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Bookshelf: The Fall of City College

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The politics of race and ethnicity has done much to dim the star of public life in New York City. But it has taken an exceptional toll on the City College of New York, once one of the city's brightest public institutions. Known in its golden age between the 1920s and '60s as "the Harvard of the proletariat," it graduated eight Nobel Prize winners, more Ph.D.s than any other public institution in the country besides Berkeley, and legions of doctors, lawyers, politicians and executives. Now it has become one of the largest remedial high-school programs in America, we learn in James Traub's provocative new study: "City on a Hill: Testing the American Dream at City College" (Addison-Wesley, 371 pages, \$25).

The fault lies with a radical experiment with open admissions, launched in the more socially optimistic days of the late '60s. Why did the college embrace open admissions and what was it about the experiment that ran the college off the rails? These questions are hardly just a local concern. The book's subtitle makes it clear that Mr. Traub sees the school as a symbol of something much larger.

Founded in 1847 as an experiment in radical egalitarianism that would give sons of the poor and middle class what only the rich could then afford, the college made the move to its present campus on the western edge of Harlem in 1908. Mirroring the grandeur of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and other gilded-age monuments, the school's Gothic gables and Ivy League archways gave the impression of "a lofty interior city" -- within yet removed from the larger city around it.

By the early '30s, its rolls were packed with driven, largely Jewish immigrants and children of immigrants who saw a degree as "a talisman, a magic key to the good life available in America." In an age when the Ivy League limited the number of Jews and other unpedigreed ethnics, the City College student body "represented perhaps the purest intellectual elite in the country."

By the '60s, however, this monument to the idea of meritocracy had become a source of racial discomfort, since high admission standards were letting in very few blacks and Hispanics. After officials debated for years what might be changed, a campus takeover mounted by militant black and Latino students demanding that the entering class reflect the percentage of minorities in New York City high schools forced the issue. Although the plan that emerged was not technically open admissions, entrance requirements were lowered so substantially and the remedial section of the school expanded so widely that it amounted to the same thing.

Traditionalists predicted doom. Many, even Great Society liberals, thought that college was not the place to make a stand against inner-city poverty, that the problem was being attacked at the wrong end. But, as Mr. Traub notes, "realism came to sound like racism" and appeals for standards were seen as "excuses to keep the joint white."

Opponents of the plan were quickly proven right, as students arrived barely able to read. "City College is decaying," one dean, soon to lose his job, wrote in Saturday Review. "It is no longer the school it was and the future is bleak."

Although faint traces of the old City College can be seen in small, rigorous programs such as engineering, philosophy and advanced literary criticism, the City College Mr. Traub saw in auditing classes is a sad picture of student dysfunction, official denial and racial demagoguery. Victims of a city public-high-school system in collapse due to its own racial politics, most of the student body enters in need of remediation. The majority of these students eventually drop out, often after years of expensive catch-up efforts.

In one remedial class, only one student could figure out a headline from the school newspaper that read "Student Turnout Nil at Games." Although students are handicapped by a lack of knowledge and vocabulary, the real problem is their inability to generalize, make deductions or think critically about what they read.

Feeding the atmosphere of fallen intellectual glory is the climate of racial intimidation and demagoguery fostered by such militants as Leonard Jeffries, City College's infamous apostle of Afrocentrism. Espousing racist mythologies and crackpot anti-Semitism, Mr. Jeffries, according to Mr. Traub, has turned the black-studies department into his personal fiefdom, complete with student toughs. The college would like to get rid of him but can't, its efforts to do so having been reversed in court.

Bad press has prompted soul searching in some administrators and other officials. But it is clear that for the true believers who control the place, open admissions is still "sacrosanct" and that even the slightest step in the direction of retreating from it is taken as a racist bid to bring back past elitism. And even if the school could get rid of racial charlatans such as Mr. Jeffries, Mr. Traub says, "the deep currents of anti-intellectualism and appetite for consolatory myths" running through the black student body would remain.

Mr. Traub closes with a vision for how he'd fix City College, calling for restricted access and a scaling back of the remedial mission and improvement in the public schools. It would still be a school with an overwhelming minority majority, but one where excellence would be the rule, not the "shining exception."

Mr. McGowan is author of "Only Man Is Vile: The Tragedy of Sri Lanka" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux).

(See related letter: "Letters to the Editor: Educating the Children Of 'the Whole People'" -- WSJ Nov. 17, 1994)