

Open Admissions and Remedial Education at CUNY

In January of this year, the Board of Trustees of the City University of New York (CUNY) voted to phase out all remedial instruction at its four-year colleges and to deny admission to any student who has not passed three skills-assessment tests measuring competency in reading, writing, and mathematics. The purpose of the reform, its supporters contended, was to "raise standards" at CUNY, but not to eliminate remediation altogether or limit access to higher education. Students who cannot meet the new requirements may enroll in one of CUNY's junior colleges to begin their work toward a bachelor's degree, or seek to upgrade their skills during special summer sessions, or obtain remediation "elsewhere as may be available." As the chair of the Board explained during a prior vote in May 1998, the new policy calls for "more remediation, not less, but the venue is different."

The action by the Board seemed to write the final chapter in a story begun with dramatic fanfare in 1970 when CUNY embarked on an historic "open admissions" experiment. Back then, in the face of student strikes, mounting racial tensions in the city, and considerable political pressure, the university promised a post-secondary education to every high school graduate in the city. CUNY was flooded with new students, many needing extensive remediation to bring them up to college level, many possessing aims and values quite different from those of their predecessors. Faculty divided sharply over the task facing them, some committed to the proposition that all students can be educated, others alarmed at the decline in standards they saw ensuing. Writing twenty-four years later about City College, CUNY's best-known campus, James Traub, in his book *City on a Hill*, described the "culture fostered by the [open] admissions commitment."

Teachers who knew that they couldn't insist on the highest standards without losing much of their class had succumbed to the ethos of mediocrity . . . ; they waved as students went on to the next level, still locked in the simplest patterns of thought. And this was so despite City's very high attrition rate, which one could interpret either as proof of the school's high standards . . . or as a sign that the majority of students were unable to meet even fairly forgiving standards.

In reviewing Traub's book, one alumnus of City College offered this lament:

Once regarded as the jewel in New York's public higher education crown, it used to be called the Harvard of the proletariat. Today only half its students ever make it to graduation; the majority can barely read or write English or do basic math.

No wonder the current mayor of New York, Rudolph Giuliani, recently characterized the present condition of CUNY's senior colleges as "really sad."

Given these mournful assessments, it may seem that the Board of Trustees acted wisely in setting out to restore standards at City College and the university's other senior institutions. Yet open admissions alone did not create the problems now afflicting the various campuses in the CUNY system. And as we shall see, the new policy may have institutional and social costs that did not enter into the Board's calculations.

The History of Open Admissions

The checkered story of CUNY's experiment in open admissions reflects important changes in higher education generally since 1970. It also demonstrates the persistence of controversy about the meaning and value of "equal educational opportunity."

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After World War II, demand in the United States for higher education increased rapidly each decade into the 1970s. One effect in New York City of increased demand for limited college slots was a rising threshold for admission to the city's system of higher education. By the end of the 1960s, an applicant needed high school grades of B-plus or higher to get into one of the four-year colleges, and at least a C-plus to get into a two-year institution. Thus, calling City College the "Harvard of the proletariat" was not altogether fanciful. Getting into City College had become quite

difficult. However, its student body was less and less a mirror of New York City's "proletariat." During the 1950s, hundreds of thousands of whites had left the city, replaced by an equal number of African Americans and Puerto Ricans. Yet few of the children of these new residents got into City College or into CUNY's other four-year colleges. Because of their lower high school grades, they weren't qualified.

This exclusion had become politically untenable by 1970. Beginning that year, under the bold new open-admissions policy, students who graduated from high school with at least an 80 average in academic courses or ranked within the top 50 percent of their class could enroll in one of the senior colleges. High school graduates who did not meet these conditions were guaranteed a place in a community college or job-training program.

The effect was instantaneous and dramatic. Whereas 20,000 freshmen had matriculated in one

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CUNY institution or another in 1969, more than 35,000 showed up for registration in the fall of 1970. Forty percent of these newcomers to the senior colleges were open-admissions students. The proportion of black and Hispanic students in the entering class nearly tripled. At the same time, significant numbers of white middle-class students with solid if not spectacular academic backgrounds—students who would have gone to college in any case, but who would have been excluded from CUNY in the years when it was the Harvard of the proletariat—took advantage of open admissions to gain a tuition-free education.

On average, the open-admissions students arrived at CUNY with one-and-a-half fewer high school academic credits than regular students and grade-point averages that were six or seven points lower. A great many of these students fell below college level in their mathematics and language skills, and a substantial stratum of remedial courses was put in place at these institutions to make up for this lack.

What was the upshot of this experiment in open admissions? Was it a "failure," as one recent critic of CUNY, Heather MacDonald, has declared? We can supply several parts of an answer to this question thanks to the data gathered by David Lavin and associates, who tracked entering cohorts of students from 1970 to 1975, examining their progress (as well as the progress of other cohorts) at different intervals for more than a decade.

After five years, 26 percent of open-admissions students who entered a CUNY senior college in 1970 had graduated, 16 percent were still in school, and 58 percent had dropped out. By contrast, 48 percent of regular-admissions students had graduated, 12 percent were still in school, and 40 percent had dropped out. Disaggregated by race, the figures show that 23 percent of black open-admissions students in the 1970 class, and just 19 percent of Hispanic students, had graduated by 1975. In contrast, approximately 35 percent of white open-admissions students had gotten their degrees. The gap between the graduation rates for minority open-admissions students (21 percent) and regular-admissions students (48 percent) was even more substantial. Then as now, minority open-admissions students were likely to be older than regular-admissions students. They were also more likely to come from poor families, to work full- or part-time, and to exhibit academic deficiencies.

It may be misleading, however, to focus on graduation rates after five years. Consider what happens when degree attainment for the 1970 open-admissions freshmen in the senior colleges is measured not against the year 1975 but the year 1984. By this latter date, 56 percent had earned a B.A., including 49 percent of

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blacks. Because of their weaker academic preparation and their greater need to work while in school, minority open-admissions students traveled the route to a B.A. more slowly, but travel the route they did, in substantial numbers.

Quite clearly, a great many blacks and Hispanics achieved college degrees they would not have gotten but for their access to CUNY. In follow-up studies, Lavin and Hyllegard estimate that for an arbitrarily selected year in the late 1980s, these students earned \$67 million more than they could have expected without their college degrees. Given the increase in lifetime earnings that this figure suggests, the financial value of open admissions for these students, and for New York City, turns out to be pretty impressive.

A Period of Declines

What happened over the years to produce the dour evaluations of CUNY's condition by Traub, Giuliani, MacDonald, and others? What happened to prompt the Board of Trustees to embark this year on radical surgery for the senior colleges?



Graduation day, Lehman College, 1998

Photograph courtesy of the City University of New York

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The original open-admissions policy at CUNY was short-lived, in fact. By 1976, several changes in the policy converged with changing demographics in New York City to alter the picture at CUNY campuses. Foremost among those changes was the imposition of tuition, forced on the city by its near-bankruptcy in 1975. Tuition changed the incentives facing new high school graduates. Middle-class white students who had flocked to CUNY because it offered a cost-free alternative to the state university or a private college no longer had a reason to prefer it. Their enrollment at CUNY dropped precipitously. Middle-class minority students likewise faced changed incentives and increased opportunities to go elsewhere. Very poor minority students, on the other hand, were eligible to have their CUNY tuition paid for by the state. Finally, blacks and Hispanics earning too much to get state support, yet tied to CUNY as their only viable source of education, had to march even more slowly down the degree path as they shifted toward more part-time study and interrupted their course-taking more frequently to work.

Their progress was yet further impeded by new academic hurdles. In 1976, admission to a senior college was limited to high school graduates with an 80 average or a rank in the top 35 percent of their class (as

opposed to the top 50 percent in 1970). Moreover, skills tests in writing, reading, and math became mandatory gateways to the junior year.

The upshot of the new rules was a sharp decline in the number of freshmen at CUNY. More than 10,000 fewer students showed up at the senior colleges in 1976, reflecting an enrollment drop that in subsequent years has not been made good at many campuses. City College, the focus of James Traub's study, illustrates the trend. In 1969, the year before open admissions, the college enrolled 1,752 freshmen; in 1970, that number rose to 2,742. The following year, City College reached its high point, with 3,216 freshmen. By 1991, however, freshman enrollment had fallen to 1,240—a figure reflecting, as Traub noted, the lingering effects of the 1976 changes. To this day, enrollment growth represents one of City College's critical needs.

One might think that since standards were raised in 1976, the average quality of students at CUNY would have improved as well. But once again, demographic and social factors alter the picture. Freshmen entering CUNY in the 1980s and '90s were increasingly likely not to speak and write English as their native language, while students entering from New York City high schools were less academically able than they had been three decades ago. As a consequence, students at

the four-year campuses needed more, not less remediation. Two-thirds of the 1980 freshman cohort at the senior colleges took remedial courses, compared to one-third in 1970. Their dropout rate after the first year was twice as high. Their grade-point average at the end of four semesters was one-fifth of a grade lower than that of the 1970 cohort.

What was true of the 1980 cohort remains true today. Two-thirds of the Lehman College freshmen initially fail the writing test; fewer than 25 percent initially pass all three skills tests. Only 14 percent of the freshmen at Medgar Evers College pass all three tests upon entry. Even at Queens College, perhaps academically the best CUNY campus, half the entering students initially fail one or more of the tests.

Setting Standards

If the present condition of CUNY is "really sad," as Mayor Giuliani suggests, major surgery may be the answer. But what realistic standard should the city and the state set for CUNY? The mayor pegs his description to the very low "on-time" graduation rate at CUNY—just 8 percent of students in the senior colleges get a B.A. after four years. However, while very few CUNY students acquire a B.A. in four years, after six years their graduation rate rises from 8 percent to 32 percent—not so obviously a "sad" rate, even if an improvable one. What rate should we expect?

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Heather MacDonald contrasts the CUNY rate to the 56 percent six-year rate within SUNY, New York's state university system. The gap is considerable. However, MacDonald fails to draw some other revealing contrasts. She neglects to note that while fewer than 28 percent of SUNY students come from families making less than \$25,000 a year, 72 percent of CUNY students do. (Nationally, 30 percent of college students come from families making more than \$50,000; only 4 percent of CUNY students do.) Likewise, she neglects to note that while 44 percent of full-time SUNY students

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are eligible for some degree of state tuition assistance, 61 percent of CUNY students are. She fails to compare SUNY and CUNY students in terms of age, native command of English, family responsibilities, and time spent in the workplace. Yet each of these factors bears on how quickly, or slowly, students proceed toward a baccalaureate. In fact, SUNY and CUNY serve very different populations. CUNY students typically work more than SUNY students do, interrupt their studies more frequently and for longer periods, and begin with greater academic deficiencies.

Still, it doesn't seem unreasonable for the Board of Trustees to aim for a higher rate than 32 percent. The question is how to make the rate better, and at what cost. Both Traub and MacDonald provide examples of CUNY students truly out of place on a college campus—continually failing their skills tests, mired in remedial courses, unable to read and write, wasting their own time and the resources of the city and state. Excluding these students would seem a sensible first step in improving standards at CUNY. At the same time, Traub and MacDonald provide examples of "diamonds in the rough," students whose initial academic records were checkered with deficiencies yet who seized the opportunity they were given to proceed successfully to the B.A. Given CUNY's historic legacy as a conduit of opportunity for New York City's "proletariat," a policy of raising standards ought not to exclude such "diamonds in the rough."

How can policy distinguish between the two kinds of students? One way would be to differentiate among deficiencies. Not all academic deficiencies are the same. As research by Clifford Adelman suggests, if a student is deficient in math, say, but not in reading and writing, that deficiency usually can be successfully remedied in college. The same is true for a student deficient only in writing but not otherwise. Students

who face remediation in more than one area, however, have a much rockier time of it: the amount of remediation matters. More importantly, the *kind* matters. Inability among native speakers of English to read well constitutes a far more serious impediment to a successful college career than inability initially to pass math and writing tests. Observes Adelman: "When reading is at the core of the problem, the odds of success in college environments are so low that other approaches [than remediation in four-year colleges] are called for."

One option, then, in seeking to raise standards is to exclude from the senior colleges native speakers of English who cannot pass the reading skills test. (The Board of Trustees, in excluding from four-year programs those students who fail any one of the tests, made an exception for ESL students—students who speak and read a language other than English. ESL students were among those Traub depicted at City College as defying, and often overcoming, enormous obstacles to get an education.)

Other policy options, too, were available to the Board of Trustees. One member, for example, unsuccessfully urged the Board to allow entering students who passed the math and reading tests an extra semester to pass the writing test. As it turns out, more students by far fail the writing test than fail either the math or reading test. At Medgar Evers, 48 percent of

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the freshmen pass the reading test, 43 percent the math test, and 26 percent the writing test. At Queens, 72 percent pass the reading, 82 percent the math, and 55 percent the writing.

The policy actually enacted by the Board of Trustees is the most draconian of the options. It takes all the skills tests previously used as gateways to the junior and senior years and makes them conditions of admission to a four-year college. As a result, freshman enrollment at the senior colleges could drop as much as 45 percent, according to estimates by the CUNY Chancellor's office. At some campuses, the drop could be substantially greater.

Anticipated Gains

The policy of eliminating all remedial classes will single out the four-year colleges of CUNY as rarities in the United States. Seventy-two percent of all four-year institutions offer some remedial classes. Numbered among these are many substantial and

creditable public universities—including the four-year campuses of the SUNY system, which MacDonald and Giuliani are otherwise prone to hold up as models for CUNY. For example, the SUNY College at Oneonta offers zero-credit courses in writing and math. The SUNY College at New Paltz provides remedial courses in math, writing, and study skills. Even SUNY-Albany, one of the system's four university centers, offers a tier of non-credit "university development courses."

Why did the Board of Trustees adopt such a draconian policy? Because it sees the policy as all gains and no costs. The gains it hopes for are many. For one

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thing, the quality of classroom instruction will go up and the good students at CUNY will begin to get the really first-rate intellectual experience they deserve. For another, the city's high schools will be forced to change their ways, providing better academic preparation. In 1970, it was thought that CUNY's open-admissions policy would spur high schools to do better, since they could see a realistic prospect of placing many more of their students into higher education. However, the high schools got worse, not better, in the 1970s and '80s. The current Board of Trustees means to shock them into real reform.

Just as important, the Board means to shock students into taking more academic courses and making sure their skills are up to par. Fewer than 19 percent of New York City's students take a Regent's diploma, notes MacDonald. The Regent's diploma signifies that a student has completed a solid academic curriculum, consisting of courses like algebra and geometry rather than consumer math. The importance of a solid academic curriculum cannot be overstated. Adelman shows that the breadth of academic subjects in a high school student's record is a better predictor of college success than either grades or class standing. Some students arrive at college with limited academic preparation because their high schools offered an inadequate curriculum, but others arrive deficient by their own choice, having avoided harder, academically challenging courses. The Board of Trustees expects its new policy to stimulate a new sense of responsibility among high school students.

This expectation may meet with some success. After the Board first voted on the new policy in May of last year, the number of students availing themselves of free CUNY summer remedial courses nearly

doubled from the previous summer. Through increased diligence, New York City high school students may pass the freshman skills tests in unexpectedly high numbers. If this happens, the declines in senior-college enrollment will not be as great as feared.

The Cost of Exclusion

Still, many students who otherwise would have attended a senior college will certainly be excluded under the new policy. The Board does not count this exclusion as a cost. Students who seek educational opportunity at CUNY will still have it. Students who need remediation will still get it. As members of the Board continually emphasized, its new policy does not end remediation; it only *changes its venue*—from the senior to the junior colleges. The new policy is not an assault on CUNY's historic role of providing educational opportunity to all; it simply reorganizes in a more effective way how the different parts of CUNY play that role. So argues the Board.

Is it indeed better to move students toward the bachelor's degree by placing those in need of remediation into community colleges? Aren't these institutions the appropriate venue for preparing students to go on to senior college? In the abstract, this strategy seems plausible, but in practice an important consideration speaks against it. Community colleges seem, in fact, to hold back rather than propel students toward the B.A. This phenomenon is a general one. Studies show that students who enter junior colleges have vastly lower rates of B.A. attainment than students who directly enter four-year institutions. A good deal of this disparity, of course, is what we would expect, given that students often enter junior college aiming only for an associate's, not a bachelor's, degree; that students who attend junior college are typically less academically prepared than those who enter senior college; and that junior-college students are more likely than their senior-college counterparts to work part- or full-time. However, a significant gap in B.A. attainment remains even when we control for these variables. Students who have the same degree aspirations, high school preparation, and off-campus work responsibilities succeed less frequently in getting their B.A.'s if they start their academic careers in a two-year college.

The studies by Lavin and associates show this effect operating in the CUNY system as well. They found that "two-year entrants were 19 percentage points less likely to earn a baccalaureate than comparable students who started college in a four-year school." Part of this gap arises from two-year entrants' not proceeding onward to senior college, but part arises from their lesser success even when they do. In their study of the open-admissions cohorts, Lavin and associates found that "senior college natives did con-

siderably better than community college transfers with comparable high school averages." Put simply, certain factors in community-college culture discourage B.A. aspirants from pushing forward to senior college, and the quality of classroom instruction in junior college is inferior to senior-college instruction. Transfer students from community colleges are ill-prepared for senior-college work.

Thus, the new CUNY policy of shifting the remediation burden to community colleges is likely to mean that even in the best of circumstances, fewer of New York's "proletariat" will make their way into the ranks of the college-educated than do now. If the circumstances are not the best—if the community colleges are required to educate tens of thousands of new students without commensurate increases in their real resources—then the Board of Trustees' policy will emphatically not be all gains and no costs. It will exact a considerable toll in educational opportunity.

A High-Risk Gamble

In the last twenty-eight years, scores of thousands of lower-class blacks and Hispanics, and more recently Asians, have earned a bachelor's degree from CUNY that they would not have attained had the CUNY admissions standards of 1969 remained in place. That is a genuine accomplishment to be balanced against the putative costs of lowering the admissions bar.

What were those costs? Obviously, inefficiency comes first to mind. An institution graduating a very low percentage of its entrants over eight years is operating inefficiently, it can be argued. There has to be a better way to match student capabilities with college demands. Secondly, the general quality of instruction suffers at colleges trying to digest too many ill-prepared students. It is difficult to quantify a decline in faculty morale or the slackening of intellectual rigor in the classroom, but "quality" is something real and its loss is to be regretted. The mediocrity in the City College classroom noted by Traub blights the performance of faculty and students alike. The Board of Trustees' desire to improve the quality of instruction at the CUNY senior colleges is not misguided. Its new policy, however, may be.

As Traub recounts, City College achieved its reputation as the "Harvard of the proletariat" largely because of the students it attracted in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s—children of Jewish immigrant families who made up a substantial majority of the college (and who made up a substantial share of the students at Queens, Brooklyn, and the other four-year institutions). These students, writes Traub, had an incredible thirst for learning and, despite their often impoverished backgrounds, came to college academically prepared.

This isn't the population CUNY draws from in 1999. The contemporary "proletariat" of New York City is the product of underperforming high schools, broken families, and different cultural aspirations for education. The college degree has become a necessary credential for entering the middle class, and CUNY students strive hard for it, often in the face of overwhelming odds. But they take a largely instrumental view of their education. A substantial amount of first-rate intellectual work still goes on at the CUNY senior colleges, but the center of gravity has shifted. No amount of "raising standards" can restore the "Harvardness" of City College.

Nevertheless, the campuses of CUNY can be made better. There are different possible paths to that goal. The path chosen by the Board of Trustees is a high-risk gamble that will be known by its fruits—as a bold and daring innovation that lifted underperforming high schools out of their apathy and prompted irresponsible students to get serious academically, or as a disastrous and rigid miscalculation that eviscerated the senior colleges and had to be undone not long after its adoption.

—Robert K. Fullinwider

Sources: The Board of Trustees of the City University of New York, text of Resolution 9 (January 25, 1999) and minutes of the Board meeting held on May 26, 1998; James Traub, *City on a Hill: Testing the American Dream at City College* (Addison-Wesley, 1994); Morris Freedman, "Sad City," *American Scholar*, vol. 64 (Autumn 1995); Rudolph Giuliani, "1999 State of the City Address" (January 14, 1999); David E. Lavin and David Hyllegard, *Changing the Odds: Open Admissions and the Life Chances of the Disadvantaged* (Yale University Press, 1996); David E. Lavin, Richard D. Alba, and Richard A. Silberstein, *Right Versus Privilege: The Open-Admissions Experiment at the City University of New York* (Free Press, 1981); Heather MacDonald, "Downward Mobility: The Failure of Open Admissions at City University," *City Journal* (Summer 1994); Report of the Evaluation Team of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (1998) (noting City College's critical need for enrollment growth); William Trombley, "Remedial Education Under Attack," *National Crosstalk*, vol. 6 (July 1998) (providing recent pass/fail rates for the freshman skills tests); statement by Trustee James Murphy, minutes of the Board meeting held on May 26, 1998 (citing the Chancellor's estimate of the enrollment drop that will result from the Board's action); SUNY Office of Finance and Management, *SUNY Facts & Figures* (October 1996); CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Analysis, *CUNY Student Data Book: Fall 1997* (July 1998); Clifford Adelman, "The Kiss of Death? An Alternative View of College Remediation," *National Crosstalk*, vol. 6 (July 1998); Karen Anderson, "Classes Are Full at Catch-Up U," *New York Times* (May 31, 1998); comments by Kathleen Pesile, CUNY Trustee, minutes of the University Faculty Senate meeting held on January 26, 1999 (describing the effect that the Board hopes its action will have on high school students); "Good Summer News at CUNY," *New York Post* (June 6, 1998).

The Ethics of Representation: Realism and Idealism in Children's Fiction

In a recent article for *Horn Book*, a journal devoted to children's literature, Anne Scott MacLeod takes a number of well-regarded historical novels to task for imposing contemporary values and ideals upon the past. For example, in *Catherine, Called Birdy*, a Newbery Honor book, a medieval heroine is portrayed as an outspoken feminist; in another Newbery Honor book, *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, a nineteenth-century girl becomes captain of a mutinous sailing ship.

I want to use MacLeod's criticisms of historical novels to raise ethical questions about realism and idealism in children's and adolescents' fiction more

generally. The kinds of questions I will address are already familiar to authors and educators who must decide how to interpret and fulfill their obligations to historical (but also contemporary) truth. Should they present figures such as Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr., simply as heroes, concentrating on the towering achievements for which they are now famous, or offer a more problematic portrait of these real human beings, warts and all? Similar questions surround media portrayals aimed at a broader, largely adult audience. Does a program like *The Cosby Show* perform a useful social function by showing the