

I. Background

A. *The Executive Order and the Research Question*

On May 6, 1998, Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani issued Executive Order No. 41, establishing the Advisory Task Force on the City University of New York (the “Task Force”), and charging the Task Force with, *inter alia*, examining “the effects of open admissions and remedial education on CUNY, and on CUNY’s capacity to provide college-level courses and curricula of high quality to its students.” In response to that mandate, the Task Force staff prepared this report, which describes the history of open admissions and remedial education at CUNY and explores the question whether CUNY’s open admissions policies and remedial education programs function effectively and efficiently.¹

B. *Research Methodology and Limitations*

The Task Force staff conducted its research over the course of more than ten months, from June 1998 through May 1999. We reviewed hundreds of documents – including reports and memoranda, scholarly articles and books, statistical printouts, court papers, and historical records – obtained from CUNY and a variety of outside sources. We visited CUNY’s 17 undergraduate colleges, sat in on basic skills and English as a Second Language (“ESL”) classes, and conducted in-person and telephone interviews with approximately 200 CUNY faculty members and administrators. In addition, we interviewed numerous other educators, CUNY students, consultants, and New York City Board of Education (“BOE”) officials.

Because the Task Force staff wanted to provide a comprehensive introduction to a complex subject, this report covers a range of topics, including: admission to CUNY’s undergraduate degree programs; CUNY’s incoming freshmen; the configuration of remediation at CUNY, particularly within the context of its undergraduate degree programs; the link between New York State’s financial aid laws and open admissions and remedial education at CUNY; the link between New York State’s higher education opportunity programs and open admissions and remedial education at CUNY; student assessment testing; the goals of remediation at CUNY; accountability for student outcomes; the processes of policymaking and implementation; and the link between CUNY and the New York City public school system.

The report also has some important limitations. The Task Force staff’s research does not cover all aspects of open admissions and remedial education, or their effects on CUNY’s broader academic programs. The following topics are just some of those that were beyond our scope:

¹ In this report, the terms “remedial education” and “remediation” are used interchangeably to include both basic skills and English as a Second Language (“ESL”) programs. The term “basic skills” refers to reading, writing, and mathematics. For more on the nomenclature of remediation at CUNY, see Section V.A.1.

- *Support programs and services.* While we recognize that support programs and services such as academic and career advising, freshman orientation, personal counseling, transportation, and child care are important to help students accomplish their academic and personal goals, an examination of the supports in place for CUNY students was beyond the scope of this analysis.
- *Remediation instructors, curricula, and instruction.* The Task Force staff did not explore the qualifications of CUNY’s remediation instructors, the content of CUNY’s remediation curricula, or the techniques of remediation instruction currently in use at CUNY – mainly due to the central administration’s lack of data on these topics. With regard to curricula and instruction, we were also overwhelmed by the seemingly infinite variety of approaches in use. Further research is needed on these topics.
- *Content of college-level curriculum.* Although we found the colleges’ course listings tantalizing, we did not study CUNY’s regular curriculum or become involved in the hotly contested debates over multiculturalism, the core curriculum, etc.
- *Transfer students.* Our study of focuses on first-time freshmen.
- *The costs of remediation.* The Task Force commissioned PricewaterhouseCoopers (“PwC”) to collect information on the costs of remediation at CUNY. PwC’s findings are presented in a separate report, entitled *Report I: Financial Analysis of Remedial Education at the City University of New York*.
- *The roots of the need for remediation at CUNY among graduates of New York City public schools.* This report does analyze several features of CUNY’s relationship with the New York City public schools – particularly with respect to the early days of open admissions, as well as current college advising and admissions practices. However, a separate report to the Task Force, entitled *Bridging the Gap Between School and College*, profiles the BOE and contains a detailed statistical analysis of the roots of the need for remediation among June 1997 BOE graduates.

The Task Force found that CUNY does not maintain an accurate, reliable, and consistent system for the collection and analysis of remediation data. On the contrary, reliable and objective information about the effectiveness of CUNY’s remedial programs was extremely limited and varies from semester to semester.

- CUNY could provide no objective information on the effectiveness of its remedial programs at transmitting basic skills, supporting college-level programs, or meeting students’ individual needs. Although CUNY’s institutional researchers collect reams of data on incoming students and on the outlines of students’ educational trajectory, they collect little objective information. For example, CUNY does not require applicants to submit Scholastic

Assessment Test (“SAT”) scores or any other objective indicators of their academic preparedness; it does not systematically archive student test results on professional licensing and graduate admissions exams; and it does not pre- and post-test remedial students on valid, reliable instruments to measure whether their skills are improving.

- The Task Force’s research suggests that much of the information CUNY does collect is unreliable. In particular, most of the information CUNY collects about its remedial students is organized in terms of students’ performance on CUNY’s Freshman Skills Assessment Tests (“FSATs”), but a RAND study commissioned by the Task Force calls into question the quality of CUNY’s testing program, and, hence, the usefulness of FSAT results in analyzing student outcomes. The same RAND study has raised questions about the reliability of grading at CUNY. Similarly, CUNY collects much information on students’ progress through remediation, but this information can tell us little about whether students are gaining skills, for at least two reasons: (1) there are college-by-college differences in students’ remedial obligations; and (2) there are no objective, university-wide standards for when students may exit remediation.