

## CHAPTER 1

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# INTRODUCTION

Unlike traditional educational approaches that separate learning from its use, [Metropolitan College of New York's] approach links learning directly to action. Students learn in order to use what they learn, and they use what they learn to reach specific goals. This gives them an appreciation for how deeply they can affect the world around them and builds a lifelong interest in learning.

—Cohen and Jordan, 1996, p. 33.<sup>1</sup>

### **“I’VE GOT THIS IDEA I WANT TO WORK ON AND I’M GOING TO NEED SOME HELP”<sup>2</sup>**

In a small college library in lower Manhattan, three adult students are busily at work around a large table cluttered with books, papers, and their own laptop computers. Tamisha Tamley is a shy thirty-five-year-old African American woman who has raised three children as a single mom. She works in a homeless shelter in Brooklyn and hopes one day to become a counselor of teenagers so that she can help others avoid the mistakes she feels she made at an early age. Sitting beside her is Bernadette Perkins, a tall, imposing Jamaican woman who has worked as a nurse’s assistant at Elmherst Hospital in Queens for ten years but who now wants to become a teacher. On the other side of the table is Juanel Gomez who grew up in the South Bronx, served in the U.S. Army, and has returned to college to take advantage of the Veteran Administration’s new GI Bill. Juanel is working on a business degree so that eventually he can open his own company specializing in computer software.

Tamisha Tamley, Bernadette Perkins, and Juanel Gomez are composite portraits of students who currently attend Metropolitan College of New York (MCNY). MCNY is a tuition-based, private, urban college with approximately 1,200 full-time students, most of whom are women of color who have jobs and families. Although not well known outside of New York City, MCNY is familiar to many New Yorkers thanks to the college's frequent ad campaigns on major highway intersections and in the subways. As those ads and the college's prize-winning website ([www.mcny.edu](http://www.mcny.edu)) make known, MCNY includes a human services unit (the Audrey Cohen School for Human Services and Education), a public affairs unit (the School for Public Affairs and Administration), and a business unit (the School for Business), with daytime, evening, and weekend schedules that allow students to attend college while continuing to work. For working adults, an important MCNY attraction is that by attending full time, including the summer, students can complete an undergraduate degree in two years and eight months. The college's promotional materials make clear, however, that the college is no "fly-by-night" institution. MCNY is accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, its Masters of Childhood Education program is accredited by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), and its School for Business is accredited by the Accrediting Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP).

What makes MCNY unique is the structure of its curriculum. In a conceptual framework that the college created and that it calls Purpose-Centered Education, each semester has a specific performance goal or purpose to which all five courses taken that semester relate. The courses themselves are then taught as "dimensions" of each semester's purpose, and the course content is often transdisciplinary—combining, for example, readings from literature and psychology or history and philosophy. Most importantly, students are required to use the knowledge gained each semester to complete a specific project—what the college calls a Constructive Action—in a human service agency, school, or business, and to document that process in a systematic way. As one student wrote, "We become immersed in the practical application of what is taught in theory."<sup>3</sup>

MCNY's unorthodox model has achieved positive results. In a recent survey of MCNY graduates, 68 percent of respondents reported that they had full-time jobs and 47 percent reported holding a manager/adminis-

trator/supervisor position. Thirty percent of respondents reported having received a recent promotion. MCNY alumni include social workers, teachers, ministers, school administrators, business owners, emergency professionals, psychologists, and lawyers. Most interesting, perhaps, 87 percent of the graduates recommended the Constructive Action process as an excellent learning tool.<sup>4</sup>

Less apparent in the college's promotional materials than its offerings and outcomes is the story of the college's founding. In 1964 activist educator Audrey Cohen and a group of hard-working, highly motivated women associates began with a dream and eventually succeeded in creating a college that, against many odds, continues to provide an academic home for students like Tamisha, Bernadette, and Juanel. As the chapters that follow show, the women who created what is now MCNY were visionaries and pioneers. Like other women of the past whose contributions to the present have been forgotten or neglected, Cohen's and her friends' courage, commitment, and foresight merit historical recognition.

Part biography, part institutional history, *Creating a College That Works* is about how Cohen created a new kind of college that has evolved over the past fifty years. The story records a feisty woman's lasting contributions to the city, but more importantly it chronicles the creation of a unique curricular structure that enables low-income adult students to integrate their academic learning with meaningful work in community settings. What motivated Cohen and her associates to devote their lives to creating an alternative model of higher education? How did they work together and what forces did they have to overcome? What were some of the defining moments in the college's early history, and how did Cohen's vision evolve? What are the lasting legacies of Cohen's leadership in terms of student learning? These questions provide the focal points for the structure of this book. I begin with Cohen's own life story, but her story quickly merges into the history of the educational institution that she founded and presided over for thirty years. In identifying and describing the key moments in the creation and early years of the college, I use the voices of the individuals who participated in the process as often as possible—in part to give life to the narrative but also to show how the fates of both individuals and institutions are often shaped by chance encounters, unforeseen events, and the random play of historical forces.

Intertwining both biography and institutional history, the book's narrative contains a built-in tension. Is this a story about a woman's life, or is it the history of a college, a reader may ask. The answer is "both." Most of Cohen's adult identity was shaped by her creation of a college, and the college's identity was the result of her vision, passion, and hard work. Cohen's life and the college's life cannot be separated. The dominant narrative, however, is historical more than biographical, mostly because of the availability of evidence. Much of Cohen's inner life remains a mystery. She did not keep a diary or write personal letters, so her deepest motivations cannot be fully analyzed. In contrast, the college's history is an open source, thanks to the extensive archives that Cohen arranged to have organized shortly before her death. It is those archives that have provided most of the material for the narrative that follows.

Current concerns about the future of U.S. higher education make the story of MCNY's founding particularly compelling today. At a time when the income gap between college-educated and noncollege-educated young people is growing,<sup>5</sup> Cohen's project has much to teach us about structuring curricula so that nontraditional adult students can complete a college degree. Around 60 percent of MCNY students identify themselves as Black or African American and 20 percent as Hispanic or Latino. More than 90 percent of the students at MCNY receive financial aid, and most come from neighborhoods characterized by low levels of household income and high levels of recent immigration.<sup>6</sup> The story of how Cohen created an alternative form of college experience that meets the needs of inner-city students is instructive for anyone interested in broadening educational opportunities.

In the context of the corporatization of higher education and the loss of its humanistic "soul,"<sup>7</sup> the evolution of MCNY's unique curriculum is also instructive. Bridging the age-old divide between vocational training and humanistic learning, the college that Cohen created demonstrates that the study of Dante and Du Bois need not be abandoned in the quest for gainful employment, and that job readiness need not be sacrificed to the pursuit of a broad-based liberal education. Cohen's story shows how an educational institution can aim to produce both practical learners and reflective practitioners—students who are self-conscious about the purpose of their learning and who connect what they learn with what they do.

Finally, as the twentieth century recedes into our collective rearview mirror, the founding of MCNY reminds us of the creative energies that the social changes of the 1960s released. Along with the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and student activism, the decade from 1964 to 1974 gave rise to hundreds of educational experiments aiming to dissolve the barriers of class, race, and gender that had marked much of the nation's previous educational history.<sup>8</sup> Today, in educational settings from kindergarten to college, we see the integrative impulses of that era being replaced by separatist and utilitarian aims.<sup>9</sup> The story of Cohen's accomplishments can help twenty-first-century parents, educators, and activists reflect on which idealistic experiments of the late twentieth century can be left behind and which ones merit being studied, sustained, and even replicated.

Metropolitan College of New York is perhaps the only institution of higher learning that can trace its origins to a conversation between two young mothers. On a warm day in September 1960, Audrey Cohen and Alida Mesrop met on a gritty sidewalk near a large fountain in Stuyvesant Town, a vast, private housing complex on the east side of Manhattan below 23rd Street. As they watched the toddlers splash in the water from the fountain, the women talked animatedly about their children, their own backgrounds, and their prospects for staying active in the workforce while raising a family. The taller of the two women, Alida Mesrop, had recently worked as the public relations and publicity director at WPIX-TV, a local news, weather, and entertainment channel, but she had had to quit her job when her first daughter was born earlier that year. On a tip from a friend she had arranged to meet the other woman, Audrey Cohen, to talk about part-time work. They had decided to meet at the fountain, because both of them lived in apartments nearby.

At age twenty-nine Cohen was already the co-founder and director of Part-Time Research Associates, a consulting firm employing college-educated women on a flexible schedule to do social science research for government and business. Petite and energetic, with curly blonde hair and blue eyes, Cohen was on the lookout for women with writing skills, which Mesrop clearly had. In addition, Mesrop had had leadership experience with the media, experience that was, as Cohen put it, "unusual" at the time. The two hit it off, and they began a friendship and collaboration

that would last for more than three decades.<sup>10</sup> Little did they know that Mesrop would one day replace Cohen as president of the college that grew out of the conversation the two women had on that day.

As a result of her meeting with Cohen, Mesrop was hired by Part-Time Research Associates to take on two writing assignments during the next few months. But by the end of the year she was pregnant again, and she was pregnant again the next year. (“With three children in four years I was drowning in diapers,” Mesrop later quipped.) It wasn’t until 1964 that she resurfaced and put in a call to Cohen to say that she was back in the world and ready to work. Cohen’s voice on the other end of the phone had a new energy. “I definitely will call you,” she said. “I’ve got this idea I want to work on, and I’m going to need some help.”<sup>11</sup>

Cohen’s idea was to establish a Women’s Talent Corps, which would create jobs and provide training not just for the educated middle class women served by Part-Time Research Associates but for a broader and less visible group of women—low income and minority women—who had been left behind in America’s postwar economic boom.<sup>12</sup> “I had a mission when I started Part-Time Research Associates, and that mission was to assist other women as well as myself to do something fulfilling,” Cohen once said. But as time passed she realized that that the fulfillment gained by Part-Time Research Associates was “insufficient.”<sup>13</sup> The business she had co-founded had succeeded in providing jobs for educated, middle-class women but was doing nothing to help low-income, less well-educated women who were also desperately in need of meaningful work.

In the previous year Betty Friedan had published *The Feminine Mystique* highlighting the bias against women in the workforce; Martin Luther King Jr. had delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech during the historic march on Washington; and Lyndon B. Johnson had declared a “war on poverty” in his January 1964 inaugural address. Heralding a new concern about gender equity, civil rights, and economic justice, these events and others set in motion a wave of change across the United States. In retrospect, though probably unbeknownst to the two women at the time, Cohen and Mesrop were riding on this wave when they discussed Cohen’s idea for a Women’s Talent Corps in the fall of 1964.

Over the next decade and a half, a diverse and multitalented group of dedicated women would join Cohen to implement her vision of a Women’s

Talent Corps for low-income New Yorkers. An early associate was Barbara Walton, an administrator and writer who had worked on the de-Nazification of Germany and then taken a job with the Institute for International Education. She recommended Sylvia Hack, a Queens resident and activist who contributed political savvy and connections to the project. Another early convert to the idea was Laura Pires-Hester, whose Creole family had immigrated to Massachusetts from the Cape Verde Islands when she was a child and who had recently earned a master's degree in social work from Columbia University. Pires-Hester was the most scholarly and serious of the group and the one with the most knowledge of the communities and social needs that the Women's Talent Corps would directly address.

Inspired by Cohen's energy, other women soon joined the project. Janith Jordan came to New York from Michigan where she had done graduate work in education and had taught for several years in a Detroit inner-city public high school. At the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum was Millie Robbins Leet, a philanthropist and activist whose husband had at one time been the landlord of the East 67th Street building where the Cohens then lived<sup>14</sup> and who provided financial support for the project in its early years. Later on a young journalist named Deborah Allen joined Cohen's administrative staff. She was hired on the recommendation of Alida Mesrop, who had met her through their work together on the PTA in the Pelham, New York public school system. Allen was also a member of the college's board of trustees and continued to serve as the keeper of the vision of the educational model pioneered by Audrey Cohen.

Together, the middle-class, well-educated women inspired by Cohen's idea of a Women's Talent Corps engaged in activities that women of another generation, or even their own generation, might have found improper or even dangerous. They lobbied in Washington, attended meetings in economically depressed neighborhoods late at night, and demonstrated in front of City Hall to push for recognition and support. They testified, petitioned, sat-in, and marched; they were criticized, harassed, and forced out of buildings.<sup>15</sup> In the early years, even within their own institution, the women faced resentment, rebellions, and strikes, and at one point Cohen's own office was occupied by a group of angry students.

But the efforts of Cohen and her supporters eventually succeeded. In 1966 the Women's Talent Corps received funding from the Office of

Economic Opportunity, and in 1970 the institution became the College for Human Services, which, under Cohen's presidency, grew to an enrollment of more than one thousand students over the next two decades. In 1992, four years before her death, the college was renamed Audrey Cohen College, and in 2002 it was again renamed Metropolitan College of New York. Today MCNY includes undergraduate and graduate programs in human services, business, urban studies, and education. The programs graduate more than four hundred students a year, most of whom are low-income, adult women of color and recent immigrants.

The story of a group of women getting together to found a college is itself worthy of historical documentation. As noted earlier, though, what makes the story of this college's founding most significant is the uniqueness of the curricular model on which all the programs offered at the college are based. Central to Cohen's vision from its earliest articulation was her desire to relate educational experience to meaningful work. Decades before the concept of "service learning" became important in academe, Cohen was committed to the idea of connecting academic study to the real needs of underserved people in urban communities. As a result, the social vision that has permeated the college's conceptual framework throughout its history has generated curricular structures, academic requirements, and forms of assessment that are unlike any others in American higher education today.

MCNY's uniqueness as an educational institution will be apparent in the story that follows. An interwoven aim, however, is to record the process by which a group of extraordinary women led by Cohen defied the conventions of their time to found a radically innovative college that has served New York City's underserved populations for half a century. Similar in some ways to Jane Addams and the generation of women who devoted their energies to establishing settlement houses and improving social work practices during the Progressive Era at the beginning of the twentieth century, Cohen and her friends who came to maturity during the upheavals of the 1960s envisioned and created new structures for individual and collective empowerment that have survived the test of time.

The story of MCNY's founding is a 1960s success story.<sup>16</sup> Here at the outset, however, I caution against any easy stereotyping of roles and motivations. Although the tumultuous events of the 1960s provided the context for Cohen's and her associates' achievements, the women themselves

cannot be identified as part of the “Sixties” generation. Most of them were born in the 1930s or before. They came of age during the presidencies of Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower; and many of them were already married and were raising their own children by the time that hippies and flower children became media phenomena. An interesting paradox of these women’s story is that although the educational institution they created was extremely radical, even for its time, the women themselves in many ways exemplified the life-styles of the mid-twentieth-century suburban middle class.

Nor can the women inspired by Cohen’s vision be easily pegged as feminists, at least in terms of the third wave of feminism familiar to us today. Cohen and her associates were firm believers in women’s empowerment, but the later preoccupation with sexual identity or gender as a social construction was not part of their education. For Cohen and her associates the empowerment of women was essentially a matter of practicality and common sense. They, and in many cases their husbands as well, felt that the bias against women in the workforce resulted in a huge waste of talent, and that meaningful jobs for women would both improve the lives of women individually and add to the welfare of the community as a whole.<sup>17</sup> As Cohen once stated, the belief that shaped her life was a firm faith that Americans could tap into the vast reservoir of human potential that at that time was being wasted in the United States: “Just as it is said that the average person only uses 10 percent of the brain’s potential capacity, so I believed that our society had not even begun to fully use the talents of all its people.”<sup>18</sup>

It was the combination of practicality and vision, common sense and “dreams” evident in Cohen’s story that first inspired me to write this book. Besides chronicling the successful work of an enterprising group of women, the book may also suggest to others some of the qualities that are needed for successful leadership in any setting. As is apparent in what follows, the achievements of Cohen and her friends did not come easily nor was her particular management style always effective. Over the long term, however, their creation of new structures for educational empowerment is of lasting value and merits recognition.