

RECLAIMING THE

# Public University

Conversations on  
General & Liberal Education



EDITED BY Judith Summerfield & Crystal Benedicks

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# The Project

## Common/Uncommon Ground

JUDITH SUMMERFIELD

*The City University of New York*

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*The spectator's judgment is sure to miss the root of the matter, and to possess no truth.*

—WILLIAM JAMES, "FROM A CERTAIN BLINDNESS IN HUMAN BEINGS," 1983

*'Certainties' are shown to be combustible, not by being brought into contact with other 'certainties' or with doubts, but by being kindled by the presence of ideas of another order; approximations are revealed between notions normally remote from one another. Thoughts of different species take wing and play round one another, responding to each other's movements and provoking one another to fresh exertions.*

—MICHAEL OAKESHOTT, "VOICE OF POETRY IN THE CONVERSATION OF MANKIND," 1962

### REPRESENTATIVE STORIES

My friend's son, Michael, now a fireman in New York City, had struggled to finish college for many years. He had wanted to be a high school physical education teacher and had shuttled back and forth between the CUNY senior college, where I was teaching, and its sister community college down the road. He finally gave up and was accepted into the New York City Fire Department.

At Thanksgiving dinner last year, we had time to talk. We talked about the psychological toll of September 11 on the men and women of the fire and police departments. I knew that he had lost a number of friends and that he himself had gone for counseling. Then we began to talk of the soreness he still felt about not

finishing college. He was trying to figure out what had happened, and why college had not worked for him.

He asked what I was doing now, and I told him I had begun a project on liberal education, getting faculty and administrators across the University to talk together about the purposes of a college education. He interrupted: "I think one of the problems for me was that I didn't understand what I was doing, and I got stuck in all those required courses at the beginning—that's what you mean by liberal education, don't you?—They're kind of like rites of passage that you've got to get through before you get to what you really want to do. But they don't add up. It didn't make sense to me, why we had to take those courses. And the teachers didn't seem to know, either." "Also," he said, "I don't know what a college means when it says it's a liberal arts college. You'd think that if a liberal education was really important, more than just words, that students would get it."

#### FACULTY ASSUMPTIONS AND BELIEFS

At the beginning of the CUNY General Education project, a group of us, faculty and administrators, sat down together to talk about our experiences as undergraduates. If we had anything in common, no matter our background or specialization or current work, it was that we had all been, at one time or another, an undergraduate. I asked that we take a moment to describe what we might call a "liberally educative experience" as an undergraduate. That was the prompt, and as with any faculty group, there were a number of questions about the assignment: Should the experience be within or outside the classroom, at the beginning or end of college, and so on? It was up to the participants, we agreed, to define their own terms.

The stories we told were, of course, journeys. Unsurprisingly, they were cast as metaphors of movement, exploration, discovery, and falling in love. They told of moving from one space in time to another, reversals, transformations, starting out in one place and ending up in another, growing up, entering new worlds, assuming new identities, of coming to know and to be known by others, of being recognized, believed in. Some told of writing the first big paper—and realizing that they could do it: They had ventured into new intellectual spaces.

Robert Whittaker told of his having been set on a particular path: His father was a dentist, and he was to be one also, until he encountered the biology "cat lab." That did it for biology and dentistry: He found his true love in Russian literature.

Fred Purnell also talked about changing his mind: He had begun in science (determined to study butterflies) and took a required philosophy course "which changed my life." The professor taught them how to investigate the big questions, how to think about the world in ways he had never imagined. Donald Scott talked

of moving from a small town in Ohio to the East Coast. It was a new world, a new culture. The experience he described that has stayed with him was meeting a great, passionate lecturer, Perry Miller, the American historian, and coming to the realization that he wanted to be like him.

Karen Steele talked about going to college in the south during the Civil Rights movement, and being in a place and time where what was happening in college made sense only in the context of the outside world, and the need for social justice. That hope for a just world, she said, has never left her. Nadine Posner talked of being a philosophy major, and of wanting to explore unknown worlds, the unfamiliar, to step outside herself. I talked about taking courses with the American social historian, Robert Colodny, who asked me in an independent study I took with him in my senior year if I could read a book he was recommending in the original Portuguese. He knew fourteen languages, and approached European history from multiple perspectives, the political, economic, scientific, literary. He knew the world in ways that I wanted to, and he imagined that I could, as well.

Marlene Gottlieb and Annette Schaeffer, who had attended CUNY colleges as commuting students, talked about coming to understand the power of "taking all those disconnected required courses" belatedly, years later. The experiences did not make much sense while they were going through them. Afterwards, they realized that this had been the chance to do philosophy and history, more languages. They looked back—a bit nostalgically—on what had not been a particularly felicitous experience while they were in the middle of it. Others talked about going to college in the 1970s when there were few requirements, except for Freshman Composition, which meant you could explore various options on your own.

I have since done this impromptu experiment with a number of groups and individuals, inside and outside CUNY. I am struck each time that I initiate the conversation that no one has stopped me to challenge the premise: What are you talking about? What do you mean by a liberally educative experience? Nor do they respond with what William Labov, the sociolinguist, might call a "withering rejoinder" (Labov 1972): "*So what?* Why even have this conversation?" Even with a group of current doctoral students and with college alumni, the question opened up a dynamic conversation about "liberal education" being liberating, about new ways of knowing and thinking, of new perspectives, of gaining a critical edge, learning ways of knowing the world, and how important, now, in the globalized world, we need to know and understand each other, to embrace multiple perspectives and points of view.

The talk about ourselves, as faculty, as administrators, veered off in a number of directions: We talked about the differences of the residential and commuter campus, of the often pastoral setting of the small liberal arts college and the urban cacophony—the noise and rush of New York. We talked about CUNY students, how they are the "same" as we were, how they are different. How they are only focused on careers, as

some said, how they do not have the advantages that some of us had, by living in dorms, how they have to work, often full time (48% of CUNY's students work more than 20 hours a week),<sup>1</sup> how they are older than we were, how they are supporting families, how they are not conventional American college students, and how at the same time they are, how so many of them do not have the fluencies they need in standard American English, how difficult it is for them, how we wish that they had the chance for the kinds of experiences that we had, how there is something vital, alive in these stories about our own "liberally educative" experiences, and that we wish our students had the chance to know what the university can give to them—and what they can give to us, and how easy it is to fall into generalities about "we and they."

Marlene Gottlieb, Professor of Spanish, talked about not talking about students' "deficiencies," their lack of preparedness, but rather figuring out how to teach to—and exploit—their strengths, their multiple languages and cultures. How to define and how to facilitate a liberal education—a liberating education—for CUNY's quarter of a million students, who commute, work, live transnationally, go back and forth between nations, cultures, and languages, who struggle to make a living, raise families, and complete a degree, who do not have the foggiest notion of what we mean by a liberal education, that was—and is—the challenge.

We agreed early on that we needed to make explicit that which we took for granted, the tacit knowledge that "we" had about the purposes of a liberal education. It was gratifying to know that we were all, somehow, members of the same club of beliefs and values, however vaguely defined, that we reaffirmed this set of beliefs at this early stage of the project and throughout the next years, that we abided by a belief system that valued this peculiarly American way of higher education, that no matter what the undergraduate degree—business, education, computer science—there is a counterpart, that of the liberal arts and sciences. How to make that part of an undergraduate education "real," to make it visible and daily, knowable and meaningful, was what we surmised we had to tackle. That would be the work of the project.

#### MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES: THE VIEW FROM "CENTRAL"

My friend Michael is right: There is an enormous gap between the unspoken promises and expectations of what is called a "liberal education" and the actual day-to-day practices of undergraduate education, between what is said and what actually happens in the lives of students and faculty. This is not news—Ernest Boyer, in his landmark studies on American higher education, framed the arguments decades ago, as he described the fragmentary nature of the undergraduate experience (1987). The parts were not talking to each other, and the "disconnects" prevailed, between the professions and liberal education, among the distribution requirements, the major, and the

electives. The metaphor of "disconnects," as Dale Coye points out in *Change* (1997), reaches into the fabric of American schooling, the disconnects between high school and college, between college and what our students at Queens College refer to as the "real world." What we began to do at CUNY, throughout the University, was to investigate the disconnects between the promises of a liberal education and the practices, between what we say and what we do.

When I began the General Education Project at CUNY in the spring of 2003, it was from the unique—and liminal—perspective of a Faculty Fellow at CUNY's "Central Office." I took a leave from my role as English faculty at Queens College, one of the senior colleges at CUNY, to begin a University-wide investigation of general education. In my mind, I was taking an ethnographic turn, in a decidedly novice role of anthropologist, trying to find out what I could about how General/Liberal Education worked in practice throughout the University. The starting point, given my work in narrative studies (Summerfield 1996, Summerfield and Summerfield 1986a, 1986b), would be to get to stories, faculty stories, student stories, to begin to uncover assumptions, belief systems, to find out what we were thinking, as faculty and administrators. It was critical, I thought, to bridge that gap, to get faculty and administrators talking with each other. If there was a great divide between students and faculty, there was an even greater divide between the "we and they" of faculty and administrators.

The ideal was clear—to get the colleges focused on strengthening undergraduate education; the method—how to get the colleges from their varying locations, their different, and differing perspectives, talking to each other and finding common ground, was not. Louise Mirrer, then Executive Vice Chancellor, who had brought me to the Central Office, hoped that we would look carefully and thoughtfully at what CUNY students need as college graduates to go out into the world. What do we mean by a liberal education? That was a critical question, and the starting point. Mirrer (2002) put it well, at the inaugural meeting of the Project: "We all probably share in the belief that we want a quality education for all our students, the challenge is how to go from here to there."

I had ventured forth to do this Project from the perspective of one CUNY College and out into the multiple dimensions of the entire system, through the lens of the Central Office—"Central," as CUNY's administration is called within the system.

CUNY is the largest urban, public, commuter University in the country, with seventeen undergraduate colleges spread throughout the five boroughs of New York City. My home college, Queens College, is situated within Queens County, one of the "outer boroughs." The Central Office is housed on the Upper East Side, across Manhattan from CUNY's oldest senior college, City College. CUNY's history begins with City College or CCNY, which was founded in 1847 as the "Free Academy" to "educate the whole people" of the city of New York. In its heyday in the mid-twentieth century, with its succession of Nobel Prize winners, including

Jonas Salk (1914–1995), the medical scientist who developed the polio vaccine that has been available since 1955 and has saved countless people from contracting the disease, it was known as the “poor man’s Harvard.” Matthew Goldstein, CUNY’s current Chancellor, alumnus of CCNY, is keenly aware of the genesis of City College: He writes of the power of liberal education in the foreword to this volume. City’s initial focus, which persists today, was engineering—and the sciences, and eventually architecture—but always with a commitment to the Liberal Arts.

The city’s colleges grew up along with the city itself, spawning senior and community colleges within the five boroughs, each developing as a distinctive institution, with its local history and particular functions. In 1870, Hunter, a Normal college to prepare women as teachers, was opened on the Upper East Side, a few blocks from what is now the Central Office. Baruch College, originally downtown “City,” and CUNY’s premier business school is in lower Manhattan, as is the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), founded in the 1960s, in close proximity to Ground Zero. It is the one CUNY College to have suffered damages from the destruction of the World Trade Center. BMCC is the largest community college in the system, with 17,000 students. Hostos, in the South Bronx, with 4,500 students, is the smallest.

Within each of the other four boroughs, the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, the city’s colleges, which charged no tuition until the mid 1970s, serve one of the most diverse student populations in the country. The colleges of New York were brought together in 1961 under one administrative roof, to create CUNY, The City University of New York, as a federated system.

While the Central Administration, with a Chancellor and a central Board of Trustees, now manages the entire University system—from budgets to buildings to human resources—each CUNY college, its president, administrators, and faculty, oversees what happens in the day-to-day lives of its students and faculty. What is taught—and how it is taught—happens within the college academic departments. Faculty determine curriculum and pedagogy. There is no centralized curriculum, either within the majors or within general education, but there is the promise of what Chancellor Goldstein calls an “integrated University” (2003).<sup>2</sup>

### THE CRITICAL FIRST YEAR OF COLLEGE AND GENERAL EDUCATION

When I left my college for Central in 2003, I brought with me several decades of teaching CUNY students—and a recent knowledge of teaching new college freshmen in their critical first year. At Queens College, a group of faculty created a space in the Freshman Year Initiative (FYI), where we could learn how best to teach first-year students. We were creating a “community of practice,” with the “experts” working

together to bring the new students into the various cultures of the college. In the ideal community, senior faculty were teaching first-year students alongside junior and adjunct faculty, as well as junior and senior undergraduates, who served as mentors and guides to the new students. We all learned from each other. The program is still a flourishing site for innovative teaching.<sup>3</sup> (See Davison and Lantz Goldhaber, this volume, and Summerfield 1999).

During the 1990s, I worked closely in FYI with Kevin Birth, a cultural anthropologist at Queens, who began to do ethnographic research with first-year students in FYI about how they see their lives as college students. His investigations—and the conversations we had—made me realize that we needed to ask different questions from those typically asked of first-year students.<sup>4</sup> When he asked students in the freshman program, “why do you want to go to college?” they typically talked about “getting a good job.” Birth suggests that we need to see this notion of “getting” in students’ discourse in at least two ways: “[F]irst, the notion of getting as related to ‘acquiring something,’ and second, the metaphor suggests a ‘moving through space: getting ahead, getting higher, or getting somewhere’” (personal correspondence, 2001). Students are talking, he suggests, about making a change, moving from one space to another.

For many of our students, this means moving up the social ladder, and, ultimately, moving from the working class of their parents’ generation to the middle class. Many of our students are, still, the first in their families to attend college. Furthermore, what college is, is not part of the cultural fabric of their lives. That still is CUNY’s history, although the story is not so simple: Many of our students, who come to the city as immigrants, have parents who are more educated in their native countries than are the parents of CUNY’s American-born students. In either case, coming to college is coming into a new culture. So Michael is right: There are “rites of passage,” into the customs of college that are not made explicit. CUNY is, after all, a commuter college (although two Manhattan colleges are now building dormitories), where both students and faculty are on the move. While more and more of CUNY’s colleges are making explicit the rites of passage through formal freshman orientations, ongoing freshman seminars, and highly organized first-semester academic communities, there are still numbers of students who, in taking a new bus to a new building in their own borough, find themselves in new and indecipherable territory. The college culture—more “free” time, less supervision, more independence—takes them by surprise; too many never move in from the “periphery” (Lave and Wenger 1991).<sup>5</sup>

Birth probed the issues differently: When he asked these same Queens students “What makes college-educated people different from non-college educated people?” or “What does college do for a person?” their answers focused on two notions, one of self-development, “knowing who I am,” and the other, of learning to be “responsible” or “independent,” of learning to manage in the world on their own. They do not, as Birth says, connect the two “in an integrated way” (personal correspondence, 2001).

They expect something to happen in college, perhaps, that will bring the two, the self and the world, together in meaningful ways.

Birth's further studies with FYI freshmen at Queens College have taken him to questions about agency, belonging, and deference in the classroom. He looks closely at the language students used in interviews about the "unremarkable activity" of "sitting," as a "common phenomenological" activity (Birth 2006). In probing the complex cultural world of CUNY, in relationship to the remarkable diversity of its students, he noted that students described themselves repeatedly as "just sitting there." Through close syntactic analysis of this most unremarkable of phrases, Birth suggests that we need to take seriously questions about notions of the self, and in particular, conceptions of the self and notions of American individualism, power, and entry into various cultures. We need to listen hard to students' language and explore the complex "common" ground in which we are all standing—or sitting.

How students' intellectual growth—or intellectual maturity—is promoted in college, or connected to a "liberal" education is not part of students' expressed expectations, but their need to know *what college is for* calls for us within higher education to recognize students' expressed—or implicit—expectations about why they are in college.<sup>6</sup> If liberal education is important, then we cannot rely on the hope that it somehow will be experienced by students as such. Birth's investigations of the "common phenomenological experience of sitting" served as a framework for what has come to be an exploration of another unremarkable activity: general education. No matter what specific degree or major students choose in their academic careers, the most common phenomenological curricular experience is the general part of that degree. The challenges of the General Education Project at CUNY involved coming to some agreement on what we mean by our terms, in particular, general education and liberal education, and to do so by investigating practices, words and structures, "systems and constellations of shared experiences," as Birth reminds us.

### GENERAL/LIBERAL EDUCATION: OPERATIONAL DEFINITION

Early on in the Project, it became clear that we would not be able to get on with the process unless we clarified what we meant by these two key terms, and while we still, three years later, struggle with the enormity of the task of finding, exploring, or staking out common ground, we agreed that General Education was the more neutral, less value-laden term of the two,<sup>7</sup> and for our purposes, it represented a set of *organizational structures* that could be quantified: There exists at all seventeen undergraduate CUNY colleges a set of actual requirements that all students must take as a portion of their college degree, no matter their major program. This set of requirements, however they are organized or whatever they are named, is what

we call "general" education. These requirements appear as college credits earned on a college transcript. Getting to this understanding took some doing, particularly as we were looking at the quality of the shared experience, as well as naming and counting course requirements, which, in itself, is a formidable task. What we mean by liberal education and how we define the term is less determined, as we will see.<sup>8</sup>

### GENERAL/LIBERAL EDUCATION: INVESTIGATING SETS OF PRACTICES

To get to the realities of how we do undergraduate education at CUNY—to get the conversation going—these were the starting goals. We decided on two small working groups of "experts": one, a group of faculty; the second, a group of administrators—academic deans, and assistant or associate provosts. I wanted to hear what the talk would sound like in each of the two groups. We needed to tackle the questions about what kind of liberal education for the twenty-first century we should provide for our students, from a variety of perspectives. We had, first of all, seventeen undergraduate colleges, each with its own curriculum, its own local customs and institutional purposes. A small planning group came up with the notion of a pilot project, beginning with six of the seventeen colleges.

From the Central Office, we sent an invitation to the six college presidents, asking them for faculty and administrators on the committees who could speak to questions about general education at the respective colleges. In the letter, we framed a number of central questions around the University's mission to "strengthen undergraduate education":

The questions [about liberal education] are very much in the public eye across the country: how do we bring students into the university and keep them not only enrolled but also engaged; how do we reconcile tensions between requirements for general education and for the professions; how do we ensure a quality education for all; how do we respect and strengthen a college's distinctiveness at the same time that we establish common goals; how do we allow for transferability from one college to another; and how do we deliver on the promises to educate students for the citizenry? (Mirror 2002)

It was time, we said, for CUNY to enter the national debate. We would work from both ends of the spectrum, from the top administration, getting the presidents engaged, and at the same time, we would work on the ground, in the field, getting those close to the academic enterprise, the students, involved.

We were to bring to the initial questions our various identities within the institution, as faculty, administrators, but, most significantly, as scholars: We were to look at what we began to call "sets of practices," both academic practices and administrative practices. Boyer is right: The disconnects reach to the tensions within all parts of

the institution itself. Faculty and administrators are largely disconnected and distrustful of each other. The administrative and academic are typically two distinct realms. At CUNY, there is a particular strain of distrust of the Central Administration: We wanted to make a clearing where we could pool our collective wisdom to work together.

We wanted for both faculty and administrators to see themselves as scholars, as researchers, and we called for them to approach their assignments as historians, anthropologists, literary and cultural critics, economists, socio-linguistics, to talk to other faculty, administrators, and students. We were to remind ourselves, again and again, to see the world through the eyes of students—to pay attention to the language we were using. We needed to “go meta,” to take nothing for granted, to critically examine the words we were using or, for that matter, mis-using. What would students make of the college catalogue, the Web site, the countless letters of information they receive from various offices, who are working independently? We were to read what students read. We were to read our own texts, the mission statements, the public statements about liberal education/general education.

We also assigned ourselves articles and books to read, as we moved our conversation into the national conversation. Numbers of CUNY colleagues were already engaged in national organizations, such as AAC&U and Carnegie, and were talking with others nationally about the issues. All the colleges were, at one stage or another, wrestling with accreditation, through Middle States, and through the professional organizations, business, engineering, accounting, to balance the two parts of a college degree, the specialized and the general.

Our assignments asked us, first, to attend to the discourse and the structures of liberal/general education: how “it” was represented in the everyday practices of the academy, the daily texts of higher education, in the advertisements, catalogues, brochures, Web site, in advising guides, new freshmen handbooks, in new college faculty hiring ads. How did we represent this “it,” as we came in the working group to call what we found. No wonder our students were often confused. The messages did not jive; they were often incoherent, contradictory, confusing, or incomprehensible. The messages were out of control, particularly as we had moved into the electronic age, and we realized that what the literature about higher education had been telling us for years was correct—that our own colleges had lost control of the messages and the practices. Indeed, “liberal/general education” had gotten lost, both as ideal and reality.

#### WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT? THRASHING ABOUT IN WORDS

It was one thing to talk about our own experiences and our beliefs in something that we had elusively identified as a liberalizing event—finding our feet as undergraduates

in the papers we wrote, the faculty who believed in us, the new worlds we entered. That was the easy part. Unpacking the discourse of liberal/general education at our own colleges was a feat, and we argued, sometimes heatedly, particularly in the faculty group, about what it was we were actually talking about. The differences between the two groups were marked: While the administrators talked about how the requirements we were calling general education were organized, the faculty typically did not know the requirements of their own colleges. We were hardly on the same page.

It took several months to agree that there was something to talk about—and, at the end of that first semester, we recognized that we had only just begun. To initiate anything out of Central was suspect: The groups were certain that eventually all would be revealed, that the University would mandate a universal general education curriculum. Curriculum, they kept reminding us, was in the hands of faculty, particularly through the structures of faculty governance.

At one meeting, a faculty member asked, “All right, what’s broken?” Another one responded, “Nothing’s necessarily broken. This kind of conversation should be ongoing—if we’re talking about curriculum, it’s a dynamic thing.”

We agreed, though, that we needed to talk to each other if for no other reason than that our students are mobile within the system, transferring from community to senior college, and back the other way around, as well. Students started at one place and moved to another: One college had already instituted General Education requirements in the upper division, beyond the first 60 credits. Most of their graduates were, in fact, “transfer students.”

The hope of an “integrated University” meant, at the least, that students would take “equivalent” courses within the system, that we could share resources, faculty, and programs. The CUNY system of seventeen undergraduate colleges is a federation of three types of college: seven *senior colleges*, which grant baccalaureate and advanced degrees; six *community colleges*, which grant associate degrees, including the A.A., A.S., and A.A.S. (Applied Associate of Science Degree), and four *comprehensive colleges*, which grant both associate and baccalaureate degrees. Each sector defines the degrees in differing—and at times contradictory—terms.

The first questions, then, had to do with the requirements, courses, activities that students “took” in common. We were to look within and across the University for common ingredients of a general education. We were looking at what we named these general degree requirements that were outside the major. We found a dizzying array of course lists and a confusion of terms within and across the seventeen campuses:

Core  
Core Curriculum



General Core  
 Core Courses  
 Core Competencies  
 Core Requirements  
 Core Distribution Requirements  
 Core Sequence  
 Core Skills  
 Core Understandings  
 Core Values  
 Associate Degree Core  
 Baccalaureate Degree Core  
 Areas of Distribution  
 Distribution  
 Distribution Requirements  
 General Education  
 General Education Requirements  
 General Foundation  
 General Requirements  
 Liberal Arts  
 Liberal Arts Requirements  
 Liberal Arts and Sciences  
 Liberal Arts and Sciences Curricula  
 Liberal Arts and Sciences Core Curriculum  
 Liberal Arts and Sciences Requirements  
 Liberal Arts and Sciences Area Requirements (LASAR)  
 Liberal Arts and Science—General Education

We did not agree on the terminology or on what we were actually talking about. The conversations, at times, got tense. Several representatives from the community colleges insisted that we were barking up the wrong tree: They had nothing, they insisted, that all students, no matter what their degree, took in common, nothing that they called “General Education.” At one point, someone said, “Oh, you mean ‘the Core,’ is that what you mean by a general education?” What these constellations—core, requirements, curriculum, sequences, understandings, competencies, skills, values—meant depended upon local culture, oral histories, unexamined assumptions. To change the system usually resulted in adding on new sets of requirements to existing structures—but leaving the existing structure intact. At some colleges, this constellation of requirements, whatever it was called, added up to 70 of the 120 credits for a college degree.

## TWO CULTURES: THE DISCONNECTS BETWEEN COMMUNITY AND SENIOR COLLEGES

An intense clash between two worldviews, of the community and senior colleges, surfaced almost immediately—and still persists—as we dug deeper into the differences between the two institutional structures, cultures, functions, and into our expectations of students. We agreed, though, that we had to step outside our respective territories, as we looked for a common ground of a *general* education. To do so, however, meant that we needed to recognize profound differences in the ways the two types of institutions organized the college degrees.

Although I insisted on an operational definition of general education as those college degree requirements not designated as the major (or minor) area of specialization, the project was—and still is—standing on shaky ground because the two cultures are organized in different ways. At the senior college, the bachelor’s degree is defined by 120 credits, with the common expectation that the major will be declared in the upper division (after 60 credits). In practice, the General Education credits can be spread out over the four years, and, indeed, the creation of upper-division General Education requirements is now being instituted at a number of senior colleges.

At the community college, by the end of 60 credits, the student is expected to have fulfilled most, if not all, of the General Education requirements, as mandated by the State. The wrestling over what we meant by these requirements took us to an imposed common ground that virtually none in the senior colleges knew existed—but all in the community colleges lived by—the State Regulations (New York State Education Department 2003).

What most participants from the senior colleges did not know was that the general education portion of a college degree is State mandated. Every college degree, the bachelor’s, associate’s, and the applied associate’s degree, by New York State law, has a portion of that degree designated as “liberal arts and sciences” (LAS). The LAS portion of the B.A. is two-thirds of the degree, one-half of the A.A. degree, and one-third of the A.A.S. (The percentages are modified for the B.S. and the A.S.)

CUNY mandates the credit limits of the degree: 120 for the bachelor’s degree and 60 credits for the associate’s degrees (including the applied associate’s degree). The major course of study is determined to be either a Liberal Art or Science (i.e., English, anthropology, chemistry) or applied/vocational/professional (i.e., engineering, business, auto mechanics, nursing, education). For example, a student graduating from a senior college with a B.A. in English will have the required 120 credits, 60 for General Education, 30 for the English major, and the remaining 30 for electives. For the A.A. degree, 30 credits are designated for the LAS portion; that is, the 60-credit

degree would be equally divided between the liberal arts and science portion and the specialized program. The student will most likely have a “major” in an area that is designated to be a “Liberal Arts or Sciences,” with a concentration in English. For the A.A.S. degree, in say, early childhood, the portion of the degree was one-third, or 10 credits.

For the State of New York, the division between the LAS and the “vocational” is clearly defined. The senior colleges set expectations for liberal arts and sciences to be both “general” and “specialized.” In fact, the accrediting agencies of specialized degrees, business and engineering, make clear how the requirements need to be balanced. For the community colleges, the balancing act is intense, particularly in the applied degrees, and for students, the stakes are high. They need to know the differences between the various degrees offered at the community colleges: The applied associate’s degrees do not have the same currency as the associate’s degree in transferring to the senior colleges.

Most of us in the senior colleges had never seen the State requirements, but community college colleagues live by the State “Regs,” as they are increasingly pressured to squeeze into the professional degrees, particularly the A.A.S., a small number of LAS. To review and reform community college curricula in hundreds of applied programs is a mammoth task, one that is beginning in a number of the colleges. Within the Project, there is reluctant agreement that even in the applied programs, there is an LAS component—general education—that needs to be integrated into the whole college degree. The community colleges, however, are focusing more and more on defining General Education as a set of proficiencies that needs to cut across the 60 credits of the college curriculum: Writing Across the Curriculum, Math Across the Curriculum, Reading, Quantitative Reasoning, Information Literacy, Oral Communication.

The two systems organize these college degree requirements differently, and, historically, they are constituted to serve different functions. The senior colleges are firmly situated within the traditions of “liberal arts and sciences,” and the community colleges are shaped, fundamentally, by applied or vocational programs. If the tensions between the professions and the liberal arts permeate the colleges, they are intensified when we try to bridge the community/senior college divide.

We agreed that the discourse and structures of CUNY needed to be scrutinized in light of the larger histories of liberal and progressive education, that these terms were vexed, complex, loaded. We agreed that we needed to know more, and that while we had tentatively accepted a functional definition, there was this something else, this elusive “it,” called liberal education that we needed to unpack, historically and locally.

We began to become experts on the issues: We had to learn about our own colleges, as well as the entire system, and realized that if *we* were having difficulties sorting out what we were talking about, then how difficult was it for our students?

## THE PROMISES OF A “LIBERAL” EDUCATION

What is a college education for? Not surprisingly, the promises of a liberal education are announced loud and clear in all CUNY college mission statements. Unpacking the discourse of the mission statements takes us to the center of often-heated debate in higher education: how to organize a college curriculum, and how to deliver it. At least three categories of assumptions—what we expect from our students—are obvious: the moral, epistemological, and vocational. Taken together, as they typically are in the colleges’ mission statements, they represent the tensions within the institution that leave faculty stalemated, unable to change, because the curriculum, itself, rests on nothing less than history, politics, ideology, and on how we envision students.

A sampling of CUNY college mission statements takes us to the clashes of values that persist in any discussion or attempt to change a curriculum. These mission statements of several CUNY colleges, selected here from both community and senior colleges, make the case for the axiological, moral, or civic—educating the citizenry for the democracy:

The Liberal Arts and Sciences curriculum prepares a student to be an accomplished and productive human being.

To prepare students to become leading citizens of an increasingly global society.

To offer a liberal arts education that gives students the preparation for enriching their lives, enhancing their understanding of the world, thinking constructively and independently, and making creative contributions to their local community and to society.

To prepare students to become full participants in the economic and civic life of the city, the nation, and the world.

The promises take us to the tacit assumptions, those beliefs and values that shape our sense of what college is for, and how, in many cases, our students need to be—or to become. Many of the statements point to the future, to a *moral imperative*, to how “we” want “them” to be: to the way we expect our students to live their lives. These tensions between developing the self and learning how to manage in the world were echoed in the students Birth interviewed. The mission statements take us to the ontological:

To lead enriched lives.

To be accomplished and productive human beings.

To become full participants in the city, nation, and world.

To become leading citizens in an increasingly global world.

Interestingly, the mission statements not only encapsulate a history of American higher education but also those “new” challenges, articulated boldly in the “Harvard Red Book,” of an increasingly “diverse” student body (Harvard 1945). At the end of World War II, the fact of “diversity” emerged out of the numbers of servicemen, through the GI Bill, entering American colleges. At this turn in history, diversity takes us into heady debates about the role of the University in an increasingly global world—and economy. Indeed, new mission statements express such awareness—and tensions:

To provide a strong foundation for students of diverse backgrounds, preparations, and aspirations in order to further their success in their chosen vocations, their future education, and their community involvement.

To promote an understanding of and respect for such differences as gender, age, ethnicity, culture, religion, sexual orientation, and physical ability.

Some mission statements take an epistemological turn, calling for core or common knowledge:

To provide access to a common body of knowledge.

To offer its exceptionally diverse student body a rigorous knowledge of the Liberal arts and sciences.

More and more, the epistemological—a focus on knowledge or “content”—is being eclipsed by the pragmatic, the practical, and by a growing list of “competencies” or “proficiencies” or “skills,” particularly at the community college:

To develop the ability to think analytically and creatively.

To advance the use of emerging technologies.

To provide learning experiences that ensure that students become competent in critical thinking, descriptive analysis, problem solving and interpretation, and in the communication of these skills.

The conflation of the moral, epistemological, ontological, and vocational results in a confused set of values and practices, and “immeasurable” goals, which are more and more called upon to be measured. The Collegiate Learning Assessment Test (CLA) is the first in what will certainly be a series of tests to “measure” the value of a General Education. The recent Commission on Higher Education calls for standardized tests to be developed to measure the effectiveness of a college education (Spellings 2006).

What we had to admit was the profound disconnect between the lofty ideals of the goals of a liberal education and the disorganization of the actual practices of

“curriculum,” what students were required to do to get a degree. The disorganization pervades the system: on the ground, students take one course after another, often not knowing why or how to connect the dots. The CUNY Gen Ed Project calls for each college to organize those practices so that they make sense to students and to faculty.

### GENERAL EDUCATION: THE LARGEST “MAJOR”

Having spent many of my several decades at CUNY within a single department in one of its senior colleges, I know that most of what we do in higher education lies within the narrow confines of our own cloisters—the department or program or office where we work. Rarely do faculty and administrators talk together as colleagues who are involved in a *common* enterprise.

Boundaries are fixed, and the divisions—and distrust—run deep between the two groups. Large institutional issues take center stage, particularly at the public university, where the big conversations about resources, budgets, and decreasing state funding hold sway. How we actually do the work of the academy with our students, from scheduling courses that accommodate their frenetic lives or designing curricula that make sense to them, gets lost in the daily work of the two cultures: on the one hand, teaching and research; on the other, management of the resources.

Paradoxically, the largest common enterprise, shared by the entire university, is General Education, that set of courses, requirements, and activities that falls outside the major. Even so, general education slips between the cracks of both the administrative and the academic realm: “It” remains elusive as a project, is characteristically overseen by no one, and exists nowhere. It is not a department or a program. It does not have an office. It is an amalgam of the liberal arts and science departments, yet is neither owned nor governed by anyone. No one takes responsibility for it. No one roots for it or tries to bolster its staff, promote its faculty for tenure and promotion. No one seeks grants for it. It is by far the “largest major” at most institutions—but without a department or chair or governance structure—or a coherent administrative organization. It fails typically at both ends—the administrative and the academic (see Smith 1993).

Each semester, thousands of seats are required to *cover* the necessary general education courses to run the college, mostly in the lower division: One CUNY senior college provost counted more than 14,000 Gen Ed seats needed for the fall semester alone, more than the five largest departments put together. Decisions, for what courses are considered to be part of the Gen Ed roster, are left in the hands of the individual academic departments, which typically act in isolation from one another. The common ground lies fallow.

Looking at the General Education offerings at any college (not unlike an investigation of mission statements) is a plunge into the history of that institution and of higher education in America and the history of curriculum development as a socio-political construct. (See Philip M. Anderson, this volume.) At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the college degree is organized to provide students with a dual intellectual experience: “broad” exposure to a range of ideas, books, ways of thinking, areas of thought or knowledge, and a “deep” knowledge of a subject, through a concentration or a major.

The broad—or general education—has taken form in one of two ways:

- a “core” curriculum, promising, in its ideal form, a set of common academic experiences, or
- “areas of distribution,” promising a range of experiences and choices from a menu of offerings.

The Core at CUNY’s Brooklyn College, a set of ten courses (with some options), follows in the footsteps of the core curriculum at Columbia University and at the University of Chicago, but most CUNY colleges offer hybrid curricula, mostly distribution models. Some lists of “required options” have not been pruned for a decade or more. One college lists over 400 offerings in General Education, 60 of them in a foreign language but, in fact, most of these courses are offered only rarely, if at all. That department still harbors the belief, one supposes, that the language will return as a requirement, and the administration is hard pressed to shine the hard light of reality on the remaining faculty.

Until the General Education Project, General Education at most of CUNY’s colleges, whether a core or areas of distribution, had not been fundamentally revised since the mid-1970s or early 1980s. Like Harvard’s Core, General Education at the CUNY colleges has been a reaction against the “freeing of the curriculum” of the 1960s, when Queens College, for example, gave up its venerable core and eliminated all requirements except for Freshman Writing. In 1976, Queens introduced an “areas of distribution” model, the Liberal Arts and Science Area Requirements that came to be known as LASAR. That system, as Donald M. Scott describes in this volume, needed to be rethought, from the ground up. The Project opened up the space for the colleges to examine their largest major and to explore common ground. To examine General Education practices meant realizing that the CUNY Colleges that had not yet engaged in a revitalization of their largest major needed to do so, and as the Project turned to examining common ground, that is precisely what began to happen.

To investigate General Education as the largest major meant that we had to look at a set of practices, within both the academic and administrative realms. We had to look at how General Education was organized, who was in charge, and how Gen

Ed requirements were renewed and reviewed. We inquired into who delivered the messages of Gen Ed and who taught Gen Ed (full or part-time faculty; how the departments valued these requirements that were outside the major). Was Gen Ed a college-wide responsibility? Was teaching Gen Ed courses valued as a scholarly activity? What structures were in place for “transfer students,” and who constituted the majority of graduates at most CUNY colleges?

## DEGREE REQUIREMENTS OUTSIDE OF GENERAL EDUCATION

We have uncovered additional requirements that are typically outside the officially recognized general education requirements. This “hidden” college curriculum, which is often seen as “service” courses, falls into several categories. First, under the rubric of Basic Skills or Degree Requirements or College Requirements, we find a set of courses that all students must typically take: Freshman Composition, Mathematics, Foreign Languages, Physical Education, and Speech or Oral Communication. Students with appropriate New York State Regents’ test scores can opt out of Foreign Languages or Mathematics, unless they need these courses as prerequisites for their majors.

Second, under the rubric of College Proficiencies, more and more colleges are adding what is being called a “horizontal curriculum.” Writing, quantitative reasoning, information literacy, oral communication—these competencies are embedded within some, but not all, of the area requirements. For example, at most CUNY Colleges, a number of writing-intensive courses (usually two or three) are required for graduation, beyond the required Freshman Composition course. The set of requirements is being organized into “across the curriculum” programs: writing, math, and so on.

If these requirements are not embedded into already existing requirements, either within General Education or the major, they become additional obligations, added on to already swollen menus, with students scrambling to add/fit “W” course into their schedules at the end of their college careers.

Finally, for 85% of CUNY students at the Community Colleges, it is developmental education in the “basic skills” (reading, writing, and mathematics) that must be completed, as well, and often before students enter the “regular” curriculum. For many students, these hidden costs of a college degree, in money and time, and incomprehensibility, often result in students’ leaving college.

## COMING TO COMMON GROUND

At CUNY, the largest public University in the nation, we have, for the first time as an entire system, put the question of how we educate our students, *generally*, on the

administrative and academic tables. The Presidents of the Colleges, in their annual reports, now report on the progress they are making in revitalizing and reorganizing General Education.

The term itself, General Education, is functioning as common fare, and while there is still discomfort in some circles about our use of that term, we have come to agree that there are organized practices that need clarification for the colleges and the University, for students, faculty, and the administration.

We have agreed that we need to distinguish between these two key terms, general education and liberal education, to come to a common language to guide our discussions and initiatives for improving Undergraduate Education. We are still struggling with the task. What we have come to, in the General Education Project, is, above all, that we have work to do, and, by engaging in the work as a common enterprise, we have a chance to effect profound change within the largest public university in the country. This collection of essays makes visible the early phase of this work.

We took important steps in these early explorations that shaped the work for the next three years: We examined our own assumptions and beliefs, trying to understand the “it,” further. We looked closely at the words, what we called liberal/general education. We studied the promises we were making, through a careful examination of the college mission statements. Eventually, we began to investigate organizational structures, to see how we practiced what we preached, who was in charge of what, who was teaching what. We began to look at what we actually do.

What started as an experimental phase in January 2003 has grown to a University-wide Project that seems to have staying power: We have created an intellectual space where we can examine our work, as scholarly administrators and faculty.

In the succeeding three years, we have brought all seventeen undergraduate colleges into the Project, as well as doctoral students in the Writing Across the Curriculum, who serve as CUNY Writing Fellows.<sup>9</sup> The Fellows program was mandated by Board Resolution in 1999 to support the development of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) across the entire University. Various committees have formed, focusing on key projects: integrative learning, faculty development, disciplinary knowledge, convening University-wide projects. We have held University-wide General Education Conferences: In 2004 the First Annual General Education Conference was held at LaGuardia Community College. A University-wide seminar on Integrative Learning was organized in preparation for the conference. The 2005 Second Annual General Education Conference was held at Queensborough Community College, with Lee Shulman, President of the Carnegie Foundation, giving the keynote address.

The work for the next three years, at least, is cut out for us. Shulman left us with a provocative challenge, to “profess the Liberal Arts” (2005). His opening argument in “Professing the Liberal Arts” hits the mark:

Liberal learning, we are warned, is pursued for its own sake, and cannot be subordinated to the aims of application or vocation. I come to offer a shocking alternative view. I wish to argue that the problem with the liberal arts is not that they are endangered by the corruption of professionalism. Indeed, their problem is that they are not professional enough. If we are to preserve and sustain liberal education, we must make it more professional; *we must learn to profess the liberal arts.* (Shulman 2004, 547)

In the end, Shulman reminds us that we are talking about students’ learning, and from their learning in professional settings, we can take our cues, our pedagogical strategies, what he calls “signature pedagogies.” In the end, we are talking about what happens in the classroom, and the kinds of understandings and experiences that we come to as fully engaged people. We come back to the beginning of the chapter, what we heard from Michael, who took those introductory courses as “rites of passage” that he did not understand, and what my colleagues at CUNY thought of as their liberally educative moments. They had been asked into the club, but he had not. Their stories tell about being invited into the conversation, brought in from the periphery, expected to eventually learn to become expert. That is Shulman’s profound contribution, that he makes it real for us, he talks about educating students to take their place within professional communities of practice. They come in as novices—we all do—and somehow along the way, we are brought into the secrets of the trade, the profession, the major, the club itself. All the “liberally educative” stories that the faculty told, in one way or another, were of being allowed in.

When we enter college, we are entering an ongoing conversation—and too often no one stops long enough to invite us in. The “great” teachers, we find out, when we begin to study them, are aware of the novices—and, with generous heart, open the doors, make the club inclusive—and perhaps make the process of learning more explicit.

That’s what Shulman is talking about.

Our project at CUNY, in many ways, has just begun. This volume is a first effort to make our work visible, halting, at times, that it is. We are faculty not working in isolation, but rather working together to tend a field that has lain fallow for too long, to produce something good and sustaining for us all. At this writing, CUNY has been accepted into the Carnegie Academy of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) Institutional Leadership Program, where we will work with other public university systems to strengthen undergraduate education.<sup>10</sup> Our focus will be on Liberal/General Education, which, perhaps in the next three years, we will be able to define, organize, and improve more fully, for the entire college community. To do this work, to investigate, interrogate our own practices means more than changing the mission statement or adding a quantitative reasoning requirement. It is not enough for the college curriculum committee to pass a new set of college requirements. This work

takes us all to the most common enterprise that we engage in—it is the most difficult, and, in the end, it could be the most important.

### ENTERING THE CONVERSATION: CONNECTING THE PERSONAL AND THE PUBLIC

In the end, it is what happens for the individual student, how the world of college works for him and for her. I end with a bit more about the story that was awakened for me, when I devised the “liberalizing” exercise for my colleagues, and in so doing, entertained the large question about what college is for. In doing my own assignment, I learned a lot.

The trajectory of the four courses I took with Robert Colodny might be read, now retrospectively, as the move from general education to the specialized, and also, as a journey of my own intellectual life as an undergraduate. That journey, I believe now, had to do with the need to make sense of my life in the shadow of my father’s story, his escape from Russia during the Russian Civil War, and his struggle to find a safe place, after the destruction of the world and family he had known in Europe. I think now that I was also searching for intellectual and emotional space to live with certain ambiguities about my own life, about gender, religion, and class, about fitting in and where the personal could be protected, but also translated into a public sphere, where I could enter the larger—ongoing—conversation of the University.

Colodny was the instrument, and the world that he opened to me was knowledge itself. He was a European historian, and later a historian of science. He was, as I saw it then, and I see it now, a staggering intellect, a participant as well as a spectator of twentieth-century history, a veteran of the American Lincoln Brigade, and an early and outspoken critic of American involvement in Vietnam. We never, however, spoke of our lives.

The three European history classes that I attended were all jam-packed lecture halls of graduate and undergraduates—standing room only. Colodny was by then legendary, remarkable not only for his erudition and passion, but also for his delivery, his pedagogy. He was a conventional figure for the times: tweed jacket, pipe, tousled grey-streaked hair. Later, I would watch him grip the banister to descend the stairs—and learned that the injury he had suffered in the Spanish Civil War had left him partially blind and paralyzed on the left side. As he became more and more the romantic figure—after being called before the House Committee on Un-American Activities for alleged Communist activity—it was said that the injury also left him unable to attend to “normal” daily responsibilities, such as remembering to carry a wallet. His wife was said to pin a \$5 bill to his inner jacket lapel, and some of us swore that we caught sight of the dollar bill when he walked. We did not, I am sure, but he became a figure of keen interest.

His lectures were anything but conventional: the world, as he represented it, was threaded together by cause and effect, moral intention and consequence, by those in power determining the untold fate and stories of the multitudes. History was the drama of the ages, and it was our responsibility as college students to enter the battlefields, the stories, and the poetry. How could the human brain comprehend that 14,000,000 Russians had lost their lives during what came to be known as the Russian Civil War, the historical moment that my father had fled the Ukraine? We needed to hear the Pushkin poem, of the voice of the mother who lost her only son, to realize that those who survived the wars were its most tragic victims.

In Colodny’s class, we struggled with questions about how to represent events, about memory and loss, from that war or any other, of one disaster or another. How relevant those meta-questions, now, when we sit in our seats before any number of screens, and register the daily loss of hurricanes and droughts, and various human invasions and wars that still plague the planet. His *Struggle for Madrid*, as his lectures, were attempts to get to the “truths” of history, to listen to those who bore witness, and to struggle to listen to those who may have had alternative versions of what comes to be recorded history. “There may be errors in the account that follows,” he says in his foreword to his book on Spain, “but there is little malice, and if Truth has been affronted, the witnesses may yet speak, and from the debate that ensues, the margin of error may be reduced” (Colodny 1958, 10).

It was, ultimately, his expectation of us, his students, that made me sit up straight in my seat: The notes I still have of those three courses are in a handwriting that I hardly recognize. I wrote on narrow-lined paper, front and back of the page, trying, I suppose, to take down everything Colodny uttered. I re-read now, randomly, decades later, through these faded pages, and I am struck by the power of his voice, on this first day of class of nineteenth-century European History:

Historiography without philosophy is senseless chronicle, a blind conglomeration of useless facts.

To be is to be related.

Since man makes his own history (however badly) but suffers it more than he controls it or understands it, nevertheless, he makes it.

Men make their history in terms of beliefs and values; you can’t say “imperialism made war.” Men make war; men may believe in war, in imperialism, nationalism.

Judgment is a moral act.

War is politics continued by means of violence.

All these notes were taken on the first day of class, when he was setting the stage for history as drama. I find, in caps in my notes, his expectations that our forty-page term paper would not be a summary. (I was a sophomore.)

DO NOT RECONSTRUCT THE NARRATIVE.

USE THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION.

The forty-page paper that I did write for the course I called “The American Response to the Russian Revolution.” I dug into American newspapers on file in the library, eyewitness accounts, journals, and later histories about how we responded here to those momentous days in March and November. I needed to understand what my father had spent much of his life also trying to understand: how history had unfolded under his young feet. He was reading in Russian and in Yiddish, and I was now reading in English, and when I came home for Christmas that year, I presented him with my findings. He thanked me for enlarging his knowledge: He was thrilled.

Colodny offered me the way to build another kind of conversation with my father, who had, until then, been my first mentor. Colodny taught me what schooling might be for—and how I could bridge the two worlds of home and the academy. This was not a deliberate part of his curriculum; in fact, one could remain anonymous in his large lecture halls, but the call for a historical imagination brought with it, as well, a moral imagination, and my early love of fiction was being called now to think about history in new ways. It was not as I had thought in high school: facts, facts, facts. I was finding ways to understand my father’s stories, that I had grown up on. If all was related, then, I could connect the private and the public, the personal and the political; fact and fiction, story and history. I could bring a number of worlds together. This was a license I had not expected in college.

My last course with him was an independent study, a book a week, alternating between fiction and non-fiction: I still have the list of the books I read on the Russian Revolution, some of which I had read or skimmed during the second course: *Dr. Zhivago*, John Reed’s *Ten Days That Shook the World*, John Maynard’s *Russia in Flux*; some part of E. H. Carr’s voluminous history of the Soviet Union, a memoir of the Russian expatriate, Ilya Ehrenberg.

I would visit Colodny’s office in the Cathedral of Learning once a week, and we would talk. Mostly, I think, I’d listen. I remember coming in to find him reading: I remember the books piled everywhere, stacked in the shelves, on the floor, on the windowsill. As I noted earlier, he was said to know fourteen languages, and one day when I walked into the office, he was holding out a book and said, “Do you read Portuguese?” “Only Spanish and French,” I said. “Well, then, you’ll need to find this in translation.”

I recovered, eventually, from the shame of being found wanting, falling below his presumed estimation of me, and realized, much later, that he had assumed,

nonetheless, that I *could* have known Portuguese, that I, therefore, could have been expected to know any number of things, and that what had prevented me from envisioning myself as being fully capable of knowing any number of things was in my mind—and not his.

I have recalled that moment throughout my life, as I recall him. In the process of writing about him, I found this statement of his in a piece he wrote for the university newspaper, entitled, “Reflections on the Contemporary Problems of Liberal Education”:

A university can never be more certain that it is properly functioning than when its faculty is accused of subversion, because then some entrenched ideal is under assault and some traditional holder of power feels the tempest of new and renewing ideas. (1970)

Our Project at this most public of universities, calls for us to interrogate those entrenched ideals and practices, unsettling the certainties, the status quo, as well as the bastions of power, as we consider how to do the job of educating our students.

## NOTES

1. Additional statistics about CUNY can be found at: <http://www.oira.cuny.edu/>.
2. For a thorough examination of CUNY’s history, see Roff et al. (2000). For a sense of the heat that CUNY’s Open Admissions policies have generated, and ensuing debate about access and excellence, see Marshak (1973); Lavin, Alba, and Silverstein (1981); Traub (1995), and Lavin and Hyllegard’s response (1996). See also Soliday (2002) and Gill (2000). For a foray into New York City’s changing demographics, see Queens College Professor of Anthropology Sanjek (1998).
3. The Freshman Year Initiative at Queens College, under the leadership of Judith Summerfield, received two back-to-back Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) Grants, from 1993–2000, totaling more than \$1,000,000. In 1996, FYI received a TIAA-CREF Hesburgh Award for Faculty Development. In 1998, Judith Summerfield was named “New York State Professor of the Year” by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Currently, under the leadership of Professor Martin Braun, FYI is part of a FIPSE dissemination grant, developed by Professor Mark Carnes, Barnard College.
4. Birth’s investigation was prompted, in part, by Astin’s annual surveys of the American Freshman, and his desire to probe students’ initial responses to a set of questions about why they think they are in college (See, for example, Astin 2003). What I represent here was part of our conversation about his research (personal correspondence, November 1, 2001). For a review of the literature on the American freshmen (and women), see <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu>.
5. Lave and Wenger (1991) discuss “legitimate peripheral participation,” a powerful conceptual and pragmatic framework for building a “community of practice,” where novices, through working closely with experts, move in from the “periphery” and develop expertise within the situated learning context.
6. There is a vast literature on why students go to college and what they get out of college, which includes Astin’s national surveys and reports (1993), as well as surveys of college graduates (Light 2001), journalistic characterizations (Karabell 1998; Moffatt 1989), and even those from professors in disguise

as freshmen (Nathan 2006). For a critical look at college, schooling, and learning, there are increasingly those scholars, including Bruner, (1996), Cole (1996), Wertsch (1985), Lave and Wenger (1991), Kincheloe (2004), and Kincheloe, Steinberg, and Villaverde (1999), who critique assumptions and constructs of the "student" apart from socio-political formations of self and culture.

7. There is, of course, the philosophy of liberalism and its singular focus on individuals—on their responsibilities, on their rights—that is inextricably bound up in the historical development of liberal education. When we speak today about "liberal education" we are speaking within a long-developing conceptualization about the relationship of the state to society. I realize within myself a tension between my emotional response to the individual "awakening stories" that are shaped by liberal education and the desire to effect change at a structural, institutional level. By trying to make the University more coherent—both for individual students and for the institution as a whole—I am attempting to bridge what is evoked by "liberal" and "general."
8. To dive into the debates about liberal and general education takes us to the history of higher education in America and the formation of the democracy, as Sean Egan and Phil Anderson explore in their essays in this volume. Further reading includes higher education histories (Veysey 1965; Lucas 2006), as well as experiments that range from a return to classical Athens at Berkeley in the 1960s (Tussman 1997) to critiques of liberalism and the University as a growing corporate enterprise (Readings 1997), as well as studies of how American colleges have not got it right (Bok 2006), and who gets left out of elite colleges (Golden 2006).
9. One of CUNY's contributions to American higher education is in the field of rhetoric and composition, including "basic writing," which developed out of Open Admissions in the 1960s. Mina Shaughnessy's research on student writing in *Errors and Expectations* (1977), as well as a host of scholarship on teaching and learning resulted in a paradigm shift in freshman composition—a respect for the writer and serious attention to the patterns of error. See other approaches to teaching writing to CUNY's students in Ponsot and Deen (1982); Summerfield and Summerfield (1986), as well as further research on CUNY's remedial programs and testing (Sternglass 1997; Gleason 2000; Soliday 2002). See Maher (1997) for a biography of Shaughnessy. The Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Program at CUNY, the result of a 1999 Board of Trustees mandate that writing be enhanced in all academic departments and programs across the University coincided with a report on the University "adrift" and the elimination of remediation/open admissions at the senior colleges. The WAC Program has developed into a thriving intellectual community of practice.
10. See the CASTL Institutional Leadership Program's description at <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/general/sub.asp?key=21&subkey=2025&topkey=21>.

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## What Is IN This Book?

JUDITH SUMMERFIELD AND CRYSTAL BENEDICKS

*The City University of New York*

Our title, *Reclaiming the Public University: Conversations on General & Liberal Education*, represents the mission of our project—to *reclaim*—as well as the spirit of our intervention—to *hold a conversation*. This book brings us into the national conversations on "liberal" and "general" education, respecting the complexities of those terms and pushing at their historical and rhetorical legacies. In the late 1990s, CUNY was considered a university "adrift," having fallen, critics insisted, into disarray. Recurrent budget crises and heated public debates over what constituted acceptable student performance threatened to focus the agenda more on staying afloat than on moving the university forward. Now, under the leadership of Chancellor Matthew Goldstein, CUNY's star has risen; and it is time for all those involved in this most public of universities to attend to our shared business of teaching CUNY's quarter of a million undergraduates.

To reclaim the public university is to focus our energies on teaching all our students well, educating them for a new, increasingly complicated age. To deliver on this promise, we must interrogate the general education we provide for our students, for this is the vast, unrecognized ground we stand on. It is what students and faculty do most in common. If we can get educating our students right, generally and liberally, then we will have laid a claim to what the public university needs to be—and provide that critical balance and integration of the general and the specialized. It is what makes American higher education unique across the globe.