Albany not because such tactics have no worth, but because they knew that their power to win radical concessions rested on their willingness to engage in radical action.

The Effects of Open Admissions

While it is not my purpose here to document all the effects of Open Admissions it is necessary to note some of the dramatic changes that occurred in the University as a result of the implementation of the policy. These changes shaped the terms and terrain of student struggles after 1969 in a number of important ways. First and foremost the size and composition of the student body underwent significant changes. The CUNY student body doubled almost immediately almost quadrupled by 1975. And over the course of the 1970s CUNY went from virtually all-white to a majority Black and Latino student body.

Most students correctly associated the policies of Open Admissions with their opportunity to attend college. In 1969 the policy of Open Admissions commanded the support of a minority of CUNY students.⁵⁴ That minority was well organized and supported by larger social forces and therefore able to prevail. But by the early 1970s a majority of CUNY students clearly supported the new policies and constituted a reliable social base for organized political activity in their defense. On most campuses, student governments passed into the hands of activist students of color and became resources for the defense of Open Admissions, with student government leaders sometimes constituting the actual leadership of the student movement on their campuses.

There were other significant changes as well. Many faculty left CUNY during the early-70s because of their displeasure with the new policy. This included many ostensibly “progressive” faculty and not just conservatives. These faculty were replaced largely with faculty who, to one degree or another, supported or accepted the new policy. There was also considerable upheaval in the administration of the various colleges and the University as a whole. The SEEK program was expanded considerably and Ethnic Studies programs and departments established on many campuses. There was widespread vision of the university as a resource of the community and campus facilities were made increasingly available to community based organizations. The overall result was what might be called a situation of “dual power” in which the public resources of the university were utilized by progressive social forces based in insurgent communities of color to develop a new layer of college trained and educated community leaders.⁵⁵

There was a temporary convergence of two visions of the university: an essentially liberal social-welfare vision committed to improving the lot of poor

communities through improved access to education and what could be called a liberationist vision that viewed that education as a means for building the capacities of oppressed communities to wage further social struggles. The SEEK and ethnic studies programs in particular became centers for the latter liberationist vision. In the face of an almost immediate backlash against Open Admissions these two trends were effectively forced to make common cause in defense of the policy. Initially this de facto alliance was to the benefit of the liberationists, who until the advent of Open Admissions had essentially no institutional power. Over time however as the backlash slowly gained ground it would be the conquests of the liberationists that would often be sacrificed. An early indication of this tendency was the resistance of the CCNY and other senior college tenured faculties to the automatic transfer of community college credits and admission of community college students as upperclassmen.⁵⁶

Struggles in the 70s

The conquest of Open Admissions did not bring about an end to student activism at CUNY. Far from it. Well into the 1970s, CUNY campuses remained hotbeds of radical student activism. From the fall of 1969 to the spring of 1975 CUNY experienced a generally high level of student activism, but nothing comparable to the events of spring 1969. This was a nationwide phenomena. Both the carrot and the stick were used effectively to restore order on campuses and in society at large. From Open Admissions to the end of conscription, major concessions were made to insurgent constituencies in the hope of pacifying them. COINTELPRO actions directed at organizations like the Black Panther Party, the Young Lords and SDS, combined with real internal frictions,

contributed to the effective destruction of those organizations and a general weakening of organized radical forces.⁵⁷ And the role of simple exhaustion should not be discounted. The Open Admissions strike took a lot out of its participants physically, emotionally and academically. A hard core of committed activists continued to carry on the work, but the larger periphery of students, who could be counted on to attend a demonstration if not a planning meeting, began to shrink.⁵⁸

The steady growth of the proportion of Black and Latino students in the university fueled a series of struggles over a variety of issues. In several instances fights were waged to defend the newly established ethnic studies programs and departments from various attempts to reduce their strength or independence. As students of color came to constitute a majority on various campuses there were also struggles for control over student governments. And of course the continuing war on Viet Nam remained a major concern for students of all colors, as did the practically annual attempts to cut CUNY's budget.

Mention of a few incidents should convey the spirit of the times. In November 1969 five students were arrested at CCNY for raising an upside down American flag on a college building in protest against the war.⁵⁹ Several months later at Brooklyn College 20 students were arrested in a demonstration defending the newly established Institutes of Afro-American and Puerto Rican Studies.⁶⁰

Open Admissions went into effect in the Fall of 1970. Most accounts emphasize the dramatic nature of the change, sometimes in lurid terms: "open admissions hit the City College campus like the D-day landing. ... Chaos reigned: Students stood in line for hours, sometimes for an entire day, just to register."⁶¹ Of course these accounts reflect the

social position of the writers. For people who had, in effect, already waited hundreds of years for the opportunity to attend college, spending a day in line to register for classes, while undoubtedly annoying, probably did not seem like such a disaster. (The original D-day, after all, for all of the chaos involved had also been the beginning of a process of liberation.)

Nonetheless the changes were enormous. According to Lavin and Hyllegard “(i)n September 1970 a freshman class of almost 35,000 students took their seats at CUNY – a 75 percent increase over the previous year’s entering class.”⁶² By 1974 the entering class had risen to almost 42,000 students.⁶³ And clearly the university was poorly prepared for these changes.

Almost immediately the Open Admissions policy came under fierce attack, with every misstep seized on as evidence of the folly of the whole endeavor. Mistakes were inevitable, but some forces seemed determined from the outset to prevent the new policy from succeeding. As if determined to sabotage the project before it could get off the ground, Governor Rockefeller called a special session of the State Legislature on January 6, 1972 to freeze CUNY’s budget at the previous year’s level. Without increased funding to meet the needs of the rapidly growing student body, application of the policy of Open Admissions would mean less resources devoted to students who, because of their lack of academic preparation, were in need of *more* resources. The student response to this attack was almost instantaneous. By January 31 the formation of a Coalition to Save CUNY was announced. The Coalition even claimed the support of 13 of 20 CUNY college presidents.⁶⁴ On March 3, CUNY students delivered over 80,000 signatures on petitions protesting the budget to Governor Rockefeller’s New York City office.⁶⁵ Three weeks

later 100 students from CUNY wearing black robes conducted a mock funeral procession from the BHE offices on 80th Street, down Lexington Avenue, and to the governor's office at 55th Street and 3rd Avenue.⁶⁶

The fight against the budget cuts wasn't the only issue claiming the attention of student activists at CUNY that spring. On April 20, 800 Hunter students rallied against the intensified air war on Viet Nam and joined nationwide student strike the next day.⁶⁷ A week later the Hunter Day Session Student Senate passed a resolution expressing "disgust and outrage over the continuation and now escalation of the war in Indochina."⁶⁸

The changing ethnic makeup of the university and the uncertainty about the future of newly established ethnic studies programs also generated protests. On February 23 four outside musicians and two students were arrested for playing Congas in the South Lounge of Hunter College. The two students were Jose Cruz and Manuel Otero, members of la Sociedad Eugenio Maria de Hostos, a Puerto Rican student organization subsequently involved in a struggle over the fate of the Puerto Rican Studies sequence at Hunter. Students protested the arrests and the Conga players were later invited to perform on campus by the Black Student Union.⁶⁹

In April, Puerto Rican students and faculty at Hunter raised objections to the treatment of Puerto Rican Studies by the Hunter administration. In particular they objected to the imposition of an interim director, Luis Rodriguez-Abad on the program by President Jacqueline Wexler, and the failure to re-appoint Edgardo Lopez-Ferrer, an instructor in Puerto Rican literature, as well as problems with payrolls and the lack of adequate office space for the program. On May 3, an emergency meeting of student government, faculty and administrators concerning a call for a student strike turned into a

shouting match when students pushed past security to get in. Wexler threatened to call the police on campus. On May 10, the “Committee to Save Our Studies” organized a rally at Hunter that marched on the Board of Higher Education where thirty Hunter students and three faculty prevented BHE Chairman Luis Quero-Chiese from leaving a conference room for four hours.⁷⁰ When President Wexler refused to address a follow up rally the next day eleven students and four Puerto Rican faculty occupied the office of Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter and were arrested the next morning.⁷¹

The 1972-73 school year followed a familiar pattern with a high degree of anti-war activism in the fall, followed by a shift towards struggles in response to budget proposals in the spring. The Hunter College Day Session Student Government was offering draft counseling to young men up until the announcement of the end of military conscription on January 28, 1973.⁷² November 18 saw nationwide student demonstrations against the war.⁷³ But the end of the draft and the beginning of the U.S. withdrawal from Southeast Asia meant a general winding down of anti-war activism. In late November, fifty students took over the office of Hunter College President Wexler protesting the killing of two students at Southern University by Louisiana State Police and demanding that Wexler sign a forceful condemnation of the killings and a statement that she would never call the police or National Guard onto Hunter.⁷⁴

Governor Rockefeller sparked another round of student protests when he proposed the introduction of tuition at \$650 per year at CUNY.⁷⁵ An Ad Hoc CUNY Coalition was formed to organize an April 26 Rally in Defense of Free Tuition and Open Admissions. The Coalition was composed of the Black Studies Collective, Boricuas Unidos, Concerned Asian Students, and the Attica Brigade (a white anti-imperialist

student organization).⁷⁶ In May over 400 CUNY students seized a building at City College to protest what they regarded as the arbitrary suspension of SEEK students.⁷⁷ Rockefeller's proposed introduction of tuition was ultimately abandoned, but it was an indication of what was on the minds of the powers that be.

The following school year saw an upsurge in activity on the part of Latino students and around Latino issues. On October 30, 1973 Puerto Rican students and faculty from Hunter College participated in a National March on Washington demanding freedom for Puerto Rican Nationalist political prisoners. The contingent had the support of the Black and Puerto Rican Studies Department along with two student clubs, Puerto Ricans United and the Hostos club.⁷⁸ A month later Cesar Chavez spoke at Hunter to build support for the United Farm Workers grape boycott.⁷⁹

The fall activities presaged an emerging confrontation in defense of Puerto Rican studies. On March 23, 1974, 400 CUNY students and faculty attended a CUNY-wide Puerto Rican Studies Conference. Benjamin Ortiz, Director of Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter described "the primary purpose of the conference" as "to analyze and develop a joint strategy that engulfs students, faculty and workers against the attempt to destroy Puerto Rican studies at CUNY."⁸⁰

The cross campus solidarity fostered by the conference bore fruit the next fall when Brooklyn College President John Keller rejected the choice of a search committee for Director of the Puerto Rican Studies Department. Keller sought to impose his own choice, Elda Lugo, over Maria Sanchez, the choice of the department's search committee.

On October 22, 1974 students at Brooklyn College took over the registrar's office in protest. The takeover lasted three days and attracted support from other CUNY

campuses, notably Hunter, which had experienced a similar struggle three years earlier. Puerto Rican studies classes at Hunter were cancelled so that students and faculty could support the action at Brooklyn College. Ultimately 44 students were arrested for their participation in the action.⁸¹ But the battle at Brooklyn College however would be quickly overshadowed by a much broader struggle.

None of the struggles that took place between 1969 and 1975 had the intensity of the Open Admissions strike. But they were important nonetheless. In some cases they were important defensive struggles that successfully preserved some of the gains won in 1969. More importantly they contributed to the ongoing development of a cadre of student leaders who would come to play a very important role when larger numbers of students were once again ready to move. Small demonstrations that attracted only a few dozen students were undoubtedly frustrating for their organizers, but it was precisely this sort of ongoing activity that schooled them in the basic techniques of organizing that they would soon employ on a much larger scale.

The New York City “Fiscal Crisis”

In 1975 New York City entered its so-called “fiscal crisis.” The New York City fiscal crisis is commonly viewed in isolation, as a self-inflicted product of profligate spending and poor financial management on the part of the city. This view is inadequate for a proper understanding of the effects of the fiscal crisis on the City University or the student movement that exploded in opposition to the measures that were proposed to change the character of CUNY.

By outward appearances the crisis was a natural consequence of the downgrading of New York City's bond ratings in response to its ballooning debt and shrinking tax base. But this market-centered view denies the essentially political nature of what happened. Deficit spending had financed both the war on Vietnam and the expansion of various social programs in response to the insurgencies of the 1960s and early 70s. When the country was hit by a recession in 1973, it was regarded as an opportunity by the U.S. ruling class to begin to roll back some of the gains made by popular movements over the preceding decade. The political situation did not yet permit a full-scale assault on federal spending on social programs. That would have to wait until the 1980s. Rather the assault was to begin on the municipal level.

Befitting its size and diversity, New York City had the largest array of municipal social programs of any city in the country, and this made New York an ideal target for what would later be called "shock therapy" when it was applied to poor countries in the 80s and 90s. The imposition of a regime of intense fiscal austerity on New York City was not just aimed at New York. It was intended to send a message to every municipality in the country. The bond rating system essentially empowers private financial institutions to set public fiscal policy. By abruptly and sharply downgrading New York City's bond rating, the fiscal crisis was in effect manufactured. It was not unlike the process by which the International Monetary Fund created a global Third World "debt crisis" in the early 1980s that enabled it to impose Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) on much of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The important thing to keep in mind here is that bond ratings are not simply and directly determined by the impersonal forces of the marketplace. They are determined by very powerful people who personally and directly control the financial

ratings institutions. Particular determinations may (or may not) be in response to market developments, but they are all political in nature. The creation of a fiscal crisis in New York City let every municipal government in the country know what they could expect if they thought they could buck the demands of the major banks and other financial institutions that controlled the bond markets.

In the case of New York City this anti-democratic process was actually formally enshrined in the form of the Emergency Financial Control Board (EFCB), a special body created in response to the fiscal crisis which “was charged with overseeing and approving a wide range of municipal decisions with fiscal implications.” The EFCB “was constituted primarily by individuals representing the interests of investors and the financial community.”⁸² Karl Marx’s famous description of the “executive of the state” as “but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie”⁸³ had possibly never been more precise.

Just as the imposition of austerity on CUNY should be viewed in a global context it is worth recalling the larger context in which the student movement that resisted it arose. In the international arena the U.S. had just suffered a major military defeat and had been forced to withdraw from Viet Nam. President Nixon had been forced to resign as a result of the Watergate scandal. And a major confrontation was emerging in Southern Africa where the U.S. was threatening intervention in Angola and Black students in South Africa organized in the Black Consciousness Movement were preparing a major confrontation with the apartheid regime. Closer to home, the attempt to integrate Boston’s public schools through busing had provoked an ugly racist response from the white working class community of South Boston. The situation was not as it had been in

1969 when it seemed that the tide was moving all in one direction. But neither was it one of abject surrender. Rather there was a widespread perception that there was pressing need to struggle, either to defend what had already been won but was now under attack, or to regain the momentum lost since the late 60s. This then was the situation when the fiscal crisis hit New York City and CUNY.

In late spring, the Mayor announced deep cuts for all city agencies, including CUNY. CUNY, anticipating a budget of \$650 million, was slated for \$87 million in cuts. But the cuts didn't stop there. In August the Mayor announced an additional cut of \$32 million to CUNY. The cuts in city funding in turn triggered an additional \$23 million in state cuts which were tied to city spending by a legislated funding formula. Scrambling to absorb \$87 million in cuts, CUNY suddenly found itself having to deal with a total of \$142 million in cuts.

Organizing against the cuts at CUNY began before the full extent and ultimate implications of the proposed cuts were known. Organized student opposition first appeared at Hunter College. On February 18, a Hunter Ad-Hoc Committee on the Budget Cuts was organized by Puerto Ricans United, the Puerto Rican Student Union, the Radical Student Union (a white student organization) and the Young Socialist Alliance (the student wing of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party).⁸⁴ Similar initiatives were soon underway CUNY-wide.

On April 23, Mayor Abe Beame proposed an increase in student fees to \$90 plus the introduction of tuition at \$25 per credit. Within days protests broke out across CUNY. On April 28, 75 students at Hunter College took over the Student Activities office to demand demanding an auditorium for a planned rally against budget cuts and proposed

introduction of tuition. The administration quickly granted the students demand. Later that day 700 SEEK students protested at the Board of Higher Education. Two days later 1,500 Hunter students rallied in the auditorium. After the rally, protesters seized the Dean of Students office and held it overnight.⁸⁵

The protests continued with takeovers taking place at Lehman and City College. On May 8, a CUNY-wide rally took place at Gracie Mansion⁸⁶ And a week after that 100 CUNY students and faculty took over the BHE offices.⁸⁷

The demonstrations in the spring of 1975 only prefigured what was to come. But they also revealed an ideological fault line that was to persistently reappear within the CUNY student movement. This fault line was over whether to view the proposed cuts exclusively in economic terms, as an assault on poor and working class New Yorkers irrespective of race, or to view them primarily as a racist assault on the educational opportunities of communities of color. The concrete question around which the issue came up was one of whether or not to emphasize the potential impact of the cuts on ethnic studies programs and SEEK.

A particularly clear statement of one side of this contradiction appeared in an opinion piece in the Hunter Envoy titled “SEEK Protest Divides Students” by Deborah De Sarle:

“Mayor Beame’s proposed cutbacks to CUNY educational programs, financial and the proposed raise in tuition involves and directly affects all students of the City University. All of CUNY have risen in protest to this threat to free education. Students have united for this cause in all but one campus: HUNTER COLLEGE. Here, where the initiative to rally was taken, the emphasis has been on racial discrimination rather than on the universal effects of the cutbacks on students. The Ad-Hoc Committee Against the Budget Cuts have given SEEK and Black/Puerto Rican Studies a major priority over the other issues at hand in this struggle. ... The leadership of the Ad-Hoc Coalition has succeeded in widening

the increasing gap among ethnic groups rather than creating a feeling of solidarity among students.”⁸⁸

This contradiction represents in part the division between the liberal and the liberationist visions of Open Admissions at CUNY. The truth of course was that not all the effects of the cutbacks were going to be universal. The introduction of tuition would be a hardship for most students, but it would tend to push only the poorest students out of school altogether. These students would be disproportionately Black, Latino and Asian.

Budget cuts to any program would hurt the students in that program, but not all programs fulfilled the same functions. Cuts to SEEK would again drive out the poorest students, and attacks on Black and Puerto Rican studies were not simply motivated by financial considerations, they were part of a larger ideological effort to discredit what was being taught in those programs. The fiscal crisis was inevitably viewed by some as an opportunity to “clean house” and roll back changes in the character of the university that had accompanied Open Admissions.

Black and Puerto Rican studies attracted only a small number of majors, but for many students, particularly students of color, taking one or two classes in those departments often had a significant impact on their college experience. It served in a sense to inoculate them against the Eurocentric bias they were bound to encounter in much of the rest of their coursework and to connect their studies to a history and tradition of struggle on behalf of their communities.

There was little question that the fiscal crisis was being used to carry out an attack on programs that served mainly students of color. An example of this was a move over the summer to close down the Paris Hotel, a residence used by the university for SEEK students in need of housing. Located at 37th Street and West End, the Paris Hotel had

provided housing for about 150 SEEK students since 1968. It was not simply a residence either. It was a locus of activism for SEEK students within CUNY. Some of the planning of the Open Admissions strike, for example, took place at the Paris Hotel. To close it would be to deny SEEK students a unique vehicle for CUNY-wide coordination. In response to this threat SEEK students took over the Board of Higher Education building in August and were able to secure the survival of the Paris Hotel for another year.⁸⁹

The fall semester began with preparation for a student strike in response to the proposal to impose tuition. On August 27, the Hunter College Day and Evening Student Governments voted to call a strike if the proposed budget cuts and tuition plan were imposed.⁹⁰ Similar actions and student protest across CUNY in September and October put pressure on the Board of Higher Education which voted against instituting tuition on October 22.⁹¹

During the fall, BHE Chair Alfred A. Giardino instructed CUNY Chancellor Robert J. Kibbee to develop a plan for dealing with the anticipated cuts. At the same time however Giardino and the Board were developing their own plan. "In early December the New York State Board of Regents ... issued a report calling for drastically increased state responsibility for the funding of CUNY, strongly affirming continuation of the open-admissions policy ... The key recommendation was the call for the imposition of tuition. In this regard the report asserted that through TAP and federal programs, no student would be prevented from attending CUNY because of inability to pay." The Board of Higher Education however refused to institute tuition.⁹²

On December 15 the BHE passed a resolution demanding "(1) uniform and strict guidelines defining student progress towards a degree and (2) new standards of

proficiency in basic skills as criteria for admissions to the junior year of college and for admission to senior colleges on the part of those wishing to transfer from community colleges.” The Chancellor “was also directed to develop plans for scaling down the size of the University through the elimination and consolidation of programs and campuses.” The Board also went into private session to pass a resolution establishing a requirement of at least an eighth-grade level of math and reading competency in order to enter the University.

On its face perhaps such a requirement seems reasonable. But if it had been applied to the 1971 freshman class the measure would have excluded more than 40% of Black students and 35% of Latinos, but less than 10% of whites. Of those who would have been excluded, 9% had already graduated and 36% were still enrolled. “In short” as David Lavin, Richard Alba and Richard Silberstein explained in *Right Versus Privilege*, “using a device that promised to reduce freshman classes by a third, the board had in effect chosen to terminate the open-admissions policy as an alternative to imposing tuition.”⁹³

By February 1976 Kibbee had developed a plan to change the respective admissions criteria for the senior and community colleges that would have transferred many students from the former to the latter but would also have excluded far fewer students overall than the BHE plan. Kibbee’s plan also called for the merger of six campuses eliminating John Jay, Hostos and Richmond College (on Staten Island) as well as the transformation of Medgar Evers and York into community colleges. But the CUNY student movement was opposed to all proposals that would roll back Open

Admissions and continued with preparations for a major demonstration at the state capitol in Albany.

Opposition to the closure and consolidation of campuses contributed to the overall momentum of the protest movement. In late February hundreds of students at John Jay and Richmond Colleges, joined by their respective college presidents, protested the elimination of their colleges. A few days later 400 students demonstrated again at John Jay. On March 4, 500 people attended a rally at Hillcrest High School in Queens to protest the proposed conversion of York into a community college. Four days later 150 people signed up to speak in opposition to the plan at a BHE hearing. 3,500 more people protested outside and, reflecting the intensity of feeling, a bomb threat was apparently called in.

The Fight for Hostos

The most intense fight took place over Hostos which served an almost entirely Latino student body in the Bronx and was distinguished as the only bilingual institution in the system. To understand the fight for Hostos it is necessary to know a little about the previous history of the college.

On January 22, 1968, in response to demands from the Puerto Rican community, the BHE voted to establish Eugenio Maria de Hostos Community College in the South Bronx.⁹⁴ The college was designed to serve the Puerto Rican community. "It was part of a larger project to improve living conditions in the South Bronx, with a special emphasis on the expansion of health services. Its curriculum was to offer students a liberal arts education needed to transfer to any of the CUNY four-year colleges and to train those

interested in careers in the health field. ... to provide educational opportunities to adult workers interested in improving their skills and expanding their knowledge, especially in the health area. ... Finally, the school was to be a bilingual institution in which students would be allowed to develop fluency in a second language while completing their studies in either Spanish or English. For the first time in CUNY's history, a language other than English was accepted as a medium of instruction for non-language courses."⁹⁵

The college opened in September 1970 with a class of 623 students. From the outset it was plagued by a lack of adequate facilities and resources which immediately gave rise to student and faculty protest. By April 1971, the college's first president, Dr. Nasry Michelen was forced to resign and was replaced by Candido de Leon.⁹⁶ Reflecting the lack of commitment to the college it was not until 1974 that Hostos was even fully accredited by the Commission of Higher Education.⁹⁷ By that year enrollment at the school had reached 2,000 and "Hostos had become the most cramped institution of higher education at the city and state level. In that year, students, faculty, and community members organized themselves to obtain better physical facilities. After several rallies and marches, a letter-writing campaign and lobbying in Albany, the State Legislature approved the acquisition of a new building."⁹⁸

When the BHE announced its intention to eliminate Hostos, two organizations, the Save Hostos Committee and the Community Coalition to Save Hostos organized marches and sit-ins. The movement at Hostos understood itself to be a part of the larger fight to defend CUNY. They also raised the demand for no budget cuts, the preservation of Medgar Evers, and the defense of Open Admissions and free tuition.⁹⁹

On March 6, 20,000 CUNY and SUNY students marched on Albany. Six buses came from Hunter alone. The large turnout was no doubt encouraged by decisions like that of the Hunter Academic Senate which had voted the previous week that no member of the Hunter community would be penalized for attending the rally. The march was a huge success in spite of heavy snows. It was also very militant. The Revolutionary Student Brigade (formerly known as the Attica Brigade) and the CUNY Fight Back Organization spearheaded the attack. *The Hunter Envoy* described the scene: “(s)tudents barged past the officers, smashing glass doors; as they entered the lobby they smashed glass exhibits containing Revolutionary War flags. A student carrying one of the flags led the march through the floors of the building in search of Governor Carey’s Chambers. Also at the head of the march, student pallbearers carried on their shoulders a coffin painted black and and lettered EDUCATION.”¹⁰¹

Among the several students arrested and jailed for the action was Hunter student Robert Hoke. The Hunter Day Session Student Government wired \$1800 to Albany towards his \$2500 bail. Hoke was apparently arrested while removing shards of glass from the broken doors to protect people passing through them from injury.¹⁰²

The Albany confrontation, while perhaps the most spectacular action of the spring, hardly marked the end of the struggle, particularly at Hostos. On March 19, 300 Hostos students briefly occupied the BHE offices. Less than a week later, after the BHE voted on a preliminary consolidation plan that would eliminate Hostos, students and faculty occupied the campus. In spite of these actions on April 5, 1976 the BHE approved a merger of Hostos with Bronx Community College for a supposed savings of \$3 million. (The plan also consolidated Richmond College and Staten Island Community College

into the college of Staten Island, reduced Medgar Evers to a community college but preserved York as a senior college.) The Board vote sparked a very militant confrontation with police in front of the BHE offices that turned into a running street fight.

Meanwhile, the occupation of Hostos continued. “For 19 days students and faculty administered the daily functioning of the College. Finally on April 12, “the take-over ended when the police intervened and arrested 40 students.”¹⁰³ The police also evicted students occupying a building at Lehman College that same day.

On May 5 a thousand City College students demonstrated at the beginning of a three-day boycott of classes. They were joined by 13 faculty members who went on hunger strike to protest the proposed cuts and imposition of tuition.

On May 11 Hostos students and faculty demonstrated outside the offices of Governor Carey at West 55th Street. Another student takeover of Hostos was attempted later when the University ordered a one week closing of all CUNY colleges as part of its austerity program. On that occasion, the police forcibly removed the students.” This action was more successful. In response to these actions and the massive community support they attracted the New York State Legislature would finally pass the Landes Higher Education Act “guaranteeing the existence of both Hostos and Medgar Evers.”¹⁰⁴ None the less, Hostos suffered as a result of the cuts that ultimately came. The Health Sciences Division was abolished as an administrative unit, the Department of Social Sciences was consolidated with the Department of Behavioral Sciences, and ESL replaced the truly bi-lingual approach that had previously characterized the college. And ultimately, some of the most militant faculty were retrenched when it came time to cut jobs.¹⁰⁵

Tuition Imposed

The crisis accelerated at the end of May. On May 17, the CUNY Council of College Presidents voted to propose the imposition of tuition on students at a rate of \$650 per semester.¹⁰⁷ On May 28 Chancellor Kibbee, citing a lack of operating funds, ordered the shutdown of the entire university pending an emergency bailout. The dramatic action left faculty unpaid and postponed the graduation of thousands of students as well as the issuance of grades. Four days later the BHE voted 7 to 1 for the imposition of tuition. The lone dissenter was Vinia R. Quinones, the only Black member of the Board. Shortly thereafter the State Legislature voted to approve a short-term rescue package to enable the University to re-open. That same day, 5000 students were protesting in the streets in front of City Hall, but the deal was already done. The university would remain closed for two weeks until June 14. When it was reopened there were deep feelings of sadness, anger, and frustration.

The imposition of tuition was accompanied by the establishment of the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), a financial aid program which was supposed to cover the full tuition expenses of the poorest CUNY students. TAP was sold as a measure that would effectively make tuition progressive. Students able to pay would do so, thereby in effect subsidizing those who could not. The promise of TAP was key to selling the imposition of tuition and it was treated like a sacred promise that would last into perpetuity. As CUNY students would later learn to their dismay, in politics yesterday's sacred trust is tomorrow's broken promise. TAP would become another frequent target of the budget cutters axe.

Even with the promise of TAP the impact on the university of the decisions that had been made would be enormous. Total enrollment at CUNY dropped within a year by 70,000 from roughly 250,000 students to 180,000.¹⁰⁸ But that was not all. In 1975 53% of entering freshman went into the senior colleges. This figure dropped to 35% in 1976 and continued to decline for several years thereafter.¹⁰⁹ And the decline in Black and Latino enrollment in the senior colleges was even steeper. The 1976 CUNY freshman class was the first majority non-white class. But the 1977 class would be 52.7% white.¹¹⁰ While the university student body, in keeping with overall demographic trends in the city, eventually became predominantly non-white, the short-term reversal of the general trend in freshmen enrollment spoke volumes about the racist implications of the decisions imposed by the so-called fiscal crisis.

The 1975-76 student movement at CUNY was not successful in preventing the introduction of tuition and a number of other important changes in CUNY. But it was able to prevent the elimination of Hostos and John Jay and to preserve the senior college status of York and partially Medgar Evers. SEEK and the various ethnic studies programs also survived. In the case of almost all of these struggles, the racist nature of the proposed changes was put front and center. These were not attacks directed equally at all CUNY students or even at the New York City working class as a whole and to pretend otherwise would have contributed nothing to the victories ultimately secured. Indeed it would have only created confusion. The defense of specific colleges and programs against perceived racist attacks contributed considerably to the power of the broader movement against the imposition of tuition. It was students of color who were most likely to be pushed out of CUNY by the imposition of tuition. Attempting to reduce the attacks on CUNY simply to

their class dimension and to deny their simultaneous racial character might have made some white students feel more comfortable in the movement, but it is very doubtful that it would have strengthened the movement.

The introduction of tuition was an enormous defeat for the CUNY student movement, but it didn't mean an end to student activism. Even further cuts to CUNY were expected in the next years budget and students began to mobilize even before the budget was introduced. The movement during the 1976-77 school year wasn't nearly as powerful as the year before, but it did not disappear. At Hunter on December 8, 75 students participated in a rally organized by Asian Students In Action, the Black Student Union, and the Puerto Rican Student Union.¹¹² When the State budget proposal was released it included further cuts to CUNY and a \$100 cut in average TAP award.¹¹³ At Brooklyn College the administration sought to cut costs by attempting to push out as many as 800 SEEK students. On January 21, 1977 fourteen students were arrested at Brooklyn College in a takeover of Registrar's office in protest against this attempt.¹¹⁴

Demonstrations continued through the spring. On March 15, one thousand CUNY and SUNY students, organized by their student governments, rallied in Albany against proposed budget cuts.¹¹⁵ A little more than a week later on March 23, five hundred students rallied at City Hall against the cuts.¹¹⁶ In May the University Student Senate organized a protest against the halt in construction of new buildings intended to relieve the overcrowding of the university. And reflecting the changing demographics of the college (and the university) in May 1977, Cynthia Smith became the first Black woman student body president elected at Hunter College.¹¹⁷

In 1979 the Board of Higher Education was reorganized as the Board of Trustees with ten appointees to be made by the Governor reflecting the increased level of state support for the university. The same year tuition was raised to \$900 per year with very little organized mass student opposition.¹¹⁸

CUNY Student Activism in the 1980s

CUNY student activism in the 1980s was overwhelmingly concerned with off-campus issues that are largely outside the concern of this study. Several comparatively small budget cuts and tuition increases took place with nothing like the protests that had rocked the university in 1976. Student activism in this period focused on issues like nuclear disarmament, opposition to the apartheid regime in South Africa, and U.S. military intervention in Central America, with CUNY students often joining in city-wide and national mobilizations around these issues.

In 1982 Chancellor Kibbee was replaced by Joseph Murphy. By 1984 tuition at CUNY had risen to \$1,225 per year and Governor Mario Cuomo was proposing a hike of \$200 more per year. Chancellor Murphy denounced the proposal as a threat to the mission of the university, but student protest was minimal. The proposal was nonetheless defeated. In the fall of that year the Board of Trustees voted to divest from all stockholdings in companies that do business in South Africa, effectively anticipating the wave of campus demonstrations and building occupations that would take place on this issue across the country in the spring of 1985.

In 1986 CUNY student governments were rocked by a scandal involving massive misappropriations of funds. In 1988 the Board of Trustees considered a radical

restructuring of teacher education at CUNY that provoked spirited debate leading to a tabling of the proposal.

The 1989 Student Strike

By late 1988 it was clear that the state was facing a new major budget crisis and that CUNY was a likely target for budget cuts. In November Chancellor Murphy imposed a university-wide freeze on new hires and non-essential purchases in anticipation of the cuts.

1989 would be a year of upheaval around the world and the events and mood of the year undoubtedly contributed to the determination of the CUNY student movement in the face of proposed budget cuts and tuition hikes. The second half of the 1980s had seen a minor upsurge in student activism nationwide beginning with the movement for university divestment from South Africa in 1985 and 86. Opposition to U.S. military aid and intervention in Central America had also radicalized many students, many of whom participated in an attempt to use civil disobedience to shut down the Pentagon in the fall of 1988. By 1989, the apartheid regime in South Africa was entering a terminal crisis and there was widespread expectation of another major confrontation. In China that spring a massive student movement emerged to challenge the ossified rule of the Communist Party by occupying Tiananmen Square. All of these developments contributed to the conviction among many CUNY students that spring that they could resist the attacks coming down on their university.

1989 was also the 20th anniversary of the 1969 Open Admissions strike. The discussion and commemorations of the strike, particularly at City College, contributed to

an awareness of the tactics and strategies employed by the strikers and a sense of the importance of their historical legacy which now seemed under threat.

In the early spring the State Legislature approved a tuition increase of \$200 a year over \$1250 per year. On April 24, two days after a 20th anniversary commemoration of the 1969 Open Admissions Strike, City College students occupied an administration building in protest.¹¹⁹ The strike leadership came from a tight knit group of students organized as Students for Educational Rights (SER). SER was based at City College but established branches at several other CUNY campuses where they played a leadership and coordination role within the larger student movement.

By April 27 the protests had spread to Hunter, Hostos, BMCC, Lehman, Medgar Evers and John Jay. At Hunter, “100 students locked and occupied 14 floors of the East Building, which houses the administration, and remained there” while “about 500 ... students blocked traffic on Lexington Avenue at 68th Street shortly before the evening rush hour, tying up traffic. With scores of police with riot equipment standing by, the protesters dwindled as the evening wore on and disbanded peacefully at 9:15.” At Hostos “1,000 students rallied in front of one of two main buildings yesterday afternoon after protesters had padlocked entrances and shut classes.” At BMCC twenty-five students took over the college president’s office while another 5,000 rallied in the schools expansive cafeteria. 250 students marched on the campus of Lehman College and at Medgar Evers students barricaded themselves in the administration building. John Jay students also chained and padlocked doors of their administration building. Reginald Holmes, President of Student Government at John Jay expressed the outlook of the

occupiers across the university when he said “We’re going to do this until we’re physically removed or until Governor Cuomo makes education a priority”¹²⁰

The occupations had an immediate impact. The next day the Board of Trustees was already meeting with student leaders hoping to negotiate an end to the occupations. The same day students at Hunter repeated the tactic they’d used the day before and blocked traffic at 68th and Lexington Ave. from noon until 6:45. Militant opposition to the cuts was not limited to CUNY. Similar cuts targeted SUNY. When students at SUNY New Paltz surround Governor Cuomo’s car and demanded no increase in tuition he told them that they were “talking to the wrong guy,” implying that the fault lay with university administrators.¹²¹

May 1 saw another escalation in the student protests. By then students had occupied buildings or offices at 13 of 20 CUNY campuses including La Guardia Community College, Queensborough, the College of Staten Island, BMCC and Baruch. Students blocked traffic again that day at Hunter for six hours. Classes were cancelled at John Jay when a second building was occupied. Another building was also taken at La Guardia and students blocked traffic on Queens Boulevard. 200 marchers from BMCC were turned away by police before they could reach City Hall. 600 rallied and 100 occupied the college president’s office at New York City Technical College. 30 students seized Boylan Hall at Brooklyn College where another 300 students disrupted classes and blocked traffic at the nearby intersection of Flatbush and Nostrand.

Until this point the occupations had remained a CUNY phenomena. But on May 1 SUNY Purchase students took over their administration building and students at SUNY

Albany seized their library for one day.¹²² The situation was clearly getting out of control. But Chancellor Murphy still refused to call in the police.¹²³

The next day classes were suspended at John Jay, La Guardia and York because classroom buildings were occupied. A march through downtown demonstrated the strength of the movement. Police estimated the crowd at 5,000 and organizers claimed 10,000. The New York Times reported that “the marchers filled the street from sidewalk to sidewalk and stretched more than four blocks long.” At least sixteen CUNY campuses were represented in the march.

On the same day as the march, Cuomo vetoed the tuition increases for CUNY and SUNY. Explaining his reversal, “Cuomo mentioned only in passing the widespread student protests” and “said he was vetoing the increases because university officials had not demonstrated that they had done everything they could to avoid higher tuition.”¹²⁴

The day after the veto, May 3, students gave up six buildings but held on to ten more, demanding no budget cuts. Mark Torres of City College and the head of occupations coordinating committee said buildings would be held until students were included in the budget negotiations. According to the New York Times, “Mr. Torres said the movement, which began as a reaction to the tuition increase, was now addressing other issues. The students for example, are pushing for more professors from minority groups, more adult education programs for the community and expanded day-care services.” Torres explained, “the tuition issue does create a hardship, but what we are looking at here is the destruction of CUNY and SUNY.” He continued, “the issue is access to the university for people of color and the working class. That’s what this struggle has evolved into.”¹²⁵

In truth the students had won their most important demand. Maintaining the occupations was increasingly exhausting and about to cut into final exams. On May 4, students at ten campuses voted to end their occupations by 10 a.m. the next morning. The occupation at SUNY Purchase was ended as well. Only Hunter decided to try to hold out. But their resolve didn't last much longer.

Signaling the willingness of at least somebody to raise the stakes a pipe bomb exploded in a garbage can at Queensborough Community College. Nobody was injured in the explosion, but a note found nearby threatened that if student demands not met there would be further violence and trouble.¹²⁶

The 1989 CUNY student strike was by all measures a major victory for the CUNY student movement. Like the 1969 strike, on which it consciously modeled itself, the 1989 strike demonstrated that the political power of students lay mainly in their willingness and ability to disrupt social peace by employing direct action. It also showed once again that students of color were the heart and soul of the movement. While many white students participated in the occupations, the movement's leadership came primarily from Black and Latino students, in particular a core of students based at City College.

The 1989-90 school year did not see the same kind of university wide militant action as the previous year. But neither did it see the complete disappearance of such activism. Between the city and state, CUNY was targeted for another \$50 million in proposed budget cuts. Significantly no tuition hike was proposed. The previous year's experience had made the powers that be more cautious. Chancellor Murphy was replaced at this point with Wynetka Ann Reynolds (who had just been forced to resign as

chancellor of the California State University system).¹²⁷ Reynolds was expected to clamp down on student protests in ways that Chancellor Murphy had resisted.

The main battleground in 1990 was John Jay College where that spring a popular Latino teacher, Professor Donald Torres of the Department of Law, Police Science and Criminal Justice was denied tenure. While Torres had received a unanimous recommendation for tenure from his department he was rejected by college personnel and budget committee. Torres filed a civil suit alleging discrimination, but students decided to use more direct forms of action. At first students interfered with payroll distribution and glued locks around the campus, creating considerable chaos in the process. When those tactics failed to get results the students settled on organizing a mass action.

On May 9, students took over North Hall at John Jay to the denial of tenure to Professor Torres and the proposed budget cuts to CUNY. The police were quickly called in and removed the students. The students described the arrests as brutal. Seven students were arrested and at least four were treated for injuries received at the hands of the police. The next day the students retook North Hall and this time issued twenty demands, including the resignation of President Gerald Lynch who they held responsible for the police brutality the evening before.

Complicating matters was the threat by Karen Kaplowitz, President of the John Jay Faculty Senate to ask the American Association of University Professors to censure the university if Torres were granted tenure on the basis that it was interference with the principle of faculty governance. Reflecting the volatility of the situation at John Jay, Police Commissioner Lee Brown, who had been selected to speak at the college's commencement ceremonies, cancelled his speech.¹²⁸

The situation escalated on May 21 when about fifty students occupied CUNY Central Administration offices.¹²⁹ The occupiers included students from John Jay, Lehman, BMCC, La Guardia, and Baruch. Two days later the occupier defied a temporary restraining order to vacate the premises. 300 employees who worked in the building either stayed home or worked in alternative offices.¹³⁰ On May 24 the CUNY administration initiated disciplinary proceedings against the students. The occupiers responded by completely closing the building to administrators who had previously been allowed entrance. The Board of Trustees in turn responded by holding an emergency meeting at the Graduate Center and voted to meet with the students if they would reopen the building to the employees.¹³¹

The next day the students ended the occupation in return for negotiations on demands for amnesty and stronger voice in minority hiring and tuition issues. Four students were allowed to remain in building pending results.¹³²

The struggles over the course of the spring of 1990 did not match the previous years intensity, but they did help hold together the core of activists forged in the 1989 strike, many of whom would play an important role again in 1991.

The 1991 Student Strike

The victory of the 1989 strike only delayed further efforts to raise tuition and limit access to CUNY. After the interlude of the 1989-90 school year, the attack was renewed. It started in December 1990 with the Board of Trustees voting to raise tuition by \$200.¹³³

In January, Governor Cuomo released his proposed state budget. The proposal included yet another \$52 million in cuts to CUNY plus an additional tuition hike of \$500

per year, raising tuition to \$1,950. On top of this he proposed cuts in TAP awards of between \$100 and \$400 per student.¹³⁴

The proposed cuts to CUNY went hand in hand with a series of cuts to SUNY and to other social services, laying the basis for a potential state-wide student alliance with organized labor and community based organizations. In March 3,000 CUNY and SUNY students joined labor and community organizations in a 25,000 strong march on Albany opposing state budget cuts.¹³⁵ But with the memory of 1989, CUNY students felt they had a more powerful weapon.

The 1991 CUNY student strike began at CCNY on Monday, April 8 at 5:30 in the morning. Students occupied the North Academic Complex (NAC). The next morning at Hunter, the East Building was occupied. At Bronx Community College, Colston Hall was taken. Over the following week new campuses continued to join the movement.

On April 15, 30 students took over Powdermaker Hall at Queens at 4:15 in the morning, securing doors with chains and covering windows with newspapers so that their movements couldn't be watched from outside. That day students at New York City Tech seized Namm Hall. At BCC students took a second building, Tech 1. Classes were cancelled at CCNY, BMCC, City Tech, the Graduate Center and Hostos.¹³⁶ Classes continued alongside building occupations at Hunter, Lehman, York, Queens, Brooklyn College, John Jay, Medgar Evers, Bronx Community College, and La Guardia. Brief occupations occurred at Baruch and at Kingsborough Community College. Occupations ultimately occurred on fifteen other campuses.

At SUNY students briefly occupied buildings to express their support. Twenty students seized the administration building at the Purchase campus and an occupation also took place at Stonybrook.¹³⁷

On April 16 CUNY took the BMCC occupiers to court. The same day a small group of students shut down the Graduate Center with the support of 200 others rallying and maintaining a continual presence outside.¹³⁸ The occupations held strong for another week.

On April 24, eight thousand students rallied outside Governor Cuomo's offices in the World Trade Center and then marched for three hours through downtown, briefly blocking traffic on West Street.¹³⁹

At the beginning of the strike the building occupiers claimed the support of the majority of the student body. And the march through downtown revealed that they still commanded significant student support. But the relationship between the occupiers and the rest of the student body was not the same as in 1989. While most of the building occupations in 1989 were carried out by small groups of students – indeed the tactic demanded it – the actions were an organic outgrowth of the larger movement and commanded the support of the student body at large. This time the students who carried out the occupations were, in many cases, veterans of the 1989 strike. They had been radicalized by their experience and there was a tendency on their part to sometimes take a superior attitude towards the masses of ordinary students. This disconnect was apparent at Hunter where the occupation of the school library tended to antagonize the student body.

Underlying some of the divisions between students were divisions of race and class. Open Admissions had made CUNY a more working class institution and a majority of students were (and still are) people of color. But the CUNY student body is far from homogenous. And the impact of budget cuts and tuition hikes are felt differently by different sections of students. This creates differences in the sense of urgency created by particular measures. Paul Rogat Loeb writing of the 1991 strike in *Generation at the Crossroads* summed it up: “White students from Westchester and Great Neck felt frustrated, to be sure, by larger classes and curtailed services, but they could better afford to pay more tuition.”¹⁴⁰ Indeed many would rather pay more tuition than see deeper cuts in staffing and services. This attitude was not confined exclusively to white students.

The leaders of the strike were not necessarily themselves facing the prospect of being unable to attend school. But as a group predominantly made up of students of color they viewed the tuition hikes in particular as an assault on access to higher education for their communities. Whatever their underlying cause though the division in student ranks was played up in the media and utilized by the administration to drive a wedge into the movement.

The clearest example of this was at BMCC, where the administration sent out letters to students in the nursing program informing them that if classes remained closed they would lose the course hours they needed for their licensing exams. The day after the mass march through downtown “a group of administrators” gathered outside BMCC “along with Chancellor Ann Reynolds, several faculty members, a class of nursing students, and others responding to (the) letters the administration had sent out.” The situation was a textbook example of the tactic of divide and conquer. In a seemingly

choreographed manner, the professors urged the nursing students to directly confront the students occupying the building. The administration had also called the media, and the nursing students began chanting ‘Get Out! Get Out! Get Out!’ accompanied by a BMCC dean whose resignation the blockaders had demanded. Someone smashed a glass door, and the group poured in.’¹⁴¹

The events at BMCC had been carefully planned by the administration to emphasize and amplify divisions in student ranks. But those divisions were real and the impact on the other occupations was quick. The occupiers themselves were not united with some arguing that the erosion of student support meant they needed to use other tactics. In any case after two and a half weeks everybody was tired. The events at BMCC left many demoralized and weakened their resolve to continue with the occupations. The next occupation to end was at the Graduate Center where the students agreed to walk out voluntarily.¹⁴² Other campuses wouldn’t go so easily.

Very early the next morning, 300 police massed at Yankee Stadium before descending on Bronx Community College in 3 a.m. raid. They entered the occupied building by prying loose the windows. Once the police were inside the building they told the students they had 15 minutes to vacate the premises before they would be arrested. Ten students chose to walk out. But another 17 remained behind and were arrested.

Twelve students were arrested at Lehman after 300 police raided the occupied building there. The same day students at La Guardia and Queens decided to abandon the buildings they held. The following night when 700 police were massed at York College, the students chose to march out voluntarily and thereby avoid arrest.

There were now ongoing occupations at five campuses: Hunter, CCNY, City Tech, John Jay and Hostos. Students voluntarily abandoned buildings at John Jay and New York City Tech. One student was arrested at City Tech however for refusing to leave and running through the halls wielding a machete. “By the end of Saturday, April 27, only Hunter, City and Hostos remained under student occupation”¹⁴³

As buildings across CUNY were abandoned, activists who had avoided arrest began to join the occupation at City College, making it the likely site of a last stand. On April 28, students at Hostos surrendered their building.¹⁴⁴ Three days later, on May 1, students at Hunter finally surrendered the library, leaving the only occupation on the campus where it had all started, City College.¹⁴⁵

The stage was set for a show down at City College. At 8 in the morning on May 1, community leaders, including Dominican City Council member Guillermo Linares and the Rev. Calvin Butts, descended on the campus to defend the occupation from any police action. The community leaders and students entered into negotiations with CCNY President Halston at 10 a.m. that would continue for the next fifteen hours. At one o’clock in the morning President Halston finally signed an agreement ensuring de facto amnesty for the occupiers. Students would be required to write an explanation of their actions. Their guilt or innocence would be determined through the disciplinary process, but no punishment would be imposed. On May 2 the NAC building was surrendered and the 1991 student strike came to an end.¹⁴⁶

Shortly thereafter the state legislature passed a budget that reduced the tuition \$500 tuition increase to \$300 and restored a significant portion of the proposed cuts in Cuomo’s original budget. Viewed in this light the 1991 CUNY student strike could be

seen as a partial victory. CUNY students were certainly better off because it had happened. But the divisions that had arisen between students broadly and within the ranks of the movement in particular were significant. The overwhelming sentiment coming out of the 1989 strike had been that the building takeovers had been an effective tactic. The feeling after 1991 among many was that they were no longer so powerful. Media coverage undoubtedly contributed to this assessment. In 1989 the takeovers were seen as an act of desperation in the face of draconian cuts. There was a grudging respect for the students courageous defiance. In 1991 though, the occupations were portrayed as a sort of radical student “rite of spring” that was only interfering with the education of serious students.

The 1991 strike showed that without sufficient mass support, the use of militant tactics would be ineffective and could be exploited to split the movement. The 1991 strikers took the support of the student body for granted. The less exciting work of educating and winning the support of the student body was neglected in favor of an unprepared rush into confrontation with a university administration much less reluctant to call in the police and a state government unwilling to suffer a second defeat.

After the Strikes

The 1991 Student Strike was the last time students occupied buildings at CUNY, but it was by no means the end of the struggle in defense of Open Admissions. Between 1991 and 1995 the CUNY student movement largely took the form of a series of skirmishes between student activists and the CUNY central administration over the basic democratic rights of students to organize protests.

In the Spring of 1992, Lehman College agreed to host a debate between the candidates for the Democratic Party presidential nomination on March 31. Students at Lehman saw the debate as an opportunity to raise awareness of the destructiveness of another round of proposed budget cuts and to expose the role of elected Democratic Party officials in the attacks on CUNY. They planned a March 27 teach-in on the subject of the cuts and a demonstration immediately before the debates. But both events were prohibited by the Lehman Administration. A federal lawsuit was necessary to secure the students their basic right to protest.¹⁴⁷

The protests at Lehman College also revealed another persistent source of conflict within the movement to defend CUNY. Health and Hospital Workers Local 1199, under the leadership of Denis Rivera, sought to participate in the rally outside the debates and offered the students the benefits of their substantial resources. But the offer wasn't without strings. Rivera insisted that Democratic Presidential candidate Jerry Brown be allowed to address the rally. This essentially undercut the message of the students who wanted to expose the role of the Democratic Party in the attacks on CUNY. In the end it became clear to the leadership of 1199 that they could not impose Jerry Brown on the rally. 1199 withdrew from the coalition organizing the rally, forcing the students to scramble to replace 1199's promised resources.¹⁴⁸

Another struggle that was important in the mid-90s was the efforts of students at York College to organize Black Solidarity events in 1993, 94 and 95. In 1993 Black students at York College sought to organize a Black Solidarity Day event on November 3 and invited several prominent radical Black activists – Viola Plummer, Prof. Leonard Jeffries, and Dhoruba Bin Wahad as speakers. The administration attempted to cancel the

event and to arbitrarily punish the organizers. The event finally took place when the students took action to sue the university. Several weeks later two students were brought up on disciplinary charges for allegedly verbally abusing an administrator and removing a flyer from his bulletin board.¹⁴⁹

The next year the students at York attempted to organize another Black Solidarity Day on November 7 and invited Khalid Muhammad, Viola Plummer and William Clay to speak. Again the administration attempted to prevent the event from taking place. College Vice President Ronald Brown cancelled the event “because of the inability of the campus to provide adequate security at such short notice.” On the morning of the event all entrances to campus were closed except one where students were required to present ID and pass through a metal detector and scheduled speakers were barred from campus. 1,000 students gathered in the street and demanded removal of metal detector and that the event be allowed to proceed. Again the administration was forced to back down, and the event took place without incident.¹⁵⁰

The 1995 Struggle

The next big upsurge in student activism at CUNY broke out in 1995. Once again tuition increases and budget cuts were proposed. Once again CUNY students responded with a powerful and militant mass movement, this time under the banner of the CUNY Coalition Against the Cuts.

In his January state budget proposal, Governor George Pataki proposed \$116 million in cuts, the elimination of the SEEK program and College Discovery, the reduction of the maximum TAP award to 90% of tuition and a \$1000 a year increase in

tuition. The proposed cuts and tuition hike were even more draconian than those proposed by Cuomo in 1989 and 91.

On February 27, 8,000 CUNY and SUNY students attended a rally in Albany organized by the New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG) against the proposed cuts. Tiring of a long series of speakers, a section of the crowd broke away and marched up and down a long mall before pushing past police on horseback and into the state capitol building. Chanting “Revolution! Revolution!” the crowd occupied the rotunda for half an hour before proceeding to SUNY central administrative offices where again they pushed past the police and took over the first floor lobby of the building.¹⁵¹

Several days later on March 1, large numbers of CUNY students joined a 20,000 strong march against healthcare budget cuts organized by healthcare workers union local, 1199. Several days later Governor Pataki attempted to speak at a hotel in the city and found his path blocked by AIDS activists and CUNY students. On March 15 speak-outs against the budget cuts and tuition hike were organized by CUNY faculty across the university.

At Hunter the speak-out in front of the West Building turned into a confrontation with the police when about a hundred students poured into the street and were attacked by the police without warning. Eight students were arrested and one was hospitalized. The event electrified the CUNY student movement which was already planning a major demonstration against the cuts for March 23. The CUNY Coalition had acquired a permit for a rally at City Hall but planned to march from City Hall to Wall Street without a permit. Wall Street was chosen as a target to indicate that the movement believed that the financial institutions based there were the real power behind any budgetary decisions.

The March 23 demonstration was possibly the largest single political protest by young people of color in the history of New York City. Over 25,000 students turned out for the demonstration. It wasn't just CUNY students either. An estimated 14,000 New York City High School students walked out of classes across the city in spite of attempts to lock them in their schools. Even if half of them made it to the demonstration they were a visible and energetic presence. The crowd overflowed City Hall Park and filled the side streets. Mayor Giuliani called out thousands of cops in full riot gear. When the crowd attempted to march on Wall Street though, the police attacked - using horses, riot batons, and pepper spray they tried to break up the crowd. The crowd wasn't going anywhere and for the next couple hours they battled the police and tried to break through their lines. Police attacks were met with a hail of bottles. The cops would arrest students only to have them snatched back by the crowd.

The police were as brutal as the crowd was determined. By the end of the day over 40 students had been arrested and many more were injured. The demonstration was the top story on every TV station and was on the front page of every newspaper. In a matter of days, the proposed cuts and tuition increase were both scaled back. This was an important victory, but it had come at a price. The movement had failed to carry out the action it had promised - a march on Wall Street, and many students were now frightened to come to future demonstrations. In the wake of the March 23 demonstration, the CUNY Coalition began to fall apart. The CUNY Coalition was a very freewheeling collection of concerned students, student government officers, independent radicals and members of various socialist, communist, anarchist and nationalist organizations. Decisions were made at huge mass meetings that often broke down into screaming matches.

On March 24, Rev. Al Sharpton and 1199 president Denis Rivera called for another march from City Hall to Wall Street on April 4, this time with a permit. About 5,000 people, mainly students, turned out for the demonstration. There was considerable frustration in the student movement with the way the April 4 march was called and organized, and many students came away feeling that they had been manipulated. After the April 4 march the momentum of the movement returned to the campuses. At SUNY Binghamton Governor Pataki's car was stoned by students as he attempted to visit his daughter who was participating in an event on campus.

On April 11 about 20 students at City College initiated a hunger strike in the NAC building, traditionally a 24-access building. City College president Yolanda Moses called in the police that night to arrest the hunger strikers and their supporters when they refused to vacate the building at 11 pm. 47 people were arrested. Only minor charges were brought against them, but the police denied the hunger strikers water in an effort to break their resolve and get them to eat. The next morning the hunger strikers returned to CCNY and by early evening they had been joined by hundreds of students from across CUNY as well as a number of community-based activists. When the crowd was again threatened with arrest they poured out into the street and marched through Harlem in the rain for several hours.

The next day Governor Pataki attempted to speak on Staten Island and was confronted by transit workers, school bus drivers and CUNY students who successfully shouted him down. But by this time the movement was for all intents and purposes over. The concessions to be won had been won in the days immediately after March 23.

The failure of students to occupy offices or buildings in 1995 was blamed by many for the failure of the movement to completely stop the tuition hike and the budget cuts. The repressive actions of the CUNY central administration had undoubtedly made students reluctant to take such actions. Many students who were willing to risk arrest did not feel willing to risk suspension or even possible expulsion from college, even if the latter threat was exaggerated. In retrospect it seems clear that had students seized even a few buildings in the wake of March 23 they would have been in a stronger position to keep the pressure on Albany.

The turnout for the March 23 demonstration showed a depth of support for the movement that was stronger than in 1991. But it was essentially a one-shot affair with no plans for keeping the pressure on. The action was both too militant in so far as it frightened off some students from future demonstrations and not militant enough in as much as it failed to really disrupt anything for more than a day. Carefully planned occupations or a sustained campaign of direct action that clearly targeted the administration or the political establishment rather than students, while entailing real risks for the participants, could have forced a more complete retreat from the original budget proposals.

The fall of 1995 was comparatively quiet. There were a number of not particularly successful efforts to bring back together some of the forces in the CUNY Coalition around a number of issues. A third Black Solidarity Day at York was organized for November 6, 1995 with the same lineup of speakers as the year before. Operating under orders from Chancellor Anne Reynolds, York College President Minter explicitly banned

Khalid Muhammad. On November 6 all entrances to York were closed except for one where SAFE Team members were denying entry to anyone without CUNY student or staff ID. One student was eventually arrested for refusing to produce an ID and then sitting down at the entrance. A crowd of students gathered on campus and then marched off campus to return with Muhammad, but the gates were locked. Confronted with approved contracts for the speakers, the administration once again relented and allowed Muhammad on campus to speak. President Minter resigned a month later under apparent pressure from Chancellor Reynolds. Long-time York Security Director Burrows also resigned the following June. The administration attempted to bring up three students on disciplinary charges for violating the speaker ban but the charges were ultimately rejected by a student-faculty disciplinary committee.¹⁵²

During the winter intersession though, Governor Pataki announced another round of proposed budget cuts to CUNY. This brought back together many of the participants in the previous year's struggle as well as some new folks. This time it was decided to establish a structure that would guarantee that decisions were being made by student activists with a real base on their campuses by requiring each campus to delegate four members to participate in the CUNY-wide meetings and by limiting off-campus participation to invited groups. The new structure also demanded that each campus delegation be at least half women and half people of color. This was a response to a persistent problem with meetings being dominated by outspoken white men.¹⁵³

The Spring 1996 movement was smaller than the 1995 movement, but it was able to put in place a more durable organization and to achieve a higher level of political agreement. The new coalition chose to call itself the Student Liberation Action

Movement (SLAM), and consisted of a hard core of groups at Hunter, CCNY, Brooklyn College, College of Staten Island, and The Graduate Center, with off-again on-again participation from a number of other colleges, notably Bronx Community College, BMCC, and Hostos. SLAM organized a 1,000 strong rally at Times Square that marched to Madison Square on March 21.

SLAM also hammered out a ten-point program that sketched out its vision of the university and the kind of society such a university would need to be a part of.

Student Government

On a number of campuses there was considerable frustration with the established student governments which were regarded as corrupt or unresponsive to the needs of the student movement. On a number of campuses, progressive student activist joined slates running for student government in the hopes of making the resources of their respective student governments more available to the movement in defense of CUNY. The most ambitious effort was undertaken at Hunter College, where the strong SLAM group ran a full slate and won the election by a landslide.

The Attack on Remediation

Starting in 1998, the CUNY Board of Trustees, now under the leadership of Herman Badillo, renewed the attack on Open Admissions. The main thrust of the attacks was the proposed elimination of remedial classes at CUNY senior colleges. Even though the vast majority of 4 year colleges in the U.S. provide remediation, Badillo proposed to eliminate all remedial classes at CUNY's senior colleges, thereby forcing students to first

attend the community colleges. No provision was made for expanding the remedial classes at the community colleges. The overall result of the proposal would be to slam the door of education in the face of large numbers of mainly Black, Latino and Asian students. CUNY's senior colleges were to be made whiter and more middle class.

Massive student protests at the CUNY Board of Trustees meetings saw CUNY students and faculty arrested both inside Board meetings and in the street. These protests combined with a lawsuit against the violations of the New York open meetings laws resulted in a one-year delay in the elimination of remedial classes. After a public hearing at Hunter College again led to the arrest of students the proposal was finally approved by the Board in January 1999. It was subsequently implemented in stages at all the CUNY senior colleges. At this writing the plan is subject to review by the New York State Board of Regents in 2003.

The attack on remedial classes failed to generate the sort of mass student protests that occurred in 1969, 1975-76, 1989-91 and 1995. A dedicated hardcore of activists, many of them veterans of 1995, put up a heroic but ultimately doomed resistance. They were willing to take the risks of direct action but they lacked the mobilized support of the student body that would have given such actions real power.

Conclusions

From 1969 to 1999 CUNY students engaged in a valiant fight to secure and defend expanded access to the university, especially for students of color. In the end the gains made in 1969 were largely lost by 1999, literally several hundred thousand people benefited directly from this struggle and the social and political map of New York

City was remade as class after class of CUNY graduates of color took up positions of power and responsibility in the workings of the city. The 1990 U.S. census revealed that New York City had over the course of the 1980s become a majority non-white city. Open Admissions at CUNY and the struggles that preserved it in some form for as long as they could ensured that that majority would not be ruled over by a white elite, at least not in the same fashion as had once been the case.

By looking at the major upsurges in this struggle it is possible to draw out some lessons that can be said to have some general application.

The first is that issues of race and racism have always been at the center of the fight over access to CUNY. Since 1969, students of color have consistently spearheaded the fight to defend Open Admissions. At times they have been able to count on the support of organized white allies. On other occasions they haven't. While Open Admissions has benefited the whole working class of New York City, the attacks on it have not been directed equally at all sectors. Neither have all sectors shown equal determination to defend the principle of higher education for the "whole people" of the city.

This should not be surprising. Communities of color would be and have been the main victims of the attempts to roll back Open Admissions. It is the understanding of the racist character of the attacks on CUNY that has animated the most spirited defenses of the university and that has drawn into the struggle the active support of whole communities which has on several occasions been the key to victory.

The persistent attempts by some to reduce the fight over access to CUNY to its (nonetheless very real) class dimension in an attempt to make a more "universal" or

“inclusive” appeal have consistently rested on an erasure of the workings of white supremacy within the working class. The result can’t help but be an impoverished understanding of New York (and the United States) multi-national working class.

The second major lesson to be drawn from these experiences is the power of mass direct action to get results. CUNY students have employed virtually every conceivable tactic in the course of the struggle to defend Open Admissions, from circulating petitions to lobbying legislators to registering student voters to filing lawsuits to engaging in hunger strikes to planting pipe bombs. But the tactics that have most consistently mobilized large numbers of students and won major victories have been ones of mass direct action, in particular prolonged building and office occupations.

The reasons for this are straightforward. Despite their numbers, CUNY students are never likely to be a powerful voting bloc. As students in a commuter university they are a transient and dispersed population. They almost all live in securely Democratic State Senate and Assembly districts and are unlikely to ever abandon in large numbers the elected Democratic Party officials who have frequently been behind the attacks on CUNY. Moreover a large percentage of CUNY students are not even U.S. citizens. Even if they were to pursue an electoral strategy it would take years to realize when most of the budget battles that set the pace for struggles at CUNY begin and end within six months.

On the other hand most CUNY students are young (if not as young as other college students) and enjoy the relative freedom to involve themselves in prolonged and intense political struggles and to take considerable risks, including that of arrest. By seizing physical control of an administrative office or a campus building they can interfere with the operations of a large public institution and draw attention to their plight

in a manner that is frequently embarrassing for elected officials who might not really care how the students vote. Also by taking action on campus they can call on the student body to join in or otherwise support the action. Such actions also have a tendency to inspire imitators and to draw in other social forces including labor unions, churches and community based organizations, all of which creates a sense of urgency around resolving the grievances that inspired the action. Building occupations won Open Admissions in 1969, saved Hostos in 1976, prevented budget cuts and a tuition hike in 1989, and even won concessions in 1991. The militant mass mobilization on March 23, 1995 also won concessions though not on the order of the earlier actions.

The third major lesson is that tactical militancy is not a substitute for actual mass support. The student body must be actively won over first to the demands of the movement and then to support for its methods. This requires constant ongoing education through leaflets, speak-outs, teach-ins and other sorts of educational activity, as well as mass meetings or other fora where differences over tactics can be argued out and the mood of the student body measured.

The fourth and final major lesson is that having allies matters. The biggest victories have been won when students taking direct action have been able to call on the support of community organizations, labor unions, and even key elected officials. The support of such allies lends legitimacy to the student demands and function as a vehicle for getting the students case out before the broader public, especially when the corporate media are unwilling to do so.

These lessons may seem obvious. But they have not been. They have been learned only through the course of difficult struggles in which, as often as not, the wrong course

of action has been pursued or divisions have paralyzed the movement before it could even get started. This too is another important if easily forgotten gain of the CUNY student movement – a wealth of experience in struggle that can inform future struggles.

¹The best of these are “Right versus Privilege, The Open-Admissions Experiment at the City University of New York” (The Free Press, 1981, New York) by David Lavin, Richard D. Alba, and Richard Silberstein and “Changing the Odds, Open Admissions and the Life Chances of the Disadvantaged” (Yale University Press, 1996, New Haven CT) by David Lavin and David Hyllegard; Also useful are “Open Admissions at City University of New York: An Analysis of the First Year” (Prentice-Hall, 1975, Englewood Cliffs NJ) by Jack Rossman, Helen Astin, Alexander Astin and Elaine El-Khawas and, “The Privileged Many: A Study of the City University’s Open Admissions Policy, 1970-1975” (New York, 1975) by the Women’s City Club of New York. James Traub’s “City on a Hill, Testing the American Dream at City College” (Addison-Wesley, 1994, New York) received considerable attention when it was published because it provided ammunition for opponents of Open Admissions. It doesn’t so much attempt to refute the rigorous scholarship of Lavin et. al. as much as it provides a wealth of anecdotal support for popular prejudices.

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