

CUNY
Climate Assembly
Project

CUNY Climate Assembly Project
On Waste at Hunter College
An Evaluation of the Nation's
First University Climate Assembly

September 2026

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	3
Methodology	4
CCAP Design	5
Assembly in Action	8
Information	8
Deliberation	11
Facilitation	14
Voting and Final Recommendations	16
Trust and Transparency	17
Student Learning and Civic Engagement	19
Tradeoffs, Challenges, and Lessons Learned	21
Conclusion	25
Appendix	27

Executive Summary

The CUNY Climate Assembly Project (CCAP) on Waste at Hunter College marks a milestone in democratic innovation. As the nation's first university climate assembly, it brought together a representative group of students to respond to a state directive by learning about, deliberating on, and issuing proposals to improve campus waste management.

This report evaluates the effectiveness of the CCAP model and identifies lessons for future university-based citizens' assemblies. It assesses whether CCAP upheld the core principles of citizens' assemblies: balanced information, inclusive deliberation, impartial facilitation, and transparent decision-making. It finds that CCAP created the conditions for high-quality deliberation. Delegates described the assembly as respectful, inclusive, and empowering, often viewing it as a rare opportunity to shape decision-making at Hunter. Skilled facilitation encouraged broad participation, expert presentations equipped delegates to engage with a complex policy issue and, together, these elements produced clear recommendations through an open and trusted process.

The evaluation also identifies lessons for future university assemblies. These include:

- providing more institutional and budgetary context during the learning phase;
- reinforcing awareness of prior campus initiatives;
- selecting external case studies that better reflect the university's operating environment;
- introducing recommendation development earlier in the process;
- using clear and consistent procedural language;
- creating more opportunities for participants to work through disagreement;
- expanding training in adaptive facilitation, neutrality, and co-facilitation;
- improving coordination among facilitators; and
- clarifying voting procedures, expanding anonymous voting, and concluding the assembly with a public presentation of the final recommendations and voting results.

CCAP demonstrates that universities can successfully convene representative, informed, and collaborative deliberation on campus policy while highlighting the organizational capacity required to do it well. As colleges and universities seek new approaches to democratic engagement, the lessons in this report provide a practical foundation for designing assemblies that are deliberatively rigorous and institutionally responsive. Whether higher education becomes a site for the next stage in this “deliberative wave” will depend on each university's willingness to invest in the infrastructure and long-term commitment needed to make these participatory processes consequential.

As a learning exercise, CCAP was a clear success. Its lasting value, however, will depend on whether Hunter translates the assembly's recommendations into meaningful institutional action.

Introduction

Declining trust in institutions is a pressing challenge for American democracy. Distrust of higher education reflects the wider trend, driven by political polarization and partisanship, as well as issues that are specific to the educational system. Americans want education to be the answer to a wide range of social and economic problems. Reflecting this complicated mandate, higher education aims to impart career-ready skills, promote upward mobility, and drive scientific innovation and economic growth. From the nation's earliest days, its colleges and universities have also sought to cultivate the democratic skills and values to prepare students for leadership in civic life. In recent years, higher education has renewed its focus on fostering democratic citizenship, defined by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences not as a formal legal status but as “the simple yet profound idea that all people can—and should—contribute positively to their communities.”

The CUNY Climate Assembly Project on Waste at Hunter College (CCAP) exemplifies this civic turn in higher education. The product of a partnership between Hunter College and The Center for Humanities at the CUNY Graduate Center, with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, CCAP is the first university climate assembly in the United States. It was convened in the nation's largest urban public university system to engage students in democratic action to address a specific institutional challenge. New York State Executive Order 22 requires all public entities, including CUNY, to develop a waste diversion plan to reduce waste disposal by 10 percent every five years. In spring 2026, 34 Hunter College students convened in an assembly designed to follow the OECD's “Good Practice Principles for Deliberative Decision-Making.” The guiding question for the assembly was: From a student perspective, what incentives, structures, and systems would facilitate more effective waste management at vertical urban campuses, like Hunter College? The delegates produced nine recommendations that will be presented to stakeholders in August 2026. During the 2026-2027 academic year, nine post-assembly fellows will work with assembly organizers and campus leaders to review the recommendations and support implementation planning through ongoing curricular development and campus programming.

This report evaluates the extent to which CCAP adhered to its guiding principles and explores the wider impact of the assembly on student learning, civic engagement, and democratic citizenship. This report, the first of two evaluations, focuses on the integrity and quality of the deliberative process. A second report will examine the implementation of the assembly's recommendations and the institution's response.

Methodology

There are two members of the CCAP evaluation committee. Anna Marchese is Senior Project Officer at Columbia World Projects. Caroline Hanley is Professor of Sociology at William & Mary. The committee members have no institutional or financial ties to CUNY and performed the evaluation independently of CCAP's governance committee.

The evaluation committee's charge is to evaluate (1) the assembly process and (2) post-assembly implementation. This report focuses on the assembly process, namely process design, participant and organizer experience, quality of deliberation, and recommendation development. A second report, to be completed in 2027, will evaluate the implementation of the assembly's recommendations. As CCAP adapts the citizens' assembly model to a higher education context, the evaluation also explores objectives beyond standard assembly best practices. Specifically, it considers how integrating the humanities into the assembly design shaped key outcomes and how participation influenced educational objectives.

The evaluation draws on observations, interviews, surveys, and document analysis. Documents reviewed include governance structure records, facilitation guides, meeting agendas, and informational materials provided to participants. Two original surveys (pre- and post-assembly) were administered to delegates.

Following the assembly, interviews were conducted with small group facilitators, delegates, and selected stakeholders. All participant research followed established research ethics practices, including informed consent and confidentiality. One or both researchers attended training sessions, all three assembly phases, and facilitation process meetings.

Participant response rates posed a challenge for evaluation. Of the 42 students selected from a pool of nearly 600 applicants, 34 participated in the assembly and 33 responded to the first survey; 18 participants responded to the second survey, and 6 agreed to a follow-up interview, one of which ultimately did not take place due to scheduling conflicts yielding 5 in-depth interviews with assembly delegates. Of the 8 graduate students chosen as small group facilitators, 6 participated in a follow-up interview. Delegates and facilitators received compensation for follow-up interviews. Spring 2026 graduates were ineligible for payment because they were no longer enrolled when the interviews took place.

CCAP Design

The CCAP process began in fall 2025 when the co-directors and program lead recruited and onboarded the governance committee. Governance documents defined CCAP as a deliberative democracy initiative to empower Hunter College students to co-create sustainable waste strategies on campus and beyond, motivated by wider objectives: catalyze collective action on systems-level climate challenges and practice democracy beyond electoral politics. CCAP's focus on waste management responds to a pressing local problem, which is to develop incentives, structures, and systems to help CUNY comply with NY State Executive Order 22. Organizers identified that changes at three levels would be required to meet waste diversion goals: individual behavior, institutional systems, and organizational integration of strategies to foster sustainability and democracy.

CCAP's governance structure involves campus stakeholders and relevant experts in six committees that support the assembly's operation, impact, and external oversight. Assembly operation: the Assembly Design Committee (based at the Center for the Humanities) develops and facilitates the assembly's flow and related public engagement, while the Learning Content Committee curates information and presenters. Campus impact: the Institutional Committee reviews assembly recommendations and supports their implementation, while the Impact Network Committee coordinates engagement across faculty, students and administrators. External oversight: the Evaluation Committee monitors and evaluates the assembly process, while the External Advisory Committee provides strategic advice on the deliberative and participatory aspects of assembly design and implementation.

CCAP was designed around 12 guiding principles adapted from the OECD's "Good Practice Principles for Deliberative Processes for Public Decision Making." These include process transparency; a clear purpose rooted in a public problem framed as a relevant, tangible, and actionable question; active steps to lower barriers to meaningful participation; sufficient time to learn, deliberate, and reflect; balanced and accessible information from diverse sources; respectful, skillfully facilitated deliberation with equal chances to speak in small and large groups; opportunities to request information and process changes; and delineated pathways for impact and stakeholder accountability.

Assembly design centered on three main questions: who would participate, how the participants would engage in collective problem solving, and what outcomes the process would produce. Organizers used a civic lottery to pick a representative group to serve as a microcosm of Hunter College's undergraduate and graduate student body. Delegates received a stipend and, as needed, language translation and childcare and eldercare support. The assembly as a space for collective problem-solving via in-depth deliberation featured substantial time, balanced information, small group facilitators, and autonomy. The outcome of the assembly was a series of delegate-developed recommendations. The governance committee intended for the recommendations to be informed by expert analysis and lived experience, bridge divides to reflect creative common ground, and provide concrete solutions while building civic agency among participants.

Planning began in fall 2025. The civic lottery of Hunter College student applicants was completed in February 2026. Graduate fellows—chosen in 2025 from a pool of CUNY graduate student applicants to serve as members of the Assembly Design committee—developed public engagement materials, training guides for small group

facilitators, and classroom curricula in spring 2026. Small group facilitators—selected from a pool of CUNY graduate student applicants—participated in a day-long training for the assembly in March 2026.

The assembly consisted of 5 full days plus 4 two-hour workshops spread across three phases. Phase I (April 2026) took place over two days and established relationships, introduced the assembly process, refined norms and guiding values, and set priorities for further learning about waste management at Hunter College. Phase II (late-April and May 2026) consisted of four two-hour Friday workshops, featuring perspectives on waste management drawn from local expert and operational communities as well as humanistic and experiential forms of learning. Phase III (June 2026) was the final, three-day deliberation in which the delegates developed, refined, and voted on recommendations. Delegates who were continuing students for the fall 2026 semester were invited to apply to serve as post-assembly fellows. The fellows will work together with governance committees to present assembly recommendations to Hunter College administrators and the public in fall 2026 and continue to support implementation through spring 2027.

Survey and interview data show that CCAP effectively operationalized many of its guiding principles. The delegates are broadly representative of the Hunter College student body in terms of class standing, major or course of study, and demographics (race/ethnicity, gender, and income). Graduate students, fine and performing arts majors, Pell grant recipients, men, Asian or Pacific Islander, and Black (non-Hispanic) students are slightly over-represented among the assembly participants as compared with the total population of Hunter College students; health and medicine majors, women, and Hispanic students are slightly under-represented. A survey administered before the assembly shows that delegates were well informed as to its scope and purpose and their role in it. Small group facilitators also understood their role in the process. Both students and small group facilitators recognized being paid for their time as a sign of respect that made their participation possible, though some facilitators felt that the time commitment was high relative to the stipend amount.

Students responded favorably to the professionalism and care exercised by the organizers. Those interviewed often indicated that the opportunity to engage university decision-makers, outside experts, and operations staff directly demonstrated the assembly's importance which, in turn, led them to take it seriously. "Initially, I had thought this was just going to be, we meet up in the classroom, watch a few videos, and then maybe talk," one student observed. "It was a lot more than that... We were in the faculty lounge and it was very professional." This dynamic extended into program execution. "I feel like everyone there was so friendly," another student said, "it felt very welcoming." Delegates highlighted how attention to detail made them feel valued. "This experience itself just felt very different from anything that I've ever done," one concluded, "I feel like the care and the love and the time that went into the whole process... making sure that we were comfortable with everything that was going on, was very welcoming." Eating well, with reusable plates, utensils, and coffee mugs provided by engaged and responsive organizers, was part of CCAP's infrastructure for meaningful human interaction.

Assembly in Action

I. Information

CCAP's success depended on delegates developing a shared understanding of waste management and diversion challenges unique to Hunter College. Doing so required an accurate, balanced, and accessible suite of resources that responded to delegates' evolving questions. Evidence suggests that CCAP largely met this standard through an iterative learning process that blended written materials, expert testimony, campus facility tours, waste bin-mapping exercises, and occasions for delegates to determine the information they received and the deliberative process itself.

CCAP structured learning as a progression from foundational knowledge to delegate-driven investigation. Members of the Learning Content Committee opened the assembly with a primer on waste management, including presentations on the history of New York City's waste system, the material life cycle, and Hunter College's former and current waste and recycling initiatives. Once this shared foundation was set, delegates were given more discretion over their learning, requesting evidence and selecting speakers to engage with in subsequent sessions from a list of curated options.

Delegates heard from experts on municipal waste policy, smart-bin technology, and waste reduction initiatives at other institutions, including representatives from the New York City Department of Sanitation (DSNY), the Center for Zero Waste Design, and the Post-Landfill Action Network (PLAN). One expert's observation—that "culture trumps strategy" because infrastructure and policy changes are doomed to fail without broad community buy-in—became an oft-repeated phrase, with delegates and small group facilitators alike invoking it when discussing how to spur behavioral change.

Participants nevertheless questioned the relevance of case studies. For instance, the Center for Zero Waste Design representative's account of overhauling Etsy's headquarters was viewed by several facilitators as "limiting" and "prohibitively expensive" for Hunter College. Doubts also arose about the applicability of the PLAN representative's examples, arguing that the experiences of non-vertical, residential, and better-resourced universities offered limited lessons.

Complementing the assembly's opening presentations was an introduction packet on Hunter's [2018 Sustainability Action Plan](#) and its [2024 Progress Report](#), summarizing the college's goals and progress on waste diversion, consumption practices, and recycling efforts. It contained a primer on city and state laws "that influence waste management," and links to podcast episodes and training modules for those interested in learning more about local waste and recycling processes. The introduction of new written materials was always paired with dedicated reading periods, allowing delegates to absorb this information before opening up for discussion. CCAP organizers were also acutely aware of the format that information was presented in, explicitly acknowledging that "not everyone is an auditory learner," while ensuring that delegates had sufficient time to both read and listen to new information before discussion. Organizers also avoided unintentionally privileging proposals with visual mock-ups by asking delegates whether recommendation formats should be standardized before final deliberation. As one participant

noted, however, delegates would have benefited from additional formats “beyond presentation” including instruction on “how to do research.”

Experiential and humanistic learning proved memorable and impactful. On day one, students were invited to create a “waste artifact”—an artistic rendition of the alternative waste future they would like to see. The next day, operations directors took delegates on a tour of campus waste facilities, allowing them to directly ask custodial staff about waste streams and contamination, staffing shortages, equipment upgrades, and space limitations. Delegates consistently identified the opening “waste artifact” exercise, the facilities tour, and a campus bin-mapping added activity—added in Phase II at the suggestion of a small group facilitator—among the most memorable aspects of the assembly. These open-ended and hands-on exercises were an effective nod to CCAP’s commitment to “participant empowerment,” reinforcing students’ knowledge of their environment and the creative thinking needed to address its sustainability challenges. Delegates also welcomed varied learning opportunities (see Appendix Table 2).

Although delegates rated the quality, diversity, and responsiveness of the information resources highly (8.59/10 or higher), participants identified two areas for improvement: information volume and gaps in content concerning budget, administrative, and policy-related matters. On the former, facilitators and delegates noted that the amount of information provided was demanding. “There were some moments where people were completely overwhelmed with information,” one small group facilitator recounted. During assembly sessions, many delegates were visibly fatigued by the amount of content they were expected to absorb. After one presentation, a student reflected, “That was a lot to take in. It was dense material. All of the DSNY programs, the collection of information, I had no idea about any of this.”

Compounding concerns about overload were struggles to remember what sustainability efforts Hunter College had already tried. As one facilitator observed, “There was so much time where it felt like students were being talked at... I think the institutional memory was challenging for students.” This facilitator pointed to the separation of packets with answers from Hunter administrators, facility, and sanitation staff to delegate questions as a case in point. “After we had provided all these questions to faculty, and it was written up into an excel spreadsheet that different faculty could respond to... that was provided for maybe more than half of the questions, and then another day where the other half was provided. But, when the second day came around, there were still questions that maybe pertained to the previous packet that were either answered or whatever, but they didn’t have that first half included with the second half.” Another facilitator, speaking about the packets, noted that “students just seemed really dissatisfied with the answers” because they appeared “blasé and non-specific.” To address this feeling, one delegate asked to hear directly from senior administrators or legal staff: “Could we meet the people in this packet... as any of our decisions will need to be approved by these people?” CCAP organizers tried without success to include representatives from Hunter’s Office of Business Services as speakers, and their lack of participation posed a challenge for the effectiveness and legitimacy of the assembly.

CCAP opened with presentations on Hunter’s history of waste management, but delegates did not always remember or draw on this information. As one facilitator reflected, “Even on the last day, students were learning about things that already existed in their proposals... If students started with more of an awareness of past efforts... they might have approached that differently.” Indeed, the latter part of the assembly was full of moments where students sought context on previous sustainability activities. For instance, when discussing a recommendation for a Green Week, one delegate observed, “It seemed like they did that in 2019,” while another asked about “the clubs that existed before COVID.”

Organizers struggled to balance time spent detailing past initiatives. An administrator who addressed the assembly recounted how they wished their presentation “went a little deeper on some of the challenges and opportunities.” Although they kept their overview concise, the administrator ultimately felt the assembly would have benefitted from a more detailed explanation of staffing constraints, composting challenges, and the contractual limits concerning campus food services, so delegates could differentiate between what they could “impact” and what went beyond Hunter’s control. On the other hand, one facilitator described how “dispiriting” it was to have presenters share where and how the college has “already tried things,” noting that these “administrative limitations” were themselves “part of the larger political sphere.” Other facilitators observed that students felt “trapped” by their lack of insight into the larger political systems in which Hunter operates and which shape what is possible. They suggested that a “foundational intro to policy frameworks” or “theories of social and institutional change” might have aided delegates in sharpening their recommendations. An organizer later acknowledged that a “political education workshop” on “uncertainty and bureaucratic opacity” might have been useful.

Budget information proved the most opaque issue. A major constraint facing both delegates and organizers was operating within an institution whose financial future remains uncertain. Throughout the assembly, delegates sought information about Hunter’s available resources, asking questions such as, “What is the budget we have at our disposal? Could we use Hunter’s endowment to make things go faster?” and “Do we know how much funding we have for this [idea]?” Many noted that the absence of clear budget information limited their ability to develop realistic recommendations, while others connected funding to the fate of past sustainability initiatives, with one student observing that an earlier composting effort “failed because there was no funding.” As CCAP did not involve any financial commitment from Hunter College, organizers could not answer many of these questions, and discussions were often met with acknowledgements of broader fiscal uncertainty and impending administrative cuts. One facilitator described how delegates spent valuable time “sneaking their way around” budget questions, rather than confronting the fiscal constraints and capital-expense realities their recommendations might face. At the same time, this uncertainty gave delegates insight into the financial constraints administrators themselves navigate. For future assemblies facing similar ambiguity, acknowledging this uncertainty while providing budget information where available, integrating cost-benefit frameworks into educational programming, and inviting finance or accounting experts to provide “preliminary guesses” about proposal costs, as one facilitator suggested, could help delegates develop more realistic recommendations and advocate more effectively for their implementation.

II. Deliberation

In keeping with CCAP’s guiding principles, deliberation involved respectful exchanges and equitable participation. Organizers reinforced these norms early and often, sharing “deliberation and community agreements” on day one, which delegates officially adopted by the third session. From a list of thirteen proposed guidelines, the assembly selected eight to govern their discussions, including “challenge the idea, not the person” and “assume good intent.” Organizers also introduced the concept of the “groan zone” to capture the frustration that often accompanies the period between defining a problem and reaching recommendations. This groundwork fostered an environment in which stagnation would be seen as an opportunity for creativity instead of something to avoid.

Organizers’ willingness to incorporate delegate feedback improved engagement and trust. One student observed, “I’ve never seen a project, um, take in feedback as strongly as this project did... I was like, okay, that’s very cool, I can actually just see my feedback working as we go through this.” Others appreciated the value-setting process but felt that it could have been shortened. “I think it was the third time when we had to correct it [the statement of

norms and values], I felt like, okay, I get it, we already corrected it, I feel like everyone got the memo.” “I think maybe we all sort of already knew to be respectful and kind. That's just, like, basic human empathy and having manners,” a different student observed, before connecting the shared process at the beginning with the quality of the deliberation that followed: “When we would vote on different ideas the group came up with, I would try to be more open-minded and see things through their perspective... Instead of just dismissing it right away, I would also try to hear people out more... If something maybe didn't make sense to me... I felt more comfortable raising my hand, asking questions, because I knew it would be answered, and everyone would listen.” The iterative and inclusive process for adopting assembly norms and values served as an experiential template for what followed.

Inconsistent terminology occasionally created confusion. Organizers and facilitators used terms like values, norms, and criteria to describe different protocols in their speeches, polls, slides, and other materials, but the distinctions between each were not always obvious. Facilitators recounted how this “undifferentiated language” made it difficult for delegates to separate behavioral expectations from the standards used to evaluate recommendations. The phrase “community norms” itself prompted uncertainty, with some students questioning whether this referred to expectations for the delegates’ behavior or to Hunter’s existing practices. In response to these observations, a CCAP organizer suggested that reserving the word criteria solely for evaluating proposals in future assemblies “could be useful.”

CCAP’s color-coded post-it note system helped organize deliberation. Delegates used the notes to record key information, ideas and opportunities, challenges, and questions or additional information requirements. During phase II, organizers added a new kind of note that delegates could raise whenever a speaker used jargon they were unaccustomed to, prompting an immediate clarification before their presentation continued. Reception of the notes was mixed, with one facilitator commenting that they “made the process easier as it went along,” while a delegate found that they “served to complicate the process,” and another facilitator encouraging students to use “frankly whatever gets your ideas down” instead of adhering to prescribed colors. The system appeared particularly effective when facilitators proactively passed students the appropriate color note after hearing a comment worth recording.

While civic assemblies often assign delegates to fixed or systematically alternating groups and facilitators, CCAP permitted them to choose where they sat for most sessions. Allowing delegates to choose their tables increased flexibility but sometimes limited opportunities to build trust or engage with new perspectives. Reflecting on the final phase of the assembly, one delegate captured both dynamics: “It was great working as a group because we had already built bonds with the people we had been working with, it was more collaborative and also fun moving across groups and working with different people to get different perspectives on the same issues.” On the assembly’s final day, this arrangement was slightly modified. Organizers partially reshuffled groups by asking half of the members of each group to join another table. As each group had developed one or two proposals together, this split was intended to “help avoid groupthink” while preserving the “institutional knowledge” they had accumulated in the process of drafting recommendations.

Collaboration characterized much of the assembly. Delegates actively listened to each other and “built on one another’s observations at a near constant pace,” as one facilitator recounted. One delegate reflected on the attitude that fostered this among their peers: “In order to come up with an idea, you need to listen to people. You need a lot of ideas flowing around and need to be open to compromise.” Collaboration was at its peak during recommendation review in Phase III. Following a “World Cafe” in which delegates moved from table to table making suggestions to draft recommendations from other groups, one group undertook extensive wordsmithing. Delegates debated

terminology—“centralizing,” “streamlining,” and “consolidating”—consulting definitions before picking language they believed would resonate with the rest of the assembly and Hunter College administration.

This collaborative ethos extended beyond proposal refinement. When preliminary voting revealed that a recommendation failed to meet a supermajority for automatic passage, the student responsible for the idea blamed themselves, noting, “Maybe I didn’t explain it well... Everyone hated my Green Week idea.” Their tablemates pushed back against this framing. “But it was cool,” one delegate replied. “It came close to passing,” another added, before a third suggested, “We could finesse it?” Throughout the discussion, these delegates regularly encouraged their peer, rebutting their negative self-talk while regarding the recommendation improvement as a shared responsibility.

Substantive disagreement was relatively uncommon. When it arose, it centered on the feasibility of proposals as opposed to their underlying merits. For instance, delegates considering a sustainability educational module were split over how to encourage the module’s completion. Some preferred mechanisms that “could block students’ ability to submit assignments.” Others found these solutions overly “punitive” and offered positive incentives ranging from extra credit to stipends.

Delegates used different forms of expertise in their deliberation. Students debated whether liquid diversion—emptying leftover liquids before recycling bottles—was a problem. “We might be creating an issue that is not an issue,” one delegate cautioned, “I haven’t heard of custodial staff saying this is a big thing.” Another countered with information drawn from personal work experience: “I need to double and triple up trash bags at my job. It would be beneficial.” Delegates then discussed whether liquid diversion belonged in a proposal for centralized waste stations or new bin designs, with one student changing their mind after hearing a colleague’s reasoning. Others worried the added specificity would weaken an already ambitious recommendation. “Can we put a pin into this idea?” one asked. “I feel scared to dilute this.” Facilitators and organizers deferred the matter for further consideration, and the final recommendations ultimately included “Explore liquid diversion; subject to custodial staff approval” under the Redesign Central Waste Stations proposal. While these moments highlight students’ willingness to revise their views and focus on developing coherent proposals, a key to substantive deliberation, they also signal a limitation. Much of the disagreement emerged during the final stages of recommendation consolidation, leaving scant time to draw out competing perspectives among the broader group before the final vote.

Time is a critical ingredient in the assembly process, and it is invariably in short supply. Some delegates felt that the time allocated for final deliberations was insufficient. One observed that this period “felt rushed” and wished “we had more time with advisors on recommendations.” Another described how the final days were “a bit of a scramble, which made it a little tense since the time pressure was on,” but acknowledged that “we still got some good recommendations in.” For others, the time devoted to discussing values at the start of the assembly came at the expense of refining recommendations: “Parts of the process felt repetitive... and we did not have as much time with the actual recommendations at the end.”

Participation became more evenly distributed as the assembly progressed. In early discussions, a small number of delegates spoke more frequently than others, requiring facilitators to invite in quieter voices. Similarly, one student, during the assembly’s second day, commented, “I feel like we’ve been talking a lot” while gesturing at all of the men at the table. They then invited the women in the group, who had said little up to that point, to share their thoughts. At other times, the presence of staff members acting as de facto delegates and the information asymmetries that presented—particularly during the Public Forum with members of the Hunter community—appeared to discourage broader participation. In one discussion, a staff member recognized they were talking excessively, noting: “I want to

apologize. I am kinda dominating here and I should stand back. Please tell me to chill. I've just been doing this for 15 years.”

Meeting spaces may have impacted deliberation. Phase II took place on the ground floor of Hunter College’s main building, adjacent to the lobby. While it increased the assembly’s visibility, this location made discussions difficult to follow during periods of heavy foot traffic and competing activity. As a Learning Content Committee member observed: “When they first started, they were kind of in this nice big room that had windows overseeing the city, and then a lot of their sessions were in the lobby as people were walking by, and that felt a little more confusing, like people didn’t really feel like they knew how to engage with it.” Phase III, meanwhile, took place in a different room each day, limiting delegates’ ability to settle into a regular deliberative environment. One session was held in a classroom with theater-style seating, which made small-group discussion particularly challenging.

By the end of the assembly, nearly every delegate appeared comfortable contributing. Post-assembly survey data bears this out. Delegates overwhelmingly agreed that they had ample opportunities to speak (9.82/10), that everyone who wished to contribute was heard equally (9.76/10), and that fellow delegates respected their views even when disagreements arose (9.82/10). These findings suggest that the CCAP fostered a respectful and inclusive deliberative environment. As one facilitator put it, the delegates “never needed us... they have the talent and capacity and drive to collectively self-govern.”

III. Facilitation

A skillful and seasoned assembly facilitator served on the assembly design committee and participated in the training of the small group facilitators who, together with the lead facilitator, were integral to the success of the deliberative process. The small group facilitator role was conceived as impartial, empowering, inclusive, equitable, and reflective. CUNY graduate students chosen as facilitators attended a day-long training where they were introduced to the main steps of the assembly process, developed a community agreement for facilitation, and practiced ice-breaking and other relational elements of facilitation. A one-page facilitation guide distributed at the training summarized strategies for navigating conflict response, participation dynamics, and process with a heading that reminded facilitators to: “Always explain the purpose, scope, and time of any activity. Ask permission before acting: everything you do is with the consent of the group. When in doubt, refer to the Community Agreements.”

Delegates overwhelmingly commended facilitators for how they upheld these principles. Skilled facilitation reinforced delegates’ sense of empowerment and trust in the process. Facilitators encouraged participants to raise procedural questions and regularly relayed observations—like signs of participant fatigue—to organizers. In surveys and interviews, delegates described facilitators as excellent and offered virtually no recommendations for improvement.

Given their position on the front lines of student deliberation, facilitators’ observations are revealing. Facilitators were highly attuned to remaining neutral. One shared, “The thing I kept in mind the most was not overstepping my role and not putting my own gloss on things or allowing what I think to shape what they are trying to accomplish or think about in this process, because they are the decision-makers.” They observed, “I was careful about not overstepping that boundary. It was hard when students were asking ‘what do you think?’ You need to be sensitive to that while engaging with them and being a welcoming part of the space.” Being a good facilitator meant different things for different facilitators. “Adaptability to your group is probably the most important thing,” one observed, continuing, “I had a variety of groups, like some groups where everyone’s so excited to talk that it is important to

sort of scaffold the conversation and let the people speak who aren't as forthright with their desire. But then I had other groups that were really more teeth pulling to get people to have the conversation.” In this context, good facilitation means both “an ability to not be part of the conversation, but just intervene when necessary” and the willingness to “do a little tight five to get the people going.”

Facilitators embraced the way openness to differences enhanced inclusive deliberation. One facilitator explained, “I feel like a good facilitator is someone who is good at listening and has the sensitivity and social awareness to understand that people have different personalities and come from different backgrounds and have different ways of just thinking and, like, moving through the world.” Part of the facilitation toolkit is understanding that engagement can look different for different participants. This means listening to “feedback from students who were feeling maybe there was an imbalance of who was participating or not, or trying to engage students who maybe checked out, and also like being okay with that as well. Understanding that people cope differently. I know that there were some times students would be wearing headphones, and I would never think of that as a disrespectful thing. It could be a sensory thing. As a way to self-regulate. Lack of eye contact, I also would not consider it a sign of disengagement. Recognizing that and not expecting everybody to come to the table and participate in exactly the same way, I think, is important for the process to really be true to being open to many different perspectives.”

Participant attrition created facilitation challenges. Facilitators observed that when the conversation among delegates lulled it was “hard to not, you know, throw out an idea just to help the conversation keep flowing” rather than engaging in the work of “teasing out some of the things that they’re already interested in.” There was a steady decline in delegate attendance from the first to the last session of the assembly. Accordingly, the “role of the small group facilitator went from six to one, to three or two, to one. There were definitely times where, even when we had enough time, the conversation would falter because we had two people. In that moment it was difficult not to spur conversation by inserting your opinion, but that is not the role of a facilitator. How can we keep students engaged and keep the groups filled out so facilitators are aiding in student conversations rather than heavily participating in them?”

These moments sometimes blurred the line between facilitation and participation. There were a few instances where facilitators responded to silence by offering their own ideas or steering the discussion more directly than intended. For example, one facilitator went from asking participants, “What is missing here?” during an exercise revising earlier assembly resources and what they reveal, to observing that “there needs to be an aspect of shame,” adding “if the deans can't get fired over this [poor waste management outcomes], it's not important to their job.” The facilitator then presented the group's synthesis to other rotating groups, despite explicit instructions that a delegate representative should do so.

Facilitators also drew on their own experiences within the CUNY system to interpret the role. Drawing on their teaching experience, one facilitator explained that the main aspect of being a good facilitator is “approaching the folks from a strength-based and not a deficit-based perspective. That is super important when we are doing this at CUNY with students coming from communities that are kept chronically and intentionally under-resourced... Beginning from that place where people know what they need, and the point of democracy is supporting folks in accessing the education and critical frameworks that shape what they know about their own lives.”

Reflective facilitation also meant recognizing and responding effectively to how power operates within the context of higher education. Several facilitators noticed that students would occasionally make comments that seemed to be aligned with what they perceived organizers or experts would consider to be valuable or correct. Recognizing this dynamic, one facilitator said, “I think it is important that you can notice how folks are holding themselves back

or censoring themselves, and that often comes from a place where students have been told that their ideas are not valuable.” In response, another encouraged students to draw on their own lived experiences as a means of assessing good ideas. Reflecting on a discussion about sustaining student voice in campus waste management policy, a facilitator remembered probing, “I wanted to ask if that was a solution that you would participate in? Most students would say ‘no, I work two jobs and I don’t have time to volunteer.’ So great, what is a thing you actually would do? They would say ‘oh wait, could this be a paid job?’ Just this little shift of encouraging and affirming folks in connecting with themselves.”

Facilitators were broadly positive about the assembly process. One called the first day of the assembly, with its use of humanistic and arts-based learning, “a space of imagination.” They felt “that generative line of thinking was informative to the rest of the process, even if it sometimes felt silly... The spaces of idea generation like that, which were not limited to reality, were useful... [because they] demonstrated what the value was. Rather than naming your value system, you can see it in what you’re imagining.” Several facilitators also pointed to the assembly’s final day as a highlight. One said, “the amount of investment and the meticulousness and belief in implementing these things was beautiful. I was impressed by the rigor the assembly brought to thinking these things through. The voting process was where I thought, yep, that worked.”

IV. Voting and Final Recommendations

CCAP’s final three days focused on synthesizing, drafting, refining and voting on recommendations. A preliminary, non-binding “temperature check” on the penultimate day asked delegates to rate draft proposals on a five-point Likert-type scale, identifying those that required further refinement before the final vote. Delegates spent most of the final day revising recommendations in response to this feedback, often simplifying or splitting proposals that had become “bloated” or too complex. For example, delegates divided a composting proposal into two separate recommendations: one establishing an operational compost collection program and another investing in on-campus composting infrastructure. Delegates viewed this final refinement period positively. In the post-assembly survey, they agreed that the time devoted to developing the final recommendations was well used (8.76/10) and that the recommendation-writing process allowed them to consider a wide range of options before reaching final decisions (8.65/10).

While the preliminary and final votes took place anonymously using digital forms, intermediate voting during table deliberations on the final day was often done by a show of hands. One delegate noted that this public aspect of the voting process introduced some pressure to conform: “Sometimes, I’ll be a little nervous because no one might raise their hand. I don’t want to be the odd one. Or maybe everyone raised their hand and I don’t agree with it. So I guess maybe that... pressure to agree because you see so many other people agreeing or not agreeing.” This outlook was echoed in a survey response, which recommended implementing “more anonymous voting in case people feel pressured.” While the confidentiality of the final vote was ensured, at one point it appeared that its anonymity was accidental: a delegate asked whether “we were supposed to put our names” on the digital ballot, to which an organizer responded, “I didn’t add that, I was supposed to, but now this is truly anonymous voting.” This example illustrates how CCAP’s position at the intersection of different organizational forms introduced challenging procedural questions.

A central question for this evaluation is whether the final recommendations reflected the priorities of the assembly as a whole. Both the deliberative process and the post-assembly survey suggest they did. Of the nine recommendations put to a final vote, seven secured the required 75% supermajority for approval. Delegates were

very confident in the final recommendations and in the fairness of the process that produced them, with survey respondents agreeing that the final recommendations reflected the different views and judgments of the assembly (9.41/10) and that their own contributions were incorporated into these outcomes (9.47/10). They also saw the quality of the recommendations as meeting or exceeding the expectations they held when first invited to participate in CCAP (8.41/10).

The seven recommendations that received the strongest support fall into three broad categories: 1) infrastructure improvements, 2) upstream waste-reduction policies, and 3) student-led education and engagement. Infrastructure recommendations focused on expanding centralized waste stations, improving signage and establishing both compost collection and on-campus composting capacity. Upstream waste-reduction proposals called for eliminating single-use plastics and promoting reusable alternatives through changes to procurement and vendor contracts. Finally, to prompt long-term behavioral change, delegates recommended creating a paid student Sustainability Working Group and integrating sustainability education into orientation programming, with a mandatory “Brightspace” module for all incoming students.

The recommendations that fell short of the 75% threshold in the final vote were Green Week and Paper Towel Reduction, a proposal to replace paper towels with hand dryers. As discussed in the Deliberation section, delegates modified the Green Week proposal after the first vote in response to concerns that “it feels redundant,” it is “overwhelming” in light of the existing level of student programming, and questions about the “long-term aspect of this... if this is just for a week how do we ensure there is behavior change toward sustainability?” Although the revised proposal narrowed its scope and strengthened participation incentives, it still fell short of the approval threshold.

The paper towel recommendation was distinct. It was proposed by a delegate, a self-dubbed “paper towel prince,” during the final collective discussion. They suggested electric hand dryers would reduce waste and “free up custodial time.” This kicked off a debate over spill response, hygiene, and the potential impact of dryer noise in quieter areas of campus. Although delegates softened the proposal before it was submitted to the final vote—prompting its originator to conclude that “we won’t go scorched earth”—the recommendation garnered the lowest level of overall support (61.54%). This weaker performance likely stemmed from both substantive disagreement and the late introduction, which left students with little time to refine its language. At the same time, the willingness to entertain a new proposal at the eleventh hour underscored CCAP’s commitment to “doing democracy differently” through experimentation.

While Phase III’s voting process was transparent and carefully designed, some CCAP participants found it unnecessarily complex. Both delegates and facilitators questioned whether the multiple rounds of voting added sufficient value to justify their complexity. One delegate described it as “very tedious,” while a facilitator described how they were “experiencing this issue of, wait, I thought we voted on this already. I didn’t get the utility of each step in the voting process.” Transparency waned in the assembly’s closing moments. Departing from other assemblies, CCAP adjourned without a public readout of the final results. After casting their last vote, delegates quickly transitioned into closing reflections. Ending the assembly without a final readout gave the assembly an abrupt conclusion and barred delegates from collectively recognizing and championing the recommendations they had developed together.

V. Trust and Transparency

Trust is a prerequisite for the success of any assembly. Participants must trust one another enough to exchange ideas openly. They must also trust that the sponsoring institution is acting in good faith, will take the assembly's recommendations seriously, and has not biased the process to produce preordained outcomes. CCAP cultivated both forms of trust, although delegates expressed more confidence in one another than in Hunter College's willingness to implement their recommendations.

From CCAP's outset, delegates questioned whether the assembly was a public relations maneuver by the college, with one observing: "Maybe this is an attempt to say we've included students. To say we did things to incorporate students in a democratic process so they can go back to doing the same things." A governance committee member expressed something similar when reflecting on what the administration's motivations might have been: "I think the esteem of being the first to do this in the U.S. was just a nice feather in the hat, and I think that might have been more of the motivation than really wanting to do anything about waste." Yet in the context of a bureaucratized higher education system that operates without student-centered democratic governance channels, the degree of administrative buy-in is notable.

CCAP featured institutional safeguards to reinforce its legitimacy. The process was conducted through a public lottery using the open-source Panelot sortition platform. Invitations were sent to over 23,000 Hunter students, and more than 570 opted into the process. Delegates were selected live, at a "CCAP Public Launch & Civic Lottery Event" in February 2026. Additionally, Hunter College also signed a Project Charter that protected CCAP's independence by committing administrators to support the process (not particular outcomes), prohibiting the lobbying of delegates, and requiring the publication of monitoring and evaluation reports.

Despite these safeguards, some delegates worried that the process placed too much emphasis on changing student behavior while leaving institutional decisions that determine campus waste management practices largely untouched. As one delegate asked, "Are we here to change how students recycle or are we concerned with reforming institutions?" Another remarked that "the process is bounded by institutional and systemic constraints" which "made it difficult to be bold in our proposals or in our thinking about certain issues."

At the same time, delegates expressed a deep awareness of how the administration would view their proposals, and weighed different strategies for making them palatable. For instance, one delegate observed that "members of the admin are numbers people" before proceeding to contemplate how best to present a student compensation scheme so that it appeals to Hunter College leadership. Composting recommendations likewise shifted toward leveraging an existing DSNY curbside collection system after the assembly was made aware of custodial staffing shortages. Instead of abandoning what the administration might deem ambitious, delegates refined these ideas to improve their prospects for implementation.

Delegates remained cautious about whether Hunter would act on their recommendations. Before deliberations began, 48% of delegates lacked confidence that their proposals would have an impact. While this declined to 35% after the assembly, several continued to worry that budget constraints or competing administrative priorities would delay or prevent implementation¹. "I am not sure how seriously the conclusions of the assembly will be taken," noted one student in their survey response, "and if there is any mechanism to ensure that at least some of these perspectives are implemented." Another was nervous that their "suggestions will be constrained by institutional factors (donors, funding, school board, etc.)."

¹ Differences in the composition of the pre- and post-assembly survey samples may partially account for this shift.

To address accountability concerns, CCAP introduced a novel institutional feature: the Post-Assembly Fellowship. From fall 2026 through spring 2027, nine students selected from a delegate applicant pool, will continue working as paid fellows with Hunter administrators to advance the implementation of the assembly's recommendations. The fellowship's effectiveness will be assessed in the second phase of this evaluation.

Consistent with CCAP's commitment to transparency, organizers published a webpage with videos and updates, including background materials on climate assemblies, lesson plans, related events, and opportunities for the broader Hunter community. These efforts were coordinated by the Impact Network Committee, which will continue working with post-assembly fellows to "contribute to a public-facing response" that "unpacks which recommendations may be viable, which may need adaptation, and which ones cannot be accepted."

Two activities in Phase II connected delegates with those outside of the process: a campus-wide waste survey and a Public Forum. The former collected responses from over 200 students, faculty, and staff about their consumption habits, waste disposal practices, and awareness of the university's recycling programs. Organizers shared survey findings during the Public Forum, where delegates and community members worked collectively to pinpoint barriers to improving waste management. Public Forum participation remained limited, however, with fewer than 20 members of the broader community attending. Thinking back to CCAP's aim to engage others across Hunter, one delegate suggested that these efforts be "elongated."

Reflecting on how to do just that, one Learning Committee member proposed an "intergenerational" assembly that would include administrators, custodial staff, and faculty as delegates alongside students. Embedding these other stakeholders directly into deliberations could make the aftermath of the process more dynamic than "responding to a report." They highlighted the limits of hosting a student-only assembly, not least that "people will move out of the system in the next couple years, and then there's not going to be a lot of people who remember what happened or felt the energy of it." While they recognized that such a model would depart from traditional citizens' assembly design and introduce new complexities, they argued it may ultimately strengthen institutional memory and implementation.

VI. Student Learning and Civic Engagement

CCAP organizers set ambitious goals for student learning. As a cross-disciplinary space for applied problem solving, CCAP aimed to increase awareness of waste management, extend students' capacity for finding common ground across differences, and ignite civic agency. Survey and interview evidence suggests the assembly largely met these objectives. Experiential and humanities-based learning prepared students for creative and democratic collaboration. Personal journaling and activities to better understand municipal waste streams, past and present, challenged existing assumptions about waste management and improved students' ability to think creatively about solutions. Group activities like creating murals to envision different human relationships with waste, mapping campus waste collection receptacles, and touring waste facilities with operations staff provided new information about the assembly's core question and expanded the students' capacity to apply that information.

In follow-up interviews, students elaborated on the different forms of learning that emerged from the assembly process. Several commented on the way their new understanding of waste systems reshaped their personal habits. Others emphasized new respect for the people who implement waste management policy on a daily basis. After the tour of campus facilities, one student noted how they came to "appreciate the custodial staff more" before recounting the sheer volume of trash generated each day and the steps necessary to move that trash from

receptacle to chute to compactor to pick-up. “I had no idea how much, like, stressful stress that is,” another student shared before continuing: “I also learned that I think they lost, like, 60% of their staff during COVID that never came back. So that was a big hit for them.” Spending time with administrators also shaped deliberation: it highlighted a history of unsuccessful initiatives and revealed the way new ideas have to make their way “up the chain of command in order for something to get done.” During deliberation, students often wrestled with the extent to which they should advance recommendations that work within the constraints identified by campus administration or press for more transformative changes in waste management systems.

When asked what they would take forward from the assembly experience, students described individual waste management decisions, democratic skills and values, and the intent to expand civic engagement. In the pre-assembly survey, about 27% of respondents indicated they did not feel comfortable discussing civic, societal, or local issues with people who held different perspectives. In the post-assembly survey, students expressed a high degree of comfort expressing their views and asking questions. When asked what they most enjoyed about the assembly, students most often pointed to the opportunity to talk and learn with their peers, writing that they enjoyed “interactions with my fellow assembly members and the facilitators” and “learning what others think about the same idea.” Students also appreciated experiencing the way collective work coheres, with one saying they liked “being able to see others’ inputs and opinions come to one big action.” Summarizing a perspective voiced by many of the participants, one student concluded that “seeing what we worked on change, until it was a final official recommendation, was fun.”

There is preliminary evidence of a positive effect on civic engagement, but a third wave of data collection planned for the implementation period will provide a better basis for assessing the impact of assembly participation. Looking to the future, one student said, “If I’m ever in a position where I have to vote or come up with ideas, I think I’ll draw back on this experience... I definitely feel more confident [that] if I’m ever in that type of situation, I’ll know how to handle myself better or even facilitate it if needed.” Another offered that the assembly “inspired me to want to be a part of something.” They explained, “you realize that... there are people doing the work, like, there are people on the front lines actually doing this stuff... the kind of stuff where you sit around with people who are different than you, and have hard conversations, and everybody doesn’t share the same opinions or views on something, and you get to talk... that’s the only way change comes about.” They concluded, “I’m sure all students will take away with them this feeling, you know, of being a part of something very important.”

Tradeoffs, Challenges, and Lessons Learned

As the first university climate assembly in the United States, CCAP demonstrated the promise of adopting participatory democratic practices in an academic setting. It also involved tradeoffs, as organizers had to balance the deliberative ideals that accompany innovations like assemblies against the financial, institutional, and logistical realities of operating within a public university. These experiences offer important lessons for those looking to organize future assemblies in higher education settings.

CCAP's multi-phased process allowed students to learn and reflect deeply, in ways that impacted the content of the recommendations. One student observed that across the assembly arc "there was also a lot of, like, orienting towards what we thought we should advocate for in terms of what was practical, versus, should we just demand more. And it seemed like as we went we kind of learned to demand more." They concluded that in a shorter process the recommendations "would have been a little more, like, lower level practical stuff." The sense that there was enough time to reflect, learn, listen, and share led to better engagement and greater trust in the process. One student reflected, "I think the last day, the fact that we spent so much time correcting the recommendations that we actually made, it made it more... serious... like, they are actually gonna take that action, and they're gonna apply it. It's not, like, a small thing that's gonna... slip through the cracks." Asked if the process would have been different without being spread across multiple weeks, another student said, "I don't think there would have been as much trust... the team building and getting to know each other..." They concluded that the trust built across sessions mattered because by the end "we knew that there was a level of respect that we all have for each other, the ideas and everything."

Full-day sessions also left many participants mentally exhausted, with delegates using words like "brain fog," "fatigue," and "tired" to describe how they felt at the end of Phase I. Facilitators likewise commented that sustaining meaningful conversation was most difficult during these longer periods. As one remarked, "You can't force yourself to do something for eight hours, when the collective energy can only support six hours." Organizers responded by redesigning Phase III to take place for six hours each day, as opposed to eight, illustrating CCAP's willingness to adapt in response to feedback.

At the same time, CCAP's scheduling created competing pressures. Spreading the 37-hour process across several months made it difficult to sustain momentum, particularly during the "Community Hour" sessions held in Phase II. These two-hour blocks of time were, according to one facilitator, "not nearly as productive" as their longer counterparts. Another noted that holding sessions on Fridays, at lunchtime, late in the spring semester made sustained engagement difficult, as they conflicted with students' academic responsibilities. "Psychologically," they said, "doing something like 10:00am to 12:00pm would be different." CCAP's spread-out sequencing may have also contributed to learning loss and depressed attendance. "The retention may have been harmed by having two hour days in May," one facilitator observed. A second agreed, concluding, "Spreading this out across months and weeks is hard. Keep it tighter to reduce learning loss." Overall, CCAP demonstrated the value of a multi-phased schedule that allowed informed judgment to grow over time. Future assemblies would do well to replicate many of its aspects. They might also benefit from concentrating deliberative sessions into fewer, medium-length blocks scheduled closer together.

CCAP organizers recognized from the outset that delegate retention would be a challenge. Indeed, the assembly experienced a considerable decline in participation over time. While 34 delegates participated in the early sessions, 23 were present to finalize recommendations, with three additional delegates voting remotely, bringing the total number of participants during the final day of the assembly to 26. After Phase I, in an attempt to “fight attrition,” organizers floated the creation of a WhatsApp group chat, first to facilitators and later during the opening session of Phase II. Their aim was to have an informative, “relational” channel where CCAP participants could coordinate logistics, and “check on” delegates who might have questions or who are less engaged in a format that went beyond a simple email. The chat was ultimately abandoned after facilitators expressed discomfort regarding privacy and work-life balance, with one facilitator stating, “I am not comfortable with students having my number,” while another called attention to the burnout this might generate, warning that they were being asked to take on “one more layer” of labor without a requisite increase in compensation. While abandoning the channel may have prevented additional communication fatigue among staff and facilitators, the lack of a structured, low-stakes digital space may have hindered delegate engagement. The lesson for future practitioners is not to forgo a digital platform, but to plan it in advance, clearly communicate its purpose, and allocate sufficient staff time and compensation for moderation.

Several participants also identified the timing of the delegate stipend payment as a contributor to declining participation. The \$750 stipend was paid out before the assembly concluded, reducing the incentive for delegates to remain engaged through its final stages. Future assemblies should reconsider this payout structure. As one delegate survey respondent suggested, organizers should consider “holding the stipend until the end because a lot of people simply dropped out after receiving it.” With this in mind, a phased payment model—potentially distributing the stipend in two or three installments tied to participation milestones—could offer a stronger incentive for delegates to stay involved. Critically, installment-based payments can introduce additional administrative complexity within university finance systems. Organizers might benefit from clarifying institutional policies and payment procedures well in advance to determine what payment structures are feasible for a university-based assembly.

Throughout the assembly, the Evaluation Committee functioned as a downstream observer because its members were appointed after key planning decisions had already been made. As a result, evaluators could not directly assess critical elements of CCAP, including participant selection and assembly design. Future university assemblies should involve evaluators from the outset, beginning with the civic lottery and sortition process, so they can independently verify that selection procedures produce the intended descriptive representation of the student body. Evaluators should also have access to the early planning meetings of core governance groups and relevant committees, to allow them to assess whether the assembly’s guiding questions, expert selection, and informational materials were developed in a balanced and impartial manner. Assessment strategies (including means of improving response rates) should be incorporated into plans for use of assembly time and funds.

Drawing directly on the evaluation findings, the following recommendations intend to maintain the core strengths of the CCAP model, while offering straightforward steps that future organizers can take to improve information provision, deliberation, facilitation, and recommendation development in the design and execution of additional university assemblies.

Recommendations for improving information provision	Recommendations for improving deliberation
• To minimize delegate confusion, reinforce previous university initiatives related to the assembly's remit throughout the process, rather than introducing them only at the outset. Revisiting earlier efforts and their outcomes would help delegates better understand the institutional context and build on, rather than duplicate, past work. • To better align assembly recommendations with institutional realities, provide delegates with information sessions on the university budget, resource allocation processes, and the institutional decision-making structures that shape budgetary outcomes. • To ensure outside examples are relevant to the institutional context, consult with speakers in advance of their presentations to review proposed case studies and prioritize ones, where possible, that best reflect the environment the assembly exists within.	• To make the deliberative process more transparent and legible, use standard terminology in presentations and materials and avoid using unnecessary jargon, particularly when communicating procedural distinctions. • To ensure sufficient time for deliberation on recommendations, introduce their development earlier in the process and create structured opportunities to surface disagreement across the full assembly. This may also require devoting less time to collectively developing and discussing values guiding deliberation and other basic principles.
Recommendations for improving facilitation	Recommendations for improving voting and final recommendation consolidation
• To better prepare facilitators for the challenges of deliberation, devote more training time to managing group dynamics, including when and how to intervene to encourage balanced participation while maintaining delegate voice and ownership in the conversation. • To improve coordination and consistency between facilitators, provide instruction on co-facilitation, with clear guidance on role division and strategies for avoiding competing interventions when two or more facilitators are working in the same group. • To build coherence across facilitators and mitigate the impulse to add substantive comments to deliberation, integrate a daily facilitator huddle for reflection on shared challenges.	• To minimize confusion during the recommendation voting periods, clearly distinguish preliminary and final voting stages and regularly remind the assembly of the purpose of each. • To reduce social pressure and encourage independent judgment, conduct all voting anonymously, including intermediate decisions on recommendation revisions. This could be implemented with readily available classroom polling technology administered via smart phones. • To reinforce collective ownership of the assembly's work and clarity surrounding immediate outcomes, end with a readout of the final recommendations and voting results.

Conclusion

A recent report by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences observed that young people “are not being provided with the evidence of democratic effectiveness needed to make them the nation’s future engaged leaders.” The CUNY Climate Assembly Project offered Hunter College students an opportunity to deepen democratic skills, refine their understanding of the barriers to institutional change within which campus stakeholders operate, and participate in a process with the potential to effect systemic change in waste management. The assembly was designed to provide immediate evidence of democratic effectiveness in its iterative decision-making process, responsiveness to student feedback, and commitment to empowerment as a governing value. Through an iterative, collaborative, and humanistic program of learning and deliberation, students expanded their sense of what is possible with collective action. Direct engagement with institutional constraints enhanced the credibility of the deliberative process. Student commitment deepened as the assembly unfolded because organizers and facilitators built trust in the value of the exercise, even as attrition complicated participant representativeness. Transparency about the limits of the process was a crucial ingredient.

The external validity of CCAP remains to be seen. Before the assembly, delegates were uncertain whether their recommendations would be implemented. As the process unfolded, confidence in their impact increased. Hunter College President Nancy Cantor and top-level administrators have committed to the process and will review and respond to the assembly’s recommendations. Work to implement assembly recommendations will continue through curricular development and campus programming. Delegates will be watching closely for evidence of impact in campus waste management systems. Democratic theorist Carole Pateman has argued that without accountability, deliberative bodies run the risk of being little more than focus groups or legitimating devices for policies that have already been decided. As a result of their participation in CCAP, delegates will evaluate the evidence of democratic effectiveness with greater understanding of the democratic process and the mechanics of institutional change. With more confidence in their own capacity to engage, and greater familiarity with the experiences of operations and administrative staff responsible for campus waste management, they may also take steps to advocate for the changes they wish to see.

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Appendix

Table 1: Delegate evaluation of assembly integrity

*To what extent, if at all, would you agree with each of the following?
(scored 0 to 10, where 0 means “not at all” and 10 means “to a great extent”)*

	Mean
The assembly process matched your expectations.	8.35
You had enough time to complete the necessary tasks.	7.88
The time you had to arrive at the final recommendations was well used.	8.76
The tasks you were given allowed you to consider a wide range of options in your recommendations.	8.65
The information resources provided (including expert sessions) were informative and helpful.	9.00
The information resources provided (including expert sessions) presented diverse viewpoints and/or perspectives.	8.65
You were able to request and obtain additional information resources beyond those initially provided.	8.59
The facilitators in the process were neutral (did not favor certain opinions or offer their own).	8.82
You had a fair number of opportunities to speak.	9.82
Other members had a fair number of opportunities to speak.	9.59
No members dominated the discussions.	8.59
All members who wished to contribute were heard equally.	9.76
You felt comfortable expressing your views and asking questions.	9.53

You and your views were heard.	9.65
The other assembly members had views that differed from your own.	8.29
Fellow members respected what you had to say, even when they didn't agree with you.	9.82
You felt pressured to agree with others' ideas or arguments.	4.00
Most members provided justifications and explanations for their opinions.	9.12
You understood others' arguments, perspectives, and concerns.	9.53
Your understanding of others' opinions of the issue became clearer through this process.	9.35
You and the other members considered information resources (including expert sessions) in your deliberation.	9.35
Waste management was discussed from a variety of perspectives (for example, considering underlying issues, existing structures, trade-offs, values, etc.).	9.00
Your understanding of waste management became clearer throughout the process.	8.94
You are well informed about waste management issues.	8.69
You are well informed about climate issues.	8.24
The final recommendations reflected the different views and judgments of the members.	9.41
Your contributions made it into the final recommendations.	9.47
The outcome of the assembly process (such as the quality of the recommendations) matches the expectations you had when you received the initial invitation.	8.41
Your privacy (from undesired attention) was protected in this process.	9.35

Table 2: Delegate assessment of experiential and humanistic learning

Thinking back to early April, Phase I of the assembly included a series of activities to help prepare you for the rest of the assembly process. For each of the following activities, how would you characterize their impact?

	Increased my knowledge about waste management issues	Helped me understand waste management from different perspectives; Prepared me to consider new approaches to waste management	Challenged ideas or assumptions about waste management that I held	Improved my ability to think creatively about waste management solutions
Journaling on personal relationship to waste	16.67%	27.78%	16.67%	30.56%
Presentation on the history of waste in NYC	37.21%	30.23%	20.93%	11.63%
Activity on the NYC waste stream	21.43%	33.33%	26.19%	14.29%
Group mural imagining different relationships to waste	7.69%	23.08%	11.54%	38.46%
Walking tour of Hunter waste facilities	32.56%	30.23%	23.26%	13.95%