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The Fight for Public Higher Education in Staten Island: The Saga of the College of Staten Island

by Mark Rivera (2010)

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Introduction

The College of Staten Island has a unique history as part of the City University of New York (CUNY). The formation of the College of Staten Island coincides in many ways with the development of the borough of Staten Island and its struggle for acknowledgment in the greater New York City. Staten Island has often been an afterthought in the grandiose political arena that is New York City politics. The borough has the smallest population of the five boroughs and receives the least attention in terms of services and funding. The demand for higher education on Staten Island began over twenty years before the establishment of any institution being founded on the island. The fight for acknowledgment and funds continues to this present day. The College of Staten Island's founding is not one of a grand idea being brought to fruition. The institution was an outcome of compromise, conflict, politics, and desperation. The story begins with the development of the Richmond County/the Borough of Staten Island, the fight for New York City's first public community college, the establishment of New York City's first Upper Division Undergraduate Institution, and the 1970s Fiscal Crisis of New York City.

The Rise of Richmond County and the Borough of Staten Island

Staten Islanders have long coined the term "the forgotten borough". The term refers to the sentiment many residents have towards the relationship the borough maintains with the rest of New York City and State. The sentiment encapsulates the feeling of isolation that has been a part of the borough's culture since the City's official consolidation in 1898 that established the five boroughs (<http://www.nypl.org/branch/staten/history/timeline5.html>). The founding of the land dates back to Giovanni da Verrazano and the island received its name upon Henry Hudson's purchase from the Native Americans as the term pays homage to the Dutch Parliament (*Staten-Generaal*). After the Second Anglo-Dutch War, the Dutch were forced to cede their New Netherlands colonies to the British in the Treaty of Breda. The British divided the colony into ten counties; Staten Island and the surrounding towns were labeled "Richmond County". Since then, Richmond County has been coterminous with the Borough of Staten Island.

Richmond County remained under development, mostly farmland until the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. The residents on the island remained isolated as a "world" unto itself. However, the 1900s brought about drastic changes to the borough and the population soon exploded. According to the United States Census in 1890, Staten Island had a population of

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51,713. By 1920, the population noticeably rose to over 116,000 residents (<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/36/36085.html>). The data would clearly coincide with the huge wave of Eastern Europeans migrating to New York in search of better opportunities. With such a dramatic increase in population, the borough and the city needed to assess the needs of its residents. The greater New York City and State began taking notice of the small borough. The development of the Fresh Kills landfill and the completion of the Verrazano Bridge brought much-needed jobs and businesses to the borough. However, one area that received little to no attention was the educational system and the need for a post secondary education system on the island.

The Fight for Higher Education on Staten Island

The first rumblings of a demand for Higher Education on Staten Island began in the 1930s (Volpe, 2001). As the borough grew in population, the inequity in treatment of essential services and access provided to *all* New York City residents became more visible. The continued feeling of neglect by New York City and State still resonated throughout the borough. The demands for a higher education institution were dismissed until the island found an effective advocate. Arleigh B. Williamson, a New York University Professor, was the advocate needed on Staten Island and he began actively protesting for a four-year institution to be established. The active protest was quelled as New York City's Board of Higher Education dismissed the outcry. In 1951, a report was released that studied the need for higher education on Richmond County. The study found that the long commute time [100 to 160 minutes, dependant on the other borough] served as a severe deterrent for many Staten Island students in continuing their education (*New York Times*, 1954). By approving a college in the borough, New York City would finally remove the inequity. The *New York Times* reported on the inequity of higher education amongst New York City and the study found "...the existing inequity has kept the total of qualified [Staten Island] students entering college at 5%, compared with 32% in the other four boroughs" (*New York Times*, 1956). The recommendations of the study strangely did not push for a four-year institution to be created but a new type of institution that had been growing in popularity since the Truman Commission Report on Higher Education in 1947. The report proposed a two-year "community college" that would assist students with general education that can transfer to a four-year college and provide special vocational programs to assist with job training. By 1955, New York State University and New York City's Board of Estimates approved the recommendation and Staten Island officially would have a higher education institution (*New York Times*). Arleigh B. Williamson could not gather the political capital to successfully obtain a four-year college, however; he was aware of the significance of the approval of the community college. In regards to the approval of the Community College, the late Professor Williamson wrote, "the expeditious thing to do was to get a foot inside the door toward complete higher education and that foot in the door would be a community college".

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Solving a problem and creating a new problem

The opening of Staten Island Community College (SICC) was celebrated throughout the borough. The state, city, and student would share the cost of the institution. The tuition would cost \$125 per semester. The first semester brought 100 enrolled students in a restructured former Consolidated Edison (Con Ed) building (McLaughlin, 1956). The trustees named Professor Walter Willig as President. Willig was previously an Assistant Dean and Professor at City University's flagship institution, City College.

The Community College was still a relatively new phenomenon across the nation and many four-year institutions did not know how to react to these new educational systems and their different missions and curriculum. The issue of classical general education versus pragmatic, career driven, vocational program education had existed for over a century. The issue took on a new form as the students and graduates of community colleges were put in the middle of this philosophical debate. Staten Island Community College graduates ran into problems when attempting to continue their education. The vocational program and training qualified them for jobs, but in time many discovered that advancement into managerial supervisory positions were being denied due to the requirement of a baccalaureate degree. The Associate in Applied Science degrees received by the Staten Island Community College graduates were not acceptable for advanced standing. In their attempt to obtain the baccalaureate degrees, many institutions required that they must start anew as freshmen. Transfer and articulation issues became the new problem in the higher educational system of Staten Island.

A study on these growing issues was submitted to the New York Board of Higher Education (Buder, 1965). The study reported a 100% increase in high school graduates on Staten Island over the next decade. The population was continuing to grow, especially due to the completion of the Verrazano Bridge. One of the most striking results of the study was the claim "a high percentage of families of the borough do not have sufficient annual income to permit them to educate even one child in a private college". The study spoke volumes to the inequity within New York City and the need for access to a four-year public institution on Staten Island. The City quickly saw the potential problem across boroughs with the conflicts between community college graduates and four-year institutions. Community Colleges have sprung up in many of the boroughs of the City and action was needed. If the City government failed to act, there would be a population of students left floundering, stagnant in their educational career without any upward mobility. In 1964, CUNY named a new Dean (E.K. Fretwell) and he brought a new innovative solution for the community colleges and particularly the people of Staten Island, an Upper Division College. The college would be known as Richmond College. Robert Altman, an expert in the study of the Upper Division College, stated "the creation of Richmond College, not unlike the creation of the Florida or Michigan institutions, was the result of a converging set of needs and circumstances, including the need of additional baccalaureate degrees and the existence of a local community or junior college" (1970).

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The Failure of Richmond College

Richmond College and Upper Division Colleges were born out of necessity. The need for community college students to have an institution tailored for them to continue their education without the conflicts and clashes with many four-year institutions that looked down on the students' alma mater and the philosophy of a community college (the German educational philosophy as opposed to the British educational philosophy). The structure of the Upper Division College seemed like a very radical change for many administrators and faculty members. This radical change meant that the institution needed to develop and create its own distinct culture to prosper. Richmond College was one of the thirty Upper Division Colleges in the United States (Volpe, 2001). The students' grade levels would be "junior", "senior", and graduate students in Teacher's education. However, what occurred at Richmond College was how an innovative idea to foster the advancement of community college graduates resulted in a jumbled, disorganized, and incompetent structure that fostered negative conflict between the administration, faculty, students, and community.

In 1967, the first semester of Richmond College began with an enrollment of 405 undergraduate students and 476 graduate students. The institution grew but as the enrollment grew, so did the disorganization. By 1974, the CUNY Chancellor was pursuing a new President to "right the ship". Similar to the selection of the first Staten Island Community College President (Walter Willig), the Chancellor looked towards CUNY's flagship institution, City College. Professor and former Chair of the English Department, Dr. Edmond Volpe was selected as the third president of Richmond College (Volpe, 2000). The faculty of Richmond protested the selection.

Chancellor Robert Kibbee told Dr. Volpe that the institution had "gone off-track" (Volpe, 2001). As Dr. Volpe was researching the institution, he became aware of several severe problems plaguing the college. The first dilemma was the selection of the faculty. The faculty was all scholars that believed in the classical general education philosophy. The prospective undergraduate population was students from the Staten Island Community College where they were taught career driven subject matter. The conflict between the faculty and the overall purpose of the Upper Division College were in conflict. Dr. Volpe delved deeper into the problems of Richmond were the initial 1967 CUNY Master Plan stated the mission of Richmond would ensure that "*...that the freshman and sophomore years will be in the hands of a community college faculty specially committed to, trained for, and experienced in its job. It assumes that the instruction of proven upper division and graduate students will be in the hands of scholars of acknowledged competence and that there will be no interruption of continuity in students' programs of study. Indeed, it may be agreed that higher education, involving commitment to a field of specialized study, does not really begin until the junior year and that the "lower division" course of study, involving basic skills and general cultural background, is essentially preparatory in character. Seen in this light the first two years of college are more closely related to the last two years of secondary school...*". The mission perpetuated the negative stigma of community colleges and career driven subjects, the Upper Division Colleges were created to discontinue this stigma and foster a positive environment where students can advance in their education.

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The radicalism of the faculty was not only in regards to stigmatizing community college education but also the attempt to innovate by instituting a flawed program structure and grading system. The academic programs would not be divided into departments but larger divisions within the institution. The faculty decided that the students of an upper-division college should not be subjected to the embarrassment of being rated by alphabetical grades. They introduced a simplified three-tier level grading system, which was: H (High Pass), P (Pass), and F (Failure). The grading system was a product of the culture of the faculty. The student population, which precisely wanted an opportunity to advance their education to assist with upward mobility in the workforce, became enraged. The Richmond students vehemently protested over the radical yet simplistic grading system that meant nothing to anyone beyond the college

(http://www.csineews.net/media_relations/history_csi.php).

Finally, Dr. Volpe studied Richmond College's relationship with the community of Staten Island. The institution was isolated from the entire community. The community had no connection or attachment to Richmond, compared to Staten Island Community College, which maintained a strong connection to the students and community. The faculty and administration were part of the radical 1960s movements and by attempting to create an environment that promoted protest and anti-war rhetoric without examining the external environment, most Staten Islanders felt ambivalent and indifferent about the college. Dr. Volpe had a tremendous challenge facing him. He needed to "right the ship" by changing the culture Richmond College created over its first 7 years, taking control of the institution over the faculty, creating a united mission where faculty and student can unite under a common purpose, and fostering a relationship with the community around Richmond (the residents of Staten Island). However, President Volpe did not have much time to turn Richmond College around as the fiscal crisis of New York City was devastating all public organizations. The City University of New York was facing severe budget cuts and the potential of retrenchment of many colleges within CUNY.

The New York City Fiscal Crisis of the 1970s and the birth of the "Comprehensive College"

In the 1970s, the financial system in the United States and in particular, New York City nearly collapsed under the weight of its own obligations. The economy stagnated and Wall Street's financial market fell in value as the City's spending continued to rise. During the administration of Abraham Beame, New York City neared bankruptcy (*New York Times*, 1976). The City government attacked unions by breaking contracts, instituted hiring freezes, froze wages, furloughs, and demanded significant budget cuts to all City agencies

(<http://home.flash.net/~comvoice/WA7606NewYork.html>). CUNY was given a mandate to institute immediate budget cuts that would account for nearly thirty million dollars. The proposed budget cuts would close or convert five of the institutions (John Jay College, Medgar Evers, Richmond College, Hostos Community College, and York College). The proposal was termed "the 3 year retrenchment plan". Dr. Volpe campaigned for the survival of Richmond College but the borough remained an afterthought to the City administration and his campaign was dismissed.

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However, out of desperation, Dr. Volpe proposed a new idea to CUNY Chancellor Robert Kibbee that would rescue four-year higher education on Staten Island. Dr. Volpe proposed merging Richmond College with Staten Island Community College (Volpe, 2000). The merger would reduce cost and still provide the borough with a four-year institution. The Chancellor Kibbee was persuaded and began plans to merge the colleges.

After New York City received federal aid, many of the budget cuts and retrenchment proposals never came to fruition with two exceptions. The first significant decision was the end of free tuition throughout all CUNY institutions. The second was the merger of the Staten Island Community College and Richmond College. The merger would mark an end to the experiment of the Upper Division College. Dr. Volpe was named president of the new institution and given the task of merging both institutions into one college. He discussed the challenge in his works "Creating a College" (2000) and "The Comprehensive College: Heading toward a New Direction in Higher Education" (2001). President Volpe saw the challenge as an opportunity and phrased the mission of the process as:

The federation of Staten Island Community College and Richmond College into the College of Staten Island provides us an exciting and challenging opportunity to create a unique four-year institution. The College we create must be truly responsive to the educational needs of an urban population in the final quarter of the twentieth century. Our educational philosophy should be based upon educational diversity. An urban institution, such as the College of Staten Island, serves a variety of student groups, each with different educational backgrounds and goals. The traditional four-year curriculum offered in most of our liberal arts colleges, is not capable of responding to the educational needs of this diverse student body. It was developed many years ago for a homogeneous student body, drawn from a restricted age group and from restricted socio-economic strata.

The City University has not been alone during recent years in the move to extend higher educational opportunity to new student populations. A large percentage of the expanded student population has been served by community colleges, which have introduced a variety of degree programs. Yet the structure of the liberal arts curriculum in both the two and four year colleges have undergone little alteration, despite the fact that the homogeneous adolescent population it was developed for has been replaced by an amazingly diverse student body.

The College of Staten Island would be the “*The Comprehensive College*”. The Comprehensive College would be an institution that’s overall mission would allow for both a mission of a community college and a mission of a four-year institution as one united vision. Dr. Volpe envisioned a five-year institution where students could be able to obtain general education, career driven education, and the fifth year of graduate professional study. President Volpe succeeded on his vision for the College of Staten Island by correcting the flaws and mistakes of Richmond College. He ended the radical programs and grading levels of the faculty, re-established the mission of the College, reorganized programs and departments, created new programs for the advancement of the College (PhD. Programs) with joint ventures with fellow CUNY institutions and the Staten Island community, transitioned from a two-campus institution to one single complete campus where all

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education would occur, and created a partnership and relationship with the external community of Staten Island that still exist to this day.

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