

The Communicator

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The Case for a More Accessible CUNY (We Were There Before!)

By Wali Ullah



Remember when CUNY was free? No? Well your parents or grandparents might. The largest urban public university system in the nation, if not the world, CUNY has had a history of providing upward mobility to lower and middle class New Yorkers. It wasn't just incredibly affordable to attend; the education was of impeccable standard – in fact City College was once called “Harvard of the proletariat.”

CUNY's tuition remained free until 1976, when a combination of factors – including the loss of tax revenues from exodus of white professionals leaving New York City for the suburbs in the 60s and 70s, and a lack of sufficient funding from the federal government – led to City Hall imposing a system-wide tuition fee in CUNY. Since that time, CUNY, along with the state public colleges have faced decades of skyrocketing tuition fees and funding cuts.

This year, New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo introduced a ‘free’ tuition plan known as the Excelsior Scholarship. Announced in early January 2017 by the Governor himself, alongside with Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT), the Excelsior Scholarship would allow students of families making less than \$125K annually attend CUNY and SUNY without having to pay tuition. Sounds amazing, right? Well, you know what they say about sounding too good to be true.

There are many hidden costs left out which put lower-class families at a disadvantage. Part-time students, many of whom attend Bronx Community College, are ineligible for the so-called scholarship as you need to have attained about 12 credits per semester (a.k.a. be a full-time student). Also, with a C or below in any class, the scholarship would not cover the costs of that class and the student would have to pay out of pocket for it. The scholarship does nothing to address the inevitable costs of textbooks, transportation and on-campus housing. And what good is free tuition if our colleges are being stripped of proper funding? Less funding means less educational integrity. The Governor himself projected that the so-called would benefit 200,000 students over the course of three years, but that figure has been debunked and debated, with it likely to benefit merely two-fifths of the Governor's projected amount. The combined student body of CUNY & SUNY amounts to roughly 740,000 students.

Proper funding for the CUNY system has stagnated on both the state and federal levels, and students need help on both ends. In Washington, Congress has not renewed the Higher Education Act since 2008. The Act, passed in 1965, governs financial aid programs ranging from Pell Grants to FAFSA and federal loans. The federal government's delay in renewing the law threatens transparency on campus, with students unable to find the graduation rates from specific programs or majors before they put themselves into debt. Worse, state and federal programs do not always work in tandem for the benefit of individual students.

“At the statewide level, TAP [Tuition Assistance Program] helps students pay tuition costs, but it doesn't cover the other costs of attending college, including food, textbooks and transportation,” says Emily Skydel, a Campaign Organizer with the New York Public Interest Research Group [NYPIRG]. “But federal Pell Grants *can* be used for those other costs. So students who qualify for TAP assistance but not the Pell program – say working families that are slightly above the poverty line – don't have access to funding for those other costs.”

Seldom do we see rallies and movements with very specific purposes rather than merely showing solidarity. Solidarity is great, but what comes after that? Pressure your leaders, run for office, immerse yourself in the political process – that is how you achieve pragmatic change. Actions speaks louder than words; That isn't just a maxim. What students must do is act, not through online petitions, but through real-time action. Gone are the days when students had a tall enough seat at the table with politicians and college administration. As Shirley Chisholm, a CUNY alumnus herself, poetically once said, "If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair."

Going to Guinea Impacted My Life By Issatou Barry



It was cloudy when my father stood by the window in our medium-sized living room that is always filled with toys that are barely cleaned thanks to my two younger siblings. He stood straight, putting one hand on his waist while the other holding tight to the house phone like he's going to break it any minutes. He kept shouting, "...what happened with the money I sent...why is the house not finished yet...I will be coming soon..." He was sweating, hitting the wall, and kicking the toys. I have never seen him get angry as he was that day. My siblings and I ran to our room in fear of his anger. And there was my mother who was crying on the other phone while speaking to her relatives in our native tongue 'Fulani' about how much she misses them "...tell mom we will try visiting as soon as we get enough money... please try to understand..." Few weeks after that we went to JFK airport and flew to Guinea for the first time. It was such a joyful moment until I overheard my parents arguing in the airplane about living me in Guinea. I then understood that life would not be the same once we landed. I was seven years old.

As a child transitioning from the Western culture to the African culture it was really difficult. We had to wake up early in the morning to pray, greet our elders and everyone go about doing their assigned duties before eating breakfast. My job was sweeping the house, using a broom made of bundle straws that are tied with a cord, I hated it because it hurt the palm of my hands. Shouldn't our vacation be over after spending five months in Guinea? I always wondered. During lunch and dinner, we all sat on the floor, together we ate rice with soup in one big plate using the palm of our right hands. We barely had electricity, as an alternative we use kerosene oil lamps to brighten up the rooms. Grandmother is always telling her funny stories about her youth period "I was the best tree climber and swimmer in my village...as a baby, your mother used to cry a lot for food." She always made us laugh before going off to bed.

My father is the dictator in the family who has so much value about our culture that he gets frustrated seeing especially younger adults deviate from the norm expected of them. He made sure that did not happen with his children. One of the norms in the African culture is to use your right hand without a spoon to eat. I remember one time my father screamed at me for using my left hand and a spoon while eating rice, "...haven't I told you several times to use your right hand without a spoon while eating" to him, eating with your hand shows an appreciation for the food. On the other hand, my mother is easy going and understanding person. I can easily talk to her about my struggles. For instance: we talked about my coming back to the U.S. to continue my studies. The fact that she fears my father and barely makes most of the family decisions with him, makes us all vulnerable. She just says "... I wish your father would listen..."

Seeing your dreams slip away from your possession at a younger age is tough to overcome. If I had not stayed in Guinea until my adulthood, I could have become a doctor. My father always said with pride "How could you be able to cook well, speak fluently in Fulani and most importantly respect your elders in a great manner if I had not sent you to Guinea to learn the ways of our culture... you should be proud that you learned better than your peers who had never been there..." I remember one time I finally decided to respond to him with anger in Fulani "Father you stole my dreams away from me...I can't go back to Guinea...I need to learn English from scratch...how can I survive in college...am I competing with my peers..." Sitting in front of me on our old couch, I could

see his hand making a fist. I knew he was not going to hit me but that's how angry he was with my unexpected response. I wanted him to understand and know how I felt about the decision he made no matter the circumstances. I am glad I did because at that moment he realized that I was not a child anymore since then we do not talk about going to Africa, we discuss a little bit about the struggles I face in school.

I am now going to Bronx Community College trying to pursue my Dietetic Nutrition degree. I am still struggling in trying to build up my reading, writing and communication skills, but it would not stop me from getting a degree. If my father had put his pride aside like my mother and let me stay in the U.S when I was young, I could have started with a better education. had a bachelor degree by now, and going to toward my master's degree in obtaining my dream career as a midwife, but because of my first trip going to Guinea, it had changed my ambition and as well my life.

Poetry Corner

Grandpa's Rocking Chair

By Yubelka Nunez

Wooden frame, basket seat and back rest
It's comfortable: to sit here and think,
To rock back and forth in thought and action,
To pass the time in rhythm, in this heat.

My grandpa Roque owned this rocking chair.
It sat quietly across his bedroom
- next to a table, a lamp, and a bible.
Momma said I could rock in it someday.

At night, I move it to the balcony
To rock among the diamonds in the sky.
The stars feel close enough to touch. I want to
sing with the fervent crashing of the tides.

In it, I can feel the pulse of Santo Domingo.
Hear the rustle of the mango tree leaves
I rock as the ground lizard jumps about
I rock, thinking about New York City.

Thanks you, Yubelka, for your steadfast service to *The Communicator*. Congratulations on being a member of the 2017 Bronx Community College graduating class. Good luck in the future.



*Yubelka at the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site
as part of BCC's 2016 Salzburg
Global Citizenship Alliance cohort.*

Salzburg Scenes/ 2017 Global Citizenship Alliance

Bronx Community College Salzburg Fellows

Alixan Ducreay / Shivanie Harry
Lara Saavedra / Jason Angel Santiago



BCC Salzburg Fellows arriving in Austria, Monday, April 10th:
(from left to right) Jason, Alixan, Lara, and Shivanie.



Shivanie making a point for her group project (above) and Jason doing the same (below).

