

I. Introduction

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.” The Task Force staff originally intended to respond to that mandate by presenting and analyzing the results of CUNY’s open access and remediation¹ policies. Accordingly, we used due diligence in seeking out data that would yield some sense of CUNY’s effectiveness in affording access and remediating students.

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.

What we found is that the university has a profound lack of information on its own effectiveness. Consequently, CUNY is, at best, inconsistent in its use of data as a basis for program improvements and policy decisions.² This is not to say that CUNY does not collect any information. To the contrary, the university’s many institutional research offices³ collect reams of data on incoming students (*e.g.*, demographics and educational background) and on the outlines of students’ educational trajectory (*e.g.*, initial scores on the Freshman Skills Assessment Tests (“FSATs”), courses taken, credits earned, grades, retention, and graduation).

The problem is that CUNY collects and disseminates information without a clear sense of need or purpose. In many instances, CUNY limits its data collection to information that is relatively easy to obtain, such as graduation rates, admissions information, and initial FSAT results; and information that is made readily available by New York State, such as nursing and teachers’ exam results. Moreover, CUNY reports exactly the same information for each of its 17

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.

² The accompanying report, *Open Admissions and Remedial Education at the City University of New York*, contains numerous historical examples of how poor information has frustrated CUNY’s policymakers. See especially footnote 34 and Section III.I.

³ In addition to CUNY’s central institutional research office, each of the 17 colleges has its own institutional research staff. As a general matter, the central institutional research office does not conduct independent data collection; rather, it compiles and reports data collected by the individual colleges.

colleges, despite their very different missions.⁴ Thus, the voluminous reports published each year by CUNY's institutional researchers contain no information on the quality of the education received, how well it satisfied students' personal educational goals, or whether it prepared students for life after college.

A leading higher education policy organization, the League for Innovation in the Community College, has cautioned institutions to "resist the temptation" to use a particular outcome measure simply because it is easily obtained. Almost a decade ago, the League issued a call for colleges to become more active in selecting and reporting measures that reflected their individual missions.⁵ They cited colleges' obligation to provide data in a manner that would allow external monitoring agencies to make informed and responsible decisions, and they urged colleges and agencies to select the measures that were best suited to identifying needed "improvements in teaching, learning, and the delivery of services to students" – even if this presented challenges in data gathering. Finally, the League recognized that, while the costs of collecting and reporting data on institutional effectiveness should not outweigh the benefits, the mere fact that certain outcomes "are difficult to measure does not diminish their importance."⁶

CUNY has not answered this call. In the first place, the university and many of the individual colleges have failed to articulate clear missions and goals. Without clear goals, they have failed to identify appropriate outcome measures. Finally, without useful outcome information, CUNY is reduced to making institutional decisions about access and remediation in a vacuum.

The accompanying report, *Open Admissions and Remedial Education at the City University of New York*, reviews the policies and processes that CUNY has established to promote meaningful access and remediate students. This report provides a framework for assessing CUNY's effectiveness at providing access and remediating students (Part II), and presents the best of the rather sparse and inadequate outcome data that were available (Part III).

⁴ See also PwC, Report II, 18 (expressing concern over CUNY's proposed use of the same indicators for senior and community colleges in the performance-based budgeting process).

⁵ (Don Doucette and Billie Hughes, eds., Assessing Institutional Effectiveness in Community Colleges (Mission Viejo, CA: League for Innovation in the Community College, 1990), 46.) These guidelines were written by a team with "expertise in testing and measurement, research and evaluation, and instructional design, and experience in academic affairs [and] student development." (Ibid., vii.)

⁶ Ibid., 46, 48.