

Tumult Brews at Brooklyn College Over Its Vaunted Core Curriculum

Next Chancellor to Face First Test on Standards

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NEW YORK — Amid the rubble of the fallen empire of the City University of New York stands Brooklyn College, the alma mater of such distinguished scholars as Gertrude Himmelfarb, Donald Kagan and Eugene Genovese. With the help of a rigorous core curriculum introduced in 1981, Brooklyn has managed to weather the storm of open admissions and budget cuts — not to mention the broad-based decline in quality that has buffeted the entire CUNY system.

But critics of a controversial new plan to reorient the school's curriculum away from liberal arts are warning that the institution is in danger of becoming another casualty of the dumbing-down of CUNY. The initiative has become the centerpiece of a battle that pits Brooklyn's administration against a determined faction of its faculty and a handful of esteemed alumni. The fight seems likely to emerge as an important test for CUNY's trustees and its still-to-be-named chancellor as they set out to raise the standards of New York's embattled university system without compromising its commitment to educating any student willing to strive.

THE QUARREL

The so-called project of curriculum transformation, dubbed "Brooklyn Connections," would focus the college's efforts on four "themes": community studies, communications, environmental studies and science education. "Decisions on resources in the years to come will proceed from these priorities," reads a statement from the Office of the Provost. "For example, they will be dispositive in decisions to hire new faculty for the fall of 1997." An accompanying report on the program explains that the changing dynamics of society require that citizens "integrate the confidence and vision of a liberal arts education into the demands and requirements of the workplace."

Opponents of the initiative fear that it will transform the widely respected liberal arts college into

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nothing more than a vocational school. "These four themes are better suited to a community college," fumes Abigail Rosenthal, a professor of philosophy and outspoken critic of Brooklyn Connections. "I don't want to say *a priori* that they are all mediocre, but there are limited resources at Brooklyn and if you allocate these resources to an experimental program without first replenishing the basic disciplines that make up a liberal arts education, you don't serve the teaching mission of the college."

These sentiments were echoed by Margaret King, a professor of history at Brooklyn. "I see it as a threat to the teaching of liberal arts and the teaching of liberal arts is the most important thing we can do for our students," Ms. King says. "My first and overwhelming response was that it was intellectually sub-standard... One of the greatest threats to our culture is the failure to teach according to high intellectual and moral standards, and I see that prospect of dilution coming to Brooklyn so I was at the forefront of protesting it."

That protest began in earnest at a February faculty meeting, when these two professors put forth a resolution calling for a fresh review of the initiative, which was first presented to the faculty at the start of the academic year. The resolution was defeated 122 to 119, a margin narrow enough to spur talk of a no-confidence vote. Moreover, Ms. Rosenthal has speculated that some department chairmen may not have wanted to ruffle feathers in the present climate of shrinking allocations. According to a dispatch in the Brooklyn College Excelsior, the campus paper, Ms. Rosenthal asked Brooklyn's president, Vernon Lattin, if — given the razor-thin margin — "anything needs to be done to assuage the split faculty." Mr. Lattin reportedly responded, "No...the issue is over."

Christoph Kimmich, the college's provost who oversaw the development of Brooklyn Connections, downplayed the notion that the program poses a threat to Brooklyn's core curriculum, which consists of 10 required courses that cover a range of subjects including art, literature, science, mathematical reasoning, computer programming and both Western civilization and non-Western cultures. "I have not heard of any major changes being proposed to the core," says Mr. Kimmich. "I don't understand it [the criticism]."

Ms. Rosenthal, however, explains

that 1997 represents the first year since the implementation of the core curriculum in 1981 that an abundance of lines for new hires were included in the budget.

"Instead of replenishing the core departments, these lines were deliberately earmarked for the Brooklyn Connections program," Ms. Rosenthal says, adding that she has seen no evidence that the administration is taking their concerns seriously. "There have been informal assurances, but we don't see what we need to see, which is a firm commitment on the part of administrators to solid educational values." In a faculty report written in May, Julia Driver, the former head of the Core program, likened Brooklyn Connections to a slow poison, concluding that it would eventually kill the Core "by passive euthanasia."

"Faculty don't get appointed to inter-disciplinary programs, they get appointed to departments, so I'm not quite sure that I can follow that argument," answered Mr.

Kimmich, noting that the goals of the program include attracting outside money and responding to the college's setting in "one of the most diverse and vibrant cities in the world."

Such talk is making some Brooklyn College graduates queasy. "There has been a rather distressing decline in academic standards throughout

the country," remarks Eugene Genovese, class of '53, a renowned scholar of slavery. "The changes that are being proposed at Brooklyn College read very much in that spirit."

Mr. Genovese, a scholar in residence at the University Center in Georgia, was one of 15 alumni who signed onto a letter to Mr. Lattin opposing the implementation of Brooklyn Connections. The missive, coordinated by the National Alumni Form in Washington, states that the program will disconnect the college from its "strong liberal arts tradition" — a tradition that was honored as recently as 10 years ago when a survey by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching placed Brooklyn among the top five schools for general education.

"It's a terrible shame. It was one of the very few colleges in the city system that was actually working and working well," offers another signee, Gertrude Himmelfarb, a 1942 graduate and a professor emerita of history at CUNY. "It's really so insulting to the people of the so-called community. What makes it so awful is that it's not as if this college was in need of repair."

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