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Attack on academic standards

In education, changing a successful formula is rarely a good idea. So the alarm that faculty members at CUNY's Brooklyn College have raised over the easing out of the college's widely admired "Core Curriculum" in favor of something called "Brooklyn Connections" is welcome indeed.

The core course of studies is widely credited with enabling Brooklyn College, which has some 12,000 undergraduates, to preserve its standards amidst the budgetary austerity and academic decline that have marked the CUNY system since the introduction of open admissions in 1970.

SOLID EDUCATION

The curriculum provides a solid foundation in the liberal arts — in art, literature, science, mathematics, computer science and Western and non-Western civilization. Brooklyn students also must acquire expertise in writing and a foreign language.

The college's faculty and some of its most distinguished alumni, such as Gertrude Himmelfarb and Eugene Genovese, worry that "Brooklyn Connections," the new program being readied by the college administration, will erode the institution's commitment to the core courses, which are now required for graduation.

"Connections" is supposed to make the college's education "more relevant" to the Borough of Brooklyn. It is a course of study designed around four "themes": community studies, communications, environmental studies and science education. In the words of a program statement circulated during the recent academic year, the curriculum will be integrated "into the demands and requirements of the workplace."

But the stark fact is that what New York City employers most often want — and find lacking — in city-educated students is not specific job-related knowledge (employers can teach that) but literacy, numeracy and the ability to learn and analyze things logically. Those are precisely the skills students acquire via immersion in the traditional liberal arts, not in less rigorous "career-oriented" courses.

"Connections" advocates deny that their program will harm the Core Curriculum, let alone replace it. But conflict over resources and faculty between the two curricular lines is inevitable given the different educational concepts they represent.

DIVERTING RESOURCES

Proponents of the new approach may not mean to lower standards at Brooklyn College, but the early details on the program's content strongly suggest it would do just that. For example, the plan would divert resources from departments where students read and write about the great works of our civilization, and funnel them to "communications" — whatever that might be.

Rather than force the "Connections" concept on a college with a well-established and highly successful identity, why not try it out in one of the many CUNY branches that have no parallel to Brooklyn's Core Curriculum? Pushing the new program at Brooklyn leaves at least the impression of another retreat in a long line of retreats

— educators deciding again that it's just too hard to ask today's students to meet standards that challenged and excited the students of past generations.

For a telling example of what can happen when educators lose confidence in traditional standards, the parties in the Brooklyn controversy might simply look across the East River. Last winter and spring, Manhattan's New School for Social Research was shaken by a bizarre revolt against what protesters called its "racist" standards.

The furor focused on demands for tenure for a professor, Jacqui Alexander, who had published no books, though among her credits was an essay titled, "Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization: An Anatomy of Feminist and State Practice in the Bahamas Tourist Economy." Three academic departments of the New School rejected tenure for Alexander, whose main claim to qualification for the elite status, it seems, was that she is a Caribbean woman who "rocks our world," as one supporter put it.

THE INCENSE BIT

In a revealing demonstration, Alexander's supporters prepared for a meeting with New School President Jonathan Fanton by burning incense, lighting candles and draping an Indian tapestry to cover the portrait of esteemed former Professor Ernest Wolf. At various times last spring, they trapped Fanton in his offices and held hostage several other administrators. In February, New School students demonstrated against an exhibit of Holocaust photographs — on grounds it was scheduled during Black History Month.

Of course, there is some irony in attacks on the New School in the name of Third Worldism: Many would say that some of the most destructive trends in American education had their genesis at the school, which was one of the first U.S. homes of Marxist scholarship. It would be a fair comment to say its faculty was hoist with its own petard.

But within the Marxist tradition — and on the New School faculty — are scholars who produce work that generates serious debate. If the universities knuckle under to pressures to retreat from intellectual standards altogether, they will be preparing a future of barbarism.

THE NEXT CHANCELLOR

The pressure to lower standards is sometimes acute — as in the New School imbroglio — and sometimes more subtle (preparing Brooklyn students for the job market sounds sensible). In either case, university administrators will be betraying their mission if they don't resist.

The New School will surely find its own balance between its hyped-up faction of radical Third World students and its more traditionally left-wing "Eurocentric" faculty. Meanwhile, Brooklyn College, widely appreciated as a public-education success, is precisely the kind of subject about which CUNY trustees should ask careful questions as they choose the system's next chancellor.

Any measure that lowers academic standards at the college won't help at all to prepare students for subsequent careers.