

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK: An Institution Adrift

REPORT OF
THE MAYOR'S ADVISORY TASK FORCE ON
THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The City University of New York (“CUNY”) is adrift. An institution of critical importance to New York and the nation, potentially a model of excellence and educational opportunity to public universities throughout the world, CUNY currently is in a spiral of decline. Its graduation rates are low and students who succeed take a long time to earn their degrees. While enrollment in New York City’s public schools (“NYCPS”) and at other public universities is increasing, CUNY’s senior colleges are losing enrollment. Accountability is largely ignored in its governance processes, and there is virtually no strategy or planning in the way it allocates its resources. Academic standards are loose and confused, and CUNY lacks the basic information necessary to make sound judgments about the quality and effectiveness of its programs. CUNY is inundated by NYCPS graduates who lack basic academic skills, but it has not made a strong effort to get the public schools to raise their standards. Its extensive remediation activities proceed haphazardly, and there are no objective measures of which remediation efforts are, or are not, succeeding. CUNY’s full-time faculty is shrinking, aging and losing ground. Many of the top administrative positions at CUNY are open and proving difficult to fill. Mistrust and confusion dominate CUNY’s governance processes.

CUNY’s downward spiral can be and must be reversed. At the eve of a new century, the United States urgently needs a model of the urban public university, and CUNY should be that model of excellence. CUNY’s historic mission—to provide broad access to a range of higher education opportunities of quality suited to New York City’s diverse population and to the City’s needs—will be more important in the 21st century than ever before. In the age of information and in a global economy, a college education is the essential foundation for a life of opportunity. For cities, states, and nations, the educational capacity of their citizenry will be more and more the decisive factor in prosperity and the quality of life. This is especially the case for New York City. The Mayor, the Governor, the political leaders of the City and State, the business, arts, and professional communities, all must join in a concerted, long-term strategy to make CUNY the preeminent urban public university in the world.

ACCESS TO EXCELLENCE

CUNY is not currently carrying out its academic responsibilities with the quality and consistency its vital mission deserves and requires. Central to CUNY’s historic mission is a commitment to provide broad access, but its students’ high dropout rates and low graduation rates raise the question: “Access to what?” There is tragic personal loss and institutional waste implicit in CUNY’s high dropout and low graduation rates. Moreover, the absence of clear standards of academic achieve-

ment tied to admissions and graduation permits doubts to fester about the value of CUNY degrees, even for the minority of students who achieve them. Educational opportunity becomes an empty promise if it is not rooted in clear standards of achievement. Public education at all levels in New York City has been terribly eroded by the absence of clear standards. CUNY must lead the effort to restore the standards that are essential to meaningful educational opportunity.

CUNY currently does not offer the full range of educational opportunities that public higher education in New York City should provide. No other public university system in the United States even close to CUNY's size has organized itself without several top-tier colleges among the range of educational opportunities afforded. Currently, CUNY does not have a single four-year college that is in the top tier of public institutions nationwide in the academic quality of its entering students. Similarly, based on the limited information that is available, not a single CUNY senior college has a graduating cohort that would rank above average among American college graduates.

CUNY must reinvigorate its commitment to excellence, while maintaining its commitment to providing broad access. CUNY must design a university system that includes top-tier senior colleges, first-rate graduate programs, and institutions that continue to provide broad access at both the associate and baccalaureate levels. The selective senior colleges must have admissions and recruitment policies that ensure diversity within the context of high standards. The more broadly accessible senior colleges at CUNY should have admissions standards that are more open, but which ensure that admitted students are capable of college-level work and are likely to succeed in four-year degree programs. The community colleges should continue to offer open admissions for all with high school diplomas or their equivalent, but they should take care that students are not admitted to associate programs who lack the basic skills for academic and professional success.

The University must organize itself and all its institutions and programs around clear, objective standards. These include:

- clear and objective admissions standards for all CUNY colleges that include a nationally normed, standardized test such as the SAT;
- clear standards of readiness for entry into college-level work and corresponding clear exit standards for students moving from remediation to college-level work; and
- clear standards of performance as a condition of graduation from all degree programs.

REMEDIAL EDUCATION

CUNY conducts remediation on a huge scale: in 1997, 87% of community college freshmen and 72% of senior college freshmen failed one or more of CUNY's remediation placement tests, and 55% of CUNY freshmen failed more than one. These tests measure whether incoming CUNY students can read, write, or understand math at low- to mid-high school levels. When colleges undertake remediation, as CUNY does, it is vitally important that remediation be done right. If remedia-

tion is not effective and underprepared students proceed into college-level courses, the costs will be substantial, including:

- students who confront life without basic skills;
- the waste of unprepared students' time in classes that are incomprehensible;
- poor use of prepared students' time, to the extent that courses are watered down;
- the distraction of professors from college-level teaching; and
- the erosion of standards that will result.

While CUNY's commitment to providing remediation is laudable, we believe that in many respects the way CUNY goes about remediation is flawed. Thirty years after the implementation of open admissions, CUNY has not yet established valid and reliable remediation tests. It does not carefully diagnose students' remedial needs. It does not measure objectively what students have actually accomplished in remediation, nor has it promulgated systematic and valid standards to determine when students may exit remediation.

As NYCPS makes the transition to higher standards, CUNY should continue to offer remedial education at the community college level – on the following conditions:

- CUNY must replace its current student assessment program with one that is consistent with modern assessment science. CUNY must diagnose students' remedial and ESL needs with precision, measure skill improvements, and compile the student outcome information required under a performance-based funding system.
- CUNY must evaluate the effectiveness of its various remedial programs according to objective standards, and must hold administrators and instructors accountable for results. Information about the effectiveness of different remediation programs must be available to all concerned, especially students.
- Students who require remediation should be given a range of remediation options funded by education and training vouchers from a mix of public sources, so they can obtain remedial education services from the provider of their choice without depleting their college financial aid. As the first step towards implementation of the remediation voucher program, CUNY and the City should conduct a pilot project in outsourcing remediation services, in order to stimulate competition and generate performance data from the various providers.

New York State's financial aid rules and CUNY policies push severely underprepared students to matriculate full-time in college programs and take college-level courses. This is bad both for students and for CUNY. It undermines the effectiveness of remediation, erodes standards in college programs, overwhelms underprepared students, and lowers graduation rates for students who succeed in remediation because they run out of financial aid before they can complete their college programs. The Mayor and the Governor need to work together and with the State legislature to revamp financial aid policies to ensure that students can obtain remediation without depleting federal or state financial aid that is intended to support college-level work.

CUNY AND THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Improving public education at all levels is the most important public policy issue facing New York City. Policymakers should view the improvement of public education in New York City from a kindergarten through college, K–16, perspective. This requires CUNY and NYCPS to forge a new relationship:

- CUNY must clearly communicate its admissions standards; undertake early testing and intervention for prospective students; establish College Now in all high schools; and help NYCPS become a standards-based school system.
- NYCPS must end social promotion; arrange for effective remediation starting in elementary school; obtain comprehensive, objective, and timely information about student performance – including requiring all high school students to take the PSAT and SAT; and use that information as the basis for deploying resources to address students' needs.
- CUNY must give urgent attention to the quality of its teacher education programs. As the system enters an era of massive teacher recruitment, CUNY, the main source of teachers for NYCPS, must ensure that its graduates who pursue education careers are well prepared for their critical responsibilities.

CUNY'S BUDGETING, FUNDING, AND FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

CUNY's current budgeting, funding, and financial management processes are ineffective. There is no strategic planning, no effort to invest in excellence, no incentives for good performance or disincentives for bad, no focus on institutional mission. The consequence of this in a time of budgetary stringency has not been inertia. On the contrary, CUNY's passivity has resulted in a dramatic shift in resources: between 1980 and 1997, the senior colleges and the ranks of the full-time faculty have eroded, while the community and comprehensive colleges, part-time faculty, and administration have mushroomed.

CUNY must order its priorities, define specific and differentiated academic missions for each CUNY institution, promote systematic assessment of performance, and use resource allocation to reinforce campus accountability. Both the central administration and the individual campuses must be encouraged to develop new sources of revenues. CUNY's record of external funding and philanthropic support is anemic. No CUNY institution or program should be supported if it does not provide clear, objective information about the quality and productivity of its efforts. The Mayor, the Governor, and the State legislature should institute multi-year, performance-based funding policies for CUNY to reinforce accountability.

Finally, CUNY must invest in a university-wide technology infrastructure and create integrated management information systems that can support rational planning and budgeting, track student progress and outcomes, assess faculty productivity, and provide better and more accessi-

ble management information. At present, CUNY lacks information for effective decision-making. In such a setting, it is not surprising that, in the words of former Baruch President Matthew Goldstein, “on any measure of performance, CUNY maximizes the variance.”

THE CUNY COLLEGES AND SYSTEM GOVERNANCE

CUNY, as a university system, has never surmounted its history as a group of separate institutions founded at different times for different purposes. When it became a system in 1961, there was no planning addressed to its system architecture or its system governance. Since then, CUNY’s haphazard evolution – characterized by rapid expansion and contraction, sudden change of academic direction, and frequent administrative turnover – has resulted not in a coherent university, but in an amorphous confederation of individual colleges. CUNY must wake up to the present and invent itself as a university system, one which focuses the academic missions of its various campuses to offer a range of higher education opportunities appropriate to the needs of New York, one which encourages excellence and efficiency, reduces redundancy, and creates a whole greater than the sum of the parts. No public university system in the country has such great potential advantages of system and scale. CUNY’s lack of coordination is leaving untapped enormous reservoirs of academic energy.

LEADERSHIP

All of the Task Force’s recommendations are contingent upon the establishment of dynamic leadership at all levels of university governance. The Mayor and the Governor should support strong leadership for CUNY, including a Chancellor empowered to reconstitute CUNY as an integrated university system and Trustees whose mandate is to provide strategic direction, based on clear accountability for all programs and institutions.

