Union and Student Coalition
Fighting for CUNY

Working in coalition with student organizations and other unions, the PSC expanded its campaign to stop proposed budget cuts to higher education that would have a devastating impact on CUNY’s faculty, staff and students. In March the PSC organized three grassroots lobbying delegations to Albany, tabled on CUNY campuses and launched a media blitz in print, online and on TV to mobilize support for City University. With the State budget in flux, now is the time for union members to stand up for public higher education in New York.

Wage Changes
Pay equity changes slated to take effect

Full-time lecturers, CLIP teachers, and CLTs and aHEOs with advanced degrees will benefit from salary equity changes that the PSC won in the last contract negotiations.

THE SAT
CCNY looks to increase power of a flawed test

City College professor Bill Crain says it is a mistake for CCNY to raise SAT cutoff scores. The test tends to exclude students of color – but is a poor predictor of academic success.

Contract
PSC members discuss union demands

Faculty and staff have been discussing workload, adjunct parity, better pay and much more at campus contract meetings to prepare for the next round of bargaining.
Mother Nature eases workload

- The study of British workers conducted by the UK Trades Union Council, reported in Steve Leberstein's "UK Unions on Work/Life Balance," (FT, 1/28/09), describes conditions for workers at CUNY as appropriately as it does our brethren across the pond. The UK TUC study showed that "five million workers regularly worked unpaid overtime, giving their employers $41 billion in free labor," and causing "stress, ill health and family strains" as well as reduced work quality and productivity.

- In the hope that working our proper hours on one day could lead to better work habits all the time, I e-mailed all my fellow HEOs at my campus to encourage them to read Steve's article and celebrate Work Your Proper Hours Day, which the UK TUC declared to be February 26. Remarkably, that day proved to be a snow day and we were excused from work entirely.

Robert Nelson
Graduate Center

City Council grills CUNY on hiring diversity

- Representatives of City University faced sharp questions about racial diversity among CUNY faculty and professional staff at a City Council hearing on February 24.

- On a national scale, CUNY officials said, the diversity of City University's academic workforce is impressive. But council members responded that this was the wrong yardstick. Compared to the University's student body, they said, the composition of the faculty falls short.

- "CUNY's student body reflects the diversity of the city," noted a briefing paper from the council's Higher Education Committee, which held the oversight hearing. In fall 2008, it reported, students of color made up nearly three-quarters of CUNY's 243,000 degree-seeking students, with black students accounting for 28%, Latinos 28% and Asians 17%.

- In contrast, the background paper said, CUNY faculty were nearly 70% white; only 12% of faculty members were black, 8% were Latino and 10% Asian.

The RIGHT YARDSTICK

- "CUNY is in a very respectable position nationally in terms of its diversity statistics," testified Glori- ana Waters, CUNY vice chancellor for human resources, with its proportion of black and Latino faculty about double the national average.

- "Can we do more? Of course, and we shall."

- "It's not a matter of, 'Can we do more?'" responded Councilmember Yudias Rodriguez, the committee's chair. "We have to do more."

- In fact, that goal is established in State education law, testified PS President Barbara Bowen. The State statute includes "a specific recommendation to have the faculty at CUNY reflect the diversity of the city," she told the committee.

- CUNY's progress on racial di-

versity has been slow, Bowen said—and in some job titles it has actually gone backwards. From 1997 to 2007, she told the committee, CUNY's own figures and categories show that the proportion of black assis-
tant professors fell from 16.5% to 13.8%. The proportion of black asso-
ciate professors fell from 11.6% to 10.1% over the same period, while the figure for black full professors rose slightly, from 7.2% to 7.8% of the total.

- Vice Chancellor Waters testified that figures since 2007 showed some improvement, for which she credited projects such as CUNY's Latino Faculty Initiative. But Bo-

wen said it remains to be seen whether any progress will add up to a longer-term trend.

- CUNY Graduate Center Presi-
dent William Kelly told the com-
mittee not to expect any dramatic improvement soon. "There are far too few minority PhDs to satisfy demand." Until that changes, he testified, "efforts to diversify fac-
ty at CUNY and elsewhere, re-
gardless of the intensity with which those efforts are pursued, will be frustrated by the fundamental mar-
ket reality."

- In order to make progress, Kel-
ly said, "we need to attract more
talented minority undergradu-
tees to doctoral programs." Kelly
detailed CUNY's commitment to "pipeline programs," which seek to draw students of color into graduate study and then support them while they work toward an advanced degree.

- "The thing that concerns me," re-
sponded Councilmember Jumaane Williams, "is that at every level of education there is that sentiment of, 'Well, they're not qualified.' Everyone blames the person before. So my concern is that at some point we have to say what we're going to do at this level.

- The number of black and Latino students earning PhDs grew more than 5% in the 10 years before 2007, testified Bowen.

- "While it's still not enough," she said, CUNY's own numbers should not lag behind.

- Debi Rose, the first black coun-
climember elected from Staten Island, said that when she was an employee at the College of Staten Island, "I did see quite frequently that CUNY has a problem in terms of retention. And I have had the privilege of working with wonderful faculty from these underrepresented classes, only to have them leave because of the culture of the college. It's not one that was welcoming, nurturing or inclusive."

- "Racism is always a factor," said former committee chair Coun-
cilmember Charles Barron. "It per-
mutes every institution in America, and CUNY hasn't escaped."

- "You didn't even give us the num-
bers of blacks that do have PhDs and don't get tenure," Barron told Vice Chancellor Waters. "That's a g
umber that we need to have,...the percentage of whites that get tenure and the percentage of blacks that get tenure," he said. "That would be very revealing."

- Later in the hearing, York College President Keizas and Presidents Ricardo Fernández of Lehman and Edu-
ardo Martí of Queensborough Community College each testified about specific steps their colleges have taken to increase faculty di-
versity, such as extending searches if the position is left unfilled or provid-
ing funds for an additional faculty line to aid broader recruitment in a given field.

- "We acknowledge those efforts," said the PSC's Bowen. "It's not easy to diversify the faculty," she said. "But we are not going to solve the problem...by just doing more and incre-
mental things." She cited an article in the September Clarion, which esti-
mated that at the current rate, "it would take 240 years for the percent-
age of black employees in CUNY's professional workforce to catch up with their presence in today's student body." (The article, online at www.
psc.cuny.org/race-employment.htm, helped spark the February 24 hear-
ing, according to com-
mittee staffers.)

- "Remember that all those numbers occurs in the context of under-
resourcing for CUNY," Bowen added. "The last time enrollment at CUNY was as high as it presently is, we had 11,500 full-time faculty. Now we have 6,700."

- "Less hiring, she said, means less op-
portunity to improve diversity.

INCREMENTAL CHANGE

Underfunding also hurts CUNY's recruitment and retention because the University's pay and workload are not competitive with compa-

nible institutions, Bowen added.

For one open position at her school, Queens College, she said, "The top 50 candidates...were people of color and all four turned the col-
lege down because of the conditions at CUNY—one of the heavy teaching load, the lack of compet-
tive salaries.

Bowen said that attempts in collective bargaining to establish cooperative efforts with CUNY management on increasing faculty and staff diversity had been re-
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PSC steps up Albany budget blitz

By PETER HOGNESS

Repeated visits to legislators

NYPRG (New York Public Interest Research Group) and SUNY’s academic union, UUP (United University Professions) helped advance coalition-building efforts for the future. CUNY students and PSC members filled five buses heading to Albany, rising just after 4:00 am to get on board before a 6:00 am departure. If tuition is raised, “my career goes down the drain,” said Natasha Ortiz, who is studying at Bronx Community College to become a paralegal. “I wouldn’t be able to afford it. I can barely afford it now. I have about six grand in loans already.”

“Some of the worst things they could do is decrease the amount of funding to education,” said Daniel Salaman, a student at Queens College. “Because you’re educating the people who are hopefully going to get us out of this crisis,” he told Clarion. “I want to be one of those people who are going to help get us out of the recession. If I don’t have college, how am I going to do that?”

“It was an exciting day, and I really appreciate the level of organization it required,” said Paul Washington, a member of the PSC Legislative Committee. “I was impressed by the number of students who came and their level of participation,” he added. “The budget is being slashed, burned and cut, and we have to fight and try to find remedies and solutions.”

In late March the PSC kicked off a media blitz – in print, online and on TV. PSC advertisements in both Spanish and English appeared in AM New York and Metro, El Diario, the Amsterdam News, Caribbean Life, the Haitian Times, and a dozen other community newspapers with a combined circulation of 1.5 million. The union’s TV ad (which can be seen online at www.psc-cuny.org) ran on NY1, CNN, MSNBC, and local ABC and CBS affiliates. Targeted internet ads ran on Google, Facebook and high-traffic blogs. In media all, the PSC ads encourage readers and viewers to go online to www.StopCUNYcuts.org, where they can send a message to legislators.

March is a critical time in the legislature’s wrangling over the State budget, and two other PSC delegations trekked to Albany that month. On March 1, as part of the Higher Education Lobby Day organized by NY State United Teachers (NYSUT), union officers met with Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, Senate Democratic Conference Leader John Sampson and others, while two dozen PSC activists met with senators and assemblymembers the following day. The PSC’s grassroots lobbyists returned to Albany for another NYSUT lobbying push on March 16, meeting again with Silver, Sampson and other legislative leaders.

On March 22 and 23, PSC chapter organizers tabling at school study and call or e-mail their representatives and ask friends to do the same. (If you have not yet sent a message, you can do so today at www.StopCUNYcuts.org.)

“The cuts being proposed are severe and will have a terrible impact on our ability to educate our students,” said PSC First VP Steve London. “We need a massive response from our membership and coalition partners to turn these cuts around.”

As Clinton went to press, reports from Albany indicated that the fight over the State budget was likely to continue past the April 3 deadline, and the union’s borough-based legislative committees were planning meetings with State legislators and City Council members in their local districts. (If you would like to attend a local district meeting, e-mail amagalalas@nysmail.org or call (212) 354-1252.)

Paterson’s proposed cuts would arrive on the heels of nearly $100 million in total cuts to CUNY senior college funding in the current year’s budget. They come at a time when the State already provides CUNY with one-third less support than in 1990.

The PSC has opposed the governor’s “rational tuition” plan as a shell game that increases the burden on working people and students in an already provide CUNY with one-third less support than in 1990.

The union has also argued against the governor’s call for allowing differential tuition for different CUNY colleges, programs and majors because this would create additional barriers, keeping low-income students out of their chosen field.

To increase State revenues, the PSC is supporting proposals advanced by the Better Choice Budget Coalition and the Fiscal Policy Institute, such as retaining a portion of the State’s stock transfer tax (recently rebated at 18%) and a marginal tax increase on wealthy New Yorkers with taxable income above $500,000 per year.

Differential Tuition

The next day, the California Federation of Teachers and other union allies kicked off a seven-week “March for California’s Future,” from Bak- kere to Sacramento. Along the way marchers are registering vot- ers and gathering signatures for the Majority Budget Act, a referendum proposal that would overturn the state’s current requirement for a two-thirds majority to pass a bud- get or approve new taxes. You can check on the marchers’ progress at fight4cafuture.com.

Public ed supporters take to the streets

By KARAH WOODWARD

A national day of protest to defend public education brought PSC members, students and community organizations out in force on March 4 for the PSC’s “For California’s Future,” from Bakersfield to Sacramento. Along the way marchers are registering voters and gathering signatures for the Majority Budget Act, a referendum proposal that would overturn the state’s current requirement for a two-thirds majority to pass a budget or approve new taxes. You can check on the marchers’ progress at fight4cafuture.com.

Public funding cuts prompt national protest

Deep spending cuts prompt national protest

By KARAH WOODWARD

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BMCC faculty pushes admin to tighten class caps

Key courses to be prioritized

By John Tarleton

Last spring the BMCC Academic Senate passed a resolution calling for the caps on class size to be lowered to a maximum of 30 students for all classes and urging the college administration to work with departments over the next three years to reach that goal. With the increase to the number of degree-seeking students, from 15,000 in 2000 to 21,000 in 2008, faculty worried about the educational impact of teaching overcrowded courses.

When the resolution was ignored by BMCC President Antonio Pérez, PSC members on campus didn’t get discouraged. They got organized.

RETENTION PROBLEMS

After union activists at BMCC took the class caps issue to departmental meetings last fall, six departments passed resolutions expressing support for the senate’s class size resolution. Some, like the English department, went further and announced they would not accept overenrollments in any of their sections. The English department also declared it would follow national guidelines that call for no more than 15 students in development courses, 20 in composition courses or 25 in writing electives.

According to the senate’s 2009 resolution, “official course caps at BMCC have increased substantially over time,” rising from 25 to 35 in social science and from 19 to 24 for English remediation. The resolution expressed concern that “budgetary pressures will increase administrative incentives to erode class-size standards even further.”

This February, the Academic Senate took up the matter again in an emotionally charged meeting that drew about 120 people, half again as many as usually attend. About 75 people in the crowd were wearing brightly colored stickers open stating their opposition to overcrowded classes.

“We want to have smaller class sizes not because we want to do less work but better work,” said assistant professor of English James Tolan.

Lisa Rose, associate professor of social science, told the crowd he too was in favor of smaller class sizes but that his hands were tied by a lack of funds.

“I don’t disagree with you [on smaller class sizes] and if it could be done, I would do so today,” he said.

Pérez also claimed the average class size at BMCC had recently declined from 28 to 27.

Charlie Post, associate professor of sociology, argued that these numbers are “deceptive,” since class sizes are ballooning in many introductory courses, which contain the greatest number of students at risk for dropping out.

“We have to find a way to balance fiscal concerns with issues of retention,” Post said.

CASH COW

“The administration’s first priority is pleasing 80th Street and using the college as a cash cow for capturing students’ Pell Grant money,” Post told Clarion.

While Pérez refused to accept across-the-board class caps, he did respond to faculty pressure by agreeing to work with the Academic Senate on prioritizing a list of key courses that would have their class caps reduced. The Academic Senate’s Instruction Committee was given responsibility for asking department chairs to identify courses to be prioritized.

“We are opening up a conversation between faculty, students and the administration that has the potential for positive results,” she said.

It’s promising if the Instruction Committee is respected,” Frank Crocco, assistant professor of English, told Clarion. “If not, we will have to step up the pressure.”

The union was able to initiate a debate about class size at BMCC because chapter activists directly engaged fellow faculty members and mobilized them to speak out about their concerns.

“What made the difference was that a number of us had one-on-one conversations with our colleagues,” said assistant professor of political science Geoff Kurtz.

More than a dozen chapter members took part in a two-hour organizing training session provided by the union in February. They then reached out to other faculty members, listening closely to colleagues’ concerns about their working conditions and asking them to become involved in changing those conditions.

TALK + ACTION

“Professors make a living talking, but having a one-on-one conversation that’s connected to action is not something anyone is born knowing how to do,” said Kurtz.

“You don’t have to think of yourself as extroverted or political. It’s a skill you can learn.”

Longtime English professor Robert Lapides said he had not seen the BMCC faculty speak out so aggressively in a decade. He said the work that went into preparing for the February 24 meeting produced more than a new Academic Senate resolution begrudgingly accepted by the BMCC administration because chapter activists directly engaged fellow faculty members and mobilized them to speak out about their concerns.

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Contract meetings begin dialogue

By JOHN TARLINGTON

From the South Bronx to Staten Island, rooms were filled to overflowing as PSC members met with union leaders to discuss what’s needed in the next collective bargaining agreement with CUNY. The campus meetings, to which all PSC members on campus are invited, began in February and continue through late April (see list below).

“There’s been tremendous turnout,” said PSC President Barbara Bowen. “What’s impressed me is how serious people are about their hopes for this contract and how knowledgeable they are about what it will take to win.” The current contract expires in October 2011, and Bowen said the union will be ready to start bargaining before then.

GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING

In addition to discussing potential contract demands, the meetings also marked the start of grassroots organizing for the coming negotiations. Members signed up to join the Committee of 500, a group of rank-and-file union members who can start by joining the PSC’s Committee of 500 and forming to: PSC/500, 61 Broadway, 15th fl., NY, NY 10006. at www.psc-cuny.org/committee500.htm, or mail this positions,” Bowen said. “We’re preparing to call the administration to provide more full-time faculty." Bowen said. "We’re prepared to lead that campaign.

To win a fair contract in this economic environment, members from every campus must work together. You can start by joining the PSC’s Committee of 500 and pledging to take the six actions listed below. Sign up at www.psc-cuny.org/committee500.htm, or mail this form to: PSC/500, 61 Broadway, 15th fl., NY, NY 10806.

JOIN THE COMMITTEE OF 500

2010 CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS

☐ Yes! I want to be part of the effort to build the power we need to win a good contract.

AS A MEMBER OF THE COMMITTEE OF 500 I PLEDGE TO:

☐ Attend one meeting of the Committee of 500 this semester.

☐ Report on conversations with colleagues about their contract priorities.

☐ Communicate with CUNY colleagues about negotiations.

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Name: __________________________ Title: __________________________

Phone number: __________________________ Work number: __________________________

Cell number: __________________________ Email address: __________________________

Department: __________________________ Campus: __________________________

PSC—Bargaining the New Contract
CUNY rallies for Haiti

By JOHN TARLETON

The catastrophic earthquake that struck Haiti on January 12 also made itself felt in New York City, which has the largest Haitian community of any city in the US. That community includes about 60,000 students at CUNY, where faculty, staff and students have rallied to the support of the island nation.

One of many fundraising events was the PSC’s Evening in Solidarity with the People of Haiti. The February 19 event packed the union hall with more than 150 people, its largest crowd to date, and raised nearly $5,000 in individual donations. The program featured Traditional Haitian food and music and presentations by Carolle Charles, associate professor of sociology at Baruch, and Francois Pierre-Louis, associate professor of political science at Queens.

The money raised is being shared between Doctors Without Borders, grassroots organizations in Haiti and support for Haiti’s devastated national university.

THE HARDEST WORK

“I want to thank the PSC and thank you all for being here tonight,” said Charles. “It shows you are really touched by what is happening in Haiti.” In addition to much-needed donations, she invited listeners to consider a future visit to Haiti to assist in reconstruction.

“The hardest work is going to begin after the next six to eight months,” said Pierre-Louis, when the Haitian quake has faded from the headlines. “I would like to ask you personally not to forget Haiti.”

In addition to raising funds, the event also aimed to raise consciousness about the context for Haiti’s crisis.

Pierre-Louis and Charles urged listeners to go beyond the now-common statement that Haiti is “the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere,” to consider how that came to be true.

“In 1980 Haiti was self-sufficient in terms of production of rice,” observed Charles in one example. “Today, 70% of the rice is imported from the United States, and...Haiti now depends on food imports.” A major factor in this shift, she said, was the “structural adjustment” policies demanded by the International Monetary Fund, which removed protections for Haitian producers and flooded the market with heavily subsidized US rice exports. As Haiti’s rice farmers were thrown out of work, they swelled the Port-au-Prince shantytowns so devastated by the quake.

The PSC event was just one of dozens held throughout the CUNY system, including fund drives and teach-ins at Baruch, BMCC, CUNY School of Law, John Jay, LaGuardia, Medgar Evers and Brooklyn College.

At Queens College, Vimsoniri Aunaettrakul, president of the school’s Model United Nations Team, told Clarion how a food and clothing drive she initiated soon after the earthquake became a month-long effort with 10 other

Campus organizations, gathering more than 1,000 articles of food and clothing. “The momentum kept growing,” said Aunaettrakul.

Brooklyn College is slated to be the venue of a major Haiti relief concert organized by a number of CUNY student groups, including the 18 Mai Committee, a non-profit organization based at Medgar Evers College and sponsored by CUNY’s Student Senate. The concert, on April 24 at the school’s Performing Arts Center, will draw on popular local performers from across New York’s Caribbean-American community.

“We saw that CUNY schools were doing separate events and Long-term involvement will be necessary.

Counseling

Many PSC members found themselves responding to the earthquake’s effects as part their job at CUNY. Counseling departments stepped up to meet the increased need. At Kingsborough Community College, for example, which estimates that about 1,000 of its students are Haitian or of Haitian descent, the department organized outreach at the school’s cafeteria to let students know about increased availability of counseling for those affected by the disaster.

Haitians living abroad are vital to the island’s economy: according to Charles, remittances from those abroad add up to $1.8 billion per year. “Meaning?” she pointed out, “that we send more money than all the international aid to Haiti.”

In the wake of the quake, US immigration activists called on the Obama administration to grant Temporary Protective Status (TPS) to undocumented immigrants from Haiti, providing them the legal right to live and work in the US for 14 months (or longer if the status is renewed).

On January 15, the administration agreed – and CUNY employees and students were ready to help. CUNY Citizenship Now! had already held planning meetings with the Legal Aid Society before the January 15 announcement and swung into action as soon as Haitian TPS became official.

“We were Johnny-on-the-spot,” said CUNY Citizenship Now! Project Director Allan Wernick. “We really brought people together.”

On January 22 Wernick’s group and Legal Aid held a two-hour online training on the basics of TPS and immigration law for 550 lawyers who had volunteered for legal clinics to assist undocumented Haitians with their TPS applications.

(Left) A crowd of more than 150 people filled the PSC union hall.

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Soon after, three clinics in Brooklyn and Queens assisted over 900 Haitians. PSC staffer Moriah Berger participated in the first clinic at Medgar Evers College on January 30. “Somebody could walk out of there with everything ready to go,” said Berger. “It was like one-stop shopping.”

The application deadline is July 14, and a group of 15 CUNY Law School students continue to travel to Columbus Heights, Queens, each Saturday to assist TPS applicants. They are working with Haitian Americans United for Progress (HUAP), a community-based organization. “We made a point from the beginning to work with organizations that have been working in the Haitian community for a long time,” said Jonathan Harris, a third-year CUNY Law student.

Photo by John Tarleton

Other members of the CUNY community are working to empower the Haitian diaspora to return to Haiti to help rebuild their country.

Pierre-Louis is pushing for federal funding for stipends for Creole-speakers who volunteer in Haiti for one to two years. “I think there are a lot of Creole-speakers who would be willing to go back to rebuild their society, but there has to be a program to help them,” said Pierre-Louis.

RETURN

Pierre-Louis is also working with a number of Haitian groups to organize a March 27 to 28 conference in New York of leaders in the Haitian diaspora to discuss coordinating their efforts to help the island rebuild.

The Medgar Evers-based 18 Mai Committee is organizing a group of youth in its Toussaint L’Ouverture Leadership Program that will travel to Haiti later this spring or summer. The delegation would help with immediate tasks like clearing rubble and distributing relief supplies. But just as important, said Executive Director Ruddel Decueus, is the effect such a trip can have on participants’ commitment to Haiti and their leadership role in its future.

“We are trying to develop student leaders who will be looking at Haiti five to 10 years down the road,” he said. “We are planting the seeds.”

The diaspora has a critical role to play in charting Haiti’s future course, Decueus added. “The work has to be done by Haitians. Despite all the international aid coming into the country, if we don’t empower the Haitian people, we are not going to see much of a difference.”

Classical guitarist Pierre-Henri Barthelemy plays a traditional Haitian song during the PSC’s February 19 Evening in Solidarity with the People of Haiti. (Below) A crowd of more than 150 people filled the PSC union hall.
In April and May, the PSC is offering training sessions on the union contract – for all interested members and those who want to become more involved in contract enforcement. (See page 4 for details.)

Faculty grievances are handled both by local chapter grievance counselors and by those in the PSC’s central office. HEO and CLT grievances are handled by HEO/CLT grievance counselors in the central office. (For coverage of a HEO grievance counselor, see tingari.com/HEOGrievance.)

Below, Clarion talks with three campus grievance counselors about their work.

DANNY LYNCH, LA GUARDIA

Twenty years ago, LaGuardia English professor Danny Lynch published a detective novel, Ventrity, about an intellectual – a painter who unexpectedly finds himself investigating a crime. Today Lynch conducts his own investigations at LaGuardia Community College, as the LaGuardia PSC chapter’s grievance counselor.

“It’s like the old Sam Spade movies,” Lynch says. “People come into your office to tell you their stories. They tell you about their lives, their relationships with their students, their colleagues, their department chairs, and you have to figure out what is going on so you can help them solve their problem.”

Management bullying can be resisted.

Being an effective grievance counselor requires a knack for both empathetic listening and timely action, says Lynch, who came to LaGuardia in 1974 and has been a grievance counselor since 1988. By working to enforce the contract, he explains, grievance counselors ensure that “the rules” are fairly applied.

“Whether talking with deans or community members, my instinct is to try to understand what it means when management acts in an arbitrary or unfair manner. Thirty years ago she was pressured out of teaching with tenure and or teaching with tenure and or non-appointments, successfully so in three of the six cases he has handled so far this year. In each, the affected professor secured an extra year for her or his work toward tenure.

“One thing I’ve learned from working in the University is that there is a deep desire not to have a strong union,” says Lynch. “My job is to make sure the contract is enforced.”

LaGuardia English Professor Danny Lynch has been his campus’s grievance counselor since 1998. He says the PSC’s ability to fight for just and dignified working conditions starts when a member decides to speak out.

**How grievance counselors defend your rights**

Professors traditionally have thought of themselves as a privileged elite, explains Lynch. “The people I represent often change their view of their place in the University. When they first come to see me, their focus may be, ‘How could this have happened to me?’ As we explore their case and explore the opportunity for reinstatement that the contract may provide, they see it’s not just about ‘me,’ it’s also about everyone’s rights in the University,” says Lynch.

Mukherjee says her biggest challenge is members’ lack of knowledge of their own rights. “Many people are unfairly denied tenure and they don’t even know their rights under the contract,” she adds. Considering what’s at stake, she says, it’s information every PSC member should have: “This is about more than tenure and job security.”

**KNOW YOUR RIGHTS**

“They’re a massive amount of public relations outreach we need to do at Queens College,” says Mukherjee, who is organizing an April 9 event on campus with QC Chapter Chair Jonathan Buchsbaum and others to educate junior faculty about their contractual rights. “We can’t have faculty members who don’t know that their right to file a grievance depends on doing it within a certain timeframe.” (Generally this is 30 working days after the contract is violated, though how that is interpreted can depend on the specifics.)

“Someone asked me if I was afraid to be seen as working for the union,” Mukherjee recalls. “And I said, ‘No, it’s a great way to learn your rights and to take ownership of the place and to make it yours, to help shape the contract for someone else.’ It’s extremely empowering, because I can hold management accountable.”

Roopali Mukherjee, associate professor of media studies at Queens College, first served as a grievance counselor in 2007-2008, returning to that post last fall after a brief interruption.

Lynch agrees. “A lot of what we do is to serve as ‘contract explainers,’” he says.

To help spread the word, one of Moss’s first initiatives as a grievance counselor was to compile important information about the contract and the rights of PSC members into a binder format. She used it as the best possible solution for a small office. “When you have the two sides go head-to-head – but sometimes they can craft a ‘win-win’ solution that satisfies everyone,” she explains. Members learn to move in either direction – whichever is the most direct path to ensuring that PSC members’ rights are respected.

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Who we lost at U. of Alabama

Shooting claims professors’ lives

By PETER HOGNESS

The murder of three faculty members in the biology department of the University of Alabama at Huntsville (UAH) made headlines across the nation. In print, on TV and online, the stories of the three professors who would commit such a crime and why.

Much less attention was devoted to the professors who were killed, all of them people of color who were known for their effectiveness as student mentors. Three very different people, they were united in their passion for science and dedication to diversifying its ranks.

ADRIEL JOHNSON

Dr. Adriel Johnson majored in biology at Washington University. After graduation he went on to earn two master’s degrees—one in population genetics from Tennessee- Tech University and another in biochemistry from UAH—followed by a PhD in animal science and nutritional physiology from North Carolina State University. He came to UAH in 1989.

“Johnson served as advisor for the Minority Graduate Student Association and religiously recruited minority graduate and doctoral students to attend the university as LSAMP [Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation] scholars for nearly 20 years,” a UAH statement said.

“He was always trying to encourage underrepresented groups to go into math and science and engineering,” said Florence Holland, a university administrator who is now at Auburn University. “Some people, when they get to a certain level of success, they want to pull away. Not Adriel. He’d invite you in and say, ‘I want you here, you have yours,’” she told the Associated Press. “But Dr. Johnson wasn’t like that. He was very willing to share and [very] passionate about it.”

Students recalled what Johnson’s support meant to them in personal terms. “Dr. Johnson had an impact on every minority student on the UAH campus,” wrote UAH alumna Ted Washington. “Even though I wasn’t a biology major, he would always ask me how I was doing and how were my grades.”

“He used to prepare files/dossiers on each student carefully,” wrote a colleague, Krishnan Chittur, so that “we knew how to help the student when they came in and talked to us... In addition, he was always looking for mentors for students he was interested in.” Johnson “had a way of getting the students what they needed to do to get to medical or dental school, or whatever they were interested in,” Chittur added. “It was more than encouragement; it was personal, since often the message would be, ‘You must do better in MCA’ or ‘You are falling behind.’”

Former student described Johnson as not just a mentor, but a “father figure” whose advice and confidence gave them strength. “He was about as even-keeled a person as I’ve ever met,” an alumnus recalled.

MARIA RAGLAND DAVIS

Dr. Maria Ragland Davis graduated from the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor with a bachelor’s degree in chemical engineering. She went on to North Carolina State, where she earned a master’s degree in chemical engineering and a doctorate in biochemistry and plant pathology. After years in private industry, she came to UAH in 2002, where her research focused on plant pathology, fungal genomics and genetic controls for drought tolerance.

Davis was both a devout churchgoer and a critical thinker. She “challenged my level of excellence as a graduate student and researcher,” wrote former student Jeneen Abrams. “My life was changed when God allowed our paths to cross. I will miss her—but her legacy will live on in so many young African American scientists who began to believe in ourselves because of Maria.”

A PhD candidate who studied under Davis said she approached her students with “high expectations” and was tough about pushing them to “think, especially critically, outside the box.” But she also had a softer side.

“Do you remember the chicken embryo lab from Cell [biology]?” she asked Christian White, currently a TA in the UAH biology department. “Some of them hatched, and she looked for someone to take care of them. My boyfriend Kris and I ended up with chickens in our house for two months! Those chickens are now at Old McDonald’s petting zoo, enjoying a happy life.”

A published poet and a jazz buff, Davis was a woman of broad intellectual interests. Her brother, Rodrick Ragland, told the Huntsville Times that she was also “a little bit eccentric.” When they were children in Detroit, Ragland recalled, his sister had a pet duck named Quack that followed them everywhere. This, he said, “made it difficult for him to build up his tough-guy image in the neighborhood.”

GOPİ PODİLA

Dr. Gopi Podila, chair of the UAH biology department, came to the school from Michigan Technological University in 2001. He spent his undergraduate years at Nagarjuna University in India, received a master’s degree from Louisiana State in 1983, and earned a doctorate in molecular biology from Indiana State in 1987. His research focused on “functional genomics of plant microbe interactions,” according to UAH, and the use of genetic engineering to develop fast-growing trees, a commercially viable source of ethanol and other forms of bio-energy.

“When I saw that Dr. Podila was teaching a course that I had never had from a professor.”

“Podila had a unique teaching style that followed the textbook, but supplemented it with journal articles, he would have class-wide discussions about,” wrote a current student in the department. “I was initially terrified of having the department chair teach one of my classes, only to find out he was probably the funniest professor in the department.”

Podila was also known for the support he extended to students outside the classroom. Joy Agee, president of UAH’s Minority Graduate Student Association, told the Associated Press that when she was anxious about giving a speech in a local organization, Podila attended to help put her at ease. “He told me if I got nervous during the speech to just look at him and just talk to him,” Agee recalled.

Former student Trisha Collins told the Associated Press that Podila helped her persist through some years of personal difficulty. “It’s amazing how, when people believe in you, it causes you to believe in yourself,” Collins said.

IN MEMORY OF

Wounded in the attack were Luis Cruz-Vera, assistant professor of biology, who was released from the hospital last week. Afterward, Joseph Leahy, associate professor of biology, who was released to a rehab center in good condition in early March, and Jose del Carmen, the department’s staff assistant, who made early progress after being hospitalized in critical condition, but remained in Huntsville Hospital in March.

More than 1,000 people turned out on Friday night to support the community and pay their respects to the three who were slain. A set of scholarships has been established in their memory; donations can be made online at tinyurl.com/UAHscholarships.
Marching toward salary equity

Pay raises for several job titles

By PETER HOGNESS & DEBORAH BELL

As part of the current contract, the union won a series of increases for certain categories of faculty and staff to achieve greater salary equity for our members. Three of those provisions are scheduled to take effect this March, improving salary schedules for full-time lecturers, CLIP teachers, and CLTs and Assistants to HEO with eligible advanced degrees.

ADVANCED DEGREES

As of March 19, employees in the full-time College Laboratory Technician (CLT), Assistant to HEO and Assistant to HEO titles with either a master’s degree or a PhD in a field related to their employment at CUNY are to receive a salary differential in addition to base pay – $1,000 for a master’s degree or $2,500 for a PhD. The differential will be based on the highest degree attained in the employee’s field. It will be treated as part of base pay, and thus will be pensionable.

“Provision of CLTs and Office Assistants encourages workforce engagement and an improved student experience,” said Andrew Beveridge, chair of the sociology department at Queens College. “CUNY employees are committed to providing high-quality programs and services to students and the community.”

The union and management have not reached final agreement on all those with advanced degrees as well as other categories of employees in CLT and HEO-series titles, noted the union’s bargaining team shortly after the contract settlement was reached.

“As a CLT and a cross-campus representative,” bargaining team member Steve Trimboli said at the time, “I have a special attachment to [this provision]...It provides money to those full-time members of the professional staff who are on a lower pay scale than faculty and other HEO titles, in exchange for the value that their advanced degrees bring to CUNY.”

If you are eligible for the salary differential, inform your campus human resources office. As of March 19, most colleges are still making determinations about eligibility. When paid, the differential will be retroactive to March 19 for all those with advanced degrees as of that date.

Lecturers

Effective March 19, each step on the full-time lecturer salary schedule is being increased by $1,000. University Payroll reports that this increase will first appear in the March 19 paycheck for those at community colleges and the March 25 check for the senior colleges. Lecturers in the Educational Opportunity Centers should expect to see the increase in their paycheck on the date that applies to the college managing their payroll.

Since this increase to the lecturer salary steps takes effect in the middle of a payroll cycle, those at community colleges will get one day’s worth of the increased salary step in the March 19 paycheck. Lecturers at CUNY’s senior colleges will get four days’ worth of this increase in their March 25 check.

CLIP TEACHERS

The last contract settlement also provided that funds would be set aside for pay rate improvements for CLIP teachers, effective March 19, 2010.

The PSC and CUNY have reached agreement on an hourly pay rate schedule with steps, so that all CLIP teachers can reach the same pay rates after specified years of service in the program. There is a conceptual agreement on a pay-rate schedule with eight steps above the minimum hourly rate. CLIP teachers will move to a different hourly pay rate every 2 years, so that they will achieve the top hourly rate (which will be above the highest amount any CLIP faculty are earning) after 16 years in the program. Future collectively bargained increases will be applied to individual employees’ pay rates on the effective dates of the increases and to each pay rate in the schedule.

The union and management have not reached final agreement on all details of the salary schedule and implementing language but report that they hope to finalize this short-term. All pay increases that result from the new salary structure will then be retroactive to March 19, 2010.

Census season

“Filling out the 10-question US Census form is crucial for CUNY and all New Yorkers,” said Andrew Beveridge, chair of the sociology department at Queens College. “CUNY questionnaires were delivered to households around the nation in March, and CUNY faculty and staff can help make sure that colleagues and students understand why it’s important to fill them out.”

New York City has been identified as the city in the US with the highest percentage of students from groups that are chronically undercounted – including immigrants (both documented and undocumented), the elderly, people with disabilities and students. Beveridge said that not being counted can leave CUNY, and the communities that rely on it, at a disadvantage.

FUNDING AT STAKE

“Non-voters, including even children and non-citizens, must be counted on the census form, because their numbers count in dividing up power and money,” Beveridge said. “If they are not, the suburbs and the wealthy sections will continue to have too much weight.”

Census results are used to determine the distribution of more than $400 billion of federal funding and the apportionment of national, state and local legislative districts.

Undercounting means that New York City will be shortchanged in next year’s distribution in the resources it needs for education, health care and transportation. It also means that public institutions and students will miss out on funding opportunities for increased federal funding.

HELP AVAILABLE

All US residents, regardless of immigration status, are encouraged to complete a census questionnaire. The Census Bureau is prohibited by law from sharing questionnaire responses with immigration authorities, other federal agencies or law enforcement entities.

“Baruch College, John Jay, City College have provided tabling opportunities for the census at student activities,” said CUNY spokesperson Michael Arena. And from March 19 through April 19, campuses across CUNY will have designated sites where people can pick up census forms. Many will also have tables or kiosks where staff will be present to upload forms every 15 hours per week to offer help in filling out census forms. For more information about locations, contact the college’s census coordinator, who is appointed by the college president.

For more information on the 2010 Census, go to 2010census.gov.
RACE & ADOPTIONS

SAT poor guide for CCNY

By BILL CRAIN

The undergraduate enrollment at City College has increased dramatically in recent years. In Fall 2002, we had fewer than 9,000 students. Now we have nearly 13,000.

The CCNY administration says that something must be done. We cannot give this many undergraduates a quality education, college officials say. But their primary solution has been to tighten admission standards, and this step shouldn’t be taken lightly. This policy shift threatens our college’s historical mission— to provide broad access to a first-rate college education.

UNJUSTIFIED RELIANCE

Moreover, a key change has been to raise SAT cutoff scores, even though the SAT consistently yields lower average scores among low-income students and students of color— precisely those students who have historically been denied access. Some people argue, “Well, if students don’t score well on the SAT, they won’t succeed in college.” But does the SAT actually predict college success? Consider the following:

- In a 2008 study titled “CCNY’s Testing Program,” Stephen Klein and Maria Orlando of the Rand Corporation reported a surprisingly low correlation between the SAT and freshman grades in CCNY’s bachelor’s degree programs. In fact, the correlation coefficient (0.25) was so low that most testing experts would advise CCNY to de-emphasize the SAT in admissions.

- When CCNY’s Office of Institutional Research and Assessment developed the Admissions Index for CCNY applicants (implemented in 2000), the researchers had to weigh high school grade point averages (GPAs) seven times higher than SAT scores to predict freshman grades in liberal arts courses.

In 2005 CCNY’s SEEK Program asked Helena Chang and professors Jay Jorgenson and Kevin Foster to examine variables that might predict SEEK students’ grades. The investigators found that the SAT was a poor predictor, whereas high school GPA predicted their college grades fairly well.

- In a 2008 report to the CCNY CLAS Faculty Council, professor Bob Melara described CCNY’s recent retention rates—the extent to which students stayed in college (without dropping out) for the first two years. He concluded that the SAT didn’t predict retention, but high school GPA did.

- In a 2007 study published by UC-Berkeley’s Center for Studies in Higher Education (available at csbe.berkeley.edu), Saul Geiser and Maria Veronica Santélices observed that high school GPA routinely outperforms the SAT as a predictor of college grades, both at the University of California and nationwide. What’s more, they found that a greater emphasis on high school GPA, relative to the SAT, permits more disadvantaged minority and low-income students to enter their university.

INSIDE THE SAT

Why does the SAT consistenly produce lower scores among some groups? A common explanation is that the disparities reflect differences in academic preparation, and this may be part of the story. But the SAT also might be biased.

In the Spring 2003 issue of Harvard Educational Review, Prof Preedle pointed out that African American students do relatively better than white students on the SAT’s difficult items— those items that the fewest number of students get correct. The reason, Preedle argued, is that the difficult items use more academic and neutral language than the easy items, which employ everyday vocabulary that is actually the vernacular of white, middle-class students.

Test fails to predict college success

CHRONICLE FALLS FOR P.R.

For-profit colleges get a pass

By STEPHEN BURD

I worked at The Chronicle of Higher Education for 15 years, and thus it is difficult to criticize the Chronicle and my former colleagues who work there. However, after reading the publication’s recent series on the for-profit higher education industry, I felt that I needed to speak out.

In February, the Chronicle ran a series of articles focused on the enormous growth of the for-profit college sector over the past three decades. Throughout the series, which includes three articles and a Q&A with a senior vice president at Kaplan Higher Education, readers are told over and over how “nimble” and “robust” these colleges are in comparison to the rest of higher education. While public colleges and universities tend to be “large and impersonal,” for-profit colleges like the University of Phoenix “promise students one-on-one attention, and a clear path to degrees and jobs,” one article states.

The Chronicle fails to note that all of that “personal attention” doesn’t pay off for many of their students. In fact, less than one third of first-time, full-time students who attend the University of Phoenix graduate within six years.

According to the lead article in the series, traditional colleges cater first and foremost to the needs of their faculty members, while “students are the No. 1 concern of proprietary institutions. How do we know this? Current and former officials at DeVry University and Education Management Corporation’s Argosy University tell us so. “We’ve crafted our entire world around students,” says Donna Loraine, DeVry’s vice president for academic affairs. “We are here to improve their futures, not make it more convenient for us.” (As if the leaders of other types of colleges wouldn’t say the exact same thing.)

CATERING TO WHOM?

There are plenty of former career college students— stuck with unmanageable loads of debt for training that has left them stranded—who would beg to differ. Executives of publicly traded for-profit higher education companies, such as Career Education Corporation, may claim that “students are their No. 1 concern,” as the Chronicle put it. But the companies’ shareholders know better.

When Gary McCullough, the president and chief executive officer of Career Ed, met recently with the editorial board at The Wall Street Journal, he complained that recent efforts by the Department of Education to rewrite its student aid regulations to protect students from unscrupulous schools had spooked Wall Street, driving down the price of his company’s stock.

MARKETPLACE

According to the Journal, McCullough said that if the proposal is implemented, Career Education may have to lower prices so as to limit the debt load its students take on… “Oh, the horror! Lower prices and less debt— what could the department possibly be thinking? Better it should leave these hard-working corporations alone, to work the ‘nimble’ and ‘robust’ magic of the marketplace without the hindrance of regulation.”

Stephen Burd is editor of Higher Ed Watch, a public policy blog published by the New America Foundation, where sections of this article originally appeared.

(Dan Winters/Stockbyte)

Preedle suggested that a new SAT based solely on difficult items would be fairer than the present SAT, which includes scores on the easy items and contains an overall bias against African Americans. Preedle also suggested that we eliminate the penalty against low-income students and other ethnic minorities and that this bias plagues standardized tests in general.

In the October 16, 2003 issue of Chronicle of Higher Education, Jay Rosner, executive director of the Princeton Review Foundation, offered a more direct reason for poorer performances among African American students. Rosner charged that when the SAT test makers select the pretest items for the exam, they don’t consider the scores on which African American students outperform white students. The test makers don’t do this deliberately; they don’t know the identities of the students. Instead, their goal is purely technical— to discard the items that will reduce the test’s internal consistency. As a result, the process is potentially unfair to African American students. More research is needed to substantiate Rosner’s assertion, but it cannot be ignored.

Whatever the reasons for the disparities found on the SAT, it is simply wrong to increase the power of a test that is such a poor predictor of college success. All too often, the process is patently unfair to African American students. The negative effects will accumulate.

In earlier days, government authorities used fire hoses and attack dogs to exclude people of color from an equal place in American society. Some civil rights leaders believe that the SAT and other standardized tests serve the same function— only more subtly. And because standardized tests have great prestige in our society, it has been difficult to convince education policymakers that the tests are unfair. But as more and more people recognize the weak predictive validity of the tests and the inequities they produce, support for the tests may change.

WRONG DIRECTION

A question remains: If CCNY doesn’t raise SAT cutoff scores, how can it address large enrollments? In faculty meetings, I have suggested that we might limit enrollment by raising our high school GPA admission standards a bit, rewarding students who worked hard in high school. We also might raise our GPA standards somewhat for students who wish to transfer from other colleges. I wouldn’t raise any admission standards greatly, for we should make room for late-blooming students, giving them a chance to develop.

We face a tough situation. We clearly need additional State funding to support our dramatic growth in students, but obtaining the funding won’t be easy. In any event, as we struggle with the enrollment issue, we must prioritize broad access to public higher education and avoid measures that betray our mission to serve the disenfranchised.

A shorter version of this article was published in The Paper, a CCNY student publication, in October 2009.
I magine a committee with only one goal – to improve your life at work – with an agenda developed by the faculty and staff (not the college president or the chancellor’s office), with only one meeting per semester and hundreds of members to share the work, and with a serious chance of wielding power within the University and beyond – wouldn’t you want to be part of it? That’s what I am asking you to do: Join the Committee of 500.

The Committee of 500 was formed in direct response to the economic and political conditions facing the union in the next round of bargaining – but also with an eye toward lasting political power. New York State has announced the largest budget shortfalls in its history, and New York City is predicting severe deficits in the next few years. While the PSC has been in the beltway, and at City Hall vigorously attacking the source of those deficits and pressing for fair sources of revenue, my guess is that the State and City will still be demanding some form of fiscal austerity by the time our contract expires in October. This is a tough moment for the union, but we have faced tough moments before – for instance, when we negotiated right after September 11 – and have emerged with contracts that made real advances. (Under the terms of the Tri Borough Law, the existing provisions of our contract remain in place even after the expiration date, but there are no new provisions or raises until we bargain a new agreement.)

As the union’s lead negotiator, I am committed to moving forward in the coming round of negotiations – not just standing still or, worse, to accepting a concessional contract. Our negotiators at CUNY are too urgent and the progress we have made in the last few contracts on salary, research time, professional development, adjunct improvements and parental leave is too precious to let that happen. That’s why the union is starting now, months before the contract expires, to create a simple and powerful structure that will allow us to use the strength of our numbers – the Committee of 500.

**The Contract We Deserve**

As a union of 22,000 people, in daily contact with more than a quarter-million students, we have the power of considerable political power. Don’t listen to anyone who says we are powerless. The PSC is one of the largest public-employee unions in the city, and is second in size nationally among higher education unions only to the SUNY union, UUP.

When I first took office, the head of the public librarians’ union said to me, “You get the contract you deserve.” That was harsh, but it is untrue. What he meant was that unions win as strong a contract as their members demand, and they are willing to fight for.

What are you willing to fight for in the next round of bargaining? A teaching load that allows us to spend real time with our students and our research? A break in the system that allows half the courses to be taught by part-timers paid a fraction of a full-time wage? A chance for professional staff to move up in rank? A better dental or optical plan?

The Committee of 500 will position us to respond to these demands. It puts at least 500 people in motion, taking small steps to bring the contract fight to life on every campus. In order to succeed, especially with the state still in the grip of the recession, the contract fight has to be everything.

It cannot be left to a handful of union stalwarts. The PSC has an unusually dedicated core of unionists who devote a major part of their time to work on behalf of all of us. We are very lucky to have them. But if we leave this fight up to the few and fail to take ownership of it ourselves, we are voluntarily surrendering the largest part of our power – and handing it to 86th Street, the City and the State. Deciding that the contract is someone else’s fight almost guarantees that the contract we achieve will fall far short of the contract we believe deserve.

Contracts are won not at the bargaining table but on every campus, every department, every program. Every job on your campus is a bargaining unit, every member can help make the difference.

Committee of 500

*By CHRISTINE LINDSTROM

Fighting student aid reform

The bill, which grew from a proposal by President Obama last year, would make huge investments to higher education without costing the taxpayer a dime. It would end the ban on student loans and private lenders have been getting for handling federal student loans – to the tune of roughly $9 billion in taxpayer funds yearly. The Pell Grant in legislation’s largest aid program, providing need-based scholarship money to more than 7 million students of modest means. But its value has eroded drastically since it started.

When the Pell Grant program was created in 1972, it covered 72% of the average cost of attending a public four-year college. In 2006 it covered only 32%. The House bill strengthens Pell Grants by investing $40 billion over the next 10 years to annually increase the maximum award. That increase in aid is badly needed. More than 100,000 high school graduates now drop out or forgo enrolling in college each year because of financial barriers. For students who make $15,000 a year, a break in the system that allows them to drop out or work more than 20 hours a week, which lowers the odds of completing a degree.

After graduation, student loans are a precarious burden. The number of college graduates with at least $40,000 in student loan debt has increased tenfold in the past decade; recent graduates are covered by $100,000 in student debt.

**Our Vision**

No single person has to do as much as the work an education convener does. Yet, the committee of 500 is so modest that almost everyone – no matter how intense your research or overhead – should be able to join. More than 225 faculty and staff have already signed up, even before the committee has been launched online. You can be part of the 500 by filling out the form on page 5 of this issue of Clarion or using the electronic form on the PSC website.

Whether you are in your first year at CUNY or your last, you have an international scholarly reputation, whether you are staff or faculty, part-time or full-time, the Committee of 500 must commit to ideas, to the city, to transformation of individual lives or society – some deep commitment brought you to CUNY and keeps you here. The time requires a vision of what this University could be. And that’s what is at stake in the upcoming fight for a fair contract, because the contract has proven to be our surest vehicle for changing the conditions in which we work. When I ask you to join the Committee of 500, I’m not asking you to give power to someone else. I’m asking you to empower yourself to advance your own vision for your working life. My guess is it’s a vision worth fighting for.

**Committee of 500**

*By BARBARA BOWEN

President

**BANKERS VS. STUDENTS**

**Fighting student aid reform**

*By CHRISTINE LINDSTROM

*Clarion APRIL 2010*
Join the Committee of 500

The PSC’s contract expires in October 2010. This is a tough time to negotiate, but, as always, we get the contract that we fight for. Are you willing to help win a good contract the next negotiations?

Members of the Committee of 500 commit to do six things, such as attending one bargaining session or talking to a few colleagues about their contract priorities. Each person who joins helps build the union’s power at the bargaining table.

Fill out the coupon on page 5 or at www.psc-cuny.org/committee500.htm to say, “Yes! I want to join my colleagues in making CUNY a better place to work.” It’s something we can only do together.

Irving Robbins’s starry night

By JOHN TARLTON

On Monday nights at the College of Staten Island, you’ll often see a long line of students and other New Yorkers outside a squat red brick building with a small dome roof. They’re waiting for a chance to peek at faraway worlds thanks to CSI’s observatory. Its 16-inch telescope provides the best view of the heavens anywhere in the five boroughs.

Inside, observatory founder and director Irving Robbins welcomes shivering visitors with a cup of hot chocolate and an extra jacket if they need it. Robbins, an associate professor of engineering science and physics, spoke with Clarion about his lifelong fascination with outer space and how it has shaped his career at CSI.

STAR STRUCK

“I fell in love with the stars as a child on a summer trip to the Catskills, when a man in an adjacent cabin invited me to look through his telescope. The fact that I was looking at another planet when I was nine years old made a deep impression on me.”

YOUNG HOODLUM

“I was the first person from my family to go to college, and I was determined to make something of myself. I worked my way through school. CUNY didn’t cost much back then. I graduated in 1964 with a degree in physics from City College.”

TEACHING AT CUNY

“I was a tough hood, I was tough during the ‘50s in Bensonhurst. But even when I was a tough hood, I was reading about things in space.”

I graduated in 1964 with a degree in physics from City College.

CUNY SPRINGBOARD

“I was in a gang called The Hawks when I was growing up in the ‘50s in Bensonhurst. But even when I was a tough hood, I was reading about things in space.”

CSI TRANSFORMED

“I started at Staten Island Community College in 1968 before it merged with Richmond College [in 1976] to become CSI. The current campus, where we moved in 1993, is lovely. There’s more space. The woods are nearby. The technology is outstanding. But I know a lot less people than I knew in the old days. Before, faculty, staff and students all got to know each other. We were all packed together and ate in one cafeteria.”

BIRTH OF THE OBSERVATORY

“The observatory opened in 1997. The [NY State] Dormitory Authority spent $750,000 on it, but when we were done, it didn’t have a telescope. They said we would have to buy it ourselves. I wrote some grants and we were able to get a 16-inch telescope.”

GOING ROGUE

“Asteroids are the debris left over from a planet that was unable to form due to the gravitational pull of Jupiter. Some of these objects go rogue and crash into other planets or the sun. I mostly hunt the ones that might be a hazard to us. We have been hit a lot of times in the [ancient] past and we will get hit again. It’s a sexy topic. Hollywood loves it.”

NAMING RIGHTS

“I discovered my first minor planet in November and have been credited for a second discovery since. I have a list of names that I plan to use when the naming of minor planets comes up: Dana (my current girlfriend), Staten Island (a number are already named after cities), my sons Ison, Davy, Zeav, and my ex-wife who tolerated me for 37 years, Freda.”

MENTORING

“Most of the students mentored at the observatory were engineering and computer majors. They have gone on to corporate, military and government jobs. One student who stands out that I am very proud of is Dr. Joseph Gurci, deputy director of the Special Projects Office at the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, DARPA.”

ALL THE WORLDS, A STAGE

“I teach 800 liberal arts students plus 30 to 40 science students plus 160 students each semester. I love teaching because I love to perform and I love sharing knowledge. It’s ideal for my personality.”

‘A MIND-OPENING EXPERIENCE’

“One of the greatest joys I’ve had is when someone gets a first real look at the heavens and sees the craters on the moon and the waves on the lunar sea and Saturn’s rings and they go ‘Wow!’ It’s a mind-opening experience, and it might open something inside them about science.”

Astronomer shares joy of learning