CB9 members criticize underused services provided by joint partnerships between Columbia, community

Based on 2018 data, local workers accounted for about 8 percent of total work hours for construction on the Manhattanville campus. Only unionized workers are hired by the University, shutting out most community members, according to board members.

BY STEPHANIE LAI | SEPTEMBER 24, 2019, 11:09 PM

Members of a local New York City advisory board representing Morningside Heights discussed concerns regarding underutilized community services provided by Columbia University, including undergraduate scholarships and the employment center for local residents, at a meeting on Tuesday.

The meeting, held by the Strategic Planning Committee of Community Board 9, met to review services provided by the 2009 Community Benefits Agreement for the upcoming year. Of the 50 community board members, only three were present at the meeting.

The CBA aims to compensate the community for the stress caused by Columbia’s multi-billion dollar project to expand to a 17-acre campus in West Harlem, also known as Manhattanville. The contract outlines the University’s $150 million allotment to the local community, which is intended to be dispersed in increments for affordable
housing, housing rights, updating community facilities, employment and training programs, and youth services for the local community.

However, due to a lack of advertising to the entire community, board members said that a number of these services have not been utilized to their full potential.

Victor Hugo, the strategic planning committee chair, said that Columbia’s agreement to provide undergraduate scholarships for local aid-eligible students has not reached its targeted audience. Under the program, Columbia recruits up to 40 students from the community and provides a scholarship for aid-eligible undergraduate students.

However, Hugo said he felt the University focused their recruitment canvassing at high-performing schools rather than less privileged high schools in the districts.

“I looked at where they were doing outreach, and it looked like they were looking at the more skilled high schools in the community and not John F. Kennedy or Brandeis [High School],” he said.

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The University has published information regarding what ZIP codes the students lived in; however, Hugo said he wished the University would disclose their names to the community board.

In addition, Hugo said not enough community members utilize the Columbia Employment Information Center, a community-based resource for residents to get advice on their job search. He proposed putting a table outside of the Broadway streetfront building to flyer.

The committee also critiqued the number of community members the University has hired as construction workers for the Manhattanville project. According to the CBA, 40 percent of hours worked will be completed by minority, women, or local workers, and at least 35 percent of construction spending will be paid to MWL subcontractors.

However, based on 2018 data, local workers accounted for about 8 percent of total work hours.
“It’s dismal,” Hugo said. “If you look on these construction sites, the workers are not from the community. I recently received some data and it looked like about 3 percent of the workforce over the last four to five years have been people from the community.”

Hugo said he has been approached by young people in the community asking how to get employed to work on the Manhattanville site.

The problem: only unionized workers are hired by the University, shutting out most community members, he said.

[Related: How Have Local Hiring Targets Shaped Columbia’s Manhattanville Construction Site?]

The West Harlem Development Corporation, an organization created in 2009 to oversee the CBA, started an apprenticeship program this year to get community members trained and unionized so that they can have a pathway to get hired by the University.

“I went to one of the WHDC apprenticeship program meetings, and the room was packed,” he said. “I’m hopeful that this apprenticeship program will increase community representation on these construction sites.”

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