

CUNYfirst's breakdown

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Disruptions at semester start

CUNYfirst, the University-wide computer system that handles everything from course registration to employee pay, promises on its homepage that you can sign in to the system “from anywhere, anytime.” But at the start of the semester it was more like “from nowhere, at no time,” CUNY staff, faculty and students said. The system crashed repeatedly across the university and was generally unusable on the first day of classes. Improvement was slow, with major disruptions persisting during the following week. As *Clarion* went to press in early October, intermittent problems remained.

“I had no access to attendance rosters, no access to room assignments, no access to anything!” said Julio Valentin, an adjunct lecturer in law and police science at John Jay College. Outages and slowdowns continued for about two weeks, he said, but “it seemed like forever.”

MELTDOWN

“Students couldn’t register for my courses,” a professor at Queens College told *Clarion*. “I told them to come anyway. As for me, I couldn’t get into any computer system in order to upload a curriculum, set up Blackboard, and so on.” Then the uploading of attendance records got corrupted: “So students were just dropped from courses in which they had properly enrolled and for which they had paid. They couldn’t get access to Blackboard after that, and couldn’t do their assignments.”

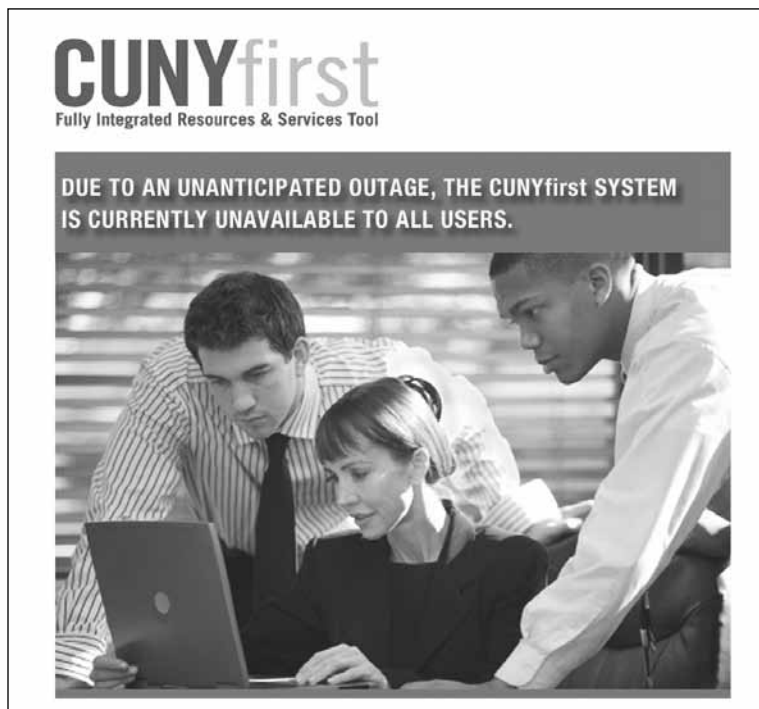
“I’ve never seen anything like this in all my days of working with computer systems and networks,” he added. “And I’ve been doing it since the 1980s.”

The CUNYfirst meltdown kept some students out of the classes they wanted, or out of CUNY altogether. “I was unable to make changes to my students’ schedules as needed,” said Victoria O’Shea, who works in the ASAP initiative at Queensborough Community College. “In the end, it left two of my students attending part-time. Another student, whose dismissal appeal was approved late, was unable to register for classes this semester.”

“Admissions were affected,” a longtime CUNY faculty member told *Clarion*. “Students were accepted and they paid and then they could not enroll. Some decided to go to other universities. Then, they struggled to get their money back. We lost students.”

“I’ve heard innumerable serious problems from students,” said Monique Whitaker, an adjunct lecturer in philosophy at Hunter. “There were students with financial aid that had been there but [was] suddenly reflected as not having been awarded. Another student was deregistered from all her classes without warning due to a CUNYfirst glitch.”

“A high volume of students simply wandered around outside my office



Above, a common sight this semester.

looking lost, and many of these students understandably asked for help in finding their classrooms,” said a HEO at a community college. Unfortunately, he could offer little help: “I was also not able to get into CUNYfirst to look up their schedules.” An assistant professor who described a similar scene was concerned about how CUNYfirst’s repeated breakdowns will impact graduation rates: “Students were wandering around lost and helpless. Is this how we increase persistence?”

More than 100 people responded within a few days to a PSC-CUNY survey on CUNYfirst’s problems this semester, raising a wide range of issues. Ordering supplies for a biology class was delayed so long that it almost forced the class to be cancelled. With students unable to register, classes that routinely fill up failed to do so. When adjuncts lost classes as a result, they lost a major portion of their income, while full-time faculty ended up with swollen teaching loads next semester.

Yediyah Langsam, professor of computer science and chair of the Brooklyn College Faculty Council, said that in discussions among faculty governance leaders there is universal dismay with the system: “Every single college, branch of CUNY said the same thing: ‘The disruption during registration, the most critical part of the semester for students, is totally inexcusable.’”

Because of these severe service disruptions, CUNY central administration extended the deadlines for 100% tuition refund and for late registration fees.

The outages were due to the system’s inability to handle the large number of users at times of peak demand. “We actually started seeing issues the Wednesday before classes started,” Christian Keck, CUNYfirst project manager at Ba-

ruch, told *The Ticker*, the college’s student paper. “We started seeing a sluggish performance on that Wednesday and we saw the system go up and down, kind of like a rollercoaster ride. One minute you had no issues, and the next minute it was extremely sluggish or you were unable to do anything, including log in.”

According to a CUNY administration statement, “Despite previous load testing, these problems arose during peak loads created by an unprecedented number of concurrent user sessions.” *The Ticker* reported that the University’s chief information officer, Brian Cohen, told a September 8 meeting of CUNY college presidents that CUNYfirst has been designed to serve as many as 10,000 simultaneous users, and prior to this year had never seen more than 7,000. But in responding to questions from *Clarion*, the administration declined to say how many simultaneous users the system had experienced this Fall.

TESTING, TESTING?

“Steps have been taken to ensure that these problems...do not recur during periods of peak demand,” the administration pledged. “Although Oracle conducted load testing at various points prior to the semester’s start, CUNY is taking a close look at how the testing was conducted. [CUNY] is also preparing to conduct its own load testing by recreating the problems, implementing fixes, and then testing at peak loads,” the statement added.

“While CUNY is undertaking many steps to make its system more robust,” the administration asserted, “additional costs [needed] to fund these efforts will be minimal.” When asked about the total cost of development and implementation of CU-

NYfirst, which various sources have put at figures ranging from \$250 million to \$600 million to nearly \$1 billion, the administration declined to answer. (Full text of the CUNY statement is online at psc-cuny.org/CUNYfirst-admin-response.)

“The trouble is that, even when it is online, CUNYfirst doesn’t work properly,” said Hunter’s Whitaker. “It’s hopelessly under-resourced and ill-suited to the user population it supposedly serves.”

“CUNY Central has to learn that with this excessive, blind push for top-down centralization that they so highly tout come demands on computing power that simply were not met,” agreed a professor at Baruch. The predictable result, he said, has been “crashes and crippling slowdowns.”

Complaints about CUNYfirst on the campuses certainly extend well beyond its crashes and slowdowns. “Due to CUNYfirst-related account problems, we had well over 250 students and a handful of faculty unable to access Blackboard course sites for their face-to-face, hybrid, and completely online courses for weeks into the semester,” Helen Keier, who manages support services for John Jay Online, told *Clarion*. “These issues are not due to Blackboard, but result from CUNYfirst.”

At City College students were retroactively being denied financial aid – sometimes aid that had already been awarded in the past Spring semester. Even students this semester in good standing with Pell and TAP grants were denied financial aid because of rigid and inaccurate definitions of “Satisfactory Academic Progress.”

“We must be the only university on the planet that came up with a computer system that punishes our best students,” said Jane Gallagher, professor of biology at CCNY.

This summer Gallagher began to see large numbers of student who lost their financial aid without warning. Gallagher, who stepped in and began volunteering once she saw the problem, says 900 students at City College were affected this Fall. The problem isn’t just a CUNYfirst issue, according to Gallagher, but it stems from how CUNYfirst connects with data from DegreeWorks and the financial aid software FACTS.

CCNY’s faculty senate passed a resolution opposing retroactive tuition bills and the removal of student aid because of “imposition of previously unenforced restrictions on course selection.”

As a result of such widespread problems, CUNYfirst has few fans in the University’s student body. “I can’t emphasize enough how much trouble [CUNYfirst has] caused me and my students, nor how much students despise this system,” says Whitaker. “And I’m very much with them on that.” A student-initiated petition demanding that CUNY

fix the system (at tinyurl.com/CUNYfirst-petition) has drawn about 1,000 signatures so far.

“I don’t know if CUNY administrators look at social media,” Communications Technology Assistant Professor Michael Branson Smith told *Clarion*. “The ire of students is unbelievable.... It’s really bad to see all this negative language about a product of our campuses.”

As the semester got underway, one student tweeted, “You know school starts tomorrow...because CUNYfirst crashes today.” Another, tweeting as @cunysecond, wrote, “If you having #collegeproblems I feel bad for you son. I’m logged into 100 different websites, and #cunyfirst ain’t one.” But while there were many jokes at CUNYfirst’s expense, student tweets about the system contain far more profanity than humor.

Faculty and staff also weighed in via social media. When the system went down on the first day of classes this Fall, Smith himself tweeted a remixed video clip he had created that shows a computer specialist hurling his laptop to the ground; Smith’s editing adds a large CUNYfirst sticker to the back of the computer. It quickly became a hit online.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Perhaps the most prolific and rigorous satire came from the parody Twitter account @CUNYfrist, created in the first days of the semester when CUNYfirst was crashing hard (see page 11).

Smith, who teaches at York College and also advises students, says not everything is bad with CUNYfirst. He says the system makes it possible to compare large amounts of data in the query viewer, which helps him track the growth of his program and identify graduating students who need to come into advising.

But others say that any such gains from a more centralized system will continue to come at too high a price; they argue that CUNY should pull back from the CUNYfirst project. “CUNY Central needs to provide or restore greater local control to individual colleges and campuses, so that local fixes can be accomplished by local IT staff who best know our needs,” insisted a professor at Baruch.

PSC Treasurer Mike Fabricant urged staff and faculty who have not yet done so to share their experiences and ideas on CUNYfirst by filling out the PSC’s brief survey about the problems this semester, at psc-cuny.org/form/cunyfirst.

“CUNY needs to change course on CUNYfirst,” Fabricant told *Clarion*. “And that has to start with listening to the University’s staff, faculty and students. Failure to do so in the design of CUNYfirst has cost the University hundreds of millions of dollars. It has saddled us with a broken computer system that hurts students, staff and faculty through delay and an inefficient explosion of time dedicated to what were once simple, quickly completed tasks. That’s a waste of money and human energy that our University cannot afford.”