Highlights of Brooklyn College History

More than fifty years have passed since 1930 when the municipally-funded Board of Higher Education authorized the establishment of Brooklyn College as the first public coeducational liberal arts college in the City of New York through the merger of the Brooklyn men's branch of The College of the City of New York (CCNY) and the Brooklyn women's branch of Hunter College.

In a period of mounting financial depression, the decision of the city to establish a third free-tuition municipal college for those who qualified for admission was an expression of faith in the future of the city and a recognition of higher education as one of its essential components. Otherwise, many thousands of young men and women would surely have been unable to attend college.

Brooklyn College was a large institution from the day it opened its doors to several thousand students in rented quarters in the borough's downtown business area. Acquisition of a permanent site in the residential Midwood section of Brooklyn provided a spacious campus. On October 2, 1935, Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia used a silver-plated shovel to break ground for the new campus—twenty-six acres of broad lawns bounded by handsome Georgian-styled buildings. Since then, Brooklyn College has distinguished itself as one of the nation's leading public institutions of higher learning.

In November, 1984, the National Endowment for the Humanities released a report hailing Brooklyn College as a "bright spot" in American higher education. Prepared by thirty-one leading educators, the report criticized most universities for neglecting the ideals and practices that have shaped society. The panel, however, specifically praised Brooklyn College for its core curriculum and for its clear vision of what constitutes an educated person. The findings of the report were highlighted in all the major daily newspapers in the country and in Newsweek and the New Republic.

During 1985-86 recognition of the college's educational excellence was spectacularly extended to include the general public. In April, 1986, simultaneous recognition by Time magazine and a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation confirmed the validity of what the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Chicago Tribune, and the Christian Science Monitor had reported earlier. Time's tribute to Brooklyn College as a challenging alternative to the best institutions of the nation touched off a new barrage of publicity with newscasts on three major television channels at prime time. "You can talk all you want about Harvard, Yale, and Princeton," said NBC anchorwoman Pat Harper, "but New Yorkers can hop on a subway and get an outstanding education [at Brooklyn College]." WCBS anchorman Jim Jensen called Brooklyn College "a challenge to the Ivy League from the Lords of Flatbush." The Daily News wrote that Brooklyn College "has become a model for colleges
throughout the United States." A U.S. News and World Report survey of college and university presidents placed Brooklyn College among the nation's most selective schools emphasizing the liberal arts.

Brooklyn College first rose to national prominence in the 1950's when it began to send large numbers of students to the finest graduate and professional schools in the nation. Its reputation was eclipsed during the decade of open enrollment at The City University of New York. The College's second rise to national prominence is a remarkable success story when viewed in the context of the difficult decade of the 1970's. From 1969 to 1975 the College literally doubled the size of its student body. New York City's fiscal crisis of 1975/76 had a brutal impact on Brooklyn College: with the end of free tuition in 1976 and with the end of open enrollment at the University's senior colleges in 1978, the student body decreased in size from 34,497 students in Fall 1975 to 24,438 in Fall 1976, when virtually all non-tenured faculty were summarily dismissed, and to 18,300 in Fall 1979.

The drastic contraction of the institution in the second half of the decade led to tremendous internal tension, the general decay of the entire administrative infrastructure of the College, a maldistribution of resources that in some instances persists to this day, and the resignation of the President. In short, everything that could go wrong in an institution of higher education seemed to have gone wrong at Brooklyn College.

Since 1979, Brooklyn College has totally reorganized itself, dramatically reformed general education requirements, rebuilt faculty morale, restored alumni and student pride in the institution, successfully fulfilled the goals of a five-year plan that required further scaling down of the size of the faculty, eliminated two departments through merger with other departments, added a number of new degree programs, eliminated one major, phased out of existence several hundred undergraduate and graduate courses, rebuilt the quality of the student body, and embarked upon a full program of physical plant rehabilitation. In short, Brooklyn College has again become a dynamic institution.

Brooklyn College's reputation has helped it to attract and keep an outstanding faculty. Known throughout the nation and the world for their scholarly achievements, more than ninety percent of the College's faculty members hold the highest degree in their fields. Its faculty includes Distinguished Professors John Ashbery (creative writing), Allen Ginsberg (creative writing), H. Wiley Hitchcock (music), Rohit Parikh (computer and information science), Philip Pearlstein (art), David Raab (experimental psychology), Carl Shakin (physics), Robert Starer (composer), and Hans Trefousse (history). The Brooklyn College Foundation has provided an endowment enabling three faculty members to hold chairs as Broeklundian Professors: Yaffa Eliach (Judaic studies), Fred Pollak (physics), and Susan Fromberg Schaefler (creative writing). Other well known faculty include Academy Award actor F. Murray Abraham, painter Lennart Anderson, author and critic Jonathan Baumbach, speech pathologist Oliver Bloodstein, sculptor Lee Bontecou, father of public
radio James Day, computer musician Charles Dodge, Lenin Prize winner chemist Vojtech Fried, geologist Gerald Friedman, playwright Jack Gelber, theater critic Glenn Loney, New York State Regent Louise Matteoni, sociologist Egon Mayer, and violinist Itzhak Perlman.

This same tradition of academic excellence is reflected in the accomplishments of Brooklyn College graduates. The National Research Council's Doctorate Records File, a virtually complete data base of the ca. 785,000 doctorates earned at American universities in the years between 1920 and 1984, indicates that Brooklyn College ranks first nationally in the number of women graduates who have gone on to earn their Ph.D. degrees in psychology and second in men graduates. The College ranks third nationally in the number of graduates who have earned the Ph.D. in the social sciences, eighth in the humanities, and eleventh in all doctoral fields combined over the past thirty years. The percentage of Brooklyn College graduates going on to earn the doctorate is higher than that of six of the eight Ivy League colleges.

In 1986 biochemist Stanley Cohen '43 became the first Brooklyn College graduate to receive the Nobel Prize. Four hundred alumni are listed in Who's Who in America, and 150 alumnae appear in Who's Who in American Women. Nearly three hundred presidents, vice-presidents, or chairpersons of the boards of major corporations are graduates of Brooklyn College. Finally, each year the college's graduating seniors receive more than three hundred acceptances to Harvard, Yale, Stanford, the University of Pennsylvania, and other leading law and medical schools throughout the country.

An outstanding faculty, highly praised academic programs, and distinguished graduates—these are the hallmarks of success at Brooklyn College. Today, Brooklyn College continues to develop bold and innovative ideas and programs. Its curricula provide the means to train new generations of students as the college builds upon traditions that have given it a place among the nation's most distinguished institutions of higher education. As it prepares for a future matching its past, the college engages in serious planning for the generations to come. The five-year plan for 1986-1991 is an integral part of such a planning process.