

# Essays in Perspective

## In Pursuit of Academic Excellence

The Story of the City University of New York and  
Its Lessons for American Higher Education

by Sandra E. Diaz





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# In Pursuit of Academic Excellence

## The Story of the City University of New York and Its Lessons for American Higher Education

### Introduction

This is a brief history of how CUNY, the City University of New York, emerged as a model of successful higher education reform. The first section offers a cautionary tale of the consequences of low academic standards. The second is a story of rebirth and an example of what board leadership and vision can achieve even in the most difficult of circumstances.

The City University of New York is the largest urban public university system in the United States. With an enrollment of over 200,000, CUNY serves a diverse student population through its four-year colleges, comprehensive institutions, and two-year community colleges. Throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, CUNY provided broad access to outstanding higher education. Its costs were low, its standards were high, and it served as the training ground for the intellectually ambitious children of immigrant and minority families. A golden period from the 1930s through the 1960s produced many prominent alumni, including former Secretary of State Colin Powell, legal scholar Alan Dershowitz, *New York Times* editor A. M. Rosenthal, classics scholar and former Yale College dean Donald Kagan, and developer of the polio vaccine, Jonas Salk. Eight of its graduates from the 1930s and 1940s would later win Nobel Prizes.

In the 1970s, however, CUNY began a policy of open admissions, allowing nearly anyone with a high school diploma to enroll at any of its two- and four-year institutions. Soon, rigorous courses gave way to costly remedial programs as many students were unprepared for the rigors of college-level academics. CUNY's attrition rates were high, and

the value and prestige of the CUNY degree declined precipitously. In 1999, only about 30 percent of CUNY four-year students graduated within six years.<sup>1</sup>

Both inside and outside the university, many felt that remediation was an inevitable byproduct of increased access. But not everyone. A group of CUNY trustees, administrators, alumni, and friends banded together to demand better. And thanks to their concerted efforts, the City University is now experiencing something of a renaissance: admissions standards have risen, the remediation rate has dropped, both enrollment and student academic achievement are up, and the system has a flourishing Honors College.

The problems that CUNY has faced are issues that many universities, public and private, have had to grapple with in recent years. In the U.S., fewer than 60 percent of first-time, full-time undergraduates finish their degrees within six years, with completion rates at some schools as low as eight or ten percent.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, a number of employers have complained that recent college graduates lack competence in writing, computation, and basic analytical methods.<sup>3</sup>

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- 1 Benno C. Schmidt, Jr., et al., *The City University of New York: An Institution Adrift*, A Report of the Mayor's Advisory Task Force on the City University of New York, 1999, 57.
  - 2 Frederick M. Hess, Mark Schneider, et al., *Diplomas and Dropouts: Which Colleges Actually Graduate Their Students (and Which Don't)* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2009), 3, 10.
  - 3 Linda Barrington, Jill Casner-Lotto, *Are They Really Ready to Work? Employers' Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century U.S. Workforce* (The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, The Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, and the Society for Human Resource Management, 2006); The National Assessment of Adult Literacy also demonstrates that most college graduates do not gain proficiency in verbal or quantitative reasoning: Mark Kutner, Elizabeth Greenberg, and Justin Baer, *A First Look at the Literacy of America's Adults in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2005) 3, 14-15 <[http://nces.ed.gov/NAAL/PDF/2006470\\_1.PDF](http://nces.ed.gov/NAAL/PDF/2006470_1.PDF)>.

In so many ways, CUNY is a case study in how to improve academic standards while enhancing student success. The happy outcome should encourage other institutions to do the same.

### **Remediation and Attrition: Unprepared Students and Institutional Mismatch**

CUNY enacted open admissions in 1970 with the laudable goal of increasing access to the CUNY campuses and increasing diversity. Indeed, the percentage of black and Hispanic students in the CUNY schools did increase markedly with the adoption of the policy, as the percentage of blacks and Hispanics rose from less than one fifth of the system's enrollment in 1969 to over 50 percent in 2003.<sup>4</sup> In one year, the number of first-year students jumped from 24,000 to over 35,000.<sup>5</sup> However, given the uneven and often low standards of New York's public K-12 schools, which supply most of CUNY's incoming students, large numbers of students were matriculating to four-year colleges without adequate preparation for college-level work.

According to *An Institution Adrift*, a report published in 1999 by a task force commissioned by the administration of then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani, placement tests showed that 87 percent of CUNY community college freshmen required remediation, compared with 40 percent nationwide. Seventy-two percent of CUNY's four-year college freshmen failed placement tests in one or more areas, compared with 22 percent of freshmen nationally who take one or more remedial courses. Altogether, 9,000-10,000 students were placed into remediation each year before the adopted reforms.<sup>6</sup>

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4 William Crain, "Open admissions at the City University of New York," *Academe* (July-Aug 2003) <[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3860/is\\_200307/ai\\_n9261681/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3860/is_200307/ai_n9261681/)>.

5 Marc Santora, "A Brownstone Becomes an Ivory Tower, and New York City is the Campus," *New York Times*, 8 September 2008 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/08/nyregion/08honors.html>>.

6 Benno C. Schmidt, Jr., et al., *The City University of New York: An Institution Adrift*, 22.

The financial burden of remediation on the CUNY system was significant, both to the institution and to the students themselves. Since students must combine remedial courses with regular college coursework in order to qualify for financial aid, their failure and dropout rates were predictably quite high. Many left college with significant debt and no degree. Meanwhile, the institutional costs of remediation for CUNY were three times the average for public university systems.<sup>7</sup>

CUNY's problem was hardly unique. Nationwide, college students who require remediation are twice as likely to drop out as students who matriculate without needing remedial courses.<sup>8</sup> According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2000 about 76 percent of all postsecondary institutions offered some form of remedial reading, writing, or mathematics. The Alliance for Excellent Education estimates that postsecondary remediation costs the United States more than \$3.7 billion a year, counting both the cost of providing the instruction and the economic costs of those students who take remediation but still leave school without completing their degrees.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Turnaround**

In 1998, the CUNY Board of Trustees voted to phase out nearly all remedial instruction at the four-year “senior” colleges and to raise admissions standards. While the board ended the open admissions policy in the four-year schools, it continued to allow virtually any student to enroll in the community colleges where remediation was now centralized. The next year, the trustees selected a leader for the system who shared their commitment to reform, Matthew Goldstein, then president of Adelphi University and the first CUNY alumnus

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7 Ibid, 32-34

8 J. Wirt, S. Choy, et al., *The Condition of Education 2004* (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2004), 63.

9 “Paying Double: Inadequate High Schools and Community College Remediation,” *Issue Brief* (August 2006), Alliance for Excellent Education, 1.



to serve as chancellor. The board directed their chancellor to raise academic standards.

The story is one of remarkable success. With the end of open admissions, enrollment at CUNY is at its highest point since the mid-1970s, with nine years of consecutive enrollment growth between Fall 2000 and Fall 2008.<sup>10</sup> The prediction of the opponents of reform, moreover, that enrollment of minority students would drop turned out to be unfounded.<sup>11</sup> In fact, between 1999 and 2008, the number of black students enrolled at CUNY rose over 30 percent, while Hispanic enrollment rose almost 63 percent, compared with a 24 percent increase in the number of white students.<sup>12</sup> Remediation disappeared at the senior colleges, and CUNY's pass rate for the New York State teacher licensure exam rose from 62 percent in 1998 to 92 percent in 2003.<sup>13</sup> Average SAT scores for incoming freshmen are in the top third nationwide, and twice the number of incoming students than was the case ten years ago have high school averages of 85 percent or higher.<sup>14</sup> CUNY's Macauley Honors College, attracting students who turn down offers at New York University and Columbia, is thriving, providing another high-profile sign of the system's academic renewal.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, CUNY has not forgotten high-needs and at-risk students. Instead of placing them as freshmen in four-year colleges where they have limited chance of success, they concentrated the remediation efforts of the system within the community colleges, from which students who are successful in acquiring basic academic skills may transfer to a four-year college to complete their degrees.

10 "CUNY Enrollment Soars," *CUNY Matters*, Winter 2009 <<http://www.cuny.edu/news/publications/cunymatters/winter09/CUNY-Enrollment-Skyrockets.html>>.

11 Benno C. Schmidt, Jr., "CUNY: The Pride of the City," An Address by CUNY Chairman Benno C. Schmidt, Jr. at the Harvard Club, 16 December 2003 <[http://www1.cuny.edu/portal\\_ur/content/2003/chairman\\_12-16-03.html](http://www1.cuny.edu/portal_ur/content/2003/chairman_12-16-03.html)>.

12 "CUNY Enrollment Soars," *CUNY Matters*, Winter 2009.

13 Schmidt, "CUNY: Pride of the City."

14 Kathleen Pesile, "Why UDC Is on the Right Path," *The Washington Post*, 22 March 2009.

15 Marc Santora, "A Brownstone Becomes an Ivory Tower, and New York City is the Campus."

CUNY has also developed an innovative Community College Initiative geared towards widening access, increasing enrollment, and improving graduation rates. The initiative, funded in part by a grant from the Gates Foundation, will have a comprehensive first-year core curriculum requiring full-time attendance, mandatory summer programs and admissions interviews, and a small number of programs with pre-established articulation agreements with the senior colleges. The initiative will also integrate academic and student services and will have an Office of Partnerships designed to help students find internships and applied learning opportunities.<sup>16</sup> The concept was tested through a pilot program called the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs across the existing community colleges, and participants showed considerably higher levels of academic achievement than those who did not participate.<sup>17</sup>

Nor did CUNY forget the importance of high school preparation in ensuring college success and academic quality. One of the factors that made it possible to cut back on remediation was the expansion of the College Now program, a joint effort of CUNY and the New York City Department of Education, to all 17 of CUNY's undergraduate colleges. College Now is a high school-college dual-enrollment program intended to help students meet high school graduation requirements and to prepare them to enroll in college-level coursework.<sup>18</sup> This program, which currently serves over 30,000 students in high schools across the city, helps put college remediation in the high schools—where it belongs. A 2005 study showed higher test scores and retention rates for those students who participated.

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16 “New Community College Concept Paper Executive Summary,” City University of New York, 15 August 2008 <[http://www.cuny.edu/academics/oaa/initiatives/ncc/ExecutiveSummary\\_111008.pdf](http://www.cuny.edu/academics/oaa/initiatives/ncc/ExecutiveSummary_111008.pdf)>.

17 Marc Santora, “CUNY Plans New Approach to Community College,” *New York Times*, 25 January 2009 <[http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/26/education/26college.html?\\_r=4](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/26/education/26college.html?_r=4)>.

18 History and Philosophy, College Now, City University of New York <[http://collegenow.cuny.edu/whatiscn/history\\_philosophy/](http://collegenow.cuny.edu/whatiscn/history_philosophy/)>.

Another matter of concern at CUNY has been the inconsistent nature of its general education programs. In 1998, ACTA, in conjunction with the Empire Foundation for Policy Research, published *A Failure to Set High Standards: CUNY's General Education Requirements*. The report showed that, like many colleges and universities throughout the United States, a number of CUNY's colleges were failing to provide a broad, rigorous foundation of knowledge for their undergraduates. While the diagnosis of CUNY's general education structures was generally negative, there were and are bright spots on certain campuses. Most notable among these is the Core Curriculum at Brooklyn College. Despite several attempts to weaken the course requirements since the core's inception in 1980, the curriculum still requires that all students take common classes such as "Classical Cultures" and "The Shaping of the Modern World."<sup>19</sup> This core curriculum, like similar programs at other universities, provides a coherent foundation for future study as well as a common intellectual conversation for students from diverse backgrounds and preparation levels—something extremely valuable in New York City. The core is designed to give students the tools they need for their future employment and education—English composition, natural sciences, mathematics, and foreign language. These are, after all, indispensable skills for students preparing to compete in the global marketplace.

Several of the core curricula at CUNY's campuses outshine general education programs at many other universities—including schools such as Yale, Harvard, and Northwestern. On ACTA's core curriculum website, WhatWillTheyLearn.com, only seven schools out of nearly two hundred receive a grade of "A" for their cores—and two of them are CUNY's Brooklyn College and Hunter College.

While there have been many positive developments at the City University of New York since the mid-1990s, there is still considerable work to be done. The six-year graduation rates for Brooklyn and

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19 Core Curriculum, Brooklyn College, accessed 13 November 2009 <<http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/portal/core/core-overview.html>>.

Hunter, for instance, are less than 50 percent. And a recent report from the CUNY Council of Math Chairs found significant deficiencies in basic mathematical skills among freshmen at the system's senior colleges.<sup>20</sup> In order to continue the progress generated by the reforms of the late 1990s and early 2000s, CUNY needs to redouble its efforts to attract strong and capable students, and must continue to offer students a rigorous core curriculum that prepares them to be effective workers and informed citizens.

### **A Harbinger of Reform?**

The story of CUNY's successful reforms is relevant not just to New York City, but to institutions throughout the country. Although few institutions have undertaken campus reforms as wide-ranging and sweeping as those at CUNY, there are other boards and presidents taking proactive steps to promote academic excellence, academic freedom, and accountability. In 1998, the State University of New York Board of Trustees voted to implement a system-wide general education framework that would ensure that students graduated with a well-rounded foundation of knowledge.

One of the most significant lessons of the CUNY reform experience has been a greater awareness of the importance of aligning secondary and postsecondary educational standards to ensure that students who enroll have the academic background necessary for a successful college career. The University of North Carolina Board of Governors in 2000 voted to increase the high school course requirements for admission into the four-year universities, as it has been shown that students who have completed more academic coursework in high school nearly always show higher success rates than students without

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20 Joel Schectman and Rachel Monahan, "CUNY's got math problem: Report shows many freshmen from city HS fail at basic algebra," *New York Daily News*, 12 November 2009 <[http://www.nydailynews.com/ny\\_local/education/2009/11/12/2009-11-12\\_cunys\\_got\\_math\\_problem\\_many\\_freshmen\\_from\\_city\\_hs\\_fail\\_at\\_basic\\_algebra.html](http://www.nydailynews.com/ny_local/education/2009/11/12/2009-11-12_cunys_got_math_problem_many_freshmen_from_city_hs_fail_at_basic_algebra.html)>.

the same background.<sup>21</sup> The new admissions standards include a foreign language requirement and additional required courses in mathematics, the first time the university raised standards to this degree in nearly ten years. Likewise, in 2009 the Connecticut State University System raised undergraduate admissions standards for its institutions, tightening high school course requirements in mathematics and world languages. The goals of the reforms include the improvement of graduation and retention rates and a reduced need for remediation at the undergraduate level.<sup>22</sup>

The City University of New York's transformation has inspired another troubled public university to undertake comprehensive reforms. In 2009 the trustees of the University of the District of Columbia appointed Alan Sessoms, the former president of CUNY Queens College, as the institution's president and charged him with effecting genuine change. UDC needed such change: Its six-year graduation rate was a mere 17 percent, and the university had been suffering from a sliding academic reputation. Almost immediately after assuming office, Sessoms announced plans to split UDC into two campuses: a two-year community college that would retain UDC's open admissions tradition, and a four-year "flagship" campus with admissions standards. The transformed UDC opened in August 2009, with students expressing an optimistic view of the school's future.<sup>23</sup>

That another public university is following CUNY's footsteps should serve as encouragement for boards, administrators, and concerned

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21 "Courses & Admissions Requirements," University of North Carolina, accessed 14 January 2010 <<http://www.northcarolina.edu/aa/admissions/requirements.htm>>; "UNC Board of Governors' Minimum Course Requirements for Undergraduate Admission and a Fourth Required Mathematics Course," The University of North Carolina General Administration, accessed 14 January 2010 <<http://education.uncc.edu/droyster/AFM/MAR%20Presentation.ppt>>.

22 Gail H. Williams, "State Schools Tightening Up on Admissions," *New Haven Register*, 18 November 2009 <<http://www.nhregister.com/articles/2009/11/18/opinion/doc4b0372a2c06fa877624517.prt>>.

23 Daniel de Vise, "A Different UDC Prepares for Debut," *The Washington Post*, 4 August 2009 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/08/03/AR2009080302694.html?sid=ST2009080302796>>.

alumni who seek to re-evaluate and reform their institutions of higher education. If the CUNY experience can teach us anything, it is that informed leadership can influence higher education for the better—and achieve real results. Especially in an era of constricted budgets and demand for measurable, positive outcomes, other colleges and universities should study CUNY’s reforms and take decisive steps to give students an education that will serve them well as citizens, employees, and lifelong learners.

A college diploma should be worth more than the paper it is printed on, and it should add considerable value for the tuition charged. Fortunately, CUNY has demonstrated that focusing on the basics—higher standards, a solid curriculum, and accountability for measurable results—can attain the goal of broadly accessible, high-quality education at an affordable price.

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