

First Things

The University is streamlining procedures in finance, human resources, and student affairs. You'll start seeing changes this summer.



Kingsborough Community College financial professionals taking training at the Brooklyn Borough Training Center at Brooklyn College.

THIS IS THE SUMMER of CUNYfirst, the launch of the new generation of information technology that will revolutionize the underlying University business systems that serve students, faculty and staff. When completed, it will streamline the way almost everything is done, from registering for courses to hiring personnel and paying bills

Sometime in July, after months of preparations, training and testing, something akin to a new University “checkbook” will go live. Managing revenues and expenditures, this new financial data storehouse will collect and crunch current and new financial information and report back and forth among the University’s 135 business units. And not a moment too soon: The new checkbook replaces a system designed and installed in the post-Watergate era.

Over the next two years, other compatible systems will gradually be added, such as procurement, budgeting, and cash management.

Similar initiatives will be launched next year to manage human resource data, and

eventually, student services. The goal is to raise a more efficiently managed University to the ranks of a national leader in higher education for delivering core business services.

“The CUNYfirst project will provide a new, University-wide suite of policies, processes and information systems in order to streamline current practices and help us become more efficient,” said Chancellor Matthew Goldstein.

Many of the front-line managers and staff are training on these new systems this summer at specially designed centers at four colleges throughout the city. All told, more than 6,000 employees will receive training on the new system in the coming years. By 2012, when the various phases of CUNYfirst are completed, the changes will affect the entire community of more than 35,000 faculty and staff and the 400,000 degree and continuing education students at 23 campuses.

“There has never been a University-wide project that has involved so many front-line people on a decision-making level,”

said Allan Dobrin, executive vice chancellor and chief operating officer.

The five-year, \$250 million CUNYfirst project (“first” stands for Fully Integrated Resources & Services Tool) will replace the “legacy”

University-wide computer systems—best known by the abbreviations such as SIMS, the student records system, and CUPS, the human resources datahouse. Others that vary from campus to campus will be replaced by Oracle Corp.’s PeopleSoft interactive processes, specially configured for CUNY needs.

CUNYfirst is “the first real test” of such computer processes implemented simultaneously across a large university, according to Brian Cohen, associate vice chancellor for technology and University chief information officer. “At CUNY, whatever we do, it’s for all the university at the same time,” said Cohen. “We’re not doing it in pockets, except for the student module”—the student administrative services, which will be rolled out in four separate waves over four years. Bill Correnti, who has worked 29-plus years at CUNY,

says he has witnessed big changes before, but “nothing like this.” Now the executive director of budget and financial planning at Kingsborough Community College, Correnti is among those who helped configure the current financial processes at the University, but affirms that it’s time for a change. “It’s been a long time coming,” he said. “We’ve been holding things together with spit and bubble gum. [CUNYfirst] will take a lot of training and it’s going to provide a lot of new things to learn, but it can only have positive end results.”

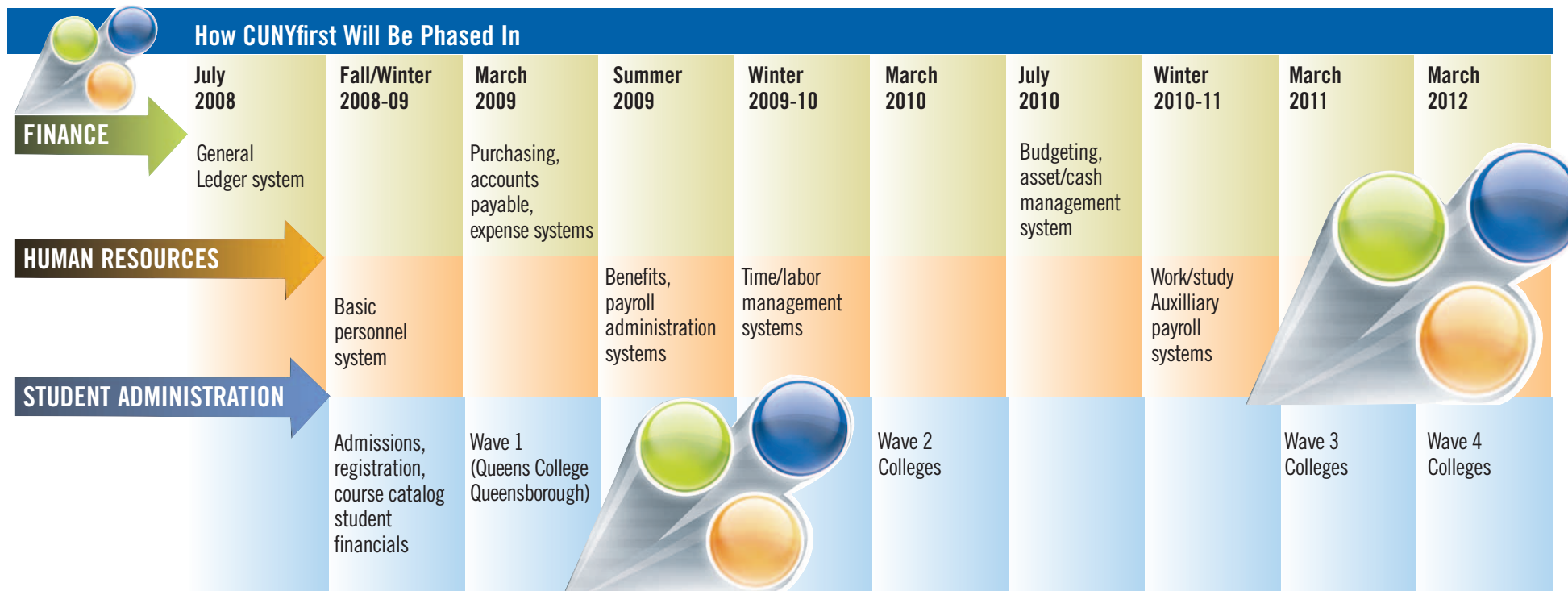
CUNYfirst is actually the project name for a generic computer-industry approach known as Enterprise Resource Planning. This approach uses software and processes that integrate three “pillars” or functions—finance, human resources and an organization’s specific line of business—in CUNY’s case, student services.

After more than 400 staff members working in finance are trained, the University will overhaul its hiring, personnel management and benefits administration systems. In the future, all job applications will be handled online. And within a year, the entire CUNY community will be given access to a new system to check out their benefits, pay information and employee records.

In the spring of 2009, CUNYfirst student systems that will assume functions

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such as the admissions process, registration and records management are scheduled to be configured for Queens College and Queensborough Community College. The systems will be rolled out on other campuses in three successive waves, until completion in 2012.

“We want to be able to provide a set of tools for students, faculty, staff and administrators to navigate the system,” said Ronald Spalter, deputy chief operating officer. For example, if a student at Hunter College wanted to take a class at Baruch College, he or she would be able to go online and register for the course. But setting up an orderly process to manage this huge transition has not been easy. Each campus has assembled a team of CUNYfirst liaisons and experts who are

responsible for managing project tasks, identifying problems and gaps that need fixing in current systems and helping prepare people for change.

Kingsborough’s Correnti, for example, was part of a University-wide group of about 20 staff members who received early training to help smooth the way for change. Even after the checkbook system goes “live” this summer, Correnti and others will continue reviewing it for about a year. (You can track the progress of CUNYfirst by visiting the project’s website, <http://first.cuny.edu>.)

“The whole education process to get a 35,000-member community ready for this activity is transformational in some ways,” Spalter said. “It’s beyond what we’ve ever done. We’re going to have to train 6,000 staff members and we want to do it in the most humane way possible. These are people who have been responsible for our success. It’s a matter of engaging and encouraging them, doing everything possible to help them understand how the new system works. We owe it to them to properly prepare them for the future.”

While the goal of CUNYfirst is to streamline systems and provide better “customer service” to all members of the University community, that does not mean that CUNY is seeking to shrink staff through technology, Spalter said. For example, as the University speeds up the process of rehiring and paying adjuncts through online applications, officials expect to save time and paper, gradually “redeploying people to use them more wisely,” he says, but not cutting jobs.

Ultimately, “this is a huge business-processes change that everyone will have to go through,” Correnti said. “It’s extraordinary. There will be a lot of good return on investment. It’s going to be the smartest thing the University has done since I’ve been here.”

CUNYfirst’s Top Ten

- 1 Streamline online course registration across the University
- 2 Pay adjuncts, freelancers and contract workers faster
- 3 Enable students, faculty, staff to view their records online
- 4 Allow online applications for University employment
- 5 Speed up rehiring of adjuncts via online applications
- 6 Create online requests for financial aid
- 7 Provide more flexibility in all interactive processes
- 8 Reduce by half new employee processing time
- 9 Redeploy staff for most efficient use
- 10 Standardize administrative terminology throughout CUNY



Q&A: CHARLESSIMIC U.S. POET LAUREATE

“I don’t think ever before has there been so much interest in poetry.”

U.S. POET LAUREATE Charles Simic was Baruch College’s 10th Sidney Harman Writer-in-Residence this spring semester. A Belgrade native who arrived in America more than a half-century ago speaking little English, he has since garnered numerous honors that include the 1990 Pulitzer Prize for his poetry collection *The World Never Ends*, the 2007 Wallace Stevens Award for Poetry and a MacArthur Foundation “genius grant.” He was previously professor emeritus at the University of New Hampshire.

Q: How do you perceive America’s current interest in poetry?

Charles Simic: Tremendous. Much more so than when I started in the 1950s. There are a lot of poets, a lot of good poets. A lot of poetry is being written, a lot of literary magazines are being published. Web sites. Writing programs almost in every college and university. Creative writing classes even in some high schools. I don’t think ever before has there been so much interest in poetry.

Q: When you moved to the United States you were 15 and a non-English speaker. When and in what language did you start writing poetry?

A: I started writing in English. I knew some English when I came, not much. It wasn’t very good. I came in 1954; by spring of 1956, my last semester in high school in Oak Park, Illinois, I started writing poetry. I wrote in English because I wanted to show my poems to my friends and I couldn’t write in my native language because they wouldn’t know. I didn’t know what I was doing; nobody does. You start kind of fumbling around. You write about this, that, the city, the life of the city, love poems, God knows what.

Q: Who were some of your early inspirations?

A: Well, when I started I didn’t read as much poetry as I read fiction. But the first poets that I really liked are William Carlos Williams,

Wallace Stevens, Hart Crane, T.S. Eliot — everybody loved T.S. Eliot.

Q: Tell us a little bit about your position as Baruch College’s Sidney Harman Writer-in-Residence.

A: It was a great honor to be invited. This is a very distinguished position at Baruch College and to be part of that was very, very attractive. The students are terrific. I’ve been teaching poetry workshops for 35, 36, maybe even more years. You see [students] in conferences, teach them how poems are made, how they’re revised and all the aspects of poetry. [Baruch] students come from a great ethnic and racial mix; most of them are children of immigrants. So this is wonderful. I just really adore it. It reminds me of the days when I was a kid, what they used to say, off the boat. These kids are just off the boat. So I’m kind of reliving my youth.

Q: What contributes to the urban motif featured in most of your poetry?

A: Well I was born in the city, Belgrade. I lived afterwards in Paris. When I was back in the United States, I lived in New York, I lived in Chicago. I lived in New York for many, many years. I still spend a lot of time in New York City. So cities are really in the heart of my imagination. I constantly think about the city. Just as a poet, we have to choose where we feel more at home and I feel very much at home in the city of New York.

Q: You also write most of your poetry with plainspoken observation. Why is that?

A: I try to make my poems accessible, to make them almost disarming in their approach. They seem at

first simple and then hopefully as readers read the poem, they’ll begin to see that there’s more to it. But a welcoming style that says come in, make yourself at home. But then strange things begin to happen.



Charles Simic, and below, the title poem of his latest book

That Little Something.

The likelihood of ever finding it is small.
It’s like being accosted by a woman
And asked to help her look for a pearl
She lost right here in the street.

She could be making it all up,
Even her tears, you say to yourself,
As you search under your feet,
Thinking not in a million years...

It’s one of those summer afternoons
Where one needs a good excuse
To step out of the cool shade.
In the meantime, whatever became of her?

And why years later do you still,
Off and on cast your eyes to the ground
As you hurry to some appointment
Where you are now certain to arrive late?

