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Modern Language Association Conference 2009
“Academic Business” Roundtable

Against Enclosure of the Academic Commons

We now inhabit the ruins of a public university system laid waste by neoliberal dogma over the last three decades. Despite the intellectual bankruptcy of doctrines of privatization in academia and other public sectors, elites’ response to the current crisis inevitably takes the form of a fresh round of enclosures of the academic commons. New York State Governor Paterson’s recent Deficit Reduction Plan, for example, proposes \$500 million in state agency cuts, most of which he imposed administratively without seeking legislative approval. More than 1/3rd of those cuts fall on CUNY, SUNY, and student financial aid. CUNY senior colleges have already suffered reductions of \$68.3 million in State aid in the 2008-2009 budget. At the same time, full-time equivalent student enrollment has shot up again this year by 6.4% in the senior colleges, and 11.7% in the community colleges. Enrollment is the highest it has ever been at CUNY. The combination of budget cuts and enrollment growth is unsustainable.

The origins of our current precarious state lie, I would argue, in the crisis of the Keynesian social contract in the 1970s. While CUNY’s fate during the economic crisis of the 1970s needs to be seen in the context of a global restructuring of higher education and the public sector in general over the last few decades, I think the struggles that have taken place at this, the world’s largest urban university system, are particularly exemplary. CUNY entered the neo-liberal era as one of the greatest university systems in the country, with its flagship campus at City College internationally recognized as the “proletariat’s Harvard.” CUNY was also home to some of the most progressive developments of the era, including the formation of one of the new higher education unions, the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), which brought all CUNY faculty, graduate students, and professional staff together in one bargaining unit. In 1973, after voting to strike, CUNY faculty and staff won their first contract. In

addition, as a result of intensive struggle led by African-American and Puerto Rican students at City College, in 1970 CUNY took the historic and radical step of opening its doors to all NYC high school graduates. By combining an open admissions policy with free tuition, CUNY broke new ground in democratizing access to higher education in the United States.

The threat represented by open admissions was immediately recognized by private schools, which had seen the public universities expand during the post-war era and their own enrollment shrink as inflation and tuition rose. While CUNY students were struggling for public access in 1969, private institutions such as Columbia and NYU lobbied hard for public resources, persuading the NY state legislature to channel aid to private institutions through the “Bundy” program of Direct Institutional Aid, which guarantees state funds for financial aid at independent colleges on the basis of “graduation productivity.”¹ In 1971, NYU’s president joined others on behalf of NY State’s private colleges in calling for an end to free and low tuition at the public schools.² After the federal rejection of publicly supported higher education, their calculations reflected the popular prediction that if CUNY were to introduce tuition, it would lose its middle-class students, who would not qualify for the New York State Tuition Assistance Program or federal Pell grants. Faced with tuition charges, these relatively wealthy CUNY students would begin to migrate to other fee-charging institutions in the metropolitan area.

But it was not until the fiscal crisis of New York City itself in 1975 that conservatives, terrified by the specter of one of California governor Ronald Reagan’s advisors called “an educated proletariat,” were able to strike a decisive blow against CUNY. Faced with deepening fiscal difficulties, President Gerald Ford’s administration simply pulled the plug on federal funding of cities; as the famous headline had it: “Ford to New York: Drop Dead.” As the gap between revenues and outlays in the city’s budget yawned ever greater, a cabal of bankers led by Citibank’s Walter Wriston, who equated all forms of government intervention with socialism, refused to roll over the city’s debt

and thereby pushed New York into bankruptcy.³ In what was to become the model for the devastating structural adjustment programs administered around the world by the International Monetary Fund during the 1980s, the debt relief that followed New York's bankruptcy entailed the construction of new institutions of governance that laid first claim to all city tax revenues in order to pay off bondholders. Encouraged by Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, who had long held CUNY's tuition-free status in his crosshairs as New York's governor, President Ford announced he would withhold federal aid from New York City until it eliminated policies of open admissions and free tuition at CUNY.

In 1976 CUNY terminated its 129-year old policy of free tuition and fired hundreds of young faculty members who had been recently hired to educate the new students resulting from open admissions. In total, 3,294 faculty members were laid off. Middle-class students who could afford to did in fact go elsewhere, and those who couldn't afford tuition left school altogether. 62,000 fewer students attended CUNY after tuition was introduced, and by 1980 the university had 50% fewer African-American and Latin@ freshman than it had in 1976.⁴ Retrenchment policies subsequently dominated the fiscal management of CUNY for close to three decades. CUNY students have had to endure repeated tuition increases, as state and federal aid dried up during the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the dismantling of the cutting-edge remediation programs set up to integrate non-traditional students into the university setting. Although CUNY has added the equivalent of a college and a half since the fiscal crisis, its full-time teaching staff is currently half what it was in 1975.⁵ The shortfall in teaching staff was initially made up for through the rehiring of the many faculty members laid off during the fiscal crisis as part-time instructors and, subsequently, through employing some of the many talented post-baccalaureate degree holders who live and work in New York City as adjuncts.

I rehearse this history of privatization not simply to remind you of historical defeats, but also, I hope, to help reanimate the vision of emancipatory, egalitarian education that drove a tuition-free CUNY to embrace open admissions before the neoliberal era. I believe that our response to the present

crisis and the neoliberal zombies who feed on the ruins of the university needs to take three principal forms. First of all, we must make the intellectual case for the crucial role of open and accessible public higher education in advancing individual human capacity and in sustaining democracy on a national and global scale. This is ultimately, after all, a struggle for hegemony, one that we've been losing by and large ever since the 1970s. We should see the current crisis of capitalism as an opportunity, a chance to devote significant parts of our academic labor to rearticulating the vision of an egalitarian public higher educational system embodied in CUNY's history and chronicled so powerfully by my colleague Christopher Newfield in his discussions of the majoritarian society that cultural warriors have sought to dismantle over the last three decades. This will take not simply historical excavation of the sort that I've performed here, but also a willingness to revalidate and reimagine forms of state planning responsive to radical democratic initiatives. We need to articulate positive visions for the transformative role of public higher education in general and humanistic education in particular, visions centered on a conception of life-long emancipatory education as a human right rather than the perquisite of a small economic elite.

But we also need to organize. Of course we need to defend collective governance through institutions such as faculty senates and the AAUP. In addition, we need strong academic labor unions such as the PSC that fight not only for incremental gains for full- and part-time staff alike, but that also incubate a vision of an alternative university and the more just society that it would help promulgate. Over the last four months, for example, the PSC has been hard at work lobbying state and city legislators to fight budget cuts by restoring progressive taxation and by arguing for a second round of federal stimulus targeted more explicitly towards higher education. In tandem, the PSC has been developing plans to push for a new hiring drive designed to create demographic parity between CUNY faculty – who are already far more successfully integrated than academia as a whole – and the population of New York City in general. Such a drive would underline the thinly veiled racism of

attacks on public education while also advancing alternative notions of educational democracy that would promise social justice for all, as opposed to the current market-oriented Hobbesian struggle of all against all.

Unfortunately, though, labor unions tend to obey the law, and to be constrained by existing legislative forums, which in New York as elsewhere, are notoriously dysfunctional and corrupt. That's why I believe that we also need to extend and deepen recent efforts to organize alternative, autonomous social movements to take back the academic commons. The bonds forged between students, faculty, and community activists in California in recent months, most evident in the tactic of occupying portions of the campus, are particularly auspicious. Such radical autonomous movements not only offer students and faculty a venue to raise consciousness about the crisis of public education; they also lend credibility and muscle to the negotiating efforts of more institutionalized bodies such as academic labor unions. The international links of these autonomous movements foster awareness of the global character of the capitalist restructuring of public higher education while also developing potent forms of solidarity. Such links need to be deepened on a national plane through initiatives such as a national day of action in defense of public education, and extended beyond Europe to include anti-capitalist movements among students and faculty in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, who, after all, have been at the forefront of resistance to neoliberal privatization for the last three decades. These initiatives should aim to develop a praxis of militant co-research focused on topics such as how to theorize and successfully carry out "occupations" of university space and time and how to build institutions of the commons that span not just disciplines and universities but also create autonomous networks of academics, activists, and artists.

In *Dark Age Ahead*, her final book, the great urbanist Jane Jacobs examined the signs of decline in the U.S.'s dismantling of its educational, scientific, and public sector infrastructure, auguring a collapse akin to that of the Roman Empire. Today, five years later, predictions of collapse are even

more ubiquitous, manifesting themselves in displaced form in popular cultural texts such as *2012* and *Avatar*. But such apocalypticism, while perhaps a relief from the Know-Nothing attitude that has prevailed in relation to issues such as climate change, cedes ground to the worst tendencies of the last few decades. Against such pessimism, we must affirm that there is an alternative to endless rounds of austerity and galloping privatization. Admittedly the challenges of the present and of the coming years in which most of you will make a place for yourselves in academia are unparalleled. We need to completely remake industrial capitalist civilization or descend into unimaginable barbarism. I believe that the vision of an open and egalitarian university that works for the common good has a vital role to play in the coming transformation.

Endnotes:

¹ See the Commission on Independent Colleges and Universities website for more information on Bundy Aid: http://www.cicu.org/learnMore/aidprograms.php?Report_ID=1

² Fred Hechinger, "Another Cry for Help; Colleges," *New York Times*, December 19, 1971.

³ On the city's fiscal crisis, see Eric Lichten, *The New York City Fiscal Crisis* (South Hadley, Ma.; Bergin and Garvey, 1986), Martin Shefter, *Political Crisis, Fiscal Crisis: The Collapse and Revival of New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), and William Tabb, *The Long Default: New York City and the Urban Fiscal Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review, 1982).

⁴ Freeman, 271, 272.

⁵ According to PSC President Barbara Bowen, there were 11,600 faculty members at CUNY in 1975; today there are just under 6,000. Barbara Bowen, personal interview, 20 May 2005.