

Ending Remediation at CUNY: Implications for Access and Excellence

Tara L. Parker

University of Massachusetts - Boston

Richard C. Richardson, Jr.

New York University

Abstract

This undisguised, embedded case study examined outcomes related to student enrollments and representation over the four year period following a decision by the City University of New York (CUNY) to eliminate remediation in four-year colleges. Qualitative and quantitative methodologies provide insight into contributing factors to changes not only for CUNY four-year institutions overall but also for two CUNY campuses with different missions and different clientele. The study sheds new light on issues related to remedial education, as well as persistent racial/ethnic educational inequalities.

Introduction

Rising admissions standards and reduced federal emphasis on affirmative action despite continuing gaps in the participation and graduation rates for students of color suggest the tension between access and excellence in higher education is yet unresolved. Recent contention surrounding the issue of remedial education further illustrates this chronic conflict. The issue has become an “ideological battleground” (Shaw, 1997, p. 284) where state and institutional policymakers debate the efficacy of college remediation.

Remedial education, also referred to as developmental education, is part of a multifaceted process designed to facilitate K-12 progression, college preparation, admissions, and finally degree completion. Persistent social inequalities in this educational pipeline suggest an enduring need for remediation. According to a recent report by Adelman (2004), more than 41

percent of all high school graduates who enrolled in postsecondary education were required to take at least one remedial course. The ratio was substantially higher for African American and Latino students (62 percent) than for White students (35.6 percent). Further, more than 76 percent of American colleges and universities offer remedial or developmental courses (Parsad et al., 2003). Given the prevalence of remediation, it is not surprising that Astin (1999) described “the education of the so-called ‘remedial’ student [as] the most important educational problem in America today” (p.13).

While remedial education is perceived by some to be a necessary tool to promote equal opportunity (Crain, 1999), others argue that admitting underprepared students causes institutions to lower standards (Mac Donald, 1998). Other critics argue that remediation is a disservice to underprepared students who may never complete a baccalaureate degree (Rosenbaum, 2001).

Few studies empirically address either side of this issue. Equally important, studies rarely connect remediation and racial/ethnic access and opportunity, despite disparate racial/ethnic participation in remedial programs. Available research on remediation focuses instead on structure (Crowe, 1998; Merisotis & Phipps, 2000; Parsad et al., 2003), cost (Breneman & Haarlow, 1998), and outcomes for remedial students (Attewell et al., 2005; Bettinger & Long, 2004; Chen & Cheng, 1999; McCormick et al., 1996). Despite limited research, more than 30 states or higher education systems have considered proposals to eliminate remedial education in four-year colleges (Mazzeo, 2002). Eleven have already either reduced or eliminated remediation. The rationale most commonly advanced to support these decisions focuses on improving quality by excluding students considered underprepared while admitting only the best prepared. The focus of this study is one of the most prominent examples of a system phase-out of remedial education, the City University of New York (CUNY).

Purpose

CUNY’s mission, by statute, is to provide equal access to the people of New York, one of the most racially and ethnically diverse cities in the country. This study examined changes that occurred after the University eliminated remediation in four-year colleges. It gives special attention to

student enrollments and representation for the CUNY system and two CUNY senior colleges. The study also explored some of the contributing factors that may help to explain these outcomes using descriptive analyses of quantitative data as well as interviews and documents. This study sheds new light on issues related to remedial education, as well as persistent racial/ethnic inequalities in student preparation and participation.

The following research questions guided the study:

- What changes in student representation and freshman enrollment, if any, accompanied the change in remediation policy?
- How were changes in institutional policy, practices, and actor behaviors linked to changes in outcomes?

Conceptual Framework

This study used an adaptation of the institutional analysis and development framework (IAD) (Ostrom, 1999). Assuming bounded rationality, this framework suggests policy decisions alter “the written or unwritten rules of the game or, more formally ... the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction” (North, 1990). Rules “constitute an ‘institutional construction of meaning’ that shapes actors preferences, expectations, experiences, and interpretations of actions” (Fischer, 2003, p. 29). While the framework posits five categories of rules in use that may influence changes in access and participation outcomes, this study, focused on three: Administration, Admissions, and Transition and Outreach. The operating assumption for the study was that if outcomes did not change following the end of remediation, as CUNY argued, then institutional behaviors, policies, and practices (rules) had to change in order to maintain the same outcomes under a different set of system rules.

Research Design and Methods

The research employed an embedded single case study design (Yin, 2003) to provide an in-depth understanding of how the policy decision to phase out remedial education was implemented at two different institutions within the CUNY system during a four-year period (1999 to 2003) and what happened after implementation. The study used quantitative data to examine the patterns of participation across the two senior (four-year) colleges selected as embedded units of the case.

There were two stages of data collection and analysis. In stage one, a team of researchers conducted more than forty semi-structured interviews with a wide range of elected and appointed state and system actors including New York State and City officials, key CUNY central administrators, executive administrators at colleges, and union officials. In addition to interviews, the researchers drew upon more than 200 institutional reports, meeting minutes, press releases, speeches, newspaper clippings, and other documents in order to understand changes that occurred at the system level. The researchers also examined web pages, and archival data available to the general public. All interview transcripts and collected documents in this first stage were integrated into a case study database. Stage one also helped to inform the selection of undisguised campus case sites (Hunter College and Lehman College) for analysis in stage two. The second stage built on the first to provide a rich, layered, in-depth perspective on changes that occurred at CUNY after remediation. All data for both stages were collected between January 2003 and February 2005.

During stage two an additional 22 open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted with campus faculty, academic and student affairs staff, and executive administrators. Interview data were used to inform conclusions about links between the remediation decision and equity indicators of student preparation and enrollment. A simple time-series analysis of outcomes data was used to evaluate how well changes in system and institutional behaviors promoted racial/ethnic access and equity. Qualitative and quantitative analyses were incorporated in a single database (Parker, 2005) in order to identify common themes.

Context

The City University of New York (CUNY) is the largest urban university and third largest higher education system in the nation. CUNY has 19 college campuses including seven four-year colleges, four comprehensive colleges, and six community colleges.¹ Serving more than 200,000 students, CUNY has historically struggled to achieve both access and excellence. In 1970, the system was transformed virtually overnight from one of the nation's most selective universities to one of its most accessible. After considerable

¹ CUNY also includes a Law School and Graduate Center; neither of which serves undergraduate students.

controversy and amidst much political pressure, the CUNY system in 1999 reversed its thirty-year open admissions policy in senior colleges by eliminating remedial education. This action followed a commissioned report which contended that the University was an “institution adrift” and required substantial changes in its admissions policies to restore educational quality (Schmidt, 1999). CUNY Trustees, supported by the Governor and Mayor who appointed them, also argued that the new policy summoned high schools to meet the challenge of preparing students for college. Opponents of the decision accused policymakers of undermining access and equity by creating “educational apartheid” (Arenson, 1999) and argued that low income and African American and Latino students would face additional barriers to obtaining a baccalaureate degree.

A change in admission standards modifies the planning document that all public institutions within the state must have on file with and approved by the University of the State of New York Board of Regents (BOR), the states umbrella organization for all levels of education. Planning document modifications must be approved by majority vote of BOR. Under the New York constitution, regents are effectively chosen by the State Assembly, which is dominated by Democrats from the City of New York. Any City educational issue quickly leads to intensive lobbying of BOR members.

To support their proposal for the change in admission requirements, CUNY system administrators promised BOR that the change in policy would not adversely impact either enrollments or the representation of students of color. BOR approved the change on a provisional basis for three years in 1999 by a single vote. As a strategy for delivering on their promise to BOR, system administrators designed a template for all senior campuses to follow during policy implementation. Three years later after reviewing information about outcomes provided by CUNY, the change in admissions policies received unanimous approval.

CUNY has thus evolved into a stratified university system (Gumport & Bastedo, 2001) by raising admissions standards and eliminating remedial education in baccalaureate programs. Currently the University grants wide access to the system as a whole through its community colleges, but limits access to the more selective senior colleges.

Lehman College

Lehman College is located in a residential area in the northwest Bronx. As the only public four-year college in the Bronx, one of the poorest and youngest boroughs of the City, Lehman values its urban mission. Seventy-nine percent of students resided in the Bronx or Manhattan, with the overwhelming number from the Bronx. In Fall 2003, students of color comprised 87 percent of 9,712 students. Because Lehman is considered a second tier college in the City University of New York and does not receive as much media attention as colleges like Hunter, many within the institution argue that the college is one of the city's "best kept secrets."

Hunter College

Hunter College is located in the heart of Manhattan's Upper East Side, serving 15,900 undergraduates and 4,890 graduate students in 2003. Nearly 70 percent of undergraduate students came from three New York City boroughs: Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens. Hunter's mission, since 1992, has been to provide access and excellence to its students by attempting to reflect the diversity of the City of New York. African Americans and Latinos comprised 39.7 percent of total undergraduates in 2003, while Whites comprised 35.2 percent. Hunter was one of the most selective senior colleges in CUNY, in terms of mean SAT scores (1071) and a 30 percent acceptance rate in Fall 2003. Hunter's position within CUNY's top tier of colleges is a distinction in which the campus community takes visible pride. Many on Hunter's campus referred to the institution as CUNY's premiere college.

We now turn our attention to how the change in admission standards has affected the access and participation patterns for students of color.

Access and Equity for CUNY Students of Color

Changes in equity performance during the period considered by this study can be understood from a comparison of preparation and participation indicators across racial/ethnic groups at CUNY. We present several descriptive variables for each indicator to provide a simple, yet detailed picture of how the policy to end remediation was linked to access and equity for students of color.

Preparation

The end of remediation at CUNY baccalaureate institutions changed admissions to a two step process: 1) evaluate minimum requirements to conditionally admit students to a baccalaureate program (without demonstrating proficiency through test scores); and 2) evaluate standardized test scores to determine eligibility for enrollment into a baccalaureate program. Preparation measures included the representation of first-time freshman at both stages of the admissions process. Certainly, these indicators are as much indices of college selectivity as they are of student preparation.

Applications to CUNY baccalaureate programs have increased since the end of remediation. In 2003, more than half (52.8 percent) of White applicants were deemed eligible for enrollment in a baccalaureate program (based on SAT and/or Regents scores) and were unaffected by the new remediation policy. Conversely, only 18.8 percent of Black and 22.3 percent of Latino applicants, were eligible for enrollment based on standardized test scores.

Those who did not meet the minimum standardized test scores were required to take and pass CUNY's Basic Skills (ACT) Tests in order to become eligible for enrollment. As a result, while the number of applications increased, the proportion of students eligible for enrollment in 2003 slightly decreased. Senior colleges thus became somewhat more selective. In Fall 1999, CUNY admitted 59 percent of its baccalaureate applicants. Although the percentage of applicants meeting basic admissions criteria increased, the proportion of students meeting eligibility requirements dropped to 55.4 and 55.8 under the new rules in Fall 2001 and 2002 respectively, after evaluating SAT and/or Regents test scores. In Fall 2003, 57.8 percent of all admitted applicants were eligible for enrollment (see Table 1 on next page). Eligibility data were difficult to assess because distinguishing between students who were automatically eligible for admission due to standardized test scores and students who became eligible after passing additional CUNY/ACT exams was not possible.

Despite myriad programs and services designed to increase the numbers of eligible students who passed CUNY skills tests, only 45.5 percent of Black and 50.8 percent of Latino applicants in 2003 were eligible for admission to a baccalaureate program² by the end of summer. As a result, 2,568 African American and Latino students were admitted to a baccalaureate program in the first stage of admissions, but excluded from the senior college in the second

2 These figures include students admitted based on SAT and Regents exam scores, ESL, SEEK status, as well as those who passed the CUNY Skills Assessment Tests.

stage. Eligibility for White students at the end of the summer was significantly higher at 69.9 percent. Finally, between Fall 2001 and Fall 2003 alone, more than 5,000 students representing all racial and ethnic groups, who were initially admitted to a CUNY baccalaureate program, were ultimately excluded from CUNY senior colleges and did not subsequently enroll at any college.

Table 1

Applicants and Admits to CUNY Baccalaureate Program, by Race and Ethnicity

Fall Term		Black	Latino	White	Total
1999	Applicants	6,925	7,696	6,938	30,337
	Admitted	3,406	4,103	4,930	17,888
		49.2%	53.3%	71.1%	59%
2001	Applicants	7,631	8,480	7,458	34,337
	Admitted	4,565	5,449	5,751	23,519
		59.8%	64.3%	77.1%	68.5%
	Eligible to Enroll due to Standardized Test Scores	NA	NA	NA	NA
		NA	NA	NA	NA
	Total Eligible to Enroll	3,446	4,099	4,925	19,030
		45.2%	48.3%	66%	55.4%
2002	Applicants	8,064	8,893	8,044	36,348
	Admitted	4,858	5,817	6,270	25,146
		60.2%	65.4%	77.9%	69.2%
	Eligible to Enroll due to Standardized Test Scores	1,536	1,761	4,029	11,662
		19%	19.8%	50.1	32.1%
	Total Eligible to Enroll	3,672	4,195	5,444	20,270
		45.5%	47.2%	67.7%	55.8%
2003	Applicants	8,432	9,196	8,172	38,688
	Admitted	5,017	6,059	6,445	26,954
		59.5%	65.9%	78.9%	69.7%
	Eligible to Enroll due to Standardized Test Scores	1,586	2,047	4,316	13,354
		18.8%	22.3%	52.8%	34.5%
	Total Eligible to Enroll	3,840	4,668	5,716	22,359
		45.5%	50.8%	69.9%	57.8%

SOURCE: CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment.

Note: Fall 2000 data was unavailable.

Participation

First-time CUNY freshman representation and enrollment were used as indicators of participation. Enrollment was measured by an examination of changes in the number of freshman enrolled. Representation was measured by changes in the proportional shares of different racial and ethnic groups in the freshman class.

Although the number of African American and Latino first-time freshman (FTF) slightly decreased during the year of the policy decision (1999-2000), CUNY FTF increased for all groups four years later. Increases, however, were uneven across racial/ethnic groups (see Table 2). Whites appeared to benefit the most from the change in remediation policy. While the number of African American and Latino freshman increased by 6.7 percent and 12.9 percent respectively, White FTF increased by 29.1 percent. As a result, the proportional shares of entering freshman changed. African Americans dropped from 23.2 percent of first-time freshman at CUNY in 1999 to 20.5 percent in 2003. The proportional share of Latinos decreased from 26.4 percent in 1999 to 24.7 percent in Fall 2003. The proportional share of White FTF increased from 32.4 percent in Fall 1999 to 34.7 percent in Fall 2003.

Table 2
Changes in Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity, 1999 and 2003

City University of New York						
Racial/Ethnic Group	1999		2003		1999-2003	
	<i>N</i>	Percent	<i>N</i>	Percent	Change (<i>N</i>)	Percent Change
Total	8,448	100.0	10,208	100.0	1,760	20.8
African American	1,957	23.2	2,089	20.5	132	6.7
Latino	2,233	26.4	2,520	24.7	287	12.9
White	2,741	32.4	3,538	32.7	597	29.1

These findings are particularly significant in the context of changes in New York City public high school graduation rates. During the same period between 1999 and 2003, public high school graduation rates in the city increased for all racial/ethnic groups. As illustrated, FTF participation at CUNY did not keep pace. African American graduation rates increased by 3 percentage points, while the proportion of African American freshman

enrolled at CUNY dropped by 2.7 points. Similarly, while Latino high school graduation rates increased by 3.2 percentage points, the proportion of Latinos enrolling in CUNY dropped by 1.7 points. Conversely, graduation rates of White high school students increased by 1.2 percentage points while White freshman enrollment increased by 2.3 points.

Lehman College. Participation indicators at Lehman College were more promising than those at Hunter. African American and Latinos gained ground in terms of enrollment and representation between 1999 and 2003. Black enrollment increased by 24.6 percent. Latino freshman enrollment made the largest gains with 33.1 percent (see Table 3). In fact, increases in Black and Latino enrollment at Lehman College account for 35 to 38 percent of the University system's increases for students of color. White student FTF increased by 6.8 percent. Representation of African American freshman at Lehman, however, remained nearly the same. Proportional shares of Latino freshman fluctuated, but by 2003 showed an increase of 2.4 percentage points. White representation, however, dropped by 1.5 percentage points.

Table 3

Changes in Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity, 1999 and 2003

Lehman College						
Racial/Ethnic Group	1999		2003		1999-2003	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	Change (N)	Percent Change
Total	644	100.0%	819	100.0%	175	27.2%
African American	191	29.7%	238	29.1%	47	24.6%
Latino	332	51.6%	442	54.0%	110	33.1%
White	59	9.2%	63	7.7%	4	6.8%

SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics (IPEDS).

Hunter College. In contrast to Lehman College, FTF participation and representation at Hunter revealed increases in racial/ethnic disparities across groups. The change in admissions policy benefited White students, while it disadvantaged students of color. In fact, while the proportion of White students in 2003 was at its highest point since 1994 (38.6 percent), African American and Latinos were at their lowest (14.0 percent and 20.9 percent respectively). Since the end of remediation in 1999 the proportion of African

American FTF dropped by 6.3 percentage points, and Latinos by 5.9 points; compared to Whites whose proportion increased by 6.4 percentage points. Greater disparities however were revealed when the total numbers of African American and Latino students were examined (see Table 4).

Table 4

Changes in Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity, 1999 and 2003

Hunter College						
Racial/Ethnic Group	1999		2003		1999-2003	
	<i>N</i>	Percent	<i>N</i>	Percent	Change (<i>N</i>)	Percent Change
Total	1,920	100.0%	1,694	100.0%	-226	-11.8%
African American	390	20.3%	237	14.0%	-153	-39.2%
Latino	514	26.8%	354	20.9%	-160	-31.1%
White	619	32.2%	654	38.6%	35	5.7%

SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics (IPEDS).

Since 1999, White freshman enrollment increased by 5.7 percent. In contrast, the number of Latino freshman dropped by 31.1 percent. African Americans at Hunter were the most affected by the policy at Hunter as their FTF increased by 18.9 percent in the year before the policy decision (1998-1999) but dropped by 39.2 percent four years after the decision (1999-2003).

Access and equity outcomes thus indicate modest declines in the eligibility and participation of students of color at CUNY and the two senior colleges central to this study. Specifically, declines in eligibility and enrollment rates were more pronounced at Hunter than at Lehman. The next section of this paper reports how these changes in outcomes were linked to changes in policy, practice, and actor behaviors.

Responses to the End of Remediation: Rules in Use

As posited by the conceptual framework, changes in equity performance may partially be explained by clues found in the rules in use. Rules are found in university and institutional policies, practices, and behaviors. This section presents some of the key changes in rules in use that influenced the differences in outcomes presented above.

Admissions and Recruitment

Historically, CUNY provided wide access to students who for numerous reasons were bound to New York City. Prior to ending remedial education, CUNY relied on its location, its low tuition, and its statutory mission to serve the people of the City of New York. Ending remediation led to increased admissions requirements, potentially excluding thousands of New Yorkers from a chance to receive a bachelor's degree. Most participants at Hunter and Lehman colleges agreed that some students who would have applied four or five years ago probably would not anymore because of changes in the admissions policy.

When New York State required the Regents exam of all state high school graduates (state rule), proponents of ending remediation argued that the need for remediation would be reduced as a result of better prepared high school graduates. University admissions rules, however, served as system constraints by limiting who was eligible for enrollment. All CUNY campuses were required to change their admissions process from a one step process to a complex two step process. Students were evaluated first, for admission and second, for eligibility.

At the first stage, students were evaluated against minimum criteria including grades, high school coursework, and skills in math and English. If they met the minimum criteria for a specific baccalaureate program, they were conditionally admitted to the campus. At stage two, students had to demonstrate skills proficiency through SAT scores and/or Regents scores, in order to maintain their admission status. Those who did so successfully became eligible for enrollment. Students who did not meet the minimum scores became ineligible for admission to a senior college until they passed another round of tests, the CUNY/ACT Basic Skills Tests.

Students who failed to pass one or more of the skills exams in reading, writing, and/or math chose between two options to remain in the CUNY system. They could: 1) retake the CUNY/ACT skills test after participating in free skills immersion workshops to prepare for the test or 2) enroll in remedial courses at any CUNY associate's program. Many students, however, enrolled at a four-year college outside of CUNY or worse, did not enroll in any college³.

³ Remedial students participating in CUNY's educational opportunity program or were identified as English as a Second Language (ESL) learner were eligible for senior college enrollment but were not permitted to take remedial courses. Instead, they were given additional time to retake and pass the exams.

While policy leaders expected high schools to provide better prepared students, the reality was that fewer students of color earned standardized test scores that met CUNY's new admissions criteria than was the case for White students.

Despite policy changes, neither Hunter nor Lehman reported a decline in the number of applications received. Staff members at Lehman College argued that their recruitment strategies and target areas had not changed. Staff identified the College's mission to serve the Bronx as the primary reason for not modifying recruitment. Instead, they worked intensively with the local community to inform and encourage students to apply.

In contrast, staff at Hunter acknowledged specific changes in recruitment and outreach. A new president emphasized increased standards and improved recruitment (particularly for students of color). In an attempt to maintain a diverse student body, the College changed target areas to include new neighborhoods and high schools with both high proportions of students of color and high academic performance.

Administrators at Hunter and Lehman were cognizant of the increased competition that arose after the University's remediation policy changed. CUNY colleges found themselves in the middle of a fierce rivalry with upstate and private city colleges to attract students of color with high SAT scores. In an attempt to meet this new competition, Hunter increased the number of African American and Latino students they accepted. Both colleges increased advertising, improved outreach efforts to the high schools, and increased scholarships. As one Hunter administrator asserted, "We have to be really, I mean, really aggressive in our recruiting and admissions... We had to admit a large number of Blacks and Latinos because we are competing. Many of them will be lured to other colleges." Additionally, CUNY central administrators expanded collaborative programs with high schools and community colleges.

Lehman's strategies of working with the community to encourage Bronx residents to apply may have helped them to maintain representation and enrollment. In contrast, the declines in the enrollment of African American and Latinos at Hunter may be explained by changes in admissions as well as recruitment. By focusing on a new clientele, Hunter was forced to compete, with much lower success rates, for the academically best prepared students of color.

Transition and Outreach

CUNY system rules related to transition and outreach included: 1) collaborating with high schools through programs such as College Now, 2) developing new University initiatives, 3) offering supplemental workshops (immersion programs) to prepare students to pass exams, and 4) admitting participants of educational opportunity programs as “exempt” from the eligibility policy. Despite good intentions, the rules changed when transition and outreach decisions made at the system level were implemented at the institutional level.

College now. The College Now program links New York City public high schools with a CUNY college. All CUNY community and senior colleges participate. CUNY’s new policy implementation plan proposed to expand the College Now program to all NYC public high schools to help prospective students meet college admissions requirements. Staff at Hunter and Lehman, however, suggested that the diversity of College Now participants needed improvement. Further, they asserted that admission to the program was academically competitive. Campus administrators, therefore, did not view College Now as a response to the end of remediation.

Prelude to Success. The Prelude to Success program was a new University initiative designed as a partnership between community and senior colleges. Developed as a direct response to concerns about ending remediation, Prelude invited only those students who failed the CUNY/ACT exam by “a small margin” (i.e. one or two points) to participate in the program. Participating students registered as community college students to access remedial courses. Classes were held, however, on the senior college campus and taught by community college faculty. Students then had one semester to meet the proficiency requirements by retaking the skills test. Those who passed were eligible for a seamless transfer process administered by college staff. Those who failed to pass the exam again were denied access to the senior college and were required to maintain enrollment at the community college to remain in the University system.

In the early stages of the program, Prelude was hailed as a benefit to the students and the senior colleges. CUNY staff expected Prelude students to integrate into the senior college campus, easing their transition once eligible to enroll. At the same time, the program provided senior colleges with a pool of presumably better prepared students who were likely to transfer to the college after demonstrating skill proficiency.

Despite the anticipated benefits to the students and the senior colleges, the program experienced implementation problems. Notwithstanding optimistic projections, very few students participated in the program. Of all students University-wide who did not meet proficiency in 2003, only 7 percent enrolled in Prelude.

Many students hesitated to participate in Prelude due to negative stigmas associated with the community college. College staff at both campuses stated that many students left admissions offices crying because they did not want to tell their families or their communities that they were not enrolled in a four-year college. A report by a group called, “Friends of CUNY” suggested that students might rather enroll in private colleges where they got academic support with fewer complications. Due to low participation as well as pedagogical and administrative complexities, there was little surprise when Prelude “quietly ended” at Hunter College in the Fall of 2004 and at Lehman College in Spring of 2005. At Hunter some staff were unaware that the program had ended. Still, one executive administrator was adamant about the decision: “The provosts were spending all their time and energy trying to coordinate the program. If a kid doesn’t want to tell anyone they didn’t get into Hunter, well, I don’t know. They will have to go to a community college and transfer back in.” In the end, Prelude to Success was a “nice concept but with no monumental importance.”

Immersion Programs

The majority of students who failed to pass one or two of the CUNY Basic Skills Assessment exams were not eligible for Prelude to Success. CUNY, therefore, offered free immersion programs before each semester to assist students in gaining admission. Prior to the end of remediation, immersion workshops prepared students for the transition to college. After remediation ended, immersion programs were redesigned to help students meet proficiency requirements (pass skills exams), for admission. Workshops focused on test-taking strategies and developing skills in reading, writing, and math. Many staff suggested the courses were “remedial in nature” but were clearly hesitant to use the term.

CUNY’s central administration pushed for commonality throughout all senior colleges; yet, Hunter and Lehman differed in terms of emphasis placed on immersion programs. At Lehman, the effort was centralized with

the Coordinated Freshman Programs Office administering the programs. Immersion at Hunter was more fragmented with different coordinators for math and writing immersion workshops. One Hunter administrator explained that immersion is “just not as important in the scheme of things” at the college. Another argued against immersion programs, indicating that the program was a low priority at the college:

I don't want to do immersion...I'd rather put [our] money in other things like Pre-law counseling...If we don't have to do it, I wouldn't do summer immersion. It's not free and [we're] broke.

Perhaps as a result, the program was significantly larger at Lehman. Lehman ran six programs during the 2003 summer while Hunter ran only two. College administrators reported that participation at Hunter declined while participation at Lehman increased. Low participation rates help to explain the disparate eligibility rates. Only 28.8 percent (2011 students) of eligible students system-wide participated in University Summer Immersion programs in 2003. African Americans and Latinos (28.3 and 32.4 percent respectively) were more likely than White students (23.5 percent) to participate but were slightly less likely to meet all basic skills requirements. Students who did not pass the required basic skills were ineligible to enroll in a senior college.

Educational Opportunity Program

CUNY's Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) program is a state funded educational opportunity program established at CUNY in 1966 to support African American and Latino access to the University. Despite its beginnings, SEEK was not designed as a program for students of color. Most system and campus staff interviewees, however, said that SEEK played a large part in maintaining access for students of color because students participating in the program were exempt from the University's remediation policy. Instead of requiring SEEK students to pass CUNY/ACT exams prior to admission, CUNY gave them one year to pass the exams after enrolling in a four-year college. Enrolled SEEK students, however, were “faced with sharply reduced opportunities for remediation.”

This policy caused some controversy at Hunter and Lehman campuses. Some campus administrators argued that the policy perpetuated “inequality” and “blatant discrimination” because students were admitted needing remediation but were unable to access remedial courses. In place of remediation, students

were required to participate in summer immersion programs and were encouraged to participate in course review (supplemental instruction) sessions. Despite the controversy surrounding the program, SEEK enrollments help to explain differences in the enrollment of racial/ethnic groups at Lehman and Hunter.

Overall, the number of African American and Latino first-time freshman enrolled in CUNY SEEK programs has decreased since the end of remediation. Concurrently, the number of White students has increased. Hunter College mirrors the experience of CUNY with a decreasing proportion of Black and Latino students. The number of Whites at Hunter College in SEEK, however also declined but at a slower rate than for Black and Latino students. These trends led at least one staff member to be concerned that Black and Latino students may become underrepresented at the College in general and within SEEK in particular: “The trend is going to continue and pretty soon we are going to [recruit] African Americans and Puerto Ricans to try and get a greater increase in participation [in SEEK].”

In contrast to University-wide and Hunter College data, all Lehman SEEK first-time freshman participation rates remained relatively stable between 1999 and 2003. Lehman College is heavily reliant on SEEK enrollment with the largest entering class of all CUNY colleges (345 first-time freshman) and the greatest proportion who enrolled via SEEK (42.3 percent). Hunter College, conversely, enrolled only 13.6 percent (230) of its first-time freshman into the SEEK program in the fall of 2003. Lehman’s emphasis on SEEK and other transition/outreach programs helps to explain why the college outperformed Hunter in terms of student of color first-time freshman enrollment. The increase in absolute numbers of students of color at the University level, coupled with declining shares of African American and Latino students, suggests that transition and outreach programs were helpful in admitting students yet were inadequate to fully offset the impact of ending remediation. Low participation rates, particularly for students of color, in *Prelude to Success*, as well as generally low participation in immersion programs help to explain why representation of students of color declined during the study.

Despite CUNY’s attempts to guide colleges through phasing out remediation, many students were excluded from CUNY senior colleges because they failed to pass standardized tests. Students who retook the test but remained ineligible for a baccalaureate program were referred to a CUNY

community college. Many of these students enrolled in private colleges in the city or left to attend college in other parts of New York State. Even with programs such as Prelude to Success, many students chose not to attend community colleges. Some students unable to leave the City, did not enroll in any college.

Discussion

In 2002, CUNY central administrators reported to the Board of Regents that they were able to achieve their earlier promise: they improved educational quality by eliminating remedial education while maintaining access and participation for students of color. CUNY began with the advantages of geographic location and a strong foundation for promoting diversity. The history of the University reflects many distinctive efforts to promote access and excellence supported by the State statute that defines its urban mission. Although CUNY colleges have experienced tuition increases, the University still offers a relatively affordable college education to New York metropolitan area residents. Moreover many of the campus administrators, faculty, and staff interviewed provided evidence of a commitment not only to serving students of color, but to serving them well. Indeed much of the evidence suggests that CUNY succeeded in promoting both access and excellence.

The study also offers evidence that qualifies or even contradicts some of the claims made in support of the policy change that ended remediation. African American and Latino students were disproportionately affected in terms of preparation and participation.

The two CUNY colleges on which this study focuses were clearly mindful of the need to work with public high schools and implemented effective intervention strategies. The success of these strategies, however, was adversely impacted by the absence of rule changes on the high school level to match changes at the University level. The argument that increased high school graduation requirements eliminated the need for remediation was not sustained by study data. The overwhelming majority of CUNY provisional admits of color whose standardized test scores prevented them from automatic admittance into a baccalaureate program illustrate this point. Comparisons of conditional admits based on SAT and/or Regents scores showed that students of color disproportionately required additional academic support to demonstrate success before – as opposed to during – college.

New and expanded outreach and academic support programs produced unexpected consequences. Prelude to Success was developed for students whose scores fell just below the minimum requirement for admissions. The program however enrolled too few students and appeared to be on the verge of being completely phased out of CUNY. Both colleges in this study ended Prelude. Further, the change in remediation policy required many students of color (and any student who did not demonstrate proficiency prior to the start of the semester) to enroll in a community college or not enroll at CUNY at all.

While community colleges were used as tools to maintain access, senior colleges were designated as selective but “meritocratic.” Many senior college staff appeared to be comfortable with this design as they argued that community colleges were better suited to educating underprepared students. These findings confirm previous research that suggests that assigning all responsibility for addressing preparation concerns to the community college sector may cause discontinuities in higher education systems thus threatening access and equity goals (Gumport & Bastedo, 2001).

Questions therefore remain regarding access for whom and access to what. Many students, particularly those of color, were hesitant to enroll in a community college. As CUNY became more selective and stratified, it may be important to consider who will serve those students who may need assistance with basic skills at the time of enrollment but may still benefit from a four-year college experience. What will happen to the students who are left outside the doors of what they perceive as their only option for a baccalaureate degree?

Overall small declines in CUNY student of color enrollment may suggest that CUNY maintained access. The University’s improved public image may suggest that the system also offers excellence. The growing gap between the proportion of Whites and students of color in CUNY freshman cohorts, however, suggests the need for continuing vigilance in a post-remediation era. Further, early publicity about ending remediation may have played a role in declining participation rates. The data suggest that Hunter College has more reason for concern than Lehman.

Conclusion

The policy ending remediation at CUNY senior colleges was controversial, as supporters and critics argued about the placement of not only remedial courses, but remedial students also. As important were the ensuing

debates about access and academic quality. This study raises issues beyond remedial education. While the elimination of remediation changed rules on the institutional level, the decision itself reflects the larger context of changes in rules related to educational access and equity at federal and state levels. The CUNY experience suggests the following implications for policy and practice:

1. *Different colleges require different strategies.* The implementation template presented to all four-year CUNY colleges may have limited campuses in the development of additional innovative strategies to better recruit and enroll students. Higher education systems with institutions that vary in size, mission, student demographics, and geographic location should consider the implications of developing policies that require a “one size fits all” approach. Colleges with larger proportions of students of color may end up by default with most of the responsibility for maintaining diversity while other colleges become more exclusive.

2. *Requiring less well prepared students to begin in community colleges does not necessarily promote equitable educational opportunity.* CUNY justified its policy to phase out remediation by offering students who failed to achieve admission to the desired senior college an opportunity to enroll at a community college. Students reportedly chose to enroll in private city colleges or other colleges outside of New York City rather than enroll at a CUNY community college. Thousands of students, however, did not enroll anywhere. Higher education systems must consider the perceptions of students labeled as underprepared before limiting their options to a community college. They should also consider the stigma this attaches to the community college.

3. *The need for some form of remediation does not disappear when admission policies change.* Admissions criteria are dependent upon the capacity of feeder high schools to prepare students adequately. In this case, the end of remediation coincided with increased academic standards at the high school level as reflected in the New York State Regents exam. The hope was that this would negate the need for remediation. As CUNY preparation data suggest, however, students of color disproportionately failed to achieve the minimal Regents or SAT scores required to bypass additional testing and to obtain automatic admission into a baccalaureate program. Future decisions about remediation should be based on alignments between high school preparation and admissions requirements rather than on optimism about potential alignments.

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