The New Community College Try

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THERE are too many worms. In a mid-Manhattan classroom, 20 applicants write their thoughts about going to community college on paper cutouts and stick them to a poster of a tree — multicolored, tapered leaves for hopes, square bits of trunk for strengths, squiggly worms for fears. The worms dominate.

For these students, college is not an assumption but an aspiration, a potential salvation from the poverty most grew up in. Several would be the first in their families to attend college — some are the first to speak English — so they get no guidance from home about the leap to that alien plane. Most of them are applying to community college because they know, or suspect, that their high school grades and test scores are not good enough to get them into four-year colleges.

All have applied for the first class ever admitted to the City University of New York's new two-year college, set to open next month, and they are gathered at the college on this March night because of a requirement that applies to no other school within CUNY — indeed, few schools anywhere. The system will not consider their applications until they have attended a lengthy information session, followed by one-on-one interviews with counselors, to be sure they understand just what they would be getting into.

They learn this night that the New Community College (officials want to give it a catchier name someday, ideally that of a generous benefactor) would be unlike any they have heard of.

What they do not learn is how much will be riding on it. Unknown to them, these students have applied to be test subjects in a multimillion-dollar experiment in how to fix what ails community colleges. CUNY has designed from scratch a new structure and new curriculum that it hopes will greatly improve students' chances of earning an associate degree and transferring to a four-year college. Experts across the country are watching closely, hopeful that the college can serve as a national model.

The experiment raises many questions, of course. The most pressing may be whether its resource-intensive approach can be carried out on a large scale at a reasonable cost. And long before a single class was to be held, faculty members and administrators battled over what was best for students.

The students know none of this. Their eyes widen as two professors walk them through what lies ahead: summer and winter sessions, mandatory full-time enrollment for the first year, mandatory and frequent tutoring and counseling, courses that do not sound like anything they have seen before, and very little choice in classes.

These students do not display the habits or confidence that would have been instilled in a more privileged group. Just one of the 20 scribbles notes during the presentation, and when the floor is opened for questions, there are none. The professors, Nicola Blake and Tracy Daraviras, try hard to be open and engaging, stressing their own modest backgrounds; when they prod the students for reactions, though, they get little in return.

But the students listen. Not one of them talks or texts or gazes out a window.

Giselle Diaz, a soft-spoken high school senior from Brooklyn, read a brief description of the college and was intrigued enough to apply, but the details are all news to her. Destiny Jackson, a senior from the Bronx, liked the idea of going to school in Midtown — she used to work at the nearby Lord & Taylor — and of not seeing the same faces she saw throughout high school. Others in the room readily concede that they marked the New Community College on their CUNY applications just to round out the list of six schools they are allowed to name, in order of preference.

“It’s a lot to think about,” Giselle says. “It’s not really what I expected. I guess I didn’t know what to expect.”

None of them did. At dozens of these information sessions, the students write on those trees a mix of hardheaded realism, worry and dreams ranging from cautious to wildly optimistic.

Leaves: “I want to do better than my parents.” “To graduate out from college very satisfied and excited for what my degree will be.” “My hope and dreams are to one day have my own record label.”

Trunk: “I like to read.” “Outgoing. Hard-working.”

Worms: “I fear to get stress during my college years.” “Workload might be too much.” “My fear for college is meeting new people and speaking out loud.” “Am I smart enough?”

FOR TOO MANY STUDENTS, community college does not work. Only about one in five students graduates within three years. Most never do, and never transfer to a four-year college. Full-time students, who account for 44 percent of all community college enrollment, fare better: less than one in three finish in three years, according to the federal Department of Education.

Yet the nation’s reliance on community colleges has never been greater, as higher education becomes a requisite for more fields of work. President Obama has repeatedly called for investment in community colleges, and partnerships between them and businesses, to train millions of workers in technical fields like health care and advanced manufacturing. This year, he asked Congress for $8 billion for community college job training.

But Jamie P. Merisotis, president and chief executive of the Lumina Foundation, which works on improving higher education, said that in the long run schools cannot count on more government aid. “What we need are new models that reduce the time to degree and yield better results, which is what CUNY is trying to do,” he said.

Even as community college plays an ever-bigger part in improving the job skills of mature workers, its role for young students has also changed.

The surging enrollment revealed in federal surveys — a 47 percent increase from 1990 to 2010 — means vastly more students arriving with weak academic records and poor study habits, unprepared for college-level work. About 40 percent of community college students take remedial courses, for which they do not earn any credit toward a degree, and studies show that many others need but do not take them.

“These are folks who’ve been told, ‘You’re inadequate, you can’t make it,’ ” said Scott E. Evenbeck, president of the New Community College.

The challenges they face stretch out the time needed to finish school. Most community college students receive state and federal aid, but it is usually time-limited, and they can use up their eligibility before graduating. Many studies show that going to school part time, taking added years to finish and losing aid all make students more likely to drop out.

To make matters worse, too often students receive little guidance about how to navigate the system and how to choose a combination of classes that will move them closer to graduation.

“You look at the transcripts of a lot of community college students, and it looks like they stood with their backs to the course catalog and threw darts at it,” said Kay McClenney, director of the Community College Leadership Program at the University of Texas, Austin. “They wander into college, wander around the curriculum, and then they wander out the door.”

GISELLE DIAZ, 17, wants to make films. She has doubts about the New Community College after learning that its narrow range of course offerings will not include any in that field.

For Reel Works, a nonprofit program that helps city teenagers make films, she produced a low-key but emotional 12-minute documentary on her father’s struggle with cancer. She has a part-time job with the group, and her prized possession is a camera donated to Reel Works by the actor Steve Buscemi. “My friends don’t even know who he is,” she says with a laugh.

Her bedroom — really a walled-off alcove in her parents’ room — is lined with posters from the “Twilight” films, a picture of Jesus and her collection of vintage-style sunglasses. Her nook is piled high with books across a striking range, from novels by Jodi Picoult and Nicholas Sparks to nonfiction by Richard Preston and Lance Armstrong.

Her view of her world and her future goes far beyond what her parents imagined at her age, growing up in the Dominican Republic. Her father used to work as a chef in a corporate cafeteria but has been unemployed since illness disabled him three years ago. Her mother is a home attendant for people who cannot care for themselves. They, Giselle and her two older brothers live on one cramped floor of a row house in the Sunset Park section of Brooklyn, a low-income area where Spanish, English and Chinese languages are spoken in almost equal measure. Neither of her parents speaks English well, and they are acutely aware that they have no insights to offer their daughter as she charts a path to college more or less on her own.

“I don’t want Giselle to be like me, a home attendant,” her mother, Maria, says in Spanish. “I want her to study. I want her to be a professional, something higher than what I could do.”

Giselle would rather go to a four-year college. She thought about trying some State University of New York schools, but she was never eager to leave the city and her family. She got distracted and never finished the applications. She had hoped to get into some of CUNY’s senior colleges, but all she got were rejection letters, which has left her surprised — she says her grades and test scores are pretty good — and dejected.

“I’ve been getting kind of depressed, with all my friends getting into schools, and I’m not,” she says. “And a lot of them are going away to college. It’s kind of sad because I grew up with these guys.”

Carlina Morales and Destiny Jackson, both also 17, each ranked the New Community College as first choice on their CUNY applications, without really knowing what it was.

“I just liked the idea that it is a new school, so I wouldn’t be the only one who’s kind of like, ‘What’s going on?’ ” says Carlina, who lives in the Greenpoint neighborhood of Brooklyn. But after the information session and the face-to-face meeting with a counselor a few days later, she, too, has second thoughts.

“It was a little bit of a shock for me, because I was looking for something with a little more freedom,” she says. “But it might be good for me to have something more structured, so I really get my associate’s and don’t just waste my time.”

All three girls say they intend to hold jobs while going to school full time. Carlina worries about balancing work with school, but the other two say blithely that they did that in high school and see no reason for college to be different. All have avoided serious boyfriends, having seen other girls let relationships — and, in some cases, pregnancy — distract them from school.

“I didn’t have any time for college because I had my children early,” says Destiny’s mother, Debra Roper, a security officer. As for offering any advice on choosing a college or a major, “I let her handle all of that.”

She and Destiny live in a high-rise housing project, which Destiny has decorated with pictures of Michael Jackson and Marilyn Monroe. Destiny has not given much thought to a career, though she has gotten to know the speech therapist at her high school and thinks that line of work might appeal to her. She recently read the novel “13 Reasons Why,” by Jay Asher, about a teenager who commits suicide, and it reinforced her interest in helping people.

Destiny sees herself going on for a bachelor’s degree after two years at a community college. “It’s cheaper to go to a community college, so I don’t want to make that big decision about choosing a college and then find out I’m not in the right place for me,” she says. CUNY community colleges will cost $3,900 in the fall, compared with $5,130 for senior colleges.

THE NEW COLLEGE represents not just a tweaking of the experience but an attempt to redesign it from top to bottom. The calendar, the required hours, the interaction with staff members, the content and structure of classes — all will be different.

The school will not offer any remedial courses, only classes that earn credits, to keep students on track to graduate. Instead, remedial work will be built into every course, along with more advanced studies.

The classes will emphasize collaborative and interdisciplinary work. There are none called “History” or “English.” One course, “City Seminar,” will use urban studies to explore government, culture, history and health. Another, “Ethnographies of Work,” will study sociology and business through the lens of various careers, and put students in touch with potential future employers.

Before students can start any classes, they must attend a bridge program spread over three weeks in August. The idea behind it is to get students into the rhythm of school, to give them a taste of the course material, and to help them brush up on math they haven't used for years. But it is also about giving them a head start in learning to be college students.

Too many students "don't have the attitude necessary or the kind of habits needed to do good work," said Matthew Goldstein, the CUNY chancellor. "We need to teach those things."

All students will take the same classes for the first year, though they will be separated into two levels of math. At other schools, students who need extra help can get it from skills labs, peer study groups, tutors or advisers. Here, none of those resources will be optional. "This is absolutely crucial because so many students appear at the door of community colleges completely clueless about what is required of them, or available to them," said Ms. McClenney of the University of Texas. "They don't know they need to do work outside of class. They don't take advantage of tutoring and mentoring services. They don't know about peer study groups or interacting with faculty."

Students will be required to spend 90 minutes a week in "group work space," working with classmates and building on what they learn in class, with help from peer mentors — more experienced students from other CUNY colleges. Much of that time will be devoted to writing and language skills, a particular weakness at this level. (When a professor in one information session asked for a definition of the word "urban," she had to call on three applicants before getting a correct answer. One thought it meant "what's going on now.")

Students will also have mandatory weekly 90-minute group sessions with advisers, called "student success advocates," addressing issues like study habits and stressful situations outside school.

"We've found that students usually try to confront problems alone, and they often make damaging long-term decisions, like dropping out, in response to temporary problems," said Donna Linderman, director of a CUNY program that has tested some of the ideas behind the new college. "It makes an enormous difference to have them sit down regularly with an adviser who says, 'O.K., how many hours are you working? How long is your commute? Let's make this work and keep you in school.' "

While elements of the New Community College have been tried in other places, experts say that as far as they know, CUNY's effort is the first time they have all been combined in a single college.

"The important thing about the New Community College is not any one thing they're doing, but that they're doing all of them together," said Thomas Bailey, director of the Community College Research Center at Teachers College at Columbia University and one of the experts who advised CUNY in developing the college.

"All the research shows that if you do them alone, for a modest amount of time, they have a modest positive effect, but it doesn't last," he said. "This will be a chance to see what happens if you do them together, consistently, over a longer period of time."

And many will be watching the process. "They've done a good job of rethinking it from the ground up," Mr. Merisotis, of the Lumina Foundation, said. "People in education are paying attention."

THERE ARE NO GUARANTEES that the New Community College will succeed. “We are going to make mistakes and make changes and find room for improvement,” said Mr. Evenbeck, the dean of University College at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis before becoming president of the new college. “If we’re doing the same thing five years from now that we’re doing this fall,” he said, “we will absolutely have missed the boat.”

But CUNY officials point to one particular reason for optimism: the college’s intensive, case-management approach to students is based partly on the program Ms. Linderman leads at six other community colleges, Accelerated Study in Associate Programs. ASAP, open only to low-income students, requires frequent workshops, advising and tutoring.

The results have been striking. More than half of ASAP students graduate within three years, compared with less than one-quarter of CUNY students who start out as full-timers but are not in the program. Based on that record, the system plans to expand the program from a little over 1,000 students in the past year to 4,000 by 2014.

But all of that hand-holding is expensive. CUNY spends about $10,000 a year on the average full-time community college student, and about $17,000 a year on an ASAP student.

In its first year, the new school, starting with enrollment of just 300, will cost well over $30,000 per student, but the price will decline as the college settles in. Officials predict that eventually the New Community College will spend only about 30 percent more per student than other community colleges in the system.

The new college is currently quartered in a small, nondescript office building across the street from Bryant Park. CUNY plans to build it a permanent home on the West Side for 3,000 to 4,000 students.

In any case, administrators argue strenuously that annual cost per student is the wrong measure, because it ignores the taxpayer savings in having students spend fewer years in school, and the benefits of having more of them graduate. “I believe we’re going to show that this is not expensive if you look at cost per graduate,” said John Mogulescu, senior CUNY dean for academic affairs, who led the team that developed the new college.

That is a legitimate argument, said Mr. Bailey of Teachers College, but it also might not be enough in a time of shrinking government aid to colleges. To be adopted on a grand scale, he said, the new model will have to show significant results without significantly increasing the cost of running a college. “Money is going to continue to be a very big question for this project,” he said.

Chancellor Goldstein has a powerful ally in Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg. The city covers $6.8 million of the $8.2 million annual cost of ASAP, and it will spend more than $10 million on the new college in the next year. The chancellor said he recognizes that such subsidies will not last forever, and will not be expanded to cover a much more ambitious effort. “It requires an investment, but it will pay itself off,” he said.

Mr. Goldstein put the new college on an ambitious timetable, calling for it to open less than three years after he first proposed it. Professors were hired in 2010 and 2011 to design the new curriculum, and they shared a belief that community college needed fixing, and an enthusiasm about what the New Community College could be.

Nicola Blake joined the faculty last fall, leaving her post at City College, as director of a center helping students develop writing skills, where she said students often questioned whether they were intellectually equal to the work. “I would tell them ‘smart’ is just time on task, it’s repetition and support,” she said. “That was really built into the idea of the New Community College from the start, so I got really excited about that.”

But Mr. Evenbeck quickly found himself at odds with faculty members hired before he came aboard. By last fall, three of the original seven had left voluntarily, and one was forced out. Mr. Evenbeck accused professors of insubordination. The faculty union accused him of contract violations and filed grievances.

The most serious issue raised, and still a concern for some professors who have remained with the college, is whether enough time has been built into the schedule for remedial reading and writing. They support the idea of embedding fundamentals into regular classes, but find the curriculum too ambitious.

“When we said it’s going to take more than this, it was viewed as, ‘You don’t support the model, you’re not on board, you’re not a team player,’ ” said Emily Schnee, one of those who resigned.

Some professors also objected to the idea that “group work space,” the time partly devoted to tutoring, would not include them. There were also disputes about vacations and workloads. Each side accused the other of deviating from the mission laid out in the original concept paper. Mr. Evenbeck said the professors had gone off on tangents with no one to rein them in.

“When you have a new campus and you’re doing things differently, and people have ideas of how they’ve done it in the past, you’re going to meet some resistance,” he added.

The original faculty members protested that there were no department chairmen to advocate for them — in fact, there are no departments — and that the college has no tenured full professors. That means, they argued, that no one has the standing or the job security to stand up to the administration.

Mr. Evenbeck said that with a faculty expected to total just 18 people when the college opens, and a curriculum designed to erase traditional boundaries between disciplines, “it wouldn’t be appropriate to have departments and use up faculty resources on administrative offices.”

Things have calmed down. Several professors insist they have no major complaints. Those who still have concerns about remediation and governance are unwilling to talk on the record, or do battle with administrators.

THE NEW COMMUNITY COLLEGE has open admissions, but it is not for everyone. Of 4,000 applicants, 504 went through the information session and interview, and 339 decided to go.

Destiny, Carlina and Giselle were all accepted, but Carlina decided to go to SUNY Cobleskill, a senior college. Only Destiny, attracted in part by the unconventional features that she hopes will help her finish in two years, is confident in her decision to attend. “Some of my friends are going to Lehman, some City Tech,” she says, and many to SUNY campuses upstate. “I didn’t want to go upstate. It costs more to live away from home, and we don’t have the money. Plus, it’s boring up there.”

Moving away was also not an option, financially, for Giselle. She will go to the New Community College, but not by choice. She has no other acceptances.

She tries to see the bright side: the structure and discipline will benefit her, but she admits to a lingering disappointment about not studying film. “It still is an issue for me,” she says. “Maybe I’ll go two years there, but I could try to transfer after one year. This is just the place to start.”

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