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Academic Stratification and Endemic Conflict: Remedial Education Policy at CUNY

Patricia J. Gumport and Michael N. Bastedo

This article examines remedial education policy at the City University of New York (CUNY) both in historical context and from a theoretical perspective. The most recent CUNY policy to phase out remedial education in its senior colleges is part of a trend toward the development of a more stratified system of public higher education within CUNY, a departure from the egalitarian principles that were evident in the implementation of open admissions at CUNY in 1970. This trend warrants further analysis, both for its rationale and its potential liabilities.

Patricia J. Gumport is associate professor of education and director of the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement at Stanford University. Michael N. Bastedo is a doctoral candidate at Stanford University, with interests in state policy, organization theory, and curriculum. The authors thank Nathan Glazer, David Lavin, Christopher Mazzeo, and two anonymous reviewers for comments on an earlier draft of this paper. The work reported here is supported under the Educational Research and Development Center program, agreement number R309A60001, CFDA 84.309A, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education. The findings and opinions expressed here do not reflect the position or policies of OERI or the U.S. Department of Education. An earlier version of the article was presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA, April 24-28, 2000. Address queries to Patricia J. Gumport, CERAS 508, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305; telephone: 650-723-7724; fax: 650-725-3936; e-mail: gumport@stanford.edu.

The historical record of policy changes in the CUNY system is a series of attempts to modify its system design. These policies, however, have not resolved the underlying tensions between those who value competitive meritocracy and those who value egalitarianism. Even as CUNY's admissions policies and planning initiatives were intended to mediate that ongoing conflict, operational challenges arising from policy implementation suggested that these structural shifts were at best temporary solutions. In this light, the remediation controversy can be seen as the most recent iteration in ongoing value conflicts between those who want CUNY to be open to everyone and those who want CUNY to be a differentiated system that promotes and prizes competitive excellence.

This article draws upon a vast array of documents collected in preparation for a larger case study of New York public higher education. The documents include system and institutional planning studies, external reports, newspaper articles, and secondary literature. The focus is document analysis, to examine how the official record reflects the premises of decision makers and highlights the consequences of these policy changes. The ultimate objective is to foster understanding of policy makers' decisions that have altered the trajectory and mission of one system of public higher education. The analysis extends to possible structural alternatives that mediate between the competing interests of access and excellence in a way that more effectively supports student opportunity.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

There are alternative designs for the statewide division of labor among public higher education institutions. Over the past four decades, statewide coordinating and governing boards have considered various systemic modifications to meet the needs of students and the economy, and to maintain academic standards and affordable access for diverse student populations. Structural provisions within systems have ranged from establishing mission diversification, facilitating articulation within a vertical hierarchy, and legislating lines of authority and institutional responsibility alongside mechanisms to demonstrate accountability. To understand the rationale for such structural modifications, we need to review some dynamics of system evolution.

From a functionalist perspective of system design, the key to understanding academic systems is to see them as "major social units," conceptually falling between an "organization" and "society" (Clark, 1983, p. 70). According to this perspective, the fundamental public policy issue for every academic system is to differentiate tasks in a way that makes sense. These theorists commonly propose that functional differentiation within a system and the ensuing modifications of the formal structure are necessary

accompaniments to growth. When applied to the evolution of public higher education systems, this perspective suggests that expansion in enrollments is accompanied by a differentiation of tasks across campuses and an elaboration of structures that are assigned those specialized functions. In time, as the Durkheimian notion of differentiation predicts, we can expect that an agreed-upon division of labor among campuses may be modified to reflect a reassignment of tasks, thereby yielding greater structural heterogeneity among campuses in a system rather than a uniform or homogeneous structure.

When applied to a public higher education system, it is clear how differentiation of tasks within a system may accompany expansion. Moreover, functional differentiation is not only as an adaptation to growth but also as a structural solution to wider value conflicts. In this way, differentiated missions can institutionalize and mediate normative tensions between egalitarianism and competitive excellence. As Smelser (1974) explains, the prototype for this form of adaptation is the 1960 California Master Plan, which in principle allows open access through the community college and competitive excellence through the university system. The rationale of different missions for each tier also facilitated sorting students by academic qualifications, which presumably demonstrated both a student's preparation and talent. By differentiating the system into tiers, the system evolved ideologically to assure both equality of opportunity (through open admissions practices) and elite control of the upper levels. At the same time, this differentiation also created real problems associated with the allocation of resources and power relations within highly differentiated structures.

Furthermore, the theoretical ideal of a functionalist trajectory of ever-increasing differentiation entails challenges of integration. According to Durkheimian reasoning, as parts become specialized and more complex structurally, stability is assured if the parts (i.e., subunits) perceive their interdependence. Thus, there is a hoped-for basis for cooperation, if not a genuine basis for organic solidarity. However, as Smelser (1974) points out, stratification accompanied by endemic conflict is a source of ongoing instability in the system.

In a fundamental sense, differentiation and stratification may be seen as working hand in hand. Differentiated levels are not only different but are also differently valued; as status distinctions arise, they are reinforced across the levels. Thus, structural differentiation becomes *de facto* stratification. Although the levels may be seen as functional in one sense, they may also be a source of frustration when they are seen as barriers to swift upward mobility. From this perspective, differentiated levels are undesirable—obstacles that squelch the aspirations of those who want the system to enable and promote more widespread access. While for some, differentiation into tiers was a desirable structural solution to reconcile ideological tensions between

equalizing access and competitive excellence, others see it as reproducing social inequalities. In this way, public policy about the public higher education system becomes a site of distributive struggle: as enrollments expand, the structural elaboration into differentiated missions mediates, but does not resolve, endemic conflict.

In retrospect, the promise of differentiation for reconciling what would otherwise be competing or contradictory tasks is incomplete. Specific structural arrangements in any given era are at best temporary, their inherent instability rooted in their failure to resolve core tensions. Even functionalist theorists acknowledge this. For example, as Clark (1983) cautions, "elite functions" in higher education cannot be easily reconciled with "certain democratic ideals" (p. 247). Clark weighs the structural alternatives in this way: if a system has uniformity in practice and rewards, it is vulnerable to overload in activities and conflict among tasks. Over time, activities will multiply, and more people will seek to be served. In contrast, a multi-sector system is more efficient, able to focus on certain tasks and reduce conflict among contradictory operations. In the differentiated and hierarchical system, however, equity is not well served; advantages and disadvantages become institutionalized in different functions, status, and often resources. Moreover, in times of resource scarcity or political mobilization, tensions will probably reemerge, threatening elite control.

In summary, differentiation is not always a clear linear trajectory toward ever-increasing structural complexity. Rather, there is potential for interruption, counter-developments, and unexpected turns. This possibility for structural and political disruption in systems is consistent with the insights of conflict theorists of education (e.g., Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Collins, 1977), and suggests that we examine systems as contested arenas with endemic conflict, even when the conflict may be submerged. It would come as no surprise, then, to see both the mobilization of entrenched interests and also ongoing evidence of partisan political conflict intersecting with deliberations over structural redesign. Thus, examining the logic of differentiation yields only a partial account that should be accompanied by analysis of underlying political interests and prolonged value conflicts.

NEW YORK PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

Public higher education in New York is divided between two large systems, organized geographically, with CUNY serving New York City and the State University of New York (SUNY) serving upstate New York and Long Island. Distinct and heterogeneous, each system is managed by its own chancellor and governing board. A statewide Board of Regents oversees both, but its influence is relatively weak in higher education. A wide range of New York political actors have substantive and political authority over CUNY,

including its chancellor, Board of Trustees, Board of Regents, the mayor of New York City, the governor, and the legislature. It is no surprise that observers and policy analysts alike see the CUNY system as more over-governed and politicized than is healthy for a public higher education system (Gill, 1999).

Enrolling over 200,000 students, CUNY is a system of 18 campuses, consisting of 6 community colleges, 11 senior colleges that grant the baccalaureate and master's degrees, and a graduate center, which is the only doctorate-granting university. Along with the segmented structure, CUNY also has a fragmented political structure dominated by "regional biases and political divisions" that hampers statewide planning and information gathering (Richardson et al., 1999, p. 73). Within CUNY, City College is the oldest and best-known campus but has never been formally recognized as the system's flagship. In recent years, other CUNY senior colleges, such as Brooklyn, Hunter, and Baruch, have often had better academic reputations. The CUNY faculty union, called the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), plays a very strong role in policy discussions and actively promotes faculty and student interests within the CUNY system. In May 2000, CUNY faculty elected a new slate of PSC leaders whose platform promised to increase the union's influence in policy decisions.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

When Albert Bowker was appointed chancellor of the CUNY system in 1963, CUNY was possibly the most selective public higher education system in the nation; by fall 1970, the CUNY system was admitting any student with a high school diploma. CUNY reacted very conservatively to the greatly expanded student population of the 1950s, unlike its public system counterparts in states like California and Texas. As the number of New York City high school graduates increased by over 13,000 to close to 66,000, CUNY enrollment actually declined by 300 to just over 8,500 students (Karabel, 1983). During the 1950s and 1960s, CUNY continued to serve its highly motivated and high-achieving student population, many of whom were the children of Jewish immigrants who had graduated from CUNY a generation earlier. Ultimately Bowker's two-tiered plan, despite being called "open admissions," would be largely affirmed.

Bowker advocated a two-tiered system that would allow much larger numbers of students to be eligible for senior college admission. A revision of CUNY's 1964 master plan contained a provision for CUNY to be open to every high school graduate by 1975. This "open admissions" policy was something of a misnomer, however. Only the top 25% of high school graduates would be admitted to a senior college, and only the top two-thirds would qualify for community colleges (Lavin, Alba, & Silberstein, 1981). The rest

would be admitted to skills centers for vocational training. The Board of Higher Education reaffirmed the 1964 master plan in 1968.

The student uprisings at City College during the spring of 1969 were undoubtedly traumatic. Although the public may have seen the uprisings as part of a long trend of campus conflict going back to 1964, earlier conflicts were driven by white students enraged by the university's complicity in the Vietnam War and frustrated with its impersonal, bureaucratic administrative structures. The minority students at CUNY, however, were engaged in different issues: admitting more minority students, changing the curriculum through new programs in ethnic studies and black studies, adding minority faculty throughout the colleges, and gaining control of student orientation programs (Glazer, 1973).

The student uprising in spring 1969 was not the result of admissions policies alone; rather, it resulted from the confluence of several factors, and university leadership was crucial. Governor Nelson Rockefeller announced a large budget cut for CUNY in January 1969, and 13,000 disgruntled CUNY students demonstrated in Albany that March. Bowker threatened not to admit anyone to the freshman class for the coming academic year. City College president Buell Gallagher resigned in protest, proclaiming that he would "not turn his back on the poor of all races" (Lavin, Alba, & Silberstein, 1981, p. 11). Twenty-three of the twenty-seven department chairs at City College threatened to resign as well. These actions lent considerable legitimacy to the student cause, and both Bowker and Gallagher brought political pressure to bear at both the state and city levels to increase the budget and improve student access. Their actions also stirred up existing student sentiment and legitimized the building takeovers that took place later that spring.

The plan that was ultimately negotiated during 1969 and 1970 by the state, city, and university was the result of political pressure, not student protest. Mayor John Lindsay, a reform Republican, was elected by an unstable coalition of Republicans and reform Democrats and desperately needed new electoral support to stay in office. Courting the city's increasing minority population was a big part of his strategy; the support of the minority community would help solidify his alliance with Democrats and please the corporate community as well, which wanted peace above all else. Lindsay and Bowker were prepared to admit far larger classes of minority students, but they also knew that places for these students could not come at the expense of the university's traditional population. It was not until the student protests of spring 1969, however, that Bowker had the opportunity to move the target date for open admission from 1975 to 1970.

City and university leaders considered other forms of admissions policy throughout 1969; but all of the plans suffered from a fatal flaw. By creating a quota-based or segregated admissions system, the plans pitted Catholic

and Jewish students against minority students (Karabel, 1983). Any change in admissions policy would be a zero-sum game, where any gain in enrollment by one group would result in a loss of enrollment by the other group. Considering the highly charged racial climate of the city, such an approach was impossible. It was also politically unfeasible, since Lindsay's reelection required the support of both groups. The only feasible plan, which was ultimately supported by both the Jewish community and the Catholic-dominated unions, as well as the minority community, was to expand enrollments dramatically by offering a place at CUNY for everyone. The emerging plan was not the result of student pressure, although student pressure was the factor that put the issue so squarely on the agenda. Rather, it was the result of high-level negotiations among powerful actors at all levels of the system.

To deal with the drastic reductions resulting from New York City's 1975 budget crisis, CUNY ended its historic tuition-free policy. In addition, to reduce enrollment (and thus lower costs), admissions standards for the senior colleges were raised, so that only graduates in the top 35% of their high school class were guaranteed admission (Lavin & Hyllegard, 1996). Students at community colleges would have to enter a transitional program unless they had an acceptable GED score, a 70 GPA, or were in the top 74% of their graduating class. As a means of reducing enrollment, the combination of charging tuition and raising admissions standards was highly successful. CUNY lost 50,000 students in the year following implementation, a full 17% of its student body (Renfro & Armour-Garb, 1999). Enrollment continued to decline over the next decade despite repeated attempts to stabilize the situation, including rolling back senior college admissions standards and ignoring community college admissions standards.

Additional academic policy changes followed. In 1970, Bowker instituted a very generous retention policy that allowed students to remain in good academic standing during the first year regardless of academic performance. By fall 1976, however, students were required to achieve a C average or better by the time they completed twenty-five credits (Lavin & Hyllegard, 1996). Students in community colleges had to pass the reading, writing, and mathematics basic skills tests (FSATs), before transferring to a senior college or before being admitted to the upper division within a senior college (Renfro & Armour-Garb, 1999); but CUNY implemented a more comprehensive remedial skills assessment program the same year. However, the policy was never fully implemented. Senior colleges routinely admitted students who failed an FSAT "conditionally," until they passed the test. When CUNY's central administration finally ordered the senior colleges to enforce the policy in 1998, approximately 2,000 students were not allowed to transfer to a senior college in academic year 1998-99.

Thus strengthening admissions standards was not seen as valuable in itself but rather a means of reducing enrollment and lowering costs. Nevertheless, the academic policy changes enacted during the budget crisis had the effect of establishing a climate of higher standards and increasing stratification among institutions in the system (by changing admissions criteria) and within each institution (through remedial skills assessment). The number of degrees awarded was undoubtedly reduced as well. Students entering in 1980 were significantly less likely to complete the bachelor's degree, when other factors were controlled, than students entering in 1970 (Lavin & Hyllegard, 1996). Rising tuition charges and students' increasing lack of academic preparation were undoubtedly factors as well.

But we must also acknowledge that campuses have played an important role in softening the impact of academic policies on student academic progress and degree attainment. In this way, administrators and faculty have resisted increasing stratification and its negative effects. The CUNY administration gave community colleges express permission to ignore the admissions standards. In the case of transfer standards, either neglect or perhaps purposeful oversight led to a lack of enforcement. It is vital to see the difference between policies that are largely symbolic and policies that are implemented and enforced, as we will see in the next section.

In retrospect—and aided by theoretical concepts of system evolution—we can see ongoing alterations to the design of the CUNY system. Conceivably, there were a number of alternative structural designs to accommodate expanded enrollments, including differentiating into additional campuses with distinctive missions or establishing entirely new campuses. Bowker's open-admissions policy was designed to improve equity and opportunity for the new population of New York City. The downside was that it made the system structurally more vulnerable, financially unstable, and politically open to charges of a victory for the legacy of egalitarianism by diluting the legacy of academic excellence.

A few minor policy changes that came during the 1980s failed to have much impact on student access and opportunity (Renfro & Armour-Garb, 1999). A new CUNY chancellor, W. Ann Reynolds, was hired in 1990 from California State University, where she was well known for improving academic preparation for college. She brought with her a program called the College Preparatory Initiative (CPI). Beginning in 1993, students would need to have eleven academic credits on their high school transcript to be admitted to a senior college (nine for a community college). By 2001, students needed sixteen academic credits, the same requirement as before open admissions began in 1970. These requirements included three years of sequential math, two years of lab science, four years of English and social science, two years of foreign language, and one year of fine arts.

The CPI was and is not mandatory, however. Students who fail to have the required academic courses may be admitted, but they must demonstrate competence in the missing areas or take courses in those areas once they arrive. The Board of Trustees was entirely aware of CPI's voluntary nature: it prefaced its motion on CPI with the reminder that CUNY remained committed to providing a place for every high school graduate (Traub, 1994). The purpose of the program was to work collaboratively with high schools to increase academic preparation, and it seemed to meet that purpose despite having no actual consequences for students. At California State University, the program increased math and science enrollment at secondary schools by 20% over five years. But as Traub points out, CUNY students are far more diverse in economic circumstances and academic preparation than students at Cal State. CSU accepts only the top third of all high school students, and many of its campuses are located in wealthy suburban areas.

In our view, the CUNY administration used CPI to signal its commitment to higher academic standards to various actors in the policy environment. Since it was not feasible for political and educational reasons to increase standards in reality—a policy that would have reduced student access and opportunity—CUNY needed a way to signal its commitment to standards without actually increasing them. The *New York Times* called it “a broad plan to tighten educational requirements over the next decade.” The CPI, as characterized by the reporter, demanded “tough new curriculum standards that would place a heavy onus on the city’s public high schools and their students, who make up a bulk of the student body” (McFadden, 1992).

Reynolds also had another program in mind, one that would restructure CUNY’s academic programs to improve efficiency and reduce duplication. Because she arrived during another CUNY fiscal crisis, this second plan became a high priority. She established a committee chaired by Leon Goldstein, the president of Kingsborough Community College, with the charge to investigate possible academic restructuring initiatives. The committee’s 160-page report, euphemistically called Academic Program Planning, urged the elimination of programs throughout the system. The faculty reacted angrily, seeing the report as a bureaucratic infringement on their traditional right to evaluate and maintain academic programs. The president of the faculty union said, “If the purpose is to give more authority to the Chancellor, then it won’t work. That would amount to an academic dictator, an academic Fuhrer. I don’t believe the Chancellor would want such a designation” (qtd. in Newman, 1992a). Faculty also argued that removing basic liberal arts programs changed the definition of “college.” A history professor at Brooklyn College said, “If French is removed from Brooklyn College, it is no longer a viable and full-fledged four-year college” (qtd. in Newman, 1992b).

Hunter College's faculty senate chair was startled by the "amazing" unity with which faculty opposed Academic Program Planning. "It's been an amazing sort of thing, because it's a proposal that has unified faculties in a way that I haven't seen in a long time," he said. "The traditional left-right divisions or whatever just don't exist on this. There is a very intense sense of outrage about this" (qtd. in Newman, 1993). Faculty opposition was so effective that Reynolds dropped the plan within six months (Weiss, 1993a). The attempt was not entirely a failure, however. The individual campuses voluntarily eliminated 45 programs, while the CUNY Board voted to institute academic program reviews throughout the system and to give the chancellor more authority in evaluating their results (McFadden, 1993). Even after the faculty had seemingly won, faculty and even local writers and actors continued to attack the APP. Reynolds later used her power of the purse to distribute an extra \$15 million to colleges that scaled back academic programs (Weiss, 1993b).

Resistance to academic restructuring is widespread, not only because it affronts faculty governance, but also because different segments of student populations feel the effects disproportionately. Critics point out that academic restructuring may create greater stratification across campuses within a system and ultimately deprive place-bound students of broad access to fields of knowledge, while other students have access to more and better academic programs. In addition, it is highly likely that access to academic programs will not be distributed equally throughout the population; rather, it is most likely that academic stratification will be tightly linked to student characteristics like race, class, and gender. While technological advances may be an antidote, the policy space for creative thinking has been severely limited. Although system-wide academic planning warrants greater deliberation, these initiatives may remain stalled in a distributive struggle dominated by entrenched interests and entitlements.

REMEDIAL EDUCATION

Although remedial education was a target for criticism at CUNY throughout the 1990s, the current controversy began in 1995 when CUNY's planning committee recommended moving students who needed more than a year of remediation from its senior colleges to community college or night school. At that time, two-thirds of all entering freshmen at senior colleges needed at least one remedial course, and 15,000 students were enrolled in remedial courses in fall 1994 at a cost of \$17 million per year (Hevesi, 1995). The planning committee's proposal to reduce remediation was not motivated by a desire for higher academic standards, however, but by the need to reduce costs during the financial emergency that Reynolds declared in 1995. The committee's proposal would save an estimated \$2 million per

year, and the CUNY board approved the plan with relatively little debate in June 1995.

The topic resurfaced in January 1998 when New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani called for an end to open admissions at CUNY. During 1997, Giuliani repeatedly called CUNY's educational record "pathetic," and New York Governor George Pataki agreed that it was "dismal." Although Giuliani and Pataki lacked the authority to take direct action, they used their powers of appointment to place like-minded members on the CUNY board. Giuliani pushed hard that year to end remediation entirely throughout the CUNY system, including in the community colleges. The CUNY board, after a great deal of discussion and compromise, eventually approved a plan in June 1998 to eliminate remedial education at the four-year colleges and to establish transition programs for students to meet the new standard (Healy, 1998). The New York State Regents demanded to review the new policy, which they approved in November 1999 after a favorable review by an outside panel (Zemsky et al., 1999). A number of compromises were negotiated by the members of Friends of CUNY, a group which had previously opposed any change in remedial policy (Arenson, 1999).

In addition, Giuliani established a task force to investigate CUNY from top to bottom. It was chaired by Benno C. Schmidt, the former president of Yale University and the current president of the Edison Group, a corporation that provides private solutions to public school problems. Other members of the committee included the Manhattan Institute fellow Heather Mac Donald, who had previously called for the termination of open admissions and all remedial programs in the CUNY system, and current CUNY Board chairman Herman Badillo, an architect of the new policy on remedial education. The report was written primarily by Roger Benjamin of RAND, who was the executive director of the mayor's task force and previously the primary author of a report calling for more accountability in higher education. This was a committee with an express mandate from the mayor, and the report reflects his political agenda more than other RAND reports produced for the mayor's task force, which are often a vital source of data (e.g., Renfro & Armour-Garb, 1999).

The Schmidt (1999) report claims that the task force was "shocked by both the scale and depth of CUNY students' remediation needs" (p. 21), the result of being "inundated by NYCPS graduates who lack basic academic skills" (p. 5). The authors proposed a more differentiated system of institutions in the name of "standards." They advocate stratification by institution: creating three tiers of senior colleges stratified by average SAT score, and stratification within institutions, with remedial students not being admitted to associate degree programs in community colleges. These new strata are in addition to the CUNY Graduate Center. Thus, the report recommends creating a five-tiered system of public higher education in New York,

making it far more differentiated than any other state system in the United States. The basic mandate in the Schmidt report is:

CUNY must strive to become a unified, coherent, integrated public university system, for the first time in its history. CUNY must rethink its architecture as a university, to focus the academic mission of its various campuses, to offer a range of higher education appropriate to the needs of New York, to encourage excellence and efficiency, to reduce redundancy, and to make the whole greater than the sum of its parts. (p. 102)

The CUNY administration, led by recently appointed chancellor Matthew Goldstein, has embraced the flagship idea, as the CUNY Master Plan for 2000–2004 makes evident. The plan articulates a vision for the future that entails “creating a flagship environment within highly selective colleges and a university-wide honors college”—in other words, creating nationally prominent flagship programs and eventually “a small number of highly selective colleges” rather than a single flagship campus (CUNY, 2000, p. 10). One strategy will be cluster hiring, where new full-time faculty will be hired in selected programmatic areas throughout the system. The flagship strategy is part of “a comprehensive strategy of institutional renewal” for CUNY, tied with the goals of high standards and accountability (CUNY, 2000, p. 3). Whether this set of initiatives can achieve these goals and the more elusive goal of a more integrated system remains to be seen. The flagship concept, however, is the linchpin of the new CUNY administration’s strategy to improve its relationship with the city and the state by responding to the Schmidt report recommendations.

Addressing remediation specifically, the Schmidt report denounces it as “an unfortunate necessity, thrust upon CUNY by the failure of the schools, and a distraction from the main business of the University” (p. 35). Furthermore, “some students’ basic skill deficits are so deep that it is highly unlikely they will be successful in reaching levels of preparation necessary for college study” (p. 40). “It is far better that such students get the skills need [sic] for vocational training, for general literary [sic], or for English fluency, without wasting their time and money in remediation programs that aim to teach quadratic equations or how to write at college levels of sophistication, when such outcomes are extremely unlikely” (p. 40). Within this discouraging context, the report grudgingly concedes that “at least some” (p. 35) of the CUNY community colleges may offer remedial programs.

The immediate effects of the new remediation policy are unclear. By enforcing standards for transfer students, CUNY rejected 2,000 applications for intra-CUNY transfers from community to senior colleges from 1996 to 1999 (Renfro & Armour-Garb, 1999). Spring 2000 was the first semester when students were not admitted to senior colleges if they failed the FSAT remedial skills assessments in reading, writing, and mathematics. Approxi-

mately 600 students in spring 2000, or about 10% of the incoming class, failed the FSAT on their first try (Arenson, 2000). An additional 350 students cleared the hurdle after participating in Prelude to Success, CUNY's intensive workshop to prepare students to pass the FSATs. A remaining 300 students have not passed the text and thus are barred from enrolling in the senior college that admitted them. These figures suggest that the remedial policy is impacting more students than estimated by the special panel hired by the Board of Regents to evaluate the policy (Zemsky et al., 1999), but far fewer than Lavin and Weininger (1999a; 1999b) estimated.

Clearly, there are many challenges in moving CUNY from "a loose confederation of colleges" into "a university system," as the Schmidt report recommends. On the one hand, there is programmatic differentiation, when campuses specialize in particular offerings. The key question is designating which campuses will cover certain curricular domains and the extent to which the campuses in a system will have overlapping or duplicate curricular offerings. On the other hand, admissions differentiation specifies the students' desired academic preparation. The key question in this case is how to set admissions standards that sort students into appropriate educational opportunities. When stated in its more contentious form, the issue is about restricting access rather than promoting social mobility; that is, it is stated as "raising the bar," a mechanism to keep underprepared students out. In this way, the discourse about admissions differentiation and programmatic differentiation tends to focus on the twin issues of "access" and "access to what?" Deliberations over both tend to be intermingled with appeals to distinctive campus legacies as well as local industry needs. Deliberations over campus missions and identities must thus be accompanied by deliberations about the mission and identity of the CUNY system as a whole.

CONCLUSION

We have seen here that system design and academic policy often work hand-in-hand, reinforcing the goals of political decision makers. It is widely acknowledged that academic policy reflects the values and interests of the governance structure; here we have argued that system design is value laden as well, and nowhere is this more apparent than in New York. Institutional stratification, very much the norm in other systems of public higher education, has not been an acceptable alternative in New York since open admissions. This cultural fact, however, has not stopped policy makers from trying to increase system stratification indirectly by academic policy initiatives.

In our opinion, this most recent attempt by CUNY to create a more differentiated system has failed to ameliorate the underlying value conflicts within the system. Political actors in the CUNY environment are varied, fragmented, and highly mobilized. Legal authorities like the CUNY board,

the state Board of Regents, the mayor, the state comptroller, and the governor have all increased their interest in CUNY substantially since the remedial education controversy. Interest groups on both sides of the political spectrum have become highly engaged, including the Manhattan Institute, the Friends of CUNY, the city's Bar Association, and the faculty's Professional Staff Congress. In theory, this involvement is not entirely unexpected, because increasing differentiation and stratification in the system, when accompanied by endemic conflict, may result in continued instability. Although the differentiated levels may be seen as structurally functional in the sense that they have sorted students among institutions more efficiently, the stratified design remains politically contentious. Those who obtain access to upper levels of the system will create an elite that will try to maintain control of these institutions to serve the interests of their status groups. Those at the lower levels of the system, however, will continue to see the elite institution as restraining opportunity for access, opportunity, and mobility. As a result, these groups will continue to engage in bitter conflict, because the increased differentiation of the system has failed to integrate the competing interests of both groups. Thus, the political instability that was evident in the development and aftermath of open admissions is replicated in the remedial education controversy, but from the opposite direction.

CUNY policy will likely continue to be a site of distributive struggle with either explicit or submerged value conflicts. Deliberations over structural alternatives will be intertwined with values represented by powerful political interests; those with political, economic, and social power in the system will carry the day. A new solution to the problem of integrating the system must serve both those interested in competitive advantage and those interested in maintaining a semblance of equality in the system. Without a solution that transcends these political and status conflicts, the battle between those who advocate "standards" and those who advocate "equity" will continue.

Nevertheless, this important case suggests issues in system design that should be highlighted for both CUNY and public higher education more generally. One possible solution is to convince organizational participants to broaden their conception of the policy sphere for higher education to include the private sector. Despite Schmidt's advocacy for privatization initiatives in the public schools, the report of his committee did not consider the extensive and elite system of private higher education that exists in New York. New York City has a wide array of private university and college options. These options are especially strong at the elite level.

Public higher education, when necessary, should form collaborative partnerships with private institutions to allow low-income, high-achieving students to attend private institutions at the same cost as their state's public

system. Elite private institutions, while often looking for students at the national level, have also recommitted themselves to meeting their responsibilities to the local community. This action moves the standards debate from admissions standards to graduation standards. Admissions standards may be necessary to ensure that students do not overload the senior colleges. However, overload should not be the focus. Rather, the focus should be on developing a curriculum and assessment system that accurately measures student learning and awards degrees based on demonstrated learning and achievement. Students who graduate with degrees based upon demonstrated achievement will be highly prized regardless of their academic preparation at admission.

Public higher education should also work to reduce information asymmetries among students that help perpetuate the negative effects of stratification. Recent research has found wide variation in student knowledge about higher education. A study conducted at the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement found that low-income students were particularly likely to miscalculate the cost of tuition at their local public colleges, sometimes by as much as a factor of ten (Antonio et al., 2000). This lack of awareness may seriously affect students' perceptions of their families' economic ability to support their college education (McDonough, 1997). Early intervention, particularly with students from poorer school districts, seems warranted. Knowledge about the higher education system, how it works, the economic benefits it can provide, and opportunities for financial assistance is vital in increasing college participation rates for less wealthy students. Such intervention can also improve equity in the higher education system, since bright but uninformed students may be attending colleges at lower levels of the system because they believe no other options are open to them. Improved information can ensure that they make informed decisions about college choices.

These are certainly not the only options; this is simply an attempt to illustrate alternative solutions in an arena marked by ongoing divisiveness and conflict. We are convinced that, without policies that address the interests of those committed to academic meritocracy and those committed to access (and those groups are by no means mutually exclusive), CUNY will remain a site for conflict and struggle among groups competing for status, economic gain, and, most importantly, the moral high ground. Solutions that transcend these boundaries may help us continue to pursue the ultimate goal: real opportunity for all students.

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