



**Testimony of**  
**University Dean for Student Success Initiatives and ASAP Executive Director**  
**Donna Linderman**  
**The City University of New York**

**New York City Council Higher Education Committee**  
**Hearing on CUNY Start**  
**April 20, 2017**

Good morning, Chairperson Barron and members of the City Council Higher Education Committee. I am Donna Linderman, University Dean for Student Success Initiatives and the Executive Director of CUNY Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP). Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you about CUNY Start, which is realizing unprecedented success serving students identified with significant levels of remedial need upon admission to our associate programs. I am joined by Lashallah Burgess, CUNY Start Assistant Director at Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) and Omar Alonso, a CUNY Start graduate and current BMCC student. Together I hope we can provide you with a better understanding of CUNY Start and the many ways it is helping students enter our associate programs better prepared for successful completion.

Founded in 2009, CUNY Start seeks to help students admitted into our associate programs with significant levels of remedial needs in reading, writing, and/or math--based on scores on the CUNY Assessment Tests--significantly reduce or eliminate those needs before matriculation. The program began as a pilot at two community colleges (LaGuardia and Kingsborough) and initially focused on GED recipients to see if an intensive, one-semester intervention designed and led by master teachers and professional developers from CUNY's Adult Literacy programs could help students reduce some of their remedial needs before matriculation. Early results demonstrated that even students with the most significant needs, including multiple levels of need, became fully skills proficient and ready to enter college-credit coursework after completing an intensive, well-designed, and carefully taught program.

CUNY Start expanded to additional colleges in 2010 and based on continued success, embarked on a major expansion in fall 2011. The program also began to admit high school graduates identified with remedial needs and created part-time programs for students who had need in either reading and writing *or* math. CUNY Start is now found at eight CUNY colleges (six community colleges and two comprehensive colleges) and has served 16,554 students since inception.

CUNY Start provides intensive preparation in academic reading/writing, math, and "college success" to students in need of significant remediation. CUNY Start students temporarily delay starting their degree studies to take the 15-18 week program, depending on the college calendar. CUNY Start seeks both to minimize the amount of required remedial coursework underprepared students must take, and to foster higher levels of persistence and graduation once students start their degree programs.

CUNY Start students pay a modest \$75 fee, rather than having to use financial aid while in the program. This allows them to preserve their financial aid for credit-bearing coursework leading to graduation. The program consists of two phases: twelve weeks of "core instruction," after which students re-take any needed CUNY Assessment Tests in reading and writing

and/or the CUNY Elementary Algebra Final Exam (CEAFE), and then an additional three to six weeks of instruction, as needed, also followed by the opportunity to re-take any required exams.

Instruction in the program is intensive: 25 hours a week in the full-time program, in which students can address all three basic skills needs: reading/writing, which is taught as one subject, and math. The part-time program is 12 hours a week in which students can address *either* math *or* reading/writing. Both full-time and part-time programs offer the same curricula and hours of instruction and include a college success seminar and advisement.

CUNY Start curricula have been developed by instructional experts from the CUNY Office of Academic Affairs with input from teachers and advisors from partner colleges. Our math curriculum and pedagogy focuses on helping students grasp math concepts and emphasizes depth over breadth of topics with teachers using a structured questioning approach to help students understand how they arrive at solutions vs. simply memorizing formulas. Reading/writing focuses on helping students learn strategies of effective readers and writers through modeling by teachers and aims to build confidence and reading and writing stamina with significant feedback provided to student work. Our college success seminar and individual advisement helps students better understand what to expect when they matriculate including learning about campus resources, expectations and requirements in and out of the classroom, specifics of various majors, and possible career paths.

CUNY Start also places a strong focus on teacher training. In addition to training led by our Professional and Curriculum Development Coordinators, all CUNY Start teachers spend one semester in the class of a lead CUNY Start instructor in preparation for teaching in the program. Advisors in training spend a semester working beside an experienced advisor in preparation for taking on their own caseload of students. Once teachers and advisors are trained, they continue to receive coaching and professional development led by our Professional Development Coordinators. This comprehensive approach ensures that the program is delivered with high fidelity to the curricula and pedagogy that have been found to be highly effective to date.

CUNY Start students are demographically similar to the larger associate degree seeking populations at the colleges to which they have been admitted. Based on most recent data from fall 2016: 48 percent of CUNY Start students are Hispanic, 25 percent are Black, 7 percent are Asian/Pacific Islander, 6 percent are White, and 5 percent identify as Other. By gender, 41 percent were male and 59 percent female. Eighty percent of our full-time students and 56 percent of students in our part-time program are under 20 years of age.

CUNY's Office of Research Evaluation and Program Support (REPS) has carefully evaluated CUNY Start and results have been impressive if not unprecedented. As mentioned, the program serves some of CUNY's most academically at-risk students. Based on analysis of students who entered between fall 2009-spring 2016 (N=13254), 68 percent of CUNY Start full-time students entered with three remedial needs and 32 percent entered with two needs. In terms of individual skills areas: 99 percent had needs in math, 93 percent had needs in writing, and 75 percent in reading.

Upon program completion, however, the picture looks completely different: 51 percent of full-time students who completed the program were fully skills proficient in all three skills areas, 30 percent had only one remaining need, and 14 percent had two remaining needs. Part-time program participants made similar gains. Across all cohorts served to date, CUNY Start has an average completion rate of 86 percent. It would typically take a similar student who matriculated immediately instead of joining CUNY Start at least two semesters to realize such gains and they would use time-stamped financial aid or pay out of pocket to do so.

Analysis of gains in individual skills areas are especially impressive. On average three-quarter of students who entered CUNY Start full-time or part-time programs with needs in reading, writing or math and completed the program became fully skills proficient in that skills area. This includes students who entered with two levels of math need (arithmetic and elementary algebra).

Further analysis by CUNY REPS found that when CUNY Start students matriculate, they take and earn more credits with higher GPA and have stronger retention over time than similar non-CUNY Start participants. CUNY Start students who entered the program with remedial math need were more likely to enroll early in credit math courses once they matriculated and performed better than a comparison group of similar students.

CUNY Start also serves as an important pathway into CUNY Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), which has consistently more than doubled the three-year associate degree graduation rates of similar CUNY students. Analysis of former CUNY Start students who have joined ASAP demonstrates that they found to have similar rates of high retention and timely graduation as ASAP students who did not participate in CUNY Start. Staff from both programs actively recruit students together and make the pathway from CUNY Start to ASAP explicit and seamless to ensure every student who wishes to move into ASAP can do so.

To ensure that CUNY Start is also rigorously evaluated by external reviewers, we are pleased to partner with MDRC and CCRC on a major random assignment study funded by the USDOE Institute of Education Sciences (IES) across four of our colleges. Dr. Michael Weiss of MDRC, who serves as co-principal investigator of the study is here with us today and will share more details about this important study.

Because math is such a significant barrier to CUNY associate seeking students (74 percent of fall 2016 first-time freshmen at our community colleges required some level of remedial math), CUNY Start has also created a condensed eight-week intervention modeled on our semester-long CUNY Start math program. Math Start was piloted in 2014 and 2015 at three colleges with support from the Petrie Foundation and is now being expanded to 4,000 students over the next three years thanks to generous support from the City.

Math Start has realized impressive outcomes serving students who are proficient in reading and writing but still have significant remedial math needs. Most recent findings from our summer 2016 program that served nearly 500 students demonstrate that 97 percent of students entered Math Start in 2016 with both pre-algebra and elementary algebra needs. Ninety one percent of students completed the eight-week program and 81 percent of completers became skills proficient in math. Students pay only \$35 to participate in Math Start, which is now offered at seven CUNY Start partner colleges in summer and at some colleges in late fall and late spring 8-week sessions.

Remediation is one of the major challenges facing community colleges across the country and prevents thousands of low-income students from earning a college degree. CUNY is deeply committed to continuing to be a portal for all New Yorkers who wish to realize their educational goals and to improve their social mobility through degree completion. The University is currently engaged in a major reform of its remediation practices at all levels and CUNY Start (and Math Start) will play a critical roles in helping to ensure all students are served effectively and can enter and complete their degree studies in a timely manner. We are pleased to be able to demonstrate that with the right curriculum, instructional model, and staff that previously unimaginable success rates are possible for all our students. It is both an honor and a privilege to serve them and we thank the City Council for your interest and support of our work.



Testimony of Lashallah Burgess - BMCC CUNY Start/Math Start Assistant Director  
New York City Council Higher Education Committee Hearing on CUNY Start  
April 20, 2017

Good morning, members of the committee. My name is Lashallah Burgess and I am the Assistant Director for the CUNY Start and Math Start programs at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, more often referred to as BMCC.

CUNY Start and Math Start are low cost, intensive, remediation alternatives for community college students who are required to enroll into developmental education courses. CUNY Start is a 16-week program that offers pre-college Math and/or Reading and Writing as needed. Math Start runs for 8 weeks and students focus mostly on improving their math skills. In each program there is an Academic Advisement component that provides students with tools and support for acclimating to college life and for planning their educational futures. Open dialogue and regular group work fosters close relationships between the advisors, teachers and students. These bonds help to build student's confidence and lead them toward success.

BMCC CUNY Start is located near the BMCC main campus. It operates out of the Murray Street building and follows the campus semester calendar. There is a full time program where students focus on all 3 subject areas and attend classes for 25 hours per week. There is also a part time program where students are either in reading and writing or math and attend classes for 12 hours per week. In CUNY Start at BMCC we have run 17 classes consistently for the past several semesters. Last year, 84% of CUNY Start students completed the program, 78% became math proficient and 67% became proficient in writing.



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In summer 2014, Math Start launched as a result of the success of CUNY Start and a high need for math remediation. Math Start is expanding this year with an off-site pilot program at the CUNY School of Public Health in Harlem. In addition, the program will enroll 200 students during the summer '17 session – doubling enrollment from last year. On average, Math Start at BMCC has a 95% completion rate, 90% skills proficiency rate and 95% matriculation rate.

In Both CUNY Start and Math Start, eligible students are those who have 12 credits or less, who have scored low on the CUNY placement exam(s) and need to increase their proficiency in order to become exempt of remediation.

Both programs are attractive to students and are effective because they help to save time and money. Students spend less time in remedial level classes and even have two opportunities to retake placement tests for a fraction of a credit bearing course.

Tuition in CUNY Start is \$75 and in Math Start it is \$35. This fee includes books and materials. Students do not use financial aid to cover the cost, allowing their financial aid funds to be used for their credit courses when they complete the program.

There is also a strong partnership between CUNY Start and ASAP. A pipeline is in place for eligible students who complete CUNY Start to go directly into ASAP upon reducing or eliminating their remedial needs. Students do well in ASAP after transitioning from a structured program as CUNY Start where expectations are similar.





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CUNY community college students really benefit from the advisement, academic and financial support that the programs offer. For many of our students the opportunity is life changing. On behalf of BMCC and the CUNY Start/Math Start programs I would like to thank The City of New York for supporting these important programs. I also appreciate the invitation to come and speak with you today. Thank you!





Testimony of Omar Alonso - BMCC CUNY Start and ASAP Student  
New York City Council Higher Education Committee Hearing on CUNY Start  
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My name is Omar Alonso. I was born in Mexico and earned my GED four years ago with the help of Union Settlement Association in East Harlem. I live in Brooklyn and I am now in my second year at BMCC. I am a computer science major and hope to do computer programming in the field of electrical engineering.

In the fall of 2015, I decided to attend college, after many years out of school. I started to think about my future and decided to apply to CUNY. I decided on BMCC because it was more affordable than other colleges.

I learned about the CUNY Start program during orientation. I attended an information session and learned the program was only \$75. I knew that I really needed it because I did not pass the CUNY Assessment Tests in math and writing. The \$75 fee was the best investment of my life.

When I first started in CUNY Start it was really frightening because I did not know what to expect. I'm not a traditional student. I had not been in school for many years. So everything was completely new for me. I didn't know what a GPA was, an essay, credit classes, what being a full time student meant. All of this was completely empty words to me. The beginning in CUNY Start was very challenging because I had to work at the same pace as my classmates. That gave me headaches – thinking of doing good and keeping the rhythm. But my writing teacher



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Daimys and my math teacher Clyde and my classmates were very patient with me. Since the beginning the CUNY Start staff emphasized respecting each other and for the first time I felt kind of weird because everyone was being nice with me, instead of bothering me, they were helping me out. Daimys really helped me become a better writer. And Clyde helped me understand algebra. I didn't know any of it when I started and at the end of the program I passed both the writing and math exams. CUNY Start also helped me learn a lot about college. While I was in CUNY Start, I was part of a leadership group. The leadership group inspired me to join the Dream Team at BMCC. The Dream Team is a club for undocumented and DACA students.

The CUNY Start seminar that was taught by my advisor Kim helped me learn how to navigate the college and learn more about the campus. During seminar we did a presentation on our major and career plans and goals. This was a good experience for me because I had never given a presentation before. I knew that I wanted to work with computers and technology and this program helped me figure out that I wanted to be a computer science major.



Testimony of Omar Alonso - BMCC CUNY Start and ASAP Student  
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At the end of CUNY Start the hard work paid off -- my writing, reading, and math skills were so much better than before. And for me this means a lot because I went from nothing to something. I gained confidence. I was ready to start college on the same level just like a regular student. The CUNY Start program is well designed because it allows the new students to learn about everything they need to know to start college. I still have a lot to learn, but I know that I'm on the right track. I am still a peer mentor for new CUNY Start students. I want to help students who are just like me as they are entering the college.

When I finished CUNY Start, the program connected me to ASAP. My CUNY Start advisor Kim also told me about the Dream.US scholarship, which I was awarded in my first semester. The Dream.US only pays for tuition. So the financial support I get from ASAP, like the Metro Card and help with books, is really helpful to me. I don't have to worry about how I am going to get to school or pay for my textbooks. It allows me to focus on my school work. The advisement that ASAP provides makes it a lot easier for students. ASAP also provides tutors for my classes. Thank you for your time and listening to my story. I would like to thank CUNY and BMCC for offering CUNY Start to me and hope the program will be expanded to serve more students.

## **Oversight: CUNY Start**

### **Testimony Submitted to the Committee on Higher Education<sup>1</sup>**

Michael J. Weiss  
MDRC

April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017

Thank you for the opportunity to offer some thoughts on CUNY Start.

#### **Who we are:**

My name is Michael Weiss, and I am a senior researcher at MDRC, a non-profit, non-partisan social policy research organization that is dedicated to learning what works to improve policies and programs that affect the poor. Founded in 1974, MDRC evaluates existing programs and develops new solutions to some of the nation's most pressing social problems, using rigorous random assignment research designs or near equivalents to assess their impact.

#### **Relationship with CUNY:**

Just over a decade and a half ago, MDRC began conducting rigorous evaluations in higher education, including the first ever large scale randomized controlled trial at a community college, here in New York City at Kingsborough Community College. Since that time, MDRC has conducted randomized experiments in over 30 community colleges across the nation, including more than 35,000 students. Within the City University of New York (CUNY) alone, MDRC has partnered on projects to evaluate the effectiveness of several different programs at CUNY, including learning communities, performance-based scholarships, CUNY ASAP, LaGuardia's GED Bridge program, and CUNY Start. This longstanding relationship demonstrates CUNY's willingness to partner with an independent third-party and to allow its programs to undergo gold standard evaluations so that CUNY can rely on credible evidence to inform its practice.

#### **The challenge:**

Each year hundreds of thousands of students in the United States enter college academically underprepared. At community colleges, underprepared students are typically referred to developmental (remedial) courses to build their reading, writing, and mathematics skills. About three of every five community college students are referred to at least one developmental course.<sup>2</sup> Students who are referred to developmental courses often struggle in college, and graduation rates for this group are disconcertingly low.<sup>3</sup> Similar to other urban community colleges across the nation, only 14 percent of students who were assessed as needing at least one developmental course graduated from CUNY's seven community colleges within three years.

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this testimony are borrowed or adapted from:

[http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Building\\_College\\_Readiness\\_2016.pdf](http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Building_College_Readiness_2016.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Bailey, Thomas. 2009. Rethinking Developmental Education in Community College. In *CCRC Brief*. New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University.

<sup>3</sup> Attewell, Paul A., David E. Lavin, Thurston Domina, and Tania Levey. 2006. "New Evidence on College Remediation." *Journal of Higher Education* 77 (5):886-924.

### **CUNY Start – A Potential Solution:**

Hoping to boost the success rates of its least prepared incoming students, in 2009 the City University of New York (CUNY) developed CUNY Start, an innovative developmental education program. Students who participate in CUNY Start delay college matriculation for one semester, beginning instead with a semester of noncredit, time-intensive instruction in reading, writing, and mathematics with a prescribed curriculum and instructional approach. The program also provides enhanced academic advising, tutoring, and a weekly “College Success” seminar designed to build the skills that can help students succeed in college. Students pay only \$75 for CUNY Start, including the textbooks. The program’s short-term goal is to substantially reduce or eliminate developmental needs after one semester, while preparing students for college courses. Its long-term goal is to improve academic outcomes, including graduation rates.

CUNY Start is markedly different from the typical approach to developmental education, both with respect to the student experience and its theory of action. For students assessed as needing developmental course work, CUNY Start focuses exclusively and intensively on remedial education during student’s first semester in postsecondary education. In contrast, the typical approach has students take a mix of remedial coursework and college-level classes. As a result, it is expected that after one semester a student in CUNY Start will have fewer, or zero, remedial needs, but have earned zero college level credits. In contrast, a student taking a more typical path may have more remedial needs, but they will have earned some college level credits.

According to CUNY’s internal non-experimental analyses of the program, it has yielded promising results for participating students.<sup>4</sup> Due to CUNY’s commitment to an independent, external evaluation, MDRC, CUNY, and the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Teachers College, Columbia University, are partnering to determine the effect of CUNY Start on students’ academic success, compared with the usual courses and services offered at CUNY’s community colleges. This project, a large-scale, random assignment evaluation, is supported by the federal Institute of Education Sciences. The evaluation will also examine how CUNY Start is implemented and its costs.

### **What questions will we answer?**

The evaluation will provide rigorous evidence about the effect of CUNY Start on students’ academic outcomes, relative to CUNY’s traditional pathways for students who need significant developmental education. It will describe how CUNY Start is implemented and its associated costs. Specifically, the evaluation will answer the following key questions:

- **What is the effect of CUNY Start on students’ academic outcomes**, compared with the colleges’ usual courses and services, including the colleges’ usual developmental education?
- **Do the effects vary across student populations** (for example, full-time and part-time students, students with different degrees of developmental need) **and settings** (individual colleges)?

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<sup>4</sup> [www.cuny.edu/academics/evaluation/library/CUNYStartStudyFall13.pdf](http://www.cuny.edu/academics/evaluation/library/CUNYStartStudyFall13.pdf)

- **How is CUNY Start implemented?**
- **To what degree is it implemented with fidelity to the CUNY Start model?**
- **To what degree are there differences between the program and the colleges' usual courses and services?**
- **What are the costs associated with CUNY Start, how do the costs compare with the costs of the usual courses and services, and is CUNY Start cost-effective?**

Answers to these questions are critical for ongoing work at CUNY to improve the outcomes of students referred to remediation. Moreover, they are important to the national developmental education reform conversation, as few programs have been proven effective for students with significant remedial needs.

**What progress has been made in the Partnership Project:**

To date, over 3,800 students at four of CUNY's community colleges have consented to participate in the rigorous evaluation of CUNY Start. Academic outcome data for these students are not yet available. Early research from this project on the implementation of CUNY Start finds that the program model is generally being implemented as designed. MDRC, CCRC, and CUNY will begin writing the first major report from this study, including early indicators of academic progress, later this year. The report is expected to be publicly available in spring of 2018.

For more information on the evaluation, see:

<http://www.mdrc.org/project/addressing-students-remedial-needs-evaluation-cuny-start-and-other-strategies#overview>

[http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Building\\_College\\_Readiness\\_2016.pdf](http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Building_College_Readiness_2016.pdf)





National Association for Developmental Education

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## **Testimony to The Higher Education Committee New York City Council April 20, 2017**

### **Re: CUNY Start**

### **Robin Ozz, President, National Association for Developmental Education**

Good Morning Chairperson Barron, Members of the Higher Education Committee, and Colleagues,

I am Robin Ozz, President of the National Association for Developmental Education, or NADE, a professional organization that includes almost 2500 faculty and learning support professionals from across the United States. NADE seeks to improve the theory and practice of developmental education at all levels of the educational spectrum, the professional capabilities of developmental educators, and the design of programs to help all students achieve their educational goals.

To that end, it is with great pleasure that I come to testify today on behalf of NADE in wholehearted support of the CUNY Start program. CUNY Start epitomizes the holistic paradigm of true developmental education which addresses the needs of the student whether they are cognitive, affective, financial, social, or academic.

Remedial education has been under great scrutiny, especially since the advent of the completion agenda in 2010, and unfortunately the most popular reforms have not been designed and implemented by developmental educators who understand that silver-bullet academic solutions do not work. That is why CUNY Start brings hope to my field—it addresses the whole student.

In this era of bottom-line, one-size-fits all, fix-them-and get them through education reforms, CUNY Start stands apart. There are several popular one-shot programs that address academic deficits, but the beauty of CUNY Start is that it is a holistic program that builds on strengths; that instead of just filling perceived gaps, it builds successful college students who feel as if they belong in college.



Other strengths that research shows work with helping students succeed:

1. Program students do not feel as if they are being labeled remedial or not smart; instead, they are CUNY Start students. Words matter, especially students are taking a risk even by stepping onto a college campus.
2. The program is low cost. Most students do not continue in remedial courses because of finances.
3. It is rigorous. Students are taught college-level material and treated as capable students. They are not pandered to or treated as stupid.
4. It is holistic. Not only are academics addressed, but college and financial literacy are covered as well.
5. Students build a network of support. We know this is the one quality of any program that will retain students and contribute to their success to the greatest degree (Tinto, 1995). Students feel as if they have a family on campus, that the program built their confidence, that they were encouraged to never give up.

If I could redirect all the time, talent, and treasure now spent on misdirected remedial reforms into one area, I would redirect them into holistic programs such as CUNY Start and ASAP as well. With these programs, CUNY is an exemplar of developmental education, and I thank you on behalf of my organization and my field.

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: LAYDA ZHAN

Address: BMCC / CUNY STREET

I represent: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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Date: 4/20/17

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Name: Donna Linderman, Univ. Dean - Student

Address: 205 E. 42nd Street Success Initiat

I represent: CUNY

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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Date: 4/20/17

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Name: Robin OZZ

Address: 1202 W. Thomas Rd.

I represent: Nat'l Asso. for Dev. Ed.

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 4/20/17

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Name: Lashallah Burgess, Asst. Director

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: BMCC CUNY Start / CUNY

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 4/20/17

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Name: Omar Alonso, Student

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: BMCC Student / CUNY

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

*Please complete this card* THE COUNCIL *Sergeant-at-Arms*  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK

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☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 4/20/17

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Michael Weiss

Address: 16 E. 34th St (19th Floor)

I represent: MDRC

Address: same