FOR THREE HOURS a day every day, I put on a brave face and ride the subway from the South Bronx all the way to Midwood, Brooklyn, and back.

The infestation of rats, delayed and crowded trains, and the peculiar sights and smells don't make it a pleasant commute, but it is well worth it.

At the end of the line is Brooklyn College, a campus that resembles a 19th century Georgian oasis where students can get a top-quality education that won't put a huge dent in their already-empty pockets.

I could have attended Lehman College near my house and studied multilingual journalism, or gone to Baruch in Manhattan and taken up journalism and creative writing.

I picked Brooklyn College because it offers aspiring journalists like me a chance to work with experienced journalists-turned-professors who honed their skills at top city newspapers.

In some ways, though, you get what you pay for at Brooklyn College.

Service with a smile is not the motto in most of the departments, where rude staff members dish out more attitude than assistance.

If you want to graduate on time you've got to stay on top of them or otherwise you'll find yourself on the five- or six-year plan because they can be lax.

Although the student body is diverse, many of the groups tend to stick together and not take advantage of the religious and ethnic variety.

The beauty about the students at Brooklyn College is that they don't slack off when it comes to their education.

Many times I have attended classes where the discussions get so intense that we forget it's time to go.

NEW YORK'S BRIGHTEST have spoken: CUNY rocks and the city's upstart universities bomb.

Princeton Review sent spies to campuses across town and interviewed scores of students for their 2009 Best 368 Colleges, released Monday.

The result: Baruch and Brooklyn College - "the poor man's Harvard" - ranked near the top in the nation for diversity and sober-socializing.

While kids at New York's elite private universities berated their schools - NYU kids whined so much the Review ranked them 14th as "least happy students" - City University of New York's scholars did nothing but rave.

"I was blown away by the mix of cultures," said Baruch business major Christopher Yi, 19. "Everyone is different."

Baruch ranked first in diversity, beating international mega-stars Harvard and Stanford. The Kips Bay campus counts 151 countries as home for its student body.

"From Trinidad to Turkey. From Chicago to Caracas," Baruch spokeswoman Zane Berzins boasted.

That wasn't all from the two CUNY schools. The Review said both are amazingly party-free.

Baruch ranked eighth for low hard liquor usage and Brooklyn College listed in seventh place for attracting anti-beer fans.

Nationally, Queens College was ranked 14th on the list of "stone-sober schools," while Baruch ranked 18th.

"They are very responsible," Berzins said. "They are children of immigrants."

The Review's annual guide ranks schools on scores from 60 to 99 based on admissions, financial aid, and a new category called the Green rating, which looks at a school's environmental practices.

In addition to being responsible and diverse, city-funded college kids also said their schools' were great places to learn.

One student called Brooklyn College "the poor people's Harvard."

"While being considered a 'Poor Man's Harvard' may be flattering, Brooklyn College is proud to be Brooklyn College," quipped college President Christoph Kimmich in an e-mail.

Another city coed said Baruch's tuition "is about one-fourth what it is at NYU," making it "the best college value in New York City."

Albanian native Keida Dizdari, 23, a finance major at Baruch, said her classmates are "friendly and nonjudgmental."

"People are like me," Dizdari said. "They just came to this country. It is really good for getting used to everything."