

# Creating Connections

A career center at Brooklyn College provides “the aunts and uncles, the friends of the family that these kids don’t have.”

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Published Feb. 20, 2020 Updated Feb. 22, 2020

*This article is part of our latest Learning special report. We’re focusing on Generation Z, which is facing challenges from changing curriculums and new technology to financial aid gaps and homelessness.*

At an event at Brooklyn College’s Magner Career Center a few years ago, Marge Magner herself was introduced. “A student came up to me and said, ‘You’re alive!’” Ms. Magner said, laughing. “I thought you had to be dead to have your name on a building.”

Ms. Magner, 70, is alive and well — as is the center that bears her name. Not only did she contribute the funds to launch it in 2004, she also remains active in helping to promote its mission: to provide advantages to students who often have not had many in their lives.

Brooklyn College, part of the City University of New York system, has traditionally educated those from what Ms. Magner jokingly calls “the real Brooklyn” — not the borough’s regentrified neighborhoods of million-dollar brownstones, but rather working-class neighborhoods like Midwood, Flatbush and Crown Heights.

When Marge Magner attended Brooklyn College, “most of the women on campus were going to become teachers.” Sarah Blesener for The New York Times

“Let’s be honest,” Ms. Magner said. “Most of the kids from the better schools have some form of infrastructure to help them with internships and jobs. I know that because I get lots of requests to help family members who are from elite schools. And I’m always happy to help them.”

But the approximately 13,000 full-time students at Brooklyn College — 75 percent of whom depend on some form of financial aid and 45 percent of whom are from families in which neither parent completed college — typically do not have that kind of access.

“These kids can’t ask their parents to help them with job connections,” she said. “That’s not their world.”

Certainly Ms. Magner couldn't. She grew up in Crown Heights. Her father was a lieutenant in the New York City Police Department; her mother taught kindergarten. At the time she attended Brooklyn College, "most of the women on campus were going to become teachers."

Ms. Magner decided to major in business, but she admitted that at the time she really had no idea what that involved. "To me, a business was the bakery, the butcher and the candy store around the corner," she said.

She managed to succeed, but she realizes that the "who-you-know" factor is as critical to the career success of Generation Z students as it was for previous cohorts. And that's why she tries to recruit her fellow alumni to become involved with current students through the center.

"I tell them, 'We're the aunts and uncles, the friends of the family that these kids don't have,'" she said.

Such ersatz family members can sometimes help students in ways that real ones cannot.

"My parents came from a tiny town in Mexico," said Karina Gomez, a senior who grew up in Sunset Park. "Neither of them went past middle school."

When it came time to look for internships and other résumé-building opportunities, Ms. Gomez said she "felt lost." But meeting with staff and alumni through the Magner Center helped her learn management skills that she used to rise to the presidency of the college's chapter of the Association of Latino Professionals for America. The experience paved the way for her internship with the New York City Department of Finance.

Karina Gomez, 22, said the Magner Center at Brooklyn College helped her learn management skills and find an internship. Sarah Blesener for The New York Times

“When I was in college, the only thing you went to the career center for was to look at job postings,” said Brian Fitzgerald, chief executive officer for the Business-Higher Education Forum in Washington.

That has changed, and more college career offices now offer an array of services, including one-on-one mentoring, job shadowing and help identifying internships. “These kinds of services are critical to first-

gen students,” he says, adding that research has shown students who participate in such programs are more likely to complete college.

What sets the Brooklyn College model apart is the presence of someone like Ms. Magner. “There are unfortunately too few people like her,” Dr. Fitzgerald said. “Most of the people who are very successful in finance and banking come from privileged backgrounds, go to elite institutions and their philanthropy is generally focused on their alma maters. So it only reinforces the advantages.”

Since its inception, the Magner Center has had an impact: According to an annual survey of recent graduates by the college, the percentage of students who had internships while attending Brooklyn College rose to over 40 percent in 2018, up from 23 percent in 2003 (the year before the center opened).

While Ms. Magner continues to contribute stipends for student internships, the college now finances most of the operations of the center. Working with its director, Natalia Guarin-Klein and her eight-person staff, Ms. Magner has helped mobilize many of her alma mater’s successful alumni.

Through the center, Brooklyn College graduates who work at organizations like JP Morgan, MSG Networks, Ernst & Young, New York City’s Human Resources Administration, the Brooklyn Navy Yard and Estée Lauder have provided internship and job opportunities to current students.

One who has been both a beneficiary and a mentor is Shikshya Khatiwada. Her parents came to the United States from Nepal, and she grew up in the Midwood section of the borough, where her family moved when she was 15. As a Brooklyn College student in the early 2000s, she felt out of her depth at the prospect of applying for internships and jobs.

“I’m an immigrant,” she said. “I had no idea how to operate in a world full of graduates of elite universities.”

She decided to visit what was then the new Magner Center, and was mentored by Ms. Magner, who offered her an internship as a research analyst.

Now Ms. Khatiwada is a senior director at the IT consulting company Avanade, and she continues to collaborate with Ms. Magner as an alumni mentor at the center. She also hired a recent Brooklyn College graduate, and in February, organized a Brooklyn College Career Day at Avanade’s Manhattan offices (an event that Ms. Magner attended).

Ms. Khatiwada said her company already holds such events for more elite private universities. “Now I’m helping to build a similar pipeline to Brooklyn College,” she said. “Someone has to say, ‘These students are just as good.’”