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How I saved (another) College

CLASS NOTES
MAR 25, 2025

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I arrived at Antioch College as a first year student in Fall 1953, and almost 50 years later--in 2001--I was appointed its president. My presidency was short-lived, less than 3 years, because like my predecessors and immediate successors, it was impossible for me to please or keep peace with the University.

Although Antioch College didn't close on my watch, it was a constant battle with the University to keep it open. They did close the College in 2008, four years after I left the presidency. Of course I blamed myself. But this is the story of a different institution, and how I was able to save it.

An Antiochian, Mike Kittross, nominated me for membership in the Registry for Retired College Presidents, an organization that places people in emergency and short-term college and university presidencies. In 2007 I was appointed to a one-year presidency at the Metropolitan College of New York (MCNY), a small private non-profit college in Manhattan that serves a working-class constituency by offering most of its classes during evenings and weekends. Over 80% of its undergraduates were African-American women of all ages.

I fell in love with the College during the interview. It was founded in 1964 by a brilliant educator, Audrey Cohen, who had innovative and idiosyncratic ideas about how to teach older adults. She conceived an integrated work-study curriculum not unlike Antioch's, except that work and study alternate daily, not term-by-term. In many ways the integration is even more deliberate than at Antioch: Work and study are formally meshed under a system dubbed *Purpose-Centered Education* by Audrey Cohen.

At least when I was president, every undergraduate either already had a job, or one was found for them. Almost all of these positions were low-paying or entry-level. Students took an integrating seminar every term, each with a theme such as "Technology", "Networking", "Persuasion", with assignments applicable to almost any kind of job, whether in a cafe, a hospital, or a construction company. In the senior year the seminar theme was always "Constructive Action". With joint mentorship by the seminar teacher and their own work supervisor, each student undertook a senior project--a "Constructive Action", as they called it--to reform or improve the workplace, and in that way became a certified change agent. This education often

catapulted low-income students into the middle class. The range and power of those senior projects was inspiring. While I was president, one student found a way to recycle old subway cars to keep them out of New York City's landfills. Another (an immigrant from the Caribbean) had such good ideas about reorganizing a clinic in Brooklyn that her Board appointed her dir

Sounds idyllic, right? That was the institut

When I arrived, having signed my contract Board Chair that the College was about to identified. My job would be to ensure a sm structure. I said (to myself, of course) *over r* costs to the bone and dismiss full-time fac minimal syllabi that neither challenge stud expensive! I knew that the unique curricul transition, and there was no chance the ne the career opportunities they were now en graduates might not learn enough or earn turned out that this very buyer was later targeted as "predatory" by the Obama administration, barred from receiving Federal student aid. The DeVos Department of Education under the first Trump administration restored government funding to many of those same schools.)



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To be sure, MCNY had serious problems--several years of large budget deficits and declining admissions. The Chief Financial Officer and the Chief Academic Officer weren't on speaking terms, and the Social Services faculty were threatening a vote of no confidence against their Dean. Nothing unusual.

But the Board had given up on fixing the College and was looking for a way to wash their hands of it. They had fired the previous president, my predecessor, but for some reason kept him on the Board of Trustees--typical of their timid style of problem-solving. So it was not surprising that they believed that a sale was not only an easy way out, but face-saving; at least the school wouldn't close. I was hired in June. I spent the summer trying to prevent the Board from meeting, and when they met, to prevent them from voting on the impending sale. I met individually with Board members to

feel out how determined each was to sell the school, and managed to switch at least one vote--the ex-president's!

I conceived a devious plan to buy myself time: I reminded the Board that you don't have to marry the first person who asks you, and we had no idea what other buyers, other options, were out there. We needed to hire a consultant with expertise in academic acquisitions and mergers to advise us before taking such a consequential decision. Of course we could ill afford such a consultant, but the Board--mostly the businessmen on the Board--bought my argument and set about searching for a consultant. I knew that this would take time, a LOT of time, plus the consultant's study and report-out time--and time was what I needed.

I worked fast: I reorganized the administration, fired the business dean and combined two schools under one dean, gave notice to the Chief Academic Officer and offered to help find him a new job--which happened in a few months. Instead of replacing him I set up an academic triumvirate--the remaining two deans and me--to run academic operations. I hired an admissions consultant recommended by the Registry. She quickly analyzed the admissions picture, recommending that I fire the Director and appoint one of the other staff people (she told me which one) as admissions director. I did all this--a popular move in the admissions department which (unknown to me) was being roiled by an alleged sexual scandal involving the Director. I also cut--the word I actually used was 'deferred'--part of the college's contributions to the faculty and staff retirement funds, explaining to the faculty that, given our budget problems, it was better to jeopardize future income (and try to restore payments later) than to cut their present income. And I recruited a few new members to the Board of Trustees.

During all this change, I held frequent faculty/staff meetings to explain the budget, the cuts, the reorganization, my hopes for the future--but with not a word about the pending sale of the school. My stated objective was to be transparent (mostly).

By Christmas the budget was in balance, and Spring admissions were up. Whew! Out of the woods! The consultant we hired--remember him?--made his report, with several recommendations (more delay while each was considered) but in the end the die-hard sell-the-school party on the Board was outnumbered and out-voted. The Board asked me to stay on as President, against the rules of the Registry which limited appointees

to short-term emergency service. But I declined because I had an exciting position waiting for me at the National Science Foundation in Washington, DC as a Program Manager in neuroscience. (I had received that job offer a few months into my one-year presidency and the NSF was good enough to hold it for me until the presidency was over.) The MCNY Board authorized a search for a new president to succeed me, and I served on the search committee.

The College prospered after that. I was able to facilitate a reconciliation between the Social Services faculty and their dean who then stayed on until retirement. I managed the ramp-up to a 10-year reaccreditation of the College, and paved the way to opening a branch campus in the Bronx--a project completed by my successor, Vinton Thompson, who was also able to move the main College from its rental space on Canal Street to a new custom-designed building on West Street near the Battery.

And MCNY remembers! I've been back to visit several times--*once to receive a medal.* One of the academic deans in our old triumvirate introduced me to a new dean as "a profile in courage". During one of my visits the Dean of Students asked me how many years I had been there, and was astonished to be reminded that it was only *one* year. She remembered it as much longer. Vinton Thompson served as President for many years, retiring from that position.

The Medal:



What happened to my beloved Antioch--the place where I learned how to be a president? After being closed in 2008, it was rescued by the alumni and reopened two years later. The College is still innovative, influential, and unique. Like much of higher education today it remains fragile, in need of its alumni and friends. The long-term survival of our college certainly is a Victory for Humanity.

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