

I. Observations

The preceding presentation of data leads to three sets of observations. At the most basic level, the data shed some light on the effectiveness, or lack thereof, of CUNY's access policies and remediation programs. At an intermediate level, the patterns of data availability shed light on CUNY's institutional priorities. Finally, at the highest level, the very process of data collection and corroboration has revealed deficiencies in CUNY's institutional research practices, which, in turn, explain CUNY's inability to demonstrate the effectiveness of its programs or strategically allocate educational resources.

A. *Effectiveness of CUNY's Access Policies and Remediation Programs*

Despite the many limitations of the data we have presented here, we can draw some conclusions about the effectiveness, or lack thereof, of CUNY's access policies and remediation programs. The data reveal several unsung strengths, and some areas of profound weakness.

Retention and graduation rates. Although we cannot tell which students enrolled in CUNY to earn an undergraduate degree – and we therefore cannot tell whether those students are achieving their educational goals – we can see that, overall, CUNY's graduation rates give cause for concern. While every other comparable public university system has one or more campuses that rank in *U.S. News & World Report's* “first tier” – a designation that rests in large part on graduation and retention rates – CUNY currently has no first-tier campuses.

- Fewer than 7% of CUNY's bachelor's entrants earn a bachelor's degree within four years, and fewer than 2% of CUNY's associate entrants graduate in two years.
- At the senior college level, four of CUNY's colleges – Baruch, College of Staten Island, Queens College, and Brooklyn College – compare favorably with other U.S. urban, public colleges with high minority enrollment, with six-year graduation rates in the mid-thirties to low forties and freshman retention rates of around 80%. In this same comparison, however, Medgar Evers had the lowest bachelor's graduation rate of any college, with only 10% of freshmen graduating in six years, and York College finished last in freshman retention.
- Six-year graduation rates for CUNY's bachelor's programs have been rising over the last two decades, from 26.5% to 32.7%, but they are still only about half that of SUNY and in New York State's independent higher education sector.
- SEEK students are less than half as likely to earn a degree as regularly-admitted full-time bachelor's entrants. After six years, for example, only 16.9% of SEEK entrants earn a degree, compared with 37.2% of CUNY's regularly-admitted full-time bachelor's entrants.

Furthermore, a substantial proportion of the SEEK students who eventually graduate take longer than six years to do so.

- At the associate level, all of CUNY's colleges except Kingsborough and LaGuardia have five-year graduation rates below the national average for public two-year colleges – in spite of the fact that the percentage of CUNY community college students who attend full-time is double the national average.
- CUNY's current four-year associate graduation rate of around 17% or 18% is only about half that of SUNY and in New York's independent and proprietary sectors. Moreover, CUNY's four-year associate graduation rates have declined from approximately 20% at the beginning of the 1980s to around 17% or 18% today. Yet they have remained remarkably stable in comparison with those of SUNY and New York State's independent and proprietary higher education sectors, which have seen drops of between 10 and 20 percentage points over the last two decades.

Professional and Licensing Examination Results. Large numbers of CUNY students take professional licensing examinations in nursing, teaching, and accounting each year. Apart from a few bright spots, the performance of CUNY students on the nursing and teaching exams is notably weak. On the accounting exam, however, CUNY students – and not just those from Baruch – perform well.

- By the standards of New York State's Office of Professional Education Program Review, all but one of CUNY's 11 Registered Nursing education programs and both of its Licensed Practical Nursing programs give cause for concern, either because fewer than 80% of their graduates passed the licensing exam in 1998, or because their graduates' pass rates have been in decline for three years or more, or both. It is worth noting that, although Bronx Community's LPN pass rates have been declining for the past three years, they have managed to remain above 90%.
- CUNY students' pass rates on the New York State Teacher Certification Exams are consistently below those of students from SUNY and New York's independent institutions – whether we look at all test takers, or only those whom the institution recommended for certification. This is a particularly important problem, when we consider that CUNY is the single largest supplier of teachers to the New York City public school system.
- Students from Baruch, Brooklyn, Queens, and York have passed all four sections of the Certified Public Accounting exam at rates exceeding the national average in at least three of the past five years. By contrast, Hunter, Lehman, and Staten Island have seen their four-section pass rates fall well below the national average.

Credit accumulation of remedial students. After four semesters, CUNY students who failed one or more of the FSATs have, on average, accumulated just one-fourth of the 120

credits needed to earn a bachelor's degree, or 40% of the 60 credits needed for an associate degree. Moreover, after four semesters, remedial students have fallen almost a full semester behind students who had passed all three FSATs. This is important because New York's financial aid laws limit the number of semesters that a student is eligible (the limit that applies to most students is eight semesters). The credit accumulation data suggest that CUNY's remedial students will reach their last semester of eligibility long before finishing their degree.

B. Inferences About CUNY's Institutional Priorities

Access outcome data. CUNY's limited research suggests that students come to CUNY with a variety of educational goals, which include not only earning an undergraduate degree, but also: general learning or self-improvement; improving their position in the job market; and preparing for further study. CUNY's central offices were able to provide data on the percentage of students who earn degrees, but they provided little information about whether students were achieving their other core goals – or, indeed, what students' goals actually were.

Even when this information would have been easy and inexpensive to obtain, CUNY's central offices and many of the individual colleges had never gathered it or archived it in a form in which year-to-year trends would be discernible. Notable examples include:

- CUNY's failure to order the Certified Public Accounting exam results, which are available at no charge;
- the failure of CUNY and many of the individual colleges to archive Graduate Record Examination results, which are available for just \$75 per college per year;
- CUNY's failure to compile and compare the results of its annual employment survey of vocational graduates to determine whether there are any improvements or downturns from year to year.

CUNY's apparent lack of interest in collecting and analyzing information about student goals and outcomes other than graduation suggests that demonstrating its effectiveness at helping students meet their individual educational goals has not been an important priority for CUNY. This cavalier attitude towards accountability may, in turn, stem from the fact that CUNY has a monopoly on both funds and students. CUNY's annual appropriations arrive each year, more or less like clockwork – regardless of its success at educating students or meeting local economic needs, or its future plans for doing so. Similarly, regardless of CUNY's track record, it is a virtual certainty that tens of thousands of students will matriculate there each year, because New York City has a self-renewing supply of students who cannot attend college elsewhere – either because they are too severely underprepared to be admitted, or because they cannot afford the tuition, room, and board at a private or out-of-town college.

The State and the City have historically depended on CUNY's commitment to providing broad access. Only when public officials and prospective students begin to ask the question "Access to what?" will CUNY be forced to demonstrate its effectiveness.

Remediation outcome data. The patterns of data availability are even more pointed with respect to remediation. CUNY does not collect valid, reliable pre- and post-test data to determine whether remedial students are mastering basic skills, nor does CUNY conduct follow-up interviews with college-level instructors to determine whether remediation is effectively supporting the university's college-level programs – although these should arguably be key goals of remediation that is provided in the context of a college degree program. By contrast, CUNY has collected extensive data on students' rates of progress through remedial programs and accumulation of degree credits.

The Task Force staff believes this is evidence that the overriding priority of CUNY's remedial programs is not to help students build a solid foundation in basic skills, but rather to jump-start underprepared students and move them into college-level work as quickly as possible.

C. Deficiencies in CUNY's Institutional Research Practices

As we explain in Part **Error! Reference source not found.**, the Task Force staff's process of data collection and corroboration has revealed deficiencies in CUNY's institutional research practices, which, in turn, help to explain CUNY's inability to demonstrate the effectiveness of its programs or strategically allocate educational resources.

We cannot count the number of times we requested information that CUNY was unable to provide, for the simple reason that it does not collect it. On numerous occasions, our requests appear to have sparked CUNY's decision to begin collecting certain types of data. On a few occasions, when we obtained CUNY outcome data from outside sources, CUNY requested that we provide them with copies for their files.

At the beginning of this Part, we list several limitations of the outcome data presented herein:

- The paucity of available information on the educational goals of CUNY and its students made it impossible to analyze the available outcome data in the light of those goals.
- CUNY does not have timely and accurate data on local economic needs, and, due to the limits of this study, we did not gather that information ourselves; this prohibited us from determining whether CUNY is meeting local employers' needs for well-educated employees.
- The outcome data that CUNY could provide us with were generally those that were relatively easy to collect or those mandated by the federal government, but they were not

necessarily the most appropriate ones for identifying needed improvements in teaching, learning, and the delivery of services to students.

- In many instances, CUNY did not have outcome data broken out by subpopulation, making it impossible for us to assess the effectiveness of CUNY's access policies in serving target groups.
- Because CUNY does not match outcome data to students' initial educational goals, the Task Force staff could not determine how well CUNY's academic programs prepared students to achieve those goals. In particular, with respect to professional, licensing, and graduate admissions tests, the Task Force staff was sometimes unable to determine how many students actually took the tests – much less how many students enrolled in college intending to prepare for the tests but changed their path somewhere along the way.
- The Task Force's research suggests that many of CUNY's student outcome measures are unreliable. For example, RAND's analysis has raised questions about the reliability of grading at CUNY. Similarly, several factors raise questions about data on student progress through remedial programs, as well as credit accumulation and graduation rates.

These limitations lead us to an inevitable conclusion: If the Task Force staff is unable to gather reliable outcome data, place it in context, and draw from it meaningful insights about needed improvements and best practices, then neither can CUNY – which helps to explain CUNY's inability to demonstrate the effectiveness of its programs or strategically allocate educational resources. As we discuss in Parts **Error! Reference source not found.** and **Error! Reference source not found.**, CUNY has an obligation to remedy this situation, and to begin collecting and using outcome data – to improve the effectiveness of its programs and policies, to aid the Trustees in making policy decisions, to inform public officials of the university's accomplishments and future needs, and to empower students to make informed educational choices.