

In 1950 the CCNY alumni association warned that once tuition was imposed at City University, "it would continue to rise as a result of political and economic pressures to a point where all but the rich and well-born would be priced out of the higher educational market."

In 1991 we have been told that economic necessity requires a \$92 million cut in state aid to CUNY, an \$18 million cut in City aid, a \$700 tuition hike and substantial cuts in financial aid. A brief look at the economic composition of our student body---at least 40% of our students come from families earning less than \$16,000 per year, 20,000 receive public assistance, many are single parents---will reveal how devastating these cuts will be.

We have inherited a legacy of declining economic support for the City University that began most clearly in 1976 with the imposition of tuition. Yet we need to remember that the struggle for the existence of CUNY is as old as the institution itself. And we need to recognize that this struggle is political.

In a nation where higher education is largely regarded a privilege to those who can pay its price, CUNY stood as a unique example of a free academy for 129 years. At its inception, journalists, legislators, and private interests warned that the Free Academy would be "onerous to the city finances, injurious to institutions of learning already established, the fruitful source of strife among different classes and religious sects, and almost useless for all purposes of good." Despite such vociferous objections, the public voted by a 6 to 1 majority in favor of the first free municipal institution of higher education in the United States.

Free tuition, however, did not mean free education for all. CUNY has never been funded in relation to the demand for free higher education. Its funding needs to be situated in relation to fluctuating political and economic support---the interests of business, the needs of the economy, the strength of the private university lobby, the force of the demands of the public.

While the university did indeed grow over time in response to a burgeoning demand for higher education, it also implemented admissions policies that curbed the number of students who would attend. By 1960's these ever-rising entrance requirements effectively prevented most New Yorkers from attending the university and took on racial significance.

While the ethnic composition of New York City changed dramatically in the forties and fifties with a flood tide of African-American and Puerto Rican immigration into the city, it was not reflected in CUNY's entering classes. In the 1960's of the roughly 20% of New York City high school graduates admitted to CUNY, 1% were students of color.

In 1970 largely as a result of the struggles of African-American and Puerto Rican students, CUNY implemented an open admissions policy that guaranteed all New York City high school graduates admission to a CUNY college. In the fall of 1970, the university admitted a freshman class of 35,000, a 75% increase over the previous year. The ethnic balance of the university changed dramatically: by 1971, enrollment of students of color rose to 24% at the senior colleges and 36% in the community colleges, among the highest representation of students of color for any public university in the country. Open admissions and free tuition together were a bold experiment, unique in the nation. And it was controversial one.

In 1970 when CUNY implemented an open admissions policy Fortune magazine wrote: "Underlying CUNY's bold venture are the premises that a large number of disadvantaged students have the native ability to master college-level instruction, and that their initial handicaps in reading and math can be overcome in a fairly short time....It is unsettling to think what the CUNY policy might lead to. Adopted universally, it would bring about a huge jump in enrollments."

Former Columbia University Dean Jacques Barzun, who presided over a conference on open admissions in Washington D.C. in 1971, predicted that "open admissions will be a minority privilege for which the entire country will pay through various forms of taxation."

6 years after open admissions was implemented, tuition was imposed on the university, ending a 129 year policy of free higher education and effectively abandoning the new admissions policy. In three years, CUNY was forced to shrink its teaching staff by nearly 50% and its student body by 75,000. African-American and Puerto Rican students showed the greatest enrollment decline on all levels.

Today CUNY faces some of the most severe budget cuts and tuition hikes since 1976. At the same time, the CUNY administration has announced a renewed concern for "stiffer preparation for students" and "higher educational standards" at CUNY. A quick glance at the history of the university reveals that such concerns have been most pronounced at times when there was a desire to limit the student body.

As students, faculty members, interested parties, we need to be aware of the significance these current trends have for the future of the university. Right now, enrollment levels are at their highest since 1976, the student body, refreshingly, is composed of people of color, of immigrants, of students who cannot afford an ivy league price tag. We need to question requirements that will function to homogenize and burden the student body. We need to fight budget cuts that threaten the diversity, the vitality, and ultimately the existence of the university. And we need to act now for the future of this university is at stake.