Memorandum

November 15, 2011

TO: Michelle Anderson  
   Chair, Pathways Steering Committee

FROM: Mitchel B. Wallerstein  
   President, Baruch College

SUBJECT: Response to the Pathways Project Proposed Common Core

Baruch College faculty and leadership have conducted a participatory and thorough review of the work of the University-wide Steering Committee that was established to propose a structure for the Common Core, which forms the backbone of the University’s Pathway Project. In anticipation of the release of the draft Common Core on November 1, 2011, the College scheduled a series of meetings to insure that there would be opportunities for faculty to provide input into the process. These meetings culminated in a College-wide meeting that included the chairs of the undergraduate curriculum committees of both the Zicklin School of Business and the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences, department chairs from both schools (the School of Public Affairs does not have departments), the Deans and Associate Deans of all three of the College’s Schools, the leadership of the Baruch Faculty Senate, and the Associate Provost for Teaching and Learning.

Discussions that took place in this culminating meeting, and in the school-specific meetings and Baruch Faculty Senate meetings that preceded the culminating meeting, were wide-ranging. They included analyses not only of the proposed Common Core but also a consideration of how the proposed Core would be integrated into other elements of the Pathways project. Not surprisingly, many different views emerged in these various meetings. There was consensus on some elements and divergence on others.

As a result, within the constraints of the 15-day review period it was not possible to reach full consensus on a singular Baruch College response. Nor was it possible to secure formal approval through the usual faculty governance process. The standing practice of the Baruch Faculty Senate’s processes is for a proposal to be reviewed first by one or more Senate committees, then by the Senate Executive Committee, and finally by the full Senate; this practice could not be accommodated in the time available. Therefore, although informed and influenced by a broad consultation with various faculty groups, this response, strictly
speaking, represents the views of the College’s leadership as informed by the above referenced meetings. At the same time, I am attaching as an addendum to this memo a statement just received from the Baruch Faculty Senate Executive Committee. It is also possible that individual faculty members from the College may submit their own responses to the proposed Common Core.

We present our responses in four major categories:

- The 30-credit Common Core
- The 12-credit College Option, which although not part of the remit of the Steering Committee, builds so closely on the Common Core that we determined that the two could not be discussed in isolation
- A proposal on limiting lower-division courses
- A series of specific comments on the detailed definitions contained in the proposed Common Core

Each of our responses is, we believe, consistent with the overall goals of the Pathways Project, with the spirit of the Board of Trustees resolution on the Project, and with the report of the Steering Committee. Taken in sum, our response recommends changes that the Baruch community feels are very important and that will allow the University to achieve Pathway’s goals while insuring both academic excellence and Baruch’s continuing success in providing a rigorous general education program that is most appropriate for our particular undergraduate student body.

Our responses are as follows:

1. The proposed “30-credit Common Core” (which includes nine courses) should be modified to include ten courses so that either the first semester of a foreign language sequence or an oral communications course may be required as part of the common core. This change could be accomplished in two ways—namely, either by a Board resolution that would slightly increase the number of credits allowed in the common core, or by reducing the number of credits for some of the courses proposed in the draft. Given that the 4-credit English and Math courses prescribed in the draft proposal for the “Required Common Core” are not currently the norm within the university, it would be possible to reduce those to 3-credit courses. That would reduce the nine-course core to 28 credits, thereby making it possible to add an additional 3-credit course to the Common Core while increasing the total credits of the Core to 31 credits.

Alternatively, the proposed 4-credit lab science course also could be reduced to 3 credits (unlike the Math and English courses, 4-credit lab science courses are a CUNY norm). It would still be possible to include 3 credit lab courses (one model would be 2 hours of lecture, plus 3 hours of lab). That change (along with those in Math and English) would reduce the 30 prescribed credits to 27 credits, and thereby allow for a tenth course within the 30-credit limit, as approved by the Board of Trustees.
The Baruch College leadership prefers the latter approach: limiting all courses in the Common Core to 3 credits, allowing a laboratory science course to continue to have a place in the core, while also allowing the addition of a tenth course. We would propose that this additional course be added to the Required Core, and that it be a course specifically devoted to oral communication. It has been Baruch's consistent experience over many years that enhanced skills in oral communication are essential if our students are to succeed in their chosen careers—especially in the world of business. We regularly hear from employers that strong oral—and written—communication skills are essential, indeed so essential that we believe a course devoted to enhancing such skills should be part of the Required Core.

2. The senior colleges should be allowed to require 12 college-specific credits of all transfer students (in lieu of the proposed 6-9-12 option). We believe that it is fundamentally important for each of the CUNY senior colleges to develop and sustain its own “signature identity” component of general education. One of the great advantages of the CUNY system is that its breadth, scale and structure allow individual senior colleges to support unique arrays of academic programs that differentiate each senior college from the others, thereby giving the applying student a range of options from which to choose. A 12-credit college option for all students would allow each senior college to develop a subset of the general education curriculum that is particularly well-suited to its student body, its faculty, and to the unique array of academic programs its campus.

3. The University should allow no more than 60 credits of lower-division courses to be considered for transfer credit. Students who start and complete their undergraduate education at a single institution should also be limited to 60 credits of lower-division courses. This limit (and enhanced advisement) would help ensure that students completing bachelor's degrees at all CUNY colleges have both a broad and rigorous education that is equally divided between more challenging and more focused upper-division courses and more broadly designed lower-division courses that provide both basic skills and general knowledge.

4. Some specific proposals for slight modifications to the proposed categories of the Common Core:

- Within each category of the “Flexible Common Core,” the draft prescribes that courses “must meet at least three of the following additional learning outcomes.” Instead, all courses in the category should be required to meet the first outcome (“Identify and apply the fundamental concepts and research methods…”) plus at least two of the remaining outcomes.

- Within the categories of the “Flexible Common Core,” specific disciplines should not be listed. Instead of listing disciplines, the first outcome should read “Identify and apply the fundamental concepts and research methods of a discipline or interdisciplinary field that addresses at least two of the following
learning outcomes." A less acceptable alternative would be a much longer list of disciplines for each category (see below under e).

- The proscription in the "Flexible Common Core" against taking more than one course in a single discipline should be dropped. The resulting flexibility would be especially relevant for language study, for which a single semester is simply inadequate.

- Within the "Required Common Core," the second bullet under "English Composition" should be revised, in recognition of the type of writing required across the undergraduate curriculum as well as for graduate study, from..."Produce coherent texts (such as formal essays, research papers, and reports) using appropriate technology, critique one's own and others' texts, and improve them using standard English, grammar, mechanics, and clear prose." to... "Produce coherent academic essays using appropriate technology, critique one's own and others' texts, and improve them using standard English, grammar, mechanics, and clear prose."

- If specific disciplines/courses will continue to be named in the categories of the "Flexible Common Core" (see b above):
  - Within the "World Cultures" category: cultural studies courses should be added. In addition, the parenthetical "(non-duplicative of previous language acquisition)" [after foreign languages] should be revised to clarify that students may not begin a college-level language class at the same (or lower) level at which s/he studied the same language before; students may take the same foreign language as in high school or at a previous college but must continue at a higher level.
  - Within the "U.S. Experience in its Diversity" category: public affairs, anthropology and cultural studies should be added.
  - Within the "Creative Expression" category, neither communications (a course that is not focused on creativity per se) nor creative writing (an course that requires additional background and literature) should be included.
  - Within the "Individual and Society" category, computer science should not be included; political science, public affairs, journalism, cultural studies, sociology, and information sciences/resources should be added.

As stated at the outset of this response, we believe that each of the specific recommendations made above, and the sum of these suggestions taken as a whole, would
greatly enhance the effectiveness of the proposed Common Core, while remaining completely faithful to the goals of the Pathway Project as well as consistent with the structure of the Common Core proposed by the Steering Committee. We believe these suggestions will enhance the ability of each of CUNY’s senior colleges not only to provide transfer students with the clear path to the bachelor’s degree they deserve, but also would simultaneously provide each senior college with the flexibility to require a college-specific core that is most appropriate to its unique array of academic programs and capabilities. We trust that these comments will be helpful as the Steering Committee prepares its final set of recommendations on the Common Core, and as other stages of the Pathways Project continue forward. We welcome further participation in this process, and would also be eager to clarify any of the issues discussed above.
Statement of the Baruch Faculty Senate Executive Committee

The Executive Committee of the Baruch Faculty Senate offers the following statement on the Common Core. Unanimously approved November 15, 2011.

The unfortunately truncated two week response period precluded this statement from going through the regular governance process. We provide our comments recognizing that they will remain the view of the Executive Committee until the entire Baruch Faculty Senate acts. We would have appreciated more time to address this very important issue.

Our first issue is the interconnectivity between Common Core Structure and the remainder of the Resolution on Creating an Efficient Transfer System. In particular, as several of the larger transfer majors are offered at Baruch it is difficult to develop a fully informed comment without some understanding of what is contained in the “...no fewer than three and no more than six courses that will be accepted as entry level courses for beginning the major or as prerequisites for such courses...”

Our second issue deals with proposed common core itself. We find it too rigid in the specification of credits instead of courses. We find the specifications of the learning outcomes of the flexible common core far too imprecise. We find omission of oral communication in the required common core difficult to understand in light of the persistent criticisms of the skills of our students.

Our third issue has to do with the 6-9-12 credits allocated to each senior college. It is our view that these numbers, as few as six and no more than twelve, are insufficient to establish a COMMON Baruch experience for our students. This will lead to a lack of consistency in the experiences of the graduates of Baruch.

Our fourth concern refers back to our first comment. The flexibility of the Common Core Structure proposal and the current unknowns regarding the remainder of the Pathways Proposal raises a very real prospect of different students in the same major having significant differences in preparation without significant differences in GPA. This will inevitably lead to confusion in the marketplace and could undermine Baruch’s reputation for quality. The total Pathways project must ensure that the unconstrained student flexibility inherent in the proposal does not inadvertently compromise student success after graduation.