

January 6, 1999, Wednesday

Hearing Brings Out City University's Staunchest Defenders

By KAREN W. ARENSON

After six months of visiting campuses, commissioning consultants and questioning administrators, teachers and students, a panel appointed by Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani to recommend changes in the City University of New York held a public hearing yesterday that was dominated by defenders of CUNY and its mission.

If the seven-member panel needed any demonstration of the loyalty and affection the university commands -- even after being publicly tarred by the Mayor and others for being too lax -- it was in ample evidence yesterday, as dozens of elected officials, businessmen, faculty members, trustees and others lined up to offer their own recipes for what needs fixing and what does not.

The Mayor, along with Gov. George E. Pataki and other CUNY critics, has charged that CUNY accepts too many students who are not prepared for college-level work and allows them to spend too much time in remedial courses, and that many of them fail to graduate anyway.

Representative Jerrold Nadler called CUNY an "invaluable resource" and an "essential tool of mobility."

Former Mayor David N. Dinkins said he was saddened by the attacks on CUNY and the question about the university's standards, and that he feared they were nothing more than "thinly veiled criticisms of the students on campuses today."

"If CUNY does not provide access to higher education, who will?" he asked.

New York State Senator Franz S. Leichter called the issue of remedial education a "red herring, a Trojan horse," and said CUNY's biggest problem was that "it has been starved for resources." He told the commission that it would be doing a public service by declaring that it

is time for greater resources.

And Jack Rudin, a real estate executive and New York City civic leader, spoke of the importance of remedial education and presented an official from Iona College in Westchester County to underline its importance.

But there were those, too, who applauded the steps CUNY's trustees have taken to remove remedial classes from the senior colleges and raise admissions standards.

"It is easy to talk about access, but the important question is access to what," said Jerry L. Martin, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, a Washington-based group that follows education issues.

Stephen Balch, a CUNY graduate and former CUNY faculty member who is now president of the National Association of Scholars, a group pressing colleges to offer more rigorous education, suggested that cuts in CUNY's size were warranted. "For CUNY to do better, it must paradoxically do somewhat less," he said.

With the hearing announced just days before Christmas and held during CUNY's winter break, only a handful of students were in the audience. Some carried placards like "Stop Educational Apartheid." Others booed and taunted speakers they opposed.

The protests grew louder as one speaker was outlining her vision for higher standards. After some scuffling, security officers removed several protesters from the auditorium and arrested one, Susanna Martin, a 1998 graduate of Brooklyn College who calls herself Suzy Subways.

Some in the audience expressed skepticism about the weight their views would carry. Lawrence K. Grossman, a former president of the Public Broadcasting System and a former president of NBC News, as well as the husband of an adjunct professor at CUNY, Alberta N. Grossman, questioned whether the hearing was a charade -- "Potemkin hearings" -- intended to allow the task force to say it had heard from the public.

But others, like Richard P. Mills, New York State's Commissioner of Education, applauded the panel, saying it was important for CUNY and for creating a template for higher education in America.

"The work of this task force is timely and very needed," Mr. Mills said. "CUNY is in need of a strategic review and strategic direction."

"The issues you have engaged affect CUNY, but they are also national in scope," he added.

The chairman of the seven-member commission, Benno C. Schmidt Jr., a former president of

Yale University and now chairman of the Edison Project, a for-profit venture that runs public schools around the country, tried to assure people that the commission was still in its inquiry stage and was interested in more input. Five of the seven commission members attended the hearing yesterday. Mr. Schmidt said he expected to release a report in late February.

"The Mayor told us to take the time we need to do as thoughtful a job as we can," he commented before the hearing began. "We purposefully scheduled this before we pull together our own opinions. We have open ears."

The two-day hearing is to continue today at 2 P.M. at Hunter College, with speakers invited to sign up at the door.

Organizations mentioned in this article:

City University of New York

Related Terms:

Colleges and Universities; Consultants; Teachers and School Employees; Reform and Reorganization

You may print this article now, or save it on your computer for future reference. [Instructions for saving](#) this article on your computer are also available.

Copyright 2001 The New York Times Company