

Also by James Traub

*Too Good to Be True*

# CITY ON A HILL

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Testing the American Dream  
at City College

J A M E S T R A U B

1994/Preface 1995



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## Preface

“Open admissions” posed a tormenting problem for liberals when it was raised as a rallying cry at the City College of New York a quarter of a century ago, and it continues to torment today. Open admissions is a species of affirmative action; like affirmative action, it advances one cherished American ideal while threatening another. When City College and City University agreed in 1969 to drastically lower admissions standards in order to give access to large numbers of black and Puerto Rican students, they did so in the belief that discrimination had denied these students the chance to compete on an equal footing with the white, largely Jewish population that for generations had used City as a stepping-stone to the middle class. City accepted an obligation to compensate for the effects of historic disadvantage. But can it? Should it? Unlike affirmative action, open admissions creates no victim class, no “angry white males”; but by substituting an entitlement for an achievement—the achievement of satisfying the rigorous admissions standards of another era—it challenges our faith in meritocratic competition and threatens the excellence that that competition makes possible.

City College is a stage on which the dilemma of the affirmative action idea is enacted every day. The abstract questions are invisible; what you feel, acutely, if you spend any time there, is the desperate struggle of the students to exploit the opportunity they've been given, and of the struggle of the college to make that opportunity real without compromising its own commitments to excellence. For many young people, I found, City College still represents an almost miraculous salvation from a life of poverty and hardship. It is, for them, the American Dream in all its glory. A great many others, however, especially those who would not have been admitted under the old standards, flail around helplessly and drop out. And City is often forced to stoop in order to try to raise them up. The truth is that, for all its heroic efforts, City cannot be expected to compensate for the failures of the public schools or of the larger society.

What is true of City is true of college generally. Save for an elite band of highly selective institutions, American higher education operates according to open admissions principles. No country sends so large a fraction of its high school graduates (about three-quarters) to college, and yet the dismal standards that obtain in so many public schools mean that American graduates are less prepared for a college education than students elsewhere in the industrialized world. This is especially true in the inner city, where poverty compounds the problems of low standards and expectations. Open-admissions colleges devote precious energy and resources to remedial rather than college-level programs; however few of them succeed in graduating as many as half of their students.

Open admissions is a shortcut. As one remedial teacher at City bitterly says, "The great problem with this society is that we don't give a shit about our children. And by the time they get up here, it's too late." If we want to preserve the ideals that made places like City possible, we must do the hard work of development, in schools and communities, rather than offer hollow entitlements. We have to draw serious lessons from success, and we have to be honest about failure.

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# Part I

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## The Evolution of a Great Experiment

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## Too Difficult Life

Every day during the school year thousands of young people swarm out of the IND subway stop at 145th Street and St. Nicholas Avenue, in the middle of Harlem, and toil up a steep hill to the campus of the City College of New York. City is a commuter college, and has been for almost 150 years. The students come from the South Bronx, from East Harlem, from Bedford-Stuyvesant and East New York and Flatbush—from poor and working-class neighborhoods all over New York. The City College student of fifty or sixty years ago was likely to come from the same patches of turf, but in those days the patches, and the students, tended to be Jewish. Now those neighborhoods, and City's student body, consist almost entirely of blacks, Hispanics, and Asians. And so the students laboring up 145th Street, past the truck full of produce and the man who sells African caps and incense from a table and the man who sells English muffins from a grocery carton and the drifting, scowling teenagers with big untied sneakers—these students know the ghetto life around them firsthand. They look on City College as their best chance at salvation from that life. That's a great deal to ask of a college, or of any institution; but those are the stakes. Jim Watts, the

chairman of the History department and a City College professor for almost thirty years, says, "We're charged with creating the middle class of New York City; that's our mission. And I don't think anything's more important than that."

No, nothing is more important than that. No nation has created so large a middle class, and so prosperous a one, as we have. The forging of a middle-class nation from the ranks of unlettered immigrants and dirt farmers and the millions in the ghettos, generation after generation, is arguably America's greatest achievement, and the crowning glory of industrial capitalism. Our political stability, and the social equilibrium that has brewed in our melting pot, depend on the confidence of each new generation of the poor that they, too, will be inducted into an ever-expanding middle class—the faith that the American promise applies to them as much as to those who came before.

Plainly, something has gone wrong with this great process of assimilation. Poverty has become persistent, and apparently self-reinforcing, for millions of city dwellers, most of them black or Hispanic. The growth and endurance of this "underclass," despite thirty years of antipoverty efforts, are corroding our sense of shared purpose and shared interest, and exposing the bombast in our everlasting sense of moral superiority. The middle class feels threatened by the poor, and politics has shaped itself around resentment and anxiety in a way that would have been unthinkable as recently as President John F. Kennedy's administration. The failure to lift the poor into the middle class is thus a far graver national problem than the erosion of middle-class standards and expectations with which we are now so preoccupied. The market may rescue the middle class; it is clearly not rescuing the poor. And so we look, with increasing desperation, toward the institutions that have fostered social mobility in the past. What can we do—what must we do—to make them work now? If they're not working, what can we learn from their failure?

In our heavily privatized, free-market society, the schools have been the public institutions we count on most for the great task of transformation. As the education scholar Diane Ravitch writes, "Americans are deeply committed to self-improvement and the school is an institutionalized expression of that commitment." We

expect the public schools to compensate for the lottery of birth by offering to everyone the basic skills required for middle-class life. But that's not happening. Study after study, most recently Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities*, has documented the utter failure of the schools to equalize the life chances of the poor and the middle class.

As the public schools' task is set by the shortcomings and failures of the world around them, so City College's task is set by those disadvantages *and* the failures of the public schools to overcome them. The stakes are very high, but that uphill climb is extremely steep. Jim Watts describes City's student body with a grim calculus: "You have a million kids who are going through an incredibly poor public school system, where literally nothing of value is learned; the schools are just holding pens. Maybe half the kids come out the other side. The bulk of those either don't go to college or go to community college." City, Watts says hopefully, gets a "hardy band of survivors." City can't even reach the majority; but what kind of transformation can it work in the survivors, hardy or not? Do the limits lie in the college or in the students? And this, in turn, begs one of the threshold questions of modern American liberalism: How powerful are our institutions in the face of the economic and cultural forces that now perpetuate inner-city poverty?

I first took the INID up to City College in January 1992. A few weeks earlier nine kids had been trampled to death by a crowd pushing to get into a basketball game featuring rap stars in City's Nat Holman Gym. Rap music, basketball, ungoverned energies, violence, and death—it was a moment that crystallized a public view of City College as a menacing site of underclass culture, a grim proof of the failure of sixties liberalism and of the utter collapse of a great institution. But on campus the tragedy had almost no resonance at all. The painfully earnest chairman of the Psychology Department offered grief counseling sessions, but the only people who went were other professors. None of the kids who had died, and not many in the crowd, had attended City College. The tragedy may have opened a window onto rap culture or the culture of poverty that surrounded the campus, but City College was not to be confused with its neighborhood. So far as I could see, the campus was full of students doing

what students do everywhere—studying in the library, gossiping and playing cards in the cafeteria. It wasn't menacing, and it wasn't slack.

Those first, eye-opening visits of mine took place during the quiet time between semesters. Not until early March did I attend my first City College class—World Humanities 101, part of City's core curriculum. The teacher, Grazina Drabik, had asked me to come fifteen minutes late. She said there was something she had to talk to the class about. I walked up three flights of swaybacked stone steps in old Shepherd Hall; listened to my footsteps as they echoed down a long, semicircular hallway; pushed open a heavy wooden door; and took a seat in the middle of the class. The classroom itself was a fine relic of City's bygone age—high ceiling, bare floor, scuffed wainscoting, old-fashioned desks, and a wall of windows at the far side. There were about thirty-five students in the class. Drabik was standing off to the side of the blackboard, and I could see that she hadn't finished her private session with the students. On the board she had written two columns of phrases. The first, headed "Student Problems," consisted of the following:

too much work  
too difficult life  
small disasters

The second, labeled "Problems with Student Work," included:

late/absences  
inc. or sloppy work  
disaster of journals

I had arrived at the tail end of the therapy session—"disaster of journals." The students were reading Dante's *Inferno*, and Drabik had asked them to record their personal impressions as they read. Hardly anyone had made more than a cursory effort. Merely doing the assigned reading had been a struggle—"too much work"—and the very idea of having "personal impressions" of a serious book, impressions worth recording, was alien to many of the students.

And then there was the problem that Drabik, in her Polish-inspired syntax, had called "too difficult life." The students labored under an amazing variety of handicaps. Philip Orama cared for his six-year-old daughter and worked twenty-five hours a week; he was close to flunking out, but if he dropped a class he wouldn't have enough credits to qualify for financial aid. William Okoi, a Ghanaian immigrant, held down three jobs. Ying Wai Hong, a painfully shy immigrant from Hong Kong, lived in terror of disappointing his parents, not to mention his aunts and uncles. "Since the first day of my education," he said to me one day, "I have not experienced any pleasure in books."

One day an older black student, Judy Edwards, peeked in at the door about half an hour late. She was pushing a stroller that held her eighteen-month-old son, Corey, still wearing his pajamas. A single mother getting by on welfare, Judy had lost her sitter and hadn't yet started with a new one. What to do? Drabik hardly wanted a little boy distracting her all-too-distractable class; but because Judy was a responsible student, and because in any case she always erred on the side of compassion, Drabik ushered them in gaily, calling out, "If he cries, we will expulse you from our Hell!" And so the boy darted around the class in his pajamas while Judy struggled hopelessly to throttle him, Drabik soldiered gamely onward, and the students giggled.

There was something enormously moving in the spectacle of black and Hispanic and Asian students, kids from the neglected edges of American culture, working with their Polish émigré teacher to puzzle out passages from the *Inferno*, the first great work of European culture. Drabik was the rare teacher who engaged both students and texts with passionate curiosity. She could make the systematizing scholarship of Saint Thomas Aquinas feel as pressing as today's newspaper. She was wise, and yet innocent, too. She often came to class in what I thought of as her Young Communist League look—white T-shirt with the short sleeves rolled up, a purse clipped onto her belt, and a scarf thrown over her shoulders and knotted over her bosom. With her pale, plump arms and her small mouth and her dark, shining eyes, she looked like she was ready to lead the class in a record-setting dawn harvest. Her students loved

her, Judy told me solemnly that she had heard Miss Drabik was world-famous.

Two or three students resonated like a struck tuning fork to Drabik's inspiring music. Several of the foreign students never spoke in class, but I knew from talking to them that they had been well educated at home and were keeping up fairly effortlessly here. And yet there were times I could hardly bear to sit in class. When it came time to discuss *Macbeth*, it turned out that most of the students, including many of the native English speakers, had been utterly stumped by the text. Drabik spoke eloquently, and the class sat quietly. Few of the students had bothered to read beyond the first act. Drabik had them act out the first witches' scene, and then asked what "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" meant. "Like the end justifies the mean," someone said. Another student offered, "Whoever you got to step on to get ahead, go ahead and do it." Everyone agreed with this interpretation, perhaps because its bleak realism lent it a ring of authenticity.

After class I talked to Hernan Morales, a student who had emigrated from Honduras as a teenager. Hernan admitted that he had made it through John F. Kennedy High School in the Bronx, as well as his first year at City, without ever reading a book. He was an English major, and he had never read a book. The trip to the City College bookstore at the beginning of the semester had given Hernan a jolt. "When I saw that the *Odyssey* was a book this thick," he said, placing his fingers about an inch apart, "I thought, 'This is going to be scary.'" Hernan said that he was getting by primarily on Cliff Notes and movie versions of the assigned classics. His friend Elvira Payamps, who was Dominican, laughed at Hernan's bumpkinishness. She had graduated from LaGuardia Community College with an associate's degree in liberal arts. But she admitted that she hadn't been able to make much more sense of *Macbeth* than Hernan had, and like him had gotten the video and Cliff Notes. "I had this idea that Macbeth had killed Banquo," Elvira said, "but I couldn't tell if I was right. So then I saw the movie, and I knew that I had understood."

Drabik called me after class one day and asked how I thought things were going. When I had told her how much trouble the stu-

dents were having with *Macbeth*, she sighed and said, "It's better I do not know this."

The river of young New Yorkers heading up from the subway swerves left onto Convent Avenue, a narrow isthmus of peace and bourgeois prosperity between a black and a Hispanic ghetto. When the City College campus moved up from downtown Manhattan to Harlem in 1908, Convent Avenue was an elegant stretch of redbrick townhouses with bay windows and carved lintels and fanciful roof lines. And so, for three blocks, it remains. Then the townhouses give way to dowdy apartment complexes with grimy windows facing the street. And then the past, City's fabled past, reappears at 140th Street, where the students walk beneath a gateway inscribed with a crest that bears City College's motto: "Respice Adspice Prospice" — "Look back, look before you, look ahead."

It's impossible, at City College, not to look back. City is perhaps the longest-running radical social experiment in American history. Founded in 1847, City was America's first urban college, and it became one of the great democratizing institutions of an emerging urban culture. Tuition was free, and admission was open to anyone who qualified. And it wasn't second-rate goods, as the poor were accustomed to. A City College education was something fine. And a City College degree was a talisman, a magic key to the good life available in America. For the tens of thousands who went there, and the millions who knew of it, City College was a living emblem of the American Dream. In *World of Our Fathers*, Irving Howe delivered this mighty trumpet blast on behalf of his own alma mater: "Of all the institutions they [the Jewish immigrants] or their children might encounter in the new world, City College came closest to fulfilling Emerson's promise that 'this country, the last found, is the great charity of God to the human race.'"

City was, against all odds, one of America's great colleges. Between 1920 and 1970 more of its graduates went on to receive Ph. D. degrees than those of any other college except Berkeley, despite the fact that City had no graduate program of its own, no research facilities, nor even a very distinguished faculty. Eight graduates received the Nobel Prize, a record for a public institution. Of the cadre of New

York Jewish intellectuals who grew up just before World War II, a remarkable fraction did their undergraduate studies at City College—not only Irving Howe but Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell, Seymour Martin Lipset, Alfred Kazin. Vast numbers of New York's accountants, and physicists, and teachers, attended City. And these graduates still speak of their college days with reverence.

What distinguished City from every other college at its level was its transformative mission. City did not reproduce privilege, as the Ivy League schools did. It gave poor, talented boys (women were not regularly accepted until after World War II) the opportunity to make it into the middle class; it compressed into a few years a process that otherwise took a few generations. City was the most meritoric of institutions; and because the idea that a man should get ahead according to his abilities, rather than the accident of birth or background, was the core principle of America's free-market society, City had a moral status that no elite college could claim. City was, as Howe's comment implies, a promise that America kept.

But that promise was challenged by new realities. By the 1960s City's rigorous standards had come to seem like a perpetuation of privilege for the well educated, rather than a commitment to egalitarianism. The civil rights movement advanced the idea that blacks and other disadvantaged groups were being denied the right to develop the abilities that would allow them to compete in the marketplace. That was why the great forces of social mobility were failing for this generation of the poor. And City was an almost helplessly faithful register of the world around it: just as the college had symbolized for generations the meritocratic values of a new urban culture, and of America itself, so now it came to stand for the new principle of "equal opportunity" or, in the more contentious phrasing, "affirmative action." In 1969 black and Puerto Rican students shut down the campus to demand vastly greater access for minority students. There were marches and fires and fistfights, and an irrevocable taking of sides. It was a single moment that defined, in a burst of harsh light, the crisis that liberalism itself was undergoing. The racial challenge could not be either repudiated or accommodated without sacrificing cherished beliefs. Liberalism—the self-confident faith fueled by the engines of assimilation and progress—could not survive

this shock. It was no wonder that many of those who viewed City as the incarnation of the American Dream reacted to the uprising as if a holy site had been desecrated.

The students won. City's admissions standards were lowered to open the college to those who had formerly been excluded. "Open admissions" shattered City's history into two parts, "before" and "after." But it also arguably represented continuity, or even summation, for City was engaged once again in a radical social experiment and in the deeply American labor of transformation. The European immigrants didn't need City anymore; it was the black and Puerto Rican citizens of Harlem, the people who for years had looked up the hill at the remote campus, who needed it now. Because of its history, its before and after, City forced a comparison and a question: Could the forces of social mobility work on the new poor as they had on previous generations?

City College's glorious past remains legible, if sometimes only faintly, beneath the accretions of its contemporary life. Decrepit old Shepherd Hall is being renovated at staggering expense. The terracotta gargoyles that once ran along its upper battlements like Harlem's answer to the Cathedral of Notre Dame have rotted over the decades and have been removed for repairs. The dim, clattering cafeteria that sat in the Shepherd basement has been converted into a music library, a cheery space of bookcases and blond wood. The rest of the old campus, low gray stone buildings built like battleships and named like Ivy League dormitories, fans out on the other side of Convent Avenue—Baskerville, Goethals, Harris, Wingate, and Compton. The old piles are ranged around a grassy quadrangle. In the center is a statue of City's mascot, the beaver—symbol of industry and persistence. This is the one and only wholly appealing place on City's concrete campus to sit outside and take the sun, or read, or chat.

The harmony of the place has been wrecked by the grimly functional architecture of the 1970s, a time when open admissions forced City into an overnight expansion. Beyond the southern border of the old campus, which is all of two blocks from the northern terminus, with its scrolled gateway and Latin crest, looms the vast, graceless bulk of the North Academic Center, or NAC, a Pentagon-like



polygon that holds the cafeteria and classrooms and office space for much of the college. And the NAC, in turn, faces a three-story cube—the administration building—and City's one skyscraper, the featureless fourteen-story rectangle of the Science Building. It takes about two minutes to traverse the entire campus—this is, after all, New York City, not Mount Holyoke. And if you stand in the plaza of the NAC building, and turn just so, more or less north-northeast, you can see nothing but the old campus, the spire of a church, and Harlem spread out in the distance.

City has a strange, hodgepodge academic identity that comes of this process of simultaneous accumulation and displacement. In certain respects City is very much a traditional liberal arts / professional college. Every student must pass through an extensive core curriculum, including courses such as World Humanities 101. City has a large and fairly accomplished English faculty, a wide variety of history electives, and several hundred students eager to read good books. The majority of students graduate in one of four professional schools—Engineering, Education, Nursing, and Architecture. City has a number of highly sophisticated programs in the sciences, including the Sophie Davis School of Medicine, an elite five-year program that enrolls 200 undergraduate students. At the same time, in recent decades City, like many other undergraduate colleges, has ramified upward into a quasi-university. Now there are 3,000 graduate students as well as 11,500 undergraduates. And doctoral programs in clinical psychology, physics, engineering, and several other fields are located on the City campus, though in fact they serve all students in the City University of New York, of which City College is a part.

But all of this is only the aboveground portion of the great massif that is City College. Hidden from view, and extending far downward, is City's vast remedial underworld. Three-quarters of City's entering freshmen are assigned to at least one remedial class, in language, math, or "college skills." These classes have hierarchies of their own. Students who hope to be engineers or architects may have to take, and of course pass, four remedial math courses. About a third of entering freshmen are admitted through what is known as the SEEK program, which offers access to senior college to stu-

dents who cannot meet admissions standards and whose family income falls below a poverty threshold. Most of these students take remedial classes in all three fields. And City's English as a Second Language (ESL) program constitutes an entirely separate track, delicately known as "developmental" rather than "remedial." Another third of entering students begin in the ESL program, though owing to overlap the combined ESL/SEEK population is about half of any given freshman class. These students may spend years trudging upward toward the blue sky of the regular curriculum; many leave City College before even reaching core classes like Grazina Drabik's World Humanities 101. The students I saw there, in other words, represented a called sample of City's entering class. One large body of students stretches below the core; another stretches above. It's only a slight exaggeration to say that City is really two colleges, a liberal arts / professional institution and a remedial / open admissions one.

City is as heterogeneous demographically as it is academically. A study of the 1,240 incoming students in the class of 1991 found that almost exactly half had been born abroad, in a total of seventy-six countries. Although 39 percent of City's undergraduates described themselves as "black" in 1992, a very large fraction, perhaps as many as half, came from the Caribbean or Africa. Another 28 percent of City's student body is Hispanic, but among them students from Central and South America vastly outnumber Puerto Ricans. According to a survey of freshmen, Dominicans constitute City's single largest foreign contingent (followed by students from Haiti, Jamaica, China, and India). Eighteen percent of undergraduates—and almost one-quarter of graduates—are Asian, and the remaining 14 percent are white. This label, too, conveys a spurious impression of homogeneity. Of City's traditional student base—Jewish and Catholic graduates of the New York public school system—only a tiny remnant remains. Many of City's white students are immigrants from Greece, the Middle East, and Russia. City has been revitalized and buoyed up by this immense tide of newcomers. Many of them bring not only immigrant drive and first-generation values but a solid, if narrow, secondary school education.

I used to meet immigrant students by wandering through the corridors of Baskerville Hall, a building across the street from Shepherd that's used as the headquarters of City's innumerable ethnic clubs. At one end of the dim hallway, laughter and shouts rang out from the open door of the Dominican Student Association. At the opposite end was Han Wave, the club for Mandarin-speaking Chinese students. (The Cantonese-speaking club was upstairs.) There nine or ten students sat in a little room with two desks and bare walls. They were silent; they were bespectacled; and most of them were reading texts with titles like *Operating Systems*.

Right in the middle of Baskerville's first floor, in a privileged position just left of the front door, was LAESA—the Latin American Engineering Students Association. Here I found four or five members slouched around a deal table shooting the breeze. They seemed a good deal quieter than the Dominicans and a good deal more relaxed than the Chinese. One of the guys at the table—they were all men—introduced himself as Wagner Ortuno, the president of the club. He was handsome, coffee colored, with close-cropped black hair, dark eyes, a square jaw, big hands. There was a self-assurance about Wagner that I hadn't seen in many City College students; he obviously enjoyed the deference of the other members. They sat and listened while Wagner perched at the edge of the table, folded his arms across his chest, and talked about the club and about himself.

Wagner had been raised and educated in Quito, Ecuador. His father was an auto mechanic, which explained his unusual name. "Wagner is some brand of auto parts that he worked with," he said with a laugh. "I was named after a brake shoe or something like that." After finishing high school in 1986, Wagner had left, by himself, for New York. "I came here to search for the American Dream," he said without the slightest trace of irony. There was something a little bit self-conscious about the way Wagner presented himself. He saw his life in emblematic terms; and his own struggle to succeed, with all its dead ends and detours and scaled heights, had taken on almost heroic dimensions in his mind. "My first year in New York was the most disappointing time of my life," he went on. By now the others around the table had resumed talking among themselves, but quietly. "I thought everything would be perfect—all the streets were straight,

and the money was just there. Then I realized that it is there, as long as you work for it. I realized that you can't just stay in the neighborhood, you have to go out and learn the language."

Wagner had climbed up the greasy pole doggedly, and methodically. Rather than pursue his education right away, he had taken English classes at night while working as a laborer by day. After a year he had enrolled at City College, which he had learned of through a cousin who was attending. Wagner set his sights on a degree in electrical engineering, and he followed his star with a fervid intensity. He struggled through ESL and bulled his way through math classes. And here he exploited an advantage that more than compensated for his unfamiliarity with English and with New York. In Ecuador, Wagner had had math shoved down him until it had come out of his pores. He was way ahead of most of the New York City public school products who came to City, and he knew it. "I have seen people here who never took trigonometry in high school," he said with something like awe. He hadn't even been able to grasp the fact that many of the students hadn't taken geometry either. That started a brief conversation with the others about the astonishingly low standards of the New York public school system, which none of them had attended for more than a year or two. They couldn't conceive of graduating from high school without having read a book.

Wagner resumed his story. At first he worked thirty-five hours a week while taking a full load of twelve credits. "I used to work at night, get home in the morning, take a shower, and then come here for my morning class," he said. "And I wound up sleeping in class." Wagner was short-circuiting on his own immigrant drive. He was finally saved from a complete blowout when he was laid off from his job. He had never saved a penny anyway, and he found that he could make do with a combination of state grants and student loans. His grades picked up, and he began to enjoy his studies. Finally he could see his way clear to his goal. The rest was just hard work, which for Wagner was second nature.

For all that he kept his nose to the grindstone, Wagner was a person of surprisingly broad interests. He had taken four or five art courses, as well as courses in music and the history of photography. In fact Wagner was taking more credits than he needed for his degree.

"To be educated means you have to have at least a little bit of knowl-  
edge about everything," he explained in his sententious style. Roberto  
Torres, who was sitting across the table from Wagner, said that he  
thought core courses like World Civ were a complete waste of time.  
Everyone agreed. But then Hugo Gonzales mentioned that he some-  
times thought of writing a book of literary criticism. He loved Spanish  
lyric poetry. Didn't everyone? "After all," said another student with  
a wink, "poetry is the language of love." A general discussion of love  
ensued. The Latins apparently made for more romantic engineers  
than the Chinese.

Wagner, Roberto, Hugo, and the others had obviously spent  
countless hours together. Many of them, like Wagner, had emigrated  
by themselves; the club was their defense against the loneliness of  
New York, against poverty, and against the strain of academic life.  
"A lot of us pretty much live in school," Wagner said. The same  
could be said for Richard and Jeffrey and many of City's immigrant  
students. "It's a modus vivendi. It's too far to go back home, and  
sometimes you don't want to be in that neighborhood." Wagner lived  
in the immense Latin barrio that stretched for two to three miles  
along Broadway, just to the west of the campus. "I just use my apart-  
ment for sleeping," Wagner continued. "I stay home on Sunday, to  
be with my girlfriend. Otherwise, I'm here. At night we chip in to  
buy Chinese food, and sometimes we'll collect pennies until we  
have enough for soda. And then we'll sit around here and have  
dinner and watch Jeopardy." Wagner and the others lived in a world  
as beset with snares as a fairy tale. And they huddled together in  
the club for warmth, and safety, and the strength that came with  
family feeling.

City College had a reputation as a caldron of black rage. The  
newspapers were full of stories about City's militant and obscuran-  
tist Black Studies Department, and especially the department's chair,  
Leonard Jeffries, a racial chauvinist whose mind was filled with dark  
Jewish conspiracies. Jeffries had a sizable body of followers on cam-  
pus and a ready audience in the larger black world. He was a men-  
acing figure who made City seem like a menacing place. But in fact  
City's reputation was largely undeserved. The school's atmosphere

was set more by people like Wagner and his friends than by the Black  
Studies Department. The campus had become increasingly apolitical  
as the fraction of immigrants had grown. Wagner, who was a political  
leader on campus, regularly bemoaned the passivity of his peers.

People at City tended to think of the college as a supremely  
successful experiment in international living. Especially in New York,  
with its apparently insatiable appetite for tribal conflict, the City  
College cafeteria—where Haitians and Moroccans and Russians and  
Puerto Ricans and Sri Lankans and Peruvians and Khmers and Afri-  
can Americans talked to one another like civilized human beings—  
was an uplifting spectacle. And this was particularly true for many  
of City's middle-class white Americans, who tended to be far more  
taken up with issues of multiculturalism than were the multicultural  
immigrants themselves. At lunch one day I met an English major  
who had grown up in a small town outside of Lincoln, Nebraska.  
Cindy had gone to an all-white high school, and when she brought  
a black friend home one afternoon her father threatened to throw  
both of them out of the house. Now she was living in a Hispanic  
neighborhood in Manhattan, taking a Bible study class in Harlem,  
and dating a Korean guy. It was Cindy's idea of heaven. She looked  
around at the sea of faces in the cafeteria and said, "What I like about  
this place is that the smallest minority is blondes."

City's faculty and staff took tremendous pride in the school's  
diversity, reveling in the sheer variety of the student body. Edward  
Cody, a World Civilization teacher, kept a map of the world with  
pins marking his students' birthplaces. Alan Feigenberg, a professor  
in the School of Architecture, compiled a list of the sixty-four coun-  
tries from which the school's students hailed, as well as their parents'  
birthplaces, the twenty-nine languages they spoke, and their twenty-  
one ethnic or racial self-classifications (African, Afro-American, Afro-  
Caribbean, Afro-Hispanic, and so on).

But Feigenberg didn't know what fraction of entering students  
failed to graduate, or what fraction of graduates failed the licensing  
exam. This pattern recurred often enough that it made me wonder  
if City's thoroughly justifiable pride in its diversity wasn't also a way  
of distracting attention from hard questions. Diversity was a goal  
that City achieved effortlessly, and daily. And it was, in its way, so

stirring an achievement that no one wanted to question whether the real experiment, an experiment in social mobility and remedial education, not in international living, was actually working. At one point in my conversation with Cindy she blurted out that her World Civ class reminded her of "eighth-grade geography." She hadn't been so lucky in her choice of teachers as the students in Grazina Drabik's class. It turned out that Cindy was worried about the low value she had heard that graduate schools placed on a City degree, and had seriously considered transferring to Barnard, the sister school of Columbia, two subway stations to the south. But she had found enough worthwhile classes in City's uppermost reaches to hold her attention. And when she had asked herself, "Do I want to go to a party school with a lot of snobby white girls with attitude?", the answer had been, "Not likely."

After that first World Humanities class, a student caught up with me in the hallway and said, "In this book of yours"—Drabik had asked me to talk about my project—"are you going to be writing bad things about City College, or good things?" It was such a sincere and artless question that I instantly gave a straightforward answer. "I really don't know what I think yet," I replied, "but I'm hoping to write something good." And I was. I *wanted* City College to work. My sixties liberalism may have been giving way around the edges, but it was still the basic shaping influence of my beliefs. I had grown up with the civil rights movement and the war on poverty; and their shortcomings or bad endings scarcely discredited the efforts themselves in my eyes. I believed in government activism, and I took it as a premise that a humane society focuses an important part of its energy on bringing the poor into the mainstream. I believed in the old-fashioned meritocratic principle that City College had arguably abandoned with open admissions, but I was also committed to the ideal of equal opportunity. It was troubling that in City College's history the two ideals seemed to rise and fall like the ends of a seesaw. But the zero-sum equation didn't seem inescapable, and in any case the sacrifice seemed small enough, and the gain great enough, to justify the bargain.

That was where my dispositions lay. But I had an even stronger disposition not to lose my grip on the fine-grained reality of the college itself and go sliding down an ideological chute. The boxes at either end were all too neat and snug. For the Left, the experiment *had* to work to vindicate the premise that the only thing holding back the inner-city poor was opportunity; and it *had* to fail to vindicate the Right's belief in an unhindered market—in this case the marketplace of abilities—and its half-acknowledged belief that the poor were responsible for their own plight. Ideological purity was against my nature. And in any case it didn't take long to realize that City College was not a story of the struggle of good and evil; it was a place where competing goods collided with one another. That was precisely what made it worth thinking about seriously.

The questions that I needed to answer were "Why did City work so well in the past?" and "Is it working now, and for whom?" And what did it even mean for a college like City to "work"? Were the students being educated in the same sense that they had been fifty years before? Or did the threshold of success have to be put so low that it represented something self-defeating? Could City serve as an antipoverty program or a fine liberal arts college, but not both? The only way to answer these questions was to become a part of City College's daily life, to sit in on classes and read papers and talk to students and teachers and administrators. To put it in the most grandiose terms, I wanted to see for myself the possibilities and the limits of the American Dream as it exists today. As Jim Watts had said, nothing could be more important than that.

**“Let the children of the rich and the poor take their seats together . . .”**

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**C**ity College was a radical and controversial experiment long before the advent of open admissions. The college came into being in 1847, when the president of the New York City Board of Education, a wealthy businessman and reformer named Townsend Harris, convened a committee to consider founding a municipal high school or college. New York was already a global metropolis and America’s commercial capital, swelling daily with a flood of immigrants from Ireland and Germany. And yet its citizens, except for a tiny elite, had no recourse for the education of their children beyond the age of ten or eleven. The city had no public secondary schools at all, and higher education was available only at Columbia College and the University of the City of New York (now New York University), private institutions that charged tuition. And the two colleges enrolled a grand total of 245 students, as Harris’s committee noted in its report to the board. “This truth,” the committee observed in a transparent attempt to rally civic pride, “would induce the stranger to suppose that we despised education.”

In fact the young nation venerated the idea of public schooling, although it was often behindhand about the reality. The Founding Fathers, and above all Jefferson, had absorbed from Rousseau and other Enlightenment figures the precept that a society of citizens rested on the powers of education. "I know of no safer depository of the ultimate power of the society but the people themselves," Jefferson wrote, "and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them but to inform their discretion." Denominational schools had been established in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia within a few generations after the colonists had landed, but the Jeffersonian idea that the school was to cultivate citizens, rather than worshippers, took shape in the "common school" movement that began in New England toward the end of the eighteenth century.

For all its glorious symbolism, the common school movement remained relatively confined until the 1820s and 1830s—the Age of Jackson—when the rise of new classes, vying for status in an increasingly open society, put a new premium on education. America was a young giant; education was a means not only of informing its discretion but of refining its dawning powers. Only in the 1840s and 1850s was public education expanded in a large way beyond the primary school. The first common school had been founded in New York City in 1805, but it wasn't until 1842 that the Board of Education was established with the goal of developing a network of public schools.

Townsend Harris's committee canvassed the available educational options, found them embarrassingly meager for a great city in a great nation, and proposed that the board "take the necessary steps to establish a *Free College or Academy*." An academy, at the time, was usually an institution preparatory to college. A public municipal college was something unheard of. And yet state colleges and universities had existed from the time of Jefferson's University of Virginia. The country had 120 undergraduate colleges, according to an estimate from the president of Brown College. About 25,000 students were enrolled. Most of these institutions were private, and tiny, but by 1860 twenty states had established college or university systems. These new institutions reached far beyond the social elite served by

the Ivy League, though the curriculum they offered was almost wholly classical. Not until the passage of the Morrill Act in 1862 prodded the states into establishing land-grant colleges aimed at farmers and mechanics did anything like vocational higher education come into being.

But the principle of a democratic higher education could still be seen as something new and dangerous in 1847. Within a few weeks of the committee's report, letters began appearing in the *Courier and Enquirer*, one of New York's innumerable newspapers, warning the public of Harris's folly. The letters were signed "Justice," and appear to have been written by a teacher or official of one of the city's two private colleges. "Will the new college do away with ill feeling between the poor and the rich," Justice asked, "or will it foster those dangerous jealousies which, at the present day, some are so studiously blowing into a flame?" He also suggested that the Free Academy might threaten an intellectual order predicated on unhurried contemplation—predicated, that is, on the existence of a leisure class. He wondered if there would be any place in the proposed college "for what is called 'liberal education'—that which regards the sciences not so much in their immediate utilities in respect to physical comfort, as in the free and enlarged views they give of human life and human relations." He indulged in a sneering reference to "the manufacture of soap and the composition of paint," which he understood to be an integral element of the Free Academy's proposed curriculum. And this question, whether colleges could preserve their elite, liberal arts character once they became accessible to the ordinary student, was to figure seriously in the debates over open admissions 120 years later.

Harris had, in fact, proposed that the curriculum of the new institution "have more especial reference to the active duties of operative life, rather than those more particularly regarded as necessary for the Pulpit, Bar or the Medical profession"—the only professions that then required higher education. Harris suggested that the Free Academy offer courses not only in Latin and Greek and rhetoric, as all self-respecting colleges did, but in "Chemistry, Mechanics, Architecture, Agriculture, Navigation, physical as well as moral or mental science...." Harris was proposing a new course of study for

a new class of students—the sons of artisans and tradesmen, rather than of landowners and clerics. The curriculum would follow the classical model, though only up to a point. It wasn't the liberal arts component of the proposed school that was new, but, as "Justice's" mockery indicates, the professional component.

Harris's ends were actually more conservative than "Justice" understood; he had no intention of upending the social order. The notion that higher education might be a means of social mobility, a premise that City College came to vindicate as perhaps no other college did, seems not to have occurred to Harris. Quite the contrary; should the new academy succeed, he wrote, it "would soon raise up a class of mechanics and artists, well skilled in their several pursuits, and eminently qualified to infuse into their fellow-workmen a spirit that would add dignity to labor." Harris ridiculed the notion that a thorough grounding in "the laws of the mechanical powers"—physics, to us—would render the mechanic himself "disqualified for handling the saw and plane." It would, he wrote, simply make him a better mechanic.

Higher education could scarcely be the means to social mobility so long as only a few traditional professions required advanced training. But if Harris's college was not meritocratic, in the modern sense, neither was it strictly vocational; and it was egalitarian. In a magistrate's answer to "Justice," an author who styled himself "Plain Truth" and who was almost certainly Harris himself wrote, "Make [the new college] the property of the people—open the doors to all—let the children of the rich and the poor take their seats together, and know of no distinction save that of industry, good conduct, and intellect." Harris was proposing that the democratic, Jeffersonian principles that governed the common school be reproduced at the most elite levels of education. Perhaps "Justice" was right to be alarmed.

In short order the committee's proposal for a public academy or college was passed by the state legislature, signed by the governor, and overwhelmingly approved in a referendum submitted to the voters of New York City. The Free Academy held its formal opening on January 21, 1849, in a redbrick building on East Twenty-third Street. In a speech to the assembled crowd, the first principal of the Academy, a West Point man named Dr. Horace Webster, struck the

note of defiant egalitarianism, and of great purposes, which was to become City's watchword: "The experiment is to be tried," he said, "whether the children of the people, the children of the whole people, can be educated; and whether an institution of the highest grade, can be successfully controlled by the popular will, not by the privileged few."

The curriculum offered to the initial generation of students was precisely the amalgam of the classical and the vocational that Harris had envisioned. There were courses in philosophy, Latin, Greek, and rhetoric; in chemistry, physics and civil engineering; and in drawing, stenography, and bookkeeping. Students could pursue a classical program of studies, modeled on the great colleges of New England, which were in turn based on the precedents of Oxford and Cambridge; or they could take the English track, "intended to prepare for the ordinary business of life." By placing the preprofessional on a par with the scholastic, the Free Academy prefigured the shape of mass higher education in America.

Harris had initially proposed that the college not grant diplomas but simply offer certificates attesting to a given student's attainments. And in fact, according to sociologist and City College historian Sherry Gorelick, only 2,730 students graduated in the college's first half century—out of a total of 30,000. This was a source of perpetual embarrassment to the college and fuel for attack on the part of critics in the press. Many of the students were simply unprepared for higher education; others had to go back to work. But it's also true that there was no very compelling reason to stay in college, since a degree was not yet a negotiable commodity in the job market. Students went to the Free Academy for the education, not for the credential.

The very concept of upward mobility was a new one when Andrew Carnegie suggested in 1889 that philanthropists needed to concern themselves with "ladders upon which the aspiring can rise." Not until 1896 would the New York State Board of Regents mandate the establishment of high schools. Until that time teenagers who wished to continue their education in public school could take the academy's entrance exam, and if they passed they would be assigned to the school's "sub-freshman," or preparatory, class. Thereafter the

course was extended to three years, which effectively transformed it into an early version of high school.

For its first half century, City College, as it was renamed in 1866, was an odd combination of high school, college, and trade school. The average age of entering students was fourteen, and the usual level of preparation was correspondingly low. West Point men ran the school until 1903, and they ruled over their charges by means of what City College historian Willis Rudy calls "a patriarchal system of benevolent despotism"—including a minutely calibrated system of demerits. The faculty was undistinguished, teaching methods uninspired, and the attrition rate, of course, appalling. The curriculum, which at one time had seemed novel, barely changed from decade to decade. One of the principal innovations came with the establishment, in 1883, of a two-year workshop course—what high schools one hundred years later called "shop."

Only in the early twentieth century did City begin to evolve into a modern college. In 1903 old General Alexander Webb, the hero of Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg, gave way to a new president, John Huston Finley, a professor of politics at Princeton. Finley relaxed the draconian code of discipline and modernized the curriculum. In 1908, after fifteen years of planning and building, the college moved from after-fifteen Street to its current home atop the St. Nicholas Heights Twenty-third Street to its current home atop the St. Nicholas Heights in Harlem. Manhattan had swallowed up the old home in relentless urban sprawl, but the Heights was quiet and clean and remote from the frenetic daily life of the city. The great black migration from the West Side—and from the Deep South—had only just begun. The new college, President Finley declared, would constitute "a lofty interior city" within, yet removed from, the larger city.

The college trustees commissioned the architect George Post to design the campus in the English Collegiate Gothic style that had become, at schools such as Yale, a physical symbol of scholastic nobility. By choosing as his principal building material the light gray schist that constitutes Manhattan's bedrock, Post balanced the aristocratic pretensions of the style with a suggestion of ruggedness, a nod to the real life of the city. The five buildings of the campus formed a quadrangle arranged around a grassy plaza, with a great flagpole in the center. The buildings, square and stout, were trimmed in white

terra-cotta and topped by gargoyles representing the various scholarly fields. And at each of the four points of the compass stood twin pillars, joined to one another by arms of delicate iron tracery. The archways, which bore the college's grand Latin motto, marked the boundaries of the lofty interior city without walling it off from the great city beyond.

The gargoyles, the battleship buildings, the solemn Latin tag, all spoke of the aspirations of what was, after all, still a modest and rather backward institution. The citizens of New York City had spent \$6 million to ennoble their little college, to give it something of the amplitude of the great academies reserved for the wellborn and the rich. The new college was a symbol of the tremendous energies being unleashed in America's great cities, energies that were born of the nation's commitment to the ordinary man.

The children of the whole people did not, at first, enroll at City College. The student body "was predominantly middle-class in its cast," writes Willis Rudy. The largest number of early students described their father's occupation as "merchant." Most were English, Irish, Scots, and German by birth. And so the institution might have remained had not Alexander II, the tsar of Russia, been assassinated as he returned from an inspection of the Imperial Guards on March 1, 1881. Within weeks the anti-Semitism that had been fostered by his brutal predecessor, Nicholas I, burst out in a series of pogroms that brought terror to the Pale of Settlement, the area straddling the current borders of Russia and Poland where the Jews increasingly had been confined. For the Jews, the pogroms appeared to be yet another episode in a timeless history of pharaonic tyranny; and they responded, as they had before, with exodus—to America, the land of freedom. The Jewish flight from Russia quickly swelled into one of the greatest mass movements in human history. Between 1881 and 1924, when the Johnson-Reed Act, inspired by the postwar Red Scare, suddenly turned off the spigot, 2.8 million Jews left Eastern Europe for the United States.

An insignificant fraction of this vast flood of immigrants, or of their children, ever attended City College or any other college. But it took only a small tincture to turn City College quite swiftly into



a Jewish institution. Even in the late 1870s and early 1880s City had had a significant population of German and Sephardic Jews, most of them probably members of the middle class. In 1890 one-quarter of the graduates had Jewish surnames, though almost all of them were German. By 1900 the figure had reached 54 percent, and by 1910, 70 percent. And now almost all of the names were Russian or Polish or Hungarian. The fraction of Eastern European Jewish students at City, and at its sister institutions in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens, never went below three-quarters until well into the 1950s.

How is it that City College, a public institution open to all, became a Jewish enclave for almost three-quarters of a century? The simple answer is that Jews went to college at two to three times the rate of non-Jewish Americans—by the early 1930s almost half of the college students in New York were Jewish—and because the overwhelming fraction of those students were poor, they had little choice but to attend a free college such as City. As Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan observe in *Beyond the Melting Pot*, "Eastern European Jews showed almost from their arrival in this country a passion for education that was unique in American history." Yes; but why?

The traditional answer to this question may be summed up in the phrase "the Jewish love of learning." But scholar Chaim Waxman writes that Jewish "educational mobility was a manifestation of the Americanization and secularization of Jewish values." While in the Old World, learning had been an end in itself—the greatest of all ends—in the New World, it became a means to that end held dearest by all Americans—success. The philosopher Sidney Hook, who graduated from City College in 1923, grew up, he writes in his memoirs, "in a poverty so stark as to be almost unimaginable these days." The word *slack* struck terror in the boy's heart, because unemployment was so often followed by eviction and the dreadful sight of a family turned out on the sidewalk. And yet, Hook writes, "above all there was a feeling of hope. The hope was sustained by faith that the doors of opportunity would be opened by education. No generation of parents has ever sacrificed so much for the education of their children."

Education meant *opportunity*—a word utterly new, yet endowed with an almost supernatural power for Jews who had escaped the

sudden violence and continual oppression of life in the Pale. The most astonishing feature of Jewish life in the United States was the speed with which these greenhorns left their poverty behind. The average tenure in the Lower East Side was about fifteen years. By the 1920s and 1930s, Jews were leaving Rivington Street en masse for Brooklyn and the Bronx—new ghettos, to be sure, but not so bad as the old ones. Glazer and Moynihan note that while the Irish took an average of three generations to escape poverty, and the Italians two, the Jews managed in one. Most of them moved from being peddlers to salespeople, not lawyers and doctors. Higher education accounted for only a small portion of Jewish mobility. But a remarkably large number of Jewish immigrants seized on education as the royal road to success.

Perhaps, then, the question should be taken back one step: Why were the Jews so driven to succeed? One plausible answer is that they were no more driven than the Irish or the Italians, but as urbanites in an urban environment they simply had better survival skills. And yet the burning drive to make it in the New World is a fixture of virtually every account of Jewish immigrant life, whether in fiction or in memoirs. Perhaps, as Chaim Waxman writes, material success meant "national liberation" to the Jews after the forty years in the desert of tsarist oppression. Or perhaps it was the humiliation of life in the tenements of the New World, rather than in the Egypt of the Old World, that cried out for vindication. The Jews of Eastern Europe, for all their poverty, thought of themselves as the heirs of a great tradition. But the Lower East Side was merely squalid—an intolerable affront to respectable folk. In his memoirs, the writer and critic—and City College graduate—Alfred Kazin recalls his parents' desperate hopes that he restore their vanished respectability. "My mother and father worked in a rage to put us above their level," he writes; "they had married to make us possible. We were the only conceivable end to all their striving; we were their America." The reason that Asian immigrants are forever being compared to the Jews of another generation is not so much that they both have a timeless tradition of learning and wisdom as that they share a fierce competitiveness, a horror of failure, and a willingness to make almost any sacrifice in order to get ahead.

If the Jewish hunger for success was so often satisfied in the schools, it also had a great deal to do with the transformation of the schools themselves. By the early period of immigration, public education in New York had become systematic, but only up to the age of eleven or twelve. The city's first public high school—Boys' High—was established in 1895. Even in the years before World War I, a period of tremendous growth in public schooling, only one-fifth to one-quarter of Americans received a high school diploma. And no more than one in twenty earned a college degree. At least until the turn of the century, a college education was more a source of intellectual and cultural refinement than of professional advancement.

But the rise of the corporate and public bureaucracy in the early years of the century made educational attainment the key to economic success. Large organizations needed trained accountants, not just bookkeepers. They needed managers and lawyers, and armies of engineers and technicians. The new professions were spawning new forms of postgraduate training—law schools and medical schools and schools of business. And the rapidly expanding public school system itself created a huge demand for teachers. Academic knowledge became valuable as an instrument rather than an end in itself. And the school system itself, with its clear vertical hierarchy, and its testing and its academic "tracks," became an emblem of the emerging meritocracy as well as the prime source of winners. Success in school proved that you were ready to succeed in the new world of bureaucratic capitalism. Alfred Kazin and his parents understood that school was becoming the great sorting device for the emerging professional class. And all you needed in order to thrive was intelligence and determination. It was an impersonal system; it made no difference who you were, so long as you could master its rules. No message could have been more beautiful for the Jews, who since time out of mind had been persecuted precisely because of who they were and whose success was forever being held against them.

The epicenter of the Jewish fixation on higher education was City College, which had accommodated these poor and awkward and insular children of refugees from the moment they had begun

to arrive in America. That City College could truly be theirs seemed a blessing of incalculable value. In *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Abraham Cahán's novel of the Jewish greenhorn, the main character reveres City College as a secular temple and a symbol of human glory: "I would pause and gaze at its red, ivy-clad walls, mysterious high windows, humble spires; I would stand around watching the students on the campus and around the great doors, and go my way, with a heart full of reverence, envy, and hope, with a heart full of quiet ecstasy. It was not merely a place in which I was to fit myself for the battle of life, nor merely one in which I was going to acquire knowledge. It was a symbol of spiritual promotion as well. University-bred people were the real nobility of the world. A college diploma was a certificate of moral as well as intellectual aristocracy."

For all his rapture, Levinsky turned out to be too eager to make his fortune to actually enroll at the college. He might have been chastened if he had, since accounts of City from the early part of the century make it sound like a poorly maintained high school. "The classrooms were bare, the chairs and desks of the plainest," writes Bernard Hershkopf, a graduate of the class of 1906 cited by Irving Howe. "The blackboards were grayed over with the chalkdust pressed into them over many years. The library was crowded and old; it had not really been well kept up for a number of years." And yet Hershkopf revered City every bit as much as the fictional Levinsky had. What he loved about the college was that it was filled with young men like Levinsky. "Scores of them thirsted for learning as men long lost in the desert must thirst for water," Hershkopf writes. "None could halt or defeat such deep-rooted determination to learn. We knew it as gospel truth that this plain College was for each of us a passport to a higher and ennobled life."

This is perhaps the earliest statement of a critical theme: City College, as an institution, was incidental to its own greatness. City was a place where bright young men educated *themselves*. If this is so, then City's history scarcely provides comfort for those who believe the college can educate students who arrive without that desperate thirst for knowledge.

The relationship was at the very least mutual. America had worked a profound transformation in this ancient, pious, and

backward-looking tribe, and the Jews, in turn, transformed the American institutions that served them. The Jews who swarmed into City College had ambitions that Townsend Harris couldn't have anticipated. They were hoping not to improve themselves but to make themselves new—to become Americans, intellectuals, middle-class professionals. And by their desperate ambitions and their feverish hopes they transformed City from a symbol of Jacksonian democracy to a symbol—perhaps *the* symbol—of the new America of assimilation, competition, and mobility.

The Jews treated City College as the upward extension of the public school system, the apex of the emerging meritocracy. City even had a miniature meritocracy of its own: the old preparatory program had evolved into the Townsend Harris High School, where admission was awarded to the top 200 finishers in a two-and-a-half-hour exam in vocabulary and math. Townsend was at least as heavily Jewish as City. It was as if somebody had finally invented a sport in which the Jews could be world champion.

Townsend boys got into City almost automatically; they had already proved their mettle. Others had to clear a number of barriers. The issue of City's selective admissions policies was later to become a supremely sensitive one, because partisans of open admissions were scarcely willing to concede that City's greatness had depended on the exclusion of the overwhelming majority of students. City's first open admissions president, Robert Marshak, insisted that the myth of "the brilliant Student Superachiever" was overblown, since City's selective admissions policy had lasted only "the short period of three decades." And it's true that during its first half century City had granted admission to anyone who passed an entrance exam. Starting in 1900, when the high school system had begun to be established, any student with a high school diploma was accepted.

But it's also true that in 1900 somewhere between 6 and 17 percent of Americans, depending on which figures are used, were completing high school. All colleges were selective at the time. And in 1924, when the high schools were turning out far more students than City could accommodate, the school refused to consider candidates with grade-point averages less than 72. By the late 1930s—the period that Marshak was thinking about—the minimum average was fluctuating between 80 and 83. But these numbers mean virtually nothing in today's terms, since City also required that entering students have completed a minimum of 15 academic credits, including two and a half years of math and five years of foreign languages—a minimum threshold that scarcely any latter-day public school students could meet. In the 1920s or 1930s it meant that students who had attended vocational schools, or had taken the commercial or preparatory track in an academic high school, couldn't get in at all. Even in the academic high schools, City was accepting only the top quarter or so of graduates. In an age when the Ivy League colleges were sharply limiting the number of Jews they accepted, as well as talented, unpedigreed students of all sorts, the City College student body represented perhaps the purest intellectual elite in the country.

A 1944 study of New York City's public colleges, the Strayer report, offers a vivid, and solemn, analysis of a readily identifiable type of young man. "Probably no group of college students of comparable size has a higher level of academic aptitude," the authors noted. All four of New York's public colleges ranked in the top sixth of the country in terms of average student performance on a test of "mental ability." The students were very young. As of the middle of the 1942 school year, 36 percent of City College's entire liberal arts population was still under age eighteen. "Physically," the study found, "they tend to be less well-developed, their average weight and height being well below comparable averages. The proportion of physical defects is also believed to be somewhat higher than that among other college populations."

Almost all of the students came from "lower income groups," the authors noted. "As many as 40 percent of the fathers would classify as unskilled laborers, on relief, unemployed, not living with the family, or deceased." And virtually all of them were first-generation immigrants. Only 17 percent of the fathers and 22 percent of the mothers of City College freshmen who entered in 1938 had been born here. About 10 percent of parents had themselves graduated from college; 40 percent hadn't made it beyond the eighth grade. In socioeconomic terms, these young men were probably more disadvantaged than the students who flocked to City decades later as a result of open admissions.

Two psychological characteristics of the student body especially struck the report's authors. The first was ambition. "Nowhere is the motivation for getting a college education more intense," they wrote. They quoted a counselor to the effect that "our students have enormous driving power arising out of personal ambitions, family pressures, economic needs and incentives, and the fact that they are definitely and consciously on the way up the economic and social ladder." The second characteristic, in part a consequence of the first, was the students' rank immaturity. Another counselor was quoted as saying, "Our students are markedly lacking in social skills, the ability to meet people and to get along with them. They frequently feel ill at ease in a social situation and cannot engage in a conversation in other than argumentative fashion." A third counselor observed, "Even their drive, persistence, and competitiveness, by offending others and especially employers, operate to frustrate them."

This, then, is the hothouse that was City College at the zenith of its glory: a den of precocious boys, at once coddled and driven by their parents, pale and frail, fierce and argumentative, pushy, awkward, sensitive, naive, and fearful. Everything about them was so recently formed—even their bookishness. For all the Jewish love of learning, most of these students grew up in bookless, semiliterate households. Alumni from this era recall fathers who read a Yiddish newspaper, if that, and mothers who neither read nor wrote. Yet books and ideas seemed almost the most solid thing in their world.

Wilbur Daniel, a graduate of the class of 1942 (who died in 1993), said, "I received an extraordinary education from the public schools, but also from one other source—the New York Public Library. I had six public libraries within walking distance of our apartment, and when I was young I was only allowed to take out one book at a time, so I would go from one library to the next, taking out a book from each." When he got older Daniel would go up to Union Square to hear the debates on Saturday and Sunday. Over at the Communist Party corner he could listen to the Trotskyists, the Schachmanites, and the Lovestonettes play dueling dialectics. "It was the best possible course in rhetoric, in logic, in marshalling evidence, and in the uses of obfuscation," he recalled.

It's no surprise that old City College boys often can't remember how they first formed their love of reading; they lived in a world suffused with ideas and debate, as today's world is charged with products and consumption. There were perhaps half a dozen regularly published Yiddish newspapers in New York, and even more English-language newspapers, and Workmen's Circle discussion groups, and literary societies named after great English writers, and of course the library system and the schools. It wasn't simply that the boys who made it to City College had native ability; they grew up in a world where those abilities were fostered and encouraged in a way that would be inconceivable today. In their world, at least, nothing was admired more than being smart. Even the most devout socialist believed in the intellectual elite—"the intelligentsia," as they said in the Soviet fashion.

And for all their poverty, and the sickening fear bred by the depression, the immediate world they were raised in was stable and almost suffocatingly snug. For the first few generations the Lower East Side, where people had been piled atop one another in a density perhaps never before experienced in human history, was an infamous den of crime and disease. But as the immigrant population stabilized, and the immigrants were dispersed across the city, the conservative traditions that had dominated the faith for centuries reasserted themselves. The kinds of pathologies that beset the inner-city poor today were virtually unheard of in Brownsville or East New York. Divorce was extremely rare in poor Jewish families, as were alcoholism, domestic violence, and the like. Many of the fathers, as the figures of the Strayer report indicate, had been unstrung by a combination of disorientation and poverty. But they were present, and often powerfully so. The terrible struggle between the first-generation patrefamilias and the child of the New World, determined to forge an identity for himself out of the materials at hand, was told a thousand times over in the Jewish literature and the memoirs of that era. But this Oedipal combat looks almost like a luxury from the perspective of today's City College, where so many of the students are survivors of shattered families and bullet-ridden neighborhoods, and a sizable fraction have children of their own to support, often without a mate.

And then there were the schools. The New York City public school system of fifty to sixty years ago has been so thickly wrapped in a mantle of nostalgia as to utterly obscure the reality. The dropout rate was high, the facilities were filthy and cramped, and many of the teachers were barely trained. It was an inequalitarian system: good students rose to the top and poor students were left to flounder and drop out. But there's no question that the good students received a thorough academic grounding. For one thing, teaching in the public schools was one of the most secure jobs available during the Depression, so talented men and women who might have gone on to something better wound up on high school faculties. Most high schools were tracked, and students in the honors track were expected to take a rigorous curriculum—three years of math, Latin, French, European history, the classics of English literature. Very few students in today's public schools undergo this kind of regimen, and of those that do, not many elect to go to City College. The grading system of that era looks draconian next to today's vastly more forgiving standards. "A 90 or better was phenomenal," says Bernard Berly, a graduate of DeWitt Clinton High School and City College. "An 85 was doing really well."

And if you did well in school, and your parents had no money, you went to City College. "In my neighborhood," says Sid Finger, who grew up in the East Bronx, "you went to high school, you graduated, and you went on to City College." By the late 1930s and early 1940s, City College was a far grander place than the overgrown schoolhouse Bernard Hershkopf had known. It had relocated to its Gothic campus in Harlem and had 8,000 students or more studying in dozens of departments or in the schools of business—located at the old address downtown—or engineering. But the campus had already become thoroughly dilapidated. The library facilities were meager, the science departments and the engineering school had to make do with outdated equipment. The intellectuals who have since written about the City College of that era had a low opinion of its academic standards. "For the bright, inquiring student," Irving Kristol has written, "City College was a pretty dull educational place." In his memoirs, *A Margin of Hope*, the late Irving Howe recalled, "Most

of the teaching was mediocre"—in his field, English, "quite poor," and in the social sciences, "hopeless."

City simply couldn't compete for topflight scholars. The pay was poor and the working conditions worse. Professors who might have been inclined to pursue original work were left staggering by a mandatory teaching load of fifteen hours a week. City was a municipal institution, after all, with all the limitations that entailed. The Board of Higher Education meddled in faculty selection; until 1937, in fact, the board enjoyed the right to choose departmental chairs, which permitted it not only to discriminate against Jews but to ensure a steady supply of political hacks at the top of City's professoriat. The chairman of the Math Department referred to himself as "the LaGuardia Professor" in honor of his political patron. The meritocracy that reigned among students thus functioned hardly at all within the faculty.

Nobody could call the curriculum innovative; City always lagged a generation or two behind the better schools. A City College education was a thing of breathtaking narrowness and perfect clarity. For their first two years virtually everybody at the college studied the same thing. The required courses for the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences included two terms of English composition; two terms of math; four terms of foreign languages, classical and modern; and a remarkable four terms of speech. "A great many freshmen," the authors of the Strayer report delicately noted in explanation of this requirement, "have developed careless or provincial habits of speaking." "They were trying to get the 'Long Gislard' out of you," as Lawrence Plotkin, a member of the class of 1940, puts it more bluntly. Also required were survey courses in English literature, economics, government, history, science, art, and music. Students had to take one course in biology, chemistry, or physics. And they had to take four semesters of hygiene, or gym—perhaps to counter their waxy pallor and puny stature.

Nor can City be said to have been ably led. The president of the school from 1926 to 1938 was a colorless and stern figure named Frederick Robinson, a sort of efficiency expert at large in the liberal arts. Robinson once told an audience, "Organized business and our

government bureaus and offices need competent leaders, lieutenants, and craftsmen who are also scholars." The students considered Robinson a reactionary, and he seemed to consider them a pack of ruffians. His position became untenable soon after he waded into a group of students at a pacifist demonstration, wielding the point of his umbrella.

In many ways the students at City College educated themselves. As Irving Kristol wrote, "The student who came seeking an intellectual community, in which the life of the mind was strenuously lived, had to create such a community and such a life for himself." This was certainly true in the hermetic, flushed and altogether thrilling world inhabited by Kristol and his friends. This was the world known as Alcove 1, the left-wing debating society that thrived in the 1930s and 1940s and has contributed immeasurably to City's mythic status.

Leftism of some stripe was all but mandatory for these poor and working-class Jewish boys. Not only had they inherited a strain of socialism from their parents, but growing up in the Depression they felt, as Irving Howe writes, that "something had gone terribly wrong." Something was out of joint not only in their own families, where able-bodied fathers sat idly in the parlor, but in the system itself. And at least the more intellectual among them transmuted the anxiety they felt into a political program, and into the habit of viewing established institutions and practices critically. They felt a need to reorder a broken world, a need that contributed greatly to their intellectual growth.

Alcove 1 was one of the immensely long tables that bordered the window side of City's vast, gloomy, and grim cafeteria. It belonged, by tradition already immortalized in Kristol's day, to the adherents of the sectarian anti-Stalinist Left. The Trotskyists were the leftmost faction, while the Social Democrats defined the permissible boundary of moderation; and all were united in their staunch opposition to Stalinism, whose brainwashed automata—or so they appeared to Alcove 1—occupied the next table over, known as Alcove 2. In Alcove 1, everything was open to debate. Brilliant, argumentative, and uncouth boys swallowed the cream cheese sandwiches they had brought from home and wrangled endlessly over the correct "line" in literature, anthropology, philosophy, and of course

politics. Howe, the de facto leader of the Trots, recalled starting a discussion, leaving for class, returning hours later, and finding the exact same discussion raging with a completely different set of characters. "We made our dark little limbo of Alcove 1 a school for the sharpening of wits," Howe writes.

Alcove 1 has since become a kind of *synecdoche* for City College in the 1930s, though in fact only a few dozen students camped out there at any one time the way the two famous Irvings did. The other alcoves were occupied by Catholics, Zionists, and various other interest groups. At Lawrence Plotkin's alcove the partisans fought over the relative merits of the Dodgers and the Giants (both, of course, then operating out of New York). But Alcove 1 was important not only because it shaped the minds of some of our leading intellectuals but because it recalls the tremendous urgency that ideas held for young men growing up in the late 1930s. The world was in turmoil: The Loyalsists were fighting the Fascists in Spain, Hitler was advancing on Central Europe, and capitalism was failing at home and in Europe. A sense of intellectual engagement gripped even City's nonpolitical majority. Lawrence Plotkin, who was a member of City's ROTC unit—the largest in the country, he says—recalls thrilling to news of the great Jewish republic supposedly being established in the USSR. "It had wonderful reviews in the *Daily Worker*," he recalls dryly.

At the same time, it would be wrong to think of City at its zenith as simply a site where brilliant young men bounced ideas off of each other; the institution *did* matter. Students less gifted than the Irvings speak of City as a transforming experience. "It was an extraordinary education," said Wilbur Daniel. "At the very least, it was the equal of the best schools in terms of the range of subjects and the depth with which they were studied." Daniels's estimate of the school's standards may be colored by nostalgia, but students who went from City to the best graduate schools seem not to have felt ill prepared. Lawrence Plotkin says that his undergraduate psychology notes stood him in very good stead for his graduate studies at Columbia.

For students like Daniel and Plotkin, City was an extension of their high school experience—a place with rigorous standards and high expectations. All candidates for a B.A. degree were expected

to master Latin as well as a Romance language. B.S. candidates, even in the social sciences, were required to pass solid geometry, advanced algebra, and elementary physics. Students at Big Ten schools may have been attending pep rallies (at least in the Andy Hardy movies), and Harvard boys may have been clicking martinis in their finals clubs; but City College boys studied. The memory that many of them have is of leaving the campus for a dreary job, and then coming home and studying until their eyes hurt.

The only really renowned scholar at City College was the philosopher Morris Raphael Cohen, a Russian immigrant who had emigrated to the United States as a teenager, graduated from City in 1899, and, after receiving his Ph.D. from Harvard, settled at City for forty years. Cohen was an archetypal City College success story, though it was clear that anti-Semitism had limited his career; no college other than City would offer him a paying job, despite the enthusiastic support of William James and Josiah Royce, among others. Even City's Philosophy Department at first refused him a position, and Cohen was forced to teach mathematics. For several generations of students, Cohen represented the Olympic level of the intellectual sport that they had mastered—or thought they had mastered. Cohen was a brilliant and remorseless practitioner of the Socratic method, although, as he himself conceded, he lacked Socrates' courtesy.

The City College of the 1930s and 1940s, ill kempt and overcrowded, resembled one of the grant public high schools of the time. And yet City had something of the spirit of a small New England college. It was a high-minded place, a monastery dedicated to the secular religion of reason, science, and the study of Western culture. The campus was tiny and self-contained, walled off from the world. It was a place without hierarchies: no graduate students, no exclusive social clubs, no unapproachable academic colossi. Only a handful of people ran the college's affairs. Everyone taught or studied, there was nothing else to do. The only diversions were participating in the occasional political protest, and rooting for the basketball team, coached by the legendary Nat Holman. Even the basketball program was part of City's cult of hard work and overachievement. Year in and year out, Coach Holman molded his squad of undernourished, aggressive Jewish boys into one of the top teams in the city. In 1950

City became the first, and last, college to win both the National Invitational Tournament and the NCAA championship.

The relationship between City College and its students was actually a fairly reciprocal one. The students transformed the nature of the institution, but the institution also put its imprint on the students. Nor was this shaping process wholly intellectual. For all that the student body was almost entirely Jewish, City, as an institution, remained resolutely Christian. And the good Christian souls who ran the college understood their role in missionary terms that would be unthinkable in our own era, when we let a thousand multicultural flowers bloom. The scholar Sherry Gorelick writes, in the modern vein, that "Western elite culture dominated the curriculum at CCNY. It permeated course content and faculty scholarship. . . . Jewish students commuting between these two cultural worlds subjected themselves to a world of business assumptions and Anglo-Saxon dominance." Gorelick insists that success in such a world was fraught with self-denial: "It required some form of confrontation with a dominant, alien but seemingly all-embracing way of life."

Gorelick would be right if she were describing students today, many of whom consider Western elite culture the ideology of the oppressor. And yet Western elite culture was precisely what most City College students once wanted to master (and what many of City's first-generation immigrants *still* want to master). They were reading not Scholem Aleichem but Tennyson and Pope. Even the rabid leftists didn't think to demand courses in labor history, or in immigration policy. They had been struggling to escape the harsh realities of ghetto life since they were children, and for all the pain they felt when their fathers accused them of spitting at God, they knew that the ultimate purpose of a City College education was to give them escape velocity. For them, as for almost all the children of immigrants, assimilation was good. If many old City College boys sport an almost plummy elocution today, despite having grown up in the Bronx, it's because they took to heart all those Christianizing lessons in speech class.

There's a polemical edge to the issue of whether City's greatness lay in the students or in the institution. If it's the former, then there's no reason to believe that the college could achieve anything like its

old stature with a less gifted group of students. If it's the latter, then City's history provides some justification for faith in an experiment like open admissions. If City was in fact the author of its own greatness, one could mine its past for evidence of the power of institutions to overcome disadvantage. But in truth the college was only the last of a series of strong institutions that shaped the young men who went there. The family, and the larger community, imparted the values that made them self-disciplined and confident and ambitious. The schools, and the libraries, and the specifically Jewish culture of argument and debate, trained their minds and made intellectual work seem like the most natural thing in the world. Life had groomed them to thrive in an environment like City College's. City's own role was to cull the winners of a meritocratic race, and to channel their raw intellectual energies into rigorous academic labor and soften their rough edges through resolute high-mindedness. The City College of today, however, can neither count on the formative power of those prior institutions nor select the students likeliest to thrive in its own setting. The old City College refined those who came there; the new City College is expected to transform them.

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### 3

## Baptism of Fire: The Birth of a New Order

The City College of 1964 was not immensely different from the City College of 1940. The school was now about two-thirds rather than four-fifths Jewish. Most of the students were second- or third-generation Americans, though still first-generation college-goers. They constituted essentially the last generation of working-class Jewish kids in New York, and they were certainly better off than those tans of yore who had gotten by on cream cheese and dialects. Many of them came to school in cars, some—or so it is said—in sports cars. A City College education was still free, still about a generation behind the times, and probably significantly better than what had been available twenty-five years earlier. A whole generation of young, largely Jewish academics had arrived in the 1950s, thus bringing the faculty up to par with the students. It was a brilliant, end-of-summer moment at City College.

In his memoirs, *Working Through*, English professor Leonard Kriegel recalls a 1964 class he taught on Emerson as representing a high-water mark of intellectual and social freedom. The chains of the McCarthy era had fallen away; the turbulence of the 1960s, with



its insistent politicization and its hostility to traditional scholarship, had not yet arrived. In their openness and vitality the students killed in the young scholar an overwhelming sense of devotion to the institution. The college remained, in Krieger's words, "The best that man in his cities could expect in the way of a college education."

It wasn't City, but the world around it, that was changing rapidly. The European migration, and above all the Jewish migration, had ended forty years earlier. And as that great movement of humanity had slowed, another had begun. Blacks in large numbers started leaving the South for northern urban centers in the 1920s. New York City's black population went from 150,000 in 1920 to 450,000 in 1940 to 1.1 million in 1960. And that was only one of two mass migrations. After World War II impoverished Puerto Ricans began to leave the island for New York. The Puerto Rican population of New York shot up from 70,000 in 1940 to 720,000 in 1961. In twenty years the black and Puerto Rican fraction of New York's population went from 6 percent to almost 25 percent. Ten years later it would be close to one-third.

In that short span of time the image of urban poverty—of "the masses"—had changed utterly. The rapid urbanization of an essentially pastoral black population had an overwhelming effect on American society as a whole. The rise of an educated black bourgeoisie, and the dawning of a new consciousness among blacks generally, gave impetus to the civil rights movement, and thereby made black people, and their plight, visible to the American public for the first time. Americans were now forced to recognize that the dismal condition in which most black Americans lived was not an incidental effect of some natural order of things but a consequence of a history of mistreatment. Black urban poverty, unlike the white urban poverty of previous generations, came to be widely accepted as an indictment of American society.

City College had never had many black students (though A. Philip Randolph and Colin Powell were notable exceptions). In the early 1960s probably no more than 2 percent of City's daytime students were black, along with a much smaller number of Puerto Ricans. The other public senior colleges in the city had only a slightly larger minority population, but City operated under a special sym-

bolic burden. The campus was located in the middle of Harlem; and yet blacks who aspired to a better life could scarcely view the campus as the fulfillment of their dreams, as David Levinsky had when City College was a redbrick building on Twenty-third Street. "Our vision was of City College as a white institution sitting up and over Harlem, very much like Columbia," says Bruce Hare, a black graduate of the class of 1969 and now the chairman of the Black Studies Department at Syracuse University. Until the age of seven, Hare had lived on 135th Street, and he used to point up the hill to the campus and ask his grandfather, "Who's up there?" And his grandfather, a mailman, would solemnly intone, "The smart people." And Hare understood that the smart people were not his people.

College attendance among blacks had been growing even faster than for the population as a whole, doubling virtually every decade since 1930. But the college-going rate among blacks was still half that of whites, and more than half of black students were enrolled in two-year institutions. Poverty depressed the black college-attendance rate, but so did low high school graduation rates and poor performance on standardized tests. The black presence on campuses with selective admissions policies such as City was thus minute.

A study by Allan Ballard, a black professor of political science at City, offered graphic evidence of the way in which the schools' meritocratic standards made admission almost impossible for minority students. Ballard counted the number of students qualified to enroll at City in the 1968 graduating classes of two predominantly black high schools. At Benjamin Franklin, in Manhattan, 11 students out of 318 met the criteria. At Boys' High, in Brooklyn, the figure was 7 of 353. Black students weren't even getting into the pool. The black dropout rate citywide was 50 percent, as opposed to 13 percent for whites. Blacks were also far more likely to be found in vocational or nonacademic programs than the academic ones required for admission; and only a few black students in academic programs achieved a grade-point average of 83 or more.

In 1965 Ballard and a number of progressive white faculty members at City started a pilot program, known as College Discovery, for about 150 black graduates of high schools in Harlem and the Bronx. The premise of the program was the premise, in miniature,

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of the civil rights movement and the Great Society. Racism had denied black people their rightful place in society, and had prevented them from fulfilling their potential. Special efforts had to be made to prevent that potential from being wasted. "This was something that was good for the college as well as for the society," says Bernard Sohmer, a math professor who helped devise the program. "There was a whole population out there that wasn't being addressed by the college. And we knew that the program should grow." College Discovery worked like a scholarship program: students who hadn't done well enough to qualify for admission, but had been recommended by their counselors or school officials, were given intensive remedial instruction and counseling in order to prepare them for the regular college curriculum.

City College's reformist impulse converged with a far more powerful, and more pragmatic, institutional drive. Four years earlier the City University of New York (CUNY), incorporating City and the other municipal colleges, had been established. This was a moment of unprecedented growth in college attendance, and CUNY was created to establish in New York City a coherent system of mass higher education, such as existed in most states, including New York. Its initial long-range plan, published in 1962, called for \$400 million in capital improvements from the state. The Holy Plan, as it was called after its author, suggested that the senior colleges begin accepting the top 30 percent of high school graduates, rather than the top 20 percent, and that the community colleges be significantly expanded. New York's "new immigrant populations," a phrase apparently intended to refer to Puerto Ricans and blacks who had emigrated from the South, might thus be accommodated with only a small diminution of the colleges' elite status. These proposals were largely accepted in CUNY's master plan, promulgated in 1964 by the new chancellor, Albert Bowker.

CUNY expanded rapidly throughout the 1960s, but almost entirely through the establishment of new community colleges. The four-year colleges neither grew substantially nor relaxed their standards. Minority enrollment at the prestigious senior colleges remained at no more than 5 to 6 percent. And yet it was clear, for demographic if not for political reasons, that the situation couldn't

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last. Julius Edelstein, then a CUNY vice chancellor, recalls that "Bowker had studied the population projections, and he saw that the elite populations, including the bright people from Jewish homes, were being admitted into the premium colleges. Although CUNY was terribly crowded at that time, he could see that a big fall in enrollment was going to occur if he tried to maintain the senior colleges' traditional standards." Even those better students who couldn't afford private college were enrolling in one of the better-funded colleges of the state university system. If CUNY was going to grow, it had to begin attracting minority students into the senior colleges.

College Discovery offered CUNY officials their first opportunity to catch up with the city's changing demographics. In 1966 CUNY changed the program's name to SEEK and instituted it throughout the system. SEEK grew almost immediately from hundreds to thousands of students, creating for the first time a real black presence on the senior college campuses. Colleges that had prided themselves on their unyielding standards began to offer programs of remedial education, and the principle that the colleges had a moral obligation to provide help to disadvantaged students took root.

The SEEK program was precisely the kind of reform that liberals throughout CUNY had been hoping for—generous, but modest, incremental, and nonthreatening. Theirs was the consensual, optimistic liberalism born of America's postwar dominance and shaped by the civil rights struggle. This form of liberalism was about to go into eclipse. In New York and elsewhere, a new race consciousness was beginning to tear at the seams of the civil rights consensus. In 1967 an experiment in promoting local control over New York's public schools culminated in a showdown between black parents and the largely Jewish teachers union in the ghetto neighborhood of Ocean Hill-Brownsville. The shouting matches, the marches, and the strikes faded away; but the bitterness and disillusionment lingered to corrupt the atmosphere of daily life. Increasingly, as the 1960s wore on, the racial debate took the form of accusation and threat on the one hand, and resentment and repression on the other. White liberals, and especially Jewish liberals, were divided among their sense of moral obligation and guilt, their fear of violence, and a growing sense of outrage.

In October 1968 City's black club, the Onyx Society, convened a conference on black power featuring H. Rap Brown and Olympic sprinter John Carlos. White students were not permitted to enter the auditorium, an unprecedented act of separatism. The student council responded by suspending Onyx's funding. Two hundred club members then descended on a council meeting, where, after a racially charged debate, the club's privileges were restored. Black students were beginning to feel their power—a power that came from a claim on conscience as well as from intimidation and fear. In early December, Stokely Carmichael, by then the "prime minister" of the Black Panthers, called for "armed struggle" in a speech in Shepherd Hall. He repudiated any form of coalition with the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) or other white radical groups.

In late 1968 a group within Onyx calling itself the Committee of Ten began meeting to formulate a list of demands and to plan a series of escalating protest actions to force the college to acquiesce. By the beginning of the following year the committee had begun to work with a contingent from a Puerto Rican organization called PRISA. On February 6 the group presented to college president Buell Gallagher a set of five demands. The demands were that students in the Education School be obliged to learn black and Puerto Rican history and Spanish; that a separate orientation program be established for black and Puerto Rican freshmen; that SEEK students be granted far greater control over the SEEK program itself; that a separate School of Black and Puerto Rican Studies be established; and that the racial composition of the next entering class reflect the racial makeup of New York's public high schools.

The students demanded a response from Gallagher within a week, and precisely a week later Gallagher issued a statement accepting the Spanish-language demand and offering a search for common ground on the others. The statement, sympathetic but faintly condescending, was suited to an era of corny already long past. That morning a group of about one hundred black and Puerto Rican demonstrators seized the administration building for three and a half hours, booting out white administrators and declaring the advent of "Malcolm X-Che Guevara University." The group had decided to raise the pressure a notch at a time. Four days later black and Puerto

Rican students launched an array of hit-and-run strikes, popping into classes with smoke bombs, dumping gallons of paint down the stairway at Shepherd Hall, slinging food around corridors, and vandalizing equipment. Gallagher neither moved on the demands nor rebuked the students.

A few years earlier these breaches of college protocol might not have seemed quite so portentous, but now they were being played out against the feverish landscape of the late 1960s. The apocalypse, the revolution, and the fascist counterattack all seemed to many ecstatic young people, and terrified older people, to be around the corner. Not only were the Panthers brandishing guns, but white revolutionaries were planting dynamite. Sociologist and ex-radical Todd Gitlin recalls the last years of the 1960s as "a cyclone in a wind tunnel." And the spring of 1969 was the heart of that cyclone, the speeded-up moment of exhilaration, danger, chaos, doom. Gitlin counts "well over a hundred politically inspired campus bombings, attempted bombings and incidents of arson" during the 1968-1969 school year alone.

Buell Gallagher was not the leader City might have chosen for such a moment. He was a tall, gaunt, dark-haired man in spectacles and a bow tie, a man who put some people—not necessarily his friends—in mind of Abraham Lincoln. Gallagher had been ordained a Congregationalist minister, served as president of all-black Tougaloo College, in Mississippi, and devoted himself to worthy causes; but he was accustomed to working on an essentially rhetorical plane, and he retained the minister's habit of orotundity. To his critics on both the left and the right, Gallagher was precisely the kind of clubbable but ineffectual gentleman who had ruled City's affairs since the antediluvian era.

On April 22 a handful of black and Puerto Rican students arrived at City College at dawn and attached a padlock to the gate that gave access to the South Campus, where liberal arts classes were held. White students were not permitted past the gate under any circumstances; white radicals eager to express their sympathy were forced to demonstrate outside the gates. The dean of students ordered the police to come and cut the padlock, but then to leave the campus. The students then held the gates shut. Gallagher had

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promised to use force if the students closed down the campus, but now he wavered. After meeting with administrators and faculty, Gallagher decided to declare the South Campus closed, postponing a decision about the strikers until the following day.

When white radicals had disrupted the campus in years past Gallagher hadn't hesitated to call in the police. But after a tumultuous meeting in Shepherd's Great Hall, in which students marched around in revolutionary style and outraged faculty members stormed out in a collective huff, the president announced that City College would remain closed, that the students would not be evicted, and that negotiations would commence. The idea of forcibly breaking up what was arguably a civil rights protest may simply have been repugnant to Gallagher. But he was also frightened. Gallagher felt that he knew the black community; and he sagely warned the Board of Higher Education, according to another professor present at the meeting, that "if the forces on the South Campus were let loose, the riots in Watts and Newark would pale by comparison." In fact, as Gallagher himself was told, the students took it for granted that they would be evicted and had decided to go peacefully; none of them had even brought a change of clothes. But he refused to change his mind.

Many black and Puerto Rican members of the faculty and administration, especially those involved with the SEEK program, sided with the students. A contingent of whites called Faculty for Action did so as well, sending negotiating formulas and chicken soup over to South Campus. Conservative members of the faculty, however, saw the takeover as the garroting of the humane tradition of which they had been the final carriers. The radical students, black and white, were "Nazis"; the administration, their craven appeasers. But most faculty members found themselves roughly in the same position as President Gallagher—appalled by the takeover, but mortified by the prospect of toppling a black protest by force. The day after the Great Hall meeting the faculty adopted resolutions deploring the forcible halt in classes but urging that the police remain off campus and the college itself remain closed. Four days later the faculty reversed that decision, and then reversed it once again. For a few days the faculty and students of the Engineering School, located on the

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North Campus, defied the ban on holding classes, with the tacit permission of the school's dean.

City found itself in an ideologically agonizing position. No other college in the nation had the tradition of radicalism that City had. And the postwar generation of faculty generally had a strong leftward tilt. But many of these same teachers were alumni of City; they revered the school and what it stood for. The brandished fists, the nonnegotiable demands, the fixation with symbolism, the separatist language—it all violated a cherished image of the school and an ideal of the life of the mind. On April 24, during one of many interminable, anguished meetings in the Great Hall, Stanley Feingold introduced a resolution calling for classes to resume, "with the least possible violence either to persons or to the spirit of learning." The resolution was an earnest and forlorn attempt to reaffirm the ancient norms. Feingold wrote, "In a society that claims to be free, revolutionary action is justified, if not morally obligatory, where dialogue is suppressed and decision-making precludes the consideration of significant and deeply-felt interests." But City College, he pointed out, had gone to great lengths to sustain debate.

Feingold was a City College figure of classic vintage, a working-class boy made good. He had graduated from the college in 1946, studied political science at Columbia, and then returned to City to teach without ever bothering to get a graduate degree. For years he had taught the course American Political Thought to upperclassmen. He loved what he did, and he was considered a dedicated teacher. He was also an outspoken progressive. He had participated in anti-war sit-ins and had taken on President Gallagher over the issue of loyalty oaths. Feingold felt that knowing justice, and doing justice, were the core of his profession. And now he found himself defending an entrenched interest that he deeply believed in. "The conduct of a college is as instructive as the teaching of its faculty," he wrote. "If, by whatever euphemism, it pays a ransom price for the return of its buildings and resumption of its classes, it can only inspire further bitter and disruptive activities."

In 1969, New York's mayor, John Lindsay, who had delighted white and black citizens soon after his election in 1965 by walking through Harlem, was up for reelection, and the mood of the city

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had changed considerably. Lindsay's chief opponent, city comptroller Mario Procaccino, was part of a cadre of white ethnics who were making their way in big-city politics by appealing to frightened and angry white voters, as President Richard Nixon and Vice President Spiro Agnew were doing on a national level. Procaccino, as it happened, was City College class of 1935. And in the City College takeover he saw a potent political issue. Declaring that it was "criminal" to allow protest to halt the education of thousands of New Yorkers, Procaccino announced on May 1 that he was seeking a court order compelling the administration to reopen the college. That same day the militant Jewish Defense League, as well as a group of students, obtained court orders requiring President Gallagher to show cause why the school should not be reopened four days hence.

The college held its collective breath as the court orders were served; but the students had long since agreed among themselves that they would leave peacefully. On Monday evening, May 5, the 250 students marched out from behind the gate without incident. Now, however, a miniature version of the race riot that Gallagher had predicted exploded on campus. On May 6 several white students were attacked by blacks; at least one was robbed. The following day was much worse. In a story carried on the first column of the front page, the *New York Times* reported that "a bloody pitched battle between club-swinging black youths and white counterprotestors erupted at City College yesterday shortly after the school had been closed for the day because of a previous series of violent incidents." Seven white students were injured; three were taken to the hospital with head wounds. A crowd of blacks, many of them high school students or not students at all, swarmed into the library and classrooms, ordering white students and professors to leave. One white girl who refused was beaten up by ten members of the crowd. Another white girl was robbed at knifepoint.

President Gallagher was at last forced to call in the police—a decision he must have found crushing. But even with 200 police officers on campus, the violence continued. Fistfights broke out all day between blacks or Puerto Ricans and whites. White radicals and counterdemonstrators pelted each other with eggs and rocks and bottles. A crowd of about 2,000 people surged up and down the

## BAPTISM OF FIRE

campus and along Amsterdam Avenue, shadowed and sometimes blocked by detachments of police. At 2:33 P.M. a fire broke out in the Finley Student Center. Before it was brought under control an hour later the fire had destroyed the college's auditorium. Pictures of the blackened building, and the billowing smoke, made the top of each network newscast. The Procaccino campaign exploited the footage in its campaign commercials as if it were *Kristallnacht*. For many City College alumni, it was.

The following day, a Friday, Buell Gallagher tendered his resignation as president, effective Monday. It was widely believed that he had been fired by the Board of Higher Education. He had become, by then, a melancholy, isolated figure. He had occupied what he thought was the honorable position; and there he had been stranded. As he said in his characteristically lofty resignation statement, "When the forces of angry rebellion and stern repression clash, a man of peace, a reconciler, a man of compassion must stand aside for a time and await the moment when sanity returns and brotherhood based on justice becomes a possibility." There was a terrible, hard truth in that windy cascade of words. Gallagher understood that, whatever he did, he would violate his principles. The liberalism that had guided him had become impossible to practice.

In his memoirs, *The Education of Black Folks*, Allan Ballard recalls an early and unsuccessful attempt to change City's admission policies. It was April 1968, and Martin Luther King, Jr., had just been assassinated. Riots had broken out in Washington, Chicago, and other major cities; there was an overwhelming feeling that something had to be done to give black youth some hope of a better life. Ballard writes, "I called together a group of the most 'radical' white faculty members and asked them to support a proposal that would have mandated that the freshman class of September 1968 have a 25 percent composition of black and Puerto Rican students to be drawn from Harlem and East Harlem." This would be a drastic change from the SEEK program, which was still viewed as an appendage to the college itself. Ballard was shocked at the reaction: "Only one of the ten radical leaders in the room agreed to the proposal. One of those who opposed the plan stated that he would leave the university since

these students would most certainly destroy the traditional academic standards of CCNY."

Ballard thought that he was asking nothing more than consistency; in fact he had touched a hidden fault line. Those activists had joined the candlelight vigil at Gracie Mansion, the mayor's home, to protest King's death. They were committed to the cause of racial justice, and City College's status as a white island in a black sea had left them feeling increasingly conscience stricken. They supported SEEK and were eager to see it grow. At the same time, they believed devoutly in "standards," and in the meritocratic admissions process that allowed the college to uphold those standards. They wanted City College to be academically exclusive but ethnically inclusive. And if they had to sacrifice the one to attain the other? That was where the fault line lay.

Ballard's proposal, like the Committee of Ten's demand the following year, reversed familiar terms of debate. Quotas had been the chief obstacle to equality of opportunity for the upwardly mobile urban poor who had flocked to City College forty years before. Freedom, for them, meant freedom from the laws that had confined their ancestors to the ghetto and excluded them from education and the professions. America was the land where people were judged according to what they did, not who they were. And City College, where no distinctions except those of ability and industry would matter, was the great symbol of that promise. Even the devout socialists of Alcove 1 believed in the free market of abilities.

The situation was different for black Americans. With the waning of Jim Crow, and the passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960s, they, too, faced no formal obstacles to success. But because of their history of enslavement and exclusion, not in Russia but here at home, they entered the marketplace of opportunity on a deeply unequal basis. As President Lyndon Johnson had said in 1965, "You do not take a person who for years has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and say, 'You are free to compete with all the others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair." Black Americans *deserved* special benefits as compensation for past discrimination, and they needed those advantages to help them overcome the effects of that discrimination.

Johnson declared a "War on Poverty," to be waged with jobs, housing, urban renewal, and programs like Head Start. These programs were designed to remove the shackles so that black people could reach the starting line on an equal footing. But these were long-term, developmental programs. What could be done to equalize the competition *now*? By the late 1960s a consensus had developed among mainstream civil rights groups that a system of preferences, or targets, should be built into decisions on hiring, contracting, and college and graduate school admissions in order to ensure proportional representation for blacks. This was the principle of affirmative action, which President Richard Nixon's Labor Department adopted in 1969, without great controversy, as a set of enforceable guidelines.

The logic of affirmative action turned the meritocratic argument on its head: Impersonal "standards" perpetuated a discriminatory system. Only through quotas—of inclusion, not of exclusion—could equality of opportunity be guaranteed. The affirmative action principle could be applied to virtually all economic or social goods. But in the case of higher education it acquired a special force because a college degree had become the indispensable passport to the good life. A bachelor's degree was worth approximately 60 percent more than a high school diploma in the job market. Unionized blue-collar jobs were dropping from year to year, and an increasing fraction of middle-level jobs were becoming unavailable to nongraduates. Black parents understood the system perfectly well. A 1966 study found that while 79 percent of white parents wanted their children to attend college, among blacks the figure was 96 percent. As Julian Bond, then a Georgia state legislator, wrote, "Higher education can no longer be regarded as a privilege for the few, but must be seen as a right for the many."

The affirmative action argument didn't question the validity of distinctions of merit, but insisted that higher education had become too valuable a good to be parceled out according to these distinctions. But at the same time white scholars on the left were questioning the meritocratic premise itself. In their highly influential *Academic Revolution*, published in 1968, sociologists David Riesman and Christopher Jencks argued that meritocracy served as a legiti-

mating device for a deeply unequal society. Higher education, with its various devices for testing and sorting, sustained the myth that economic success was being distributed according to ability rather than birth. In fact, they said, while high school graduation had become more democratically distributed in recent decades, college entrance and graduation had become, if anything, increasingly correlated with prior socioeconomic status. Higher-class parents were passing down to their children the abilities that made for college success, as once they had passed down trust funds or WASPY affiliations. Moreover, Riesman and Jencks weren't even convinced that social mobility was such a good thing. "What America most needs is not more mobility," they wrote, "but more equality."

Riesman and Jencks considered the question of admissions standards irrelevant. Employers faced with a more democratically distributed pool of college graduates would simply discriminate on the basis of grades, which would continue to be correlated with class. College-level remediation, they argued, "being of limited duration and coming late in life, can almost never undo more than a fraction of the damage done by earlier neglect." Moreover, they insisted, colleges would never devote their precious assets to students so unlikely to succeed.

But it was possible to turn the critique of meritocracy against the schools themselves. Jerome Karabel, later a professor at Berkeley, noted, "Universities are irrevocably committed to the business of conferring awards, and once this fact is recognized, their exclusive stance, based on an idealized image, becomes less defensible." Like Riesman and Jencks, Karabel didn't really believe in meritocratic distinctions at all: "A frenetically competitive inegalitarian system," he wrote, is scarcely preferable to "an ascriptive society [one based on inherited status], which, at least, does not compel its poor people to internalize their failures." But unlike the authors of *Academic Revolution*, Karabel believed that opening up higher education to all students could strike a serious blow at the unequal social structure that it sustained and appropriate the resources of the elite for the use of the many. Karabel's hope was the realization of "Justice's" nightmare 120 years earlier: that higher education could be used to upend, rather than confirm, the existing order.

But here was the rub: City College was either an exception to the claim made by Riesman and Jencks, and by followers like Karabel, or its refutation. Indeed, the very idea that higher education might redistribute goods from the wellborn to the academically worthy depended on the legendary reputation of City College as much as of any other institution. City had turned poor boys (and by now girls) into successful professionals. Perhaps New York City had run out of bright, underprivileged Jewish kids. But weren't there plenty of other students, many of them black and Puerto Rican, who could be fed into City's meritocratic machine? Moreover, the entire anti-meritocratic argument, which often appeared to be conducted by upper-class whites feeling guilty about the good fortune they had inherited, irritated City's faculty and administration, so many of whom were City boys who still felt in their bones the immensity of their struggle to succeed, and felt as well a corresponding pride in their achievement.

Philip Baunel, a professor of physics, had been born into grim, Depression-era poverty. His father, a nonunion housepainter, had contracted sciatica when Philip was seven, and the family had eked out a bare living in the Bronx on workmen's compensation and income from his mother's hospital job. But Philip had been accepted into the prestigious Bronx High School of Science and had graduated from City College in 1953. For Baunel, belief in the system of meritocratic advancement was indistinguishable from self-respect. "I taught myself a foreign language," Baunel says proudly. "It was called standard English. I learned it by reading." And Baunel didn't just believe in the abstract idea of distinctions of merit; he believed devoutly in City College as an institution predicated on those distinctions.

For men like Baunel, and for others more skeptical of the glories of the system than he, the demands of the students constituted an attack on values they had scarcely even questioned before. To lower admission standards would be, in effect, to devalue the currency in which their diploma had been issued. This was the visceral reaction that Allan Ballard had encountered the year before. In one of the innumerable Great Hall resolutions, two professors declared that "an admissions policy based upon racial and ethnic quotas rather than academic achievement would destroy this College and . . . such

an admissions policy if implemented would in fact perpetrate a cruel hoax on the young people so admitted." It would destroy the college because City would have to sacrifice the standards that had made it what it was. It would be a cruel hoax because City would not be able to undo the damage these young people had suffered. In years past City had been only the last of a series of institutions that had shaped its students; it could not be asked to do the work that other institutions were now failing to do.

Or could it? Fran Geteles, a counselor in the SEEK program and former stalwart of Faculty for Action, asks, "Which is the stronger truth: That you are locked in by your background, or that you have potential?" For Geteles and others, *potential* was the magic word, the answer to all the talk about standards. Potential was the underlying quality that the hardships of ghetto life had obscured but not destroyed. If you looked, you would find it. In a magazine article in the summer of 1969, an associate professor of English, Leo Hamalian, noted, as many others had, that "the planning and organization that went into the strategy of seizure by the BPRC was masterful." They had taken over the South Campus in a surgical strike, they conducted negotiations with great self-assurance, and, unlike white radicals, they hadn't trashed property or raided liquor cabinets. If these students, many of them from SEEK, didn't belong at City, Hamalian said, "then perhaps we should examine the academic process itself rather than the student." Hamalian also noted that a study in East St. Louis had isolated a quality in ghetto youth—"hipness" for lack of a better term—which, he said, "may be an indication of educational potential." Hamalian offered a cautious endorsement of these alternative gifts. "With massive supportive services," he wrote, "many such youngsters are performing passingly well in college."

For the Jewish liberals who made up so large a part of City's student body, faculty, administration, and alumni, there could be no easy resolution to the debate between merit and potential, or between standards and access. But most black students and faculty members considered the entire discussion demeaning. "The whole notion that we were endangering the college's standards was racist," says Bruce Hare. "Those were just excuses, and the excuses were serving to keep the joint white." If black students had done less well

in school than the white students now at City, it was because of the low expectations that teachers had for blacks. And if black students performed far less well on the SATs than whites, it was because standardized tests were culturally biased. Bruce Hare hadn't done well enough in high school to be admitted to City. He had spent three years in the evening session before transferring to the supposedly far more rigorous day session. And he hadn't been all that impressed. To his grandfather, who had told him that "the smart people" went to the school up on the hill, he had said, "Grandpa, you were wrong."

Negotiations on the five demands resumed on May 19, after the new college president, Joseph Copeland, agreed to withdraw the police from campus in exchange for promises from white and black militants to end the disruptions. An earlier set of discussions had already led to acceptance of the first three student demands, an agreement to set aside the issue of a School of Black Studies, and a stalemate on the fundamental question of admissions. The students wanted a black and Puerto Rican quota equal to minority enrollment in the public high schools, then about 40 percent. The faculty negotiators accepted the idea of a separate track of nonmerit admissions, like the SEEK program, but balked at the numbers.

Now those agreements had been nullified, and the faculty negotiating team replaced, on orders from the Board of Higher Education. The new three-member team included Stanley Feingold, who had made his opposition to the takeover very clear, but who was hoping to find some sort of middle ground on the critical issue of the quota. But the legitimacy of the quota demand had been granted in advance—it was a demand, after all—and only the means remained to be discussed. Feingold recalls that the students presented one ingenious formula after another designed to raise the fraction of minority students at City to 40 percent. None of them involved explicit ethnic quotas; all of them, Feingold felt, amounted to the same thing. Feingold could not accept a quota at City College. On May 22, as the group was reaching agreement, he quietly resigned his position.

It was a wrenching moment for Feingold: He stood sharply defined against a background that was all too schematic. Conservatives



welcomed him as a convert. Pro-student faculty members accused him of losing his nerve. And radical students vilified him. Feingold had always thought of himself as a radical egalitarian, and City as a radically egalitarian place. But old-fashioned egalitarianism, with its implicit faith in competition and the marketplace, had come to seem like the mask of domination. And so, by standing in one place while history spun by him, Feingold had become something he never could have imagined: the enemy of potential.

In mid-June, Feingold was asked to testify before the Board of Higher Education, and he took the opportunity to map out the place in the middle where he stood. Yes, he agreed, the students were "sincere," but to say so was condescending, since "neither the man nor the appearance of the students had anything to do with the merits of their case." The question was not who had the moral upper hand but how best to achieve "equality of access without diminishing excellence in standards." It wasn't enough, he argued, to accept students merely on the basis of minority status, because potential was not something that belonged to all students, or to all minority students. The colleges would have to reach down into the high schools and identify and nurture the students who showed signs of special abilities.

Feingold proposed that CUNY institute a system like California's, where the top 12.5 percent of high school graduates were eligible to attend the elite "university colleges"; the top third of graduates, the state colleges; and the remainder, a two-year community college. In fact CUNY chancellor Albert Bowker had previously worked in the California system and had devised a version of the state's master plan in which the three tiers were, in effect, dropped down one level each. According to CUNY's 1968 master plan, the senior colleges—the system would accept one-quarter of high school graduates—slightly less than the Holy Plan had anticipated—in addition to several thousand others enrolled through programs like SEEK; the next 40 percent of graduates would be admitted to community colleges; and the remainder, including dropouts, would be eligible, according to their academic level, for vocational, apprenticeship, or college transition programs in Educational Skills Centers. The master plan was scheduled to be implemented in 1975.

The tiered system was designed to reconcile equality of access with excellence. Feingold was scarcely the only faculty member to have suggested one: Others, including several of the archconservatives, had proposed some sort of college preparatory institute, where students would be given remedial instruction; survivors of the course would be enrolled at City. Another group recommended the establishment of a high school affiliated with City, as Townsend Harris once had been. All of these proposals assumed a careful act of selection; underachieving students with the potential to succeed at City would be culled from the many who had fallen too far behind.

But Feingold had a deeper point to make. City College, he insisted, was not, and could not be, the place to make a stand against inner-city poverty. Feingold says, "I believed then, I believe now, and I will continue to believe that the problem was being attacked from the wrong end. The place to create equality of opportunity is birth through secondary school, not beginning at the college level. If you tried to deal with the problems of a child before the age of six, which is really where you should begin, you would be talking about cataclysmic changes in the society. But nothing short of cataclysmic change will ever produce equality of opportunity in the United States. Higher education is vulnerable to change in a way that the rest of society is not; but by that time it's too late to make a difference."

To the actors in the open admissions drama, City College appeared literally to be determining the course of history. But of course they lived inside history, and events were being driven along by larger historical forces. Throughout the twentieth century the United States had moved, with incredible speed and consistency, toward the idea of universal access to higher education. The Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 established the system of land-grant colleges; billions of dollars of expenditures by state governments produced a vast, if patchwork, system of public colleges and universities. Unlike City College, very few of these public institutions practiced selective admissions policies. Most accepted any student within the state who had completed an academic course of study in high school; and their standards tended to be governed by their egalitarian commitment. As far back

as the mid-nineteenth century the president of the University of Minnesota proudly declared, "The State Universities hold that there is no intellectual service too undignified for them to perform."

Higher education was remarkably accessible, even when few Americans availed themselves of it. In 1900 only 4 percent of eighteen- to twenty-one-year-olds were attending college, largely because so few young people graduated from high school. But as public school attendance became mandatory, and as graduation thus became commonplace, the number of college students increased astronomically. By 1920 the fraction of eighteen- to twenty-one-year-olds in college had doubled to 8 percent. By 1940, when high school enrollment had reached 73 percent, the figure for college had almost doubled again, to 14.5 percent. And by 1950, with the huge release of veterans from the service, the college-going rate had doubled again. Almost 2.5 million young people were attending college. Four and a half million veterans ultimately took advantage of the GI Bill to pursue higher education.

In the years immediately after World War II, policy makers asked a question that had never been seriously posed before: How many Americans should be able to go to college? President Harry S. Truman appointed a commission to look into the question, and at the end of 1947 the Zook Commission, as it was known for its chairman, delivered the kind of supremely confident answer that was a hallmark of postwar America: "at least 49 percent" of college-age Americans had the "mental ability" to complete a two-year post-secondary school education, and at least 32 percent were up to the demands of a liberal arts college or professional education. "Mental ability" was postwar bureaucratese for "potential." The report, titled *Higher Education for American Democracy*, called for free and universal access to schooling through the fourteenth grade, as well as an immense expansion of four-year college facilities.

The report's very title was a statement: Higher education had to serve the larger purposes of American democracy. In the postwar years, Americans would need "education for peace," for "international-mindedness," for "self-understanding." Most important of all, higher education had to accept its role as the credentialing device for the new middle-class society emerging from the war. The authors

recognized that a college degree had become, as never before, "a prerequisite to social and economic advancement"—the insight that Riesman and Jencks would formalize a generation later. And yet, the commissioners wrote, "for the great majority of our boys and girls, the kind and amount of education that they may hope to attain depends, not on their abilities, but on the family or community into which they happen to be born or, worse still, on the color of their skin or the religion of their parents."

Part of the problem was cost, for City College was unusual not only in being selective but in charging no tuition; thus the recommendation that the first half of a college education be free. Another part was accessibility, and so the commission had proposed a boom in campus construction. But perhaps the most intractable obstacle to mass college attendance was the elite character of the college itself. Many private colleges, and some public ones, had become increasingly selective as the number of applicants had skyrocketed, and had made their rigorous standards a selling point. The Zook Commission, like the sixties leftists, counted selectivity as another form of discrimination. The authors wrote that colleges "cannot continue to concentrate on students with one type of intelligence to the neglect of youth with other talents," such as "social sensitivity," "motor skills," and "mechanical aptitudes and ingenuity." Higher education for peace and self-understanding required a new kind of student, as did higher education for the ordinary citizen. America needed mass colleges for a mass society.

The Zook Commission's triumphantly middlebrow, anti-intellectual tone infuriated many people, especially in the academy. Another study, commissioned by the Rockefeller Foundation and staffed by scholars and administrators from the elite colleges, stoutly defended the academic tradition. "The primary purpose of higher education," the Rockefeller group wrote, "is the development of . . . intellectual promise and . . . [the capacity to] deal with abstract ideas." It was this traditional purpose, rather than the new credentialing function, that must determine the scope and character of higher education in the United States. Higher education would contribute to society not by widening the circle of pedigreed young people but by contributing "the trained experts, the scholars, and the leaders"

America required. The study put the number of Americans who could benefit from some form of higher education at 25 percent. A 1952 report titled *Who Should Go to College?* reached the same conclusion.

Higher education in the United States was too heterogeneous to allow one to say that one or the other of these models ultimately was adopted. But the Rockefeller panel's suggestion that college be limited to those prepared to master a liberal arts education never had a chance against the sheer national faith in the value of a college degree. The state never agreed to guarantee education beyond high school, as the Zook Commission had hoped, but it didn't matter. By 1960, 3.8 million students, and 34 percent of eighteen- to twenty-one-year-olds, were attending college. And by 1970, in a burst of growth unprecedented even by the awesome standards of past decades, the number of college students increased 124 percent to 8.5 million. Even without the governmental inducements that the Zook Commission had proposed, the numbers had outstripped the commission's own predictions. As a report by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education boasted, "The United States is creating a society in which more people will have had more education than ever before in history in any nation."

The negotiators whose ranks Stanley Feingold quit ultimately accepted what was known as the "dual admissions" formula: half of the next incoming class would be selected from essentially all-minority high schools in Manhattan and the Bronx, and the other half according to traditional criteria. It was a zero-sum solution in Solomonian form: instead of deciding between two principles, they had divided the school into two parts. But for many people who thought of City College as one of the great institutions of American culture, half a principle was almost worse than none. Every mayoral candidate, including Mayor Lindsay, denounced the accord. Representative James Scheuer called it "a shameful violation of the basic principles of a free society." The American Jewish Committee labeled the proposal a transparent form of quota. City College alumni, including the Nobelists and the left-wing intellectuals, reacted with horror. Alfred Kazin pronounced himself "thoroughly unhappy." The

head of the alumni association said that his group was "violently opposed" to the new system. A *Times* editorial criticized the plan for placing faith in "educational magic."

But for all the noise, the dual admissions plan was simply the prelude to an ultimate solution. Admissions standards could be decided only by the Board of Higher Education. When the board began to review the demands in June, it was clear that something drastic had to be done. Virtually every campus in the system had been rocked by violence and strikes. The board had to find some way of accommodating the demands for access, and it had to be done on a systemwide basis.

And yet one drastic solution contradicted another. The board couldn't adopt the quota system discussed by the City College negotiators and rejected by the faculty. Quotas were abhorrent, especially to the Jewish voters whom Mayor Lindsay was courting in his reelection bid. But neither could the board embrace Bowker's master plan, with its three tiers of educational opportunity. Minorities wouldn't stand for it. State senator Basil Paterson, then the most important black political figure in New York, had said, "I will not be able to support any system of open admissions which turns out to be a continuation of the second-class, vocationally-oriented, dead-end policy prevalent in our public high school system for Black and Puerto Rican youth."

And at this point the particular set of circumstances that had produced City's racial standoff was overtaken by the larger dynamic of growth, both within CUNY and nationally. There were constituencies that had no interest in the civil rights issues, but great interest in expanded access to higher education. Harry van Arsdale, the immensely powerful president of the Central Labor Council of the city's unions, had opposed the quota proposal but observed that the senior college's high standards had denied admission to "thousands and thousands of youngsters who do not have the marks, but who might become good students"—the children, that is, of his largely white ethnic members. And what constituencies were there to support the principle of high standards when it was opposed, not by fist-brandishing militants, but by working-class New Yorkers upholding the national tradition of ready access to higher education? None,

except the faculty, students, and alumni of the colleges. And so the obvious solution was to admit more minority students into the senior colleges and more nonminority children, thus circumventing the dangerous issue of equity and threatening only the colleges' standards.

In early July the board announced its decision: "We have concluded that the City University should initiate an open admissions policy as soon as practicable." This last phrase meant that open admissions would be instituted not in 1975, as the master plan had foreseen, but in 1970. Nor was the board merely accelerating the Bowker plan. The board directed that admissions criteria be designed so that all high school graduates could enroll in a college program; "standards of academic excellence" be maintained; all colleges be ethnically integrated; and no student be denied a place he or she would have had under the previous criteria. The board, in other words, insisted that all of the contradictory impulses that had propelled the debate be simultaneously accommodated. Ethnic integration meant that minority students would not be confined to the lower reaches of a hierarchical system; the Skills Centers had been dropped altogether. The last stricture meant "no losers." The system would simply expand—the deus ex machina of the 1960s.

Since there really was no way to reconcile open admissions, integration, and standards, the board, like the City College negotiators, came to no conclusion on how best to do it. That was left to a Commission on Admissions, which spent the summer and fall wrangling bitterly over the details. The commission discovered that it would be impossible to achieve an acceptable level of integration simply by lowering the required grade-point average, because so few minority students graduated even with a 75 average. Class rank would have to be included as well. But even taking all students in the top half of the class would be insufficient, because too many minority students were concentrated in the bottom half of their class.

In the scheme finally adopted by the board, every student with an average of 80 or more or a standing in the top half of the graduating class would be assured a place in one of the senior colleges. Full integration would be achieved by admitting thousands more through special programs like SEEK. Everyone else would be guaranteed a seat in a community college. The system not only was much

less stratified than the one that obtained in California but also was less concerned with protecting standards than with helping students achieve their ambition. In California it was very difficult to move from the two-year to the four-year system; in CUNY's open admissions plan, community college graduates would be automatically accepted at senior college with full credit. And while half of each freshman class routinely flunked out at many midwestern universities that functioned under a state-mandated open enrollment system, CUNY agreed to give all incoming students a one-year grace period. In other words, CUNY committed itself not only to accepting a vast cadre of new students but to advancing them toward a bachelor's degree.

The open admissions plan was to be implemented in the fall of 1970, a year from the time it was conceived. The change was so drastic, and the time given to adjust to it so short, that many of the students' supporters accused CUNY of trying to discredit the reform by introducing it in an impracticable way. They hadn't sought open admissions, they pointed out; they simply wanted to increase the representation of black and Puerto Rican students. But if they got more than they bargained for, it was because they hadn't fully reckoned with the historical forces that lay behind their own demands. Open admissions lay at the convergence of several powerful trends—the century-long movement toward mass higher education, the changing demographics of the American city, the critique of meritocratic distinctions, a growing sense of obligation toward the black poor, and CUNY's own expansionism.

City College's admissions policies had to change, although the old guard couldn't admit that this was so. But they didn't have to change in the way that they had. Without the lockout, City's, and CUNY's, admissions policies would have evolved over a period of years rather than being dismantled overnight. More important, CUNY would have adopted a different model—the 1968 master plan, or the California model, or one of the alternatives devised during the debate. Any of these models would have reflected more conservative assumptions about what a college education could do for ill-schooled eighteen-year-olds. But the lockout, and the ensuing negotiations, produced a fait accompli that could not be undone. It

fostered an atmosphere of intimidation and blackmail within which realism came to sound like racism. And it provoked larger forces that transformed the demand for affirmative action into a demographic free-for-all. And so open admissions, in the form it took at CUNY, became perhaps the most improbable and radically idealistic experiment in the history of American higher education.

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## 4

### Paradise Lost

In the fall of 1970, open admissions hit the City College campus like the D-day landing. The previous fall 1,752 new students had registered for class; now the figure was 2,742, an increase of almost 60 percent. The freshman class would peak in 1971 at 3,216, and then fall off, for the simple reason that City College was not built for the volume of students considered normal in the Big Ten. Chaos reigned: Students stood in line for hours, sometimes for an entire day, just to register. The college rented space in a building down the hill at 134th Street to accommodate overflow classes. Great Hall, the cavernous space in Shepherd where grand and bitter debates had been staged for sixty years, was divided by partitions into a dozen classrooms. City had always been bulging at the edges and out at the elbows; but now the school felt like a rushing, bellowing madhouse. If the Board of Higher Education had decided to punish City for its impertinence, it had succeeded admirably.

But even monumental inconvenience seemed trivial compared to the change in the school's demographics. By 1969, City College was no longer all white, but most of the black and Puerto Rican students lived in the separate world of the SEEK program. In 1970

the number of SEEK students almost tripled, to 2,000; and the number of non-SEEK minority students tripled as well, to 15 percent of the entering class. Nowhere else in the CUNY system were the changes quite so stark; City's location in the middle of the black ghetto, and adjacent to the black and Hispanic slum areas of the Bronx, meant that it received a disproportionate number of minority students. The fraction of Catholics at City also rose from 23 percent to 43 percent. The Catholics, ironically, were numerically the greatest beneficiaries of the Board of Higher Education's decision to lower admission standards rather than to institute a minority quota. Some left-wing members of the faculty were heard to grumble that they hadn't planned to teach "white trash." But Harry van Arsdale had gotten the drop on them.

Family income among CUNY students had been creeping toward middle-class levels in recent years, but open admissions returned the school to its proletarian past. In 1970, median family income among Jewish CUNY students was \$12,000, and among Catholics, \$10,300, but among black open admissions students it was \$6,700, and slightly less for Puerto Ricans. These students not only were economically disadvantaged but were, by definition, academically disadvantaged as well. The number of incoming students with high school averages under 80 went from 124 in 1969 to 1,473 the next year. Among SEEK students the median average was close to 70, since they now had to fall below the new admissions standards. And the A students started going to Queens College, or SUNY, or private colleges. In a pattern that held ominous implications for the future, the better a student did in high school, the less likely he was to choose to attend City. By 1972, well over half of the student body had scored under 80 in high school.

The faculty and staff had a year to brace for the vast tide of unprepared students, but they still were swamped. City had never needed a remedial program before; freshman composition had been abolished, in a burst of liberal reform, just before the open admissions battle. Now remedial programs were drawn up in math, writing, and "college skills." All entering students were given evaluation tests. In the first year of open admissions, 90 percent of those 2,700 incoming students were assigned to at least one remedial course—a fraction

that implied either that many traditional City students needed special help or that the remedial standards were too strict. By the next year the figure was down to three-quarters.

City College's academic mission changed overnight, not by design but by sheer force of circumstance. Seventy percent of English courses had traditionally been given in literature, and 30 percent in writing; open admissions reversed the ratio. Electives in English and some of the other humanities fields rapidly became vestigial, because the new students viewed education in almost exclusively instrumental, vocational terms. Older faculty members, especially, were appalled. One of the shibboleths of the time was that physics professors taught graduate seminars in the morning and algebra in the afternoon, though in fact almost all of the remedial math teaching was conducted by the Math Department. But the underlying truth was that scholars who propagated "the best that is thought and said" — or at least felt that they did—found themselves training students in the fundamentals.

It was in many ways the worst of times, and in no way the best. Conservatives on the faculty enjoyed the grim satisfaction of seeing their predictions of catastrophe realized in full. Their memoirs bear titles such as *The End of Education* and *The Death of the University*, testifying not only to their bitterness but to the implicit assumption that City College had a symbolic dimension that gave a global significance to local events. What they recalled of that time were sneering, illiterate students and fellow-traveling junior faculty, the collapse of standards, and the demise of an old reverence for learning. Many older members of the faculty felt that the commitments of a lifetime were being mocked and belittled. The wounds from the sixties' revolt against authority were still fresh when they turned to face the crisis provoked by open admissions.

Warfare raged within the faculty. At a debate held at the Bronx High School of Science, Howard Adelson, a rather magisterial historian of the Middle Ages and a former officer in the Air Reserves, an Old Believer in the City College orthodoxy, told a packed hall of students and parents, "City College is decaying. It is no longer the school it was, and its future is bleak." For generations Bronx Science had supplied City with a constant stream of brilliant students, just as

Exeter and Andover had done for Harvard. In recent years the contingent had shrunk to a dozen or two. Now Adelson recommended that Bronx Science graduates go not to City but to Queens, the whitest and most middle-class of the senior colleges. City College president Robert Marshak, who had come to debate Adelson, angrily insisted that City College had a new mission, and that it was performing it ably under trying circumstances. Marshak never forgave Adelson for what he considered an act of treachery; Adelson, in turn, savaged the college president regularly in his column in the *Jewish Press*.

The History Department, where Adelson had been teaching for twenty years, broke down under the sheer weight of ideological difference and personal hatred. The fact that they were historians only made matters worse, since the Left and Right factions naturally interpreted the events they had been witnessing in completely opposite terms—as a capitulation to racial fear and racial politics on the one side, and as a new phase of empowerment, of class self-assertion, on the other. The invective came to a head in a battle over control of the department, a mock-epic war that might have come straight from the pages of *Tom Jones*. One of the conservatives, Stanley Page, claimed that he had been punched in the stomach by the chief of the radicals, a woman. Liberal and left-wing members of the department denounced Page in the letters column of the *Campus*; one questioned whether he was “mentally competent” to teach. It would be many years before hostilities subsided.

And it was still a bad time for the people in the middle. The career of Theodore Gross, who became chairman of the English Department in 1970 and was later dean of humanities, became a sort of cautionary tale of the decline of the liberal center. Gross’s academic field was black literature, and like Stanley Feingold he considered himself a member of City’s liberal wing. But it was also his job to oversee the new remedial writing program, and he was stunned by the near illiteracy of many of the new students. In his 1980 memoirs, cautiously titled *Academic Turmoil*, he wrote that “the problem of Open Admissions students that controlled all others was a weak command of the language.” Gross accepted the validity of teaching basic language skills in college; but the effort, he concluded, simply didn’t work:

When we failed to bring students to the accepted level of literacy, we blamed ourselves—we hadn’t been adequately trained or we lacked patience or our standards were set too high too quickly.

But in fact we had false expectations. . . . [The students’] entire miseducation and bookless past rose up to haunt them, and all the audio-visual aids and writing laboratories and simplified curriculum materials we tried could not work the miracle. The mistake was to think that this language training would be preparation for college education when what we were really instilling was a fundamental literacy that would allow social acculturation to occur. We were preparing our students to be the parents of college students, not to be students themselves.

In 1978 Gross wrote an essay titled “Open Admissions: A Confessional Meditation.” In January of the next year it appeared in *Saturday Review* under the title “How to Kill a College.” The cover of the issue showed a dagger, dripping in blood, plunged into the facade of a college building. Gross was not, in fact, a member of the death-of-the-university wing of the faculty, and he was horrified at the treatment; but in his essay he disclosed his deep sense of ambivalence about open admissions. Among the more impolitic passages was his observation that many of the new minority students came from families “in which television and radio were the exclusive sources of information.”

Gross had said nothing that many, perhaps most, members of the faculty considered wrong; but he had said out loud what until then had been conveyed in whispers. Like Stanley Feingold before him, he had violated the taboo against discussing the limits of the remedial process. And, like Feingold, Gross became an enemy of the people. At a mass demonstration in his office, militant students denounced him as a racist; faculty members did their denunciations by mail. Gross desperately pointed to the work of a lifetime to show that he was scarcely unsympathetic to the plight of minority students. It was fruitless. In a letter to the *Saturday Review*, President Marshak declared that “Dean Gross’s use of sexual, racial and religious stereotypes is profoundly offensive to our student body and faculty.”

Marshak felt that Gross had betrayed his trust and the college itself. In late April, Marshak informed Gross that he was fired as dean. Gross left on a sabbatical and never came back.

In *Academic Turmoil* Gross went to far greater lengths than he had in the magazine article to underscore his belief in open admissions, criticisms notwithstanding. "Educating the parents of college students," he wrote, "is a worthy social function for any institution of learning." He spoke of the historical inevitability of open admissions and described it as an experiment "fundamentally in the American grain." A conservative book reviewer accused Gross of losing his nerve. Perhaps he had; he had felt the tightening of the screws of ideological compliance. But Gross was also an agonized liberal, like Buell Gallagher and Stanley Feingold, and he was torn between an a priori faith in that American grain—the grain of optimism and inclusiveness—and the terrible evidence of his own eyes. Open admissions was an easy call for the Left and the Right; for liberals, it was torment.

It was impossible to dispute Gross's claim that City College was not the place it had been. Students still took courses, or even majors, in philosophy and history and physics; but the task of City had become increasingly a remedial one. By 1975, 45 percent of students were beginning their careers in remedial math, writing, and reading. And very few of them were emerging from these courses as traditional City College students. A 1972 study found that the College Skills course made a "small but significant difference" in student performance in nonremedial courses, and Basic Writing made none at all. Three-quarters of students going from remedial to nonremedial math flunked. Averages were dropping every year, as were graduation rates. In the late 1960s between three-quarters and four-fifths of students graduated, generally in four years. But after four years only one-third of the class of 1970 had graduated; only a half remained in school. A 1981 study put the graduation rate for black open admissions students at 22 percent, and at 19 percent for Puerto Rican students.

There was an alternative point of view about open admissions: that City College *shouldn't* remain the place it had been. City had

to be a new kind of college for a new kind of student. In a 1974 article in *Daedalus* Robert Marshak argued that it was time "to redefine the traditional model of the 'educable' by reaching out to students of all ages, backgrounds and degrees of preparation in the metropolitan area and to turn out well-educated graduates who will serve the city with diligence and dedication." Marshak took up a call first issued by Clark Kerr, president of the Carnegie Foundation, for the establishment of the "Urban-Grant College," an inner-city version of the land-grant colleges. Marshak embarked on a campaign to transform City into the first such school, dedicated not only to educating underprivileged youth but to dealing with problems of urban blight. He was trying, in effect, to reimagine higher education in the democratic and egalitarian form envisioned by the Zook Commission. But the "urban educational model," as Marshak called his grand design, was never realized, owing in part to public skepticism and in part to a lack of money.

The fierce debate over the virtues of open admissions in the 1970s, a debate that took place not only in dueling memoirs but in innumerable symposia and foundation reports and scholarly studies and magazine articles, offered a kind of recapitulation of the positions taken by the Zook and the Rockefeller groups. The question of who should receive higher education was an indirect way of asking what higher education was for. Conservative critics continued to argue that the purpose of college was the propagation and the pursuit of learning. Martin Trow, a Berkeley sociologist, wrote in 1970, "I believe we are seeing the consequences of the profound error of prescribing for half, and in some states for 70-80 percent, of the age-grade a form and content of education that closely resembles the bookish, traditional academic education that was designed for 5-10-15 percent of the age-grade."

Not only the Left, but some traditional liberals as well, asserted that this bookish tradition was an anachronism, and probably a myth. Timothy Healy, the vice chancellor of CUNY and later the president of Georgetown University, claimed in a 1973 article in *Change* magazine that the "patronizing collegiate stance" of selectivity and standards had more to do with institutional self-aggrandizement than with scholarship. For several generations, Healy noted, colleges had



been a willing adjunct to the labor market: "In addition to keeping the nation's culture, the colleges also keep the keys to the treasure chests." And this being so, "the pressure on students to get in is a matter not of prestige but of survival."

Healy was echoing the point made by Jerome Karabel: Once it was understood that colleges had long served a credentialing function, their defense against the claims of open admissions vanished. How could higher education refuse its role as a weapon in the war on poverty if it already served as a middle-class entitlement program? Higher education was reinforcing likely outcomes instead of altering them. Alexander Astin, a careful student of admissions policies and the demographics of higher education, compared the selective college to a funnel, with good students going in one end and out the other, and the typical admissions officer to a handicapper, "picking winners." Astin suggested an alternative model, in which colleges would select those students most likely to be positively affected by the experience rather than most likely to succeed.

And yet neither Astin nor Healy nor Marshak nor Karabel believed that the new model of higher education required a wholesale reduction in academic standards. They felt that colleges could be far more inclusive without becoming less intellectually serious. Healy admitted that "there is little that open admissions can do to turn the high schools around," but he was confident, as Marshak was, that open admissions would vindicate the educability of the new student. The question itself struck Healy as a form of obfuscation raised by the guardians of the status quo—just as it had Bruce Hare and so many black students at City College. But this was too easy a form of dismissal. Riesman and Jencks, for all their attack on the academic meritocracy, had also expressed a dim view of the powers of remedial education.

City College's own experience seemed to be confirming the fears rather than the hopes. Yet there were tantalizing hints that remediation might not be quite so futile as Gross and others took it to be. Mina Shaughnessy, the director of City's Basic Writing program, said that after less than a year of remedial work a group of her students had outperformed nonremedial students on a writing test. Shaughnessy had gathered a group of gifted and idealistic

teachers around her; their experiments in teaching writing to semi-literate students offered thrilling anecdotes to those who believed that higher education could make winners rather than simply pick them. Healy wrote of Shaughnessy's efforts, "A straw in the wind? Perhaps, but also a demonstration that new methods and good teaching can work wonders."

But the experiment came to an abrupt end. In 1976, with New York City having come within a whisker of bankruptcy, CUNY's budget was slashed by a third. The system actually shut down for the first two weeks in June. City fired fifty-nine nontenured faculty members, including virtually the entire cadre of dedicated teachers whom Shaughnessy had assembled. And it wasn't only the remedial commitment that was circumscribed. To reduce the flow of students to the senior colleges, and to raise their level, admissions standards were changed to admit the top third, rather than the top half, of graduating classes. And in a decision that was no less shocking for being inevitable, CUNY ended its tradition of free tuition. That tradition, at City College, was over 125 years old. Tuition would be only \$900 a year, and state grants were generally available to cover much of the cost, but a higher education was no longer available to all who qualified.

Open admissions was dead, or so said its partisans. Technically, of course, open admissions had never applied to the senior colleges, but only to CUNY as a whole. At a place like City the phrase really denoted the vastly greater ease of access that came with lowered admissions standards and the huge increase in the SEEK population. Despite the imposition of tuition and the tightening of admissions standards at the senior colleges, CUNY still offered a place to every high school graduate, and City was still radically more accessible than it had been before 1970; and so it was appropriate to keep using the term *open admissions* in its loose sense. But what the partisans really meant was that the open admissions experiment was meaningless without massive funding for remediation; to cut off funds was to preclude success and instead to establish a self-fulfilling prophecy.

But was that so? If the cuts had never happened, would the Basic Writing program have proved that potential, like rocky soil, is perfectly cultivable so long as you have the right tools? Or did the

problem also reside in the hardness of the job itself? Open admissions proved to be a chastening experience for some of the most idealistic people at City College. Leonard Kriegel, the English professor who had rhapsodized over his 1964 class on Emerson, was an ardent champion of open admissions and a barn-burning orator in the late 1960s. He had eagerly signed up when Mina Shaughnessy asked him to teach Basic Writing, and he dedicated his memoirs of the time to her. Now Kriegel says, "You wanted so desperately for this to work. The educational Left decided that potential was reality. Never mind that the kid was functionally illiterate; he's really brilliant. Anyone who says that the students I was teaching in 1974 were as good as the students I was teaching in 1964 is either a liar or is perpetuating an out-and-out illusion."

Kriegel was another poor Jewish boy from the Bronx who had made good. He was a well-known essayist and an authentic member of the New York intelligentsia. And his politics were founded on a visceral identification with the disadvantaged. He couldn't deny the evidence of his senses, as so many ideologues could, but neither could he abandon the ideals represented by open admissions. And so Kriegel, like Ted Gross, came to feel that open admissions didn't work but was the right thing anyway. "The previous system was immoral," Kriegel concludes, "and that made open admissions necessary. You knew that the standards were changing. You had to have the honesty to admit that, and know that it was worth it. I compare it to the 40 years in the wilderness. They had to have a long transition period."

In the early 1970s open admissions was a burning, bitter issue for policy intellectuals, fraught with symbolic overtones. Like school desegregation, the other great issue of the day, it represented a massive attempt by the state to transform the lives of the poor by giving them access to a good enjoyed by the middle class. In fact open admissions was often posed as the means to desegregate higher education. For people on the Left, open admissions represented the commitment, begun in the civil rights era, to confer full citizenship on black Americans. For conservatives it represented the vanity of social engineering and the breakdown of the liberal state in the face

of impossible demands. And this was especially true for the neoconservatives who considered themselves the heirs of an abandoned tradition of postwar liberalism. Many of the neoconservatives were City College alumni like Irving Kristol and Seymour Martin Lipset. For them, City College's demise was of a piece with what they saw as the collapse of national values in the 1960s.

In 1972 the Council for Basic Education, a Washington-based think tank, sponsored a symposium on open admissions in which Kristol was one of half a dozen panelists. Kristol denounced open admissions as "a fraud." And it was, he continued, a fraud with a critically important moral: "To think that you can take large numbers of students from a poor socio-economic background, who do badly in high school, who do badly on all your standardized tests . . . who show no promise, and who do not show much motivation—to think you can take large numbers of such students and somehow make them benefit from a college education instead of merely wasting their time and their money, I say that this is demonstrably false. . . . Schools just cannot do that much and colleges simply cannot accomplish this mission." Kristol conceded that his skepticism about the power of institutions "runs against the grain of our American ideology—by now an American instinct—which asserts that it is always in man's power to abolish injustice and inequity, if only the will to justice and equity is strong enough." But, he said, "that proposition, quintessentially American though it be, happens to be false."

This was too much for Kenneth Clark, the black psychologist whose research had been instrumental in shaping the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Clark had taught at City College for decades, and he insisted that Kristol and others were gilding City's past with retrospective glory in order to discredit the present. Like so many other supporters of open admissions, Clark asserted that higher education had never performed the intellectual function that the neoconservatives were now urging on it. He had, he said, "given up" trying to infuse scholarly values into higher education, "because I think a more concrete and immediate battle is to open up higher education in America on what I consider questionable values . . . to a larger proportion of the American people." Here

was the argument for credentialism in pure form—open admissions without illusions.

But Clark had devoted his entire career to proving that disadvantaged children were victims of their environment, and to arguing for reform of that environment. If he was cynical about the values of the academy, he was deeply idealistic about the human capacity for change and growth—about potential. "Institutions, and particularly schools, do perform miracles," Clark retorted to Kristol. "And one of the miracles which I think he is ignoring is the miracle of taking a precious human being and dehumanizing him. . . . A kind of amoral cynicism permits this miracle to continue when it actually could be remedied and solved, and I think those of us who believe that institutions are important in affecting lives of human beings cannot permit ourselves to be seduced by your perspective."

Open admissions was one of those fundamental questions about which, finally, you had to make an almost existential choice. Realism said: It doesn't work. Idealism said: It *must*.

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## Part II

# The Remedial Underworld