Sylvester Arenas has always wanted to be an author, and he believes the road to success is paved through the City University of New York (CUNY). A senior at Baruch College on Manhattan’s East Side, Arenas has been studying journalism and creative writing and dreaming of the day his name will grace the cover of his first novel.

But he concedes the path to this new career has its share of seeming obstacles, most visibly a changing marketplace and trying economic conditions that have left many of his friends – and him – on unemployment lines and scrambling for work to make ends meet and be able to continue studies.

As he researches his next academic step, graduate school, he is looking no further than the lines that bound New York City’s five boroughs. CUNY, he says, will serve as his main option for the next three years of study – and for reasons that speak to both his current financial predicament and his future endeavors.

“First of all, affordability,” concedes the 41-year-old, who subways from Queens to Baruch for classes. “It can be very costly when you have a wife or family, and what attracted me to CUNY were proximity and cost. All of the CUNY schools are close by, and all of these resources are open to me.”

Arenas, who aims to cap his undergraduate studies this fall by studying poetry in the college’s creative writing program, is considering several CUNY graduate programs at Hunter College and City College of New York, both in Manhattan, and Brooklyn College.

“It is very competitive now at the master’s level,” he says, noting his discovery that one program had more than 3,500 applicants for a dozen open seats. “Obviously, they are looking for creativity in applicants. It’s important for me to get a master’s degree because it will give me that many more opportunities.”

The City University of New York system is bounding with such opportunities, particularly for students considering graduate studies. It is a sprawling system of schools – the nation’s largest urban public university – unfolded across New York City and many of which deliver both undergraduate and graduate programs. Among CUNY’s 23 institutions are 11 senior colleges, the Graduate School and University Center, City University School of Law at Queens College, the four-year-old CUNY Graduate School of Journalism in the heart of midtown, the CUNY School of Professional Studies, and the CUNY School of Public Health.

All CUNY senior colleges except Medgar Evers College and the New York City College of Technology, both in Brooklyn, offer master’s degrees. Several institutions additionally offer doctoral degrees in collaboration with the graduate school (which alone offers 30 doctoral programs). Among the senior colleges, which exclude the system’s six community colleges, there were 156,096 full- and part-time students enrolled in fall 2007; of that number, 29,445 were enrolled in graduate studies, with 21,089 studying part time and 8,356 studying full time.

Hunter College had the steepest numbers of graduate students with 5,127 enrolled in the fall of 2007, and most of them, 4,103, studying part time. Not far behind was the Graduate School and
University Center with 4,543 enrolled that year, but with most of the students, 4,091, attending full time.

CUNY’s graduate programs in some cases are now unable to accommodate all of the students applying to study. And systemwide, there are hurdles faced by CUNY schools in attracting not only the best and brightest but the most diverse graduate-level student population. Total undergraduate enrollment in fall 2008 was 213,293 students, and of that, Hispanic enrollment was 60,307, or 28 percent, consistent with the size of the Hispanic population of New York City. But that pipeline to graduate studies seemed to disconnect, with such enrollment halving to 14 percent, or 4,413 students of the total 30,980 enrolled in graduate studies that season.

It’s a concern that affects other higher education institutions across the nation and has not eluded notice by administrators in the CUNY system, even as they witness strides at an undergraduate level.

“From my perspective,” says CUNY Vice Chancellor Jay Hershenson, “most of the good news at CUNY with respect to students is at the undergraduate level because there have been steady increases in Hispanic students enrolling at CUNY. The undergraduate level is where Hispanic student enrollments are at their highest levels in CUNY’s history.”

CUNY reports that from fall 2003 to fall 2008, the percentage of Hispanic students seeking master’s degrees has grown significantly. In fall 2003, 2,618 had sought master’s degrees, and that number rose by 23 percent to 3,220 by fall 2008.

But, he cautions, that success hasn’t necessarily carried over to the doctoral program. The number of Hispanic students seeking those degrees amounted to 273 in 2003 and 360 in 2008; while that represents nearly 32 percent growth, Hershenson says the national portrait is far from rosy.

“The bad news for higher education in general, and CUNY is no exception, is the fact that 2.9 percent of all persons holding a Ph.D. in the United States were Latinos, and that’s a bad news story for all of higher education in the country,” Hershenson says. “The fact that less than 3 percent of Ph.D.-holders are Latinos is nothing short of an educational catastrophe.”

At CUNY, he says, 7 percent of the Ph.D.s conferred at the graduate school in 2008 were awarded to Hispanic students while other nearby private universities encountered even lower numbers.

“There is a severe shortage in the United States of America nationally as well as in New York of Latinos who are on track to become doctoral students,” he says, stressing that this leads to fewer Hispanic faculty. “When you consider the fact that one of the best routes to becoming a faculty member involves holding a doctorate, now you begin to understand one of the reasons there is a shortage of Latino faculty members at universities in the United States.”

Dr. Laird W. Bergad, Distinguished Professor of Latin American and Puerto Rican Studies at Lehman College in the Bronx and the graduate school, says CUNY’s central administration, and the leadership at the graduate school, have made an unwavering commitment to strengthen the
ranks of Hispanic faculty.

“In terms of diversity, there is a sincere and genuine commitment by the central administration,” says Bergad, who has been with CUNY for 25 years. Those efforts deliver a message to students. But, he notes, many students still face financial obstacles.

“I don’t think this is a CUNY problem; it is a fundraising problem. I cannot tell you how many extraordinarily talented students I have encountered who successfully completed a B.A. degree but can’t go further because of the fairly large debt burdens they have accumulated. They work full time to pay back their loans, so there is a gap,” he says.

Bergad maintains that one path toward leveling the playing field is to create fellowships to recruit talented students and bring them into the fold of a Ph.D. program. Bergad is engaged in raising funds to create these five-year fellowships at the graduate school.

The nearly 50-year-old graduate school, which last year awarded 410 doctoral degrees and 39 master’s and is facing a noticeable increase in applications, is attractive to Hispanic students because it has a Ph.D. program in Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian literatures and languages, the Center for Latin American, Caribbean and Latino Studies, and the Bildner Center for Western Hemisphere Studies.

“Since each student stakes out his or her own scholarly specialty in his or her doctoral dissertation, students in a wide range of fields can focus their studies on specific Hispanic issues related to his or her academic program area,” says David Manning, the graduate school’s spokesman.

The graduate school proves an enticing destination. Says Manning: “We offer some of the most highly regarded Ph.D. programs in the country, public or private; are committed to bringing underrepresented minorities into the academy; and are located at the heart of one of the world’s most thriving cosmopolitan environments.”

Hispanic enrollment fluctuates by campus and by program. At Lehman College, 31 percent of graduate students were Hispanic in fall 2008. And, for example, of the 1,358 graduate students in Lehman College’s Graduate Teacher Education programs, 421, or 31 percent, were Hispanic. Lehman, a liberal arts school, prepares students for careers in teaching, social work, business and the health sciences, among others.

“We have certain programs that are in high demand, based on the number of applications we receive, and some are newly instituted, such as the Master in Public Health,” says Lehman’s president, Dr. Ricardo R. Fernández, past chair of the American Council on Education and of the Governing Board of the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities. “Last fall, we started a Master in Business in Science, which is attracting a number of students.”

Fernández cites the location, its close proximity to counties north of the Bronx, as well as low costs and specialized master’s programs as attractive to applicants. “It is a combination,” he says, “with its accessibility and affordability.”

While students may lament escalating academic costs, CUNY students interviewed credited the reasonable costs of the CUNY system. Tuition for master’s programs ranges from $3,680 to $5,405 while tuition for doctoral programs ranges from $815 to $3,290 per semester, and law school tuition is $5,120 per semester. Lehman’s is $3,700 per semester (if a student is full time and a resident of New York).

Fernández notes that the master’s programs are not always isolated at individual institutions but link to one another within the broader CUNY system. A Master in Public Health, which administrators note is a popular pursuit because of stronger market demands for qualified employees, was initiated at Hunter College and stretches to offerings at Lehman and Brooklyn colleges.

“It is the only Master of Public Health program in a public education institution in New York City,” Fernández says. “Prior to its creation, none existed, and so it is very much popular and in demand. Health is a booming business, and it is the biggest business in the Bronx. A lot of students are looking to health as a potential field of employment.”

Despite this demand, Fernández admits that the school cannot accept all candidates. “It is not an open door,” he says. “It is very competitive for that program as well as the Master in Social Work program. We had close to 300 applicants to the Master in Social Work program, and we only were able to admit a fraction of that.”

Lehman College offers more than 30 master’s programs in arts and sciences, health fields and teacher education, and collaborates with the graduate school’s 24 doctoral programs. The largest graduate enrollment is in teacher education programs.

Fernández arrived at Lehman in 1990 and, as he reflects on evolving demands on higher education, he says CUNY has adjusted well to the times by recasting the net and designing creative programs. For instance, Lehman houses a Ph.D. program in plant sciences, complete with a greenhouse and labs, in partnership with the nearby New York Botanical Garden; currently 50 students are enrolled in the program, unique among the CUNY schools.

“The university has placed a great emphasis on graduate education in the senior colleges,” he says, and proudly states, “We were the first institution within CUNY to have our graduate programs accredited by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education in 2002. This is a seal of approval by a nationally respected agency and means we have a high-quality program.”

Another offered by Lehman is a speech-language-hearing sciences program, which draws four to five applicants for every slot (Lehman only admits 30 to 40 students annually into the program). Fernández notes the eventual financial rewards reaped by students who launch careers in this field.

The diversity of master’s programs is systemic: Brooklyn College offers eight master’s degrees and a number of doctoral programs through the graduate school. The City College of New York offers 13 doctoral degrees with the graduate school and 47 master’s degrees and houses the Dominican Studies Institute.

Hunter College offers graduate degrees in many different programs of study. In addition to being home of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter has a well-known School of Social Work that currently is relocating, and a CUNY School of Public Health will officially open its doors next year, making Hunter a Ph.D.-granting institution.

CUNY’s new Graduate School of Journalism offers a Master of Arts degree in journalism, an intensive, three-semester program designed to prepare students for a wide variety of careers in the field of journalism.

John Jay College of Criminal Justice offers master’s degrees in eight fields of study, including criminal justice, forensic science and the new international crime and justice, as well as doctoral programs in forensic psychology and criminal justice. The School of Professional Studies, located at the Graduate Center, offers a graduate program in immigration law. And the College of Staten Island offers 12 master’s degree programs, including in nursing, as well as a number of doctoral degree programs with the graduate school.

Queens College offers master’s degree programs, including a Master of Arts in Spanish as well as doctoral programs, such as in foreign language education, through the department of Hispanic languages and literatures and the graduate school. York College has a master’s program in occupational therapy. And the CUNY School of Law is the premier public interest law school in the country and ranks among the nation’s top law schools in clinical training.

Jenny Rivera, an associate professor of law at CUNY’s School of Law, founded and serves as director of the law school’s Center on Latino and Latina Rights and Equality, or CLORE, which promotes law reform scholarship, public education and litigation in support of expanded civil rights, and issues impacting the Latino community in the United States.
A former administrative law judge of the New York State Division of Human Rights and a former member of the New York City Commission on Human Rights, Rivera notes that Hispanics are woefully underrepresented in law schools across the nation, often because of academic barriers.

“The LSAT [Law School Admission Test] does present a challenge for many Latino students,” she says, noting that an additional obstacle is the lack of role models and services that can lead students to consider pursuing a law degree.

“Many students don’t have connections to anyone who is a lawyer and anyone to turn to for information, so it can be difficult to get a message out about why a law school is an option,” she says. “I am hoping that with new Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor there will be more visibility of the law profession and this will motivate more students to pursue this profession.”

The law school has fashioned a number of programs to enrich the graduate school experience. For example, there is a Center on Diversity in the Profession, which works to strengthen Hispanic representation in the legal arena, and a mandatory clinic program to ensure that students practice and simulate real-life legal experiences, often working with members of the public. Such clinics focus on immigration, women’s human rights, health law, economic development and equality.

“They meet with clients and have sessions. It is a great experience,” she says.

The law school additionally created a targeted initiative, the Pipeline to Justice Program, which identifies students not accepted initially and provides intense academic assistance to prepare for the LSAT and eventual acceptance.

“One of the hallmarks of this school is its commitment to pedagogy,” Rivera says. “Over the 13 years I’ve been here, we have continued to evolve in our teaching, in our curricula and in our teaching methodology. We have gotten better in the way we do our teaching, so we identify what are the skills our students need and better prepare our students.”

That speaks to the law school’s mission, to train students to be lawyers in service of the public. The mission of the school, Rivera says, is exemplified by its motto: Law in the service of human needs.

Speaking of the new Supreme Court justice, she says, “She is a tremendous role model for Latinos and Latinas. She sends a message that resonates. I do think that although this is a tremendous moment for the Latino community, unless we continue to work hard to prepare students and educate students on what they need to put themselves in the best position to succeed in law school, then we are not going to see an increase in those numbers. Desire is one thing; actualizing, implementing and getting results is another thing.” She pauses, then adds, “And I hope we don’t let them down.”

CUNY doesn’t appear to be letting students down in its offerings. While it has increased offerings — bolstering health programs and creating the journalism school — it has seen astronomical growth in applications and enrollments in several fields.

Hispanic enrollment, from fall 2004 to fall 2008, has jumped in business, management, marketing and support services by nearly 70 percent, in public service and social service professions by nearly 54 percent, and in security and protective services by almost 33 percent.

Most seeking graduate degrees are enrolled in education programs. In fall 2008, 1,519 students were enrolled in these, a 10.9 percent increase from the 1,519 enrolled in fall 2004. At Lehman College, for example, as of fall 2009, the graduate programs with the largest enrollment were early childhood and childhood education, middle and high school education, social work and nursing.

Dr. Edwin Meléndez, professor of urban affairs and planning at Hunter, says that has been an important aspect of the CUNY experience. Meléndez is director of CUNY’s Center for Puerto Rican Studies (Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños), based at Hunter College.

“We offer many, many programs, and for the most part, compared to other programs in the nation, we have a more concerted effort to recruit Latinos,” he says, noting CUNY’s Latino Recruitment Initiative. “We have a good chunk of Latino faculty at Hunter, and that makes a big difference.”

Meléndez stresses the importance of ensuring diversity in the programs that often attract greater numbers of Latino students, such as health professions, education and social work. He says that philosophy validates what students bring to the classroom beyond books.

“It is not just that a school is open to the recruitment of Latino students but also, at the pedagogical level, that professors are being put to good use. The Latino faculty has grown substantially over the last decade at CUNY,” he says. “From the top down, there is a recognition of what Hispanic faculty bring to the training of our students, specifically at the graduate level.”

The three-year-old Latino Faculty Initiative has elevated such faculty ranks on several campuses. At Hunter College alone, one department had four new, recent Hispanic hires. “The initiative will have a discernible impact over the next few years,” he says.

That is a noticeable aspect to Amalia Torrentes, whose interest in public policy blossomed during her undergraduate studies at Hunter College.

She is now a part-time student in Baruch’s Master of Public Affairs program, taking three courses on public affairs, economic and public policy and public management while working as a full-time assistant to the director of the CUNY Institute for Virtual Enterprise, Leadership, and Social Entrepreneurship, and also assisting the executive director of the Center for Economic and Workforce Development.

Of her busy schedule, which also includes leading the recruitment efforts for CUNY’s Coalition for Students with Disabilities, she says, “It’s because I want to do so many things.”

Speaking of her experience on an graduate level, she waxes enthusiastic. “There are so many opportunities for students to go beyond the classroom and impact the lives of people. It is taking what we learn in the classroom and applying those lessons to real-life experiences.”

“My passion is child welfare,” she says. “I have always wanted to help people and families. I love anything having to do with children.” The coursework is anything but easy, but she views every challenge with aplomb and sees a future helping to craft policy that will improve public services. “I would say I have a different way of thinking. Even though I knew about policy and how it works, in my research class I learned about different studies and how to determine what is credible and what is not. If ever I want to evaluate a program, I could ask the critical questions that I have been taught.”

Arenas, as well, says he has had a rewarding experience at CUNY, not only because of his academic experiences but his financial ones.

“The CUNY system is a good value for your money,” Arenas says. In the coming months, he will file his applications for graduate schools, and hopes his drive, creativity and academic record will win him a coveted seat in a fine arts and creative writing program.

Arenas, recently laid off from an Upper West Side car rental agency, is receiving unemployment until he lands permanent work, hopefully at a publishing house.

“Even with a bachelor’s degree, it can be very difficult to secure a job,” he says. “I want an edge. I want to say I have a master’s degree to show that I made the extra effort and commitment in my chosen field to attain my degree.”

“What I really want to be is a novelist,” says Arenas. “That has always been my goal, to do something creative. I used to write songs for an independent record label two years ago — and wrote poetry as well. I’ve always wanted to do something that made me happy. I have seen many people in careers that make them happy; they are doing what they have always wanted to, and I want to be one of those people.”

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