First TEDxCUNY Event Explores Idea of Access

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NEW YORK—Access was what brought Jake Levin from New Hampshire to New York City for higher education.

Three years ago, Levin had narrowed his college choices down to Carnegie Mellon in Pennsylvania and the Macaulay Honors College at the City University of New York (CUNY). Levin, now a junior, chose the latter and intended to pursue a career as a theater producer.

“IT came down to an accessibility thing for me,” Levin said. He could get a full merit scholarship at CUNY, or pay $45,000 annual tuition to go to school in Pittsburgh. “How could you pass that up?”
Along the way, he took classes out of interest and curiosity and found himself immersed in political science and philosophy. So he switched to a double major concentrating on both subjects.

Then last summer, Levin had an epiphany. He had taken a class on enlightenment and it opened his mind to completely new concepts. It prompted the next question: how could he spread his ideas to the rest of the world? How could he make this knowledge more accessible?

Levin was familiar with TED, a nonprofit focused on “Ideas Worth Sharing.” TED began as a one-off conference in 1984 to discuss technology and design. As of 2012, TED Talks garnered over one billion views online and the talks are hosted in over a hundred countries and languages. The talks are hosted by one speaker at a time and each has up to 18 minutes to share an idea.

And TEDx conferences, launched in 2009, were spinoffs that could be independently organized by anyone. Columbia University had put on a TEDx conference, and New York University had done so as well. Levin thought it was time CUNY started one too.

“We really need to build and start the idea-sharing vehicle for the CUNY system,” Levin thought. “TEDx conferences are incredible vehicles for spreading knowledge and ideas throughout the world.”

A year and a half later, his idea came to fruition. On Nov. 16, students put on the first TEDxCUNY conference with 16 speakers and the theme of access.

Access

For the first conference, Levin wanted to tie the theme to CUNY’s mission of access.

“We belong together because we share this extraordinary TED mission of spreading ideas and being involved in the community, bringing together people from all kinds of disciplines and experiences and culture,” said Macaulay Honors College Dean Ann Kirschner.

CUNY was formed in 1847 as a free academy for the city of New York. Over time it expanded into several schools throughout the five boroughs and eventually incorporated tuition. But its mission of providing affordable higher education remained.
CUNY Chancellor J. B. Milliken at the TEDxCUNY conference at Macaulay Honors College in Manhattan, N.Y., on Sunday, November 16, 2014. (Catherine Yang/Epoch Times Staff)

Up to that point, higher education had been exclusive, said Chancellor J. B. Milliken. “Access is at the heart of what we do at CUNY and what CUNY does for New York.”

Today about 40 percent of the students come from families with household incomes of about $20,000. About 60 percent of the students pay no tuition. And 80 percent of the graduates leave with no federal loan debt.

This year CUNY reached record enrollment numbers with 274,000 students seeking a degree.

About 400 students attended the conference on site, but the program was also shown at livestream parties on every CUNY campus and was available online.
Knowledge

There were four sessions with different focuses on access: your mind, your community, your world, and your future.

The talks kicked off with a discussion of knowledge. Chemistry professor Spiro Alexandratos proposed the question to the audience of whether reality can be known, and concluded the answer was found in the intersection of chemistry and philosophy.

Alexandratos began by saying the theory of modern thought started with philosopher George Berkeley, who essentially thought there was nothing man knew for sure, and thus anything is possible. And as chemistry developed, that was proven wrong, according to Alexandratos.

The atom, for instance, was eventually discovered, but whether or not it really existed was of no importance to chemists. The fact that the data fit the theory was workable enough. “Molecules were simply symbolic language,” Alexandratos said. Atoms were believable but could not yet be experienced.

"Access is at the heart of what we do at CUNY."

Chancellor J. B. Miliken

But as technology developed, there were more and more systems and methods one could use to get at the idea of atoms. And eventually they were visible. Atoms and molecules could be experienced, and it turned out they were structured just as the theories said they were.

“This knowledge, I would propose, is certain,” Alexandratos said. In essence, seeing-is-believing. Reason in knowledge is proof of certainty. “Everything is not possible.”

CNN anchor Don Lemon took a very different subject as the focus of his talk on accessing your mind. Lemon, who is currently in Ferguson, Mo., covering the shooting case, recorded his talk in advance for the conference.

The Ferguson case, similarly, has been a story about people fighting for access, and longing to be heard, he said.

“The fight for access has and always has been the story of America,” Lemon said. He was born in 1966, at the height of the Civil Rights movement. His father became a lawyer, but Lemon felt he was to become a different sort of advocate. He pursued a career in journalism with the mission of advocating for the truth.
It has forced him to challenge his personal beliefs on a daily basis, Lemon said, and strive to be open.

“Through that process, invariably, I am made to reassess societal norms, to resist conformity, to buck group-think, to evolve,” Lemon said. And in that state of mind, he is truly emancipated, Lemon said.

He encouraged the mentality, but acknowledged the difficulties. “Society acts just like gravity does in pulling you into the fold,” Lemon said. But “when you own your own mind, no one can own you.”

**Ideas**

From there, the talks broadened. People talked about projects they worked in to create and connect communities. Speakers shared global ideas and gave talks on the cosmos and the growing Asian countries. The conference ended with talks on accessing the future—topics like rebranding science, forgiveness, and narrative history.

Tim Decker, a performance painter from Florida, told his story about how he quit his six-figure-salary job at an ad agency to follow a—literal—dream. Despite having no formal training or interest in art, he felt compelled to make the painting in his dream a reality.

Through his journey he learned that, for fear of ridicule, so many people do not share their ideas. “And that basically limits the ideas that go into the world,” Decker said.

The hope and goal of the conference is to encourage the opposite.

“I hope that the theme of our inaugural conference ... will be an effective vehicle for provoking thoughtful discussion and creating change through the spreading of ideas,” Levin said.

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