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Why Innovation Matters

Although healthcare reform has been President Obama’s top priority, it was hardly surprising that he devoted a portion of his recent State of the Union address to education in America. “The idea is simple,” he said. “Instead of funding the status quo, we only invest in reform—that raises student achievement; inspires students to excel in math and science; and turns around failing schools.”

But meaningful reform, the President might have added, can only come through innovation—and that applies at every stage of the educational process. “In this economy, a high school diploma no longer guarantees a good job,” he said. “That’s why I urge the Senate to follow the House and pass a bill that will revitalize our community colleges, which are a pathway to the children of so many working families.”

At BMCC, we’ve long viewed innovation as a precondition of educational excellence. In my state of the college remarks this year, I noted that we are continually looking for ways to expand our curricular offerings—to make them more responsive to our students’ needs and aspirations and to prepare them for the challenges they will face in a rapidly evolving marketplace.

Thus, each year brings new course offerings and imaginative new curricular programs. At the same time, we are determined to set the pace for the nation’s community colleges in developing and implementing new models of teaching and research and in our use of cutting-edge instructional technology.

Innovation, said Apple computer visionary Steve Jobs, “is what distinguishes between a leader and a follower.” In the education arena, innovation also distinguishes between progress and stagnation—and between success and failure. Nowhere is that more true than in our nation’s community colleges. It’s a truth that BMCC lives every day, in and out of the classroom.
Swimming to America

Until he was 12, Haftom Ambaye had never even seen a swimming pool. Born in 1986 in a refugee camp in Sudan—where his family had relocated while civil war ravaged their home province of Humera, Ethiopia—he eventually moved to New York to live with his father, who was pursuing a Masters degree in Math.

Flying unaccompanied, the 10-year-old landed in New York in August 1997, and started sixth grade in Washington Heights the next day. “I spoke virtually no English,” he says. “Even so, it was fun.”

Ambaye’s language skills soared, and so did his dancing skills, leading to a scholarship at the Alvin Alley American Dance School summer camp. Today, he’s enrolled at BMCC, and establishing records in the men’s backstroke and individual medley, on the BMCC swim team.

BMCC Student Wins Grand Prize in CUNY-wide Nobel Science Challenge

BMCC science major Kimberly Thompson won first place in the economics category of the 2009 CUNY Nobel Science Challenge—as well as $5,000 as an overall Grand Prizewinner.

Thompson—the contest’s only awardee from a CUNY community college—wrote her award-winning essay on the Nobel-prizewinning work of Elinor Ostrom, who proposed eight basic tenets relating to sustainable common-pool (shared) resources, or CPRs.

“A key component to Ostrom’s work,” writes Thompson, “is an interdisciplinary approach; her research and publications on CPRs draw from conservation biology, ecology, psychology, and economics, among others.”

Altogether, 12 CUNY undergraduates—out of 101 applicants—received awards for their essays based on 2009 Nobel prize-winning work in chemistry, physiology and medicine, physics, and economics.

First, second and third prizes in each category included an Apple iMac Computer, a Dell Mini 10 Netbook, and an Amazon Kindle.

Kimberly Thompson was announced as the surprise Grand Prizewinner at the end of the ceremony, elation alternating with stunned disbelief as she posed holding the giant, sweepstakes-style CUNY check made out for $5,000.

“I plan to put it toward school,” she said.

Gala on the Hudson

BMCC’s 22nd Annual Scholarship Gala, held at The Lighthouse at Chelsea Piers on Manhattan’s West Side, raised over $435,000 in funds supporting the BMCC Scholarship program.

Honorees were Robert J. Mueller, Retired Senior Officer, The Bank of New York Mellon, and Jessica Schell, Senior Vice President for Digital Strategy and Business Development at NBC Universal. Master of Ceremonies and CBS correspondent Jim Axelrod introduced the speakers, including BMCC President Antonio Pérez. “BMCC’s mission is to make higher education accessible to all with the ambition to attain it,” he said. “Most BMCC students are the first in their families to attend college. Our mission to provide a step-up to these students is critical, because jobs requiring associate degrees are growing twice as fast as those requiring no college experience.”

The event brought together over 330 attendees, and featured a reception, silent auction and dinner.

Robert J. Mueller

Jessica Schell

Jim Axelrod
Born in the U.S. but raised in Haiti, Stephen Faustin graduated from BMCC with a degree in engineering science, and is now taking additional courses at his alma mater. He returns to Haiti every year to visit family and people he grew up with, and on a recent visit, the afternoon of Tuesday, January 12, he drove to meet a friend—and headed right into the earthquake’s destruction.

“With my car, I could see streets swaying and buckling,” Faustin says. “Buildings had collapsed and there was so much dust it was hard to see. People were walking in the streets, bleeding and dazed.”

Faustin turned the car around, headed to his family’s home in the Bourdon section of Port-au-Prince, a few kilometers from the quake’s epicenter, and found the structure intact—but the building next door was gone.

“My two sisters who lived in Haiti, my cousins and goddaughters, had all gotten out and were safe,” he says. But two people were unaccounted for—his father, and Mami, who had cared for him as a child. “She was like a mother to me,” he says.

Faustin formed a rescue party, frantically calling Mami’s name into the rubble. “We could hear people who were trapped crying for help,” he says. And finally, they heard Mami calling “Stephen, Stephen,” in a weak voice.

Faustin and his friends continued digging and extricated more people, including a woman who died the next day. After nearly two weeks, he and his aunt boarded a flight back to New York—but sadly, his aunt, stricken by the ordeal, died just a few days later.

“The hardships faced by the Haitians now are beyond imagining,” he says. “I feel it’s important that Americans continue to help the country through donations.”

Back in New York, Faustin is trying to resume normal life. “I still jump when I hear a subway rumble, and sometimes wake up in the middle of the night,” he says. The sounds and images from his 2010 Haiti visit will be with him always, he says. “But so will the memories of a happy childhood in a beautiful country.”

http://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/news/news.jsp?id=2339
BCC men’s basketball coach Dan Nigro is instructing sophomore Justin Daniels, a 6’7” forward, on the finer points of free throws, lay-ups and jump shots.

“Keep your eye on the rim and your shoulders straight—and make sure to follow through,” he calls from the sidelines. “That way you get the ball to rotate and spin into the basket.”

Nigro assumed the helm of the Panthers in Fall 2009, after successful stints with a number of other college teams—including Division 1 squads—as well as coaching at the high school level.

“What drew me here,” said Nigro, “was BMCC’s commitment to team sports, as well as the great resources. The facilities are among the best in all of CUNY.”

“Our main goal for the season was to stay competitive,” he says. The Panthers made the CUNY finals, and Nigro continues expecting the best. “We’d love to get into the regionals, which are statewide, and ultimately, the nationals.”

That won’t all happen overnight, he acknowledges. In contrast to 4-year colleges, the Panthers roster changes continually, “since our players stay for only two years at most.” Among this season’s standouts are Janel Cobb and Tony Vails, who have repeatedly garnered CUNY “Player of the Week” awards and are ranked among the nation’s top college scorers and rebounders.

For now, says Nigro, skill development—both on and off the basketball court—is a higher priority than trying to win championships.

“We use basketball as a vehicle for teaching life skills,” he says. “Playing on this team is about being on time, showing respect to others, paying attention to details. If the players can conduct themselves this way on a day-to-day basis, both academically and athletically, it will stand them in good stead in the future.”

Adds freshman guard Justin Daniels, “I love basketball. But I’m learning a lot more than how to play the game. I’m learning about responsibility and how to function independently.”

Nigro holds practices six days a week, “and the players are expected to arrive punctually, just as their professors expect them to show up on time for class—or an employer would expect them to show up on time for a job,” he notes. “We stay in close touch with their instructors, and require them to take part in tutoring programs.”

What it all comes down to, he adds, is that team members must meet basic academic standards in order to keep playing. “In a sense, they’re under a microscope much more than other students.”

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http://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/news/news.jsp?id=2200

Players of the Year
Eyandra Molina, a 5’6” guard from the Bronx, was selected CUNYAC Player of the Year, scoring 426 points and averaging 23.7 points per game, the second highest effort in all of the National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA). Tony Vails, a 6’2” guard from Brooklyn, scoring 427 points and averaging 22.5 points per game this season, was selected CUNYAC Player of the Week five times this season.

http://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/news/news.jsp?id=2336
Sexton notes that in the time he’s taught science fiction at BMCC, “students really latch on to it, to think about ‘what if?’”

In “Mad Moon,” future and past worlds meet in two characters, ‘Grant’ and ‘Lee’, and Sexton points out parallels with the Civil War. “That could be supported,” says a student, “because they have a North Pole and a South Pole in the story. There are two opposite, opposing factions.”

“And in the end,” says another, “Grant and Lee get married. It’s like the country coming together after the war.”

The class also debates whether a character’s reality is an hallucination, noting that opiate plants grew on the planet. Others mention the subjugation of aliens harvesting the addictive ‘ferel’ leaves, and Sexton brings up the concept of colonization, which triggers a student’s observation that “Grant has a fire gun that annihilates the whole culture, and we’re exploiting other cultures for their inflatable crops today.”

In the students’ analysis, past, present and future overlap. “I never saw the stuff I read in science fiction as not being able to happen,” Sexton says. “I just saw it as not happening now.”

Some would argue that science fiction has to have science in it, that it makes an attempt to explain the unexplainable,” says Professor Danny Sexton, who teaches Introduction to Science Fiction. “My definition is a bit broader, because I think good science fiction comments on the past, and the present, and anticipates the future.”


A contemporary lens

Every alien seems the same,” asserts one student. “There’s no possible justification to envision a society, an entire species, as all just one culture.”

They’ve just read the 1949 Stanley Weinbaum short story, “Mad Moon,” and reviews are mixed. “It’s like how we look at immigrants,” another student adds, “as being all the same.”

“Look at the word ‘alien’,” says Sexton. “Think of the term ‘alienation’—where you feel separated and isolated from other people.”

Student: Emmanuel Mendoza

Music Man

A student leaves BMCC and returns—with a clearer sense of who he is.

“I started teaching myself to play electric bass when I was five,” says Emmanuel Mendoza. “Later, I’d run home from school and listen to records over and over—rock, reggae, jazz, funk, Latin.”

By age 18, Mendoza was playing gigs in local bands—but when he enrolled in BMCC in 2006, he opted to major in business and confine his musical activities to evenings and weekends—which didn’t happen.

“Working all day, then rehearsing and playing gigs at night was just too hard,” he says. Eventually, he left BMCC—but now he’s back, this time as a Liberal Arts major with a much clearer sense of who he is and where he’s going.

“I’m taking courses in theory and global music,” he says. “Once I graduate. I’d like to audition for a jazz program, like the ones at The New School or Julliard. I really want to get a degree in music and make music my career.”

He’s well on his way. Two years ago, he joined Judah Tribe, a well-regarded Reggae band that has performed at Brooklyn Academy of Music, and Jazz at Lincoln Center — and recently gave a benefit concert for Haitian earthquake relief.

“I’m thrilled to be back at BMCC and working toward my dream,” says Mendoza. “Music has enriched my life. It’s really the only thing I want to do.”

http://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/news/news.jsp?id=2396
MCC alum Mohamed Hoque—a Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) Civil Engineer who ensures the structural integrity of one of the world’s most extensive public transportation systems—started his life walking dirt roads, with his father.

“I come from a village named Katakhali,” says Hoque, “in the southern district of Barisal, in Bangladesh. When I grew up, it was pure rural with no electricity, no paved roads, very few bridges or brick houses. I remember, during the rainy season, I used to travel on muddy and slippery roads for about three hours with my father to reach the nearest town.”

Eventually, Hoque moved to Ohio, took ESL courses, then moved to New York, enrolling at BMCC. “I was not certain how far I could make it,” he says, “At BMCC, working with a very cooperative faculty and staff lifted my spirits up.”

After graduating from BMCC in 1994 with an Associate degree in Engineering Science, Hoque transferred to Polytechnic University, earning a Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering, and a Master of Science in Transportation Planning and Engineering.

Today, Hoque is a Civil Engineer III with the MTA’s Civil/Structural Core Group. “Mostly, we explore subsurface soil and rock conditions,” he says, “to see if it can support the building structures.”

For the last eight years, he has also taught General Physics at BMCC, a subject that “enlightens students about the things around us: the light, the magnets, the various machinery and equipment, the loads, forces, speed, velocity—even the pitch and sound.”

Teaching future engineers is Hoque’s way of giving back to the school where he got his start. “I don’t just teach them, I like to see them grow,” he says, “and fully realize their potential. I am there for them at every level, whether they need a reference—or any kind of assistance I can provide.”

When Sonia Gill was growing up in Guyana, she imagined becoming a teacher. Later, she considered economics, and her strengths came to light during admissions testing at BMCC. “I had done really well on a math exam,” she says, “and my advisor suggested I go for accounting.”

After earning an Associate in Accounting degree from BMCC, and a Bachelor in Accounting from Baruch College, Gill, a licensed CPA, began her career at a Big Four accounting firm, and now works in investment banking.

“There are always new accounting rules to interpret,” she says. “It’s a profession that evolves over time.”

On weekends, she teaches accounting at BMCC, sharing professional insights with students. Will the field provide careers, as they envision? “I think accounting is an excellent profession,” says Gill. “There are still positions, more so at the junior level. It’s a cycle, and it’s turning around.”
Does Mauby Really Work?

Testing a folk remedy from Trinidad—and winning first prize in the process.

In the Caribbean nation of Trinidad and Tobago, people with high blood pressure seek relief by eating a native plant called “mauby.” “Folk remedies are popular there,” says Trinidad-born Kwame Amin, who graduated from BMCC with an Associate in Science degree. Supervised by BMCC Science Professor Brahmaddeo Dewprashad, Amin tested the folk remedy’s medical validity, and confirmed a study claiming hypertensive patients benefit from the plant’s chemical compounds. Testing mauby’s effects on blackworms, Amin noticed “a distinct lowering of their pulse rate.” Eventually, those findings earned him a first-place showing—competing against students from an array of 4-year and Ivy League schools—in the chemical sciences division of the prestigious Annual Biomedical Research Conference for Minority Students. Professor Dewprashad holds us to extremely high standards,” says Amin. “We wound up beating out some very tough competition.”

http://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/news/news.jsp?id=2060

CommonsCalendar
Events, exhibits, performances for the coming months.

Jazz Special Event
- Uhuru Afrika: 50th Anniversary Concert Celebration with Randy Weston & His Orchestra. Weston’s tribute to African countries liberated in 1960 features lyrics by Langston Hughes. Nov. 13 @ 8 pm, $45 orchestra, $35 mezzanine, $25 upper mezzanine. Students: $10 off mezzanine prices.

Tribeacon Dance
- Iñaki Urlezaga: Ballet Concierto. Led by founder and choreographer Iñaki Urlezaga, Ballet Concierto fuses Argentinean and classical dance. Program A: Gala Vivat Argentina, Oct. 15 @ 8 p.m. and Oct. 17 @ 3 p.m. Program B: Classical program, Oct. 16 @ 3 p.m. and 8 p.m. $35, $45, $55 and $65.

Family Series
- Steve Songs. Steve Roslonek appears on PBS Kids as the lovable music teacher, Mr. Steve and has been performing for families for over a decade. Oct. 23 @ 1:30 p.m., $25; 10 Club Members $14.
- Harold and the Purple Crayon. Life-size puppets, magic and music enliven this Enchantment Theatre Company production based on Crockett Johnson’s stories of an adventurous boy. Nov. 20 @ 1:30 p.m., $25; 10 Club Members $14.
- Junie B. Jones. This funny, fast-paced musical about new friends, new glasses and other first-grade situations, is based on Barbara Park’s stories and presented by BMCC Tribeca PAC & Theatreworks USA. Dec. 12 @ 3 p.m., $25; 10 Club Members $14.
- Likeness to Lily. This Brooklyn band features singer-songwriter Susan Oetgen, pianist Tony Melone, bass player Ian M. Rigg and drummer Evan Pazner. Nov. 12 @ 8 p.m., $15.

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Tribeacon Spotlight
- Likeness to Lily. This Brooklyn band features singer-songwriter Susan Oetgen, pianist Tony Melone, bass player Ian M. Rigg and drummer Evan Pazner. Nov. 12 @ 8 p.m., $15.
- Rana Santacruz. Called “Mexican Bluegrass” or “Irish Mariachi,” Santacruz’s music travels from Ireland, to Appalachia, New Orleans, and Mexico Dec. 17 @ 8 p.m., $15.