

CUNY First At Its Worst

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The struggles that Queens College students and staff have endured as a result of CUNYfirst incite the question whether the system was worth nearly \$350 million.

The new updated system was designed to replace Qusar, better known as eSIMS – the previous system CUNY used for registration and tuition payment. CUNYfirst was created to connect all 23 CUNY campuses with one system and enhance student and staff security.

Before all CUNY campuses become a part of CUNY's unified database, Queens College and Queensborough Community College were selected to test the system.

"Get rid of [CUNYfirst]. Go back to the old system. I mean that sincerely," said Mirian Green, a math department secretary for over 35 years. "Qusar scared us when it first came in, but it worked. If they would have updated the Qusar and put [CUNYfirst] in as a backup, it might have been something good."

Although the estimated cost of CUNYfirst ranged from \$335 to \$385 million, no officials have confirmed the figure. Board members and officials refused to comment on any financial issue regarding CUNYfirst.

Furthermore, the system itself has led to a loss in revenue for the school this semester, according to Associate Bursar Patricia Finlay. This suggests that hundreds to thousands of students have not paid their tuition, including students covered by Financial Aid.

Financial Aid refuses to put in payments and the bursar refuses to take payments until the glitches are fixed.

"CUNYfirst was not allowing me to pay my bill online so I went to bursar to pay there and they told us we can't pay there until they have their problem fixed. It's like a Catch-22," said graduate student Marwan Ali. "[CUNYfirst] is a joke."

According to the bursar, Queens College hasn't collected millions from students, which has directly affected the budget.



PHOTO BY SWEETINA KAKAR

After investing nearly \$350 million to the CUNYfirst system, schools like Queens College are willing to work through the technical and financial problems it has encountered.

QC has not put any holds on student records, allowing students who have not paid this semester to register for the summer and fall 2011 semesters.

As a fully integrated system, CUNYfirst was supposed to calculate student tuitions and update balances and changes to bills. Ideally, these changes would facilitate the jobs of bursar and financial aid administrators.

"I wondered how it was going to help us [staff], but I expected it to be helpful," said Associate Bursar Finlay.

Bursar claims that they can't do their jobs because CUNYfirst disallows them to make reports or change student information.

The new system failed to record if a student had paid full or any part of their tuition this semester. Some tuition bills were doubled or extra fees were added to accounts. The system was also unable to add or subtract payments – forcing bursar staff to go through up to 78 entries per account to acquire the correct tab.

"Earlier in the semester, [CUNYfirst] said I owed a lot of money even though I had already made the payments," said junior Stephanie Aristizabal. "Then, I received an email saying that they were having trouble with the financial aid money and distributing the checks. I don't know if it's all related, but I know a lot of people are not happy."

Bursar assures the student body that no one is getting a free

ride even if they are no longer enrolled at QC next semester. As soon as CUNYfirst will allow, the bursar will contact the students who have not paid their balances, allotting them a new deadline to do so.

If students refuse to pay before the deadline, a hold will be placed on their accounts preventing them from using any QC services, including registration. The same penalty will be applied for those graduating at the end of the semester.

"Everything takes a long time to investigate. I don't know why they went to CUNYfirst," said Finlay. "I'm amazed at the patience of the student body as we go through this process."

The bursar's office was forced to manually sort out checks and receipts to record student payment history, and provide manual refunds to those owed money. Some bursar staff worked from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Friday, and some came in on Saturdays to try and manage the workload.

Employees are getting paid overtime when applied, but they receive the same pay from the nine-to-five shifts even though the workload has increased.

Processing a payment using a check used to take approximately 20 seconds. With the new system and its glitches, this process now takes about four to five minutes.

"We're totally frustrated. We had stress management come in," said Finlay.

According to the math secre-

tary Green, on Nov. 23, 2010, just after CUNYfirst was introduced on campus, 23 secretaries from the QC Academic Department retired due to the issues and difficulties CUNYfirst caused.

The glitches in the system go beyond tuition payments, according to Green. Registering students for classes has proven to be just as difficult.

"It takes three times as long [to register] and sometimes [students] aren't in the system. [CUNYfirst] sometimes flips account numbers and registers the wrong student," Green explained.

With an already tight budget, CUNY's expenses continue rising with extra payroll for staff members who deal with the new workload and the programmers who try to fix the glitches.

CUNY does not plan to revert back to the old system, but they also do not have enough programmers or the time to make immediate improvements to the current system. Programmers spend their days dealing with issues specific to a certain day's need, not the entire system's glitches.

As of today, only Queens College and Queensborough Community College have made the transition. Moving forward, CUNY plans to expand the program to all CUNY campuses as an official CUNY database.

"I can't imagine how much worse it is going to be when they put other schools on to the system," said Finlay.