

The Strategic Plan: An Engaged Intellectual Community

An engaged intellectual community is one that, by its composition and its physical organization, is engaged in activities and an ongoing exchange of ideas related to research, scholarship, creative work, and to teaching and learning. It is one that generates a wide array of activities for faculty and students, allows them the time to participate in activities of their choice, and accords them meaningful recognition of the worth of taking part.

Bureaucratic procedures, teaching and meetings, and the considerable pressure for more and more paperwork are eroding the ability of the faculty to engage at any intellectual level beyond what particular circumstances may compel. Creating and fostering an engaged intellectual community at Brooklyn College must also confront the commuter nature of the school, the workload, and the lack of physical facilities that would favor such community engagement. While we do have programs of both narrow and wider appeal (the Wolfe Institute's offerings, for example), social opportunities (such as Faculty Circle), a place to dine (the Georgian Room) and even a new bar (perhaps a *sine qua non* for any intellectual community), for some reason(s) many members of the faculty do not avail themselves of these. This may be partly because, at a very basic level, we are a group of New Yorkers (not a bad thing, certainly) who, like many other New Yorkers, live quite private existences outside of the workplace. On the other hand, our profession makes us fundamentally different from other New York civil servants. Despite all the efforts to force us into an industrial model, we and our students produce, experiment with, and manipulate ideas and attitudes that cannot be assessed, accelerated, or made more efficient by time/motion studies or speeding up the assembly line.

One of the reasons that some of us have been "unengaged" may be that we have lost the feeling that what we do is valued and important to others. This may be related to feelings about our research, scholarship, creative work, administrative work, or teaching. The College must let faculty know that all of these sorts of work are recognized and appreciated at the College, as well as our participation in non-required activities and events.

If we want to create and foster an engaged community of scholars, we should have opportunities to combine intellectual and social interaction initiated at the grass roots, small-scale level, perhaps starting with individual/ department programs and interaction and then working towards related disciplines. Some departments do have departmental faculty seminars/teas/lunches on a regular basis; in others, colleagues may not really know what research others are doing, what they are writing or reading, what they are painting, sculpting, directing, designing, composing, or conceiving. Some related disciplines sponsor joint events. This is not supported to the extent that it should be.

Moreover, in terms of the culture of the College, engagement is, perhaps, not seen as being important. Schedules and good facilities for informal interaction (lounges and lunchrooms in various user-friendly locations in several buildings, a café on the quad) are

not planned with faculty interaction in mind. Administrators (many of whom have come from faculty ranks) rarely show up at faculty programs. In order to engage the faculty, there must be a clear message that the work of the mind and creative spirit is of primary concern to the academic community, and that it must be shared.

Accepting the premise that a sense of community must suffer from dispersed residency, heavy teaching loads, and the intense concentration required to produce professional work, there is still the opportunity at Brooklyn College for engagement. In fact, one thing that our committee would point out is that there are currently a large number of events and activities on campus in which the faculty could engage; indeed, there is not a need to create more activities, but rather a need to encourage more faculty to participate in the events and activities already available. This is the big challenge, given that we are a commuter college, and that many faculty feel overloaded with their current teaching and administrative responsibilities. Nevertheless, we should make every effort to create the best possible engaged intellectual community at the College.

Activities/Events Currently Occurring at the College

The following is a report on activities and events currently occurring at the College.

Method: Data were drawn from the Brooklyn College Smart Calendar (found on the BC website <http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/smartcal/main.htm>) for the academic year 2004-2005. These were titles/listings of events of general interest to the campus community. It is probable that this is in fact a minimal list; smaller events may not have appeared, and others may not have been listed for a variety of reasons. Since the object was to determine what sorts of possible events might be available for faculty participation (as a rough correlate to “engagement”), events that were primarily or solely student-oriented (e.g., test-taking workshops or student intramural sports events) were not counted.

Those events that remained were sorted into four categories: Intellectual, Social, Professional, and Creative. These are admittedly somewhat idiosyncratic, and some activities (such as films) could fall into several categories. They were then counted and tallied. Multiple instances of the same event were counted separately, as each was viewed as a separate chance for faculty participation.

“Intellectual” events included lectures, talks, seminars, colloquia and other activities judged to be primarily of a scholarly nature. Examples of such “intellectual” events are: “Department of Sociology Presents the Twelfth Charles R. Lawrence II Memorial Lecture: The Limits of Public Policy and the Changing Character of Social Science in the United States: Comparing 1904 and 2004” or “Chemistry Colloquium: Nonstatistical Dynamics of Organic Isomerizations” or “Hollywood Singing: Cartoons and the Persistence of Tin Pan Alley.”

“Social” events were those whose primary objectives seemed to be entertainment or promotion of collegiality on campus. Included here were opening receptions (e.g., “Comic Book Art Exhibition, opening reception”) film showings that were not part of a

lecture or film series, most Faculty Circle events, authors' parties, and Alumni Day and Brooklyn College birthday events.

"Professional" events included a wide range of activities concerned with faculty development and college administration. Examples are: "Developing Resilience in the Classroom," "Fireside Chat with President Christoph M. Kimmich," "The Strategic Plan 2005-2010 with Provost Roberta Matthews," and other such events. AIT computer workshops and CUNY faculty development seminars, although falling under this rubric, were not listed on the Smart Calendar, and thus were not counted.

"Creative" events were those showcasing or devoted to the display of creativity in the arts (*sensu lato*) and music. These included film series with associated lectures/discussions, composers' for a ("BROOKLYN COLLEGE COMPOSERS' FORUM presents MICHAEL PISARO "Experimental Music and the House that Disney Built"), art exhibits ("ILLUSORY IMAGES: The Photographs of Jessica R. Pepper"), and poetry readings ("A Poetry Reading with Marie Ponsot"), among others.

Results: During the 2004-2005 academic year (i.e., from September 23, 2004, to June 2, 2005), there were a total of 257 activities on campus that were open primarily to faculty participation, as listed in the Brooklyn College Smart Calendar. In terms of the above categories, they were distributed as follows:

Intellectual	91
Social	46
Professional	40
Creative	80

The events were rather evenly distributed across the year, with an understandable gap at intersession.

Interpretation of these results in terms of "an engaged faculty" is a bit tricky. There is obviously more than enough to do at the college, judging from the events listed on the calendar. The fact that it would be impossible for any faculty member to participate in even a good percentage of them (and still bear a normal Brooklyn College teaching load) goes without saying. One might point to the disparity between the "social" and "intellectual" categories as a problem for a campus-based community, while it is equally likely that this is symptomatic of the commuter nature of the faculty and the resources available in the city as a whole. It may be that the faculty does not associate "social" activities with the college as much as it does "intellectual" and "creative" events. Our committee does not believe that this means that the faculty is not "engaged." We certainly do not think that one can maintain such a contention from the above numbers.

Some Additional ways to Encourage Faculty Engagement

Although the College currently offers ample opportunity for faculty engagement, our committee nevertheless thought of the following additional steps that might encourage more engagement.

- Facilitating contact among professorial staff at lunch—faculty luncheons, such as by division, on various days of the week where somebody gives a talk about work that they are doing. Expanding on lunch, perhaps more faculty retreats could be organized.
- An e-mail circle that functions as a shared chat room for scholarship, faculty council debate, humor, issues, etc. Perhaps a separate URL site for this purpose could be established within the College.
- Scholarly interaction within departments and across departmental and divisional boundaries. For the most part, this would be spontaneous, however, BC Faculty Day offers a yearly platform that can serve as a template for smaller scale endeavors where faculty mingle in settings both intellectual and social. Part of the problem with interdisciplinary research could be lack of knowledge or awareness of other disciplines that hinders collaborative pursuits. Interaction has always been best when generated by individuals whose intellectual needs force them to reach out to others with shared interests, but usually for a specific goal, not on an ongoing basis. For example, a theatre director staging a play by Marivaux might contact the History Department for a discussion of 18th century French culture and ideas.
- Mentoring of new colleagues, both within and across disciplines, can stimulate wonderful scholarly ideas. Alternative viewpoints and various departments could be encouraged to confront each other in open forums. The Donald and Paula Smith debates at CUNY Graduate Center often attract considerable interest and can be a prototype for an offering at BC.
- The Wolfe Institute sponsors stimulating seminars, guest speakers and authors that are open to both the faculty and student population at Brooklyn College. Participation in the Center for Teaching programs should be encouraged. There is also the Wolfe Institute Reading Group, which meets once a month to discuss a common text. The meetings have brought together junior and senior faculty from different departments, and are intellectually provocative as well as fun. January intersession workshops have been initiated. Along this line, there can be “works in progress” seminars within departments, allowing faculty to engage in intellectual discussion in a way that would be an antidote to meetings where interaction with colleagues is often limited to administrative issues.

- An on-campus day care facility (perhaps subsidized) for faculty so that they might be able to stay on campus for collegial events, socializing, programs, etc., despite the demands of young families.
- A faculty lounge space where club hours, seminars, poster sessions on research, happy hour discussions and debates, evening exhibitions, and readings of new works could all take place. Such a space would be an inviting place where faculty could take a break during the day or stop in on the way home and run into colleagues. The lounge would ideally include a kitchen. The current underutilized faculty lounge, managed by Faculty Circle, could possibly be renovated, or a new space could be found that might have access to an outside patio.
- Considering having Faculty Day in the fall, or mid-semester, at a time when faculty are not so busy with end-of-semester responsibilities.
- Considering having a big annual teach-in (perhaps every fall) on a topic of vital national and/or international concern.
- Asking the Director of the Center for Teaching, in collaboration with the Director of the Learning Center, the Dean of Undergraduate Education, and other interested parties, to organize events that would bring faculty together, such as the above-mentioned annual fall teach-in.
- Asking each college department to communicate to the college at large how it encourages faculty engagement within the department (works in progress talks, invited speakers, events for student majors, etc.), so that other departments could consider doing these same sorts of activities. Making funds available to departments to support these sorts of activities, or perhaps asking departments to submit proposals for funding of such activities, which could also include proposals for events/activities that would involve several departments, or even the College at large.
- Considering the possibility of creating more mini-colleges, similar to the honors colleges, whether representing themes or objects of inquiry, as a way to foster the socialization of students into intellectualism (this would probably require getting the required resources through grant funds).
- Finding physical ways to show off faculty and student accomplishments, e.g., by having author parties to which students are invited.
- Finding ways to encourage more student-faculty collaboration, such as by involving students as research assistants and teaching aides, so that they become more engaged in our intellectual lives.
- Doing more to encourage team teaching, development of blocked courses, and other sorts of pedagogical collaboration, both within and across departments.

- Organizing new types of faculty forums and debates that would be more lively and engaging than those currently available.

Recommendations on the Need for Faculty Space

Our committee discussed the fact that faculty engagement requires the availability and appropriate use of faculty space.

Many departments have some kind of space that is devoted, to some significant extent, to activities that foster intellectual engagement. Our informal survey elicited responses from thirteen departments (Africana Studies, Anthropology, Art, English, History, Music, Physical Education and Exercise Science, Political Science, Psychology, Puerto Rican and Latino Studies, Sociology, Speech Communication Arts and Sciences, and Theater). Most of these departments have one, or in some cases, two spaces, that are used for seminars, colloquia and the like. Only one mentioned a space (actually part of a subdivided space) that functioned as a lounge. In the vast majority of cases the spaces in question are multifunctional, serving, for example, as a library or meeting room as well as a seminar room. Departments seem to be doing the best they can with limited resources. Clearly, some important space needs remain unmet: a serious need for adequate research space was voiced by some in response to our survey.

The College has an ongoing and active commitment to building new spaces, and refurbishing existing ones, in which formal scholarly interaction can take place. In addition to large-to-medium-scale spaces like Whitman and the library's Tanger Auditorium, there are numerous smaller-scale spaces like those in the Wolfe Institute and the Graduate Dean's Office. It does not seem that intellectual engagement across departments should be hampered by any lack of suitable venues, though it would no doubt be useful to confirm this in a more systematic way.

It appears (again, subject to further confirmation) that there is a lack of spaces successfully devoted to informal interaction across departments. The word "successfully" here registers an important qualification, for there is, of course, a Faculty Lounge in Boylan Hall. However, that space is underutilized, and it is important to determine just why this is so. If it is mainly because of inadequacies of the space itself, then it will be important to design and bring into being a more adequate one (or more adequate ones).

In conclusion, the two primary common areas—the Georgian Room and the Faculty Lounge in Boylan—help to meet the needs of an engaged intellectual community. The Faculty Lounge is, on the whole, well set-up as a common area and as an inviting space for quiet reading or small meetings. However, it is underutilized. We recommend that the reasons for this underutilization be identified and remedied.

The Georgian Room is also underutilized, and the space needs to be reconfigured and reconceptualized as more than a lunchroom that is accessible only for a few hours each day. We also recommend that the reasons for this be identified and remedied. The poor

quality of the food is clearly a major factor in the underutilization of this space. We also recommend that possibilities be explored for the creation of a convivial space in the Georgian Room (for example, a wine/beer bar open later in the afternoon).

In Conclusion

Though being a commuter school is a detriment, we need to think more creatively about what we do have—an entire New York City community whose intellectual life is there for the partaking. How can we make connections with other universities in the area for students and faculty to create NYC as part of our intellectual community?

An ideal engaged intellectual community would be one where professors would have a workload that allowed them to pursue their academic interests while also having the time to improve the quality of their teaching. It would be one where they would also have the time to attend lectures, symposia, performances, and workshops of interest, both in their field and outside it. Hopefully, Brooklyn College will move closer to being this ideal engaged intellectual community in coming years.

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