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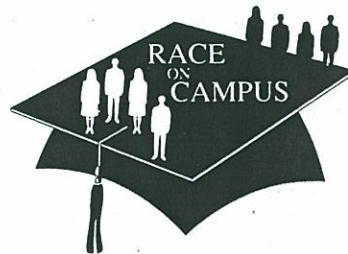
I N THE MIX

By Jim Sleeper

NEW YORK, NEW YORK

In the spring of 1988 New York University sophomore Brian Stettin decided he wasn't a "major talent" in film, his chosen field of study. That summer, during the 1988 presidential campaign, he developed an interest in politics. But NYU, renowned in film, didn't offer political science courses compelling enough to justify paying nearly ten times what it would cost to study at the City College of the City University of New York. So Stettin, Jewish, middle class, from suburban Long Island, transferred to CCNY—38.5 percent black, 28.2 percent Hispanic, 14.5 percent Asian, and 18.5 percent white. Continuing to live in Greenwich Village with NYU friends who thought he'd gone crazy, he began taking the subway up to Harlem.

If some of New York's colleges have reputations for racial conflict, CCNY is in a class of its own. Its African Studies Department chairman, Leonard Jeffries, has characterized whites as "ice people" and racial minorities as "people of the sun"—the latter more compas-



mate and communal on account of the life-giving melanin in their skins, he says. CCNY also employs philosophy professor Michael Levin, who believes in blacks' inherent criminality and intellectual inferiority. The school has had more than its share of student demonstrations against "racism," including one last spring protesting an honorary degree for alumnus Col. Powell on the grounds that he serves racist interests. So what Stettin found among City's 11,075 undergraduates surprised him. "I was struck by the seriousness of the place—by how much more politically aware and how much less frivolous the students were than I would have known." Survivors of the toughest urban neighborhoods, working their way through a commuter college at great personal sacrifice, many were focused on careers in bio-medicine, law, engineering, and community service. "For many of them, earning a college degree is itself a liberation," Stettin found. They've been out in the world; they have kids; they have to arrange classes to fit work schedules. It made life, with no obligation except to study, a lot more serious."

Beneficiaries of CUNY's controversial 1969 "open enrollment" policy (which guarantees admission to virtually all high school graduates) and assigned by affirmative-action law to so-called protected groups, many of CCNY's students nevertheless express discomfort with anything, administrative or curricular, that smacks of racial protection. "I've found just the opposite [of racial protectionism]," says Zaida Colon, 27, a Puerto Rican-born mother of three who's a senior in City's Urban Legal Studies program. "Students feel, 'I've been held down long enough by money problems or problems at home.' Now they want to prove themselves. I was brought up to believe you make your own way. True, I didn't have connections; in high school I took the commercial course because the teachers didn't encourage me to go to college. If affirmative action can help make up for that, well, OK. But you have to keep your grades up."

Stettin says he never personally experienced racial hostility at City, even in his spirited arguments with those students who think America limits their chances because they're black. "The activists have a fiercely charged racial pride; they believe this is a racist society and that everything the U.S. does is wrong. But I've never felt threatened."

Stettin's defense of American opportunity finds especially strong confirmation among the one-half of City undergraduates who are immigrants from among eighty countries. Not surprisingly, nationalist passions run deep; arguments about Puerto Rico's future and anti-apartheid strategies fill rooms that once rang with Jewish students' disputes over the socialisms of Stalin, Trotsky, and Schachtman. But most of City's thousands of Latino, Caribbean, Chinese, Pakistani, Indian, Iranian, and Israeli students are desperately seeking relief from ancient feuds. So too are others. "I grew

up in South Bronx, which is racially isolated," says Brenda Singleton, a black, 26-year-old education major. "I'd never had a real friendship with anyone not African American. Now my best friends are from Nigeria, Antigua, and Ireland. I'm friends with a girl from Yugoslavia who I'm tutoring in English. It's not polarized at all."

Singleton, who dropped out of high school and earned her GED while working for a foundation and a city agency for six years, speaks appreciatively of the African Studies Department as a place where black students from insular communities can get their feet on the ground. But she's learned that "taking anything that one professor says at face value hurts your education. . . . What [students] learn doesn't end with Jeffries. There are so many other professors who are convincing."

That's the view, too, of Safa Howard, a 31-year-old political science major whose conviction that "the political system is organized on racist principles" might mislead a casual white listener. "The political theory I've studied here transcends race. People are divided by more than that; whites are in trouble, too." Howard declined to join CCNY activists who circulated a petition last year to demand the firing of Levin: "I felt it was the wrong place for people to put their energy. Levin isn't representative of the white faculty here; most are objective and liberal." David Garrow, the biographer of Martin Luther King Jr., who has taught constitutional law at City for six years, says: "It's really a first-rate student body. They're incredibly well-motivated and, among American-born blacks, far less damaged by the New York City public schools than one might expect. For these kids, City is still the personification of upward mobility. There is less ethnic tension and more interracial camaraderie here than anywhere else in New York."

CCNY isn't the only college of the City University whose multiracial strengths have been unfairly eclipsed by instances of racial demagoguery and tension. Baruch College became famous last spring when the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools deferred its reaccreditation, claiming that its campus was "fraught with racial tension" and not committed enough to "the values of social justice and equity critical to serving working people in a multicultural urban environment."

Most students and faculty were stunned—and offended. By Middle States' own admission, Baruch—with the nation's largest business school, the 1990 Nobel Prize-winning Professor Harry Markowitz, an 18 percent minority faculty, and a 16,500-member student body that is 36 percent white, 26 percent black, 20 percent Asian, and 18 percent Hispanic—has a healthier racial mix than most other schools in the association's domain. As at City, students mingle freely in courses and activities; the hustling, articulate



staff of Baruch's student paper, *The Ticker*, is a miniature U.N.

Baruch's real problem, like City's, is that it's underfunded, hence overcrowded and inadequate in providing student-support services. Most students understand that racism isn't the issue here, but I learned again how easily their views can be eclipsed by racial demagoguery when I visited a public administration class of twenty-five students, only five of them white.

A young man of Puerto Rican background called affirmative action "scary, because you don't know where you stand." "That crosses my mind, too, where I work," admitted a black woman employed by a marketing firm. But then a black student cowed the class into silence with windy rhetoric about blacks' having been "three-fifths of a person since *Plessy v. Ferguson*." I asked whether, looking around the room, he could honestly say that Baruch is "institutionally racist." My question answered itself, he claimed, since "the white students fled to NYU." Having thus dismissed his fellow students and CUNY's historic mission to serve new populations, he concluded with a non sequitur: "We are three-quarters of the world's population, but we have a minority mentality." Three students called me later to say they have no such mentality.

Why, then, did Middle States defer accreditation? Its new director, Howard Simmons, who is black, has inaugurated an all-out push for affirmative action; Middle States' visiting team at Baruch was lobbied furiously by black studies professor Arthur Lewn and education department chairman Donald Smith, who believes that university scholars are "pseudo-scientists" who foist justifications for white domination upon unsuspecting students. We will soon learn whether Middle States overreached; the U.S. Department of Education has deferred its recognition of the association until Simmons can come up with a clear rationale for the criteria imposed on Baruch.

Both Simmons and the department ought to talk to Zaida Colon, Safa Howard, Brenda Singleton, and Rafael Olmeda, news editor of Baruch's *Ticker*, who said this when I asked whether he had ever experienced racial discrimination in college: "Well, once, but it wasn't at Baruch; in fact, it explains why I'm here and not in the Ivy League. When I was a senior at Bronx Science, I sent for Harvard's admission materials. The package came to my house, and out came this Minority Student Information Request Card for me to send in, and a leaflet saying, 'Here are some of the things minority students experience at Harvard.' And I thought: What is this. . . . I want to know, what do *students* experience at Harvard? Like, what am I to them? Well, I knew what I was. I was the fulfillment of a quota. And I have no intention of being that."

JIM SLEEPER, an editorial writer at *New York Newsday*, is the author of *The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York* (W. W. Norton).