

2009 Professional Staff Congress/CUNY Questionnaire for NYC Candidates

Candidate for City Council
(Borough President, City Council, Comptroller, District Attorney, Mayor, Public Advocate,)

City Council District: 16

Borough: Bronx

Name: Helen Diane Foster

Campaign Address: 1000 Grand Concourse, #4M

Bronx, NY 10452

Telephone #: 718-992-2379

Email Address: hdf7@aol.com

Political Party Affiliation: Democrat

Occupation: Councilmember

Current Employment / Employer: New York City Council

Are you an incumbent: Yes No Number of years in office _____

Under the current term limits law, how many more additional terms, after this one, will you be able to serve? 0

Education:

High School: Hyde School in Bath, Maine

College: Howard University in Washington D. C.

Graduate / Professional: City University of New York School of Law (CUNY).

1. I received support to pay for college from:
(Please check all that apply)

- Pell Grant**
- NYS Tuition Assistance Program
- Scholarship
- Student Loans
- Family**
- Self
- Other Source _____

2. In my view, paying for public higher education (CUNY) should primarily be the responsibility of:
(check only one) Government

- Students
- Parents / Family
- Government
- Employers
- All of the above**

(Please attach additional sheets as necessary to answer the following questions.)

3. Public funding to public higher education has fallen sharply over the last two decades. Since 1991, NY State funding per student for CUNY senior colleges fell 14% and, for CUNY community colleges, it fell by 25.6%.¹ Though NY City began to restore funding to CUNY community colleges five years ago, proposed budget cuts this year will eliminate this advance. What would you do to increase public investment in CUNY?

Public investment in CUNY is vital for the continuation of quality, affordable higher education in New York City. As Councilmember, I urged the Mayor to ultimately roll back the proposed cuts to the CUNY operating budget and reinstate the Vallone Scholarship. In addition, I support increased federal funding for CUNY, in order to maintain small classes and innovative programs for students.

4. More than 50% of CUNY students come from households with annual income below \$40,000, but students will pay 15% more on average next year to attend a CUNY senior college and 14% more to attend a community college if tuition hikes go through. Overall, student tuition makes up 40% of CUNY's total operating revenue and the CUNY Master Plan ("CUNY Compact") calls for regular, annual tuition hikes.

4a. Do you support or oppose the current tuition increases? Oppose

4b. Do you support or oppose the CUNY Compact's call for annual tuition increases? Oppose

4c. What would you do to relieve the burden on students and families to pay for CUNY?

Tuition at CUNY senior and community colleges needs to remain as low as possible. One of my priorities is working to obtain federal, state, and city funding for CUNY as well as identifying ways to cut wasteful spending. If this funding is made available, more cash will be freed up and this can be used in areas where students are helped the most.

4d. Some economists argue that earning a college degree enables a student to get a good-paying job upon graduation, and, therefore, government policy should be structured around an expectation of students to finance their education by taking out loans. Do you agree or disagree with a higher education financing policy that is structured around students taking out loans to finance tuition increases? Why or why not?

I do not support the financing of higher education being structured around student loans. I support education financing by keeping tuition as low as possible and providing scholarships to students in need.

¹ Fiscal Policy Institute Report: "New York State's Underinvestment in Public Higher Education," January 15, 2009

5. CUNY enrollments are higher than at any other time in its history, but in 1975 (the last enrollment peak), CUNY had 11,500 full-time faculty and now it has 6,800. Similarly, there has been a decline in the number of professional and support staff. CUNY now has 9,000 adjunct faculty and 1,000 adjunct professional staff who are part-time and low-paid. The dramatic decline of the full-time workforce and reliance on an exploited and over-stretched part-time workforce compromises the quality of education and the University's ability to deliver educational services to students.

- 5a. What specific policies would you advocate to provide CUNY with the resources to hire more full-time faculty, counselors, professional and other staff?

Hiring additional faculty is one of the wisest higher education investments we can make. We need to encourage our city, state, and national leaders to recognize that securing more talented and dedicated instructors is only going to produce more quality students, but will also raise the level of academic standards at CUNY. If re-elected, I will continue to work to obtain the financial support CUNY needs to increase full-time faculty and give well-deserved pay raises.

- 5b. What specific policies would you advocate to improve the wages and working conditions of part-time adjunct faculty and staff that currently provide half the instruction at CUNY?

Adjunct professors, like all workers, should have economic security and access to unemployment benefits. I support legislation that would remove the unfair impediment that prevents part-time adjunct college faculty, who are otherwise eligible to receive Unemployment Insurance benefits, from receiving benefits when they are out of work.

6. What are your views on New York City's current tax structure? If you are elected, what specific tax and revenue policies would you advocate?

In times of economic hardship, I do not support raising taxes or balancing budgets on the backs of working families. I have worked in the City Council to cut waste and fraud from the City's budget, to incorporate technology in order to improve efficiency and curb unnecessary spending, so more of our resources can be directed where they are needed most.

7. What fiscal policies would you advocate to help New York City maintain public services during the current recession?

Maintaining public services, including but not limited to quality CUNY education, is vital to the continued success of our City. In the City Council I will continue to fight for more police officers on the streets, better funding for fire stations, as well as a higher-quality service in public hospitals throughout New York City.

8. In your view, where does CUNY stand, as a priority, in New York's economic development and economic recovery?

In the area of New York City's economic recovery and development CUNY has an vitally important role. Providing quality, affordable higher education to thousands of students a year increases the productivity of our economy and prepares students to make important contributions to our society.

9. Academic freedom is important because adherence to it allows colleges and universities to best serve the public interest. For this reason, the university must be a place where all ideas, even those that are unpopular, may be freely expressed and debated without interference from management, trustees or public officials. Yet, for short-term political advantage, politicians have undermined academic freedom by publicly attacking unpopular speech by faculty and calling for punitive action by college or university managements. Such public calls go beyond simple disagreement.

Academic freedom is crucial to the continued success of CUNY, as well as all colleges and universities in New York. Politicians across the country should stop trying to gain political advantage by attacking unpopular speech. Freedom of speech is essential to the fabric of our society and must be embraced by all in public office.

- 9a. Do you agree that it is necessary to uphold academic freedom at CUNY and other colleges and universities? Will you agree to avoid taking unfair political advantage of unpopular speech on campuses?

Yes, I agree that politicians should avoid at all costs taking unfair advantage of unpopular speech.

- 9b. Academic freedom also extends to pedagogical practices, academic standards and curriculum and program decisions. Who do you believe is best placed to make determinations about these matters: faculty, college administrators, community organizations, private businesses, or public officials?

Academic decisions are best made by those with the deepest and most intimate experience and it is clear that those individuals are CUNY faculty and administrators. Public officials should fight to help CUNY grow and succeed, and not to micromanage the institution.

10. Do you believe that public employees should have the same right to strike as private employees? Please explain?

Public employees should be entitled to strike just like their counterparts in the private sector. In any incidence where labor rights are being denied or ignored, it is imperative that any employee be able to exercise their voice and desire for equality and fairness.

11. In general, public employees have had more generous health and pension benefits than private employees. Some politicians have used this disparity to argue for a diminution of public employee benefits and blamed New York's fiscal problems on such benefits. Do you believe public employees' health and pension benefits should be maintained, reduced, or enhanced? Please be as specific as possible.

Public employees' benefits should be greatly enhanced. In addition, increased health and pension benefits will encourage other talented individuals to join the public workforce in service to their fellow New Yorkers.

12. Incumbents, please list your committee and subcommittee memberships and indicate if you are chair:

Parks & Recreation (Chair); Aging; Education; General Welfare; Health; Lower Manhattan Redevelopment; Public Safety

13. Please list the bills you have introduced or co-sponsored in support of CUNY and higher education, or other actions you have taken in this cause:

Each year I have worked on the budget negotiating team to restore funding to CUNY and all programs and scholarships that directly help the individual schools or students.

14. Please list other legislation that you have introduced or co-sponsored in the last two legislative sessions:

I sponsored legislation that prohibited landlords from discriminating against tenants' based on lawful source of income. Studies have shown that landlords discriminate against holders of Section 8 vouchers because of prejudices they hold about voucher holders. I have also sponsored legislation that would further prevent an owner from harassing their tenants. In addition, this legislation prevented owners from using force or making express or implied threats that force will be used against any persons lawfully entitled to occupancy of a dwelling unit, and barred owners from commencing repeated baseless and frivolous court proceedings against tenants.

15. Please describe other actions you have taken in support of union-related initiatives:

I support paying prevailing and family-sustaining living wages which are essential to the life of New York City. I oppose privatization of city services as a means to balance or further cut budgets. In addition, I also support worker rights and the right to organize and assemble free of intimidation or retaliation. I support investing in new technologies that will create the next generation of reliable and sustainable union jobs.

Return completed questionnaire and brief personal biography to:

Professional Staff Congress / CUNY
61 Broadway, Suite 1500
New York, New York 10006
(212) 354-1252
Fax: (212) 302-7815
Attention: Amanda Magalhaes
amagalhaes@pscmail.org

We encourage you to send the questionnaire and attachments via email or by fax.

Councilmember Helen Diane Foster was born and raised in Bronx County. Her parents are former Councilmember Rev. Wendell Foster and Mrs. Helen Foster, a retired principal. She is the younger sister of Ms. Rebekah Foster, President & CEO of Ujima Sound Productions.

Helen Foster attended Hyde School in Bath, Maine, Howard University in Washington D. C. and City University of New York School of Law (CUNY). While attending law school, Helen Diane Foster participated in an international exchange program at the University of Havana. She served as a summer associate at the Atlanta Legal Aid Offices.

Upon graduating from CUNY, Ms. Foster worked as an Assistant District Attorney in the Manhattan District Attorney's Office. She eventually moved into the private sector where she served as an Assistant Vice President for Legal Affairs at St. Barnabas Hospital for a number of years.

Helen Diane Foster was the first African-American woman elected to a City office from Bronx County in November of 2001. The 16th Council District is made up of Highbridge, Morrisania, and Bronx Heights. She was re-elected with 98% of the vote.

Councilmember Foster is the Chairperson for the New York City Council Committee on Parks & Recreation and serves on the New York City Council Committees on Aging; Education; Health; Lower Manhattan Redevelopment; Community Development and Public Safety. She is the former Co-chair of the Black, Latino and Asian Caucus of the New York City Council.

Councilmember Foster is not a "yes, sir" type of elected official. She has taken some courageous stands in the City Council like voting against the New Yankee Stadium and water filtration plant where the needs of development were valued above the needs of the community.

Councilmember Foster serves as a member of the Board of Trustees of Christ Church and is also a member of the nation's oldest Black sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., Tau Omega Chapter, Harlem, New York. Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. is a social service organization involved in civic, community and political affairs throughout the country and the world. She is married to Eric McKay, a writer and film maker, and has a 12 year old bonus daughter, Aminah McKay.