

The future of higher education, leadership, diversity

How Bronx Community College President, Dr. Thomas Isekenegbe navigates the obstacles and opportunities of pandemic-induced setbacks

By Uchenna Ekwo, Robert Bernstein, and Edmund Janniger

Clearly, Covid-19 pandemic changed the world, lives, professions, and indeed everything in lasting ways, and glimpses of that transformed system are already emerging. In education, many institutions of higher education are in the middle of massive experiments in new ways of teaching and learning, and new ways of dividing responsibilities between home, school, and work. For the Nigerian-born academic, scholar, administrator, and solution-provider, Dr. Thomas A. Isekenegbe, President of the Bronx Community College of the City University of New York, the pandemic unleashed a wave of innovation in several sectors that has accelerated change and prompted blue-sky thinking throughout the college of predominantly underserved students of color. In an exclusive interview with the CMPI editorial team, Dr. Isekenegbe - the first CUNY president originally from Africa bares his mind on a wide range of topics. Below are excerpts of the interview featuring the vision map of a college president who provides leadership in a diverse, underrepresented community that mirrors his rise to the pinnacle of administration in education.



*Dr. Thomas Isekenegbe
President, BCC-CUNY*

Can you just tell us in general terms, the goals you set for yourself when you came to this college (BCC-CUNY); the extent to which you have been able to achieve them; and the challenges you're facing?

When I came in here seven years ago, as my second presidency I was a former President at Cumberland County College. So, I love to make a difference and am keen on serving a diverse community with unique challenges. If you look in the Bronx, of all the 62 counties in the state of New York, it's on the bottom of all the metrics- health, education, and social mobility etc. So, I was looking for a challenge of a place that is well diversified. At BCC, 99% of our students are people of color -Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, West Africa and so on. And I really wanted a place to take all the resources that the university has to offer to work with our students that other schools would not take and polish them to make them citizens of our country. If you look at our strategic plan, with seven goals- our goal is to build an institution of excellence whereby we take the students as they come, work them through the different categories and make sure that they succeed and graduate from us.

Pre-pandemic, we had about 10,000 students here on campus. Things have been going on very well, but the last two years have been very stressful. You know things go on cruise control and then the pandemics brought us back to reality. In March of 2020, we had to go off campus and resort to online classroom instruction. The type of students we have typically meet you face to face in class. So, the last few years have been challenging, but I think we tried to bring the ship back and do the right thing for our students. The College graduation took place last Friday (June 10, 2022) with 1,566 graduates.

Before the pandemic 95% of our classes were in-person, which meant students came to class and met with instructors. March 15, 2020, we had to take a pause and moved everything online to zoom asynchronous format. Most of our students don't have internet in their homes or access to the internet and most of the students didn't even have laptops. So, the first three weeks we had to deliver laptops to students. First three weeks we had to deliver laptops and wifi to students at their homes, and most of the instructors have never taught in an online format. So, I mean, it was a struggle. It was stressful. But we've managed to realize that we have to cope under difficult circumstances. We expect that next Fall, we shall have close to about 80% of our classes in-person because our students thrive when they sit down and work with the faculty.

“...the number of high school graduates in the Northeast is projected to decrease in the next ten years. It portends a gloomy picture for education.”

This spring we have about 7000 plus students. So, there are 2000 students that we've lost between March and June. We try using this summer to do another campaign to say please come back.

And if you know the student's background, most of them live in homes that really are not conducive. During the lockdown, there were too many people in their houses, most of the students that refused to

turn the cameras on because instructors determined that the noisy environment wasn't conducive. We don't want to use that as an excuse. I mean we're going to use the lessons that we've learned in the COVID to make ourselves better and make us a better institution. Online classes are not going to go away; there are students that thrived during that period. There are members of faculty that thrived during that period. So what we try to do now is to use the lessons learned during the COVID to make the institution a better one. This Fall we shall offer about 70% of our classes in-person, 30% online or hybrid format.

On the graduation rate of community colleges, the President admits "it's not good. Remember our students come with a lot of background issues. If we are possibly a two year institution as opposed to community Just students who actually graduate in two years is about 24% of students after three years, it goes up to about 30% ;after six years it's over 50% So for most community colleges, the average is not great.



Dr. Thomas Isekenegbe explains a point

What can be done to redress the situation?

Most of our students come from foreign countries. Our largest population on campus are students from the Dominican Republic. And most of them are the first in their families to go to college. So they have a lot of issues dealing with the English language, because for them English is a second language. So they have to go through English immersion. And most of the students don't have the necessary skills in mathematics and writing. So, most of the students here will have to take remedial classes, English and mathematics that get them ready to start taking college level classes.

We just did away with all of that setup right before the pandemic. What we're now doing instead of students spending three semesters, two semesters taking remedial classes we'll come up with co-requisite classes, which means you take in your remedial classes and the college level credit class at the same time, so that you don't waste one to two years, taking remedial classes that won't count; wasting your financial aid. So, we've now developed things like that in the hope that it is going to speed up the graduation time for students. Because in the past we had to spend semester one taking remedial classes; second remedial classes in second semester and you have to pass an exit exam before you get into college level classes. It's not just CUNY, most community colleges are migrating out of the remedial to co-requisite model to avoid some students staying 4-6 years in college wasting financial aid.

Do you have a Pipeline program whereby maybe like some high schools, feed you or they also send some?

All of our intakes from high schools come from the Bronx and we've developed College Now or Early College- that's where students are taking college level classes while still in high school. In fact, CUNY has a very good model. We have the Inwood Early College that can feed in partners. We also have CUNY-start - a program for some students that have remedial needs that are not ready for college work. They can take those classes for free in English and Math. So, it doesn't cost you any money. And you do it for one semester. You meet all of your college level needs before taking college classes.

International Education

We have students from 70 countries. We encourage international students, yes we do. We have few students on F-1. The only problem is that the tuition is not cheap. If you are a city resident it is \$2500 for 12 credits a semester, which means for the academic year it costs \$5000. For an international student, the tuition doubles. The cost is \$10,000. So that's just tuition and doesn't include the board, books, and so on.

You spoke about your aspiration to serve in a diverse environment and underserved communities. Apparently it looks like you're on track. Are you?

The greatest challenge is the lack of preparedness by our students. We have a lot of students that are not ready for college. So because of that we have a lot of students that take remedial classes. So, the biggest challenge is just getting our students ready. And we have a lot of support services. We have counseling, we have tutoring, we have the food pantry. How do you also make students aware of the various support services and to take advantage of that? We do a lot of advertising, social media, and posters on campus. We hire a lot of students that network in order to tell them. We are one of the very few colleges that have a food pantry which opened in 2017 and even during the pandemic. But there are times when we don't have students coming to actually use the facilities. We have a lot of students with mental health issues, personal counseling. How can we get students to use more of that aside from the challenges of lack of preparedness? We have also had the issue of getting students to use the services that we provide on campus. That's one of our challenges. Personally, I believe everybody can learn and to make students learn, you gotta provide the facilities and the support services. A lot of our students work, and a lot of students are parents, and have similar challenges. How can you make them prioritize their time to know when to come to class? Yes, you have to work out when to access the services that we provide.



We are working to bring back the students lost due to Covid, President Isekengbe tells the editorial team (L-R: Robert Bernstein, Edmund Janniger, and Dr. Uchenna Ekwo listen with rapt attention)

What percentage of your students go ahead to pursue a baccalaureate degree?

Exactly 66%. We have the Associate of Arts and Associate of Science. About 50% of our students transfer to Lehman College which is right down the road. Other students transfer to John Jay College. We have a Criminal Justice Academy with John Jay which if you start here, they will basically take all of your credits and transfer to John Jay. So, students that graduate who want to major in Policing, Criminal Justice transfer to John Jay. For Social Work, Liberal Arts, Psychology, Education, most of them transfer to Lehman. For Engineering, which is about 10% and most of them transfer to City College. Then of course, those that are into the Business and Actuarial Sciences go to Baruch College.

Remember we also have an Associate of Applied Arts, Nursing, Nuclear Medicine, Automotive Technology - those are the students that don't really need to transfer anyway. When they graduate in about three years, they will get jobs. Most of them don't graduate in two years. Most of our nursing students once they graduate they get a job at a Bronx Lebanon, or Lincoln Hospital or any of the local hospitals here. Most of the students in our Medical Lab Technology programs don't need to transfer. During the COVID we couldn't even graduate enough students because with all of the lab tests, lab work, it was easy to find good jobs.

BCC's hottest program is the Automotive Technology Program. We only take between 10 and 15 students every year. The graduates go to the finishing line and make \$75 -85,000 starting salary as service technicians. We have a partnership with Nissan of America. In fact, they supply all of the tools. The funny thing is that Mercedes Benz of Manhattan hires most of the service managers. So, that's a program if we have facilities we can even take about 40 students. We only have one Bay right now. We'd like to expand that. We are in the process of expanding it actually across the street,.we're building six bays.

Do you have a relationship with the guidance counselor's of High Schools that could help identify college ready students?.

Prior to the pandemic, we used to host the counselors every semester, right? We will do relationship and network events. But the most important place we get our students from is the NGOs. There's one called The Good Shepherd -a social service organization in the Bronx. They deal with students that are previously incarcerated; students that have criminal justice challenges. So they have students from between the ages of 17 or even lower than that to 25. What we've done is to build a pipeline for each winter. We meet with the social workers, we take all of their students, all of their clients or students whatever you want to call them. We put them through College Now and get them ready for remedial work. Usually, we get about 10 to 15% of our students from NGOs.

How would you describe the funding prospects or opportunities of BCC? Are you satisfied with the financial status?

Laughter!!! Is anybody ever satisfied with the amount of money they get? Community colleges in CUNY are funded in two ways: All of our operational expenses come from the city as part of the university because we are fully owned by the city or we get money from the state based on our full time enrollment. So there's a designated amount of money we get from the city every year which is not based on FTEs (full time registered students) For example, when we have 10,000 students, you get an equivalent money from the state that compensates you for that number of students, when we lose in enrollment, which means you're gonna get less money from the state. But the Governor has been generous. The Assembly has been generous as well. They're going to fund us at the 2020 levels, which means despite the fact we lost about 2000 students, they will still fund us at the 2020 model. This City is being generous too. I won't complain. I mean do we need more money? Obviously! With the COVID and the various stimulus money from the Federal Government has been very, very helpful. Some of that money (about 60%) went directly to our students to help them meet their financial needs. Some of that money we used in fixing air conditioners, our ventilation system, and buying COVID related materials to keep us going. So my worry is that unless we move our enrollment needle, the future doesn't look too good because again, it's a business if you're being compensated on the number of students that you have. That's why we have to work hard to bring back about the 2000 students we lost as a result of the pandemic. We just finished our retreat on Friday. We have to work hard to bring back most students back to campus otherwise we will be in trouble financially.

Do you have partnerships with organizations that work with you to raise funds?

We have donors, and we write a lot of grants. Some of these ancillary services we provide are not City money. For example, all of our recycling services, we get the money from the Peachtree Foundation, we write grants to different foundations that help us to provide necessary support services. The Food Pantry which we run comes from the New York Food Bank. So, we do write a lot of grants to different foundations for money. We just did a gala this June 1st and we raised \$450, 000. All of that money goes into scholarships. So, aside from money from the City, and the State, we have a Grant Office whose job is to look for money that we can generate. In fact, last year, this fiscal year through federal grants, city grants, I think we've raised close to \$11 million to support different initiatives. You cannot just depend on just city and state money to survive.

With this 2000 Student deficit that your college has because of COVID, there appears to be a trend whereby a lot of young people don't see the value of higher education. So you're not only fighting the economic obstacles post COVID, some potential students are getting the message that maybe it's not such a good idea to go to college because what's the point of college? So that's something I think your advertising campaign must emphasize, presenting to young people the value of a degree of value in higher education. Your thoughts!

You're gonna make twice the amount of money if you stay in school and get an associate's degree, then exponentially that's even going to increase if you get a baccalaureate degree, right. You're absolutely right. Yeah. Besides the economic downturn because of COVID, the number of high school graduates has been decreasing in New York for years. I mean, that's the next five years the number of students actually graduating from high school is going to be less. So the number of intakes where we used to get from, it's not as much and again for the last few years, most of our population used to come from new immigrants. Most of the 3000 West African students I was telling you are recent immigrants. But, because of the COVID, we have fewer migrants here. So that's one of the things that is affecting us too. So not only that position, the number of high school graduates in the Northeast is projected to decrease in the next ten years. It portends a gloomy picture for education.

Do you think that maybe the immigration policies of the government can also impact the number of people who come in?

CUNY doesn't ask for student immigration status for you to register for classes but you will not qualify for financial aid. However, I can say that during the 2016 through 2020, there were less immigrants coming from West Africa. I know most of them usually come to the Bronx. One of the things we try to do is that we go out into the community to build a network within those immigrant communities on 149th Street and 3rd Avenue. If you look at the last four years, there were less people that came through. There is an African NGO dealing with mental health issues. I'm hosting it because I'm hoping to get some students at the event.

Certificate Programs/workforce Development programs

The future of higher education depends on the ability of institutions to adapt rapidly to the demands of industry while also preserving the quality and reputation of their specialized programs. BCC continuing education programs and non-credit certificate courses could serve as the driving force to help train the workforce, skill acquisition, elevate new industry knowledge, and upskill professionals while also serving as revenue generators to balance institutional budgets. What's the status of short-term certificate programs in your college?

We still have continuing education. Through our continuing education we have short term certificate programs. In fact, one of the best examples I can give is Pharmacy Tech because people enroll for six months and if they pass the exam they go make \$25 an hour. During the COVID they were looking for people to fill those meds because nobody wanted to work. We have a certification program in Early Childhood. It's a nine-month program, six month program, usually they work in a daycare center. We have the Alcohol and Drug Counseling certificate program. In addition, we are trying to build those programs into credits. For example if you did Pharmacy Tech Certificate program, you could transfer to enroll into an Associate in Health Sciences.

Partnership Prospects

What I'm saying here is that as a public institution, especially as a community college, how do we broker with all non-governmental entities in town to further the mission of educating and promoting social mobility for members of our community? When we talked last time, I think I see what you're trying to do, and we welcome the opportunity to be partners with you. We welcome the opportunity to work with you and further the mutual causes and objectives of our institutions.



Dr. Uchenna Ekwo (R) presents a copy of the quarterly Journal of Media and Public Policy to President Isekegbe (L).

Tell us about your professional life. How did you get to be the President of BCC?

I'm one of those people that was very fortunate. From my perspective, I think America is one country that if you come in and God is on your side, you can succeed. I came to graduate school at Indiana State University in 1981 after my undergraduate education at the University of Nigeria. My goal in life has always been to be a teacher. I love teaching. So, I always saw myself as a teacher even growing up, I always wanted to be the classroom teacher. So when I came to

the US, I wanted to get a master's in science education because my background is in biology. My goal was to go back to Nigeria, teach science education, teach how to design science materials to teach science. So that's why my master's degree is in science. When I came in there, the program was supposed to be for two years and I did it in one year and the university gave me a fellowship in the Ph.D. program. At that time, I was a little bit naive. I said, why would I want to do this? I want to go back to Nigeria. He said to me, are you kidding me? We're gonna pay you \$500 a month, you're going to teach one class; you pay no tuition for up fees. They will give you two or three years to do your Ph.D. I jumped at the offer. I mean, I mean, I don't know of any other country anybody will do that for you.

My first job was with Hudson County Community College, Jersey City, New Jersey. They advertised for the post of Assistant to the Vice President for Academic Affairs. I have no clue what that meant. At the interview, they asked me: can you write? I think so, I responded. Can you represent me at meetings? I think so. Just tell me what you want me to do. I will go and I will do all of that. So they called me and said they told me they were gonna hire me. I told them I don't have documents to work. So they said okay, so they called the Vice President for Administration. Oh, we can help him, we shall file H1-B1 for him - the work visa for professionals. You work for 2 years and you get a green card. They filed for the B-1 visa for me. I worked with them for one year at a community college and just got a PhD. So I was in college. I worked for them from 1987 January to December.

At the University of South Carolina there was a job opening there and I applied as the Director of the Academic Center. This was the Coastal Carolina Campus in Conway, South Carolina. I didn't think I was going to get an interview. They invited me for an interview. And on my way back to Newark, the guys said we are gonna offer you the job and I said I got to talk to my wife first. By the way, I was offered the director of academic center position and I was going to be the first black person in the administration.

“I can solve problems”

I can solve problems. I think I'm better at problem solving or managing than leading. If you tell me there's a problem, I'll fix it or find a solution. So at Coastal Carolina, I was hired as Director of Academic Center, they moved me to Director of freshman program, became the director of interdisciplinary program within the Provost Office. And if there are issues, they will call me. But they were using me when I saw they bring in people at a higher pay of \$50,000. They hired me at \$33,000. So one day I went to the Provost and I said, you have hired me for six years and I'm still on the same salary. So they told me we're doing you a favor by completing your immigration working papers, we'll take care of you at the appropriate time. I went to the human resources office and I went to tell the president I'm leaving.

So, that's how I came back to the community college track – Sussex County Community College is way down in the northwestern part of the state of New Jersey. It's very quiet. It's a beautiful town. And it's a great community. So when they advertised for the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs and I looked at all of the things that they wanted, they were things I was doing at Coastal Carolina. I interviewed with the President in September of 1996 and was hired as Associate Dean, Academic Affairs.

At some point, there was an opportunity for Kellogg Fellowship, which was to integrate, improve diversity in administration in community colleges. It was a one year program. You are off campus once every month. They pair you with mentors in different community colleges across the country. The President volunteered he was going to pay for me. He asked me to apply and see if you will be selected and we are willing to take the chance on you. The fellowship was an eye-opening experience – sat with experienced presidents, how to manage issues, and leadership issues.

So as soon as I finished the fellowship program in 1999, I was getting headhunters calling me to be vice president of academic affairs and I was getting people calling me because that was part of the program.

There was an opening for the Vice President for Academic Affairs at Cumberland County colleges in Vineland, New Jersey. And the guy who was the president that I had met in the past informally called me and said that I should apply for the job. I applied and got the job. I was with them for 18 years. I served as the vice president for academic affairs for six years. Then served as president for seven years. It was a wonderful experience. I thought I was going to retire there.

In 2015 January, I applied for the position of President at BCC. I mean, I thought it was a joke. But I got a call that brought everybody to BMCC right at the World Trade Center for an interview. They had 14 candidates. You're gonna do speaker interviews, 90 minutes. You meet with the search committee and you can eliminate them right away ...so I went for the interview. I mean, the interview was really a conversation. We talked about remedial work, talked about lack of graduation, talked about a lot of things. I made the last three candidates and eventually was offered the job.



Americas historic figures on display at BCC's University Heights Campus - the only community college in the US designated as historic national landmark

Facts about Bronx Community College, City University of New York

Bronx Community College (BCC) is an institution of higher education that grants both two-year Associates degrees as well as a variety of certificate programs. BCC is a component of the City University of New York (CUNY). It is in the University Heights section of the Bronx on the former campus of New York University. The College is the only community college in the US designated as a National Historic Landmark.

The Borough of the Bronx is the lowest ranked county in New York State with low ratings in health services, education levels and great needs for mental health programs. Clearly, there is a great need to access college level educational opportunities at reasonable prices as well as access to professional certificate programs.

BCC has a current student body of 7000 students, down from its level of 10000 matriculants in the pre-pandemic period. This is a very diverse student body from the Bronx as well as Northern Manhattan. The two highest representative groups are from the Dominican community as well as more than 3000 West African students. The entire student body represents 70+ countries of the world. While there are undocumented students matriculated, they can take classes but are prevented by law from receiving scholarships or financial aid.

As previously indicated, the college grants two-year Associate Degrees in both Arts and Sciences. While these degree programs are normally designed for a two-year duration only 24% of BCC students complete their studies in this period. The majority of students (60%) complete their studies in six years while 30% complete their programs in three years.

The entering students present many needs both academically and socially. There are many requiring English as a Second Language (ESL) services as well as remedial language arts and mathematics support. As such, the college has modified its Core Basics curriculum to integrate the remedial practice thus providing knowledge as well as remediation. This presents an opportunity for its students to avoid the expense of a year's work solely on remediation while earning degree credits.

In addition, CUNY has developed a program of remediation entitled "CUNY Needs" which provides remedial classes for free. To accommodate its student body, this CUNY unit provides classes in the evenings as well as on Saturday and Sunday.

BCC reaches out to the surrounding secondary school community with its "College Now" program that offers college level courses with credit to high school students. They can earn up to 30 credits before entering college.

"BCC is the only community college in the US designated as a National Historic Landmark."

The motivation of BCC students is not to be taken lightly as 66% of the graduates move on to four colleges with the majority transferring to Lehman College and John Jay College of Criminal Justice. There are other students who will transfer to business programs at Baruch College as well as engineering curricula at CUNY in Harlem. BCC provides applied arts programs, of

which the nursing program is very popular. Among certificate programs the three most popular are Pharmacy Tech, Day Care Certification and Alcohol and Drug Counseling Certification.

The Center for Media and Peace Initiatives (CMPI), New York and Bronx Community College plans to establish a partnership for the mutual benefits of both organizations. College President, Dr. Thomas Isekenegbe told a visiting delegation of CMPI that the college welcomes a memorandum of understanding with the Center to publicize their great programs and initiatives as well as provide an outlet to offer programs that CMPI has the ability to disseminate.