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OF TECHNOPOLY AND UNCARING

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A quarter of a century ago, the trustees of the City University of New York (CUNY), almost all appointed by Republicans Mayor Rudy Giuliani and Governor George Pataki, decreed a shift to technopoly at CUNY community colleges. That shift, which seemed to lack any redeeming social purpose, would further stratify society. The trustees ended remedial instruction at the senior colleges, forcing students with deficiencies in reading and math to enroll exclusively at poorly funded community colleges such as Bronx Community College (BCC). If that wasn't cruel enough, they imposed the CUNY Proficiency Exam which students needed to pass in order to obtain their sixty-credit associate's degrees. Students might pass all their courses, but all for naught if they failed the exit exam.

In a report titled "Rising to the Challenge: Exemplary Community Colleges in a Revitalized City University of New York," the CUNY trustees urged faculty and administrators to consider "how to move from time-bound, place-bound, bureaucracy-bound, role-bound practices to anytime, anyplace, anyway learning opportunities," and "how to create a 'culture of evidence' that uses data and experience about learning." The report recommended that CUNY "establish business/industry advisory councils related to each professional/technical instructional program or program cluster, asking these groups to advise faculty and administrators on knowledge/skill requirements of graduates, curriculum content, business / industry partnership opportunities [so as to] eliminate barriers to flexibility so that programs can be customized quickly for business."¹

The new managerial imperative was to train the working poor as cheaply as possible through online learning. On May 3, 1999, a live interactive satellite event, "The Privatization of Higher Education," was held at BCC to promote the benefits of partnerships between colleges and private corporations. Two weeks later, a day-long colloquium, "Technology Transfer at CUNY: Bringing Scientific Ideas to Market," took place in which intellectual property attorneys and CUNY professionals advised faculty on how to protect their inventions and intellectual property in their interactions with business and industry. The Teaching, Learning, and Technology Roundtable first met in February 2000 to hasten the automation of learning at BCC, which was happening sooner than at other minority-serving institutions. As assembly-line, cookie-cutter, education began to take hold at BCC, Marcia Keizs, Vice President of Academic Affairs commented, "We've only just begun."²

BCC administrators displayed their organizational savvy in forward-looking documents such as "Goals & Strategies: 2000-2005" which sought, in its own words, to increase productivity, improve customer service, and control audit vulnerability. The administration introduced course assessment straight out of behaviorism, with detailed learning goals, outcome behaviors, measurement, evaluation, and course

¹ "Rising to the Challenge: Exemplary Community Colleges in a Revitalized City University of New York" (Report of the CUNY Trustees Committee on Board of Community Colleges) City University of New York (Spring 2001): 15, 24.

² Quoted in "Distance Learning at BCC." *Teaching, Learning, and Technology Roundtable Newsletter*. (January 2000): 1.

modification. In a seminar, faculty learned how students might use clickers during class presentations to respond to questions and tabulate their likes.

The cost of technological innovation at BCC fell heavily on students who were already burdened with mandatory fees for student activities and consolidated services. In 2003, CUNY imposed a student technology fee of \$75.00 per semester for full-time students and \$37.50 for part-time students. On May 16, 2005, BCC held a Town Hall meeting to solicit “input” from students “to help determine the continued utilization of these funds for BCC,” empowering them, so to speak, to have a say in choosing the sauce in which they would be cooked.³ Technology begat entrepreneurship. In February 2005, Marlon Smith, nicknamed the “High-Tech Motivator,” was the keynote speaker at the Freshman Convocation. Smith had founded the company Success By Choice, had authored the book “What’s Up-Solution Guide for Today’s Young People,” and had given speaking tours in a dozen countries. He was evidently meant to inspire entrepreneurial wannabes at BCC.

Technology did little to streamline institutional procedures and efficiencies at BCC. After the 2006 PSC contract settlement, Vice President Mary Coleman informed BCC faculty that there had been errors in the payroll deposits for retroactive pay. The union sent faculty a flyer requesting that they verify their retroactive pay, since the administration had declined to provide a general accounting. Tellingly, it was the union, not the administration that provided faculty with the form to request information on their retroactive pay.

Students and faculty often found it difficult to exercise initiative at BCC. On July 7, 2005, Ted Lehterman, on behalf of People for the American Way, sent an email to BCC faculty regarding a fellowship program for student activists. That very day, Mary Rogan, BCC Legal Counsel, sent an email to faculty that stated: “Kindly do not respond to this email until I have had a chance to determine who this group is and what this is about. If you have any questions or information, please contact me.”⁴ The faculty never heard back from Rogan.

While prompt to quash activism, the administration was slow to secure personal information. For years, faculty had to put their social security numbers on their reappointment briefs. In September 2006, Claudia Contreras, who had studied at BCC for thirteen years without graduating, was arrested for identity theft. While working at the BCC health center as a data entry clerk, Contreras had used the social security numbers and birth dates of at least ten students to open fraudulent credit card accounts and buy electronic equipment.⁵

In spring 2009, the FBI arrested Marlo Garvin, BCC’s new financial aid director, on campus. Garvin had landed his \$85,000-a-year position using a forged transcript. He had been convicted four times in Florida of check kiting and credit card fraud.⁶ According to an investigative article in *La Voz Latina*, a Savannah area publication, Garvin had swindled immigrants in South Carolina and Georgia by representing himself as an immigration attorney who could ease their path to U.S. citizenship.⁷ Fortunately, when Garvin resurfaced at BCC, some of his victims notified the FBI. As the scandal broke, BCC swiftly deleted references to Garvin on its website. He was suspended from his position in July 2009.

Caring was the signature theme of the CUNY Campaign for Voluntary Charitable Giving which solicits donations for city agencies and charities from CUNY employees. Carol White, Special Assistant to the

³Coleman, Mary E. Vice President of Administration and Finance. “Town Hall Meeting Notice.” (21 April 2005).

⁴ Rogan, Mary. “RE: Political activism and leadership training at BCC.” Received by BCC Faculty. 7 July 2005.

⁵ Ross, Barbara. “Campus ID Theft Arrest.” *New York Daily News*. (9 September 2006) <https://www.nydailynews.com/2006/09/09/campus-id-theft-arrest/> ; Gregorian, Dareh. “Waiter in \$kim Bust.” (9 September 2006) *New York Post*. <https://nypost.com/2006/09/09/waiter-in-kim-bust/>

⁶ Messing, Philip. “‘Phony’ Wiser Than U.” *New York Post*. (17 July 2009) <http://nypost.com/2009/07/17/phony-wiser-than-u/>

⁷ Newton, John. “Where’s Marlo (Garvin)? Man Preys on Immigrant Community.” *Voz Latina*. 1 April 2007.

President for Public Affairs and the CUNY Campaign Coordinator for BCC, wrote in a December 15, 2000 letter to the BCC community: “As we approach the holiday season and we all get and give gifts and well wishes, let us not forget those among us who do not have our good fortune. The true spirit of the season is about sharing your bounty with others.” In a similar vein, BCC President Carolyn Grubbs Williams, in a November 13, 2006 fundraising memo for the CUNY Campaign, urged “The BCC Family”: “Please be generous. ‘We cannot hold a torch to light another’s path without brighten (*sic*) our own.’ Thank you for opening your hearts.” Under Williams, who liked to compose her face into a semblance of affability and benevolence, BCC was one of the five colleges that paid its adjuncts less than other CUNY colleges for the same work, under the pretext that adjuncts did not teach during finals week but instead only proctored exams.⁸

In a message asking support for the 2002-03 CUNY Campaign for Voluntary Giving, CUNY Chancellor Matthew Goldstein evoked the memory of 9/11: “Last year’s CUNY Campaign – “Building Communities” – took on added resonance and urgency in light of 9/11. Members of the University community answered the call, with 2,357 people collectively giving over \$371,000. That figure represents a 10% increase over last year’s total and a phenomenal performance, especially during these difficult times.” In 2003, Goldstein received a 40% raise, bringing his total compensation to \$420,000, which well exceeded the CUNY Campaign’s haul cited above. That same year, Goldstein began serving as a funds trustee for JP Morgan Chase, in which capacity, in 2011 alone, he was paid \$325,000.⁹ Upon his retirement in 2013, the CUNY trustees conferred on Goldstein the title of Chancellor Emeritus which came with an annual salary of \$300,000 for five years.

After fourteen years at BCC, Williams retired as president in June 2011. That month, the New York State Assembly passed a resolution honoring her. After detailing her family members, honorary and earned degrees, administrative positions, and board memberships, the resolution, in the sonorous tradition of legislative decorum, proclaimed:

WHEREAS, It is the sense of this Legislative Body that those who enhance the quality of life in their community and have shown a long and sustained commitment to the maintenance of high standards in their profession, certainly have earned the recognition and applause of all the citizens of this great Empire State; now, therefore, be it **RESOLVED**, That this Legislative Body pause in its deliberations to honor Dr. Carolyn G. Williams upon the occasion of her retirement after many years of distinguished service as President of Bronx Community College.¹⁰

The BCC Archive and Special Collections has preserved the many awards and gifts proffered to Williams during her storied career as college president.¹¹

A presidential search committee had to choose Williams’ successor from just two candidates because CUNY Chancellor Matthew Goldstein denied the BCC College Senate’s request for more candidates. Carole Berotte Joseph became BCC president in July 2011, having previously served as president of Massachusetts Bay Community College (Mass Bay) where Joseph LeBlanc, faculty union president, described her tenure as “a reign of terror.” There Berotte Joseph oversaw the departure of the deans, associate deans, interim provost, two vice presidents, and her own executive assistant.¹² In 2007, Mass Bay faculty voted 93-44 no-confidence in her leadership.

⁸ Menna, Diane. “Five Colleges Shortchange Adjuncts.” *Clarion*. (April 2007): 12.

⁹ Edelman, Susan. “CUNY Boss’ Sweet Goodbye.” *New York Post* (21 April 2013). <https://nypost.com/2013/04/21/cuny-boss-weet-goodbye/>

¹⁰ Bill No. JO6202, Sponsored by Senator Hassel-Thomas. https://nyassembly.gov/leg/?default_fld=&leg_video=&bn=J02602&term=2011&Summary=Y&Text=Y

¹¹ “Carolyn Williams Collection 1983 – 2012.” Bronx Community College Archives and Special Collections. <https://bccarchives.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2019/02/20/carolyn-williams-collection-1983-2012/>

¹² Stripling, Jack. “Reign of Terror at Mass Bay.” *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/07/07/reign-terror-massbay#>

In a 2008 interview, Berotte Joseph reflected on her tribulations as “an agent of change” at Mass Bay, seemingly caused by little more than a reflexive aversion to change on the part of faculty and staff:

When I arrived, the board asked me to review everything. Changes needed to be made at the college. Among other things, we needed a new strategic plan, and mechanisms for assessment and accountability to be put into place. I’m committed to the belief in the potential of each human being. I always challenge people to do their best. So I came to collaborate with the faculty and staff, not to make the changes in a vacuum. But – some people don’t like change. They find it difficult, and they feel the need to resist it.¹³

At BCC, Berotte Joseph prioritized vocational training and the whims of businesses. In an interview with CUNY TV, conducted shortly after she became president, Berotte Joseph said that she intended to create a business and industry advisory council for BCC and to find out the needs of automobile dealers so that they might create internships for students from BCC’s automotive technology program.¹⁴ Under Berotte Joseph, BCC became one of the five CUNY colleges to participate in Start-Up NY. The brain-child of Governor Andrew Cuomo, Start-Up NY incentivizes businesses to relocate to campus buildings without paying state and local taxes for ten years, while exempting their employees from state and local taxes for five years and exempting \$200,000 in income from taxes for yet another five years.¹⁵

Ideally, BCC might have benefited from Berotte Joseph’s background in bilingual education, Spanish, and Haitian Creole. As it was, Berotte Joseph did what she had been tasked to do. The provost, the senior vice president for academic affairs, and the deans for academic affairs departed in a mass exodus that left just one member from Berotte Joseph’s original cabinet. Some faculty agreed that many of the administrators, holdovers from the Williams administration, needed to go. However, as Franklin Moore, BCC Faculty Senate chair, pointed out, the removal of so many administrators in so short a time caused a loss of institutional memory. Berotte Joseph reduced the role of faculty search committees in the hiring process, appropriating to herself the sole right to hire a candidate from three unranked finalists. Berotte Joseph had to meet sixty finalists in fall 2014 alone, causing long delays in the hiring process. Three department chairs filed grievances over their improper removals. On September 17, 2014, the BCC Faculty Council voted to create a select faculty committee to investigate areas of concern regarding her administration, which it deemed authoritarian and intimidating. Five days later, CUNY announced in a press release that Berotte Joseph had resigned.¹⁶

Berotte Joseph appears to have been rather disenchanted by her experiences as college president. In an editorial published in 2024, Berotte Joseph compared herself to Harvard University president Claudine Gay, for having been perceived as uppity women of color and forced to resign. Although racism in academia is a reality that no number of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives can conceal, Berotte Joseph greatly simplifies the causes of Gay’s and her own troubles. Gay was targeted by demagogic politicians who conflated anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism in order to suppress free speech and peaceful protest. Moreover, Gay appears to have plagiarized parts of her dissertation, failed to properly cite sources in five articles, and deserved to be held to the same standards of academic integrity as Harvard faculty and students.

As the first Haitian-American community college president in the United States, Berotte Joseph saw herself as a role model. However, she failed to recognize her own complicity in the colonizing enterprise to which our system of higher education is integral:

¹³ Solomon, Marjorie Walk. “The Third College.” *Wellesley Weston Magazine*. <https://wellesleywestonmagazine.com/past-issues/summer-2008-table-of-contents/the-third-college/>

¹⁴ McCarthy, Sheryl. Interview. “One to One: Carole Berotte Joseph, President, Bronx Community College/CUNY.” CUNY TV. (16 April 2012).

¹⁵ Ahmad, Shomial, et. al. “Tax-Free NY: Cuomo Business Plan Comes to CUNY” (May 2014). <https://psc-cuny.org/clarion/2014/may/tax-free-ny-cuomo-business-plan-comes-cuny/>

¹⁶ Ahmad, Shomial. “BCC President Leaves Position.” *Clarion* (October 2014). <https://psc-cuny.org/clarion/2014/october/bcc-president-leaves-position/>

Becoming the first in my culture to be named president of an institution of higher learning in the US brought additional burdens of responsibility. My achievements were no longer simply personal. Now, I was also representing several communities – Haitians, immigrants, people of color and women. Throughout my career, I had to overcome many instances of racism, sexism and xenophobia. I also navigated instances of internalized oppression – a remnant of colonization – within my own communities.¹⁷

Her successor, Thomas Isekenegbe, prided himself on becoming the first Nigerian-American community college president, but BCC remained scandal-ridden. In spring 2015, the BCC administration fired James Freeman, social sciences department chair, for falsifying the work time sheets of a secretary with whom he was having sex, as evidenced by arbitration documents obtained through a freedom of information request.¹⁸ In spring 2017, BCC fired Rogelio Knights, Jr., temporary Director of Athletics, for having allegedly sexually harassed a female student. BCC then rescinded the termination and paid Knights for the thirteen days remaining in his substitute appointment. Knights nonetheless sued BCC for wrongful termination but the jury only awarded him one dollar in damages, while the judge granted him \$75,000 in partial payment for his legal fees.¹⁹ In July 2018, Jonathan Lacay, resigned as Chief Information Security Officer after sixteen years at BCC. According to an investigative report by the New York State Joint Commission on Public Ethics, Lacay had pressured the interim registrar to hire his fiancée to a permanent position in the registrar’s office in return for a promise to help him become the permanent registrar.²⁰ This case is highlighted in a 2024 ethics training program for state employees.

Neither business incubation nor online learning has benefited BCC. Between 2014 and 2023, student enrollment declined 44% at BCC, the steepest decline of any CUNY college.²¹ This decline led to the closure of the BCC cafeteria in 2023, leaving only food vending machines. The full-time equivalent of student enrollment in World Language and Cultures at BCC dropped from 3.5% in 2019 to just 2.4% in 2023²² even though most Bronx residents speak a language other than English at home, and Bronx social workers, hospital interpreters, paralegals, and nurses need Spanish proficiency.

BCC ought to host theater groups, art galleries and civic associations instead of businesses in pursuit of tax breaks. Be that as it may, inscribed on the Gould Memorial Library Rotunda at BCC is a quotation from *Job* 28:12-14, 28:22 that might well serve as an epitaph for BCC, CUNY, and American higher education:

But where shall wisdom be found? and where is the place of understanding?

Man knoweth not the price of it; neither is it found in the land of the living.
The depth saith, it is not in me: and the sea saith, it is not with me.
Destruction and death say, we have heard the fame of it with our ears.²³

¹⁷ Berotte Joseph, Carole. “Claudine Gray faced the same racism I did as the first Haitian American President.” *Haitian Times* (Jan 8, 2024). <https://haitiantimes.com/2024/01/08/berotte-haitian-college-presidents-opinion/>

¹⁸ Barbera, Bridget K. “Disciplinary Hearing. Bronx Community College v. James Freeman” Office of the Vice Chancellor for Labor Relations. (15 March 2015).

¹⁹ “Knights v. The City University of New York.” United States District Court. Eastern District, New York. Case No. 1:19-CV-480. (3 October 2023) <https://casetext.com/case/knights-v-the-city-university-of-new-york>

²⁰ “In the Matter of Jonathan Lacay, Former Chief Information Security Officer, Bronx Community College at City University of New York. Substantial Basis Investigation Report and Settlement Agreement.” Case No. 18-065. State of New York Joint Commission on Public Ethics. <https://ethics.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2019/03/2019-02-06-settlement-lacay.pdf>

²¹ Kelchen, Robert. “How Dire Is Higher Ed’s Budget Crunch?” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (28 February 2025). <https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-dire-is-higher-eds-budget-crunch>

²² *Data Bulletin*. Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Bronx Community College. (February 2024): 11.

²³ Macauley-Lewis, Elizabeth. “The Gould Memorial Library: A Forgotten Stanford White Gem in the Bronx.” The Gotham Center for New York History.” <https://www.gothamcenter.org/blog/the-gould-memorial-library-a-forgotten-stanford-white-gem-in-the-bronx>