

Plans to Boost Two-Year Colleges Fall Victim to Budget Cuts

by Alshawn Kelly Rushing

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Borough of Manhattan Community College Despite being touted by Mayor Michael Bloomberg and President Barack Obama, two-year schools, such as Borough of Manhattan Community College, must grapple with rising enrollments and falling resources

During his bid for a third term, Mayor Michael Bloomberg [promised](#) to make community colleges a top priority if he were re-elected. That campaign promise to help the [City University of New York](#), which runs the two-year public schools, has now been abandoned in the face of proposed cuts of over \$50 million in city funding for the next fiscal year.

This change has sparked criticism from many advocates who have protested Bloomberg's cuts in funding to CUNY during a time of high enrollment and tough economic times -- especially after the state already cut \$95 million, according to CUNY officials.

"With the increasing need of services for students at both community colleges and senior

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colleges in the CUNY system it is unacceptable to continue to cut CUNY's budget the way the administration has done the past few years," said Councilmember [Ydanis Rodriguez](#), who chairs the higher education committee. "These drastic cuts come on top of a quarter of a billion dollars worth of cuts that have been handed down to CUNY over the past three years."

The administration defends its decision and blames its own fiscal problems.

"The city has had to make some hard budget decisions for the coming fiscal year, and we're asking everyone to do more with less," said Jessica Scaperotti, a spokesperson for the mayor.

CUNY officials say that while they understand the city and state's economic situation, the budget cuts and the economic downturn are taking a toll on CUNY resources.

"The university recognizes that state officials are diligently endeavoring to meet the fiscal challenges associated with the current budget deficit," CUNY Chancellor Matthew Goldstein said in a statement. "At the same time, record-breaking numbers of students are seeking higher education opportunity at CUNY so that they may compete effectively for careers in an unforgiving economy and increasingly international marketplace."

While the cuts will affect the entire CUNY system, they come as a particular blow to the two-year community colleges. During his 2009 campaign, Bloomberg proposed a "Gateway to the Middle Class" to help increase community college graduation rates by 20 percent by 2020. The plan was a response to President Barack Obama's

[plan](#)

to graduate 5 million more people from community colleges in 10 years. Bloomberg vowed to expand access and "help those who are enrolled stay enrolled." The mayor also called for an investment of \$50 million in hopes of graduating 120,000 students from college.

"Community colleges really do have the power to help more Americans get through this recession and come out with better skills ready to build new careers in good paying jobs," said Bloomberg at his presentation. "Investing in those who want to invest in their own education and careers is one of the single best ways to promote economic growth and help most New Yorkers earn good paying jobs and improve their financial security."

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Bloomberg's office declined to comment about the promise to invest \$50 million in CUNY, and CUNY representatives have refused to disclose if the system even received the money. According to Kate Pfordresher, director of research and public policy for the [Professional Staff Congress](#), the union representing CUNY faculty, the \$50 million pledge amounted to nothing more than a campaign promise.

The Two-Year Solution

When the nation was hit with the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, many public officials turned to community colleges. Bloomberg focused on the increased role of community colleges and vowed to make the modernization of community colleges a top priority.

"Education is the future of our country, it is the future of our state and city, it is the future of our world," said the mayor announcing his Gateway to the Middle Class initiative. "If there's one thing that we should do to help everybody — it is making sure that everybody gets the kind of quality education they need to participate in the world and particularly here in the great American dream."

Many other public officials also called for increase enrollment in community colleges. Obama even referred to community colleges as "the unsung heroes" of education.

"They may not get the credit they deserve, they may not get the same resources as other schools, but they provide a gateway to millions of Americans to good jobs and a better life," the president said last year when presenting his [Skills for America's Future](#) partnership.

Now, though, community colleges around the city find themselves in a precarious position, with record admissions and decreasing funds. Many blame CUNY's financial woes on the lack of commitment from the state. According to State Sen. [Toby Stavisky](#) of Queens, the state's share of CUNY funding fell sharply in the past 20 years from 65 percent in 1991 to 40 percent this year.

"That's not the fault of CUNY; it's the fault of the state -- because we had budget crises and

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higher education has not been a priority," she said.

Increase tuition has made up some of the shortfall. The CUNY board of trustees already authorized a tuition increase of \$75, bringing [tuition](#) for a year to \$3,300. Fall 2012 will see an additional \$30, bringing the yearly total to \$3,360. When Bloomberg announced his initiative in 2009, tuition for CUNY community colleges was \$2,800 a year, Pfordresher said.

According to the City Council Committee on Higher education, in 2009, tuition made up \$840 million of CUNY's budget. For the projected 2012 year, that number is expected to jump to \$1.1 billion. Barbara Bowen, president of Professional Staff Congress describes students as being mobilized and determined to block further hikes., "Our students can't afford to pay more. They don't have the resources to support that," she said.

A New Initiative

Despite the cuts, CUNY officials have praised the mayor for leading other initiatives in community colleges, such as the Accelerated Study in Associate Program, or ASAP, which started in 2007 and aims to increase the graduation rate among community college students and to keep students in school. All ASAP students attend class full time, which makes them eligible for financial aid, and receive regular tutoring help. Students meet with academic advisors twice a week and also meet with job developers who help them find employment while they go to school. The program provides free Metro cards, textbooks and tuition assistance.

"ASAP would not exist without the steadfast support of the mayor and the city's Center for Economic Opportunity," said Goldstein. "It can be extremely challenging for community college students to balance a college schedule with the demands of work and family. ASAP helps eliminate these stresses by providing students with the academic, social and financial support they need to graduate."

While not disputing the value of the program, Pfordresher said it reaches only a small number of students, and low funding restricts the program from being expanded to accommodate more students.

he initiative, though, will be the basis for a new community college, called the Innovative Model Community College, slated to open in Midtown Manhattan in fall 2012. Students who attend the

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new college must enroll full time for the first year. As a way to help students graduate faster, the college will offer remedial classes, along with six majors related to industries with increasing demand: business administration, health information technology, human services, information technology, liberal arts and sciences, and urban studies.

Those students who don't need remedial help will be automatically placed in the college's ASAP program. The college's president will be [Scott Evenback](#), a psychology professor and founding dean of University College at [Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis](#)

. According to CUNY, the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#), the [Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation](#) and the [Carnegie Corp.](#) will contribute funding.

"The new community college employs an innovative model for improving student performance and graduation rates," Goldstein said. "Over the next year, the new college's team will flesh out the concept developed during more than two years of intensive work by faculty and staff from 15 of CUNY's undergraduate and graduate institutions and the central administration."

The school will launch with 500 students and will grow to 5,000 students. It will be the first community college opened in the city in over 40 years, and will eventually move to the [John Jay College](#) campus on the West Side of Manhattan.

The Money Hunt

Meanwhile CUNY has looked to other funding sources. "Many public colleges were not really focused on how to sustain higher education in an era of reduced resources," said CUNY director of communication and marketing, Michael Arena.

One proposal in the Gateway to the Middle Class initiative that did not materialize included restrictions on out of State students getting Financial Aid.

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Under the so-called [CUNY Compact](#), the state pays all of CUNY's mandatory costs, such as labor, benefits and energy costs, along with 20 percent of the academic initiatives in the four-year master plan. The other funding is to come from donations and "internal restructuring." The funding formula also allows for incremental increases as opposed to large spikes in tuition.

Former Gov. David Paterson [wanted to allow](#) individual CUNY and SUNY schools to set their own tuition in accordance with a national higher education price index as opposed to having to the state legislature approve an across-the-board tuition increase. The state legislature rejected the idea. Recently, though, Gov. Andrew Cuomo has come out in support of a similar proposal for SUNY.

In the meantime, CUNY has no guarantee that the state or city will increase funding, leaving students to face tuition hikes.

There are many obstacles put in the path of students who are trying to get an education," said Bowen. "At a time when the economy needs to be revitalized it makes no sense to cut one of the chief engines in that revitalization.

Bowen criticized the city for cutting back during the recession instead of being as innovative as it once was.

"During the Great Depression, NYC built three new colleges for CUNY: [Brooklyn College](#), [Queens College](#) and [Lehman College](#)," she said. "If during the greatest economic depression New York can have the response of adding colleges, why can't New York have that response now?"