IBM, CUNY Launch Watson Student App Competition

By Darryl K. Taft | Posted 2014-09-04

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The contest, known as the CUNY-IBM Watson Case Competition, is an opportunity to learn and develop apps for applying the IBM Watson cognitive technology to improve the operation of organizations and the delivery of services to customers. The IBM Watson technology embodies the future, and this competition enables CUNY students to be part of the new generation involved in the jobs and businesses that will be created.

That is why the CUNY Institute for Virtual Enterprise and The Lawrence N. Field Center for Entrepreneurship at Baruch College are inviting all CUNY students to participate this semester in the CUNY-IBM Watson Case Competition. Registration for the competition opened today and runs through Oct. 20.

Prizes will be awarded to the top three teams: $5,000 for first place, $3,000 for second place and $2,000 for third place. Participants also will have an opportunity to sign up for summer 2015 internships, join CUNY Entrepreneurship Boot Camp, work in CUNY's Incubator, and have access to the entrepreneurship network in virtual and real space.

In this competition, Baruch College, CUNY and IBM are looking at ways that IBM Watson can be applied to higher education and the delivery of public services by New York City. The competition will enable student teams to explore ideas and concepts on how cognitive technology can be applied in these two areas.
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Indeed, some possible examples to apply IBM Watson are improving the quality and effectiveness of public undergraduate education and helping to better deliver public services such as public safety, health and transportation.

Teams of CUNY students will work through various milestones during the fall 2014 semester, while being mentored by IBM, CUNY faculty and other experts in the field. Teams of three to five students will present their preliminary concepts during Watson "boot camp" Oct. 24 and 25. The finalists will participate in a final round of presentations on Jan. 15, 2015, when cash prizes will be awarded to the top three teams.

IBM has made the rounds with Watson at major universities around the country, and Big Blue has been working with these schools to include Watson-related curricula. In 2012, IBM sponsored a case competition at the University of Rochester (UR) Simon School of Business. In that competition, 25 MBA and master of science students with concentrations ranging from marketing and business consulting to finance and entrepreneurship competed in teams submitting seven proposals outlining how Watson's technology could be applied to solve complex challenges in the transportation, energy, retail and public sector industries.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, there will be a 24 percent increase in demand for professionals with management analysis skills over the next eight years. The McKinsey Global Institute projects a need for approximately 190,000 more workers with analytics expertise and 1.5 million more data-savvy managers in the United States.

Also in 2012, IBM and Michigan State University joined up to offer the first-ever Watson case study curriculum. The collaboration was part of an ongoing effort to expand and strengthen student skills and understanding of big data and analytics to meet the growing demand for highly skilled analytics workers. IBM has been hosting Watson case competitions and has established project-focused classes with universities. Back then, IBM also completed its first Watson internship program where students experimented with new ways the Watson system could be applied to societal challenges.

And in a Watson case competition at Cornell University, 55 Cornell business and computer science students worked as part of mock IBM Watson commercialization teams, each charged with selecting an industry and developing an application that could best use the IBM Watson system in a real-life business environment.

IBM also opened Watson up to even greater numbers of competitors earlier this year when the company launched the IBM Watson Mobile Developer Challenge at the Mobile World Congress in Barcelona last February. The IBM Watson Mobile Developer Challenge was a global competition to encourage developers to create mobile consumer and business apps powered by Watson.

Teams spanning 18 industries from 43 countries submitted more than 400 business concepts that demonstrated how cognitive computing innovations can tackle some of the most challenging societal and business problems. The submissions addressed a wide range of issues, including micro-finance in developing economies, early education learning, and remote diagnosis and treatment using evidence-based health protocols.

In June, IBM named three winners of the competition: GenieMD, Majestyk Apps and Red Ant. The winners each will receive support from IBM to advance their concepts into the market. When IBM launched the IBM Watson Group last January, it also announced $100 million in venture investments to support an ecosystem of entrepreneurs developing Watson-powered apps.
Besides Pre-K, What Is de Blasio’s Education Plan?

By Chris Smith

De Blasio and two first-day pre-K students  Photo: Theodore Parisienne-Pool/Getty Images

As you may have heard, the city’s expanded pre-kindergarten program starts today. How well pre-K works is a very big deal — politically, for Mayor Bill de Blasio, and educationally, for the 30,000 new kids. With all the hype, money, and energy being devoted to 4-year-olds, though, it has almost been possible to forget that there are 13 other grades — and that the mayor’s plans for improving them have been slower to come into focus.

Take, for instance, candidate de Blasio’s second high-profile education promise, that he’d impose a moratorium on high school “closures.” Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s team contended that it didn’t really close failing schools — that it broke up big, dysfunctional high schools into smaller, more manageable units, because it was the only way to replace entrenched staff. The results, in terms of grades and graduation rates, were often positive, but the political fallout from the tactic was enormous, and some of the toughest-to-educate kids were further marginalized.
The new mayor has kept his word on the moratorium: The 17 high schools graded F on their final Bloomberg report card all reopened today. De Blasio hasn’t ruled out shutting underperforming schools if it’s eventually necessary, but what he’ll be doing as an alternative in the meantime is harder to determine. “The schools chancellor, Carmen Farina, keeps saying that she’s about to announce their new strategy for assisting struggling schools,” says David Bloomfield, a professor of education leadership at the CUNY Graduate Center and Brooklyn College. “It hasn’t come yet.”

And it may never, at least in the bells-and-whistles, screaming-and-headlines form the past 12 years conditioned us to expect. De Blasio’s boldest education initiative, apart from pre-K, has been negotiating a new teachers’ union contract. Educational improvements, he believes, will flow faster and easier from labor peace, and the new mayor clearly wants to move away from the overarching, often contentious strokes of the Bloomberg years.

For high schools, this means there have been a series of modest moves so far. Farina has installed a superintendent, Aimee Horowitz, to oversee troubled buildings; she’s launching a program to have retired principals mentor current high school leaders; she’s boosting the amount of time devoted to teacher training.

The rest remains a bit vague. “We are really working to support struggling schools with a team of instructional people that are going to be going in and doing targeted intervention,” says Dorita Gibson, the senior deputy chancellor. “Each school is different, and we want to make sure we’re working with the school community, together, so we can address all the needs.”

Which sounds rational and nice. Within walking distance of City Hall, however, is one rugged example of just how hard it is to improve a flailing high school. Murry Bergtraum serves a disproportionate number of poor and poorly prepared students; the result has been years of dismal graduation rates and security problems. The school also has an especially aggressive teachers union chapter that thinks UFT president Mike Mulgrew didn’t fight Bloomberg hard enough.

Last week Bergtraum got its fourth principal in six years. “You cannot turn around these schools without bringing in a team of people, and Bergtraum had a staff that was not willing to change,” says Ernest Logan, head of the principals’ union. “I don’t know what the plan is for this school now.” Logan nonetheless says he’s “optimistic” about the new educational era.

Collaboration instead of confrontation is the hallmark of the de Blasio approach, not just in the schools. Now all the mayor needs to do is turn good will into better grades.
U.F.T., de Blasio to re-negotiate part of contract

By Sally Goldenberg   5:49 a.m. | Sep. 5, 2014

The de Blasio administration and the United Federation of Teachers will return to the bargaining table in the coming weeks to hammer out an unresolved portion of the recently ratified contract, Capital has learned.

The two sides need to agree on how to pay union members who retired before June 30, 2014, because more teachers left than the contract had accounted for, both sides confirmed.

City Hall had set aside $180 million to pay lump sum retroactive wages to retiring teachers—a figure the union agreed to in June when it signed off on the nine-year deal that runs from 2009-2018. But the higher-than-anticipated retirement rate means the city may need to increase that total and negotiate how retroactive payments will be made to the additional retirees.

Wiley Norvell, a spokesman for Mayor Bill de Blasio, confirmed to Capital that the $180 million was reached, but would not say how many additional teachers retired before the deadline.

"We’ll start discussions with the U.F.T. as to how to handle disbursements," he said. "There’s not a precise roadmap of how to handle. If we hit the cap, we have to sit down" to negotiate with the union.

 Talks with the U.F.T. would take place “later this month,” he said.

A U.F.T. spokesman said only that “the issues are under discussion.”

The union is likely to ask the city for enough money to pay all retirees 100 percent of their back wages at once—the same deal the first batch of retirees covered under the $180 million got. It is unclear whether the city will attempt to stretch out those payments over a period of years.

Capital previously reported 2,263 U.F.T. members applied for retirement in June, up from 1,484 applications in June of last year, according to figures provided by the New York City
Teachers' Retirement System. (The figure includes CUNY instructors who are not covered by this contract.)

At the time, Norvell said, "To the extent a small fraction of employees decide to retire a year or two early, that's something we have planned for in a system of more than 75,000 teachers, something we can easily accommodate."

The UFT deal was arguably the city's most complicated because the teachers had been without a contract since 2009 and did not receive the 8 percent raises former mayor Michael Bloomberg granted most municipal workers at that time.

In settling the contract, de Blasio's labor negotiators agreed to account for the 8 percent raises in 2 percent increments over a four-year period from 2015 to 2018, as well as pay out the retroactive cash from 2015 to 2020 in five installments, skipping 2016. Those payments will continue beyond the life of the contract.

The city insists the wages are not "retroactive" because they would not be granted to teachers who quit. Instead, the administration refers to them as "restructured payments." Teachers who opted to retire by June 30, 2014, were granted the entire back pay at once.

The exact language in the agreement reads: "Upon ratification, the city shall establish a structured retiree claims settlement fund in the total amount of $180 million to settle all claims by retirees who have retired between Nov. 1, 2009, through June 30, 2014, concerning wage increases arising out of the 2009-2011 round of bargaining. The fund will be distributed based upon an agreed upon formula."

Beyond that, the contract, which has thus far set the pattern for all other labor deals de Blasio's administration has struck, offered raises of 10 percent over seven years and a one-time bonus of $1,000.

The contract totals $9 billion—a cost that would be offset by health-care savings the UFT is required to come up with.

All unions under the umbrella Municipal Labor Committee must find a total of $3.4 billion in health care savings over four years by restructuring their benefits. The provision is legally binding and, if the unions do not meet their end of the bargain, an arbitrator will dictate savings, which could entail forcing employees to pay toward their premiums. Currently basic health plans for city workers are free.

MORE: CITY HALL  ALLIANCE FOR QUALITY EDUCATION  BILL DE BLASIO  EDUCATION  LABOR  MICHAEL BLOOMBERG  UNITED FEDERATION OF TEACHERS
SAP and New York City Education Partners Open Six-Year High School in New York Focused on STEM

New York City Department of Education, Queensborough Community College, the Early College Initiative at CUNY and SAP Collaborate, Simplifying Path to IT Careers for Young People

TWEET ME: ..@SAP and partners open new 6-year #STEM focused high school in NYC http://wp.me/p3DD4j-sd2 @NYCSchools @BtechSchool @sapcc @QCC_CUNY http://twitter.com/hashtag/6yearSTEM?src=hash-search

PRESS RELEASE
Thursday, September 4, 2014 - 12:05pm

NEW YORK, September 4, 2014 /3BL Media/ — SAP SE (http://www.sap.com/) today announced the opening of the Business Technology Early College High (BTECH http://www.btechcny.org/) School, an innovative new school in Queens, NY, that enables students to earn a high school diploma, an associate degree in business systems or engineering technology, and gain relevant work experience in the business technology field — all at no cost to the family. Developed in collaboration with SAP, the New York City Department of Education, Queensborough Community College and the Early College Initiative at the City University of New York, BTECH is a response to the increasing demand for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) talent in the United States.

This kind of innovative public-private partnership model has created a six-year school that provides high school and college courses, as well as on-the-job experience and professional development training to ensure students are prepared to succeed in their future careers. These partnerships have been praised by President Obama’s White House for preparing students with skills for the new economy and offering them a ticket to the middle class.

"The future of work is being redefined by new technology, demographic shifts and the next generation of employees’ expectations," said Torie Clarke, senior vice president of Global Corporate Affairs, SAP. "Education needs to keep pace with these changes. Working together, private industry and public education institutions can create the programs required to support this new peer group and simplify their transition into satisfying technology careers."

A core academic curriculum — designed and taught by faculty at Queensborough Community College — will help students develop a strong Liberal Arts & Sciences and Technological education. BTECH students will take the same courses as Queensborough students in Business CIS (Computer Information Systems) and Internet Technology as well as other related programs. QCC instructors will teach these courses with the same level of academic rigor as all other courses. Queensborough is working together with the teachers and principal of BTECH to ensure alignment of learning outcomes.

Employment in STEM occupations is projected to grow nearly two times faster than the average for all occupations over the next four years**, and economic projections point to a need for approximately 1 million more STEM professionals than the U.S. will produce at the current rate over the next decade**. To close this skills gap, SAP is helping to cultivate the workforce of the future. This is part of the company’s corporate social responsibility (http://www.sap.com/about/sustainability.html) commitment to help increase the pipeline of talent ready to move into the technology industry.

In addition to a core academic curriculum, students at BTECH will develop technical, design and communication skills and will have opportunities to work with SAP technologies such as cloud solutions from SAP (http://www.sap.com/oc/technologies.html), the SAP HANA platform (http://www.sap.com/products/mem-computing-technology/software/overview/index.html), and mobile apps (http://www.sap.com/arc/technologies/mobile/software/products/appcenter/overview.html).

Mentorship and guidance will be a critical component of the program, and BTECH students will be paired with SAP mentors to help them stay focused on their education and understand what kinds of careers are available in technology. Students will also have the opportunity to gain real-world experiences working in IT or the corporate environment via apprenticeships, internships or job shadowing within the SAP ecosystem.

"The BTECH model adds multiple layers of opportunities for learning among teachers and students as we connect the classroom experience directly to the working world," said Hoa Tu, founding principal, BTECH. "Working in partnership with SAP, we’ve developed a curriculum that empowers students to be successful in our modern, information-based global
economy. Not only are we committed to the model, we’re also committed to each individual student’s learning to make sure that we are delivering on what we promise: desirable, job-ready employees in 2020.”

Students are selected based on their demonstrated interest in the school’s educational mission, which encompasses both business acumen and technological expertise. ETECH’s first class of 124 ninth graders brings together students from across all districts in Queens, New York.

For more information, visit the SAP News Center (http://www.news.sap.com/). Follow SAP on Twitter at @sapnews (http://twitter.com/sapnews/).

*Speech by President Obama about the rising costs of higher education, Wednesday, April 25, 2012 at the University of Iowa Field House in Iowa City, Iowa
**U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
***2012 Council of Advisors on Science and Technology

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BTECH welcomes its first freshmen

by Mark Lord, Chronicle Contributor | Posted: Thursday, September 4, 2014 10:30 am

With the primary goal of making graduates workplace ready, Business Technology Early College High School, or BTECH, will open its doors to its first students on Sept. 4 in Martin Van Buren High School’s building in Queens Village.

To help the new pupils get their feet wet, orientations were held on Aug. 26 and 27, during which the incoming freshmen had the opportunity to tour their future home and become acquainted with some of their soon-to-be teachers.

Among those on hand was 13-year-old Jaelen Jones, who said he and his mother, Tracci, discussed several options before deciding on BTECH.

With a “strong passion for computers,” Jones was drawn to the school, which will emphasize a STEM — science, technology, engineering and mathematics — curriculum, where he looks forward to discovering “how they work.”

For his mother, the chief selling point was the school’s affiliation with SAP, a software developer.

“[It’s] an opportunity to get my son’s foot in the door,” she said. “For me, SAP was the way to go. I see a great future with this program.”

BTECH will enable its students to earn not only a high school diploma, but an associate degree in business systems or engineering technology, while gaining relevant work experience in the business technology field.

The first class of 124 ninth-graders, of which 70 percent are males and 30 percent females, includes approximately 35 percent African Americans, 30 percent Hispanics and 20 percent Asians. About 89 percent of the students are coming from public schools all over the city, with the other 11 percent coming from private schools. About 13 percent of students have individualized education programs.

Each year, approximately 100 more students will be admitted to the school. It is expected to eventually serve about 660 students in grades 9 through 14.

There will be nine teachers on the high school level in the first year.

By the time they enter their third year, students will begin taking college classes on the
Queensborough Community College campus.

“It’s a wonderful opportunity for students to become academically and workplace-ready,” said Denise Ward, interim vice president for pre-college, continuing education and workforce development at QCC.

“We’ll help students determine what direction they want to go in,” she said.

BTECH will share only limited services with Van Buren, such as the library and gymnasium.

Academically, BTECH is “a completely separate program and high school,” Ward said.

Students entering the school participated in the same application procedure as do students in most DOE schools.

“We are not a specialized high school,” Ward said, “but a unique high school.”

The high school staff was recruited by the principal, Hoa Tu, Ward said.

Seven-year teaching veteran Knatasha Hunter of Queens Village will teach algebra and introduction to business and entrepreneurship at the school. Though she said this will mark her first year teaching a business class, she comes equipped with experience in the business world. She was particularly excited by the prospect of working in a brand new school.

“We’re deciding everything,” she said. “The students will help us decide on a mascot and a school song. We have the ability to create our ideal school.”

Samuel Elfarah, 13, of Corona, who will likely be one of Hunter’s students, will have to travel upwards of an hour to get to school every day, but he feels it will be worth it.

“They offer so much. It’s amazing,” he said. While admitting he hasn’t been the best student, he added, “I’m going to try to focus the best I can.”

He is particularly encouraged by the prospect of having an associate degree in six years.

Howard Robinson III, a parent of an incoming student, said, “A good part of it is it’s backed up by a large corporation and a good college. It’s a vision of what a school should be.”

Also on hand at the orientation last week was the Pollicino family, helping 14-year-old Giuseppe acclimate to life in high school.

Giuseppe had been homeschooled, his mother, Bernadette, said. “We felt he was missing out on socialization and being able to collaborate” with others his age.

His father, Anthony, admitted that sending their son to a brand new school came with a certain level of risk, but said, “My son was willing to take that step. He was very excited. He did a lot of research. It made me feel a lot more comfortable.”
For Aiyana Middleton, 14, of St. Albans, attending BTECH means an opportunity for “two free years” of college.

“In my family we don’t have that much money,” she said. “My parents didn’t have the opportunity to go to college. This is a really good opportunity for me.”

The school was developed through a partnership between SAP, the city Department of Education, QCC and the Early College Initiative at the City University of New York.

Its mission is to “combine academic excellence with technical aptitude, thus empowering students to be successful in our modern, information-based global economy and community.”

Students will study core topics, as well as develop technical, design and communication skills. Graduates of the six-year program will receive professional certifications and, it is hoped, the workplace experience necessary to give them a competitive edge.

BTECH students will be paired with SAP mentors to help them understand what kinds of careers are available in the information technology field.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment in STEM occupations is projected to grow nearly two times faster than the average for all occupations over the next four years. BTECH is seen as a response to this employer demand.

The school’s path to formation was not without its hardships.

The location was proposed by the Bloomberg administration last year. The co-location led to some opposition within Van Buren and from local officials, including state Sen. Tony Avella (D-Bayside) and Mark Weprin (D-Oakland Gardens) and several civic leaders who felt it was an attempt by the previous administration to destroy Van Buren.

However, the new school did receive strong support within the community and among civic associations after learning more about the school. It was approved by the DOE’s policy-making body, the Panel for Educational Policy, last November.
‘Uncomfortable Learning’ – How 3 Students Changed Their Elite College for the Better

by Jennifer Kabbany - Fix Editor on September 5, 2014

WILLIAMSTOWN, Mass. – Decades ago, Williams College had a reputation as a preppy, country clubbish university, and it was in the midst of this atmosphere that a famed professor at the New England campus, Robert Gaudino, exposed students to the so-called real world.

He’d ship them off – as close as America’s inner cities to as far away as Calcutta – to spend some time getting their hands dirty, so to speak; a process he called “Uncomfortable Learning.”

“He would just put them on a plane and give them a much more viable academic experience confronting the world, the real world, instead of the ‘Purple Bubble,’” said Williams College’s Ben Fischberg, 22.

In the spirit of exposing students to the realities of the real world, Fischberg and two other students started their own “Uncomfortable Learning” effort at Williams earlier this year.

But this time, instead of confronting the problems outside the “Purple Bubble,” the trio of students took aim at issues within their 221-year-old elite university, which – like so many others – has created an atmosphere in which academics and intellectual debate are heavily influenced by left-leaning scholars, and a diversity of opinions – especially conservative ones – do not openly flourish.

It’s a college in rural New England where talk of white privilege and oppression are just as commonplace as at other elite colleges in that region and beyond, but sometimes felt even more so because of the campus’ intimate size. At about 2,000 undergrads, it has fewer students than most mainstream public high schools.

So perhaps launching Uncomfortable Learning took more guts than might be expected at a place like Williams, but the students who launched the endeavor said in interviews with The College Fix that they wanted to add to their education, expand their beloved institution’s horizons, and challenge themselves and their peers to search beyond the echo chamber found today at most colleges.

“There is no learning, without being uncomfortable,” said Williams College student David Gaines at the group’s April 29 event. “One cannot learn and grow without being challenged and made to think.”

With a desire for a more robust college debate than their classroom time produced, Fischberg, along with Gaines and fellow student James Hitchcock, challenged the status quo and formed their student club. The three students emphasized the project was not borne out of a lack of rigor on their professors’ part, but rather a desire for a well-rounded college experience.
"We created Uncomfortable Learning out of a desire to push our Williams education further and to challenge ourselves and the Williams community," Fischberg said. "We aimed to expand the dialogue at Williams on certain issues that was restrained."

(Pictured from left: James Hitchcock, David Gaines and Ben Fischberg)

Delving into the ‘Restained’

To that end, Uncomfortable Learning hosted five guest lecturers in the spring of 2014 on topics that were not readily broached within the classrooms.

KC Johnson, a past Williams professor who is now a history professor at Brooklyn College and the City University of New York Graduate Center, kicked off the parade of highly regarded intellectuals who visited the campus during the school year in his January address titled: "Educating Dangerously: How History is Being Mistaught in U.S. Universities."

In introducing Johnson, Fischberg told the crowd that he was excited for the launch of Uncomfortable Learning, noting that "we are looking forward to having speakers who challenge the Williams orthodoxy and promote intellectual diversity on campus."

Johnson talked about how history professors focus more and more on narrow subject matter that can often be politically charged at the cost of not offering a fuller historical curriculum, often lacking in western and American history.

Renown economist Richard Vedder, a professor at Ohio University and the director of The Center for College Affordability & Productivity, focused his speech on how the federal government is waging a war on work, offering "perverse incentives created by the U.S. welfare system," Fischberg said.

The talk also explored how lowering the minimum wage would not only benefit the U.S. economy, but minority workers in particular. And many in the audience expressed surprise to learn that the majority of economic studies on the minimum wage support the notion that if it's raised, it is likely to lower employment.
Greg Lukianoff, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, gave a talk on how colleges suppress free speech and enforce draconian and unconstitutional speech codes. One example he gave was Drexel’s prohibition on derogatory laughter, for example.

National Review’s Jonah Goldberg, author of The Tyranny of Cliches: How Liberals Cheat in the War of Ideas, spoke on how liberals use cliches to prevent debate. He argued that issues such as social justice and microaggressions are tools used by certain groups as values that someone cannot disagree with – unless they are a racist or a homophobe, Fischberg said.

“He pushed us to think about what social justice truly means and why it is problematic when people hide behind euphemisms instead of engaging in debate,” he said.

And finally, the Heritage Foundation’s Mike Needham rounded off the speaker visits with a talk on how Washington is responsive to the desires of large interest groups like unions or big business, but not the needs of the public, Fischberg said.

A Budding Success

Uncomfortable Learning wasn’t exactly embraced with open arms when Fischberg first sought official permission from administrators to launch the club in the winter of 2013.

At first, administrators wanted Uncomfortable Learning to have representation from different student groups on campus, such as a member from the Latino, Black and queer campus clubs, Fischberg said. Eventually Uncomfortable Learning decided to venture forth as an unofficially recognized club.

Over time, as each talk attracted anywhere from 30 to 70 guests, the events starting to gain traction in the Williams community, and students and professors began to openly support the effort. Many people attended the talks and were interested to hear what the speakers had to say. The audience was often very opened minded, surprisingly so, the founders said.

“One of the things I liked about Uncomfortable Learning is it got professors and the administration to come out of the woodwork,” Fischberg said. “Professors would come up to me and say, ‘I think what you are doing is fantastic.’ I started hearing more and more of that.”

“We began to develop a motivated group of supporters who ignored criticism from certain groups at Williams,” he added. “Uncomfortable Learning had a successful trial run at Williams, and is well prepared to capitalize on our success next year.”

Moving Forward

Fischberg graduated in May, and Hitchcock and Gaines, both 21 and seniors, said they have exciting plans to continue the effort this year at Williams.

In interviews with The College Fix, Hitchcock and Gaines said the continued goal of Uncomfortable Learning is not only to “ask the tough questions,” but to encourage their peers to do so as well.

As a new wave of freshmen come to into the “Purple Bubble,” that goal is vital, they said.

“What we hope is that Uncomfortable Learning plays a big role in defining a campus landscape that allows for
open discourse and creates a marketplace of ideas,” Hitchcock said.

“It’s not that we are trying to push an ideology,” Gaines added. “Our goal is to bring speakers who will challenge campus norms.”

With that, both Republican, Democrat, libertarian and independent voices will be part of the 2014-15 lineup, they said.

It’s something that can be launched at any campus, and the trio who founded Uncomfortable Learning said their ultimate vision is that such clubs spring up at universities across the nation.

The speaker honorariums at Williams were supported by generous private funding, but that shouldn’t discourage students from trying. As a start, Hitchcock and Gaines said students should try to ask notable alumni at their schools to speak for free or speak if travel and lodgings are covered. They could also ask professors from their own schools with unpopular opinions to speak.

Fischberg said support is there for enterprising students.

“Students interested in creating a chapter of Uncomfortable Learning at their college should reach out to alums and foundations like the Charles Koch Foundation and Young Americans for Liberty,” he said.

It’s worth it, he added.

When Goldberg visited the campus in April, he subsequently wrote about his experiences at Williams:

All of this was against the backdrop of an outbreak of peak collegiate stupidity here at Williams. The school invited Michael Bloomberg to be a commencement speaker. This is hugely controversial on the left. A bunch of students and faculty are furious because Bloomberg supported stop-and-frisk policies in New York. Hence, these kids are passing around flyers comparing Bloomberg to a slaveholder or some such. One professor told me that perhaps as many as 150 members of the faculty might turn their back on Bloomberg on graduation day. And everywhere there is a lot of talk about how Williams is a “white supremacist” institution. Gotta love a thoroughly liberal liberal-arts college being called white supremacist by the very same black kids it admitted for an excellent four-year education. Dumbest. White. Supremacists. Ever.

But Fischberg said things have changed at Williams, for the better.

“The fact is we are now ready to talk about microaggressions and privilege in a way I haven’t heard in the last four years,” Fischberg said. “From my first three years at Williams, that didn’t exist.”

“Students were willing to have dialogues behind closed doors, but students have those conversations in open places now, where they are not stereotyped.”

Jennifer Kabbany is editor of The College Fix (Follow Jenn on Twitter: @JenniferKabbany)
Should employers check your credit?

By Kaycia Sailsman, Chronicle Contributor | Posted: Thursday, September 4, 2014 10:30 am

A bill that aims to "prohibit discrimination based on one's consumer credit history" by banning employers from doing credit checks on job applicants will be the subject of a City Council hearing set for 10 a.m. Sept. 12 at City Hall.

The main sponsor of the bill, which was introduced in April and is being debated in the Civic Rights Committee, is Councilman Brad Lander (D-Brooklyn). The legislation has 38 co-sponsors who have signed onto it; among them are several members of the Queens delegation: Daniel Dromm (D-Jackson Heights), Jimmy Van Bramer (D-Sunnyside), Costa Constantinides (D-Astoria), Peter Koo (D-Flushing), Elizabeth Crowley (D-Flushing), Donovan Richards (D-Laurelton), Ruben Wills (D-South Jamaica) and Daneek Miller (D-St.Albans).

"Credit history gives no indication of a person's ability to work," Richards said in a statement. "When we no longer allow companies to check the credit history of applicants, we greatly aid millions of people rebuilding their credit, especially recent graduates who needed loans. As a co-sponsor of this bill, I am proud to fight to eliminate the discriminatory use of credit checks by employers."

Wills supports the bill because he said people are often turned away from jobs they are qualified for simply because of bad credit.

"Their standing credit does not have to do with the jobs they are applying for," Wills argued.

He said that these are not big-time financial jobs but everyday jobs that everyone can get. If the bill gets passed supporters say it will be able to uplift the economy even more because more people will contribute to the economy and make it stronger.

"If this bill helps 1,000 people then this bill works. There would be a lot of people contributing money to the economy, which would help the city in a tremendous way," Wills said.

A rally was held in support of the measure at Queens College on July 23.
According to an article by Amy Traub titled “Discredited: How Employment Credit Checks Keep Qualified Workers Out of a Job,” the practice of checking credit on prospective employees is legal under federal law.

The article says The Fair Credit Reporting Act makes it legal for employers to ask applicants for their credit information on their job application as well as any current employer. In order to check credit, the employer must obtain written information from whose ever credit they wish to see. Also, employers must notify individuals before taking any “adverse action,” such as promotion, failure to hire, or retain current and prospective employees.

Although the practice is legal, it is difficult for future employees to opt out because employers have the right to reject their job application if the person refuses to consent to have a credit check.

Supporters of banning the practice say credit checks affect newly matriculated college students, people who are seeking employment and various minority groups who are more likely to have bad or little credit. They argue the issue puts people in a catch-22 situation because people in debt need income from a job to improve their credit — a job they cannot get due to their credit.

“It is time to draw a line in the sand by banning this practice, which traps job seekers in a vicious cycle of debt and unemployment,” said Tashi Lhewa, staff attorney in the Queens office of the Legal Aid Society.

Joby Thoyalil is the Campaign Organizer for the New Economy Project and a supporter of this bill. He is hopeful that the outcome will be positive.

Thoyalil mentioned Dromm and Constantinides as “extremely supportive who attended press conferences in the past to speak out and support the bill.” He added that Mayor de Blasio is in full support of the bill and that this issue was a part of his 2013 campaign platform.

“The fact that employers are using a credit check as a punishment in effect to deprive people who need employment [of] employment is unacceptable ... I agree entirely with the efforts to ban the practice of [these] background checks being used in any kind of employment or hiring practice,” de Blasio has said on the subject.

A potential negative of this bill, according to the article by Traub, is that it would limit employers’ eligibility standards. These kinds of checks also include potential criminal information as well, so not having credit checks could put the company at a serious risk.

According to an article in insidebusiness360.com, the reasons businesses do credit checks is to prevent resume fraud, negligent lawsuits and discover bad work record. However, the article states that “credit checks only mirror a person’s payment history but can be misinterpreted by employers who perceive that someone who is a late payer may be a tardy worker, or someone with debt may be dishonest.”
A college degree worth waiting for

by Tess McRae, Associate Editor | Posted: Thursday, September 4, 2014 10:30 am

Alexander Phillips gives new meaning to the term “super senior.”

The Fresh Meadows native who attended Queensborough Community College 50 years ago finally received his degree this summer.

He’s also 90 years old.

“This is one of the proudest moments in my life,” Phillips, who now lives in Georgia, said. “It’s wonderful and overwhelming.”

According to the recent graduate, he was speaking with his daughter-in-law, Marsha Johnson Higgins, about his time in Queens and how disappointed he was he never got a college degree.

“I dropped out early,” Phillips said. “I was working overtime as a bus driver for 60 hours a week for 20 years. At the same time I was in school, I was preparing for a promotion which I eventually got, but I soon developed eye problems. After a year, I had to drop out.”

Johnson Higgins contacted Queensborough to see if there was anything that could be done to fulfill Phillips’ dream of a degree.

An academic committee was appointed to review his record and determined he was eligible for a degree based on approved course substitutions to meet both the Business and the Speech Communication and Theater Arts program requirements.

“Mr. Phillips’ unique situation and history at Queensborough touched many of us at the college,” Diane Call, the school’s president, said in a written statement. “I am so pleased he has been awarded an official Queensborough Community College associate degree in business, class of 2014.”

While Phillips could not attend a commencement ceremony with the other students, the college did send over a cap and gown with his diploma.
Though his time at QCC was short-lived, he remembered a conversation he had with a math professor during one of his first classes.

“I asked, ‘What is the most important quality in being a good student?’ and he answered me with one word: ‘Perseverance,’” Phillips said.

The Queens native has always emphasized the importance of education over his nine decades.

“Education was always a priority in my life,” Phillips said.

That priority is something he also instilled in his five children. Two of his daughters pursued careers in the healthcare industry — one as a pediatrician and another as a nurse practitioner — another daughter is employed in the social services field and the fourth graduated from Columbia University and became a teacher. His son, Anthony Higgins, runs his own antiques business.

“All of my children have degrees,” Phillips said. “We have a doctor, nurse practitioner, a psychiatrist. I’m proud of all of them, but it did make for a lot of reflection and thinking, which is what lead me to finally getting my diploma.”

In addition to having a degree in business, Phillips served in the Army during World War II and worked for the New York City Transit Authority for more than 40 years before retiring and moving south to live with his son.
PAUL KRUGMAN: Conservatives Want 'To Push Us Back To 1894'

COLIN CAMPBELL
8 MINUTES AGO

Paul Krugman speaking at CUNY's Graduate Center.

New York Times op-ed columnist Paul Krugman believes the conservative movement's "real goal" is to shift the entire country's social policies back 120 years.

"Their real goal is to push us back to 1894 — not even to 1924. So these are the stakes. This is really serious stuff," he declared Thursday night. "Never forget just how big this thing is."

The Nobel Prize winning economist sat down for a discussion with Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Massachusetts) at CUNY's Graduate Center in Manhattan. The two were pressed for their take on the U.S. Supreme Court's "Hobby Lobby" decision in June that ruled some, "closely-held" corporations had the right to deny insurance coverage for birth control.

Krugman, needless to say, was no fan of the decision. He argued the "outrageous" and "insane" ruling was based on the flawed premise that business owners could be shielded from
certain government regulations based on their individual religious beliefs.

"We're telling you you have to provide health insurance. So if we can do that, we can say, 'Yeah, it has to be the standardized thing,"' he said. "This is an insane thing. And of course, where exactly does the line end? ... How closely held does a corporation have to be when it ceases to be a person? I would say no corporation is a person — no matter what, no employer. Your role as an employer and your role as a person is not the same thing."

Krugman pivoted to a larger point and said the ruling must be viewed in the context of a "scary" conservative push on these sorts of issues.

"[We] should not be astonished to see this happening in 2014. The deep roots of what's going on in our political system is much bigger and much scarier. Of course, you have to the political fight as you do on individual issues. But we are fighting something that is quite scary," he said.
Contractor must reimburse workers $274,000 for wages he stole from them: A.G.

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on September 04, 2014 at 5:04 PM, updated September 05, 2014 at 6:03 AM

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- The owner of a Port Richmond electrical contracting firm must shell out nearly $274,000 in restitution to workers who were cheated out of required wages on government-related projects, said authorities.

Ronald Bartiromo and his company, R3 Electrical Inc., previously pleaded guilty in Manhattan state Supreme Court to a felony count of failing to pay the prevailing wage, said state Attorney General Eric T. Schneiderman. The company also pleaded guilty to grand larceny, he said.

According to Schneiderman, R3 Electrical was hired as an electrical subcontractor on a project to upgrade science labs at five City University of New York campuses between 2008 and 2010. The company was also contracted to upgrade boilers at the Rutgers Houses, a New York City Housing Authority development on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. The state Power Authority funded the boiler renovations.

Under state law and the contracts' terms, the defendants were required to pay prevailing wages for electricians to their employees. The state's prevailing wage laws seek to ensure that government contractors pay salary and benefits comparable to the local norms for a given trade.

Under the law, the hourly rate for construction work performed for public agencies is much higher than the state minimum wage, and it is also higher for overtime, weekends or work at night.

However, Bartiromo, 50, aided by Raymond D'Auria, 49, his project manager, underpaid workers by nearly $274,000, Schneiderman said. Bartiromo doctored his books to indicate the employees received the prevailing wage on both jobs, said Schneiderman.
Court records allege the workers were paid between $15 and $25 an hour without other benefits, while the defendants claimed to have paid them more than $86 per hour in wages and benefits on the CUNY project and between $84 and $88 per hour on the Rutgers Houses job.

The bogus payroll reports were sent to CUNY and the Power Authority, the attorney general said. The cheated employees were working as electricians, Schneiderman said.

D'Auria previously pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor count of failing to pay the prevailing wage.

Bartiromo lives in Tottenville; D'Auria resides in the Howard Beach section of Queens.

Besides the restitution he and his company must pay, Bartiromo was sentenced Thursday to five years' probation, said Schneiderman. D'Auria and R3 Electrical were sentenced to conditional discharges.

The defendants are barred from working on public-works projects for five years.

"Mr. Bartiromo, Mr. D'Auria and R3 Electrical Inc. are being held accountable for stealing wages from workers who did electrical work on several public works projects throughout New York City," said Schneiderman in a statement.

James J. Bonicos, the lawyer for Bartiromo and R3 Electrical, declined comment on the case.

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