

Learning to Think Well

Central Park East Secondary School Graduates Reflect on Their High School and College Experiences

David Bensman

N C R E S T

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Acknowledgements

Educational research is inevitably a collaborative project, but often the collaboration between academic researchers and school practitioners is uneasy. Teachers often fear that academicians will use the data they generate to grind their own axes, regardless of the repercussions for the school; researchers often believe that school personnel are trying to lead them through a Potemkin village, where everything is nicey-nice and all problems are hidden from view.

It says something important about Central Park East Secondary School that its staff went about collaborating in this research effort without defensiveness. Rather than fearing an "outsider's" access to the learning process, CPESS personnel asked how they could use this research to understand better what their students were learning, so that they could ultimately improve the effectiveness of CPESS practice.

This confident, goal-oriented attitude started at the top, where Deborah Meier and Paul Schwarz, who were then co-directors of CPESS, used their influence not only to secure resources from the Catherine T. and John D. MacArthur Foundation, but also to elicit cooperation from CPESS personnel. Deborah's refusal to accept easy answers was a model for me as I tried to make sense of diverse and complex experience. If all educational researchers could call on a school administrator as helpful as Paul, there would be fewer silences in the literature on school reform.

In the project's initial stage, Haven Henderson served as CPESS's liaison to the project at the same time she was conducting her own research about CPESS's impact on its students. Haven generously provided me with a treasure trove of data, in the form of interviews that she conducted with CPESS graduates; she also gave me advice and insights that shaped the direction of this study. Working with Haven was a privilege I cherish.

Shirley Hawkinson, who served as CPESS's liaison to the study in its later phases, was, in effect, co-coordinator. Shirley's extraordinary caring for her students inspired me throughout the course of this work; her good humor helped ease me over some of the bumps in the road.

Margarita Sanchez, who served as Shirley's administrative assistant on this project, not only recorded minutes, scheduled interviews, and maintained a directory of all CPESS graduates, she also conducted several fascinating interviews. Margie's contribution to this project was substantial.

I would also like to thank several members of the CPESS staff for helping me plan and execute the research: Pat Wagner, Jeremy Engle, Aurea Hernandez, and Julian Cohen. Their determination to identify potential problems motivated them to help me revise and improve my interview schedule; their thoughtful consideration of the interview materials

helped me develop my analysis. While they may not agree with all my conclusions, their commitment to learn from their graduates' experiences and reflections has earned my immense respect.

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Finally, at the Rutgers Labor Education Center, Estelle Kramer, Amalia Marchitto, Jeff Katz, Ida Koury, Gail O'Brien, Ellie Babich, and Eugene McElroy gave me cheerful and competent support.

In the end, collaborating with the faculty and students of CPESS influenced the way I think about teaching and learning very much by raising my level of dissatisfaction with what passes for pedagogy at my university and in higher education generally. CPESS's commitment to continuous learning and continuous improvement has prompted me to rededicate myself to reforming universities so that they can become more effective at enabling their students to become critical, independent, lifelong learners.

David Bensman

Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS) has become the prototype for what many educators mean by high school reform. Its reputation throughout educational circles is enormous. Yet it has graduated only a few classes of students. The ways in which the school impacts on its largely low-income "at risk" African-American and Latino students need documentation.

The school makes a variety of claims for its work and approach. It promises that students who graduate from CPESS, through successfully meeting its performance-based diploma requirements, will deserve the reputation for being "well educated" -- thoughtful and reflective citizens, capable of handling work and/or further academic preparation. CPESS promises its students that it will help them live productive, socially useful, and satisfying lives. The school claims to create a powerful community -- for both adults and students -- that transforms young peoples' expectations and dreams, while also giving them the tools to work toward them.

Does the school have the impact it seeks? What are the major factors in its successes? When graduates enter college, how do they fare?¹

In order to answer these questions, the Center for Collaborative Education hired David Bensman, a historian at Rutgers University, to conduct a study of the first two CPESS graduating classes. In conjunction with a committee of CPESS faculty, students, and parents, Bensman developed a questionnaire schedule and then interviewed a stratified sample of ten members of the first year's graduating class, and five members of the second-year graduating class. In addition, research assistants worked with CPESS faculty to collect information about the postgraduation experiences of all members of the first three graduating classes.

CPESS Graduates' High College Attendance Rate Viewed in Context

During its first three years, CPESS sent a very high proportion of its graduates to institutions of higher education. Nearly nine of ten (87.4 percent) of the first three graduating classes (1991-1993) went on to college or community college (see Table 1). Most of these graduates (80.2 percent) enrolled in four-year colleges.

¹This introduction is drawn from the grant proposal submitted by the Center for Collaborative Education to the MacArthur Foundation.

Table 1: Proportion of CPESS Graduates Going on in Higher Education

<u>Year</u>	<u>Percent</u>
1991	84.3
1992	92.7
1993	87.3

Source: Data collected by CPESS personnel.

These figures are impressive in view of the fact that many CPESS graduates were raised in families and communities where college attendance is not the norm. In East Harlem as a whole, for example, according to the 1990 U.S. Census, the proportion of people 25 years and older who have attended college is only 15.5 percent (U.S. Census Office, 1990).

Many students stated in interviews that most of their friends from the neighborhood were not going to college. They believed that the success of CPESS graduates was not the result of the school selecting unusually talented students; it was CPESS itself that made the difference.

Three male graduates from East Harlem testified from personal experience that CPESS saved them from the kind of trouble that most of their friends have fallen into. Hector Delgado, who spent his elementary school years in a special education school because he hit classmates in first grade, made this point most emphatically: "If I went to another high school, I know for a fact that I wouldn't even have a chance to go to college. . . . Most of us are going to college at CPESS. And I know some of my [neighborhood] friends envy that."

Esteven Gomez echoed Hector's analysis:

The kids I went to elementary school with, I don't think they even bother to try. I'm not like that. Not because of my family; it had to do with the school and the kind of people I was hanging out with there. . . . I'm glad I came here, because most likely I would have been in jail by now, or knowing me, I'd have murdered somebody for some silly reason. I have a temper.

Jose Valenzuela compared himself with his girlfriend, cousins, and friends, and concluded that CPESS had made a major difference in his life:

If I was in a regular high school, I wouldn't have even graduated. I know how the average high schools are. My girlfriend went to an average high school, and she barely made it out. My cousin, who's the same age as I am,

20, just came out of jail. He never made it through the ninth grade at Julia Richman. . . . The difference is in the school I went to, because my family looks over us very much, but the first two males of the family, my cousins, didn't make it. . . . In a regular high school, all they would have done is put me in one of those special ed classes. That's where they would have stuck me in. They wouldn't have tried to help me.

CPESS helped its students graduate and go to college by creating a community in which caring teacher-student relationships provided students with support and provided a model for supportive relationships among students.

Jose Valenzuela described faculty support as part of the very fabric of the high school:

Every single teacher that I have met cares for you. It was an act like a parrot. "Did you do this? Did you take care of your portfolios? Did you get your homework done? I don't want to call your mother." At first, it was just really nagging and nervewracking. At first, I felt like everyone was in my business, and I had a major attitude problem, especially when I was younger; I felt like everyone was against me. Then I thought about it and realized, if it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't even be considering law school or teaching the way I am now.

Faculty support was institutionalized in the CPESS advisory system. Each faculty member was assigned an advisory group of 15 students for a two-year period. The "advisories" met weekly, to discuss school policies and requirements, students' personal problems, college applications, and whatever else members brought up. Graduates were unanimous about the effectiveness of the advisory system: "Your adviser remains your confidant for at least two years and knows you better than a guidance counselor who serves the entire school. It's like a family situation," said Kenya Boston. Kenneth Garrido added: "Advisors were always ready to help out in school matters. My advisor taught me how to rely on myself. I didn't have to keep going to him all the time."

Jose Valenzuela insisted that CPESS's caring went beyond support from individual teachers and advisors. The school went to extraordinary lengths to help him identify and solve his problems, he said.

I was having problems when I first came, in about seventh or eighth grade. It was hard for me to adjust. I was a straight "A" student in elementary school; then my grades really went down. I would get a satisfactory minus and it was hard for me to deal with that. . . . They tried to find out what was going on with me, and it helped a lot. It made me feel good because in a regular high school, they would not have done that.

Not only did the CPESS faculty provide each student with help and support; they created an environment in which nurturing and respectful relationships grew among students. Julia Gonzalez remembered how it all began at a retreat organized by the staff at the beginning of CPESS's first year:

We went to a camp, where we first met each other. Late at night, we were all outside by a campfire. We had these little boats that we put wishes in, like, "I hope I get through this successfully." We let the boats go into the lake. The next day, we did the same with balloons. That's where we learned how to do things together. We had to. The teachers set us together in tables, and right away I saw a table where my girlfriends were. I just went over and sat there at lunch time. After lunch, we walked the lake, fishing or just walking around. My friends and I were united in everything. Everything we did was for each other.

Classroom experiences contributed to the development of close personal relationships, as Tammy Martin recalled:

When there's a class discussion, everyone is equal and everyone respects everyone else. When I'm having a conversation with one of my friends, I tend to listen to what they have to say. I don't feel like I'm higher than anyone else, and I don't like putting anyone down. I think that comes from what goes on around me in the school. Long-lasting friendships grow. When you learn to treat people with a certain amount of respect, it enables you to have relationships that last longer and are more meaningful. It affects boy-girl relationships to a certain extent. When there's respect in a relationship, with the respect comes loyalty and all the other aspects in having a relationship.

Napoleon Bruce described how his peer relationships grew so strong they became a force that kept him in the school.

The longer I stayed in the school, the closer and closer I got with the kids that were in my grade, and then with the kids underneath me. After a while, I said, "What the hell, I'm not going to leave." We were so close. It was like a little family here. I can get mad at someone, or I can dislike someone but it wouldn't last that long because I'm always around this person. We went on trips, we went on outings, so we got closer. Some of us go out after school together, so we're bonding. It was like a family. My friends, they were real close to me.

Esteven Gomez added that CPESS students learned how to work together independently of adults, giving them a sense they could count on each other for help in accomplishing their goals. The high school sports program, which was deemphasized in the

beginning by the CPESS faculty but grew dramatically as a result of student initiatives, was an important arena where young people gained a sense of their own collective ability:

The members of the baseball team knew each other pretty well. Almost the whole team always hung around together. We have been playing together since we were in eighth grade, so we developed our skills on our own. We all knew each other pretty well. The volleyball team, that's another way we developed our skills by ourselves, playing by ourselves at lunch time and in the winter. It wasn't really the coach. The coach helped us, but we all knew what to do, who to give the ball to, and who to set it up for, and everything. We all knew how we played and we knew our strengths and our weaknesses in the sport.

Some CPESS graduates believed the strong peer relationships helped students learn to control their behavior and keep up with their schoolwork. Esteven Gomez, for example, explained why CPESS students get in less trouble than other neighborhood teenagers:

CPESS students probably think twice before doing something. Other kids probably just do it and think, "Oh, well, I'm in trouble. What should I do now?" But before I actually do something, I think about it more than twice. Because if you do something bad, the school knows in less than a week. And they'll say, "I can't believe you actually did that." I'd probably be one of them saying that, too.

Hector Delgado explained how peer pressure at CPESS has made him different from his neighborhood buddies:

I wouldn't call myself a street kid. Some kids are really into the street, with the slang and the way they dress, how they carry themselves. I'm not really into that. Probably because of the school. It's funny to me, the way people try to be all tough. I laugh at them. . . . It's terrible to say that a drug dealer is a role model. The kids just see them as guys who have a lot of money, drive expensive cars. So it's only natural to want to be like that. You could see kids are leaning toward that. I hear some kids saying, "When I grow up, I'm going to have the same car." And they know what the dealers are doing. If everybody in the neighborhood came to CPESS, I think they would be different.

But it was more than the emotional sustenance provided by faculty-student and peer relationships that enabled CPESS students to complete high school and win admission to

college: CPESS graduates pointed out several elements of the school's academic program that had contributed significantly to their academic success.²

Paths to Success: CPESS's Academic Program

CPESS reconstructed the high school curriculum to allow students to investigate a limited number of issues in depth. (The principle is known as "less is more.") In Division I, which comprised what are traditionally known as seventh and eighth grades, and in Division II, which replaced the traditional ninth and tenth grades, students enrolled in two interdisciplinary classes, "Humanities," and "Mathematics and Science." Each class was small enough (15 students) to allow students to participate actively in discussions and group projects, and long enough (2 1/2 hours) to allow students to engage in a variety of learning activities designed to enable them to develop habits of mind that would lead to their becoming independent, critical, lifelong learners.

Above every blackboard, signs urged students to ask five basic questions: "What is the Evidence?" "What is the Point of View?" "How does it compare to other situations?" "What if it were otherwise?" "Why does it matter?" In order to help students make connections between what they were learning in the classroom and what they would need to know about the outside world, students participated in community service projects that took them outside the school to work with community organizations and social service agencies.

After completing Division II, students entered the Senior Institute, which included classes and seminars designed to enable students to produce 14 portfolios, each of which required them to demonstrate their understanding and ability to explain what they learned in such areas as "Media," "Literature," "History," "Autobiography," "Mathematics," and so on. The principle of encouraging students to connect their schoolwork with their understanding of the world outside school continued in the Senior Institute; throughout these two years, students participated in internships in which they worked and learned about the world of work. Members of the Senior Institute also attended two courses at local colleges.

The CPESS experience was cumulative, culminating in the students' production of 14 portfolios and the defense of seven of their portfolios in front of public committees composed of teachers, parents, and students. As Linda Darling-Hammond notes in her study of CPESS (1994), preparation for and defense of portfolios boosted students' self-esteem and confidence in themselves as independent learners able to develop their own viewpoints and defend them through the use of rhetoric and evidence.

²The graduates' comments on their academic experiences at CPESS focused on their final two years, in what was called "the Senior Institute." This doesn't mean that the Senior Institute was the best part of the CPESS experience; it simply reflects the fact that the graduates were interviewed just as they completed the Senior Institute. Moreover, the survey instrument focused on the students' experience in the Senior Institute.

How did CPESS faculty lead students to take the steps that stimulated them to become independent learners? Reflecting on graduates' testimony about how they developed at CPESS, I would suggest that the teaching process at CPESS resembled an ongoing critical conversation, to which each member of the school community contributed. As everyone learned from each other, the conversation became more informed and complex; participants became more knowledgeable and more aware of alternative viewpoints. Graduates identified the following six features of this sustained conversation as contributing significantly to their academic development.

1. Beginning in the early years in Division I, *faculty encouraged students to express their ideas and feelings in writing and in class discussion*. When Alicia Perez entered CPESS, she said, "I was really quiet, and I wouldn't speak out. I would know the answer, but I wouldn't say it, because I was afraid it would be wrong and everyone would laugh at me." But in her CPESS classes, she said,

I'd just say anything. Whatever came into my mind, I would just say it. No one would really laugh at you if you would be wrong. Over here, everyone would speak out loud. I felt like giving my point of view. . . . I wasn't too good in writing when I first came here. I would have to think for an hour what to write and how to bring up the paragraphs and grammar and all that. How did I improve? Setting up and writing an outline on what I'm going to talk about and then writing roughly what I want to talk about. I learned really quick. Also, in seventh grade, I liked humanities. I had to make things up, creative writing. I liked that we would make up anything we wanted to. I would write a lot of stories; I'm good at that, making things up. I really liked it.

Then, in tenth grade, Alicia went on, Cosby, a humanities teacher,

gave us certain topics to write myths on, or if we wanted, we could make one on our own. So I made one on my own, and she really liked it. She gave me a D(istinguished) on the paper that I did, and I liked it too, so I just continued doing it. I like writing poetry on my own.

Tammy Martin underwent a similar transformation. She emphasized particularly the public nature of the CPESS conversation:

There was an exhibition in each of the classes, one for humanities and one for math/science. For humanities, the exhibitions would be a combination of two written papers. All the exhibitions are a combination of what you've learned during that past semester. There's an oral presentation of your paper and what you've learned; there's usually a group assignment which is also orally presented. There might be another paper written on a book that you read on your own and that was related to what we had studied.

In sixth grade, at CPE, we had gone on a tour of Frederick Douglass's home and seen where he lived; maybe an hour was spent on him. But in seventh grade, I had to do more research on the assignment. I had several drafts of my paper, and I spoke more about who he was and what he stood for. It was really in seventh grade that I found out who he was and then was able to share my knowledge with the other students in the class.

2. CPESS faculty were not content to have students express themselves, nor were they exclusively concerned with students' mastering the formal art of written expression. Because they prepared students to present their ideas to others, *CPESS faculty demanded that students rewrite their papers to strengthen their persuasiveness.*

Cheryl Baker described the process of criticism and rewriting: "You wrote and practiced writing. What they stressed is not just writing as far as punctuation is concerned, and grammar, but understanding why certain things go in certain places." Lindsay explained this further by comparing how friends in other secondary schools were taught:

I've had friends tell me that they've turned in a paper, and the teacher hands it back with all this red ink; and the student continues to make the same mistakes because they don't understand why [the teacher made his red marks]. What we learned here was not just how to correct, but why. Once you understand the techniques and why certain things go certain ways, your way of expressing yourself explodes on paper. Once I got the hang of techniques and the skills of writing and understanding why things are supposed to go a certain way, my writing has changed drastically. I'm not Stephen King yet, I still make mistakes, but they are much fewer and not as dramatic as they used to be. . . . A lot of people say I explode with my thoughts when I talk, but I really blast when I write. I really enjoy writing.

The rewriting process became most intense in the Senior Institute, when students prepared their portfolios for presentation and defense. When I asked Julia Gonzalez how she learned to develop and express her ideas clearly, she answered:

In the process of all those drafts that I did for the portfolio, I learned to express my ideas. When I was working on the history [portfolio], over and over, Julian would tell me, "You need to link the two paragraphs together." And I do that. In the computer, I change everything around.

3. In order to engage students in sustained conversations that would encourage them to develop their ability to express and argue for their ideas, *CPESS faculty grounded their curriculum in the students' own experiences and interests as young men and women, members of ethnic or racial groups, and so on.*

Napoleon Bruce credited this approach to curriculum for helping him make it through the perils posed by adolescence:

At CPESS, in ninth and tenth grade, my teachers were always making me think about the problems of adolescents. In other schools, they don't even acknowledge this. Doing well in school is all they're worried about. Here teachers are always saying, "Look towards the future, not just at college, but your life." Because black men, there's not enough of them around; most of them are in jail, on drugs, or dead. They always kept this reality in my mind. I would always have to think about that when I went home. I would see what's going on in my community and I was worried. I believe other schools are not into helping students to realize what's going on in the community; they just say, "Finish class, pass your class, go to college."

Cheryl Baker praised the school's multicultural approach to literature:

One of the things I really liked about this school [was] the choice of literature. You find a lot of times in traditional schools, they choose the classics. When you really think about it, "What makes this a classic? What is a classic?" It's in a bubble. Only a certain number of books must be read. It confines a student. You read Shakespeare or Dickens and so forth. Lots of times in traditional schools, they stress to you, "This is a classic. This is a very good piece of writing. If you don't like it, something's wrong with you." There are certain classics that people rave about and I don't even like. So I've even obtained choice for literature. I have things that I like to read, and I know it doesn't have to be a classic, it doesn't have to be written by Shakespeare. I loved Hurston's *Your Eyes Are Watching God*, which we focused on in ninth grade. I loved that book more than I did *Oliver Twist*. If I tell that to a traditional teacher, they'll say, "How can you say something like that?"

[At CPESS], the choice of reading has been so diverse. We've read things from Hispanic culture, African-American literature, African literature, Asian literature, European literature. When you have a country that is so diverse, why would you give your students just your Eurocentric novels? There are so many brilliant novels of all different colors, creeds, and religions. Why not give your students a taste of all of that? How can a teacher, who's looking out at forty students in the average traditional public high school, the majority of your class is African American, Latino, Asian, how can you teach a class and just teach it in your Eurocentric way?

Lin Lee emigrated to New York from mainland China when she was ten years old. She said that during her second semester of tenth grade, when CPESS created a "program for other people in the school to understand the ancient Chinese culture," her own interest in learning history, especially the history of her own culture, mushroomed. As a result of her

newfound interest, in the Senior Institute she did a history portfolio on the Han Dynasty and her autobiography portfolio on Chinese women writers. These experiences helped her develop academically and emotionally. The autobiography portfolio, she said,

helped me put my life together. I never saw it as a complete picture, so it's like a movie you can play, to look back and to see what has affected who I am today and who I'm going to be in the future. I read a lot of biographies by Chinese women who are living in the U.S. and who wrote stories about their own lives and about lives of other women, both in mainland China and in the United States. That has really given me a sense of encouragement, to fight for myself, because the general Chinese society has a lot of discrimination against females. That literature really played an essential part in establishing my strengths that I live for. One book was *The Joy Luck Club*, *The Woman Warrior*, *Second Daughter*. Then the book *Life and Death in Shanghai* taught me a lot about the cultural revolution. I loved it. It's given me a lot that I can't express. It's much better than if someone sat down with me and talked to me about it.

Tammy Martin pointed to her course "Media in Society" as being especially important, because it enabled her to explore issues concerning her own social status and identity as a woman:

I wrote a paper about the types of women in commercials and TV. I wrote about how women are portrayed in sit-coms and commercials, always as the sex object and the weak one, never really smart. Especially in commercials, women are always advertising perfume or hair spray, not very important stuff. I compared it then to the man on television. The man is always the one going off to work, the stronger one, the smart one. In my paper, my big question was, "Why is this?" Why are there so many differences? Does society have a part in this? Do we feed into this? How can this be changed?

It was a really interesting paper and I spent a really long time on it, doing a lot of drafts. There was a museum that we went to, a media museum. There was an exhibit, which I had to incorporate into my paper. I did some research on annual subscriptions to magazines. I also worked with *Jet* magazine and wrote about the different stereotypes there are in those magazines, the lighter skinned woman, women in black magazines with very white features. How they had become white in a way, and that was considered more beautiful than their original way. I worked hardest on that paper. By seeing that, I realized that this is what society is doing. That's how I became more interested in what was going on.

For portfolio presentations, there's a committee of five people: your advisor, co-advisor, a student, an adult, and a parent. When presenting that paper,

your presentation is only supposed to last about five minutes. I remember mine lasting a lot longer because everyone had a lot of opinions and feelings about what I had written. A lot of people agreed, and a couple of people disagreed. It was interesting because it was something that everyone was familiar with and I had laid the basis for the conversation. It took off from there and it was really nice to know so much about a certain area and be able to defend it.

It changed the way I viewed commercials and TV. I find myself now pointing out stuff and saying, "That's so sexist." I'm more involved with what's going on. It affected my views as a woman in society.

Kenya Boston made a similar point about how CPESS helped foster her own identity

[as an] African-American girl. I guess it's because of the African-American teachers that we have here, like Pat Wagner, she's the perfect example. Because I always felt that because I was black, I wasn't getting anywhere in life. . . . CPESS is like a big family. My mother calls CPESS a rainbow. Everybody, no matter what color or religion, we were one big happy family. I learned to accept other cultures from coming to CPESS. I never knew anything about the Mayan civilization, Hitler. I just felt proud about myself. They taught me different cultures. There were a lot of things that I never knew about my own culture. They taught me to be proud of who you are and don't try to be someone else. They gave me that self-esteem, because at one point I had little self-esteem. I would say that I'm never going to be anything. Because at one point, I really didn't want to go to college. I didn't think I would be able to make it. But they taught me different.

We read Toni Morrison. We analyzed their lives and compared them to our lives now. We read *The Bluest Eye* and we analyzed her. The type of family she lived in, why she acted the way she did. We analyzed a lot of the books, and it gave us a different perspective on African-American life back then. Reading Toni Morrison, the fact that she's a black author period. I like her, she's one of my idols. At one point I wanted to write a book of poetry. I wanted to be the next Nicky Giovanni. I remember hearing Nicky Giovanni's name, but I never knew she was a poet. There were so many things that I didn't know about literature. Pat's classes were real interesting. It was something that I could really concentrate on because basically it was black authors.

In time, as CPESS students absorbed their school's commitment to multiculturalism, they raised their own demands for ethnic history, particular African-American and Puerto Rican history. Esteven Gomez remembered:

The blacks and Puerto Ricans in the school were feeling separated and we wanted to learn about black history. We were asking for these courses. We were tired of just learning about European history. We said, "I want to know about myself," so we started getting into black history. Some of the Puerto Rican kids said, "We want to know about Puerto Rican history." So one semester they taught black history, the next semester they taught Puerto Rican history.

It was useful because we learned what we wanted to learn. Some kids took a month of extra literature, reading a lot of books by black authors. I read a couple of poems and books on black authors, and I read some about Malcolm X, his autobiography.

Cheryl Baker, who plans to graduate early from Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations to attend law school, said of CPESS's efforts to foster the students' sense of their ethnic heritage:

I developed a sense of pride about myself, about my people in general. . . . If I sat down and watched television all day, I would think very bad about myself and people that are also African-American. All you see are the negatives. . . . It's very important to instill positive energy, especially into children that are looking for good things about themselves. This is something that CPE tried to do; when you come to school, and you feel good about yourself, that shows. It shows not only in the way that you act toward yourself, but how you act with other people. How are you going to conduct the class and teach everyone when the majority of the people are acting up or doing things that are crazy because they don't feel good about being there, or about themselves or where they're living? Especially in African-American and Latino communities, there are so many things that go on that affect children psychologically, that we never touch base on. If that child acts up, he's bad. No one asks why. Something is making them do that. You've got to go deeper, under the surface.

4. The community service and internship programs were additional means of helping students learn to connect their own experiences and interests to the academic curriculum.

Alicia Perez's interest in science arose after she started her community service program in a local hospital.

I did community service from seventh grade to tenth grade. It was all related to hospitals and children. In seventh and eighth grade, I did children. Then I worked on the pediatrics ward. It was useful, because it really got me into the sciences and into what I wanted to do in the future.

After Alicia became interested in science, she chose to do a science-related internship.

I was good in chemistry, and I liked combining the chemicals. . . . For my internship, I wrote a paper on a patient whom I talked to who had a disease. My science portfolio was based on my internship. I wrote it on iron deficiency. I did my internship in geriatrics, and I liked it so I continued, and I went back on my own. So I did another internship on my own, after school, in the hematology lab. One summer, I worked in the hospital. They paid me \$400 or \$500.

When Alicia left for college, she planned to become a doctor.

Abraham Miner, who enrolled at Brown University after graduating from CPESS, pointed to both his community service and internship programs as awakening his social conscience and his academic interest.

The community service program helped me grow tremendously. I worked at community centers. I worked at a newspaper. I created the darkroom, which is right next door [to where we are doing this interview]. We cleaned it all out, painted it black, covered the windows. . . . I gave tours of the school for two years. Every day, I was meeting with educators. People would come in and I'd tell them all about the school's philosophy. Meeting all these people coming from all around the country, and even from other countries, because everybody wanted to know about CPESS. That was a real experience. I really got to know how important this school is to the education community.

When I first got an internship through this school at the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, I was working underneath a woman named Donna Katzen, who is the Director of Southern African Affairs. What that program does is tries to find organizations and companies that have money invested in South Africa and find alternative means for them to invest their money. Working under her, I got involved in anti-apartheid activities.

My internship with the International Youth Institute, with which I'm going to Africa with this summer, and another organization named Encampment for Citizenship, through which I went to California for six weeks during the summer, helped me to grow tremendously.

5. While CPESS encouraged students to work with and help each other, and to undertake independent research projects, graduates also valued the way *teachers made themselves available to give students personal assistance when they were having trouble learning something*. Esteven Gomez gave credit to Jill Herman in particular:

She was the teacher I really liked most; she used to worry. I used to have my

problems with the schoolwork, and she helped me work on it, to see the easy ways to do it. She didn't give me the answers; she helped me to get a short way to do them. They used to give us work I didn't understand. I used to ask the teacher, and I could go work with Jill; I used to have my own hours to go to her.

Napoleon Bruce enjoyed similar support:

If I had a problem with a certain subject, I could go to the teacher and the teacher would find time for me. It was, "Okay, we'll make time after school. This is how it's done." They would explain things, and I would understand them.

They were always telling us to say, "I don't know how to do this. If you don't know how to do it, just ask the teacher." Usually in elementary school, if I didn't know what I was doing, I wouldn't say anything because I didn't want to be embarrassed. With this school, I felt, "I'm going to ask the question that somebody else doesn't know. It'll be helping me and that person."

Herb Rosenfeld [a science teacher] was always there to talk to me and he would always ask me how I was doing. At first I wasn't talking to anybody. I got to know Herb and then things got easier. My relationship with Herb will always be the same; he will always be my friend, even though he's a teacher. I can see him as being my friend. There's Santiago, he works in the younger division. I've grown real close to him this year, got a real rapport with him.

As part of the Senior Institute, we have to complete 14 portfolio items. I had none [completed] last year. They had Santiago work with a few of us. Santiago was more my age; he's Puerto Rican; he knows what's going on, what I have to deal with in life right now because he's been through it. He's one of the few teachers who can relate to me so I was able to really talk to him. I would say, "I'm going to do this," and he'd say, "Just keep doing work at school. If you're doing it, see you've got everything done." Then, me and him got really friendly. He's a teacher; he's strict with me at times; he's like my older brother.

6. In small, intimate communities, there is a danger that conformity in the name of solidarity will overwhelm the freedom of the individual. In a school like CPESS, where the cultivation of individual viewpoints and critical thinking are core values, this danger poses a threat to the very integrity of the collective enterprise. In response to my questions about this issue, CPESS graduates emphasized that *the school encouraged everyone to remain open to the viewpoints of others, rather than to promote groupthink.*

For example, when I asked Tammy Martin whether everyone in her media class had agreed with her analysis of how women are depicted in the mass media, she adamantly denied any such thing had happened.

The students in the school are able to have strong opinions about the world and strong views about what goes on. They're able to defend their views in a convincing way. In my media class alone, people felt differently. There were some people who wrote papers completely different from mine, saying they didn't see it at all. They thought that women were shown as women and men were shown as men, and they didn't see the problem in the way they were being shown. I think even within the school, there are different opinions, and different views, but what's important about the school is that they let you know that your views are just as important as someone who has opposing views. It's important that you share your views.

Alicia Perez said that defending her portfolios reinforced lessons she had learned about entertaining diverse viewpoints:

When I found books that disagreed with each other -- I would find something that would say one thing, and then something else said another thing. I would get the point of view from both and put them down, and then, at the bottom of the page, I would always write a footnote, [explaining] from what book [the opinions came]. At the graduation committee meeting, you would have to talk about your portfolio item, so I would have to really back up my portfolio, show the teachers that I know what I did is right, and try to prove that I know what I know.

Maya Ellison believed that CPESS taught her to think critically not only in class but in the outside world as well:

If I hadn't come here, I would have accepted things much more readily than I do now. I question. Even if my friends tell me something, I ask, "Where did you get that from? You shouldn't believe everything you hear."

The fact that members of the Senior Institute took classes at local colleges helped keep CPESS from becoming too insular, providing students with an opportunity to explore issues and fields they were just introduced to at CPESS. Lin Lee took the astronomy program at Hunter College, and "it really inspired me. . . . The Hunter College program was a link between what I was doing [at CPESS] in tenth grade, and the internship I'm doing now at Columbia. So it's like a ladder climbing up."

Conclusion

In conclusion, from Division I through the Senior Institute, CPESS cultivated the students' ability to become independent learners. Abraham Miner described this cumulative process:

We've gotten to the point where, if we want to learn something that we haven't learned, it's a much easier process now because we've learned how to learn. We don't need somebody up there telling us, "This is what you need to know." We've been taught to go out there and get our own information and we're able to do that. All along, the philosophy of the school is that the teacher is the coach and not the preacher. They don't stand up in front of the class and dictate, they basically tell you, "This is the assignment," and they help you do the work. So you're doing the work, and they're just there for you to bounce off them whenever you need a little help. So you go to the library, you do your own research, you read books, and then when you're writing your paper, you hand it in, they write some corrections, and then you rewrite. It's been ongoing ever since seventh grade. Whenever you had a project, you'd do your own research, or you research in groups, and the teachers aren't there to give you all the answers.

CPESS Graduates' Reflections on Their Experiences After High School

It is still far too early to make any judgments about how CPESS prepared its graduates for life after high school. At this time, three years after the first students graduated, we can formulate questions for further research based on initial indications of the students' first experiences after high school.

For CPESS's first graduating class, of the 43 graduates who went on to college or community college, 36 (83.7 percent) remained in higher education. Seven students (16.3 percent) were no longer in school, but five (71.4 percent) of these indicated that they had plans to return imminently. According to our reports, five graduates (11.6 percent) experienced academic difficulty in their first year of college. Of these five, two left school and three continued.

Data for the second and third graduating classes are similar. For the second graduating class, of the 38 graduates who went on to institutions of higher education, three (7.9 percent) dropped out and two (5.3 percent) transferred. One of those who left college later applied for readmission. For the third graduating class, of the 48 who enrolled in institutions of higher education, five transferred (10.4 percent) and one discontinued studies.

The CPESS graduates' rate of academic persistence compares very favorably with national and local data. A study by the City University of New York's (CUNY) Office of Institutional Research and Analysis (1989) reported that only 35.5 percent of City University students persisted for five years (Murtha et al., 1989). Nationally, the figure was just over 50 percent (Murtha et al., 1989). By the end of the sophomore year, only 66 percent of candidates for the Bachelor of Arts degree remained at CUNY colleges, and only 55 percent of candidates for the Associate of Arts degree were still enrolled (Murtha et al., 1989).

Before we look further at our data for clues about how CPESS prepared its graduates for higher education, we should note that these initial results reflect the influence of several variables, of which the graduates' high school education is but one. For example, financial pressures played a role in the decision of one student to delay matriculation for one year, and at least two students decided to interrupt their college matriculation because of money troubles. In addition, problems concerning family members also contributed to the decision to leave college for work.

Furthermore, as we will discuss later, the graduates' experiences in college were influenced not only by their preparation at CPESS, but by the social and academic environment of the colleges they attended. Some students clearly felt uncomfortable being far removed from family and neighborhood; for example, Kenneth Garrido transferred from Morrisville College after one year because "it wasn't my kind of place. I wasn't comfortable there because I wasn't used to the surroundings. City people are more like people that I can relate to. Up at Morrisville, people were like farmers and I wasn't really into that. . . . There were a lot of racist things that were happening there that some of my friends were involved in. It was from the townspeople and the people in college." In addition, some students may have chosen colleges that were not good matches for their needs and interests; one student felt much more comfortable at Hunter College than at Spellman, and another student enjoyed LaGuardia Community College more than Utica College. Finally, we should keep in mind that it is normal for college freshmen to experience problems adjusting to their new environments. Homesickness, culture shock, new rules and expectations, an abundance of freedom and autonomy, all combine to make the first year of college a major challenge for most students.

These caveats aside, there is much in the students' reports of their college experiences that may give us clues for further research.

Many of the students reported that they had some difficulty adjusting to being in college during the first semester. Partly it was a matter of being away from home. Julia Gonzalez took this as a matter of course: "Obviously, first semester for a freshman, it's very difficult for the little baby of the house to live out of the house. Because it's usually the tradition to stay home until she gets married." Alicia Perez added that her connections to her family contributed to the difficulty of adjustment: "I had a rough semester. A lot of things happened; a lot of family problems."

Many students also had initial difficulty adjusting to college courses that were organized very differently from what they were used to at CPESS. Alicia Perez had problems "in the lecture halls. I say no high school prepares you for lecture hall classes in college. So those are the classes that I did pretty bad in. I wasn't used to dealing with the big lectures and just textbooks."

Tammy Martin also identified working with textbooks as a problem for her in math class. "I guess it was a different way of teaching. I'm not used to math right out of the textbook. At CPESS, they always had a different way of teaching. It was a hands-on experience, more than, I suppose, teaching from a textbook." For Lin Lee, large class size was a problem: "It was pretty hard for me to get help when I had trouble." The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's report *The Undergraduate Experience in American Higher Education* found that there was considerable "discontinuity between schools and higher education. . . . Students found the transition from school to college haphazard and confusing" (Boyer, 1987, pp. 2-3).

By and large, however, CPESS students said they overcame these initial difficulties. Tammy Martin overcame her math problems, for example: "They had math labs at the school. I had to go there a couple of weeks and it worked out well. I was able to go on by myself." Lin Lee found that tutoring helped her over her initial problems: "I needed a tutor and professors after office hours, and I talked to other people. Those things worked, and I ended up getting a decent grade."

Most CPESS graduates reported that their high school education prepared them to do well in writing, research, and critical thinking and less well in mathematics. This is in line with national data, which indicate that more than three times as many college freshmen believe they need help in math (17 percent) than in reading (5 percent) (Murtha et al., 1989, pp. 10, 15). Moreover, among City University of New York freshmen, whose demographic characteristics are probably closer to those of CPESS students than are those of the students in the national data base, 32 percent of regular senior college freshmen and 56 percent of regular community college entrants believed they needed remediation in math (Murtha et al., 1989).

Shaquille Johnson, for example, was a CPESS graduate who had trouble learning to write well at CPESS until his senior year, while he received a D[istinguished] on his math portfolio. But Shaquille reported that the English and history courses that he took at Virginia Union were "a breeze because of CPESS. . . . Research papers were no problem; I knew where to go. They teach us all of that at CPESS from the seventh grade. The writing, all the mechanics they teach about research, that training was excellent. But the math at college was hard."

Kenneth Garrido had the same experience at LaGuardia Community College, where he transferred after one unhappy semester at Morrisville State College:

I learned a lot of writing skills while I was [at CPESS]. When I went [to LaGuardia], my teacher told me that she liked the way I write. She said that I was a good writer. CPESS helped me a lot in my writing.

My math skills I have to straighten out. At LaGuardia, I took a placement test and they found that that I shouldn't have been in Algebra or Trig. 101. They put me in Math 095, which is a beginning algebra course, to help me to learn things I probably didn't learn in high school, or to remind me of how I should do it. Some of what [we were doing at LaGuardia Community College] I remember and some of it I don't. The way [the professor at LaGuardia] taught it was clearer. He would do order of operations -- what comes first -- when you do algebra. I was kind of mixed up. I knew some of it but I probably didn't know what order I should have done it. Now I probably know a little bit more.

If the reader is wondering why CPESS graduates had to take remedial classes, he or she might consider what Helen S. Astin reported about remediation at the University of California at Los Angeles: "Though we admit only the top 12 percent of graduating high school seniors, half of all our new freshmen are placed in noncredit remedial math and English courses" (Boyer, 1987, p. 76). Moreover, according to a national study on the basic skills of incoming students at colleges and universities, 32 percent are judged deficient in mathematics (Boyer, 1987, p. 76).

Hector Delgado experienced problems with math similar to those of Kenneth and Shaquille. During the summer before his freshman year at Utica College, Hector was placed in the beginning remedial math course, Math 100: "100 was starting from the beginning. These are the numbers, this is the sign for multiplication. Toward the end it got into algebra." Then, during his first semester, he had to repeat the course.

I took 100 during the year because during the summer I was supposed to get a C or better, and I got a C-. I was doing really good during the first part of the class, averaging an A, but when we got to algebra, I bombed. My grade point average went way down. So I had to take it over during the regular class year. And I got a C in it.

The math course he took twice in college, receiving a C- and then a C, was "about the same" as the course at CPESS. Even though college algebra "was pretty simple, I just didn't know it so well." He had studied algebra in high school, but "not as in depth as they did in college. We just touched on it. That's what I did."

But not all CPESS graduates had trouble with math in college. Jose Valenzuela, who took geometry at CPESS during the extra year he spent at CPESS finishing his portfolios, took the diagnostic exam in geometry at college and passed. "I didn't have to take any remedial courses. I went into the math class and I found it a breeze. The first semester, I

scored a B in algebra. The second semester, I scored a B+ in precalculus. Now it's calculus. There was no problem. I enjoyed it very much."

Julia Gonzalez's account of her math classes at Marymount was positive also; she attributed her success to the fact that she took as much math at CPESS as she could:

Danielle Hurtado [another CPESS graduate who went to Marymount] is always complaining about the math course that we're taking. She's always saying, "CPESS didn't teach me this." And I say, "I don't know where you were, but I was in the right place." Because before I graduated in June, I had taken precalculus, and that helped me tremendously. What we were doing last semester, I already had done them at CPESS. That's something I tell my cousin, take as much math as you can at CPESS. Because you are going to need it for college.

Many CPESS graduates reported that they had difficulty with a second facet of academic life at college -- not a curriculum area, but the method of instruction. Unlike CPESS, where teachers organized hands-on learning activities, assigned research projects, and encouraged critical discussion, in many of the colleges the graduates attended, teachers attempted to transmit knowledge via textbooks and lectures. Assessment was based primarily on short-answer quizzes and tests. The goal was mastery of the material transmitted by professors and textbook authors. Critical thinking, or the development and defense of independent ideas, was not on the agenda.

Some CPESS students believed that their problems mastering what professors presented indicated that CPESS had failed to teach them crucial skills. "I didn't really know how to study for a multiple-choice test," Shaquille Johnson recalled of his first year at Virginia Union. Jose Valenzuela said that he "had to drop a course because it was based all on exams. I need something to back me up like homework or assignments in class. I can't just rely on exams because I'm not a good test taker." Kenneth Garrido added:

When I was at Morrisville and I was studying history, everything was out of the book. You read the pages and it would give you questions. It was like you had to learn everything that was in the book, and that's it. If you didn't know the book, you just failed. That's the way the professor made it feel like. The course was more tuned into the textbook and the questions. I had problems memorizing things. That's what it is. When you read out of the textbook, like in my biology class and my sociology class, you were supposed to read the textbook, memorize what you learned, and be able to come to the class and answer questions. If you didn't memorize everything, or read the whole chapter, you were going to fail.

Hector Delgado experienced the same problems meeting the demands placed on him by his teachers at Utica College:

You were supposed to memorize a lot of stuff. I couldn't do that. That's important in college. That's basically it, memorizing stuff. . . . They want you to think independently but only what they're teaching. You can only think in this area. Don't be sitting and ask a question. Only ask a question that's in the book. Don't ask a question they can't answer.

This is what I had to adjust to. I think I had a tough time. I couldn't figure out why they were teaching like this. Then I started speaking to other kids, and it seems like in their high school, they went through the same thing as at college, except that college was a little more rigorous, and they had more work to do. But I couldn't really grasp the concept of test scores being the grade. That was tough for me. Finally, one day it hit me. "These are my grades now. I just got to do whatever it takes."

The insistence on mastering the material in textbooks and restating them on short-answer exams was not a result of large class size, Hector explained: "They were pretty small classes. The accounting class had about 20 students. The biggest class was economics; it had about 40 students." Yet even though classes were relatively small, teachers were not interested in their students developing and defending their own ideas:

In economics, no one said anything in the class. He just was talking and talking. The most boring class ever. A lot of kids didn't even go to class. They just showed up on test day. And that was another thing. I couldn't get why the kids were missing class. I started doing it myself because they were saying, "Why go to class?" He would lecture and supposedly what they lectured was going to be on the test; so you have to write down everything he says to study for the test; but usually the lecture wasn't on the test. The test was straight from the book. So a lot of kids didn't go to class. You just read the book. I did the same. I went to most of the classes, but sometimes I didn't learn anything.

I needed to understand when something [in the lecture] was really important to write down. A lot of times I wrote down meaningless things but in time, I could understand that when a teacher said something twice, you realize, "Wow, that's important."

I got a C. I worked hard on it. I hardly ever studied for it, because I thought it was so easy. The day before the test I'd read the whole three chapters, and it was all multiple choice. There were some essays, but his essay questions were like "Define whatever."

College was also different from CPESS, Hector reported, in that the intimate, respectful, supportive relationship between CPESS teachers and students was nowhere to be found at college. "With them, I felt I had no say in whatever they did, as far as anything

really. They are like God. . . . Teachers were more strict. You couldn't hand in stuff late. It was a whole different style. I felt it was very impersonal. I felt like I couldn't talk to them."

While Hector responded to his academic problems by working to learn the new skills being demanded of him -- note-taking, memorization, and test-taking -- he did not believe that what he was being asked to do was right: "I didn't like it all. If there was anything in the world I could have done to change it, I would have done it. But there was nothing. They're teaching like this since the first day of [college], so I just have to adjust to it."

Many of the students interviewed agreed with Hector that CPESS should teach students how to take notes on lectures, use textbooks, and memorize material for short-answer tests: "If they want us to be successful in college, they're going to have to teach us those techniques. Like memorizing, things like that, that's going to be useful to us at college."

Jose Valenzuela believed CPESS should do more to prepare students for college pedagogy, but he was not sure that CPESS should go so far as to adopt textbooks:

You need to focus on quizzes weekly, note-taking weekly, tighten up, be stricter, and final exams. . . . I'm not sure if CPESS should use textbooks or not because this school is based on being different from the average high school and I guess using textbooks goes against what they believe. It would help, but I don't think we should. I think it should be emphasized their junior and senior years that textbooks are going to be a major factor in college, and test taking. All of that should be emphasized in the Senior Institute. Maybe they should use textbooks in the Senior Institute. But as far as seventh to tenth grades, I don't really think they should.

Before we get carried away with the skills CPESS graduates did not have when they arrived at college, it is worth noting that many graduates reported being helped by a skill that we did not identify or ask about: finding adults to provide assistance. In some of the interviews, graduates recounted stories about obtaining help from adults without being aware that this was a skill. For example, Shaquille Johnson said that when he was having trouble memorizing the textbook in a sociology course that he felt well prepared for, "I told the teacher that she had to let me slide a little and she put a curve on my grade. If I didn't tell her, I would have probably failed."

Kenneth Garrido formed a close relationship with an accounting teacher. "I would meet with him after class and ask him questions and he would explain it. He said, if I passed his class I should be able to pass Accounting II and do my other business classes with no problem because I did so good the first time. He says I should continue with it." Furthermore, in Kenneth's math class, "I would explain to the teacher that I didn't learn that way in high school; I learned it a little bit different. He would ask me how I learned it. In

LaGuardia I can talk freely. I can tell them different things that I learned when I was in high school. He would tell me if I was doing it right or wrong."

Alicia Perez also found she could obtain the help she needed:

Whenever I need help, I go over to the writing center, the reading center, the math center. They give me lots of help, so that's good. And the teachers are welcoming. I would go up to them after class and talk to them about the problems, and they would be willing to stay after class a little while and explain it to me. Or I would go to their office hours and do the work with them. That helps a lot.

Conclusion

It is still too early to draw conclusions about how well CPESS prepared its graduates for college. While we know that many CPESS students experienced difficulties adjusting to the demands of the colleges they attended, we do not know the more important thing: how many of them were able to overcome these difficulties.

Nevertheless, the graduates' accounts of their first two years of college suggest the following avenues for further research.

1. Many CPESS graduates said that they would have been better off if they had been taught how to use textbooks, prepare for quizzes and exams, and take notes on lectures. *It may be that CPESS needs to recognize the reality of college education in America today and to modify its pedagogy to make transition to college easier.*

But we do not know whether lack of study skills proved to be a long-term handicap. It is possible that the skills CPESS graduates did possess -- the abilities to work independently and collaboratively, to define and solve problems, to think critically, to access and evaluate information -- enabled them in the long run to succeed in college.

Furthermore, we may find that the relative importance of study skills and critical thinking skills shifted as CPESS graduates passed from the lower divisions of their colleges, where they had to complete a variety of required lecture classes, to the upper divisions, where students take (usually) smaller classes in their major field. If we extend this study into the graduates' third and fourth years in college, we may find that their CPESS education proves more valuable the further along they go.

2. Another possibility is that *further study may reveal that CPESS graduates fared better in some kinds of colleges than in others.* If this proves to be the case, CPESS, and other high schools like it, might decide to put great effort into identifying the kinds of schools most compatible with the CPESS style of education.

3. *Our study of CPESS graduates' initial transition to college studies suggests that there is something profoundly wrong with the pedagogy practiced in many colleges.* Several graduates told us that their courses encouraged memorization and regurgitation rather than defining problems and solving them. If further investigation proves that this testimony is reliable -- and the Wingspread report, *An American Imperative: Higher Expectations for Higher Education* (1993), suggests that it is -- then we may decide that what must be modified is not CPESS's pedagogy but that of many colleges. Following CPESS graduates through their third and fourth years of college should enable us to evaluate whether their initial reports about their college academic experiences really do point to the need for a reconsideration of postsecondary education.

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