Preliminary Notes on Hunter College’s Self-Study Report  
November 5, 2008

The Process of Self Study

Every ten years, all U. S. colleges and universities are thoroughly evaluated as to their overall effectiveness by their regional accrediting agencies. In 2007, Hunter College began self-study for its 2009 reaccreditation by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE). A steering committee headed by co-chairs Vita Rabinowitz (Provost and Professor of Psychology), Sandra Clarkson (Professor of Mathematics and Statistics), and Philip Alcabes (Associate Professor of Urban Public Health) was formed. The co-chairs convened eight working groups, consisting of faculty, administrators, staff members, and students. Seven of the working groups were charged with investigating the college’s compliance with one or more of the 14 standards of excellence in higher education set forth by MSCHE (available at http://www.msche.org/publications/CHX06_Aug08080728132708.pdf), and addressing matters relevant to strategic planning for Hunter’s future. The eighth group was charged with investigating the implementation of technology for teaching, learning, research and communications at Hunter College, and it interacted with each of the other working groups. Working group chairs, along with selected members of the faculty and administration, constituted a steering committee for the entire effort.

Toward the end of the spring semester, 2008, the working groups submitted reports on their findings to the steering committee. Compiling working groups’ reports and adding the results of their own further investigation into compliance with MSCHE standards, the co-chairs presented the first draft report to the steering committee in October 2008. The steering committee has begun the process of turning the draft report into a final statement of the state of the college, which will be submitted to the MSCHE in early March 2009. An evaluation team will visit Hunter College on April 26-29, 2009, and will issue its evaluation report thereafter.

The report of our self study is meant to serve not only as our application for accreditation but also as a basis for our strategic planning in the new decade. The self-study has three main emphases: Forging the 21st-Century University; Promoting Student Success; and Creating a Culture of Assessment, Reform and Renewal.

Summary of Findings

The main findings of self study, as contained in the draft self-study report of October 2008, are:

1. **Hunter College has essentially become a university within a university.** With five schools, two high schools, an elementary school, 1500 full- and part-time faculty, and over 20,000 students, Hunter is equal in size to many state and private universities.
• In fall 2008, Hunter enrolled 21,259 students, fully one quarter of which are now graduate students (15,699 undergraduates and 5,560 graduates). Hunter offers an increasingly broad array of graduate programs, including 107 masters programs. Hunter College has just been granted the right to co-confer, with the Graduate Center, doctoral degrees in five areas: biology, chemistry, biochemistry, physics, and public health. Several CUNY doctoral programs for which the degree is conferred by the Graduate Center, ranging from Social Work to Nursing to Physical Therapy to Biopsychology, largely reside at Hunter College. Hunter’s professional schools — Social Work, Education, Nursing, and Health Professions — are among the strongest in all of CUNY and New York City. They will soon be joined by the new CUNY School of Public Health at Hunter College.

• Despite the growth and prominence of its graduate programs, Hunter remains at heart a liberal arts college, offering more than 140 undergraduate majors/concentrations to almost 16,000 undergraduates. Hunter boasts the largest, most select and most diverse units of the Macaulay Honors College and the CUNY Teacher Academy.

• Hunter’s faculty is among the most accomplished and distinguished in all of CUNY. Because of its storied history, appealing mission, talented students, and superb location in one of the world’s most desirable neighborhoods, Hunter has always attracted a strong faculty of scholars and teachers. Increasingly, we are hiring a highly research-active, grant-supported faculty. Hunter College now regularly attracts about $40 million in external research funding each year, and is recognized as one of New York State’s top twenty research-intensive institutions of higher learning.

• In keeping with the historic tradition of great universities, Hunter has long had a system of shared governance, with the administration, staff, faculty, and students acting in concert via the Hunter College Senate. Like all institutions of higher learning, Hunter sometimes struggles with the nature and extent of shared governance in a changing economic, political, social, and academic landscape. Hunter is also challenged by the desire to chart its own course within the guidelines of the central office of the City University of New York.

2. Hunter College has significantly raised its academic profile over the past decade.

• By all indications, Hunter’s national and regional reputation is on the rise. Hunter has improved its standing in national rankings. Hunter has become the most sought after college in the CUNY system, and is by far the first choice of students applying to CUNY generally and its Macaulay Honors Program particularly. More than 10,000 applications were received last year for a freshman class of 2,038. Hunter now accepts only 30% of all applicants for freshman admission. Hunter’s Macaulay Honor’s program receives more and stronger applicants than any other CUNY college. Hunter’s Macaulay program has grown every year since its inception, without sacrificing quality or diversity. Last year, Hunter enrolled 120 freshmen in Macaulay; the average SAT scores for enrolled students exceeded 1380.
Hunter’s incoming freshmen are better prepared for college than at any point in the recent past. The cumulative grade point average of new freshmen is now 85 and the proportion of incoming freshmen who have a high-school average of A (94 or higher) increased from 2 percent in 2000 to 6.3 percent in 2008. In 2008, for the first time since open admissions, the average SAT math and verbal scores of enrolled students exceeded 1100 (2008 national average = 1017). Hunter students are winning more national fellowships and attending graduate and professional schools at higher rates than a decade ago.

Increasingly, Hunter’s graduate programs draw students from around the United States and abroad, and several, such as the MFA programs in Studio Art and the Schools of Social Work and Nursing, are nationally ranked. Our MFA program in Creative Writing is regarded as one of the best in the city.

3. The diversity of Hunter’s students and faculty is our great pride, and is intrinsic to achieving the college’s mission.

The majority of freshmen entering Hunter have at least one immigrant parent, and over one quarter of Hunter students were themselves born out of the U.S. Approximately 45% of Hunter’s students speak a language other than English at home.

The overall demographic profile of Hunter’s students reflects changes in the city’s high school population. Over the past decade, the proportions of Latino and Asian students have risen.

Hunter’s faculty has a higher percentage of minority members (28%) and women (50%) than national averages. It has more minorities and women in the sciences proportionately than most American colleges and universities.

4. Despite Hunter’s great advances over the past decade, significant challenges remain.

Hunter’s graduation rates, while on the rise, remain low relative to comparable institutions. Despite a series of initiatives to improve retention over the past few years, fewer than 40 percent of students graduate within 6 years of matriculation. But our retention rates having been steadily if slowly improving over the past five years, and the gains in retention have not yet had time to affect graduation rates. We expect increases in graduation rates as early as this year. The college has redoubled its efforts to increase retention via pre-registration advising for freshman, a revamped First Year Student Experience (FYSH), special services for transfer students, assigned professional advisors and systematic outreach through the Office of Student Services, more guidance in declaring majors, and more scholarships to help students finish their studies. The college is also re-envisioning our general education requirement with an eye to making it more easily understood, communicated, navigated, and valued.
• Hunter routinely collects important information about its students that would enable us to craft more targeted retention, graduation, and engagement initiatives, but we have not fully mined the information that we have about our students. We do not know, for example, why students come to Hunter in the first place, what they expect from Hunter, why enrolled students accumulate credits at a slow pace, or why some students “stop-out” or leave altogether. Once students graduate, we do not follow them systematically. The Offices of the Provost and Student Affairs plan to work more closely with the Office of Institutional Research to collect more and better use our data.

• The professoriate is disproportionately small. Hunter’s full-time faculty has grown steadily in recent years, but with only 689 full-time faculty for over 20,000 students, it remains small for our student body (Hunter’s student-faculty ratio is about 25:1), and small relative to peer institutions (e.g., University of Massachusetts at Boston [818], SUNY Albany [over 1,000]). Increasingly, faculty receive released time for research, teaching at the Graduate Center, and administrative work. This means that the majority of Hunter’s undergraduate courses are taught by part-time faculty. Full-time faculty are also less available for mentoring and sponsorship than is optimal.

• Recent surveys of student engagement suggest that Hunter students are less satisfied with the level of personal contact that they have with faculty outside of the classroom than students from peer institutions. In response to these findings, Hunter has instituted a series of student engagement initiatives to foster opportunities for research and social and co-curricular activities among students and faculty.

• Student advising, both academic and professional, remains a challenge, as students regularly complain that they are given different advice by departmental and professional advisors in Student Services, or by different offices that serve students. But many improvements to advising have been instituted or are underway. A new electronic advising system, DegreeWorks, is making it easier to deliver consistent information to students and their advisors everywhere. Hunter is in the process of developing regular training for academic advisors within departments. A mechanism for communication between advisors in student services and advising in the major department is being devised. Student Services has expanded advising services. Every freshman and incoming transfer student is now assigned an advisor who regularly communicates with the student. Pre-law and pre-health professions advisors provide guidance to students interested in post-graduate professional training in those fields. A pre-business office is planned for those liberal arts and pre-professional students who are considering careers in the private sector.

• Hunter long ago outgrew its physical plant. There is widespread concern about Hunter’s ability to remain a vibrant center of teaching, learning, and research—and a desirable destination for faculty, students, and administrators—if Hunter cannot procure significant new space for classrooms, programs, laboratories, studios, and offices on the Upper East Side, near to its main campus. Planning is well underway for a new Science and Health Professions building a few blocks from the 68th Street
campus that will contain state-of-the-art laboratories for Hunter’s strong science programs. Its completion will unlock thousands of square feet on the main campus for the remainder of Hunter’s programs. Hunter has just secured a new site and the funding for a new facility in East Harlem that will house the School of Social Work and the new CUNY School of Public Health at Hunter College. Part of the funding for this new facility—40 million dollars—constitutes the largest single gift to a CUNY institution in its history.

- Hiring and retaining a world-class faculty with a 21 hour contractual teaching load is proving increasingly difficult. In addition, CUNY’s salary structure and the cost of living in New York City relative to the rest of the country may render Hunter College less competitive in its quest to hire and retain the best faculty in the future than it has been in the recent past.

5. As Hunter looks to the future, we see key areas in which we can prosper and grow:

a) Hunter College seeks to develop a culture of assessment, reform, and renewal in all areas, especially student learning.
   - Since 2001, Hunter has participated in CUNY’s Performance Management Process (PMP), a comprehensive annual evaluation of its institutional effectiveness that has garnered national attention for its scope and rigor. The PMP calls for goal-setting and accountability on matters ranging from academic and student affairs to financial management and fundraising. Hunter itself has initiated assessments of some of its key operations, ranging from professional advising and the First Year Seminar (FYSH) to the food service and the bookstore. However, administrative units are not yet routinely required to do regular self-assessments, and Hunter can do more to assess the effectiveness of its operations.

   - Learning assessment is standardized and rigorous in the programs at the professional schools as well as in some departments within the School of Arts and Sciences. But some departments in the School of Arts and Sciences have been slow to recognize the intrinsic value of goal-setting, learning assessment, and evidence-based reforms. The hiring of a full-time Director of Assessment to work out of the Office of the Provost has greatly energized this process.

   - The Provost’s office has promoted the institutionalization of student learning assessment by requiring all departments and programs to submit information on learning outcomes, assessment of student progress, and assessment-based planning on a routine basis. The Dean of Arts and Sciences, working with a Senate Committee on Assessment and the new Director of Assessment, is helping departments to implement their plans. The nature and extent of these efforts vary by department. More needs to be done to make learning assessment standard practice.
b) **Hunter seeks to build on the improvements it has made to its technology infrastructure over the past decade to enhance student learning and increase administrative effectiveness.**

- We will accelerate efforts to explore the uses of technology to improve students’ access and opportunities for learning, collaborating, and communicating.

- CUNYfirst, a fully integrated resources and services tool will replace aging systems and streamline and standardize procedures related to finance, human resources and student affairs.

c) **Hunter seeks to improve communications throughout the College using technology and other means.** From catalogues and brochures to websites and signage, we are embarking on a college-wide effort to ensure that students, faculty, and staff alike receive timely, consistent and useful information on requirements, standards, locations, options and opportunities.

- Websites for some units of the college had been out-of-date and/or hard to navigate. A new Content Management System should make inputting material and coherent navigation much easier. More than 25 new academic websites are expected to be launched in 2008-2009.

- Better signage and information are needed to help students, faculty, staff, and guests navigate the physical plant. Travel among Hunter and CUNY campuses should be facilitated.

d) **More attention will be paid to the quality of student life.**

- With a subway stop named for it, Hunter is the ultimate urban public institution. All Hunter students commute to campus, the majority from the outer boroughs. This basic fact shapes student life in ways that are particular to the urban setting.

- Space for meeting, working together, or socializing and relaxing between classes is limited. The college has been working to create new and better areas where seating and computers can be installed, and has been replacing furniture and upgrading amenities in student areas. But a more comprehensive solution to student spaces is being sought.

- The high cost of eating in the neighborhood of the Upper East Side demands a low-priced source of quality food within the college. A recent survey explored perceptions of Hunter’s food service; the results will inform future choices.
6. **Hunter College is more than ready for a new strategic plan.** The decade old strategic plan, created by former President Caputo in 1999, has not guided the college in any meaningful way for some time. Several of Hunter’s academic units have strategic plans of their own, but Hunter College as a whole is ready for a new plan, one that addresses the needs and aspirations of the college and those it serves in the 21st century. The process of self-study, evaluation, and reaccreditation should provide the foundation for writing a new plan.