

I. A Framework for Assessing Outcomes

A. *Defining the mission*

“[A] college must explicitly articulate its purposes as a prerequisite to any serious attempt to determine how effectively it is achieving them.”⁷

In order to determine whether they are functioning effectively, CUNY and its constituent colleges must first define what it is they are attempting to accomplish, individually and as a system. The following sections summarize the missions of the CUNY colleges and the university as a whole; discuss the respective roles of access and remediation; and comment on the process that CUNY might follow to reexamine its mission.

1. CUNY’s mission

This section compares CUNY’s official mission, as articulated in state law, with the colleges’ professed missions, as set forth in their college catalogs.

According to section 6201 of the State Education Law, CUNY is “an independent system of higher education,” committed to “academic excellence and to the provision of equal access and opportunity for students, faculty and staff from all ethnic and racial groups and from both sexes.” The university is a vital “vehicle for the upward mobility” of the city’s disadvantaged, and must therefore “remain responsive to the needs of its urban setting.” This language is broad enough to provide CUNY with great flexibility in defining its activities, but it is too vague to provide a clear sense of purpose.

The next section of the statute defines two categories of CUNY colleges: community colleges and senior colleges. According to section 6202, the “primary purpose” of CUNY’s community colleges is “providing certificate and associate degree post secondary programs in general and technical educational subjects.” The description of CUNY’s senior colleges is less pointed; senior colleges include, but are not limited to, “professional,” “graduate,” “research,” and “administrative” institutions; perhaps because they do not clearly fall into any of these categories, Medgar Evers, N.Y. City Tech, and the College of Staten Island are specifically defined in the statute as senior colleges. (See Appendix A for a complete listing of the CUNY undergraduate colleges.)

By contrast, the missions of the individual colleges, as set forth in their catalogs, fall into five categories:⁸

⁷ *Assessing Institutional Effectiveness in Community Colleges*, 5.

⁸ The Task Force staff developed these categories as a “first cut”; of course, each college’s mission is unique and multifaceted, and there is considerable overlap across categories.

- Brooklyn College has the most **traditional four-year college mission**: it seeks “to provide a superior education in the liberal arts and sciences.”
- Four of the colleges – Baruch, John Jay, N.Y. City Tech, and Medgar Evers – say that they are primarily **career or professional colleges**: they seek to provide a high-quality education that will prepare students for a career in business, public service, criminal justice, technology, or a related field or profession. To varying degrees, these colleges emphasize broad access; providing a background in the liberal arts and sciences; and meeting the educational and economic needs of the community or the region.
- Eight of the colleges – BMCC, Bronx Community, Hostos, Kingsborough, LaGuardia, Lehman, Queensborough, and York – have articulated the kinds of multifaceted, student-centered missions that are most typical of **community colleges**. (Medgar Evers arguably falls into this category as well.) These colleges seek to help students meet their personal educational goals and achieve socioeconomic mobility. There is great variety in the level of emphasis each college places on providing educational access to diverse populations; providing career preparation and advancement; providing a liberal arts education in preparation for transfer or advanced study; providing basic skills, ESL, and developmental education; and serving as a community resource.
- **Preparing global leaders.** Two of the colleges have lofty, yet nebulous missions: City College is committed to providing “academic quality” in a “global, pluralistic context,” while Queens College is seeking to “prepare students to become leading citizens of an increasingly global society.”
- **Enriching students’ lives.** Two of the colleges seek to provide an education that will enrich students’ careers, personal lives, and contributions to society: Hunter emphasizes the liberal arts and sciences, while the College of Staten Island emphasizes science and technology. (Lehman’s and York’s missions could arguably fall into this category as well.)

Notice the lack of congruence between the colleges’ conceptions of their missions, on the one hand, and the statutory categories, on the other. Although all six of CUNY’s so-called community colleges have “community college”-type missions, CUNY’s eleven senior colleges are spread across all five mission categories. Whereas the missions printed in the college catalogs probably provide a more accurate description of the colleges’ activities, the formal categories of “senior college” (comprehensive and non-comprehensive) and “community college” are most often used for purposes of regulation and analysis. This divergence may lead to misleading comparisons between colleges that fall into the same formal category but in fact have very different missions.

Both the emphasis on providing access and the priority afforded to remedial education vary within and across CUNY's mission categories. The next two sections discuss the respective roles of access and remediation at CUNY.

2. CUNY's commitment to access

Throughout CUNY's history, people have debated the best way to achieve the university's dual goals of academic excellence and the provision of equal access and opportunity. These goals have often been understood as mutually incompatible and requiring tradeoffs: at any given levels of funding and productivity, improvements in quality were thought to be possible only at the expense of access, and *vice versa*.⁹

CUNY's history over the last thirty years would appear to support that "zero-sum" view. The accompanying report, *Open Admissions and Remedial Education at the City University of New York*, describes how CUNY did not merely decide to expand and increase access for racial and ethnic minorities while maintaining its commitment on excellence. Rather, the Trustees viewed ethnic integration as synonymous with "academic integration" – *i.e.*, the distribution of severely underprepared students throughout the system's 17 colleges. This vision of an "academically integrated" university, combined with a lack of rigor in evaluating the effectiveness of its access and remediation policies, have contributed to the demise of CUNY's historic commitment to excellence.¹⁰

A very different vision is possible, however. Consider that one of the challenges of providing educational access in New York City is meeting the very diverse needs of the city's residents. Then consider that one of CUNY's strengths is the fact that it has 17 colleges spread throughout the five boroughs, with multiple campuses in every borough but Staten Island. Therefore, rather than blurring the distinctions among the colleges by promoting academic integration and maintaining a full range of programs at each college, CUNY could capitalize on its physical decentralization by working with each college to define a distinct, mutually complementary mission. The CUNY system would thus continue to provide access to a broad

⁹ See Roger Benjamin and Stephen Carroll, "A Framework for Linking Resources to Mission in Higher Education," in *Breaking the Social Contract: The Fiscal Crisis in Higher Education – Supporting Analysis* (Council for Aid to Education, 1997), 1-2.

¹⁰ Two related trends are (1) the simultaneous growth of CUNY's community and comprehensive colleges and erosion of the non-comprehensive senior colleges, and (2) the shift in resources away from the academic mission, away from upper-level education, and away from full-time faculty. (See RAND (Kim) (showing a large decrease in full-time faculty at the senior colleges between 1980 and 1997, in contrast with smaller increases at the community colleges, as well as substantial increases in administrative staff and part-time faculty); RAND (Kim) (showing a 3.1% decrease in student- and instruction-related expenditures at the senior colleges between 1988 and 1997, in contrast with a 21% increase in such expenditures at the community colleges); PwC, Report III, 33 ("There has been a decided shift in expenditures from the academic mission to academic and administrative support services."); PwC, Report III, 35 ("Enrollment at the [non-comprehensive] senior colleges has been slowly decreasing since 1980, while the community and [comprehensive] colleges have experienced significant increases. . . . These enrollment trends have led to an overall level of instruction at CUNY that is heavily weighted in lower level education. . . . The impact of these shifts has been to change the internal focus and the external perception of the CUNY colleges to associate level study."))

range of students, but a major difference would be that each college could pursue excellence on its own terms – in relation to the needs and abilities of its particular student body and in service of its individual mission.

Subsection 4, below, briefly describes how CUNY and the individual colleges might go about reexamining their missions.

3. The role of remediation in the CUNY colleges

Recently, some higher education policy experts have termed remediation a “core function” of higher education.¹¹ This blanket statement ignores fundamental differences between community colleges, for whom open access is a fundamental principle, and four-year colleges and universities, whose overriding “core function” is ordinarily the provision of college- and graduate-level education to a select group of degree-seeking students.¹²

At the community college level, open admissions policies yield student populations with diverse educational objectives and generally lower levels of academic preparation and skills. As a result, community colleges have taken on the critical task of raising the skill levels of underprepared students, and remediation has become one of the community colleges’ several “core functions.” Accordingly, the effectiveness of a community college hinges, in part, on its success in improving the skills of its remedial students and meeting those students’ individual career and personal development needs.¹³ In the senior college context, by contrast, remediation is an ancillary or supporting function, and its effectiveness must be judged by how well it supports college-level programs.¹⁴

Section B.2, below, describes how CUNY’s senior and community colleges might go about selecting appropriate measures for assessing the effectiveness of remediation.

4. Reexamining CUNY’s mission

CUNY is a system that has never taken the time to forge an institutional identity. The accompanying report, *Open Admissions and Remedial Education at the City University of*

¹¹ The Institute for Higher Education Policy (“IHEP”), 1998.

¹² *Assessing Institutional Effectiveness in Community Colleges*, 2; see also CUNY University Budget Office, Report on the 1996-97 Cost of Basic Skills Instruction and the 1996-97 Cost of ESL Instruction, 4-26-99, 1 (describing basic skills and ESL as “ancillary to the [university’s] core operations”).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 21, 26.

¹⁴ The Task Force staff recognizes, of course, that a core function of government is to educate its citizens. We simply wish to emphasize that the city needs an educational division of labor, and that while CUNY is one of numerous local institutions that provide basic skills and ESL courses, the core function of CUNY’s senior colleges is to provide a college- and graduate-level education whose hallmarks are academic excellence and equal opportunity for students of all ethnic and racial groups and of both sexes. (N.Y. Educ. Law § 6201(3) (McKinney 1985 & Supp. 1998).)

New York, shows that, for most of its 150-year history, it was not a system at all. The original municipal colleges, City College and Hunter, were not joined by Brooklyn and Queens colleges until the 1930s, and those colleges were not united with the College of Staten Island, Bronx Community, and Queensborough under the CUNY banner until 1961. In the decade that followed, the university was expanding so rapidly – with the addition of ten new colleges – that it did not have a chance to coalesce into a unified whole. As a result, many of the colleges whose existence predated the founding of the university never became comfortable with the arrangement.¹⁵

Then, in 1970, less than a decade after the university was officially created, CUNY was overwhelmed by the enormous influx of new students, many of whom were severely underprepared and totally different from anyone the colleges had ever tried to educate. As a result, CUNY has never really forged an identity as a system. Its public relations strategy has been an attempt to appropriate the proud heritage of Hunter, Brooklyn, and City colleges,¹⁶ while at the same time trumpeting the size and diversity of the current student body – but the mixture has never totally gelled.

In the context of the current movement towards outcome assessment in higher education,¹⁷ the time is ripe for CUNY to reinvent itself as a system. Indeed, the League for Innovation's guidelines for assessing institutional effectiveness recommend that colleges begin the assessment process by reexamining their mission statements. This section outlines the process that CUNY might follow for updating its mission.¹⁸

Mission reexamination is basically the process of developing a straightforward statement of the institution's highest-priority activities. The first step in the mission reexamination process is to list all current institutional activities and compare the list with the current mission statement. The second stage of the process is similar to strategic planning: it requires developing a vision and setting priorities for the future of the institution. During this stage, the institution should take into consideration environmental scanning information, resource allocation studies, and other

¹⁵ See, e.g., Chancellor's Advisory Committee on Articulation & Transfer, Report to the Chancellor, 6-30-93, 2.

¹⁶ For example, CUNY administrators and faculty frequently refer to the 11 Nobel Prizes won by graduates of City, Hunter, and Brooklyn colleges, yet none of the laureates graduated after 1954, and the majority graduated in the 1930s. (W. Ann Reynolds, The Chancellor's Budget Request 1997-98: 150 Years of Access and Excellence, 11-96.)

¹⁷ See, e.g., Brian P. Gill, The Governance of the City University of New York: A System at Odds with Itself (RAND Report to Mayor Giuliani's Advisory Task Force on the City University of New York, 1999) (citing Robert H. Atwell, "Higher Education Governance in Despair," in Journal for Higher Education Management, 11:13-20); W. Norton Grubb, "From Black Box to Pandora's Box: Evaluating Remedial/Developmental Education" (presented for the Conference on Replacing Remediation in Higher Education, National Center for Postsecondary Improvement, Stanford University, January 1998); Virginia K. McMillan et al., "Remedial/Developmental Education Approaches for the Current Community College Environment," in Effective Policies in Remedial and Developmental Education, ed. Jan M. Ignash (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Winter 1997); Brenda N. Albright, "From Business as Usual to Funding for Results," (background paper prepared for the Ohio Higher Education Funding Commission, June 1996); Brenda N. Albright and Diane S. Gilleland, "A Clean Slate: Principles for Moving to a Value-Driven Higher Education Funding Model," in Focus on the Budget: Rethinking Current Practice, ed. Rhonda M. Epper (State Higher Education Executive Officers and the Education Commission of the States, 1994); Assessing Institutional Effectiveness in Community Colleges, iii, 1.

¹⁸ The steps are paraphrased from Assessing Institutional Effectiveness in Community Colleges, 4-5.

strategic information. The remaining steps include drafting a statement; circulating it for review; formal adoption of the final version; publication of the new mission statement; and regular review and updating. At all stages of the mission reexamination process, an institution should consider the interests and obtain the input of key constituencies.

This last point is especially important, and especially challenging, for a complex public institution such as CUNY. Examples of groups whose interests CUNY should consider and whose input CUNY should obtain include:

- ⇒ students and prospective students;
- ⇒ area employers;
- ⇒ accrediting bodies;
- ⇒ the New York City Board of Education; and
- ⇒ representatives of the taxpayers.

In addition, each CUNY college should consider how its efforts fit into the context of the whole university system, and the university should consider each college's unique history, community, and vision for itself.

B. Developing Outcome Measures and Identifying Data Sources

“Outcomes-based assessment allows . . . colleges to demonstrate their effectiveness by developing and implementing criteria appropriate for evaluating their performance of their separate missions.”¹⁹

Simply stated, “assessing institutional effectiveness is a ‘comparison of results achieved to goals intended.’”²⁰ Once a college has defined its intended goals, it must design outcome measures to reflect those goals, then implement an ongoing program of data collection and dissemination, self-evaluation, and institutional improvement. The Task Force staff's research revealed that neither CUNY's central administration nor the individual colleges have developed mission-based outcome measures.²¹

The following sections discuss approaches for assessing CUNY's effectiveness at affording meaningful access and remediating students.

¹⁹ Ibid., 2.

²⁰ Ibid. (quoting Peter Ewell, senior associate, National Center for Higher Education Management Systems).

²¹ See also PwC, *Report II*, 18 (citing CUNY's failure to devise metrics that reflect the very different missions of senior and community colleges).

1. Assessing the provision of access

Some public officials and CUNY representatives have stated to Task Force members and staff that providing access to higher education simply means promising all New York City residents the opportunity to “try” college. According to this view, CUNY’s duty is to admit students to its degree programs, but whether those students persist and succeed is not the public’s responsibility; in other words, students have a right to fail. These interviewees sought to win the Task Force’s support for open admissions by arguing that CUNY’s cost per student is low, so admitting students who drop out after taking only a few courses does not cost the taxpayers much.²² Such arguments are contrary to sound public policy.

In 1969, when CUNY’s Trustees voted to establish open admissions at the community colleges and eliminate objective admissions standards at the senior colleges, they recognized that the university had a responsibility to help students succeed. The Trustees knew that if CUNY were simply to admit everyone to its degree programs, then stand by silently as students dropped out in the first or second semester, the “open door to higher education” would be nothing more than an “illusion,” a “revolving door.”²³ Ever since that time, CUNY’s official policy has been to provide programs and services aimed at helping underprepared students succeed in college.

The League for Innovation’s guidelines support CUNY policy and reject the “right to fail” argument. The guidelines state that providing “meaningful” access “implies a commitment to ensuring the ‘open door’ does not become a ‘revolving door.’”²⁴ As a corollary, “it is clearly unacceptable for . . . colleges to enroll as many students as possible if those students are not gaining anything from the experience.”²⁵ Similarly, the Institute for Higher Education Policy states:

The underlying assumption is that if a college or university admits a student, the institution has an obligation to help that student succeed. Matriculation implies that the institution has confidence that the student has the necessary skills and knowledge to experience academic success. It would be morally reprehensible for an institution to admit a student knowing that he or she would have little or no chance of passing the courses without informing the student. Thus, whether it is a community college, a state flagship university, or a private liberal arts college, the institution must have policies and procedures in place to help those students who are experiencing academic difficulty.²⁶

Accordingly, colleges that seek to provide access must assess their effectiveness in doing so – not only by measuring their success in enrolling students from diverse demographic and geographic groups, but also by measuring the degree to which students persist through and

²² Marshall, interview, 8-98; LaGuardia, interview, 9-24-98.

²³ Board of Trustees, Minutes, 7-9-69.

²⁴ Assessing Institutional Effectiveness in Community Colleges, 33, 41.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁶ IHEP, 6.

succeed in college programs. Thus, a college must not only ensure that its policies and processes promote student success; it must also measure student outcomes, such as:²⁷

- ⇒ Are students successfully completing their planned program of study?
- ⇒ Are students in transfer programs actually transferring and succeeding at the next level?
- ⇒ Are students in career programs learning the necessary skills and being placed in jobs?
- ⇒ Have remedial students improved their basic skills or English language competence?

The potential data sources are too numerous to list here. Examples of promising data sources that are infrequently used by CUNY include surveys and interviews of students, employers, and instructors at the next educational level; job placement rates; and results of certifying board examinations and standardized assessment tests.

2. Assessing the provision of remediation

As we discussed in Section I.A.3 (entitled “The role of remediation in the CUNY colleges”), remediation typically plays a different role in community colleges than in senior colleges. Thus, in senior college context, the effectiveness of remediation must be judged by how well it supports college-level programs. If, for example, the faculty in college-level courses require incoming students to possess certain skills, outcome measures should assess the effectiveness of remedial courses and programs in producing students who possess those skills.²⁸ Examples of promising data sources include pre- and post- competency testing and follow-up surveys, interviews, or focus groups with professors in college-level courses.²⁹

By contrast, community college students seek remediation for many different reasons, and the community college’s provision of remediation can meet a variety of individual and community needs. Accordingly, outcome measures should be designed not only to assess whether students have achieved the educational outcomes of a course or program; they should also assess whether students’ career and personal development needs are being met and whether the institution is effectively serving the needs of the community. Data sources, in addition to those listed in the preceding paragraph, can include educational planning documents; state and community socioeconomic data; and interviews with community leaders, *inter alia*.³⁰

²⁷ Assessing Institutional Effectiveness in Community Colleges, 33, 41.

²⁸ See accompanying report, *Open Admissions and Remedial Education at the City University of New York*, for a discussion of whether CUNY’s current remediation programs seek to help students build solid skills before they move into college courses, or to “jump-start” students so they can move into college-level instruction as quickly as possible.

²⁹ Assessing Institutional Effectiveness in Community Colleges, 25.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 21-26.

C. *Using Outcome Information to Improve Effectiveness*

*“[A]dministrators, faculty, and staff require the results of outcome assessment to guide program improvements. Members of boards of trustees have similar informational needs to insure that programs are designed and implemented as effectively as possible. External audiences, especially legislators and state officials, will use assessment results in making policy decisions.”*³¹

CUNY is, at best, inconsistent in its use of outcome information – to improve the effectiveness of its programs and policies, to aid the Trustees in making policy decisions, to inform public officials of the university’s accomplishments and future needs – and to empower students to make informed educational choices. The Task Force staff’s research and interviews indicate that CUNY does not fully understand how access and remediation fit into its mission; has not identified valid outcome measures that dovetail with the goals of providing access and remediation; and therefore cannot consistently use outcome data to assess, improve, or demonstrate the effectiveness of its access policies and remediation programs.³²

There are exceptions, however. For example, Bronx Community periodically surveys both employers – to determine how satisfied they are with graduates of the college – and students – to determine how well their time at the college has prepared them for further education and job experiences. The results are used by the college administration and the individual departments to strengthen academic and training programs and outcomes.³³ N.Y. City Tech has recently begun a similar survey of its graduates to determine how well their education prepared them for employment, in terms of math, communication, computer, and other skills. In addition, N.Y. City Tech has recently appointed a director of outcomes assessment, who is charged with leading institutional assessment efforts and facilitating the use of data to inform academic decisionmaking.³⁴

But for every instance in which CUNY is effectively using outcome data to assess, improve, and demonstrate the effectiveness of its programs, there are many more examples of resistance to such analysis. For example, Baruch rejects the notion that its success in meeting students’ career preparation objectives should be measured in terms of job placement:

³¹ Ibid., 47.

³² This is consistent with the findings of PwC, Report II, 18 (“CUNY does not have an agreed-upon structure for assessing the quantitative and qualitative outcomes of strategic initiatives, and relating their outcomes to future planning processes and resource allocation decisions.”), and RAND (Kim) (“CUNY lacks an adequate information-gathering and management system. CUNY collects a great deal of data but . . . CUNY does not maintain, use or analyze the data it does collect systematically as a unified system.”).

³³ “Bronx Community College Collection and Reporting of Student Job Placement Data: Response to CUNY Task Force Request,” fax dated 3-22-99; N.Y. City Tech Student Affairs, “Policies and Practices on Collection of Student Job Placement Data at New York City Technical College,” fax dated 3-23-99.

³⁴ (Tirschwell, N.Y. City Tech, fax dated 4-7-99.) At least one CUNY college has vested responsibility for outcomes assessment in a committee of faculty, administrators, and staff; this committee appears to have been project-oriented rather than ongoing. (College of Staten Island, “Alumni Survey – 1990/1991 Graduates: Six Year Follow-up.”)

[P]lacement per se is not the appropriate outcome criterion to look at in evaluating our services since we no longer consider it to be our primary objective. Our objective is to teach every Baruch student how to find work. Since we cannot control variables such as personality, motivation, the job market or “goodness of fit,” we find it more realistic to work to ensure that every student who becomes involved with our Career Development Center (CDC) learns how to find work. . . . We do not promise our students jobs.³⁵

CUNY’s failure to adequately benchmark the effectiveness of its access policies and remediation programs has been detrimental, to both the students and the institution. The information that CUNY could generate if it implemented sound benchmarking practices would likely yield new opportunities for the university – opportunities to identify existing and potential strengths, to act on emerging trends, and to strengthen or eliminate weak elements. CUNY students would benefit from better consumer information and improved programs. The university and the individual colleges would benefit by refocusing and strengthening their missions. And New York City would benefit from the dissemination of positive information about CUNY – information based on demonstrated effectiveness.

CUNY has a historic opportunity to achieve a better balance between access and excellence than it has at any time in its history. By maintaining broad access to the system, while simultaneously using outcome data to improve the quality of programs at each college, CUNY can improve its effectiveness and reconcile its two seemingly contradictory goals.

³⁵ Sam Johnson, Vice President for Student Development, Baruch, “Placement Data,” memorandum to Lester Jacobs, 3-23-99.