

Tanya Domi: Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project recorded at the graduate center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi: This week's guest is the graduate center's interim president, James Muyskens. He is a distinguished educational leader with a commitment to public higher, education both as a teacher and administrator. This marks his return to the graduate center where he taught philosophy at the beginning of his career, and later served as university professor following his 12 year presidency at Queens College. Welcome to the Thought Project, President Muyskens, and welcome back to the graduate center.

James Muyskens: Delighted to be here.

Tanya Domi: Now you've been here for a few months. Can you give us some of your thoughts about the graduate center and being back here in CUNY again?

James Muyskens: I'll tell you it's really dynamic and invigorating. My re-introduction was actually the dissertation showcase back in May.

Tanya Domi: Oh, you were here for the [crosstalk 00:01:21]?

James Muyskens: I was here for that joy and I went and it was amazing to see those people, the diversity, hear them talk about their dissertations. So I saw the students after they completed their work. Then of course we've had orientation sessions now, so I've had a chance to see the students coming in, and I must say if you feel discouraged about the future, this is a real antidote to that. It's great to see the kinds of students we have here and the passion they have to study and to learn.

Tanya Domi: It is exciting in that the first day of the semester was Tuesday in the academic year, and there was a lot going on with the new leadership here with you, and at heading up CUNY with a new chancellor. It's a really exciting time to be at CUNY.

James Muyskens: I think it is. In fact, one of the first people I talked with on the faculty was Cathy Davidson, because this year the chancellor is going to take the kind of work she does in pedagogy and active learning and try to talk about this across the university. I'm very excited about that because that shows the kind of contribution this graduate center can make to the university and beyond.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, the future initiatives is very exciting and I think Professor Davidson, she's done a great job of laying a track down across the system. And some of the stories that you hear about the young people that are participating, it's very exciting.

James Muyskens: It is. I also just happened to be at Tony Rowe's lab. He does brain research.

Tanya Domi: Oh yeah, neuroscience, yes.

James Muyskens: Neuroscience, met his colleagues. Just another really exciting thing, cutting edge, making a difference.

James Muyskens: And then also in June I took a trip to the advanced science research center. Now there've been a lot of growing pains, but that is really an exciting place and we've got wonderful people there. So this is really, as I said, dynamic and invigorating.

Tanya Domi: So I certainly agree with you about the ASRC and I've been told by several of those scientists that lead the initiatives that this is the only center of its profile anywhere in the world.

James Muyskens: Yeah, I've heard some really good things about it. So we're going to have some fun really developing that.

Tanya Domi: So what are your priorities for this academic year? You're interim, you're here during the search for a new president. I've been told that you have no intention of treading water, but you want to move some things forward. What are the those priorities and projects that you have in mind for the graduate center?

James Muyskens: Oh, you're right. I don't want to tread water. I'm not good at that. If an institution stands still, it falls behind. So as interim, I'm very much aware I am interim. Certain things one perhaps cannot do, but we can certainly strengthen our relationship with the colleges, and that's with Cathy Davidson project that we're doing, but other things, and having been a president at Queens, I know some of the challenges they face from our policy, so that'll be a key thing. Also, we're so fortunate. I found that we have some people here who are really excited about improving our services, becoming more streamlined in how we process things. I think that's really important to do before the next president comes so the president can inherit a really well functioning organization. But of course the biggest challenge for us is we had yet another budget shortfall, and we have to deal with that in a way that doesn't lose our momentum. So that's a big challenge.

Tanya Domi: And really probably undercut the mission as well.

James Muyskens: Exactly. So we'll work with everybody on that and so that's a big priority.

Tanya Domi: Speaking of important projects, the graduate center this year is going through the Middle States review, the commission on higher education in reviewing the graduate center and its accreditation and affiliation with Middle States. What

are your plans to ensure that the GC meets that goal, and we hope even exceeds those standards required?

James Muyskens: Well, I'm determined that we really do well and we exceed those standards. We have some really good work already done. A self-study is underway. In fact, in a day or so there'll be a report from me about the progress we've made and we're looking forward to the time table. No institution really says, "I love a Middle States or an accrediting review," but what it does for us, and this is perfect timing before the new president comes in is, forces us to do a self-study. What are we doing well? What are we not doing well? Where can we improve? How could we improve? Those are the questions underlying an accreditation visit.

James Muyskens: The other thing that makes this both complicated but especially exciting is it's not just the graduate school that's being reviewed, but it's the university center. It's the other schools like McAuley or the J-school or-

Tanya Domi: The CUNY BA.

James Muyskens: All those.

Tanya Domi: All those school programs, right?

James Muyskens: Right, right.

Tanya Domi: People don't like to go through a review, but it seems to fit your intention to really tune up the graduate center in preparation for an eventual successor to you. So in that vein, how do you plan to support the search for the next president? What's your role, if any?

James Muyskens: I'm not involved in the selection.

Tanya Domi: I see.

James Muyskens: And I shouldn't be. But what I am eager to do and feel my charges is, is to put this institution in the best possible place so that an attractive candidate that the institution, the community really wants, will say, "I want to come." So I'm going to address any problems I see to try to make sure that those are not impediments for our next president deciding to come here.

Tanya Domi: That's really important. I think in the last several years it's been challenging. As you mentioned, the shortfall in the budget that occurred a few times in the past since my tenure at the graduate center, which is a little less than seven years. So this has been a challenging time in American public higher ed. I know you've made comments about that. We've seen the trend across the country where public higher ed is being cut.

Tanya Domi: I think that the Alaska, University of Alaska-

James Muyskens: Oh, terrible.

Tanya Domi: ... example is absolutely horrific. There is potential, speaking to a colleague actually in Alaska, there's potential they're going to lose their accreditation. They definitely have to cut down on campuses and given that Alaska so huge, that's really going to affect people's access.

Tanya Domi: Universities seem to be under attack and there's a parallel track here of this crisis on individual student loan debt and in growing dissatisfaction. Parenthetically saying that with public higher ed attacks, political in many instances in terms of ideology and discussions around free speech, but this is a very difficult moment, and you as a philosopher who embrace rationality, there's a lot of irrational discourse happening. What do you think about this moment?

James Muyskens: It's an incredibly challenging time. In general, the negative view we have in the public I think is partly our fault. We lost the narrative. Not too many years ago people thought of higher education as a public good, and then it became more a private good. If it's a private good, then makes sense people pay for it, and that kind of got us into that spiral. And the fact that so many people have huge debts, even if it's not true for CUNY students, has been a big black mark for us.

Tanya Domi: It's had a corrosive effect, right, has it not?

James Muyskens: It definitely has, and some people are saying, "Why do you need a college education?" But whenever I've talked with any such person, they're never talking about their own kids or their grandkids. There still is a real belief that education makes a difference.

James Muyskens: But the other problem, this is a huge social economic problem, is higher education, although unintended, often has been a roadblock to upward mobility rather than what it was meant to be, the door to new opportunity.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, it's an interesting time. I grew up when everybody said, "I'm going to go to college." I'm a first generation graduate, neither of my parents went to college, and studies show that particularly with respect to CUNY, that it is a great social mobility mechanism to the middle class. But today, college loan debt exceeds that of credit card debt in America. It's 1.5 trillion dollars. How do you think we get that narrative back? What do you think, as somebody who's had all this experience coming back into the system this year, what do you think of somebody that knows so much about higher education? How do we reclaim that narrative that you have spoken of?

James Muyskens: I think we have to go back to real basic things. If we're going to be a thriving democracy, we need an educated citizenry. We need people who can't be conned. We need people who know what the truth is, who know how to ask the right questions.

Tanya Domi: Critical thinking.

James Muyskens: So we need all of that just to be a democracy that's thriving. But then, America is losing its way and at least it's prominent position in the world. To make sure that doesn't continue, we need people who are highly qualified. That's why we need graduate education. And if you look at what made the U.S. such a dominant force after World War II, it was because there was a collaboration between business, a government, and universities and the university role was so significant. Unfortunately, the narrative has not picked that up. So many people have thought it's just entrepreneurs who created Microsoft or Apple. You wouldn't have either of those without all the university and government research and government support.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, this is really troubling to see how corrosive it's become. And now speaking of rationality, this whole dismissiveness of climate change where is an existential threat to our very existence, you can see how it's affecting young people and the millennials who are really running with this, like the 14 year old who won the Nobel Peace Prize. With respect to this issue, very soon it's going to be climate change week in New York City during the U.N. General Assembly, and even here at the graduate center, we're going to host an event, a side event. This lack of rationality could end up really destroying the earth.

James Muyskens: I would never have thought as I went to graduate school and started as assistant professor teaching and as a philosopher, emphasizing the enlightenment and the importance of reason and thinking clearly and knowing what questions to ask, that we would come to this point. And it is really an existential threat. If we don't really get ahold of the issue of climate change, life will be diminished far worse for our children and grandchildren.

Tanya Domi: New York City got a taste of it during Superstorm Sandy and a number of our faculty and students have been really engaged around the aftereffects of that. It is a very challenging time without a doubt, and it'll be interesting to see what happens during the U.N. General Assembly week, which is dedicated to climate change, and I think that we'll be talking to some of our scientists who're going to come on this program and talk about it. Where do we go from here?

Tanya Domi: You as a person, a CUNY person, you are a tried and true bleed CUNY blue person. You've come back. It's the largest urban university system in the country, the third largest in the country following UC's California, SUNY, and CUNY being the largest urban university in one city. 25 colleges, 58 years of existence it's pretty unbelievable. What a jewel.

James Muyskens: Yes.

Tanya Domi: What a jewel. How do we keep getting support? Albany needs to wake up to this fact of the jewel here in New York City.

James Muyskens: Yeah, it's so distressing that we don't have more support. If you look at the national studies, Cal State system and CUNY are the two that stand out for upward mobility, for making it possible for students to really achieve that American dream. We have got to say that again and again and again, and we have to hope that there's enough change in politics and in how politicians and thought leaders talk, to see that that's something we cannot lose. So many other institutions, some of the privates are actually exacerbating the problem of lack of mobility. They're promoting a kind of inequality. We're not, and so I just have such a passion for the mission of CUNY. That's in fact what brought me back each time I've left.

Tanya Domi: You left.

James Muyskens: I was so happy some years ago in Georgia where I was, I didn't have to suffer any winters, but when I was asked if I'd be willing to consider being President at Queens College, it was the mission that brought me back.

Tanya Domi: I see. That makes sense. I have been around CUNY now seven years and actually this afternoon at four o'clock I will step into my first CUNY classroom as a professor at Hunter College. I'm thrilled about doing that. Teaching human rights is just something I've done uptown at Columbia for many years as well, but the CUNY student body is what is so thrilling about New York City too. Diverse from all over the world and as some of our sociologists right here in this building, Nancy Foner has written about New York City, one out of three is either an immigrant or a child of an immigrant. This too is a really challenging time for those folks in our classrooms.

James Muyskens: It is. It is.

Tanya Domi: So you've already told why you think it's so important to be here. Given everything that you're thinking about and that you're focusing on in this interim role, what kind of message do you have for faculty today? There's been a lot of ups and downs in the last several years. I think people knowing that you're a CUNY alum in many ways are taking a deep breath.

James Muyskens: Well, I still think having taught for many years myself, there's no more rewarding job. And when I've talked with some students who've come through the graduate center, what they talk about is how a professor reached out to them or either motivated them or said this is good work, lets move forward. Who collaborated with them, who consulted with them, who were mentors. And then years later as I can do, I see some of these students thriving. It doesn't

get much better than that. In fact, I have been really impressed talking with faculty here how despite the setbacks we get again and again with budget and that is frustrating, there's still a can do spirit and there's still a desire to make sure that they take the time as faculty to work with the students and help the students achieve what they can.

Tanya Domi: Because that's the real mission of this place.

Tanya Domi: So is there anything that you've been surprised by in your return? I know you missed, you said that you missed New York, you've returned to the city. Anything that pleasantly surprised you?

James Muyskens: I'll tell you one thing that pleasantly surprised me is how many people I know. Every meeting I go to, I say, "Oh, there, you're here." Just because I'd been a New Yorker for a long time, [crosstalk 00:18:43] of course Queens, but many other organizations. So there's seldom a meeting where there isn't someone who I'm really pleased to meet, so that was a real surprise.

Tanya Domi: So there's all these re-connections.

James Muyskens: Right, right. And then just how this place seems to have high morale despite it being hit again and again with unfortunate budget problems.

Tanya Domi: Well listen, it was great to talk to you today. I want to thank you so much for coming on the podcast and welcome back again, President Muyskens.

James Muyskens: Thank you.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning into the Thought Project and thanks to today's guest, the graduate center's Interim President, James Muyskens.

Tanya Domi: The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering and technical assistance by Kevin Wolf of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.