

The New Community College at CUNY and the Common Good

by Bill Rosenthal and Emily Schnee

On a prime site in Manhattan, a block from the lions guarding the New York Public Library, the City University of New York (CUNY) opened its newest community college in the fall of 2012. Designed to achieve greater student success, as measured through increased graduation rates, the New Community College at CUNY (NCC) is seen as a beacon of hope in the otherwise daunting picture of community-college education nationally. Funded by deep-pocketed “reformers” such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Lumina Foundation, and most recently the Stella and Charles Guttman Foundation,¹ and lauded in the *New York Times* for its work with disadvantaged students,² NCC serves as an example of the national movement towards restructuring public higher education.

This article tells a cautionary tale, from two founding faculty members’ perspectives, of the first two years of NCC and how its innovative educational design was undermined by CUNY’s organizational imperatives. In practice, the absence of shared governance and the hiring of an entirely untenured founding faculty compromised the educational mission of the college and established harmful precedents for faculty and students at the largest urban public university in this country. The NCC instantiates a false dichotomy between desperately needed educational innovation and protection for faculty rights. Our purpose here is to deconstruct this damaging dualism and advise readers to be wary of institutions

Bill Rosenthal is associate professor of mathematics, engineering and computer science at LaGuardia Community College of the City University of New York (CUNY). His main interest in teaching and research is developmental mathematics. He was a member of the founding faculty of the New Community College at CUNY from September 1, 2010 through December 2, 2011. **Emily Schnee** is assistant professor of English at Kingsborough Community College of the City University of New York (CUNY), where she teaches developmental English and composition. She was a member of the founding faculty of the New Community College at CUNY from September 1, 2010 through November 15, 2011.

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that situate these two ideals as polar opposites—because the innovation may end up subordinated to and corrupted by the imposition of administrative priorities.

WHY THE NCC ATTRACTED US: FEATURES OF THE EDUCATIONAL MODEL

On the evening of September 1, 2010, the first six faculty members hired for the NCC met. The venue was the CUNY Graduate Center, situated catercorner to the Empire State Building; the occasion a dinner hosted by the central CUNY planning team that had been developing the new college for the past two-and-a-

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half years. The faculty's excitement was palpable, a blend of intense uncertainty and fervid hope that this new college would offer educationally shortchanged low-income students the curricula, pedagogies, and supportive services that would lead to their academic success.

The project we were joining appeared to be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity: to participate in creating the first new CUNY community college in forty years. Conceived as "...a new institution, one that is singularly focused on the need to dramatically raise graduation rates nationally and at CUNY," the NCC's planners sought to achieve a 30 percent three-year and a 40 percent five-year graduation rate.³ To meet these benchmarks, the new college would scale up and synthesize experimental practices that had proven successful when implemented at other institutions, according to NCC's concept paper, unveiled in 2008 by former CUNY Chancellor Matthew Goldstein and his planning team. Though vaguely defined and differently interpreted by all players, "student success" became the college's mantra and the stated *raison d'être* for the NCC.

The six founding faculty had arrived in midtown Manhattan from sites as far-flung as Brooklyn, New York, and Bellevue, Washington. What united us was our desire to actualize a visionary educational initiative. For the authors, the most attractive feature of the NCC model was the reinvention of developmental education. The college was designed to offer students no stand-alone zero-credit remedial courses. Instead, developmental education in mathematics and English would be integrated with credit-bearing courses within the mandatory first-year experience. The centerpiece of this experience, City Seminar, would enroll cohorts of students in learning communities spanning three courses.⁴ Facilitated by a teaching team using an integrated curriculum, City Seminar was intended to engage students in critical inquiry on "sustaining a thriving New York City."⁵ We believed

that this new conceptualization of developmental education would improve the dismal graduation rates associated with requiring underprepared students—the majority in most community colleges—to take noncredit remedial courses, and that it also would provide students with a cognitively rich and developmentally scaffolded introduction to college-level coursework. Zero-credit developmental English and mathematics courses are the bane of community-college education: Legions of students enter these courses and many don't make it through.⁶ Of those who do, a significant number deplete their financial aid, their wherewithal to continue in college, or both. To integrate basic-skills material with college-level con-

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tent while maintaining our disciplines' integrity would be a formidable and worthwhile endeavor.⁷

EDUCATION, ORGANIZATION, AND THE COMMON GOOD

Underlying the faculty's shared mission was our collective conviction that we were working for the common good of students and faculty. We threw caution to the wind to jump on board an idealistic project that, we believed, would enrich our professional lives, benefit students, and potentially serve as a national model for community-college education. We knew that idealistic did not mean ideal, and most of us were uncomfortable with elements of the instructional and organizational designs (including our realization that no one was hired with tenure—a fact soon to become far from parenthetical). Yet we expected that the administration's stated commitment to inventing an educationally pathbreaking institution, coupled with respect for our expertise and the protections of CUNY's strong faculty union and collective-bargaining agreement, would enable us to shape the NCC's curriculum, pedagogy, and professional culture into an uncommonly good common good.

Although the NCC had numerous supporters throughout the university, not all shared our trust in the college's conceptualization. Many CUNY colleagues pointed to the interdisciplinary curriculum as substandard, while the university faculty senate decried the absence of foreign-language instruction and the elimination of broad survey courses. Both the faculty union, the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), to which the entire CUNY faculty belongs, and the faculty senate expressed concern that the organizational scheme, if implemented, would decimate faculty rights, protections, and decision-making capabilities.⁸

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Soon after our hiring in Fall 2010, the American Federation of Teachers joined the PSC in a resolution against the NCC's educational and organizational models and urged that questions about educational quality, faculty tenure, shared governance, academic departments, elected departmental chairs, and academic freedom be resolved.⁹ Their concerns proved prescient. In hindsight, we realize that our excitement about the potential of the educational model led us to disregard our union's concerns and conflate legitimate critiques with a knee-jerk defense of the *status quo*.

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discomfiture, and disillusionment increased at a dizzying rate. Scant weeks into our work, our unease about lack of governance and administrative control over areas universally considered under faculty purview led us to seek the counsel and support of our union's leaders. They proved to be stalwart allies despite our embrace of an educational model many within the union perceived as a threatening precedent for CUNY. In consultation with the PSC, we puzzled out ways to secure administrative adherence to the letter of our collective-bargaining agreement and university bylaws, and we developed a new understanding that an active role in governance by faculty would not endanger—indeed, would advance—the college's educational mission. Unfortunately, NCC administrators were impervious to such logic. As we worked to create the new college, administrators continued to act as if educational innovation and faculty protections were inherently opposed.

The first two years of NCC showed us that the tantalizing new community college promised in the concept paper was irreparably harmed in practice. The absence of shared governance, the hiring of an untenured founding faculty, and the imposition of an organizational structure featuring unilateral administrative decision-making power over academic matters compromised the educational integrity of the college and established dangerous precedents for all of CUNY.

FEATURES OF NCC'S ORIGINAL ORGANIZATIONAL MODEL

Institutional organization went hand-in-glove with the educational model as a pillar of the NCC's foundation. Much of the blame for dismal community-college graduation rates was attributed to conventional structures and norms of higher education. Chief among these hypothesized impediments to student success

were the segregation of student services and academics, the compartmentalization of faculty into discipline-based departments, the faculty's sovereignty over curriculum, and governance structures that mute the voices of administrators and staff members while privileging those of faculty.

Organizational groundwork at NCC was laid by the Working Committee on Governance and Organizational Structure, which was convened in Spring 2010 before the hiring of any faculty, chaired by CUNY's associate provost, and included the CUNY General Counsel and Senior Vice Chancellor for Legal Affairs. The committee's charge was to "define organizational roles and relationships, and gov-

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ernance processes that support and align with the educational program."¹⁰ Despite qualms about some of the committee's recommendations and discomfort with the wholesale absence of shared governance during our first year, we remained supportive of the axiom that college organization should serve students' learning and success.

CORRUPTION OF THE COMMON GOOD: GOVERNANCE

Makeshift Governance

During the faculty's first year, the NCC had no governance structure, no procedures for decision making, and a complete lack of clarity as to who held authority over curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and professional development. In lieu of shared governance, the administration, faculty, and staff met as a Planning and Implementation Team (PIT), later renamed the NEW Committee, which served as a *de facto* college council—without the authority. This committee discussed all matters related to the planning of the college, after which (or before) the college administration made its decisions. This process, undergirded by a rhetorical commitment to collaboration, produced interminable discussions, paralyzing confusion, duplication of effort, and few decisions. An oft-used strategy of NCC administrators was deferring key decisions until the last minute, at which point they would run roughshod over faculty proposals and expertise. This wait-until-the-last-minute strategy preempted genuine debate and prevented meaningful input from a powerless faculty.

In March 2011, faculty recommended the constitution of a preliminary college council to make decisions; that proposal was neither acknowledged by administra-

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tors nor acted upon. A faculty proposal to form a curriculum committee similarly was ignored for a month, then curtly jettisoned by the college president with the comment, “We are not at the stage to have committees.” Meanwhile, as these matters remained unresolved, including important curriculum creation, we were either stymied or doing work that would be undone later. Despite being told not to work on governance—a specified job duty in our appointment letters—the faculty made yet another effort to spark discussion and move planning forward: a governance proposal. In May, we submitted it to the PIT, and asked for its consideration in September.

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Instead, a full year after faculty were hired, NCC administrators finally responded to the clear ineffectiveness of the ad hoc model by introducing a number of standing committees. This committee structure served to formalize administrative control over decision making, at least until a permanent governance plan could be finalized. Faculty were assigned to them without input, and each committee but one was led by an administrative staff member. (These leaders were euphemistically termed “conveners,” and the college officers insisted on the term “task forces” instead of “committees.”) A “consensus-based” process by which committees sent proposals to the NEW Committee for approval never functioned as promised. Administrative decision making remained the *modus operandi*.¹¹

Finalizing Governance

The administration’s committees included one charged with writing the official governance plan for the new college. This committee was “convened” by the president and included four untenured faculty—one from the first founding faculty (Rosenthal) and three newly hired—plus two consultants who had held high office in the central CUNY administration and served on the original planning team. Curiously, no staff members were included despite the fact that one rationale for having a nontraditional governance structure at NCC was to increase student and support staff participation in decision making.

The committee’s first meeting was an unsettling affair. There was no agenda. The president recited his governance wish list, topped by having a college council with student representation and, in place of academic departments, a faculty-of-the-whole headed by the provost. He distributed copies of governance-related documents, including the working committee report but excluding the faculty proposal. Contravening the consensus-based decision-making model, no procedure

for arriving at decisions was mentioned. A consultant's sketchy notes substituted for meeting minutes. Two of the four faculty members never spoke. A third (who resigned for personal reasons within a fortnight) was visibly and audibly angry at being asked to rubber-stamp the administration's *faits accomplis*. Rosenthal's comments and questions undoubtedly contributed to his summary dismissal five weeks later.

It soon became clear that the college's governance plan was being developed by the two consultants and the university's general counsel, who decreed, against the faculty's recommendation, that there would be no departments at NCC.

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Throughout, faculty involvement in the development of the governance plan was nominal and our original governance proposal was ignored. The one faculty member on the committee (Rosenthal's replacement) who dared to represent a dissenting perspective was intimidated, accused of not representing the views of the faculty, and told that his desire to have departments meant that he should seek employment elsewhere.

In March 2012, the college president forwarded a governance plan to the Board of Trustees, without faculty approval, that codified a centralized form of governance whose key features include a college council with substantial administrative representation, rather than a faculty senate; a merging of curriculum and co-curricular affairs into one committee headed by the provost; a top-heavy administrative structure (president, provost, and additional administrative officers) with the provost assuming all responsibilities typically associated with a department chair; and no departments, thus no elected department chairs. Upon reading the draft document that became (with cosmetic revisions) the college's constitution, a colleague wrote, "There are no departments mentioned....There's no mechanism for faculty input regarding scheduling of classes, forming of instruction[al] teams, or setting up of learning communities. These would have been among the responsibilities of the department chairs. . . The provost (the only tenured faculty member) is a dominant part of every committee. As implemented, the concept of 'shared governance' means we must do as told lest we be considered insubordinate or lacking in the service component of our faculty obligations."

The battle over governance has harmed the common good at NCC and led to a damaging new model for college governance at CUNY. The faculty's exclusion from contributing to the governance plan is only one aspect of this injury. It was the last straw for the above-quoted faculty member, who left the NCC immedi-

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ately after the release of the draft document. That same week, another faculty member resigned due to “toxic institutional politics.” These two resignations constituted one-sixth of the faculty at the time; moreover, each person was solely responsible for one of the college’s five majors. The governance plan itself, codifying the unfettered dominion of the provost over faculty without department chairs as a buffer (among other faculty-unfriendly provisions), also was cited by others who left later on as a factor in their decisions. The NCC was short on faculty before losing these personnel; their loss led to a crushing workload for surviving faculty and left the institution shorn of expertise impossible to replace in the brief

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time remaining to design the college’s first-year experience.

The manner in which the NCC operated prior to the administration’s imposition of its governance plan compromised the college’s curriculum and its personnel’s ability to address students’ educational needs. This “authoritarian anarchy” delayed faculty’s development of the flagship first-year experience to such an extent that crucial elements were still being put in place as students arrived in classrooms. Professional development, rightly anticipated as necessary for the creation and implementation of a delicately interdisciplinary curriculum, all but dropped off the radar. A reservoir of professional-development expertise among the faculty and staff went unused, underused, and misused. The unrelenting devaluation of faculty input and imposition of administrators’ priorities led to the departure of seven of the fifteen founding faculty members in the first two years.

We cannot overstate the damage these losses have done to the college’s educational mission. The bleeding was especially devastating in mathematics where Rosenthal’s dismissal left the college bereft of expertise in developmental mathematics, soon after which the resignation of the colleague quoted earlier—encouraged by the college administration—stripped NCC of all collegiate-mathematics experience. While the remaining faculty did heroic work to complete the mathematics pieces of the first-year curriculum, it appears the administration preferred no full-time mathematics educators to those who would uphold the integrity of the educational model for which we had joined the NCC.¹² And far from incidentally, despite the best efforts of faculty and our union, CUNY now boasts a model college with no departments, no department chairs (let alone faculty-elected chairs), and an official governance process that marginalizes faculty and centralizes decision making in administrative hands.

NONTENURE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Of the fifteen founding faculty hired in the NCC's first two years, all were hired without tenure, including those previously tenured elsewhere. The creation of a college with an entirely untenured faculty proved to have disastrous implications for many of the individuals involved, further served to compromise the college's educational integrity, and provided stark evidence that tenured rank-and-file members are necessary for a faculty to act collectively when administrators renege on their commitment to make students' educational interests the alpha and omega of their decisions.

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As the faculty began to immerse ourselves in building the college, it became apparent we were expected to complete tasks without questioning the rationale, appropriateness, educational value, or sustainability of the products we were charged with working on. In meetings, faculty members were discouraged from entering into intellectual inquiry with administrators (or one another), and an environment of fear and intimidation prevailed. As a collective, NCC faculty lacked the power and authority that tenure bestows—not just upon individuals—in standing up to administrators when decisions that went against our educational judgment were being made. Dissenting opinions, particularly on key issues of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, provoked reflexive accusations by administrators that faculty were not committed to student success. Faculty who raised questions about an administrative initiative or openly disagreed had their collegiality called into question. Even curricular matters were not trusted to the faculty's expertise as all course proposals and instructional design were vetted and revised by senior administrators.

Faculty members who openly disagreed with the president or provost were released from committee duties or reassigned to obscure projects having little to do with their professional expertise. The environment was stifling, and within months of the provost's hiring, Rosenthal had been dismissed on questionable grounds and six faculty had left the NCC for colleges where they would enjoy a measure of professional autonomy and the safeguards that tenure and shared governance afford faculty.¹³ The administration's insistence on tight control over all areas of the college, even those traditionally under faculty purview, reduced many of the tenets of NCC's educational model to platitudes whose meaning was, as Humpty-Dumpty asserted in *Alice in Wonderland*, "what I choose it to mean." Claiming that a given

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decision was to ensure “student success” became a catch-all justification for pushing through any administrative initiative that lacked faculty buy-in.

In particular, a debate over an innovative component of the first-year experience, known in NCC parlance as Group Workspace (GWS), became emblematic of the administration’s commitment to usurp faculty power. In the concept paper, GWS was envisioned as “a structured session facilitated by one member of the seminar team (City Seminar, Reading and Writing, or Quantitative Literacy faculty)” for students to work on assignments, receive academic advisement, and access developmental skills support.¹⁴ As a required element of the first-year experience,

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ience, GWS would be a unique opportunity for faculty to work with students one-on-one and in small groups, differentiate instruction, and provide the individualized academic support that community-college students rarely get. Faculty with background in developmental education were thrilled about this opportunity to have dedicated instructional time to support students with heretofore unmet academic needs.

The concept paper is explicit that faculty are to facilitate GWS.¹⁵ However, midway through our first semester at NCC, one of the consultants let slip that GWS would be staffed by “freebie grad students,” not faculty. Faculty questioned the wisdom and logistical feasibility of these plans and worked, over many months, to develop a detailed proposal to make this instructional time most advantageous for students. The president’s response, close to a year later, was to order GWS staffed by “peer mentors.” Second-year community-college students with no pedagogical training, no background in developmental education, and no knowledge of the NCC curriculum were deemed more appropriate than faculty for teaching GWS. Though faculty desperately tried to discuss with NCC administrators the educational implications of this decision, it became clear that administrators would rather sacrifice student learning than concede faculty knew best.

Having a completely untenured professoriate not only proved problematic for the educational integrity of the college—it also raised troubling questions about the tenure process itself. How does legitimate peer review happen in a college with no tenured faculty, no departments, and no elected chairs? Without a governance plan that represents faculty’s interests, and with the administration’s refusal to address concerns about the reappointment, tenure, and promotion processes, faculty were committing to an institution that might find them dispensable or change the terms of the deal midstream.

As planning for the new college became more acutely top-down and restrictive, we realized that the hiring of an entirely nontenured faculty was not incidental. In fact, as we served on hiring committees during Spring 2011, we observed firsthand how the process was skewed against senior faculty candidates in subtle, difficult-to-document ways. Suffice it to say that every search resulted in the hiring of an untenured faculty member.

THE LOCAL CONTEXT: PATHWAYS TO WHERE?

As we reflect on the first two years of NCC, we believe it is crucial to consid-

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er our experience in the present context of our university. Soon after we were hired, CUNY's "Pathways" initiative went public. Introduced as a solution to the problems of intra-university transfer, Pathways ignited a firestorm when it metamorphosed into a reconstitution of general-education requirements. Many faculty colleagues perceived ominous similarities between Pathways and the NCC: the "college completion agenda" advocated by the Lumina Foundation; the use of learning outcomes for assessment; interdisciplinarity at the expense of disciplinary knowledge; and the perceived lowering of standards and expectations.¹⁶ Many in the university expressed fear that Pathways would "NCC the curriculum."

Upon closer inspection and taken in context, the commonalities between Pathways and NCC are not quite so robust. However, certain commonalities are incontestable. Both Pathways and the NCC are characterized by a muscular usurpation of faculty prerogative. Both push the university further in a direction the administration has been energetically moving for years—towards centralization of decision making, encroachment on what has been collectively bargained, and establishment of precedents for other parts of the university to follow. We have come to believe that any account of the NCC is incomplete without mentioning its co-incidence with Pathways and urging others to consider what this means for the future of our university.

LESSONS LEARNED

Despite the struggle, tumult, and heartbreak of the NCC's first two years, we continue to embrace features of the college's original educational model and mission. Although we were never smitten with the college's organizational scheme, joining the NCC made us more cognizant of how the forms and structures of community-college education can support (or not) student success. We remain

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committed to reinvigorating the conventional culture and organization of higher-education institutions in our quest to make postsecondary education more fertile and meaningful to students and faculty alike—aspirations that brought us to NCC.

But, with hindsight, we see that our enthusiasm for an innovative educational model—one that held great promise for solving some of the most intractable problems in community-college education—obstructed our view of the hidden-in-plain-sight institutional objectives for NCC. Despite our best intentions, and even with our tenacious and savvy faculty union fighting alongside us, we were unable

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to stop, slow down, or redirect the administration's initiative to create a model college in which faculty have few rights, power is concentrated in administrative hands, and student success is synonymous with increased graduation rates. The insistence upon these administrative priorities jeopardized the college's educational program and established harmful precedents for the university at large. An important lesson learned is that without shared governance, tenure, and respect for the spirit as well as the letter of the collective-bargaining agreement, NCC faculty were powerless to act in the best interests of our students and our university.

We conclude by affirming our belief that educational innovation and protection for faculty rights are not inherently contradictory. We petition our readers to be more than wary of projects and institutions that situate these two principles as polar opposites. As progressive educators, we must figure out ways to critique and resist the ends of wholesale educational "innovations" without becoming defenders of an educationally bankrupt status quo. Our desire to radically improve what we do educationally goes hand-in-hand with a defense—a strengthening—of the higher-education structures that ultimately afford faculty the protections we need to serve our students as well as we possibly can. To achieve such synergy of purpose would truly be a common good.

Acknowledgements: The authors are indebted to our former faculty colleagues at the NCC at CUNY, whose wisdom, experience, and dedication to education continue to enlighten and inspire us. We are profoundly grateful to those who have contributed to this article but must remain nameless. 

ENDNOTES

1. In tandem with a \$15 million gift from the Guttman Foundation, the New Community College was renamed the Stella and Charles Guttman Community College in June 2013. Because this paper addresses a time period prior to this renaming, we use the name NCC throughout.
2. Pérez-Peña, "The New Community College Try."
3. City University of New York, (2008), 53. Fewer than half of community-college students in the United States graduate within six years, and the most recent data show a three-year graduation rate of 11.4 percent and a five-year rate of 25.5 percent for entering CUNY community-college matriculants. See, respectively, American Association of Community Colleges, (2012), and City University of New York, (2012). See also Lax, "CUNY Community College Graduation Rates Do Not Effectively Measure Student Success," for a cogent argument that an accurate accounting of student success compels us to consider factors other than graduation rates.
4. In its original conceptualization, the first semester of City Seminar comprised Critical Issues in New York City, Quantitative Reasoning, and Reading/Writing. In the second semester, Composition replaced the Reading/Writing component.
5. City University of New York, (2008), 8.
6. From Edgecombe, Jaggars, Baker and Bailey, (2013), 3: "A majority of community college students are referred to remediation in math, writing, or reading, and most of those are referred to sequences of two or more courses in the relevant subject. . . Many students succeed within each developmental course they take but exit the sequence before completing it. . . [O]nly a minority of students referred to developmental education ever complete a college-level course in the given subject." (Bailey, Jeong and Cho, (2010), are cited in the quoted passage.)
7. A passage from the concept paper illustrates this challenge and its appeal: "[U]nprepared students require more sustained time to develop, practice, and demonstrate *beyond the level of minimum proficiency* the[ir] skills and knowledge." (Emphasis in the original.) See City University of New York, (2008), 7.
8. Professional Staff Congress of the City University of New York, "New Community College Plan: PSC Members Debate, Discuss," 6-8.
9. American Federation of Teachers, (2010).
10. City University of New York, (2009), 5.
11. One instance: When the committees convened, whether Statistics would be part of the City Seminar cohorts remained undetermined despite many conversations in which faculty asserted it should not be. Administrators would not commit. The entire curriculum depended on the decision and could not wait indefinitely. Planning proceeded amid the uncertainty. Shortly before the college opened, instructors learned that Statistics would be included in the cohort structure.
12. The second mathematics educator departed less than six months before the college was to open. At that time, the plan was for nine out of 21 hours (42.9%) of students' first-semester seat time to be in mathematics. This share was later reduced; we know not why.
13. Strictly speaking, none of us resigned or was fired from the NCC. While the NCC was being approved and accredited, each faculty member was appointed to one of the six existing CUNY community colleges and had between 75% and 100% of her or his time assigned to the NCC. When Schnee left the NCC in November 2011, she assumed full-time duties at her "host college," Kingsborough Community College. Three weeks later, when the NCC president informed Rosenthal his services were no longer desired and gave him two hours to clean out his desk, all of his time was reassigned to LaGuardia Community College. Of the four individuals who departed during or immediately after Spring 2012, three chose to stay at their CUNY host colleges and one returned to the private university she had left to join the NCC.

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All six of us who remained in CUNY did so at the same rank and salary. The union leaders and staff closely monitored our transitions, ensuring that the administration took no retaliatory action.

14. City University of New York, (2008), 21.
15. From the concept paper: "Group Workspace is...a structured session facilitated by one member of the seminar team...the *faculty* member facilitating the workshop will hold individual advisement sessions during this component...student development specialists will be available to support *faculty*..." See City University of New York, (2008), 21. (Emphases added.)
16. See Bowen, "The Real Agenda of Pathways," 11. A Lumina report cited in the concept paper is Bailey and Alonso, "Paths to Persistence: An Analysis of Research on Program Effectiveness at Community Colleges."

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