

Stalled Dreams at Lehman College?

By Don Sutherland

On May 28, 2016, *The New York Times* published a lengthy [story](#) illustrating how a chronic funding squeeze has resulted in a range of adverse consequences for the City University of New York (CUNY) system. Among the examples cited was a persistently leaky roof above Lehman College's Library.

With Lehman College nearing both its 50th anniversary and the start of its next reaccreditation process, there is actually a silver-lining to the story. First, it identifies an issue that the College should address in the very near-term. An e-mail from the Provost's office circulated Friday evening provided a correction to the article, explaining that the tarp covering the bookshelf shown in the newspaper's photo was the result of a previously leaky 33-year-old drainpipe. That the bookshelf remains covered may indicate a measure of continuing concern that the source of the leak has not been fully addressed. Second, the story opens the door to a reflective discussion of the College's planning and resource allocation systems, processes, and procedures in general, and deferred maintenance, in particular. A rigorous and open discussion would allow the College to strengthen its capacity for improvement, innovation, and renewal, especially in the context of limited new State financing. Third, the national exposure provides a vivid illustration that Albany's persistent austerity atmosphere entails real costs, both for the CUNY and SUNY systems that combine to serve more than 950,000 students all across New York City and New York State. A continuation of austerity or near-austerity will diminish New York State's future economic and social returns. Those long-term losses will significantly outweigh the short-term savings associated with fiscal austerity.

The news story notwithstanding, there is much that is good at CUNY and Lehman College. Following the story, CUNY Chancellor James B. Milliken made a [powerful case](#) that CUNY is "more important than ever." Among other things, he explained that 80% of CUNY's undergraduates earn their degrees with no federal student loan debt, graduation rates across CUNY have been increasing, and CUNY's faculty have received "hundreds of millions of dollars in research grants" and a variety of national awards.

A similar narrative prevails at Lehman College. The College is continuing to make progress in [serving](#) "the Bronx and surrounding region as an intellectual, economic, and cultural center." That story needs to be told. This blog conveys a small part of that story.

For fiscal context, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities recently [revealed](#) that New York State's inflation-adjusted per student funding for higher education fell 6.4% from 2008-2016, or an average of \$670 per student. Over the past year, New York State did increase its per student funding by an inflation-adjusted \$107. However, that increase was less than 40% of the national average change in real per student funding.

At Lehman College, per [FTE](#) student [instruction and instructional support](#) fell nearly 3% during the 2009-10 through 2014-15 period when adjusted for the [PCE Price Index](#). Nevertheless, Lehman College was able to increase its first-year [retention rate](#) for first-time, full-time freshmen from 80.4% from the fall 2009 cohort to 82.6% for the fall 2014 cohort. Its

two-year retention rate rose from 60.9% for its fall 2009 cohort to 72.5% for its fall 2013 cohort. For transfer students, who now comprise more than two-thirds of the College's undergraduates, first-year retention rose from 72.1% in 2009 to 74.4% in 2014.

There is much more to the story than retention statistics. Some recent additional examples include:

- Professor Victoria Sanford, Chair of Lehman's Anthropology Department and Director of the Center for Human Rights and Peace Studies [received](#) her third J. William Fulbright Scholarship.
- Dr. Deirdre Pettipiece, Dean of the School of Arts and Humanities, and Professor Janet Munch of the Leonard Lief Library Faculty, were [named](#) by the *Irish Voice* newspaper as among the 100 leading Irish educators across the United States.
- Joseph Boateng Danquah II and Patricia Pena Carty, two Lehman College alumni, [received](#) the Alfred P. Sloan Award for Excellence in Teaching Science and Mathematics.
- Lehman College sophomore, Radya Shaid, [won](#) the CUNY Ethics and Morality Essay Contest for her essay on the importance of contemplation and reflection in cultivating an articulate and engaged citizenry. Four other Lehman College students received honorable mention citations.
- ToBecomeATeacher.Org [ranked](#) Lehman College's School of Education the #5 education program in New York State.

Despite the challenges confronting it, Lehman College is making a difference in the lives of its students and contributing to the larger community's welfare and future. The College's efforts are providing its students with valuable intellectual capital. In today's increasingly knowledge-intensive economy, that capital is the currency that positions them for career and post-graduate success. That Lehman College has made tangible progress in the face of fiscal austerity's stiff headwinds is no small achievement. If anything, it's a heroic tale that's worth telling.