

ENVOY

the independent voice of Hunter College

Issue #5, Fall 2006, December 6th

Editorial

Hunter Needs the JREC Building

At least one Hunter science student has been injured carrying bulky glassware between labs with insufficient storage space. The ill-equipped labs, where students and faculty work with toxic and carcinogenic materials, lack sufficient fume hoods, used for dispersing these fumes. Hunter students and faculty are in danger and they need new facilities.

Hunter and the Department of Education have proposed the acquisition of a building down the street from Hunter, at 67th and 1st Avenue, for use as a new science facility. However, they have met with fierce opposition from the building's current occupants, six distinct New York City public schools that compose the Julia Richmond Education Complex (JREC). In 1995, the building was redesigned as a "multi-age" academic community, one of the first of its kind that many other collaborative educational facilities have been modeled after. Hunter has offered the schools a trade: a new, state of the art building on the Brookdale campus in the East 20s for their building, whose locale is perfect for Hunter science students and faculty.

"Hunter College is a singular bright light for CUNY's excellent science faculty and students. We're uniquely situated near several of the nation's premier science institutions and our own public college students stand to benefit beyond measure from a new health and science facility located on the current Julia Richman site," wrote Hunter biology Professor Roger Persell, in an e-mail on the Hunter listserv in October.

Hunter already hosts prestigious science facilities, including the Center for Study of Gene Structure and Function, a consortium of researchers who study AIDS and other important issues. Like all other departments at Hunter, the science department is committed to serving a student body as diverse as New York City's population. Conversely, *The Scientist Magazine*, in its special supplement "Where are the Black Scientists?," notes that the number of black "investigators at the National Institute of Health has actually fallen in the

past decade, from 2% and 4.5%, respectively, to 1% and 1.5%." Hunter deserves facilities to serve its diverse students and faculty who are making inroads into the national scientific community and helping to change the overwhelmingly white face of the sciences in America.

So what's the problem?

At an Oct. 12 Community Board 8 meeting, angry parents and faculty of JREC swarmed the already crowded room. Most were furious that they had not heard of the plan until a state senator called a JREC administrator and tipped the school off to Hunter and the D.O.E.'s plans.

Hunter's students and faculty deserve up-to-date science facilities and what the administration is proposing is a fair trade

"We're all familiar, sometimes painfully, with the eccentric style of our current president," wrote Professor Persell in the same e-mail, but he added that "the project should be evaluated on its own merits and not tainted with any negative feelings faculty may have over how the administration runs it show." It is the lack of transparency—which Persell refers to as "Bush-like"—that incites people's natural suspicion of authority in this situation and lends the plans an undeservedly sinister appearance. No matter how many times President Raab shows up and apologizes to the community (and she has, at least once, at a September 20 meeting of the community board) the fact remains: no one informed the people of JREC of their fate and, naturally, that's upsetting.

Nevertheless, Hunter's students and faculty deserve up-to-date science facilities and what the administration is proposing is a fair trade.

The wildly successful Stuyvesant High School survived a move across the West Side Highway, noted Professor Persell. JREC can also survive a move. A school is only as good as its faculty—and JREC's faculty has proven itself impassioned and devoted. A move a few miles downtown won't change that, particularly in a school where most of the students aren't even from the neighborhood.

The definition of "neighborhood" is a loose one in Manhattan anyway. Anne Purdy, the assistant principal of JREC's Vanguard High School, told *Envoy* news editor Sam Lewis that the "neighborhood" is anything east of Lexington Avenue, between 14th and 96th Streets. Brookdale falls within those boundaries. Though many parents of JREC's Ella Baker students work near the present site, the Brookdale neighborhood is served by all the same public transportation as JREC. A fifteen-minute ride downtown to attend some of the city's finest public schools is a minor inconvenience compared to the great benefits the Hunter community will feel.

The most considerable inconvenience JREC will face is forging new community partnerships, but they were so successful here uptown. The dedicated and experienced faculty and administration at JREC are up to the challenge, and with past experiences under their belt they will likely do this more easily than before. Surely, businesses and institutions in the East 20's will be pleased to integrate the JREC community, which has already proven itself a fine addition to any neighborhood.

"The question is what is the best facility for JREC for the next 75 years. Is it an 86-year-old building that will continue to have a host of maintenance issues, or is it a brand-new building that can be built to our specifications?" Jamie Smarr of the Department of Education asked, in a November 20 article in *The Observer*. For JREC, and for Hunter, the answer is clear. JREC should make the southward move to a state of the art new building; Hunter should have safe and well-equipped science facilities in the neighborhood.