

## VI. Conclusions

Our analysis of CUNY's open admissions and remediation practices revealed evidence of ineffectiveness and inefficiency at every step of the process:

- CUNY has essentially delegated its admissions standards to the New York City public school system. Unfortunately, the diplomas and grades awarded by the New York City public schools are no guarantee that incoming students possess the basic verbal and mathematics skills they will need to succeed in college.
- Rather than establishing an affirmative action program designed to admit the top applicants of each race, CUNY has relied on its SEEK and CD programs to achieve racial and ethnic balance. SEEK and CD, which base eligibility on low high school grades and thus admit students with particularly serious remedial needs, lead to educational ghettoization, provide a disincentive for high school achievement, and reduce the number of seats that CUNY can offer to economically disadvantaged students who are academically qualified to pursue a degree.
- CUNY's post-1969 admissions policies and its destructive symbiosis with the New York City public schools have led to a university system that is remarkably homogeneous in terms of the overall low levels of students' academic preparation. Whereas every other large public university system in the U.S. has multiple campuses whose entering students' SAT scores average in the first or second quartile, CUNY does not have a single senior college whose entering students' SAT scores average in the top half of SAT takers nationwide.
- CUNY has oversimplified its application process – no personal essay, no teacher recommendations, no SAT, no deadlines – to the point where even the most apathetic student can gain admission. At the same, CUNY has made it almost impossible for students, parents, teachers, and guidance counselors to know what levels of preparation are necessary for success in its various programs. Thus, CUNY has nominally maximized access, while virtually guaranteeing a high incidence of student failure.
- CUNY relies on home-grown tests of questionable validity and reliability to determine the remedial needs of large numbers of incoming students.
- The majority of students – even those diagnosed with deep remedial needs – are funneled into a traditional, full-time degree program and counseled to register for college-level courses. Yet there is no university-wide policy requiring all students diagnosed as needing

remediation to address their remedial needs right away.<sup>404</sup> Furthermore, large numbers of students must use their college financial aid to pay for remedial courses.

- Once a student is in remediation, whether her remedial needs are met is left largely to chance. Many colleges leave adjunct instructors to their own devices to design remedial curricula and instruction methods. Because there are no university-wide exit criteria for remediation, determinations of readiness for college-level courses vary from college to college, instructor to instructor, and even student to student.
- CUNY does not evaluate the comparative effectiveness of the various approaches or hold instructors accountable for student outcomes. In fact, CUNY does not systematically track student outcomes, so it is impossible to tell whether the money that CUNY spends on its remediation programs is producing results.

In sum, CUNY lacks many of the policies that would be necessary to support an effective and efficient remedial program. By the same token, many of the policies that CUNY has established with regard to admissions and remediation are deeply flawed, yet – due to a lack of leadership, a deficit of expertise, or a tacit decision to place self-interest above the interests of the students – those policies are allowed to remain in place long after their defects have been recognized.

Our investigation revealed a number of themes that cut across the various steps of CUNY's admissions and remediation processes:

- **Inadequate information.** No one can say for certain which methods of remediation work best, or if CUNY's programs have any positive impact. The information that CUNY does produce is of little use because it is based on CUNY's own assessment testing program, which is fatally flawed.
- **Defensive use of demographic data.** Rather than designing meaningful research projects, CUNY's Office of Institutional Research churns out volumes of data on student demographics. Armed with this information, faculty and administrators we spoke with were quick to point out that CUNY's remedial students are mostly women, majority-minority, foreign-born, of nontraditional age, attending part-time, working full-time, supporting children, etc. They seemed to be using the demographics as a shield with which to deflect questions and criticisms about the quality of education CUNY provides.
- **Haphazard approach.** Rather than establishing policies and practices based on information about what works, CUNY employs a haphazard approach to admissions and

---

<sup>404</sup> Indeed, CUNY officials could not readily account for the substantial difference between the number of students who initially fail one or more FSATs and the number who enroll in basic skills courses during their freshman year. (Crook, Office of Institutional Research and Analysis, interviews; see RAND (Klein and Orlando); Cilo & Cooper.)

remediation. This lack of deliberation is reflected at each step of the process and at each juncture in CUNY's recent history: from CUNY's precipitous rush to establish open admissions, to the arbitrary selection of FSAT passing scores; from the Trustees' sudden imposition of a new community college graduation requirement just days before graduation, to their recent adoption of a new certification exam over objections about its scientific soundness. On many issues, the university has chosen not to set a policy at all, instead allowing each college – with its own unique mission and student population – to create its own remedial placement guidelines, sequences, curricula, and exit criteria, as well as its own academic standards and prerequisites for participation of remedial students in college-level courses.

- **More and more like high school.** We were struck that CUNY is increasingly using concepts and strategies that were developed in the high school context, such as block scheduling and theme courses. At some colleges, large numbers of remedial instructors are moonlighting high school teachers and administrators.<sup>405</sup>
- **Institutionalization of large-scale remediation.** Rather than trying to decrease the need for remediation while strengthening the university's focus on college-level academics, CUNY seems bent on institutionalizing its remedial programs and affording them the same status as college-level programs. CUNY's admissions policies and practices, rather than supporting academic excellence, instead undermine the BOE's efforts and facilitate the admission of large numbers of underprepared students. CUNY has legions of professors of remediation, to whom it affords the same academic freedoms and contractual benefits as professors of college subjects, and who have a vested interest in maintaining the *status quo*.
- **Inertia and insularity.** Many of the most important issues surrounding open admissions and remediation have remained unresolved for the last 20 or 30 years. What factors best predict an applicant's likelihood of success at CUNY? Why does CUNY continue to mandate the use of obsolete assessment tests? Why doesn't CUNY have more sophisticated methods of assessing ESL students? Why, when CUNY knows that many of its students have deep remedial needs, and when it knows that financial aid is available for part-time students, does it continue to enroll the vast majority of students in full-time degree programs? Which remedial curricula and instruction methods are most effective, and for which student populations? What level of basic skills is required before a student is ready to do college-level work? Why can't CUNY establish a common course numbering system and develop articulation and transfer policies that work? How can academic excellence be reconciled with broad access? Although higher education institutions around the world have developed workable solutions to these and similar problems, CUNY insists on reinventing the wheel. Strong leadership and outside expertise are needed to bring each of these questions to a swift, sound resolution.

---

<sup>405</sup> We also note that one of CUNY's Trustees is a BOE employee.

- **Students are harmed.** The people who are harmed by all this are, of course, the students. First, they are admitted to programs in which they may have little chance of success. Next, they are forced to submit to a universally-maligned writing test. Then they watch their financial aid entitlement waste away as they struggle to earn equated credits. And in the end, whether they ever get the remediation they need is largely up to chance.