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*“The experiment is to be tried, whether the children of the people – the children of the whole people – can be educated; and whether an institution of learning of the highest grade can be successfully controlled by popular will, not by the privileged few...”*

Horace Webster, on the opening day of the Free Academy, January 29, 1849, spoke those stirring words to the entering class. The children of the whole people consisted of 149 young men between the ages of 13 and 15. The first municipal system for higher education was born from this modest beginning. Today 150 years after the Academy received its Charter on May 7, 1847, these “children” muster over 200,000 strong at the City University of New York as matriculated students while another 150,000 attend extension and adult education classes. The fifteen faculty members recruited to teach that first class have grown to 5,500 full time faculty members of CUNY and a host of part-time instructors.

The Free Academy, renamed the College of the City of New York in 1866, is the strong root from which public higher education in New York City grew into a system of eleven senior colleges, one technical college, six community colleges, a law school, medical school and graduate school.

This exhibit attempts to suggest in images the rich history of the past 150 years and the many activities in and out of the classroom which reflect the pursuit of excellence which has characterized public higher education in New York City since the Free Academy received its charter. The exhibit cannot tell the complete history of each college in CUNY, but some aspect of the life of each college is represented in the exhibit.

The initial effort of providing for the establishment of a Free Academy “for the purpose of extending the benefits of education gratuitously, to persons who have been pupils in the common schools of the said city and county of New York” proved successful, and a movement gained momentum to provide

higher education for women as well as men. In 1870, the second municipal college, the Normal College for Women, opened its doors. The original mission of the College was to prepare women for teaching careers, but with the turn of the century, the curriculum expanded and women were able to obtain a bachelor's degree. This meant expanded career and educational options for those women attending what became Hunter College (renamed 1914).

Now both men and women of New York City had an opportunity to pursue higher education separately within the municipal college system, the founding of a coeducational institution was the next step. Special annex programs and evening sessions were the first introduction of women into programs at City College, but it was in the borough of Brooklyn that the earliest coeducational liberal arts college in New York City would become a reality.

A movement for a University in Brooklyn can be traced back to the nineteenth century. It was not, however, until the twentieth century that the number of applicants for admission to City and Hunter far exceeded the seats available and Brooklyn was seriously considered as a site for a new campus. In 1926, looking toward the creation of a third municipal college, the Board of Higher Education was created to supersede the individual boards of the City and Hunter and plans for a College in Brooklyn moved forward. Brooklyn College opened in 1930 in the rented quarters formerly used by the Brooklyn Center in the downtown business area. After some experimentation with co-ordinate units, the College became fully co-educational.

Undeterred by the depression of the 1930s, New York City continued to expand the municipal college system. The new School of Business building of the City College of New York was completed just after the crash, and enrolled women as well as men. The Bronx campus of Hunter College (later Lehman College) began construction in 1931 in rural Jerome Park. In Queens, meetings with officials of the LaGuardia administration, the Board of Higher Education and civic organizations finally resulted in the creation of Queens College, which welcomed its first class on October 4, 1937.

As the municipal college system expanded, so did its programs to serve the needs of the community. In 1938, Mayor LaGuardia requested that the Board of Higher Education establish a two-year course of study for the training of Fire and Police Department personnel. This program initially established as a Division of the City College School of Business and harked back to municipal service courses inaugurated during World War I. The John Jay College of Criminal Justice can be traced to this initiative and that of the later Police Science Program at the School. Such two year programs laid the groundwork for the creation of a network of professional vocational opportunities for New Yorkers. The first of these community colleges was New York Institute of Applied Arts and Sciences (now New York Technical College) which opened in downtown Brooklyn in 1946.

Staten Island was the last of the boroughs to achieve a college, but community pressure dates from 1937 when petitions signed by over 2,700 residents were submitted to the Board of Education. Not until 1956 did the efforts of Richmond residents bear fruit and Staten Island Community College opened in St. George. The community college movement then caught fire in New York City with the creation of Bronx Community College in 1957, Queensborough Community College in 1958, and the Borough of Manhattan Community College and Kingsborough Community College--both in 1963.

Meantime, the municipal college system itself was undergoing a profound change. In 1958 the Chair of the Board of Higher Education created a "Committee to Look to the Future" whose report recommended the transformation of the system of municipal colleges into a University. Governor Nelson Rockefeller signed the bill creating the University in April of 1961, at the same time the Rockefeller sponsored amendment to the State Education Law repealed the free tuition mandate. The City University Graduate School was established in 1961 and within a few years was offering programs in over twenty disciplines, each under the direction of and Executive Officer who drew doctoral faculty from the various campuses. The creation of the University led to an acceleration of research activity on the campuses and greatly increased grant support.

The renewed quest for social justice in the late 1960s brought pressure on CUNY to open its doors more widely. York College (1966) and Medgar Evers (1969) were established in response to local needs in Bedford-Stuyvesant and South Queens. Eugenio Maria de Hostos Community College opened in 1970 to serve the special needs of the large Hispanic community of the South Bronx. Queens County continued its population growth, necessitating the creation of a community college in Western Queens; Fiorello LaGuardia Community College in Long Island City admitted its first class in 1971. New York City's fiscal crisis of 1976 resulted in such a serious funding shortfall that the University had to shut its doors on May 28, 1976. After negotiations with New York City and state Officials, the Board of Higher Education voted at its June 1 and June 14 meetings to institute tuition in the Fall of 1976, ending a 114 year tradition.

The City University of New York had 90,000 students at the time of its creation. Today, it is educating over 200,000 students and is still evolving and changing. Thousands of alumni have contributed to the professions, the arts and to business and industry--many achieving national and international renown. Civic, professional, and cultural life in New York City as we know it today is unthinkable without the contributions of the alumni of the City University of New York. Let the doors of CUNY remain open to admit those who will contribute to the greatness of tomorrow.

*This brochure is made possible by the generosity of the H.W. Wilson Foundation*

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**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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*The offices of the following CUNY college Presidents:*

Baruch College  
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Bronx Community College  
Brooklyn College  
City College  
The College of Staten Island  
The Graduate Center  
Hostos Community College  
Hunter College  
John Jay College of Criminal Justice  
Kingsborough Community College  
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Lehman College  
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