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“I Have No Idea What You Do Out Here”: Community Colleges, Academic Freedom, and the University as Global Marketplace

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We are professors of history and English, respectively, at Kingsborough Community College, located in Manhattan Beach, Brooklyn. Founded in 1963 during a rapid nationwide expansion of community colleges, Kingsborough, which serves some thirty thousand students a year, is one of six two-year institutions that are part of the City University of New York, the nation’s third-largest university system. Kingsborough is perched on Brooklyn’s Atlantic edge, on the site of a former merchant marine facility. The ship traffic arriving at and departing from New York harbor, visible from campus, continuously reminds us of the relationship between the community college and a large, diverse, and ever-changing population, converging from a global horizon on what appears to be an intensely local context.

Whatever we imagine globalization’s referent to be, as a description of transformations in the contemporary world it is predicated on both social and logical contradictions for which the term itself seems unable to explain or account. Describing the rhetoric of globalization theory,

Justin Rosenberg observes that “what presents itself initially as the *explanandum*—globalisation as the developing outcome of some historical process—is progressively transformed into the *explanans*: it is globalisation which now explains the changing character of the modern world—and even generates ‘retrospective discoveries’ about past epochs in which it must be presumed not to have existed.”¹ In other words, the thing that is to be explained continuously seems to change places with the explanation itself. As we shall see, this is an instructive tautology, and one that marks more than a logical fallacy.

Globalization is both metaphor and model for the forces that shape our very local context at Kingsborough in different ways, and Rosenberg’s critique of a certain admiring stance toward processes of global change allows us to articulate the dynamics of our workplace and the world in which it is located. That is, globalization theorists have argued that contemporary technological and economic forces have utterly restructured our relationships to the traditional constraints of space and time; that they have collapsed the old distinctions between center and periphery, us and them, here and there. As “globalization” becomes a kind of shorthand for describing such shifts, it also becomes an alibi for what those shifts retain or conceal. In short, the global forces driving us toward homogenization and interconnectedness continue to reproduce—even as they deny—vast inequities in power and resources. Moving from the rhetoric of globalization to the language and practices that have defined academic freedom and the role of the community college in an increasingly globalized university marketplace, we aim in this paper to demonstrate how the simultaneous denial and reinscription of center/periphery relationships characterize our experience at Kingsborough and its relationship to the CUNY system, especially in the university administration’s recently announced plans for a new community college.

It is worth emphasizing that, in what follows, our primary interest is in critiquing a system, rather than in taking particular individuals to task. In other words, we want to contextualize developments at CUNY in relation to larger economic and political shifts; the contradictions

and pressures we point to in this article are ones affecting all of higher education today and the domestic and international economies more generally. Indeed, thinking about our daily experiences through the prism of globalization theory is representative of the way we are committed to approaching our experiences as CUNY community college professors *as* professors—as analysts of structures, systems, texts, and language—and in using the understanding such analysis generates to weigh in on what has recently become a very active debate on the future of institutions like ours.

In July 2009, President Barack Obama announced his national initiative to strengthen community colleges, pledging billions of dollars in aid to the effort; locally, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg followed up with a promise to commit \$50 million to community colleges should he be re-elected. In both cases, aid will be tied to pushing community colleges toward innovation, higher graduation rates, workforce preparedness, and institutional and individual accountability. These are laudable goals, although it remains unclear how they will be accomplished. It is an important moment, therefore, to take a critical look at how such issues have been developed within our own institution, meaning both the community college at which we work and the CUNY system in which it is located.

We begin with an anecdote we find particularly telling. One afternoon last year, CUNY’s Chancellor Matthew Goldstein arrived on our campus to brief a group of faculty about the upcoming budget crisis—a rare visit from a representative of the university system’s central administration to members of the faculty of one of the system’s most geographically marginal institutions. He began by admiring the panoramic harbor view. Then, by way of lighthearted introduction to his presentation of the university’s grim fiscal forecasts, he said to the assembled faculty, only half-jokingly, “I have no real idea what you do out here.”

This rather impolitic, off-hand remark highlights the interlocking contradictions that define our role as faculty of both a major university system and of an urban community college. The chancellor’s frank admission of his disconnectedness from our institution and its daily practices speaks to the multiple ways we at Kingsborough find ourselves marginalized from what is

perceived to be the academic center. This contradictory position has been underscored in recent years as the system seeks to transform itself from a loose confederation of nearly independent institutions into a centralized, corporatized entity with its “headquarters” on Manhattan’s swanky Upper East Side, a world away from the outer edge of our “outer borough.” It is within CUNY’s institutional center that many of the conditions for Kingsborough’s financial, technological, and pedagogical operations are determined, and it is through the perspective of central administrators that the college’s performance is judged. Yet, as Goldstein’s comment suggested, Kingsborough as an actual place is represented only as remote, foreign, somehow alien to the university’s accepted, familiar, normative practices. This is true despite the urgently necessary role that Kingsborough, like all the system’s community colleges, plays within CUNY. Despite the university’s centralizing mandates and practices, roughly 30 percent of its student body attend community colleges, the only component of the system that continues to uphold (albeit in an ameliorated fashion) CUNY’s nearly extinguished ideal of open admissions.²

This tension between central administration and peripheral institutions (with all the diversity of their faculties) is itself reflective of a larger contradiction in the era of shrinking educational resources. As David Moltz has recently observed in an *Inside Higher Ed* report, while “the state budget is plummeting, enrollment at community colleges is booming and graduation rates are disappointingly stagnant. What better time, officials of the City University of New York seem to think, to create a new type of community college to complement its six existing two-year institutions.”³ A seemingly counter-intuitive move to expand in a moment of hiring and construction freezes and institutional “downsizing” (including the general trend toward part-time or adjunct faculty over tenure-line professorships), this proposed community college “emanated directly from Chancellor Matthew Goldstein,” who has also lavished great care and attention on a number of ambitious projects: the Graduate Center in its refurbished

midtown facility, the “flagship” McCauley Honors Program, and the public relations promotion of cooperative initiatives between CUNY and corporate or private-sector funding.⁴

Anyone aware of the administration’s priorities, as we certainly are, was understandably taken aback by the chancellor’s frank incomprehension about what actually goes on in the system’s six community colleges. In fact, however, this is evident in the proposed community college expansion. Moltz points out that the “vision” that CUNY administrators have for the new community college “is consistent with national calls by many educators to look for new ways to get more community college students to complete programs speedily, but the plan has stricter requirements and a narrower curriculum than many community colleges—leaving some observers concerned.” Not only observers, we fear, but participants as well, including the faculty of existing community colleges whose views—while acknowledged by central administration in a series of local-campus, “town-hall” style discussions of the proposed new college, in which space was provided for individual faculty members but not for elected representatives as such—have not been an integral element of institutional planning. Quite the contrary, as CUNY’s own concept paper for the proposed community college makes clear, the institution is predicated on assumptions, practices, and outcomes that implicitly marginalize and effectively neutralize faculty participation at every level. While this paper is revealingly “not meant to provide detailed instructions for the implementation of a new community college,” it “neither addresses issues of faculty governance nor recommends an organizational structure or operating budget for the new college”⁵

Perhaps the authors of the concept paper do indeed believe that faculty governance, organizational structure, and operating budgets are, as they go on to say, “critically important matters to be tackled in the next phase of the planning process”—and, indeed, there have been recent calls for faculty to join committees tasked with working out the details of the new community college—but it remains to be seen to what extent this will be true as the project moves forward. The CUNY administration promises innovation, but what, we wonder, would really be new about the new community college, unless perhaps it provides a sort of public

admission that the distinction between public and private educational institutions is pure fiction of a very revealing sort? As one reader of a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* piece on the proposed college commented online, “this plan sounds like the private, for-profit college I work for It may be new and innovative for the public college, but the taxpayer should know that little of this is new in the industry.” As faculty, we thus find ourselves reduced to being outside observers of some objectively structured workplace, functioning according to the inexorable “laws of the market.” Like other workers in the global economy, we seem to be able at best to affect individual conditions at a local level but entirely outside of, alienated from, or passively subject to the larger networks by which our workplace is defined as a “global” —if not a universal—entity.

This tension between marginality and centrality (or between the individual and objective social structures) applies beyond the CUNY system to the wider academic world, where faculty at major research universities and other four-year colleges seem desperately to cling to the fiction that their own workplaces represent the realities of higher education, a fiction that systematically displaces the realities of both students and faculty at the community colleges. Both of us, for example, were graduate students at the University of Michigan, where the understanding was that the academic profession was synonymous with work at similar institutions, and where taking a position at a two-year college was never discussed as a serious career option. But community colleges serve 45 percent of college students nationwide, not to mention that they bear the burden of being pretty much the last significant point of access to higher education for a vast proportion of would-be college students.

Something of the self-negation of this condition is interestingly visible in comments made on the centralized, streamlined, and assessment-based curriculum of the proposed community college by John Mogulescu, CUNY’s senior university dean for academic affairs and dean of the School of Professional Studies. The proposal explains that the college will be open only to full-time students. Mogulescu rejects the idea that this full-time requirement is “exclusionary,”

despite the fact that a significant percentage of the existing two-year college student body attends part time, and selectively presents statistical figures that support his viewpoint (for instance, by focusing only on “first-time freshmen” rather than the overall student body). The picture he paints of the CUNY two-year student is not entirely accurate, particularly because it limits assessment criteria for success to speed and efficiency of production, “the skills and knowledge [these students] will need for associate degree completion, baccalaureate transfer and/or workplace readiness.”⁶ Mogulescu comments that “[i]f we play this out and see that the results for full-time students are well beyond [those for part-time students], we would be very open about this with our student population. There would still be opportunities for students to attend part time. Still, we would tell the student, ‘If you go full-time and kill yourself for three years, you’ll have better success than if you went part time for six years.’ Then, the student would have a very informed decision to make.”⁷

In other words, success comes through the putatively rational choice of the subject: between the failure of an education integrated (if often at odds) with the social lives of our students, on the one hand, or on the other, the metaphorical suicide of those students who choose to not conform with the methods of corporate efficiency and the representational image of the four-year academic calendar. In presenting students with this no-win model of educational planning, Mogulescu inadvertently bolsters one long-standing critique of market theorists’ reliance on the idea of “rational choice,” for, in reality, such choice is rarely what economic models imagine it to be.

Thus, both Mogulescu’s and the chancellor’s remarks also highlight the gap between academia’s pervasive lack of self-reflection, on the one hand, and its universalizing assumptions and expectations, on the other. Certainly we recognize that Goldstein was joking when he professed ignorance of our institution. After all, every year Kingsborough’s president meets with him and gives him a thorough briefing on the college’s performance, according to certain benchmarks: student test scores, student retention, etc. So clearly he knows a great deal, in certain ways, about the college’s workings, as he must about those of the other two-year

colleges. But the ingenuousness of his remark, its very un-self-consciousness about what it is that he knows, signals an obliviousness to how these benchmarks are defined or effected, or what this actually means for faculty or students on a day-to-day basis.

In other words, that perspective cannot acknowledge, except as a peripheral mirage, the realities of its faculty or students who are necessarily “out here,” beyond the student model as they construe it, precisely because the community colleges can only be sites of development, the receding horizon of an equally instrumental and yet-to-be-realized future. That is, in seeking to transform needy students into more palatable students-fit-for-four-year-colleges, or else into underdeveloped semi-professionals, it seeks to monitor us minutely, applying those kinds of quantitative methods and assessments normalized and codified by the Bush administration in its No Child Left Behind legislation. Our job thus is not to teach as we defined that term through our own graduate training—as a direct outcome of and necessary complement to our work as researchers and writers—but rather to carry out an increasingly rationalized, pre-established curriculum, pre-determined not only in its outcomes and methodology but also in its structural assumptions. This is driven by the further administrative assumption that, having now realized the corporate model, the institution is at the end of history in a way thoroughly instrumental to, and now utterly discredited by, the neoliberal project.

This is increasingly true, and not simply by fiat of the CUNY central administration but by our own campus administration and certain of our colleagues as well, particularly those who see standardized curricula, methods, and assessment as a correlate to standardized tenure/promotion criteria across programs or departments. This is happening alongside an increased emphasis on “learning communities,” in which faculty from two different disciplines or areas of study share the same group of students, and interdisciplinary projects that recall that most revealing of nineties corporate buzzwords: “synergy” (a term that explains nothing and permits everything).

One particular, paradoxical corner of our institution that both of us have become involved with over the past year—not entirely voluntarily, it should be added—is the KCC Honors Program, geared toward “historically underserved, high-performing students” (those with a GPA of 3.2 or higher), as one administrator put it. This program is meant to provide them with the perks of smaller classes, premium advising services for their transfer to four-year institutions, and increased access to an “elite core” of faculty, meaning full-time, tenured or tenure-track faculty with the PhD pedigree. One of the administration’s hopes is that this program will increase the desirability of Kingsborough for high school graduates. This is a seemingly redundant aspiration given that our enrollment has skyrocketed with the current recession, but makes sense in light of institutional competition *within* the CUNY system for a limited supply of already qualified students, those students for whom “value-added” is a reliable prediction, given their status as simultaneously resource, labor pool, and product. What is meant, of course, is that the Honors Program will reproduce within the community college the same dynamic we see in CUNY more generally—the segmentation and tracking of the student population into the deserving achievers and the less-deserving strugglers, with the distribution of resources *naturally* and *inevitably* following.

Expectedly, even as a segment of our faculty is being separated out to service the needs of the Honors Program, expectations for all faculty are being revised in ways that are not always clear to us. Over the past several years, a committee assumed to be representative of the faculty, but appointed without any faculty oversight, has been engaged with codifying and updating the hitherto murky (some would say “flexible”) requirements for tenure. Supposedly this has been done to increase transparency in the tenure and promotion process, reflecting the faculty’s own commitment to research and to teach in ways that reflect broader professional norms (to which Kingsborough is, like all other accredited institutions, expected to conform). In reality, this renovation of our professional standards puts us on a collision course with other demands of the university, for example the emphasis on raising enrollment as an imperative of the faculty itself, so that decisions about release time for research are directly instrumentalized by

department chairs and other administrators, who are working to increase the number of students enrolled and to lower the numbers of dollars spent on that task.

The intensity of the contradictions raised by the proposed new community college, as we've said, is exemplified by the self-evident logic of the administration's aims for that institution: to better serve the existing needs of CUNY's eighty-one-thousand two-year students, and to better prepare them for a future whose realizable actuality recedes ever farther toward a conceptual horizon that no longer seems possible. In that imagined institution, poised to address the global marketplace, a predetermined core curriculum and limiting of student choice to "about 12 majors ...[,] each with a prominent focus on internships and other on-the-job educational opportunities ...[,] mostly in pre-career fields of study such as nursing, surgical technology and energy services management," equates to the elimination of our own disciplines in favor of "innovations," but innovations carried out by academic labor with, it seems, as little choice or control over the definitions and conditions of that labor as the students themselves.⁸

Sadly, these contradictions, which we as faculty are being asked simultaneously to embody and to drive, reflect the larger condition of life at the end of history, as Francis Fukuyama famously put it. In other words, we are at a moment in which—despite the self-evident results of the Bush Doctrine domestically and abroad—certain assumptions about society and culture become ever more entrenched or unquestionable. The institutional and individual autonomy protected by academic freedom as it has heretofore been conceived protects against political, religious, and corporate pressures. In public perception of academic freedom, however, it is too often conceived as a somehow more collective assertion of an individual faculty member's First Amendment rights, with an emphasis on the first two of the above three negative pressures: political and religious. Similarly, however one examines the term globalization, it is restrictive political relations or primordial social structures—exemplified by the religious intolerance so often identified with the "Muslim world"—that so preoccupies the liberal imagination. As the planning for CUNY's new community college exemplifies, however, it is the third of these

negative pressures that is the most significant. The view implicit in Chancellor Goldstein’s remark, with which we began, that “I have no idea what you do out here,” has its mirror image in a process of absorbing academic labor into the institution’s productive imperative, so that the students themselves, faced with a pre-established curriculum in which some version of social suicide is an intended assumption, may also state of their instructors, “we have no idea what you do in there.”

A recent draft version of CUNY’s University Faculty Senate Statement on Academic Freedom describes the pioneering 1915 AAUP *Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure* as follows: “A university is not ‘an ordinary business venture.’ It must be protected from ‘private or class interests’ and from ‘political considerations.’ The Declaration asserts ‘not the absolute freedom of utterance of the individual scholar, but the absolute freedom of thought, of inquiry, of discussion and of teaching, of the academic profession.’” Sadly, it is when the “business venture” model—corporate assumptions, structure, and outcomes—has become so ubiquitous in society that democratic procedures, on the one hand, and institutions of higher learning, on the other, become indistinguishable from it, that we find our fundamental contradictions so clearly visible as spectacular objects, rendered as alien and untouchable as the ships that approach our campus from the four corners of the globe.

To paraphrase Justin Rosenberg’s description of a crucial rhetorical inversion in globalization theory, “what presents itself initially as the *explanandum*—CUNY’s proposed community college as the developing outcome of some historical process—is progressively transformed into the *explanans*: it is that community college with all its narrowed horizons for faculty and students which now explains the changing character of the modern world—and even generates ‘retrospective discoveries’ about past epochs in which it must be presumed not to have existed.” These “past epochs,” in this instance, constitute the history of the actual institutions within which we labor, displaced with all their actual problems and promises; needless to say, it is this reworked statement that composes the beginning, and not the end, of our particular story.

Notes

1. Justin Rosenberg. *The Follies of Globalisation Theory* (London: Verso, 2001), 3.
2. For these figures, see Marc Santora, "CUNY Plans Campus for New Approach to Community College," *New York Times*, January 25, 2009. See also "CUNY Enrollment Skyrockets," *CUNY Matters*, winter 2009, <http://web.cuny.edu/news/cm-archive/winter2009/CUNY-Enrollment-Skyrockets.html>. This article from CUNY's internal newsletter gives data from the fall 2008 semester, in which 81,518 students were enrolled in community colleges out of a total university enrollment of 244,253. Overall, community college enrollment at CUNY is up 31 percent over the last decade.
3. David Moltz, "Shaking Up the Community College Concept," *Inside Higher Ed*, February 6, 2009, <http://insidehighered.com/news/2009/02/06/cuny>.
4. City University of New York, "A New Community College Concept Paper," 3, http://web.cuny.edu/academics/oaa/initiatives/ncc/NCC_Concept_paper.
5. "New Community College Concept Paper," 5.
6. "New Community College Concept Paper," 7–8.
7. Moltz, "Shaking Up the Community College Concept."
8. For further and more detailed comments on the issue of academic labor and the new community college, see Lenore Beaky, "Community College Plan Unveiled," *Clarion: Newspaper of the Professional Staff Congress/City University of New York* 38, no. 2 (March/April 2009): 8 and the letter from Professional Staff Congress President Barbara Bowen to Chancellor Goldstein, excerpted in *Clarion* 38, no. 2 (March/April 2009): 9.