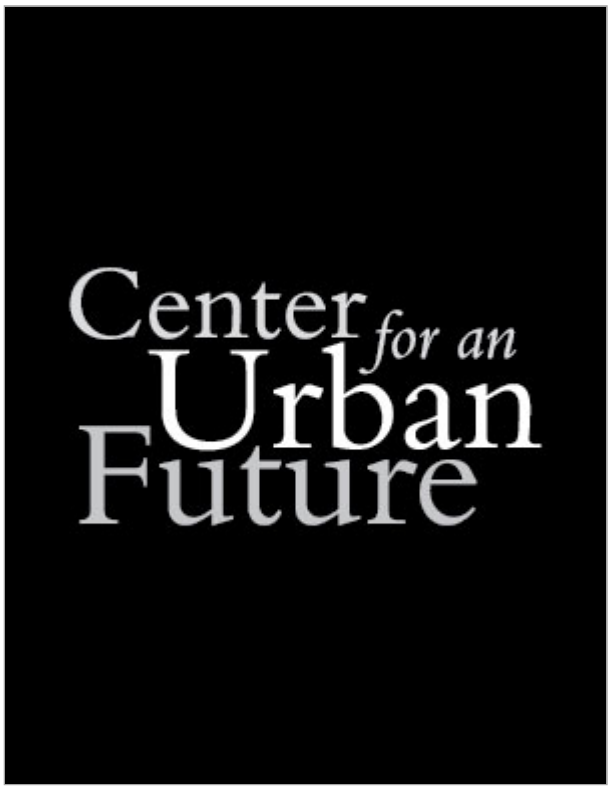

Commentary/Op-Ed - February 2008

Q&A with Matthew Goldstein, chancellor of CUNY

As part of our series of Q&A's with New York City innovators, entrepreneurs and policy experts, the Center's Jonathan Bowles interviews Matthew Goldstein about CUNY's recent accomplishments, the university's role in the city's changing economy and Governor Spitzer's new higher education initiatives.

by Jonathan Bowles

When Matthew Goldstein was appointed Chancellor of the City University of New York in 1999, the nation's largest and most diverse urban public university had just gone through a bruising campaign to end remedial education at its four-year colleges. Nearly a decade later, CUNY has put that controversial chapter behind it and is basking in widespread acclaim for progress it has made on a number of fronts. The Center for an Urban Future's Jonathan Bowles recently sat down with Chancellor Goldstein to find out which accomplishments he's most proud of, what challenges still remain, what role he sees for CUNY in the city's changing economy and what he thinks of Governor Spitzer's new initiatives to support higher education in the state.

CUF: You graduated from City College. How has CUNY changed since then?

MG: I started at City College in 1959; I was there for 4 years, finishing in 63. I studied primarily mathematics, statistics and probability. I took the train everyday to school.

CUF: Where were you commuting from?

MG: Sheepshead Bay.

CUF: That's a long ride to City College.

MG: Yes, but I had no choice really. Either you had the academic record to get in to a city college or I don't know what Iwould have done. And while I was attending City College, I worked.

CUF: What kind of job did you have while in school?

MG: I was bus boy, a waiter and I worked at a factory that manufactured sweaters. In the summer, I played the saxophone, clarinet and flute at bar mitzvahs, weddings and confirmations.

CUF: Interesting. So beyond your job, what had changed when you came back to the institution as Chancellor in 1999?

MG: Oh, this is a totally different place. The students in my class were largely white, largely male and they were eitherJewish or Italian or Irish. There were very few African Americans, Hispanics and Asian students. It was dominated by men. And it was small. The college itself only had a few thousand students. We now have 23 campuses; we have about 230,000 plus students studying for a degree and an equivalent number taking continuing education programs, which didn't exist when I was at City College. Today we have more women studying than men, we have more languages spoken, and people who are new immigrants to this city. Many of our students come from very modest backgrounds. The major challenge of this university today, which is very different than when I went to City College, is about variance.

CUF: What do you mean by that?

MG: When I went to CCNY, there was very small variance. People came from similar backgrounds, from a similar economic position, looked very similar to one another, and were prepared probably comparably to do the work challenges that we had.

CUF: How has that become a challenge?

MG: Many students come in with severe remedial needs, for several reasons. Some have very poor training academically in the countries where they grew up, and when they come here as new immigrants to the city, language is a problem and their academic background is a problem. There are also students who were born in this country, but have gone through several generations of poverty, poor education and sub-optimal living conditions that urban America has. There are a whole bunch of pathologies and characteristics that account for their inability to come to a university and be prepared to do good work. On the other hand, we have students of exquisite academic background who, if they wished to exercise that option, would be very seriously considered by the most selective institutions in the U.S. Between those two book ends is a whole distribution of thousands of stories and characteristics. So you have this very wide dispersion of readiness to study and poverty as opposed to people who come from middle or upper middle class families that can devote total time to their studies.

CUF: Is there one program that you have helped to institute at CUNY that you're particularly proud of?

MG: Convincing the state's Board of Regents to amend our master plan to allow us to place at our senior colleges work that was truly defined as baccalaureate work, and remanding work that was below baccalaureate work to institutions that can best do that. That was the so-called remediation policy and it was a major battle that lasted for a good year.

CUF: What outcomes are you proudest of?

MG: When I came in, the law school had a pass rate of maybe in the 60s on the Bar exam. I was seriously concerned about that for a long time, and finally we were able to attract a fabulous dean – Michelle Anderson, a Yale law school graduate who had a very good career at another law school. In a very short period, we are now above the median in pass rates in New York. Pass rates are 82.75 percent, which is the highest in the history of the law school. Pass rates on the teacher certification exams is another thing. When we came in they were appalling. Now we are hovering in the high 90 percents—97 or 98 percent of the students that go through our program pass the two certification exams which enable them to be practicing teachers with a New York State license. Also, when we came here in 1999, there was very little money raised from alumni and friends of the university. We cannot move this university and invest in things that we need to invest in without having private money.

CUF: And that has changed?

MG: We just completed a $1.2 billion campaign, four years earlier than anyone believed that we could do it. We are now raising between $250 and $300 million a year. When we came in in 1999, it was probably under $10 to $15 million a year. The other things that I am proud of are the new institutions that we've established: an honors college, a graduate school of Journalism, a school of professional studies. We are going to be launching a new graduate school of public health. Also, the big investments that we are going to be making over the next several years in the sciences.

CUF: What are disappointments for you?

MG: I still am not happy about retention rates. I am still not happy about graduation rates. Those, to me, are critically important, because getting a degree matters. And yes, they will get something out of attending an institution, and it will be a positive impact on their lives, but it is not going to do the same if they don't get their degree. I would love to see more students staying the course and finishing up their degree. There is still much that we need to do at this university, that we have control over, that we need to push even further, to help that student get that degree.

CUF: What's still needed to make CUNY a top tier university?

MG: It's going to require substantial investment, and a courage to stand up on a regular basis—and not just my courage, but also the courage of our board—not to be persuaded by voices that don't like this movement of accountability and success. And it's going to require a lot of money. Most of our progress to date in this administration has been done by what I would call "enlightened management," of reshaping the priorities, and reshaping the budgets that we have to work with, with little private money and no real investment on the public side. We're raising serious money and I think the political environment is much more supportive of this university now because they feel part of its renaissance and renewal. But while we are making progress, some of the most elite universities are making quantum leaps in progress because of the capital appreciation on their very large endowments. I am hopeful because this governor cares deeply about higher education, which is reflected in his support of his commission on higher education, of which I was a member. If we get the investment that the commission recommends, that is going to be the wind that we need to project forward.

CUF: What's your reaction to the Higher Education Commission report and what the Governor and Legislature have said they will do to support its recommendations?

MG: I commend Governor Spitzer for the creation of the Commission. His desire for bold recommendations to improvehigher education in the state, especially within its public systems, signals the importance of our colleges and universities to the future of New York State and reinforces the critical role of government in developing public systems of national repute. The commission's preliminary report offers a historic opportunity for this state. The report is crystal clear on two points: one, New York's system of higher education has not kept pace with many of the leading public universities. And two, SUNY and CUNY have a chronic problem: too little revenue, too little investment, and too much regulation. The Governor is working to create an endowment that will help support the Commission's recommendations which include a New York State Compact for Public Higher Education based on the CUNY model. This is our time to set a new course. This is the time to strengthen CUNY and SUNY.

CUF: Does CUNY, and higher education in general, get the attention it deserves?

MG: There is, in this city and in this state, a tremendous asymmetry between the attention and the investment in lower education versus higher education. That is unquestionable. When you see the amount of money that has been invested in lower education, and the amount of investment in higher education, it is a tale of two worlds. It's almost as if we are living in parallel universes, where one is very well fed, and one starves.

CUF: Why is this?

MG: I think you have to go back in time. The northeast established its higher education community around privateuniversities – i.e. the Ivy League institutions—not public universities. It wasn't until the 1960s that CUNY was actually created as a full university. The SUNY system came even later. So we are relative newcomers into higher education in this region. Go out of this region and it's a totally different story. In Michigan, it's hard to think of a great private university; the University of Michigan is the powerhouse. And the University of Wisconsin at Madison is the powerhouse in that state, as is the University of North Carolina, the University of Virginia and the University of Texas in those states. In California, Stanford was not what it is today 40 or 50 years ago. Berkeley was there well before as a prominent place in that state.

It wasn't until after World War II when the explosion of new public universities all over the United States and in this city occurred. Our population had increased dramatically and the demand for education increased, but particularly among students who did not have access to private institutions. In New York, the public universities were building buildings and absorbing lots of students. But at some point, the state, with all of the new population it was accruing, started to have issues with transportation, criminal justice, healthcare, infrastructure and lower education. You then had all of these competitors now taking the oxygen out of the room, and there was less oxygen for public universities. What public universities could do, that others could not, was generate revenue by charging tuition. When I went to City College, it was free. Today, it is not free. When I went to school, it was all state or city supported. Now, it's about 40 percent from the public sector and the rest is from tuition and other revenue. So, yes, there is a wake-up call that's needed.

CUF: What role does the city play in CUNY's overall budget?

MG: The city of New York virtually puts in nothing to our senior colleges. When I say nothing, they support some programs, but nothing directly into the operating budget. They do fund a part of the operating budget of our six community colleges. After the city went through the fiscal crisis in the 1970s, the state took on the responsibility.

CUF: Does this still make sense today?

MG: I'd like to see the city be a much bigger participant in helping to support the City University of New York.

CUF: How would you make that case?

MG: We are the last chance for thousands of students to get the kind of training they need to participate in the innovation economy. And I think that we have to wake up people in the state and the city to the vital role that this university plays in the economic future of not only its citizens and the people who come to this city to change their lives, but for the future fiscal health of this region as well.

CUF: What role is CUNY already playing in city's economy?

MG: We are the engine that educates people with skills and ideas that then become honed so people can get out in the marketplace and participate in advancing the goals of companies here. We train so that people can get jobs that companies need. If businesses don't have an educated workforce, they're not going to stay in this city, they're going to go where the educated workforce it.

CUF: Can you point to specific industries where CUNY is helping to make a difference?

MG: I can't think of an industry that isn't loaded with people who either got degrees or some training at this university. We are probably the largest supplier of teachers. The financial services industry is loaded with people who are trained at CUNY institutions. So is media—including advertising, broadcasting, cable companies, magazines and newspapers—and hospitals, from physicians and scientists down to nurses and others that take care of patients. In addition to that, we do a lot of

workforce training. And our school of professional studies is involved in upgrading skills for workers at many city and state agencies. We are probably more embedded into the economic life of this city than any other place.

CUF: Do you think that that message has gotten out?

MG: Quite frankly, I don't think that enough people in government fully appreciate how deep we are into the life of this city. I think everybody really appreciates the hard work that collectively we have done, but I don't think a lot of people fully understand how much we really do that affects the economic vitality of this city. And, it is enormous, it is deep, it is historic and it is sustainable.

CUF: You mentioned continuing education. Are those programs more important in today's economy?

MG: We have about 230,000 degree seeking students—in programs that lead to an Associate, Baccalaureate, Master's, PhD or professional degree. We have an equivalent number that are coming to the University for continuing professional development. Many of them are working and many have degrees already; they come here because they want to change jobs or advance in their career. For example, somebody gets interested in working in the telecommunications area, or in software development. We have certificate programs that work with Google, Microsoft, and other software companies to certify that these students have gone through a program—not leading to a degree, but leading to a certification that they have taken a body of courses that will credential them to work in a particular field. We are loaded with those kinds of certificate programs.

CUF: And that's a big change.

MG: That is a huge change. The other thing that we haven't even talked about is the closeness that we have with the city's Department of Education. We run about 18 high schools for the Department of Education. We have a College Now program which has over 50,000 students. These are students that are in high school.

CUF: Why are programs like College Now important?

MG: So many of the students graduating from high school today are not prepared to do college level work. Many of the youngsters who are studying in the city's public schools come from families that have very little connection with universities. Their parents did not go to a college or a university and they often don't have friends or extended family who did either. College Now introduces somebody who is in high school to this thing called a university. We try to intervene early to assist them in their basic skills so that when they do graduate from a DOE school they have a leg up in passing the entrance exams that we have. We help make the transition to the university easier. We also have a large group of students in College Now who are more academically prepared, and are ready to take college level work.

CUF: In several other states, government leaders and the business community seems to see community colleges as an important partner when it comes to economic and workforce development. I'm not sure that focus is the same here.

MG: In general, this city and others don't fully take advantage of what is available in the community colleges. One problemwe have is a problem nationally. Only about 1 out of 5 students at two-year institutions graduate in two years. When you take it up to 5 years or 6 years, the graduation rate jumps maybe 10 or 15 points. This is a serious issue that pushes some people away from community colleges.

There are legitimate reasons for this. Many students come in very poorly prepared, so we have to remediate them with work that is not college work. That can take a year or a year and a half. Also, the students are often poor; there is a big difference between the economic profile of a student that goes to a place like Borough of Manhattan Community College, Bronx Community College or Hostos Community College and someone that's at Hunter or Baruch. Many have to work while they are going to school, and that's a serious issue. And they are not well funded, so we can't give a wide spectrum of courses

over a wide number of hours during the day. You put all of that stuff together and it adds up. And then there are students who go to community colleges without the intention of getting a degree. Those are all legitimate reasons why graduation rates are low. But that is not going to succeed in convincing the market place that these are serious places that deserve investment. If we get graduation rates up, community colleges are going to be viewed in a very different way. So we have to get graduation rates up. I can't do anything about the economic profile of a student, but I can do something about helping them to succeed in their courses. I can do something about scheduling these courses to make it easier for them to study, rather than for some other constituency. And we actually have programs now that were funded by Mayor Bloomberg—we call it ASAP, Accelerated Study of Associate programs.

All of that said, a lot of businesses do come to partner with our community colleges. There are a lot of students that take the AAS program, which is a design program for a job—whether it's learning to be an optician, a sous-chef, to work in a textile organization or technology companies. We have those programs, and they flourish. We need to do more of that, but we need to get our academic house in order. And it's not just we, it's every community college around the United States.

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