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SAVE HOSTOS: POLITICS AND COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION TO SAVE A  
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# Save Hostos: Politics and Community Mobilization to Save a College in the Bronx, 1973–1978

GERALD MEYER

## ABSTRACT

From the fall of 1973 to the spring of 1978, Eugenio María de Hostos Community College, a component of the City University of New York that first offered classes in the fall of 1970, in the heart of what was then defined as the South Bronx, was the site of one of the most prolonged and successful mass movements of the 1970s in New York City. During that time, students, staff, faculty, and members of the community mobilized three successive mass campaigns to obtain facilities for the college and to prevent the Board of Higher Education from closing the college. These campaigns utilized a combination of tactics that effectively politicized the campus and attracted widespread support from both the leadership and the ordinary residents of the Latino communities. The willingness of those within and outside the Hostos campus to commit themselves, and in some instances risk arrest to ensure the survival of the college, reflected the degree to which Hostos embodied, for large sectors of the Latino community, a concrete achievement in the fight against discrimination as well as the fight for bilingual education. The success of this, at times, conflictive movement in achieving goals also demonstrates the potential and effectiveness of movements that have secured a mass base. [Key Words: South Bronx, Puerto Rican politics, social movement, student movement, New York City politics, radicalism]

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*Hostos contingent at a pro-CUNY rally at Albany (1976).  
From the personal collection of the author. Reprinted, by permission, from Gerald Meyer.*

*Editor's Note: CENTRO Journal respects the way individuals write their names.  
We have checked the spelling of the names for all those mentioned in the essay.  
Their names are spelled accordingly.*

Eugenio María de Hostos Community College, a component of the City University of New York (CUNY), first offered classes in the fall of 1970, with an enrollment of some six hundred students, at a campus that consisted entirely of a five-story renovated factory—475 Grand Concourse—on the northwest corner of the Grand Concourse and East 149th Street, in the heart of what was then defined as the South Bronx. From the fall of 1973 until the spring of 1979, students, staff, faculty, and members of the community mobilized around the related goals of obtaining facilities for, and preventing the Board of Higher Education (BHE) from, closing the college. Although each of these campaigns had its own specific realities, in essential ways they constituted a single movement to secure equal treatment and security for an institution of higher learning dedicated to serving the South Bronx and other minority communities.

By 1972, Hostos enrolled over two thousand students who, together with administrators, faculty, and staff, endured a uniquely negative educational environment. The college had the least square footage of space per student of any CUNY unit; it had no gym, child-care facility, cafeteria, or bookstore. Every hour in the day, Hostos' students, staff, and faculty experienced the discomfort and, even more profoundly, the sense of injustice engendered by this situation. Hostos' lack of facilities undercut its ability to provide quality education and to increase its enrollment. Perversely, the Board of Higher Education presented the very conditions that had been imposed on the college as the rationale for closing the institution. This story merits retelling because a remarkably persistent militant movement dedicated to "Save Hostos" prevailed over the "commonsensical" arguments of the BHE. Today Hostos' nearly four thousand students are enrolled in numerous degree programs in an architecturally acclaimed campus, spanning the Grand Concourse, because a determined movement refused to let the college be sacrificed to the expediency of the powers that be and the ineffectiveness of its administration.

Hostos was established, along with other units of CUNY, as a direct response to the burgeoning enrollment in the university brought about by the implementation in 1970 by the BHE of open admissions, which permitted any city resident who had

*Massive march, from El Barrio to the headquarters of the Emergency Financial Control Board at 56th Street and Avenue of the Americas, to save Hostos (May 1976). From the personal collection of the author. Reprinted, by permission, from Gerald Meyer.*



earned a high school diploma or the equivalent thereof entry to the university. Consequently, the freshman class in CUNY in 1970 was 75 percent larger than in the previous fall. Moreover, the racial and ethnic composition of the university dramatically changed: in 1960, only 5 percent of CUNY's enrollment was African American, Latino, or Asian American. Today, in large part because of open admissions, CUNY's enrollment is 80 percent minority, which almost exactly mirrors the profile of the college-age population of New York City.

The mass movement at City College in 1968, which had demanded open admissions, directly led to the founding of new CUNY campuses, including Hostos. Unlike Hostos, however, this reality did not transfer into the cultures and practice of these other campuses. Hostos elicited a type of passionate support not evidenced in the other campuses. The other campuses which had been established or expanded due to open admissions either inherited campuses that had previously served almost entirely white student populations or were constructed on sites without ties to a particular community. Hostos had been deliberately located in the community it was intended to serve. It was enmeshed in the hubbub of an important South Bronx crossroads, which organically connected it with the community. Although Hostos' enrollment was small, each week the thousands of community residents who passed by the school were delighted to see that it was there.

People, some of whom had never actually seen the college, also rallied around the college because it was named after a Puerto Rican man of letters, Eugenio María de Hostos (1839–1903). Hostos' astonishingly prolific writings and indefatigable activism were devoted to human progress, and especially to the advancement of education throughout Latin America, as well as the cause of independence for Cuba and Puerto Rico. He was at the same time one of the most important figures in the history of Puerto Rico and revered in the Dominican Republic, where, after helping to establish the public educational system, he died. So he was equally a hero to the two largest ethnic groups of Hostos' student body. Last, but not least, Hostos Community College was an institution dedicated to bilingualism, where the full range of disciplines—from Biology to Mathematics, from Psychology to cultural studies—were taught in Spanish. At Hostos, Spanish-dominant students studied



Calculus, Latin American literature, and Economics while developing their English-language skills. The college officially adhered to a policy of “transitional bilingualism,” where students enrolled in courses taught in Spanish while learning English. It was also a place where students who knew Spanish improved their knowledge of the language, and where many who at most knew *español casero* learned a more formal Spanish. In general, it was those students who were attracted to the college because of its association with Hispanic culture and history and who benefited from its bilingual programs who became the most consistent and ardent supporters of these movements. Indeed, there was a minority of students who enrolled at Hostos as a type of political act.

Hostos was also special because its faculty was selected to specifically implement its mission. Consequently, knowledge of Spanish and involvement in social movements were considered pluses. For example, neither the Chairperson of my department nor the Dean of Faculty blinked their eyes when, on my application under the heading “have you ever been arrested,” I responded that I had served a ten-day sentence for contempt of court as a result of an arrest at a demonstration in support of striking teachers in Newark, New Jersey. In addition, the original cohort of faculty contained a number of individuals who had achieved distinction in their fields, including: Al Hollingswood, artist; Pablo Cabrera, theater director; and Graciela Rivera, the first Puerto Rican to play leading roles at New York City’s Metropolitan Opera. Others had left tenured positions in prestigious colleges to be a part of an exciting experiment.

From the fall of 1973 until 1979, I served as Chapter Chairperson of the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), which was the American Federation of Teachers local that represented the professors and professional staff of City University. This position allowed me to play a key role in the movement. Prior to its launching of these campaigns, I had concentrated on building the PSC Chapter. It soon boasted a twenty-member Executive Committee with representatives from every department, as well as representatives from the professional staff, who nominally were members of university-wide chapters. Monthly, the chapter published a newsletter, which was, at the time, the only organ of communication within the college. The chapter also sponsored a series of educational forums on topics such as the handicapped student, student retention, and writing across the curriculum. By 1974, 90 percent of the faculty had joined the PSC. This was the highest percentage of union membership of any of the twenty chapters that comprised the PSC. Significantly, the PSC chapter was organized earlier than the Hostos Senate, and in general during this period had a larger presence than any other entity on campus. The endorsement of the PSC, both on campus and citywide, represented a major asset for this movement. It legitimized faculty participation, and enabled many to join in activities they probably had never anticipated being associated with. The PSC also provided material resources, which helped support these campaigns. It financed the Chapter newsletter; it also regularly published articles about Hostos’ plight in *The Clarion*, the PSC newspaper that was closely read throughout the University. The PSC also provided small sums of money for expenses such as renting a sound truck.

I was predisposed to use my position as chapter chair to define the chapter’s work as including coalescing with students and others in political movements on behalf of the institution. Since my high school days in the late fifties, when I handed out leaflets and put campaign literature under hundreds of doors in support of Adlai Stevenson, to my being fired from a college teaching job for helping to organize a

student strike protesting the United States invasion of Cambodia immediately before coming to Hostos, I had been participating and helping organize progressive political activities and campaigns that entailed some risk of personal loss, but which sometimes actually won their objectives.

Although I did not maintain a journal during these years, I did write many leaflets for the various campaigns, articles on these movements for the chapter newsletter, and a short history of the Save Hostos year of 1975–1976, which was circulated within the college. These I maintained along with extensive files of leaflets, petitions, memoranda, newspaper clippings, student newspapers, etc., from these campaigns, which later other activists augmented. This essay is consequently the work of a participant-observer who has had some time to reflect on these events. Beyond whatever value my study possesses, I do hope that it will some time soon contribute to a larger study, which this remarkable movement merits.

The initial impetus for these mass movements came from a student. Sometime towards the end of the fall 1973 semester, Sam Saunders, the leader of the Student Government Organization (SGO), dropped into my office and said to me: “You know, it’s a shame how we have to live like this in the College. Do you think we could get the Security Mutual Building for Hostos?” Sam was referring to 500 Grand Concourse, a five-story, recently vacated edifice, located directly across the street from the college on the northeast corner of 149th Street and the Grand Concourse, which had been constructed a few years earlier as the headquarters of an insurance firm that had relocated to Houston. I remember responding, “Let’s talk about it.” On the spot, we decided to launch a campaign to obtain “the 500” for Hostos.

This movement, which was organized around the slogan “Hostos Needs Space,” met with a powerful response. The first event in what was to become a five-year-long mobilization took place on April 3, 1974 when the SGO/PSC Coalition brought four buses filled with students and faculty unannounced to the door of the BHE on East 80th street and East End Avenue in Manhattan. From on top of a sound truck, faculty and student leaders as well as the President of the PSC, Irwin Polishook, told Hostos’ supporters they would continue to fight until Hostos received equal treatment. *The Clarion* published a front-page article about the rally, which made Hostos’ plight known throughout the University. That afternoon, members of the Board invited a delegation of faculty and students (that in addition to Sam and myself included Prof. Manny Ramos, from the Modern Languages Department) from the College into a conference room to present Hostos’ case. The members of the Board who met the delegation listened with interest to the presentations and related their amazement that no one had ever come to the BHE with these grievances.

In May, the Coalition organized a march that wended its way up the Grand Concourse to East 161st Street, then east to Third Avenue, then back down to East 149th Street. As the Hostos contingent marched through the streets chanting “Hostos Needs Space” and “Justice for Hostos,” South Bronx residents, who lined the streets and looked out their windows, waved and shouted their support to the marchers.

The marchers had stopped at the office of then Congressman Herman Badillo, at the Grand Concourse and 159th Street, where they were welcomed by members of his staff. Shortly after, a delegation from the PSC and the SGO met with Badillo, seeking his help in obtaining the 500 Building for Hostos. During this meeting, Badillo revealed to us that he disagreed with the President of the College, Candido de León, about the location of Hostos’ permanent campus. Badillo proposed that the college campus be constructed within the shell of the Concourse Plaza Hotel,

which was located on the northeast corner of 161st Street and the Grand Concourse, or on a platform built over the North Central Rail Road tracks at 149th Street between the Grand Concourse and Morris Avenue. de León favored a site near the so-called Hub, a major transportation and commercial crossroads in the vicinity of Third Avenue and East 149th Street. This disagreement explained, at least in part, the paralysis of the Hostos administration in responding to the lack of facilities at the college. The negative dimensions of this inaction were underscored when Saunders and I met with the Deputy Borough President of the Bronx, George Batista, who reported that our visit was the first ever to the Bronx Borough President's Office on behalf of Hostos. He further pointed out that the administration of Bronx Community College frequently came to the Borough President seeking one type of help or another for their school. Apparently, the assumption shared by both de León and Badillo was that Hostos could wait in its current condition indefinitely while this dispute was sorted out. Subsequent events were to prove that this was a self-serving and false belief.

Day by day, students and faculty, who proudly wore buttons saying "Hostos Needs Space," dedicated themselves to this campaign. Frequent assemblies at the college energized faculty, staff, and students. Finally, on May 29th, two buses filled with Hostos' supporters traveled to Albany to place the college's case before the State Legislature. After rallying on the steps of the capitol building, a delegation, which included de León, Saunders, and myself, met with State Senator Joseph Galiber and State Assemblyman Robert Garcia who both represented districts in the Bronx. That very evening, they submitted a bill that passed both houses of the State Legislature that modified the state budget to include \$2,500,000 (an amount which, under existing formulas, had to be matched by the City) to purchase the 500 Building for Hostos. Within six months, the SGO/PSC-led coalition had succeeded in obtaining the first Hostos-owned facility—the 500 Building, which would more than double the square footage of space available for the College. This campaign also resulted in an immediate and significant gain for Hostos. The Board agreed to fund the leasing of temporary facilities: a vacant elementary school and convent from Our Lady of Pity Church, which were located on East 151st Street between Morris and Courtland Avenues. Despite their five-block-long distance from the 475 Building, these facilities did provide adequate office space and some additional classrooms for the Social and Behavioral, Humanities, and Mathematics departments.

The ability of this movement to spring to life, gain momentum, remain focused, and so rapidly achieve its very large goal depended on a number of factors. The small size of the College certainly helped. Everyone knew everyone else, and casual interactions were constant. Sam Saunders, for example, had been a student in one of my classes. The faculty was remarkably young and most of the students had not come directly from high school, so the average differences of age between faculty and students were small. The willingness of the leadership of the PSC and the SGO to take up this cause lent legitimacy to these activities. The campaign to obtain facilities for Hostos was not viewed as a radical endeavor. Indeed, Sam—a New York City-raised Puerto Rican, who had served in the Navy and had enrolled for some time in the New York City Police Academy before matriculating in the Radiologic Technology Department at Hostos—termed himself a "conservative."

The success of the SGO-PSC coalition's campaign to obtain the 500 Building demonstrated to the college community that mass political action could accomplish large things. This lesson was the foundation upon which was constructed the much more complex and fateful Save Hostos campaign.

In the fall of 1975, Mayor Abraham Beame proposed resolving the city's fiscal crisis in part by closing three campuses of the City University—John Jay, Medgar Evers, and Hostos. In compliance with the Mayor's decision, Chancellor Robert Kibbee declared that Bronx Community College would absorb Hostos, whose bilingual programs would continue to be offered in a separate institute located at its 149th Street site. At least publicly, Kibbee's rationale for closing Hostos hinged on only one point—it cost twice as much to educate one student at Hostos than at Bronx Community College. Kibbee, the BHE, and the media ignored the fact that, based on a highly favorable evaluation, the Middle States Accrediting Association had granted Hostos full and unconditional accreditation.

At the November 6 meeting of the Hostos Senate, where I served as the representative of the PSC, I submitted a resolution, which was enthusiastically and unanimously passed, for the organization of a Save Hostos Committee (SHC), whose work was to be implemented by six subcommittees—Letter Writing, Petitioning, Voter Registration, Community Outreach, Finance, and Publicity. During this fateful year, I served as the SHC's overall chair.

The SHC's letter-writing campaign—chaired by Prof. Pat Parzych, and later by Prof. Louis Brown—became the single most sustained activity in the effort to save Hostos. A large percentage of the faculty incorporated letter writing into their classroom work so that students composed multiple letters in various classes in both the fall and spring semesters. For a community college, this was an ideal tactic because it combined advocacy with developmental writing. Pat Parzych, who was the Chair of the Secretarial Science Department, assigned to students enrolled in her classes the typing of the letters generated in the other classes. Thousands of letters now arrived on the desks of political officials. Stephen Berger, the Chair of the Emergency Financial Control Board (which had oversight of the City's finances), acknowledged receiving over four hundred letters from Hostos students. In his response to student letters, Manfred Ohrenstein, a State Assemblyman from the Upper West Side, stated: "the mail on Hostos is so heavy that it is impossible to answer each letter personally." Time and again, representatives from Hostos were told by the elected officials they lobbied that they marveled at the flood of letters that landed on their desks from Hostos.

Faculty members also wrote letters. Prof. Peter Roman, for example, sent letters to Governor Hugh Carey, Mayor Ed Koch, Alfred Giardino, Chair of the BHE, and other public officials as well as succeeded in having a two-column letter published in the *New York Times*, which in part said: "Hostos Community College is too important to be closed—too important for the South Bronx, too important for New York City. To close Hostos would be to slam the door in the face of those who as much as anyone deserve education and jobs."

The letter-writing campaign was reinforced by the work of the Voter Registration Committee, chaired by Prof. Diane Penner, which actually registered five hundred members of the Hostos community. In tandem with this effort, the staff of the President's office carried out the painstaking task of identifying the congressional, state senatorial, state assembly, and city councilman districts in which each student resided. This effort enormously amplified the effect of the letter writing campaign, because the elected officials to whom students sent their letters now knew exactly how many Hostos students lived in their districts. For example, Bronx Congressman Jonathan Bingham's strongly expressed support for Hostos was likely connected to his being informed that 572 Hostos students resided in his district.

In School District 3, the board of parents."

# Hostos Closing Seen A Loss to Biz of 2M

By KEITH MOORE

Between \$2 to \$3 million a year will be lost to the South Bronx as a direct result of the September closing of Hostos Community College, business and political leaders from the area estimated yesterday.

Bronx Borough President Robert Abrams, joined by City Councilman Ramon Velaz (D-Bronx) and members of the Hub-149th St. commercial area, described Hostos as a "crucial economic pillar" of the community and that its loss would further erode the South Bronx economic base.

The officials maintained that the 149th St. and Grand Concourse area where the college is located is one of the more stable communities in the South Bronx and that students spent up to \$3 million a year in local shops and businesses.

The business leaders, including officials from Citibank, the Yankees, the 149th St. Merchants Association, Alexander's and the Hearn department stores and the Bronx Chamber of Commerce, said the Board of Higher Education's decision on Monday to eliminate the school as presently formulated was "short-sighted."

The group said in a joint statement that the saving realized from Hostos' closing was minimal. According to its figures, Hostos accounted for only 0.5% of the City University's budget.

The Board of Higher Education, which runs the university system, had actually called for a merger of Hostos with Bronx Community College. The board said that bilingual and health programs at Hostos would be preserved within the merged institution.

Hostos President Candido de Leon termed the board's plans to save bilingual and health pro-



Here photo by Tom Corbridge  
Councilman Ramon Velaz talks to South Bronx residents about Hostos College.

grams "a fraud." He said nobody from the board or from the university's staff had actually discussed how the programs would be saved.

Noting that Bronx Community was already overcrowded and that it would be "unfair" to Hostos students to have to attend the merged institution, he said the university system still had not made arrangements to break the five-year lease it now holds on the Hostos building. It costs about \$150,000 a year, according to the Hostos proxy.

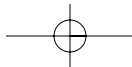
A 1976 New York Post article detailing the crisis at Hostos.  
From the personal collection of the author. Reprinted, by permission, from Gerald Meyer.

Along with these activities, the Petition Committee, chaired by Prof. Selena James, became another ongoing, vital part of this campaign. The text of the petition underscored the following: "Hostos Community College and Open Admissions were established as a result of the struggles of people to gain access to higher education. Now, these hard-won gains are threatened. We must make sure that these opportunities continue to be available to the people." This petition brought the Hostos story to the community, where people eagerly signed this document. One Hostos student, on a number of occasions, set up a card table on Southern Boulevard in the East Bronx and obtained hundreds of signatures. On March 11, 1976 a delegation of Hostos faculty and students brought petitions containing over twenty thousand signatures to City Hall, where they presented them to Deputy Mayor John Zuccotti. The following week, a photocopy of the petitions was delivered to Governor Carey's office in Albany.

The impact of these petitions was enormously increased because while they were being presented to Deputy Mayor John Zuccotti, a throng of Hostos students and faculty (who had just arrived in eight buses) were circling City Hall chanting and carrying placards that demanded "Save Hostos." At City Hall, the assembled members of the Hostos community were addressed by a number of city councilpersons (including the chairperson of the city council, Paul O'Dwyer), all of whom pledged their support to the Save Hostos cause.

None of these efforts would have been possible without funds, the responsibility for which fell onto the shoulders of Wally Edgecombe, then the College's Director of Public Relations. In total, the SHC raised approximately \$6,000, the equivalent today of approximately \$20,000. The largest single component of this sum was amassed from the \$15 solicited from each member of the faculty/staff, 80 percent of whom contributed at least this amount. The PSC contributed directly over \$1,300. One thousand dollars was raised at a Christmas dance organized and hosted by Professors Anita Cunningham and Selena James. Hundreds of dollars accrued from the sale of thousands of buttons that simply said "Save Hostos." The SHC had five hundred copies printed of an emblematic graphic captioned with the Save Hostos logo created by Al Hollingsworth. The single greatest expense was incurred from the cost of renting buses to transport Hostos supporters to rallies; then there were the expenses of endless reams of paper and thousands of postage stamps.

Publicity, which was also chaired by Wally Edgecombe, was an integral and essential part of all these activities. A major pillar of all efforts to convince public officials and wider constituencies to join the Save Hostos cause was the "Hostos Community College: Information Sheet" (developed by Associate Dean of Students Peter Martin), which presented hard evidence supporting this demand. Among other things, this four-page pamphlet (printed in both English and Spanish) pointed out that Hostos had the highest percentage of Latino students in CUNY, and that it was the only bilingual college in CUNY. It also documented Hostos' successes, such as the splendid results of Hostos students on the State licensing exams in Radiological Technology and Dental Hygiene. The "Information Sheet," which was widely distributed as a leaflet, also provided the factual basis for Polishook's well-received testimony on behalf of Hostos before the Board of Trustees. The SHC regularly communicated to the Hostos community through *Update*, a newsletter, edited by Edgecombe, which among other things printed an excerpt from Congressman Bingham's letter in support of Hostos, which read: "[Hostos] is not a New York luxury, but an American necessity." (In *Update*, Edgecombe first coined the slogan, "Hostos: The People's College," which until recently was much used.)



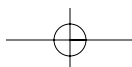
Shortly after the SHC was founded, the SGO and a number of student clubs, with the support of the Hostos Puerto Rican Caucus, organized the Community Coalition to Save Hostos (CCSH), which was led by Ramón Jiménez (a professor in the Behavioral Science Department and a graduate, at age twenty-five, from Harvard Law School), SGO President Alexis Colón, President of the Student Senate Nilsa Saniel, and many other courageous and talented student leaders.

The CCSH's first major activity, a demonstration that took place on November 19, revealed the different orientations of the SHC and the CCSH. First, the very large demonstration took place in front of the Chase Manhattan Bank, on East 149th Street near Third Avenue, and not in front of a government building. Without ever openly saying so, the CCSH discouraged participation in the political process—voting, lobbying, letter writing, petitioning—which its leaders clearly assumed would derail the movement. Some who adhered to the CCSH viewed these activities as contradicting the cause of the Puerto Rican nation, which they viewed as incorporating Puerto Rican people living in the diaspora together with those living in Puerto Rico. At the time, this was the political perspective of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, which had a large contingent of members and supporters in the CCSH. This also goes far to explain a characteristic difference between the SHC and the CCSH: there were few Puerto Rican faculty/staff active in the SHC and few non-Puerto Rican faculty/staff active in the CCSH.

CCSH's activities combined the call to Save Hostos with the demand to change Hostos, and specifically to remove Candido de León as President of the College. The headline of one of the flyers announcing the November 19th rally blared "de León: Whose Side Are You On?" The text of the leaflet then complained about the "failure of President de León to mount a militant, strongly organized coalition to defend Hostos." It closed by stating: "We will not allow de León to sell us out!" Over time, the CCSH's attacks on de León escalated. One CCSH-endorsed leaflet stated: "The most important goal is to save Hostos. Unfortunately this can only be done with good leadership; this is why Candido de León must go."

de León, who had lived some time in a Trappist monastery, was de facto the College's first president. Nazry Michelin, a Dominican medical doctor, filled this position for a year, but he had abruptly resigned after a student sit-in inside his office, which demanded a response to the extremely negative physical condition of the college, caused him to exit through the window. Prior to assuming office, de León had developed the overall academic plan for the college. Specifically, he had established the credit distribution for the Associate of Arts and the Associate of Science degrees, which to an almost unique extent for a two-year college, anchored these degrees in the liberal arts. de León also prescribed for the college a pedagogy, that he termed a "systems approach," which abolished grades and was designed to allow students to advance at their own pace. He also devoted an inordinate amount of his own, and key faculty members', time to offer college courses at Greenhaven Correctional Institution in upstate New York to a cohort of approximately twenty inmates, who were to eventually arrive on campus.

de León's design of the course distributions for the Associate of Arts and Associate of Science degrees, which reflected his own classical education at Catholic educational institutions, has remained almost intact until this moment. (They are, however, scheduled to be replaced in the fall of 2003 with far less rigorous and less transferable course distributions.) de León's other progressive and promising initiatives more or less rapidly fell apart. His pedagogical schema, which were widely rejected by both





*The author addressing a rally during the 500 Building campaign at 149th Street and the Grand Concourse (1978).  
Photograph by J. R. Salderelli of the PSC Clarion.  
From the personal collection of the author. Reprinted, by permission, from Gerald Meyer.*

faculty and students, were abandoned in 1978. In part because of his aloof, and somewhat sanctimonious personality—for example, when he met with the prison-release students he began the meetings with a minute of meditation—de León succeeded in offending the students from the prison release program who later became a major component of the CCSH. The various ways in which de León subverted his own ostensibly admirable efforts is perhaps best illustrated by his decision to accept an invitation from the United States State Department to visit the Ivory Coast in order to lecture on the value of community colleges at a time when the community college he had responsibility for appeared doomed. Upon his return, he lectured to a baffled faculty about the similarities between the fruits and especially the music of the Ivory Coast and Puerto Rico!

While de León's behavior was off-putting, most faculty and staff accepted that the president of the College was not in a position to publicly "join the struggle" in opposition to the BHE. Those closest to the organization of the SHC's activities also knew that, as he had done in the campaign to obtain the 500 Building, he had in fact substantially contributed to the campaign to save the College. Shortly after the founding of the SHC, for example, he convened an outdoor convocation for the Hostos community, where he publicly endorsed the work of the SHC and specifically praised its community outreach initiative. Most importantly, he had released key members of his staff to work on SHC activities. Unfortunately, his phlegmatic, often cavalier demeanor alienated, and even enraged, many students and community residents.

Despite their enormous differences in outlook and style, the SHC and the CCSH were in fact complementary organizations. Indeed, for some time they successfully cooperated. For example, a massive demonstration on March 11, which brought eight buses filled with members of the Hostos community to City Hall, was in fact co-sponsored by the SHC and the CCSH. Inexplicably, this success became the moment of the parting of the ways between the two organizations.

Within the college fear mounted that the very broad and consistent efforts on behalf of the college were not succeeding. There simply was no sign that the BHE was reconsidering its decision to merge Hostos. The CCSH and other groups—especially the Puerto Rican Socialist Party and its youth group, the Federation of Puerto Rican University Socialist Students, which published newsletters and leaflets in their own names—began to insist that more militant tactics were necessary in order to save the College. For example, in early March the CCSH convinced hundreds of Hostos students, staff, and even faculty to carry chairs onto the Grand Concourse where traffic on this major thoroughfare was halted for over one hour.

Ultimately on March 25, the CCSH occupied the 475 Building. Shortly thereafter, the administration obtained a temporary restraining order that specifically named faculty and students who the administration claimed were participating in the takeover of the 475 Building. The CCSH barred the administration as well as the leaders of the SHC, including Edgecombe and myself, from entering the building. At a meeting held on April 2, the Professional Staff Congress agreed on the following recommendation: "The Chapter renounces the use of force in clearing the building at 149th Street." While the resolution also stated that "classes continue in session as long as there is not any interference with or harassment of the faculty," various academic departments suspended classes. The CCSH had assumed that classes would continue to be offered normally. However, while some classes were held, the operations of the college more or less rapidly shut down. The takeover of 475 had put the SHC out of business, and the vast majority of the faculty, staff, and

students—that is, the mass base of the movement to save the college—were no longer present on campus.

On April 3, the Hostos faculty met at John Jay College and by very large margins passed three resolutions presented by the Chair of the Hostos Senate, Antonio Santiago, which called for: (1) the approval of the negotiating efforts of the Executive Committee of the College Senate to resolve the “takeover”; (2) the renunciation of the use of force to remove those occupying the building while these negotiations were in process; and (3) the suspension of classes while these mediating efforts were in process. Unfortunately, almost immediately after these conciliatory resolutions were accepted, a group of students stormed the doors of the hall and pushed aside the guards in an attempt to seize the microphone. Consequently, faculty and staff sentiment turned sharply against those participating in the takeover.

During the takeover, the CCSH transformed Hostos into a type of community center. The President’s Office was converted into a child-care facility, which was quite a statement for a college that had a predominantly female student body but had not been able to provide a child-care facility. On a daily basis, CCSH activists organized activities intended to attract the maximum number of people to participate in the takeover. For example, on Friday March 26, a day-long agenda of educational activities featured: 9:00 a.m., films *Attica* and *Black Power*; 11:00 a.m., videotape of the *The Poems of Pedro Pietri Done in Scenes*; 2:00 p.m., conference on “The Crisis at CUNY”; 4:30 p.m., film *Teach the Children*; 5:30 p.m., film *The Five Puerto Rican Nationalists*; 8:00 p.m., more movies. On another evening, Roy Brown, the renowned Puerto Rican folk singer, gave a concert. Despite these creative initiatives, in the absence of classes, few students and teachers remained on campus. On the other hand, the takeover transformed Hostos into a magnet for activists from a variety of religious and political movements and organizations. Frequent visits by Seymore Posner, the State Assemblyman from the district, for example, greatly encouraged the occupiers. The drama of the takeover also led to increased media coverage about the struggle to save Hostos.

On April 4, 1976, the Board issued the long-dreaded death certificate of Hostos Community College. Over the objections of its two Puerto Rican and one African American members (Sandra López de Bird, Vinia Quiñones, Franklin Williams), it passed a resolution calling for the merger of Hostos with Bronx Community College. That Saturday, at the CUNY Graduate Center (where the locked out faculty, staff, and administration met), I presented a resolution, which was unanimously accepted. It stated “the faculty and staff of Hostos Community College condemn Chancellor Kibbee and the majority of the BHE for closing Hostos Community College as a brazen act of racism and the faculty and staff of Hostos call upon the Board to immediately reconsider the alternate plan of the minority members of the board which allows for the continuation of Hostos Community College.”

That morning, when the faculty had filed into the hall, Efraín Quintana, an important student leader, and Alexis Colón distributed a signed letter stating that the “polarization” that had developed at Hostos was the result “of a state [of mind] brought on by the threat of the closing of Hostos.” They acknowledged that both the SHC and the CCSH had “engaged in an endeavor to assure that Hostos Community College remained open as a separate unit of CUNY,” and they stated that they were “deeply disturbed to hear that many of our professors were intimidated, abused, disrespected” at the April 3 meeting in John Jay. They now sought the lifting of the injunction as “the only precondition for serious dialogue with the Administration.”

# WE ACCUSE

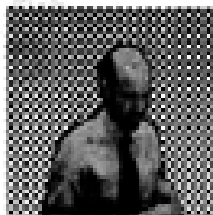
## THE MEMBERS OF THE EMERGENCY FINANCIAL CONTROL BOARD of CRIMES against the COMMUNITY



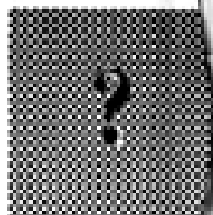
Governor Carey



Mayor Bease



City Controller Goldin



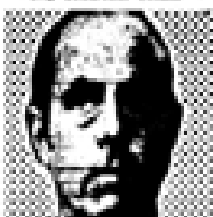
State Controller Larrick



Albert Casey - American Alliance



Felix Rohatyn - Big MAC



David L. Margolis



William Ellinghaus - N.Y. Telephone

.. These are the members of the Emergency Financial Control Board, the government agency responsible for all the cutbacks. The EFCB members, government representatives and members of big corporations, have decided to solve the city's budget deficit through massive layoffs of workers and cutbacks of essential services, such as health, education, daycare, and many others.

.. We accuse the EFCB members of crimes against the community by selling us to the banks, closing down vital community services, of which the decision to close down Hostos is an example.

Committee for the Democratic Rights of Puerto Ricans

**Save HOSTOS - Monday MAY 10 - 11 AM**  
**march from 116<sup>th</sup> & Lex to E.F.C.B. on 56<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup> ave.**  
Emergency Financial Control Board

*A 1976 flier accusing the members of the City's Emergency Financial Control Board for the proposal to close Hostos. From the personal collection of the author. Reprinted, by permission, from Gerald Meyer.*

This olive branch was not grasped by anyone on the other side. I offered a second resolution to put the body on record as favoring clemency for the participants of the takeover, which the assembled faculty shouted down. On April 13, the police broke into the 475 Building and arrested forty students, the charges against whom were later dismissed.

The bedraggled supporters of the SHC and the CCSH returned to Hostos and joined with an exhausted and diminished community to complete the semester. Despite the death warrant signed by Kibbee, however, the struggle continued. One final—and spectacular—event on behalf of Hostos took place. On April 27, a meeting called by the Committee for the Democratic Rights of Puerto Ricans, a coalition that included the CCSH, organized a massive march from the heart of El Barrio, Lexington Avenue and East 116th Street, to the headquarters of the Emergency Financial Control Board on 56th Street and the Avenue of the Americas. On Saturday, May 10th, as many as three thousand people from all over the city of New York marched over sixty blocks chanting “Save Hostos.” No other event had ever so visibly demonstrated the breath of concern for Hostos in the Latino and other communities. The takeover, despite all of its negative consequences, had forced the story of Hostos into the press, thereby creating enough publicity to bring about this unprecedented turnout for the May 10 march. In general, the takeover had created a public drama that complemented the other activities that had been mounted to save Hostos.

Starting in late April, members of the Hostos administration and faculty traveled to Albany to lobby on behalf of the College. They received a warm reception from the legislators, and especially from the members of the Black and Puerto Rican caucuses. Senator Garcia’s office served as a virtual headquarters for the Save Hostos cause. In the State Assembly, freshman Assemblyman José Serrano led the fight for the restoration of the Hostos budget to the State budget. Although Assemblyman Louis Nine had introduced a bill that specifically called for the restoration of Hostos’s budget, Hostos was saved in a less direct way. On June 11, 1976, the state legislature passed the appropriation for CUNY with, in the words of the *New York Times* article, this proviso: “the Legislature [has] veto power over closings [of CUNY units].” The article went on to say that this was “a provision that Governor Carey originally opposed, [but] gave in on as the price of legislative acceptance.” This reversal occurred because the members of the Black and Puerto Rican Caucuses had informed Gov. Carey that they would not vote for the CUNY budget unless he could guarantee the integrity of Medgar Evers College, a predominantly African-American campus situated in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, and Eugenio María de Hostos Community College. Then, on June 18, 1976, the legislature passed the Landes Higher Education Act that restored \$3 million to the University Supplemental Budget for the 1976–1977, the precise amount that Kibbee said would have been saved by closing Hostos. Subsequently, the BHE voted to rescind its resolution of April 4 that had called for the merging of Hostos and Bronx Community College. The Save Hostos movement had achieved its “impossible dream.”

Hostos was saved, but at a high price. The Nursing Department was closed (just as the new Lincoln Hospital, adjacent to Hostos, was about to open), and Hostos faculty—including many counselors as well as two professors closely associated with the CCSH, María Barbosa and Ramón Jiménez—decreased from 170 to one hundred full-time professors. de León who resigned as President, was succeeded by two Acting Presidents—first by Evangelos Gizis, an administrator who never clearly demonstrated his commitment to the college’s mission; and then by

Antonio Santiago, who appeared almost afraid of the position. The college changed in other ways. In part because of the closing of the Nursing Department, the demographics of the student body shifted—the percentage of African-American students dramatically declined. Perhaps as a consequence of the enormous amounts of publicity the Save Hostos campaign had generated in the Spanish-language media, the number of Spanish-dominant students, especially Dominicans, enrolled in Hostos increased substantially.

Despite the extraordinary victory, the Save Hostos year was conflictive, even embittering, for many of those who had participated in that campaign. So the academic year 1976–1977 served as a much needed and deserved respite. However, during this time something remarkable—and ultimately very important—occurred. The remnants of both the SHC and the CCSH began working together to secure funding for the renovation of the 500 Building. The initial efforts were on a small scale. For example, in the spring semester, a press conference was called to announce a new campaign to obtain monies for the renovation of the 500 Building, which resulted in excerpts from the statements presented by the SGO president Nilsa Sanieel and myself being published in articles in the *Daily News* and the *New York Times*. The most important thing that happened that year was the bonding of the activists from both camps of the Save Hostos movement. Although much of this was never put into words, all had arrived at a similar conclusion: the SHC had been a top-down, faculty/staff-led organization; and the CCSH a more grassroots student-led movement. Both had their own strengths and weakness and both served



*State Assemblyman José Serrano (top right) addressing a rally for the renovation of the 500 Building (1978). From the personal collection of the author. Reprinted, by permission, from Gerald Meyer.*

vital purposes; but the dynamic of the movement caused a polarization between the two organizations, which lessened the impact of that life-and-death struggle. This time, key members from both camps made sure that no breach would ever again occur among those dedicated to the cause of Hostos, and subsequently none did.

A open letter dated January 11, 1978—signed by Victor Vásquez, President of the Veterans Club, and myself, as PSC Chair—invited student clubs to send two voting representatives to create an organization dedicated to obtaining funds for the renovation of the 500 Building. The letter reminded the community that Hostos still had the worst physical conditions of any college in the CUNY system. The 500 Building standing across the street from the college, the solution to all of these problems, appeared as a daily mockery. The letter also asserted that it was becoming increasingly clear that the struggle for the 500 Building was in fact a struggle to Save Hostos. The college resembled a time bomb set to implode. Its administrative offices, library, counseling services, career programs, and science laboratories—80 percent of the College's functions—were located at 475 Grand Concourse, a building rented for \$642,208 annually, whose ten-year lease was due to expire in 1980. Members of the Hostos faculty, staff, and student body concluded that the term of the lease represented the life span of the college as calculated by the BHE.

After meeting informally throughout the fall of 1977, key members of the now defunct SHC and the CCSH, as well as other students and faculty members, including Profs. Virginia Paris and Humberto Cañate, called a public meeting to launch a campaign to obtain funding for the renovation of the 500 Building. The participants in this meeting unanimously decided on a name of the group, Hostos United / Hostos Unido (HU/HU), which encapsulated the key need—unity. HU/HU was a coalition, an organization of organizations, comprised of the PSC Chapter, the SGO, and many student clubs, including the Veterans' Club, the Christian Students' Association, the Dominican Club, the Puerto Rican Students Association, the Federation of Puerto Rican University Socialist Students, the Modern Languages Club, the Latin American Students Club, and the Black Student Union. The problems that had plagued the Save Hostos organizations did not disrupt this campaign, in part, because of the innovative structure of HU/HU. The HU/HU was governed by a steering committee, which consisted of one representative from each student club joining the HU/HU as well as four representatives from the SGO. The prospectus for the new coalition also called for the presence of one faculty or staff member for every two student members; however, the number of faculty active in the guidance of this organization was quite few. There were five subcommittees, each co-chaired by a faculty or staff member and a student. This structure remedied the top-down tendencies of the SHC and the anti-organizational tendencies of the CCSH. The inclusion of the clubs proved invaluable to the HU/HU movement because their budgets and constituents became integrated into this movement. Also, the students often felt genuine loyalty to these clubs which represented core elements of their identities as, for example, Dominican, Christian, or veteran. The SGO played no role in these events, because its president ultimately opposed the takeover of the 500 Building. The absence of the SGO caused no apparent loss to this campaign. The students voted for candidates for SGO position, but they expressed no loyalty to the SGO as an organization.

In its initial appeal to the Hostos community, the steering committee of Hostos United/Hostos Unido clearly stated its primary concern: “1) Hostos continues to have the worst facilities of any institution of higher learning in the State of New York;

and 2) Hostos' future is jeopardized by this fact." The HU/HU proposed to the college community that its members join in a common effort to create enough pressure on the city so that the sale of \$3,000,000 worth of bonds would be authorized for the renovation of the 500 Building.

Ideologically, HU/HU was closer to the SHC than the CCSH. At the same time, the campaign projected the underlying assumption that Hostos was a victim of discriminatory practices. The fundamental demand was for equality. In that sense, the campaign was, by its very nature, a movement against racism. Yet there was another, perhaps even more resonant assumption, namely, that the existence of Hostos, as a bilingual/multicultural public institution, was inherently progressive. At the same time, the HU/HU combined the conventional tactics of the SHC with the direct-action approach of the CCSH. Unlike the SHC, Hostos United was not a committee of the Hostos Senate and so was not restrained in the type of tactics it could employ.

Initially, HU/HU focused its activities on the organization of a letter-writing campaign and petitioning, the call for which came from former members of the CCSH. The letter-writing campaign, though not as massive as that mounted during the Save Hostos year, proved an important element of this struggle. Aside from the pressure that these letters placed on elected officials, they also helped inform and deepen the commitment of the students who wrote them and the teachers who assigned them. In addition, HU/HU's appeals resulted in the generation of letters to Mayor Koch on behalf of Hostos' cause by Robert Abrams, the Borough President of the Bronx; Tom Holbart, President of New York State United Teachers; Cleveland Robinson, Secretary Treasurer of District 65, Distributive Workers of America; Edward Moore, Episcopal Bishop of New York; Community Planning Board No. 1; Manuel Bustelo, Executive Director of the National Puerto Rican Forum; Irwin Polishook, President of the PSC; and Charles Rangel, Congressman. On June 1, a delegation from Hostos presented to John Zuccotti at City Hall petitions with five thousand signatures whose text read: "We demand equal treatment; We demand an equal right to education; We demand that the 500 Grand Concourse Building be opened immediately for the use of Hostos Community College."

Hostos United/Hostos Unido would have been more than satisfied if these conventional political techniques had been efficacious, but from the beginning the steering committee assumed that a takeover of the 500 Building on behalf of the College was inevitable. In that sense, the employment of more conventional tactics, while being viewed as having value in themselves, were also seen as a means of legitimizing the takeover of the building. After all, if the conventional tactics did not result in a commitment by the State and City governments to appropriate the funds for the renovation of the 500, then an escalation of tactics was justified.

A massive assembly was called for March 2, which served to inform and build up the spirits of the hundreds who attended. This event was followed on March 9 by a one-thousand-person-strong march through the community which first stopped traffic at the Hub (East 149th Street and Third Avenue) and then stopped traffic on the Grand Concourse. For the next two hours, a rally was conducted in the Grand Concourse, at which student and faculty leaders and, most importantly, Assemblyman José Serrano spoke. The message from this event, which was covered by the *New York Times* and *El Diario*, was clear—a united movement with support from the community and its leaders was determined to have the doors of the 500 Building opened for the use by the Hostos community. A palpable sense of excitement and anticipation pervaded the campus after the rally. This action also

demonstrated that the students, and some faculty and staff, were willing to commit civil disobedience thereby risking arrest.

Within the movement, there was much pressure, especially from the leaders of the Dominican Club, to takeover the 500 Building either during the rally of March 9 or soon after. The steering committee, which had experienced the Save Hostos year, vetoed this demand. We were especially concerned that, because inadvertently the evening students had been excluded from the movement, the base for the movement was still too narrow to carry out what was in fact an illegal tactic and sustain a protracted occupation of the 500 Building. Consequently, a third and final major event was organized prior to the takeover of the 500. The HU/HU organized a vigil, held on March 16th from 6:00 to 10:00 PM, in front of the 500 Building.

The HU/HU leaflet promoting the vigil reminded the Hostos supporters: “Again the school faces a fight for survival. If we do not obtain the 500 Building our college will suffer a slow and tortuous death.” It also asked members of the Hostos community to join the vigil in order to “support our campaign against discrimination.” The vigil was one of the most effective and memorable of the events sponsored by HU/HU. Traffic backed up on the Concourse as cars slowed down to witness this emotionally moving manifestation. A light snow began to fall and candles had been distributed to the participants, so a touch of beauty and drama was added to the event. This truly spiritual event helped steel the movement for what was to come. The HU/HU responded to the mounting pressure to immediately take the building by issuing a flyer that explained: “This is a vigil and not a demonstration to seize the building.... To take and keep the building requires a massive and unified movement of students, faculty, and community people. It requires the understanding from all of what has to be done and the commitment by all to participate in achieving our goal. Otherwise, we will not win. Through unity there is strength; through strength there is victory.”

Finally on Thursday March 30, HU/HU called for an assembly to decide the question of whether its supporters should “takeover” the 500 Building. While this meeting was proceeding, a group of students (who were mainly from the Veterans’ Club) had surreptitiously entered the 500 Building. I then announced to the assembly that students had begun the occupation of the 500, and exhorted those present to join those students already inside the 500. Most of those present immediately moved across the street to join those already inside of the 500. At once, student leaders (including Norma Villanueva) visited every classroom and encouraged the teachers and students to attend an assembly in the 500 Building. After a nearly four-year struggle, Hostos students and teachers were actually inside of the 500 Building. I am unable to put into words the excitement of this action. For the participants, it somehow combined the emotions that might be felt by the group that first entered King Tutankhamen’s tomb with those of the first group that reached the summit of Mount Everest.

After the assembly concluded, the steering committee had to decide—what next? The basic concept that developed at this meeting was embodied in a slogan that would influence the entire campaign—“Use It or Lose It!” Students also volunteered to take turns sleeping in the building.

On Friday, the day following the takeover, HU/HU’s leadership was informed that the administration was negotiating with the Police Department to evict those occupying the 500. We then took a number of steps to combat this threat. Students formed a facilities committee, which began systematically to clean the building.

Students affixed a huge banner to the fence surrounding the 500 Building which read, in English and Spanish: “With Valor and Sacrifice, We Will Defend This Building.” The slogan echoed Pedro Albizu Campos’ affirmation: “With valor and sacrifice, we will free the motherland.” Students organized a picket line outside the building; and then they called for Ramón Jiménez, now an activist-lawyer practicing in the community, who quickly arrived. On Saturday evening, the elated but somewhat overwhelmed occupiers were confronted by the Dean of Students, who read them a court injunction charging them with criminal trespass and liability for \$10,000 in damages to the building, and specifically damage to the boiler. Forty-one students, including Ponce Laspina, Roberto Lugo, Rene Hopelman, and Antonio Martínez, as well as Prof. Judy Nowinski, and myself, decided to face these charges rather than retreat from the building. However, when the police arrived, they saw students busy sweeping the floors and scrubbing the tiles on the walls of the cafeteria. The students escorted the police around the entire building, where they observed that, contrary to the writ issued at the behest of the administration, there was neither damage to the building nor to its boiler. Then, the police left. Later, a member of President Santiago’s staff, who was sympathetic to HU/HU, told me that when the police officers returned from their inspection of the 500, he overheard them tell the Acting President, Antonio Santiago: “Look, this is the South Bronx, and we are not going to arrest them. If you can find some way to arrest them, go right ahead.” For the rest of the semester, a police car was parked outside the 500 Building. Many of the takeover’s supporters made it a point to say “good morning” or “good afternoon” to the officers sitting inside the patrol car.

Students with experience working in restaurants made the appliances in the cafeteria in the 500 Building functional, so that every evening the thirty- to forty-member core of HU/HU ate dinner together. The cook was a student, Anna Monegro, a woman with a large family of her own, who expressed her love for people by her every word and deed. The money to pay for the excellent food came from the student club budgets. A child-care facility was organized; so Hostos’ students who had preschool-age children could attend class without worrying about their children’s care.

The steering committee knew that the key question—would faculty in any significant numbers teach in the 500?—would have to wait until Monday. When Monday came, the answer was “yes.” By April 12, sixty classes, totaling 1,500 students, were held in the 500 Building. In fact, one class had to be turned away for lack of space.

The willingness of faculty to carry out their work in a building that had been illegally occupied was due to a number of circumstances. High on the list was the extraordinary dedication of Ron Mendel, a Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) worker assigned to the Social Science Unit. Ron, who was a member of the steering committee representing the CETA workers, became the unofficial Registrar of the 500. He undertook the task of assigning and monitoring locations in the building for classes. In this way, HU/HU could guarantee that teachers wanting to teach in the 500 would have acceptable facilities. For the Social and Behavioral Science, Modern Languages, and the Math Department faculty teaching in the 500 meant leaving the “Siberia” of the Our Lady of Pity school and convent to rejoin the campus. Indeed, the chalk boards and chairs utilized in the 500 that had been “liberated” from this facility made teaching in the 500 possible and teaching in Our Lady of Pity impossible. Furthermore, resolutions were passed by the Hostos PSC Chapter and the SGO endorsing the occupation of the 500 Building.

Two departments—Modern Languages and Social Science—also passed resolutions endorsing their faculty’s teaching in the 500. Hostos’ delegates to the CUNY Faculty Senate (Profs. Nowinski and Roman) introduced a resolution before that body that was unanimously passed. It resolved: “The CUNY University Faculty Senate fully supports the Hostos efforts to obtain the funds to renovate the facility at 500 Grand Concourse.” (Curiously, the Hostos Senate adamantly refused to engage in this movement.)

The takeover of the 500 Building contrasted greatly with the takeover of the 475 building during the Save Hostos year. The takeover of the 500 Building was a takeover of a vacant building; hence, no one was displaced or inconvenienced. In fact, the takeover of the 500 afforded more comfortable facilities than those they replaced at Our Lady of Pity. This was critical for this campaign, because classes continued to be taught so that many hundreds of students and teachers were directly involved with ongoing activities. It also meant that there was an available constituency for marches and other political manifestations in support of the campaign.

The slogan that inspired this movement was “Hostos United Can Never Be Defeated” / “Hostos Unido Jamás Será Vencido.” The facts seemed to substantiate these words. Not only was the 500 occupation continuing against a court injunction, the faculty and students defied a demand by the Acting President to vacate the building. On April 10, the faculty received a memo which, in part, threatened: “Failure by faculty to meet their classes as previously approved and scheduled is in open violation of the duties of the members of the instructional staff. In addition, failure to meet assigned classes clearly jeopardizes the students’ ability to receive course credit.” Prof. Juan Rivera, of the Modern Languages Department, responded to Santiago’s memo by pointing out that “the opinion of an administrator does not have legal validity as it pertains to violations of a contract.... Therefore, we have to conclude that President Santiago’s memo is simply informative.” Despite this threat to the faculty’s livelihood and the students’ academic standing, not one participant retreated.



*The takeover of the 500 Building (1978).  
From the personal collection of the author. Reprinted, by permission, from Gerald Meyer.*

The takeover of the 500 Building attracted significant media attention. Channel 5 carried an in-depth report of the Hostos situation, and WPIX ran an editorial in favor of Hostos obtaining the 500 Building. Radio stations (WLIB, WINS, WCBS, WBAI, and WBLS) broadcast programs sympathetic to the Hostos story. *El Diario* and smaller community newspapers frequently published articles about this campaign.

After much heated discussion, a majority of the HU/HU steering committee voted to invite Deputy Mayor Herman Badillo, who some of the activists viewed as “a sell-out,” to visit the 500. Badillo’s appearance at the 500 Building on April 26 proved priceless. In the presence of the media, Badillo unequivocally endorsed the Hostos United/Hostos Unido movement, which tendered a measure of legitimacy to an insurgent movement that was running out of energy.

The invitation to Badillo to visit the 500 on April 26 had been timed to maximize attendance at the largest demonstration organized during the takeover. This was a march that started in the heart of El Barrio, went to the BHE on East 80th Street, and then concluded at Gracie Mansion, on East 86th Street and York Avenue. A flyer blared: “Hostos is once again in a fight for its survival; Hostos is a College that refuses to die; Hostos is a symbol of victory and struggle, not defeat. Join Us!” Eight buses left Hostos for the start-off point, where they were met by others who had traveled there by subway. This demonstration was planned so that students who attended classes in the evening could, in lieu of attending these classes, go directly to Gracie Mansion. As many as six hundred Hostos members participated in this demonstration, which was covered by WCBS and WBAI. Also as a consequence of this event, Murray Kempton, the renowned Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for the *New York Post*, wrote a moving and insightful appraisal of Hostos’ struggle. Kempton wrote: “What Hostos seeks is a treaty of recognition of rights so long forgotten that their very demand is a surprise, almost an affront. There is the condescension on our side and the same desperate protest on theirs.” Aside from Badillo, Hostos United/Hostos Unido also garnered expressions of support from Councilman Gilberto Gerena-Valentín, Father John Luce of St. Ann’s Church, Councilman Wendell Foster, as well a number of community organizations, including Aspira, the South Bronx Community Corporation, United Bronx Parents, and Raza Unida.

The final political act of HU/HU was the organization of a hunger strike at City Hall by some of the most ardent supporters of the 500 cause, which included Antonio Martínez and Victor Vásquez. Unfortunately, the distance between City Hall and Hostos—spatially and politically—could not be bridged. Some supporters from Hostos visited the encampment to express solidarity with the hunger strikers (Judy Nowinski could not resist slipping them food which the hunger strikers could not resist nibbling on), but the press never reported on the hunger strike and after a few days it ended.

The movement to obtain funds for the renovation of the 500 was not, however, entirely free of conflict. Simultaneously with the hunger strike, a small group of students, on May 8, took over the 475 Building. The takeover, which was not supported by HU/HU, proved short lived, because the following day six students were arrested and the building was returned to normal use.

The growing tension between the supporters of Hostos United and many of the faculty, and to a lesser degree, students in the 475 Building, perhaps best explains this takeover. While the takeover of the 500 proceeded from day to day, and then week to week, and then month to month, with all its inconveniences and discomforts, life went on as normal in the 475 Building. It was understandable that Allied Health and science classes that used laboratories could not be taught in the 500, but it was

difficult to comprehend why faculty and students from the 475 Building across the street (or for that matter the Visual and Performing Arts faculty, which continued to use the facilities at Our Lady of Piety) rarely ventured into the 500 or in some other way demonstrated their support for a movement, which at its essence was about saving the College for everyone. It was also clear that, to a very noticeable extent, the participants in the march and other activities were students who took classes in the 500 Building. After I questioned the disengagement of that part of the Hostos faculty from the campaign in an article published in the Hostos PSC Newsletter, Prof. Anita Cunningham, who chaired the Dental Hygiene Department, visited the 500 and sent a memo to the faculty which, in part, read: “[In the 500 Building,] I observed a group of dedicated faculty and students carrying out the takeover. I observed classes being taught, and apparent genuine concern on the part of the participants in their quest for the acquisition of 500 Grand Concourse. In order to get [the space Hostos needs] several tactics must be utilized. Letter writing and petitions are important. Telegrams can be sent to Mayor Koch. . . . Please select the method best for you to save Hostos.”

The final energies of the HU/HU movement involved lobbying to ensure that bonds would in fact be placed on sale for a renovation of the 500 Building. Members of the Steering Committee met with Kibbee and testified before a special meeting of the BHE held on May 29th. Ron Mandel also testified on May 17th at a public hearing of the Board of Estimate. Remarkably, not one member of the Administration appeared at these forums to present Hostos’ case. Nor had any of them found a way to advocate for the college while the HU/HU was struggling for the 500.

Hostos United/Hostos Unido’s members and supporters could, however, experienced a tremendous sense of satisfaction brought about by the success of their efforts. First, the Bankers Trust Company agreed to buy \$4 million in bonds for the renovation; then on July 15, 1978 a *New York Times* headline announced “Koch Is to Approve Hostos Renovation.” The renovation of the 500 Building began the following year. Hostos had its first Hostos-owned facility. Once again Hostos was saved by a mass movement.

The commitment by the State Dormitory Authority and the City of New York to renovate the 500 Building led to the next logical step, the purchase of 475 Grand Concourse for use by Hostos. It also directly resulted in the appointment of Flora Mancuso Edwards as President of the College, who in a short time founded the Hostos Culture and Arts Center, re-established the Nursing Department, and in numerous ways tied Hostos to the community. The BHE’s now evidenced its commitment to Hostos survival. Hostos was saved!

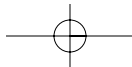
While the movement to save Hostos had succeeded, many longed for a return to “normalcy.” Nonetheless, for decades after the conclusion of the Save Hostos movement—which represented one of the most prolonged, persistent protest movements in New York City during the 1970s—it reverberated in the lives of participants and the college itself. Many of the student leaders prospered by becoming, among other things, an owner of Medicare/Medicaid centers, a real estate broker, an Assistant Dean of Students in a prestigious college, a chair of a coop board. During these campaigns, the students were the prime movers who learned a series of highly transferable skills and had life-expanding experiences. The faculty who were most active in these movements bonded and continued to work on political projects within the college.

The culture of Hostos was politicized by the Save Hostos movement. The effect of the Save Hostos movement to some extent transferred to the PSC Chapter,

which continued to play a much larger role at Hostos than other CUNY campuses. Starting in 1980, I helped organize the Anti-Reagan Coalition, which in addition to sponsoring large assemblies, registered approximately five hundred members of the Hostos community and their family and friends. From the spring of 1986 until the fall of 1990, Prof. Joyce Dunston and I co-chaired the Hostos Solidarity Coalition / Coalición en Solidaridad con Hostos (HSC/CSH), which joined Bri McAlevy, a new member of the Hostos staff, with the veterans of the Save Hostos movement, in an validly left organization that maintained a constant presence at the college. The HSC/CSH united faculty, staff, and some students in an ongoing series of activities that ranged from assemblies with three hundred attendees to discussions with twenty participants. The HSC/CSH's activities focused on providing support for the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, fighting United States support for apartheid in South Africa, and combating the English Only movement. Especially because the HSC/CSH regularly issued a newsletter (which was edited by a student, Jonas de León), it impacted on the general atmosphere of the college.

The university-wide campaigns in opposition to tuition increases always found Hostos in the vanguard—fighting harder and longer and contributing proportionally the largest contingents to the citywide demonstrations. When the SGO took over the campus in 1991, as part of a university-wide movement in opposition to increasing tuition, the College administration, in tandem with the Executive Committee of the Senate, while not approving of the takeover, focused on preventing the police from carrying out a mass arrest of the student activists. For the nineteen-day duration of the student strike, faculty stayed with students the entire time, including overnight, to ensure that no damage occurred to the buildings. The most emblematic event in this entire movement took place on the last day of the student strike, when perhaps fifty members of the New York City Tactical Police Force marched down the Grand Concourse, with acrylic visors over their faces and batons across their chests. When they arrived in front of the 500 Building where the students had assembled, faculty and staff—Nydia Edgecombe, Dean Eugenio Barrios, Profs. Loreto Porte, Humberto Cañate, myself, and others—linked hands in a human chain so that the police and the students were separated. In order to clear the students from the street in front of the 500 Building and in the process inevitably to arrest many, the police would have had to first arrest faculty and students. Instead, the police, with their shields, batons, and guns at their side, retreated back up the Grand Concourse. After a complete amnesty was declared, the students agreed to end the strike. Left almost unnoticed in this turmoil was the fact that Gov. Mario Cuomo, in response to the student movement in the State University system and CUNY, rescinded his proposed tuition increase.

It has been difficult for Hostos Community College to memorialize the very events that gave birth to the institution and allowed it to survive. To acknowledge the truth of its birth and survival would challenge the power relations embedded in what is after all a bureaucracy. Nonetheless, the recovering of this history is enormously salutary because it contradicts powerful currents aimed at conventionalizing Hostos Community College. The standardization and homogenization of Hostos, which to many seems so sensible, in fact, exposes the college to grave peril. The history of the Save Hostos movement communicates a warning that a future fiscal crisis can cause the powers that be to question again Hostos' existence. When that day arrives, the willingness of students, staff, faculty, and community residents to come forward to battle for the college's existence and the ability of these forces to obtain a fair hearing from the wider public will depend on whether Hostos has continued to be a very special place,



doing very special work, very well. For many, the college can only truly fulfill its mission when, at least in the Associate of Arts and Associate of Science degree programs, it achieves full bilinguality, that is, when English-dominant students have the option of learning Spanish equal to the Spanish-dominant students learning English. A truly bilingual Hostos Community College—a goal that is fully justified by the increasing Latino presence in New York City and the increasing demand for bilingual professionals in all areas—will attract enormous attention and support to the institution.

The history of the Save Hostos movement surely has import and relevance beyond the walls of the college. There have been innumerable studies of the larger movements associated with the sixties (which continued into the seventies), but relatively few local studies. Nonetheless, it is on this level that the gains for specific individuals and communities can be assessed. The Save Hostos movement reveals the enormous power lying dormant in ostensibly nonpolitical structures. Somehow, the simple act of coalescing the various and sundry already existing organizations politicizes them by allowing them to redefine their goals in ways that lead to actions leading to a redistribution of power and resources. The strength of the Save Hostos movement came in large part from its deep roots in the political experience and culture of its participants. The Civil Rights and Anti-Vietnam War movements had proven that a determined political movement, utilizing a range of tactics, could win historic victories against powerful opponents. The frequent demonstrations and the willingness to risk arrest by those who participated in the Save Hostos movement sprung from an awareness of—and in some cases, the participation in—these mass movement. (Indeed, it seemed at times that the Save Hostos movement represented the last gasp of the sixties in the entire United States.) This movement also drew inspiration from political experiences closer to home. The focus on the “takeover” as a tactic, for example, harkened back to December 1969 when the Young Lords carried out their single most publicized action, that is, the takeover of the United Methodist Church in El Barrio. The utilization of Lexington Avenue and East 116th Street as the starting off place for demonstrations connected the movement to the historic Puerto Rican community. The Hostos movement also had roots in the political movements in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. When the phrase *con valor y sacrificio* was appended to a slogan, the participants in the movement knew that these were Pedro Albizu Campos’ words; and when they shouted *el pueblo unido, jamás será vencido*, they knew that this was the slogan of the tragically defeated Popular Front government in Chile. Slogans that originated in the Dominican Republic were modified for use in the Save Hostos movement. These included: *en la lucha de Hostos, nadie descansa* and *ni con bombas, ni con balas, esta lucha no se para*. Puerto Rican *plenas* were also adapted, the favorite of which said: *mírala que linda viene, mírala que linda va, la revolución de Hostos, que no da ni un paso atrás*. These slogans and songs helped build solidarity in the ranks of the movement. The Save Hostos movement, then, was more than a series of coordinated activities; it had a distinct culture which helped bond its members. At the very minimum, the Save Hostos movement demonstrates how very much ordinary people can achieve for themselves, their families, and communities when they find ways to unite in a struggle for the common benefit.

