

## V. CUNY's Current Approach to Remedial Education

This Part describes CUNY's approach to helping its remedial students succeed in college. First, we examine the configuration of remediation at CUNY. Then we look at how CUNY diagnoses the remedial needs of its incoming students and assesses their progress through remediation. Finally, we look at CUNY's remedial curricula and instructional methods.

### A. Configuration

This section describes the macro structure of the programs that CUNY has put in place to help its underprepared students succeed in college. We first explain the various labels that CUNY uses to describe remedial courses and programs. Second, we describe the financial aid rules that dictate so many remediation decisions – both at the institutional level and at the level of the individual student. The third subsection explains the primary ways in which CUNY colleges structure remediation, and the fourth subsection describes several variations.

#### 1. The Nomenclature of Remediation at CUNY

Many of the CUNY representatives interviewed by the Task Force staff objected to use of the term “remedial” to describe courses and programs whose purpose is to overcome academic deficiencies or teach a student a second language. Some said that “remediation” is a medical concept based on the erroneous notion that the students are “sick”; they prefer to use the term “developmental” to describe programs that are intended to help students develop the skills they need to succeed in college. Yet, in describing CUNY's basic skills and ESL programs, these same individuals use medical, pop-psychological, and special education buzzwords such as “mainstreaming,” “treatments,” “holistic” approaches, and “improving self-esteem” – words that suggest that students have become patients, institutionalized within the university.

The terms “remedial” and “developmental” are also used as terms of art at CUNY:

- A “*remedial*” or “*non-credit*” course is pre-college level and carries no degree credits, only “equated credits” (see below for a discussion of equated credits).
- A “*developmental*” course is a hybrid – that is, it is part college-level and part pre-college-level. It carries a combination of degree credits and equated credits, in proportion to the level of the material.

- A “*compensatory*” course, also known as a “*supplemental instruction*” course, is college-level, but it has extended classroom hours for remedial students. The course itself carries degree credits, while the extended hours carry equated credits.<sup>256</sup>

Credit designation is an important issue for CUNY and its students because of its financial aid implications. Although CUNY remedial, developmental, and compensatory courses do not carry degree credits for the full number of hours of instruction they represent, the full number of hours is counted for purposes of determining full-time status (defined as 12 credit hours) and financial aid eligibility. The non-college-level hours are assigned “equated credits,” also known as “institutional” or “billable” credits. Equated credits do not count toward a degree, but are billable, reimbursable, and counted in determining eligibility for financial aid.<sup>257</sup> Thus, a “non-credit” course (which has no college-level content) carries equated credits, but no degree credits; a developmental course carries some degree credits and some equated credits, depending on the amount of college-level content; and a compensatory course carries a full complement of degree credits, plus equated credits for the extra hours of instruction.

While there is a degree of agreement on these definitions, there are no common course codes across campuses and there is no system-wide standard for what content is “remedial” and what content is “college-level.”<sup>258</sup> Thus, what is essentially the same course may carry degree credits for one student and not another, simply because the two students are at different colleges.

For example, Table 14, below, shows that in Fall 1997, Lehman, Queens College, York, and Hostos offered degree credit for all basic reading, basic writing, and ESL courses. In fact, at Hostos, a student could qualify for full-time status and earn up to six degree credits in a single semester by taking just two developmental or compensatory courses, because each course carried such a large number of credits. At the other extreme, Baruch, Medgar Evers, LaGuardia, N.Y. City Tech, and Queensborough gave no degree credit for any of their remedial courses. Moreover, at Hunter and Queensborough, for example, each remedial course carried relatively few total credits, so a student would have had to take two or three remedial courses plus one or two college-level course in order to qualify for full-time status.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Hassett Responses, 14 & Attachment 9, ESL and Basic Skills Courses by College.

<sup>257</sup> This practice is not unique to CUNY. About 80% of public 2-year institutions nationwide award equated credits, compared with about half of private 4-year institutions. (NCES PEQIS, Oct. 1996, 17.)

<sup>258</sup> (Institutional Research, interview, 6-25-98; CUNY Responses, 8-18-98, 1.) This is ostensibly because (1) admission standards vary across the senior campuses, (2) curricula vary depending on the pedagogical priorities of the faculty, and (3) graduation requirements vary among different fields of study.

<sup>259</sup> CUNY, July Responses, Attachment 9.

**Table 14. Remedial Courses Carrying Degree Credits, by Subject Area and College**

Senior Colleges	READING	WRITING	MATH	ESL
<b>Baruch</b>	none	none	none	none
<b>Brooklyn</b>	some	some	none	some
<b>City</b>	none	none	some	some
<b>Hunter</b>	none	none	none	all
<b>John Jay</b>	some	some	some	all
<b>Lehman</b>	mainstreamed	mainstreamed	none	all
<b>Medgar Evers</b>	none	none	none	none
<b>N.Y. City Tech</b>	none	none	none	none
<b>Queens</b>	all	all	all	all
<b>Staten Island</b>	some	all	none	some
<b>York</b>	all	all	some	all
Community Colleges	READING	WRITING	MATH	ESL
<b>BMCC</b>	none	none	none	none
<b>Bronx</b>	some	none	none	some
<b>Hostos</b>	all	all	all	all
<b>Kingsborough</b>	none	none	none	some
<b>LaGuardia</b>	none	none	none	none
<b>Queensborough</b>	none	none	none	none

Source: Fall 1997ESL and Basic Skills Courses by College.

The dividing line between remedial and college-level math varies considerably from college to college within CUNY – and even for students in different majors at the same college. While most CUNY colleges consider arithmetic and elementary algebra to be pre-college-level courses, for example, Hostos and Queens College gave even their lowest-level remedial math students some degree credit in Fall 1997. At the other extreme, most CUNY colleges give full degree credit for pre-calculus courses. Yet Queens College offers three- and four-hour developmental and compensatory pre-calculus courses that carry only one or two degree credits.<sup>260</sup> And at the City College School of Engineering, all pre-calculus math courses are considered non-degree-credit courses, whereas for non-engineering majors, Math 100: “Precalculus” is a 3-credit college-level course.<sup>261</sup> Most CUNY colleges draw the line somewhere in between elementary algebra and pre-calculus, but there is no CUNY-wide consensus as to whether intermediate algebra, geometry, and trigonometry are high school or college-level math.<sup>262</sup>

<sup>260</sup> CUNY, July Responses, Attachment 9, Fall 1997 ESL and Basic Skills Courses by College; Queens College bulletin, 1996-1998, 164.

<sup>261</sup> City College bulletin, 1997-99, 182, 269.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.; college bulletins.

## 2. Financial Aid

One cannot make sense of CUNY's remedial problem without understanding the influence of state and federal financial aid laws. Because many of CUNY's remedial students are profoundly economically disadvantaged<sup>263</sup> and rely on financial aid in order to attend college, the academic eligibility requirements of the major financial aid programs have an enormous impact on remediation at CUNY. This impact is magnified because CUNY conducts remediation on such a grand scale.

The two largest sources of financial aid for CUNY students are New York State Tuition Assistance Program ("TAP") awards and federal Pell grant awards.<sup>264</sup> PwC has estimated that the TAP attributable to remedial full-time equivalents totals \$22.1 million annually.<sup>265</sup> This estimate is misleadingly low, however. Table 15, below, shows that if we consider the entire basic skills headcount (we cannot include ESL because unduplicated headcount figures are not available), rather than reducing it to FTEs, then basic skills students brought in a total of \$91,770,378 in TAP in 1997-98. In addition, basic skills students received \$96,768,774 in Pell, for a total of \$188,539,152 in TAP and Pell combined.

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<sup>263</sup> In 1996, the mean household income of CUNY basic skills students was \$20,646 at the bachelor's level and \$19,435 at the associate level; the mean household income of ESL students was even lower – \$18,080 at the bachelor's level and \$13,463 at the associate level. (*Basic Skills & ESL Overview*, 5 & Tables 5a & 5b.) The average family income of a CUNY remedial student is far lower than the national average for college students. In 1995, 60% of CUNY senior college freshmen who lived with one or both parents reported household incomes below \$25,000, while only 21% of 4-year college freshmen nationwide reported that their parents' income was below \$25,000. Even more strikingly, 72% of CUNY community college freshmen who lived with one or both parents reported household incomes below \$25,000, while only 29% of 2-year college freshmen nationwide reported that their parents' income was below that level. (*CUNY Student Data Book: Fall 1997*, Vol. I, 177.)

<sup>264</sup> CUNY's annual federal and state financial aid disbursements – which include TAP, Pell, and several other grant, loan, and work-study programs – are approximately \$450 million. (Hassett Responses, 27; UAPC, interview, 7-15-98.) The importance of TAP for remedial students has grown since 1995, when the state eliminated the Supplemental Tuition Assistance Program, which was a program designed specifically for those students whose remedial needs made it difficult for them to fulfill TAP's program pursuit and academic progress requirements. (Proto, interview, 7-7-98.)

<sup>265</sup> PwC, *Report I*, 33.

**Table 15. Estimated TAP and Pell Awarded to CUNY Basic Skills Students in 1997-98**

	Basic Skills Headcount	TAP (\$)		PELL (\$)		TAP+PELL (\$)	
		Average Annual Award*	Total Awarded**	Average Annual Award*	Total Awarded**	Average Annual Award*	Total Awarded**
Senior	17,659	2,142	37,825,578	1,986	35,070,774	4,128	72,896,352
Community	27,300	1,976	53,944,800	2,260	61,698,000	4,236	115,642,800
All CUNY	44,959	2,042	91,770,378	2,150	96,768,774	4,193	<b>188,539,152</b>

Sources: PwC, Report I, 12; CUNY Student Data Book: Fall 1997, Vol. I, 181.

\* “Average Annual Award” equals the average Fall 1997 award per CUNY student, multiplied by two. This is a conservative estimate, since basic skills students have, on average, lower household incomes than the CUNY student body as a whole, which would make them eligible for higher TAP and Pell awards.

\*\* “Total Awarded” equals “Basic Skills Headcount” multiplied by “Average Annual Award.”

In recognition that many high school graduates need remediation at the postsecondary level, the federal Pell legislation allows students taking remedial courses to receive federal aid for up to one year of purely remedial coursework.<sup>266</sup> New York State’s TAP regulations, by contrast, contain six requirements that make it difficult for postsecondary students to finance remedial work: (i) the four-year limit, (ii) the full-time requirement, (iii) the degree program requirement, (iv) the three-credit minimum, (v) the program pursuit/academic progress requirement, and (vi) the leave-of-absence and transfer rules for restoring academic eligibility.

- **TAP awards are generally limited to four academic years of study.** Thus, a bachelor’s student whose college career is extended because she had to spend her first two semesters in non-degree-credit courses will exhaust her financial aid eligibility before she has enough credits to graduate.
- **Only full-time, degree students<sup>267</sup> who are taking at least 3 degree credits during their first semester are eligible for TAP.**<sup>268</sup> Thus, a student who needs basic skills instruction must enroll in a degree program and load up with 12 credits (four or five average courses), including at least 3 college-level credits, if she wants to receive TAP money. After the first semester, moreover, students must take at least 6 degree credits to qualify.<sup>269</sup>

<sup>266</sup> Lawrence E. Gladieux and Arthur M. Hauptman, *The College Aid Quandary: Access, Quality, and the Federal Role* (New York: Brookings/College Board, 1995), 27.

<sup>267</sup> The Pell regulations also require students to be enrolled in a degree program. (20 U.S.C. §1070a; 34 C.F.R. §690.)

<sup>268</sup> By contrast, the Pell regulations do not mandate that students carry any minimum number of degree credits in order to be eligible. Pell will pay for up to 30 hours of basic skills coursework (Pell does not limit ESL courses). Queensborough catalog, 37.

<sup>269</sup> Queensborough catalog, 35-36.

- In order to maintain satisfactory **program pursuit and academic progress**, students must complete a specified number of courses, accumulate a specified number of degree credits, and achieve a certain minimum GPA. These standards are ratcheted up with each passing semester.<sup>270</sup>
- Students who fall behind on the program pursuit or academic progress requirements and want to **restore their TAP eligibility** have limited options, including **taking a leave of absence of at least one calendar year** or **transferring to another college**.

Thus, CUNY is placed in the position of designing (and advising freshmen to sign up for) undemanding “college-level” courses that overloaded remedial freshmen can handle.<sup>271</sup> For example, as part of its freshman program, Kingsborough advises students who failed the RAT to take SPE 11, a 3-credit course with the following description:

**Listening and Speaking Skills** – To strengthen oral language abilities and improve listening proficiency, students are made aware of the nature for [sic] their language. Focus is on vocabulary enrichment, word pronunciation, attention to grammar, verbal self-expression, listening as a skill and note-taking techniques.<sup>272</sup>

Similarly, Hunter advises incoming basic skills and ESL students to take the following 3-credit course:

**Map of Knowledge** – Introduction to range of knowledge available in the curriculum. Discusses subject matter and methodology of various disciplines as well as their relations within and across the curriculum to aid students in making intelligent choices in their course of study.<sup>273</sup>

<sup>270</sup> **Table F2. TAP Program Pursuit and Academic Progress Requirements**

To be eligible for TAP in semester number:	A student must have completed ( <i>i.e.</i> , passed or failed) this number of credits (degree or equated) during the prior semester:	A student must have earned ( <i>i.e.</i> , passed) this <b>total</b> number of degree credits by the end of the prior semester:	A student must have earned this <b>cumulative</b> GPA by the end of the prior semester:
1	not applicable	not applicable	not applicable
2	6	0	0
3	6	6	1.0
4	9	18	1.2
5	9	31	2.0
6	12	45	2.0
7	12	60	2.0
8	12	75	2.0

**Sources:** Queensborough catalog, 35-36; BMCC catalog, 14.

<sup>271</sup> City, interview, 7-20-98; N.Y. City Tech (referring to such courses as “useless towards the degree”).

<sup>272</sup> Kingsborough Freshman Prescriptions; Kingsborough catalog, 151.

<sup>273</sup> Hunter “Foundations” pamphlet; Hunter catalog, 125.

In addition, many CUNY colleges attach large numbers of equated and degree credits to certain basic skills and ESL courses, which enables some students to achieve full-time status by taking just two or three courses. Basic skills courses can carry up to 7.5 total credits, and intensive ESL courses can carry up to 10.5 total credits.<sup>274</sup> Thus, at some colleges, basic skills and ESL students can avoid the “time management” issues that would arise if they were taking the usual full-time load of four or five courses.<sup>275</sup>

CUNY has also established a “grade replacement policy” that automatically erases D and F grades from students’ GPAs if they repeat the course and earn a C or better the second time around. (Queens College goes one step further, allowing students to repeat any course if they need to improve their grade to meet a departmental or major requirement; Queens sources emphasize that the second grade always replaces the original grade, even if it is lower.) Under the CUNY-wide policy, which was enacted by the Trustees in 1990, students may repeat up to 16 credits.<sup>276</sup>

Thus, according to interviewees, some freshmen cope with an overly demanding full-time course load by deciding ahead of time to write off one of the courses as a sure “F” and to focus exclusively on the remaining courses.<sup>277</sup> Indeed, in Fall 1997, one-third of all bachelor’s freshmen and almost half of all associate degree freshmen failed one or more courses during their first semester. Moreover, the students who failed one or more courses had, on average, attempted more credits than those students who passed all of their courses.<sup>278</sup> Although these data do not prove that students purposely “throw” courses, they do confirm that large numbers of incoming CUNY students are unprepared to handle a full-time course load.

What these students may not have realized is that state and federal financial aid are not available to repeat a course for which a student already received credit (D or better). Thus, if a student repeats a course in which she originally received a D or better, she must simultaneously enroll in at least 12 additional credits to qualify for financial aid as a full-time student. Similarly, credits received in a repeated course that a student has already passed are not counted under the TAP pursuit and progress requirements.

The combination of financial aid rules that tighten each semester and CUNY policies (financial aid advising, allowing concurrent enrollment, grade replacement) can overwhelm students. The

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<sup>274</sup> CUNY, July Responses, Attachment 9.

<sup>275</sup> N.Y. City Tech., interview, 9-23-98. See Section V.A.1, “The Nomenclature of Remediation at CUNY,” for further discussion of this issue.

<sup>276</sup> Trustees’ Resolution 4-23-90; Queensborough catalog, 187; Queens College bulletin, 60; Queens, interview, 7-21-97.

<sup>277</sup> Queens, interview, 7-21-97.

<sup>278</sup> (CUNY 8-18-98 Responses, attachments B-11-a & B-11-b.) On average, SEEK students attempted 16 credits during their first semester – two more credits than the average regularly admitted student; not surprisingly, almost half of the SEEK students failed at least one course, compared with one-third of regular students. (B-11-a & B-11-b.) It should be noted that, except under extenuating circumstances, SEEK students are required to enroll as full-time students. (The Guidelines for the Structure and Operation of the SEEK Program of the City University of New York, 6-27-94, F2.)

more they try to work the system, the heavier the courseload they must carry and the higher the grades they must earn.

When these overwhelmed students fall behind on TAP's program pursuit or academic progress requirements, New York State law provides that they can restore their TAP eligibility by taking a leave of absence of at least one calendar year or transferring to another college. These rules go a long way toward explaining two heretofore mysterious phenomena at CUNY: the "stop-out" phenomenon, whereby students take six, eight, or even ten years to earn their degree because they only attend every other year or so; and the phenomenon of students apparently dropping out of CUNY in bad academic standing, only to resurface the following semester as incoming transfer students at another college. Both of these phenomena undoubtedly contribute to CUNY's poor graduation rates (see accompanying report, *Beyond Graduation Rates*).

The effect of the financial aid rules is dramatic when one looks at the proportion of CUNY undergraduates who begin college as full-time degree students. The majority of CUNY students attend full-time and are matriculated in degree programs. More than two-thirds of degree-seeking undergraduates are full-time, while the vast majority of non-degree students are part-time.

**Table 16. Fall 1997 Undergraduate Enrollment, by Full-Time/Part-Time Attendance and Degree Program**

	Full-time		Part-time		Total
<b>Bachelor's</b>	56,248	66%	28,619	34%	84,867
<b>Associate</b>	52,725	70%	22,935	30%	75,660
<b>Certificate</b>	449	61%	282	39%	731
<b>Non-degree</b>	851	6%	13,093	94%	13,944
<b>Total</b>	<b>110,273</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>64,929</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>175,202</b>

Source: CUNY Student Data Book: Fall 1997, Vol. I, pp. 11-17.

About three-quarters of CUNY freshmen are enrolled full-time, but that percentage drops noticeably in each succeeding class year. While the percentage of CUNY senior college students who attend full time is about ten percentage points below the national average, the percentage of CUNY community college students who attend full time is double the national average.<sup>279</sup>

Meanwhile, there are no federal, state, or CUNY regulations on how many hours a full-time student who is receiving financial aid may work, nor are there any regulations on how many credit hours a working student may take.<sup>280</sup> Thus, according to a 1995 CUNY survey, 13% of CUNY's full-time undergraduates reported working 35 or more hours per week.<sup>281</sup> Similarly,

<sup>279</sup> CUNY Student Data Book: Fall 1997, Vol. I, 171.

<sup>280</sup> Mirrer "Responses" memo.

<sup>281</sup> CUNY Student Data Book: Fall 1997, Vol. I, 169.

CUNY has no workload guidelines for basic skills students. Thus, according to the same 1995 survey, a third of basic skills students in bachelor's programs and more than a quarter of basic skills students in associate programs reported work commitments of 20 or more hours per week.<sup>282</sup>

### 3. The Basic Configuration of Remediation at CUNY

While CUNY faculty and administrators would generally agree that the main purpose of remediation is to prepare students for college-level work,<sup>283</sup> there is no consensus on how to structure a remedial program to achieve that purpose. There are some fundamental similarities in remedial programs across the university. For example, the majority of remediation at CUNY takes place within the context of a traditional degree program, and most remedial students are simultaneously enrolled in college-level courses.<sup>284</sup> Beyond those similarities, however, the relationship between remedial and college-level coursework varies from college to college. There is college-by-college variation in remedial placement policies, limits on remediation, the configuration of remedial courses and departments, and the use of prerequisites.

Most notably, there is no CUNY-wide policy mandating remedial courses for students who have failed one or more of the FSATs. While most of the colleges place these students into basic skills and ESL course sequences, Baruch and Lehman mainstream basic skills students into regular classrooms and address their basic skills needs outside of class.<sup>285</sup> Baruch and York also prohibit students with low WAT scores from enrolling in their regular ESL sequences; students must instead enroll in the CUNY Language Immersion Program ("CLIP") or complete their ESL requirements at another CUNY college, on "permit." Table 17, below, summarizes each college's placement policy for students who initially fail one or more of the FSATs, as well as any policies limiting remediation.

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<sup>282</sup> (Basic Skills & ESL Overview, 5 & Tables 5a & 5b.) According to the U.S. Department of Education's *1995-96 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study*, 55% of students who were employed full-time while in college said that work had a negative effect on their grades, compared with one-third of those who worked 16-20 hours per week and just one-fifth of those who worked 1-15 hours per week. (NCES 98-013, 152.)

<sup>283</sup> See Section V.C.1, "The Goals of Remediation at CUNY," for further discussion of this issue.

<sup>284</sup> These common features of remediation at CUNY are not necessarily the result of a consensus about what is best for students. Section 2, above, explains how financial aid eligibility rules encourage these features, and Section V.C.2.a, below, explains that CUNY collects no data on which remediation practices are most effective. See Sections 4 and 5, below, for a brief discussion of alternative configurations (*i.e.*, immersion and continuing education).

<sup>285</sup> Note that Lehman's admissions standards are significantly lower than Baruch's, with the result that Lehman has far more basic skills students, and a higher percentage of students with severe remedial needs.

**Table 17. 1997-98 Remedial Placement Policies and Time Limits for Students Who Initially Failed FSATs, by Subject Area and College**

Senior Colleges	Reading	Writing	Math	ESL	Semester Limit	Repeat Limit
<b>Baruch</b>	mainstreamed	tutorial	summer or permit*	WAT score: 6 - course 5 - cont. ed. 4 - permit* or CLIP	2	academic dismissal upon 2 <sup>nd</sup> failure to pass required remedial course
<b>Brooklyn</b>	course	course	course	course	1	“
<b>City</b>	course	course	course	course	2	“
<b>Hunter</b>	course	course	course	course	1	“
<b>John Jay</b>	course	course	course	course	2	“
<b>Lehman</b>	mainstreamed	mainstreamed	course	course	2	“
<b>Medgar Evers</b>	course	course	course	course	2	“
<b>N.Y. City Tech</b>	course	course	course	course	2	“
<b>Queens</b>	course	course	course	course	1	“
<b>Staten Island</b>	course	course	course	course	2	“
<b>York</b>	course	course	course	WAT score: high 4 - course low 4 - permit* or CLIP	2	“
<b>Community Colleges</b>						
<b>BMCC</b>	course	course	course	course	none	none
<b>Bronx</b>	course	course	course	course (lowest level advised to enroll in CLIP)	none	none
<b>Hostos</b>	course	course	course	course	none	none
<b>Kingsborough</b>	course	course	course	course	none	academic dismissal upon 2 <sup>nd</sup> failure to pass required remedial course
<b>LaGuardia</b>	course	course	course	course	none	none
<b>Queens-</b>	course	course	course	course	none	academic

borough						dismissal upon 2 <sup>nd</sup> failure to pass required remedial course
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**Sources:** Mirrer “Responses” memo; ESL and Basic Skills Courses by College; college interviews.

\* A “permit” allows a student matriculated at one CUNY college to take courses at another CUNY college.

Pursuant to two 1995 Trustees’ resolutions, CUNY senior colleges are currently prohibited from offering more than two semesters of remediation, and their students are subject to academic dismissal upon the second failure to pass a required remedial course.<sup>286</sup> It is important to note that a two-semester maximum can be interpreted as allowing, when necessary, five “treatments”: the pre-freshman summer program, the fall semester, the January intersession, the spring semester, and the summer following freshman year – plus workshops, learning centers, and tutoring. Similarly, a one-semester maximum can allow three treatments.<sup>287</sup>

The institutional framework of remediation is not uniform across CUNY. The math and English departments are in charge of basic skills at most CUNY colleges. At Queensborough, however, the Department of Basic Educational Skills covers reading, writing, and ESL; similarly, BMCC’s Department of Developmental Skills offers credit-bearing courses in critical thinking and linguistics, along with non-credit ESL and reading classes. Some colleges locate ESL in the English department, while at others ESL is part of an “institute” or special program, or even – as at York – part of the foreign language department. At Medgar Evers, reading, writing, and ESL courses are all offered through the Department of Languages, Literature, Communication Skills and Philosophy. In sum, one might say that CUNY has both decentralized and centralized remediation models.

Under the umbrella “Coordinated Freshman Program,” the university both provides for direct instruction to remedial students and sponsors curricular and instructional innovation.<sup>288</sup> The Coordinated Freshman Program includes summer and intersession immersion programs, which we describe later, and academic year programs, which we describe in this section.

Academic-year programs for freshmen commonly include the following elements:

- **Freshman orientation seminar.** This is typically one hour per week, covering effective study habits, time management skills, and student adjustment to college.
- **Block programming** (described below).

<sup>286</sup> Board of Trustees, Minutes, 6-29-95, 99.

<sup>287</sup> Hunter, interview, 7-22-98.

<sup>288</sup> CUNY, July Responses, 14.

- **“Linked” or “paired” courses.** A basic skills or ESL course is linked with a degree-credit-bearing content-area course. The topics and readings covered in the content course are used as the basis for skill development in the remedial writing or reading course.
- **Supplemental or compensatory instruction.** This approach involves placing remedial students in college-level courses and using a variety of methods – such as study groups, tutors, and extra hours of instruction – to help students stay up to speed. Some colleges place tutors directly in the classroom, where they are supposed to get to know the students and identify the ones who are having difficulty. Outside of class, the tutors are supposed to re-teach what was covered in class; help students with individual problems; and work on study techniques, note-taking and test-taking strategies, and critical thinking skills.<sup>289</sup>
- **Support services.** Both remedial and regular students have access to campus learning centers and computer labs, academic and personal counseling, and tutoring by trained peer tutors and faculty. Some colleges provide self-paced, computer-assisted instruction. Some colleges also provide support services designed to assist students in “developing a positive self-image.”
- **Faculty development.** Faculty must develop the skills they need to collaborate effectively in conducting blocked and linked programs.<sup>290</sup>

While some of these elements were originally designed for remedial, SEEK, and CD students, some colleges have extended their use to all freshmen.

Interviewees pointed out that CUNY colleges are increasingly using block programming, whereby a group of students attend a cluster of courses together.<sup>291</sup> At Hunter College, for example, double-remedial students can take a block program entitled “Foundations,” which includes five of the following courses:

- Reading
- Writing Workshop
- Elementary Algebra and Geometry *or* Basic Structures of Mathematics
- Map of Knowledge
- Introduction to Sociology *or* Conquered Peoples in America
- Introduction to Music
- Orientation Seminar *or* Orientation for Success<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> Watson, memo 1-26-98; Lehman, interview, 7-23-97.

<sup>290</sup> Watson, memo 1-26-98.

<sup>291</sup> In 1995, the Trustees passed a resolution encouraging the use of this practice. (Watson 1-26-98 memo.)

<sup>292</sup> Hunter “Foundations” pamphlet.

Block programming at CUNY has a dual motivation. First, it is designed to facilitate the transition from high school to college – particularly for underprepared students – by fostering the development of “learning communities” that can offer academic and social support. Second, block programming is thought to provide a “cohesive learning experience” for CUNY’s all-commuter student body. As one professor explained, whereas residential students return to a dormitory or roommates after classes, commuter students return to their homes, jobs, and families – which place competing demands on their time. Block programming is a substitute for the dormitory experience, enabling commuter students to make friends quickly and begin to develop a sense of community. Proponents believe that block programming increases student achievement, involvement in college activities, and retention.<sup>293</sup>

Some schools use FSAT scores to block students with similar remedial needs together and link remedial instruction with subject matter instruction. A notable exception is Lehman, which offers no reading or writing basic skills classes, but instead mainstreams all reading and writing basic skills students in block programs with non-remedial students (this model makes extensive use of in-classroom tutors). Remediation instructors at Lehman stated that this approach spurs remedial students to higher levels of achievement and reduces stigmatization of students who fail skills tests, but they produced no evidence of this.<sup>294</sup> They also stated that, because students form friendships across ability levels, informal peer tutoring arrangements spring up that result in benefits both to the remedial student and the better-prepared student who is providing the help. They acknowledged, however, that (1) the better-prepared students may reap fewer benefits from mainstreaming than the remedial students; and (2) the neediest remedial students may be overwhelmed by a full schedule of college-level classes.

Each college establishes its own policy regarding allowing remedial students to enroll in regular academic courses. All colleges allow students to take some regular courses while they are in remediation (the alternative would be to deny remedial students eligibility for TAP), although the options are often limited. Speech, health and physical education, and psychology were most frequently mentioned college-level courses that remedial students can take. Some colleges broaden the options available to remedial students by offering compensatory courses in a variety of areas.

Many of the programs offered to other remedial and non-remedial freshmen are mandatory for SEEK and CD students. At Brooklyn College, for example, all SEEK students are automatically scheduled in blocked courses for their first two semesters. Students take 26 hours per week of remedial and core courses that follow a theme. They are also divided into study groups, each of which has 10 students and a tutor. In each of the first two semesters, Brooklyn’s SEEK students accumulate just 4.5 credits.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> Hunter Fall 1998 Block Program pamphlets; Lehman, interview, 7-23-98.

<sup>294</sup> See accompanying report, *Beyond Graduation Rates*, for a discussion of CUNY’s inability to demonstrate the effectiveness of its policies and programs.

<sup>295</sup> (Watson, memo, 1-26-98.) Brooklyn’s 1991 SEEK entrants had lower retention and graduation rates than those at every other senior college except City. (*Beyond Graduation Rates*.)

All SEEK and CD students who have failed one or more of the FSATs are required to participate in CUNY's summer skills immersion program.<sup>296</sup> In the fall, SEEK and CD students who require remediation are placed according to the college's normal remedial placement requirements. SEEK and CD students also receive additional counseling, one-on-one and small-group tutoring, supplemental instruction, and financial aid, over and above the services provided to regularly admitted students.<sup>297</sup>

Conversely, several of programs that provide support for remedial students are offered to all students. For example, many campuses offer block programs designed around themes or geared towards particular majors, such as pre-med, nursing, and business. Typically, all instructors in the block work together to coordinate curricula around the theme.<sup>298</sup>

4. Alternative configurations: USIP, CLIP, and Continuing Education

a) **University Skills Immersion Program**

The University Skills Immersion Program ("USIP"), which is part of the Coordinated Freshman Program, offers intensive instruction in all three basic skills and ESL during the summer and January intersession. Courses combine intensive skills instruction with academic content. Through their participation in USIP, many students who failed one or more of their FSATs on the first attempt are able to obtain a passing score – or at least get a head start on their remediation – before the start of classes. The importance of this program is increasing as the Trustees enact stricter limits on remediation.

USIP is offered on all CUNY campuses and is available to students at no cost. Summer sessions range from two to seven weeks in length, with a typical session lasting six weeks, four days per week for an average of five hours a day. Coursework is usually supplemented with tutoring and counseling. The campuses are free to experiment with different formats, however, and there are many variations depending on the subject, the level of students, and available resources.<sup>299</sup>

For example, in 1998, the College of Staten Island offered two-week modules for students who were close to passing one of the FSATs. LaGuardia's summer program, known as Quick Start, uses two- to four-week sessions, and classes meet for up to seven hours per day.<sup>300</sup> ESL

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<sup>296</sup> (Mirror "Responses" attachment.) SEEK and CD students who pass all three FSATs are "advised" to attend the summer immersion program. (Proto, *ibid.*; see also Board of Trustees, Minutes, 6-26-95, 99 (resolving that all special program students "should attend the prefreshmen [sic] summer program").)

<sup>297</sup> CUNY, Responses, 8-18-98, 22-23.

<sup>298</sup> Lehman, interview, 7-23-98; Hunter, interview, 7-22-98.

<sup>299</sup> Watson, memo 1-26-98.

<sup>300</sup> Staten Island, interview, 7-29-98; Alison Gendar, "Summer catchup time at LaG," Daily News, 8-6-98, 5.

immersion courses tend to run at least a month and give students 30-35 hours per week to concentrate on improving language skills.<sup>301</sup>

The January intersession version of USIP offers intensive instruction over a one- to three-week period. This period is often used to extend the semester for students who are close to passing a course they took in the fall. It is also used as an intensive three-week startup period for spring semester ESL courses. Finally, at many colleges, the intersession USIP focuses on students who are very close to passing their FSATs.<sup>302</sup> Data are not available on the intersession USIP.<sup>303</sup>

Participation in USIP is voluntary, except for SEEK and CD students, who are required to attend if they have failed one or more of the FSATs.<sup>304</sup> Participants fall into three major categories: newly admitted freshmen; continuing students, who may have first entered CUNY the previous spring or even earlier; and transfer students.

USIP grew steadily during its first decade, from about 500 students in its pilot summer, to 9,226 students in the summer of 1995.<sup>305</sup> Then, in 1996, CUNY implemented two important new policies that had an impact on USIP participation: the senior colleges imposed limits on the number of semesters of remediation students could take, and enrollment in USIP became mandatory for all SEEK and CD students who had failed one or more FSATs.<sup>306</sup> As a result of these measures, summer enrollment jumped 27% in 1996, and an additional 24% in 1997; see Table 18, below. The summer program posted moderate growth in 1998, serving a total of 15,192 students.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> Watson 1-26-98 memo.

<sup>302</sup> Watson 1-26-98 memo.

<sup>303</sup> Basic Skills & ESL Overview, n.3.

<sup>304</sup> (Mirror "Responses" attachment.) SEEK and CD students who pass all three FSATs are "advised" to attend the summer immersion program. (Proto, interview, 7-7-98.)

<sup>305</sup> USIP Assessment, 5; Mirror "Responses" attachment.

<sup>306</sup> Board of Trustees, Minutes, 6-26-95, 99.

<sup>307</sup> Task Force staff observed several USIP classes during the summer of 1998. The quality and style of instruction varied, but we were consistently struck by the almost palpable deficit of abstract thinking skills among community college basic writing students. For example, we observed as one instructor attempted to lead a discussion of a reading assignment on cloning, in preparation for writing a WAT-type essay, but the students' grasp of the scientific concepts was so weak that the discussion alternately veered wildly and faltered. In another class, an instructor carefully and cheerfully walked students through the process of developing a WAT essay on the theme, "Why do we need both fears and fantasies?" Again, however, the students seemed unable to grasp the theme, much less organize their thoughts into an essay.

**Table 18. Summer Immersion Program Participation and Annual Growth, 1993-1998**

Year	Total Students			SEEK			CD		
	Number	# Growth	% Growth	Number	# Growth	% Growth	Number	# Growth	% Growth
1993	9,217			787			378		
1994	8,873	- 344	- 4%	770	- 17	- 2%	488	+ 110	+ 29%
1995	9,226	+ 353	+ 4%	610	- 160	- 21%	317	- 171	- 35%
1996	11,710	+ 2,484	+ 27%	1,275	+ 665	+ 109%	1,027	+ 710	+ 224%
1997	14,530	+ 2,820	+ 24%	1,808	+ 533	+ 42%	955	- 72	- 7%
1998	15,192	+ 662	+ 5%	1,949	+ 141	+ 8%	1,232	+ 277	+ 29%
<b>Total</b>	68,748			7,199			4,397		

Source: Mirror “Responses” attachment.

According to newspaper reports, rapid expansion has strained the program’s capacity at some colleges. For example, while 450 students participated in LaGuardia’s USIP during the summer of 1997, enrollment was up to 600 in 1998, and demand was so high that LaGuardia could have added 10 more classes if it had more space and funding.<sup>308</sup>

When the Trustees voted recently to phase out remedial course instruction in bachelor’s programs beginning in January 2000, they provided that a senior college could continue to provide remediation to prospective bachelor’s students “only during its summer sessions.”<sup>309</sup> This suggests that the senior colleges will no longer be permitted to provide remediation to prospective bachelor’s degree students during the January intersession.

### **b) CUNY Language Immersion Program**

In October, 1995, CUNY piloted the CUNY Language Immersion Program (“CLIP”), which is designed to provide interested students who have been accepted to a CUNY college but have substantial language-learning needs with the option to defer their enrollment and participate in an intensive English program of 25 hours per week for up to one year. While deferring freshmen make up the majority of CLIP participants, the program also serves matriculated students who have failed one semester of ESL, as well as students who have been dismissed from one of CUNY’s senior colleges as a result of having failed the same ESL course twice, pursuant to university policy.<sup>310</sup>

Prior to the establishment of CLIP, increasing numbers of immigrant students were depleting their financial aid funds on semester after semester of non- or low-credit English language study.

<sup>308</sup> Alison Gendar, “Summer catchup time at LaG,” *Daily News*, 8-6-98, 5.

<sup>309</sup> Board of Trustees, *Minutes*, 5-26-98, 114.

<sup>310</sup> *CLIP Final Report*, 1-2.

Now these same students can learn English in CLIP without using their financial aid. CLIP students typically pay just \$10 per week.<sup>311</sup>

All CLIP sites are supposed to follow the same instructional philosophy (“a holistic approach to language development that integrates listening, speaking, reading, and writing, in the context of academic preparation”) and curricular guidelines that were established by a university-wide committee. As with all other CUNY remedial programs that we have studied, however, course offerings and content vary from site to site at the option of the local instructors.<sup>312</sup>

According to official CUNY policy, entrance into and exit from CLIP is voluntary. The Office of Academic Affairs has recommended, however, that once stable profiles are developed that can predict ability to benefit, student advisement guidelines should be established for program participation and readiness to return to college studies.<sup>313</sup> The fact that no university-wide participation guidelines have been established after more than two years of program operations is consistent with CUNY’s shotgun approach to remediation in general. It seems axiomatic that improved assessment and guidance would yield more direct hits.

Perhaps realizing this, some colleges seem to have established such guidelines already. For example, at York and Baruch, we were told that the lowest-level ESL students – those who score a 4 or less on the WAT – are not permitted to enroll in the bachelor’s program. Instead, they are given the choice of enrolling in another CUNY college or CLIP.

One reason that York is so willing to refer students to CLIP is that it is home to one of CLIP’s six sites. (The others are located at Bronx Community College, Kingsborough, LaGuardia, N.Y. City Tech, and the Upper Manhattan site of BMCC.) Even though CLIP students, after completing their language preparation, are supposed to return to the college to which they were initially admitted, colleges that are not CLIP sites have complained that some of their deferring freshmen decide, after attending CLIP, to switch to another CUNY college.

### **c) Continuing Education**

A number of CUNY colleges offer remedial education through their continuing education divisions. In fact, remedial students make up a substantial percentage of CUNY’s continuing education headcount. The impetus for the senior colleges to shift remediation out of degree programs and into continuing education comes from the Trustees’ June 1995 resolution setting a one- or two-semester maximum on basic skills and ESL remediation for students in degree programs. That resolution explicitly provided that colleges could offer additional basic skills or

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<sup>311</sup> (CLIP Final Report, 1-2.) The fee for non-residents is higher, approximately \$30 per week, and the fee for welfare recipients is reduced to approximately \$2.50 per week. (CLIP Executive Summary, 1.)

<sup>312</sup> CLIP Final Report, 3.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 14.

ESL through their adult and continuing education programs.<sup>314</sup> As a result, CUNY senior colleges are reexamining (or, in some cases, establishing) continuing education divisions as an option for delivering basic skills and ESL instruction to current and prospective undergraduate degree students.

PwC found that three senior colleges – Baruch, Hunter, and Queens – offer basic skills and ESL through their continuing education programs to significant numbers of participants (in 1996-97, Baruch and Queens each served about 2,900 remedial students through continuing education, and Hunter served about 7,400).<sup>315</sup> Some colleges actually divert degree students who require remediation into their continuing education divisions. For example, Baruch ESL students who score a 5 on the WAT are not admitted to the regular ESL course sequence; instead, they are placed into an ESL course offered through Baruch’s continuing education division.<sup>316</sup> Medgar Evers (which in 1996-97 served only about 700 remedial students in continuing education) is considering setting up a four-track system, whereby students who are substantially underprepared for college would be referred to continuing education to work on their skills; students with some basic skills needs would work on their skills in the context of a degree program; regular degree students would be on a middle track; and honors students would be on the highest track.<sup>317</sup> The importance of remediation offered through the senior colleges’ continuing education divisions is likely to increase as CUNY gears up to end remediation in its bachelor’s programs.<sup>318</sup>

Several of CUNY’s community colleges already serve large numbers of remedial students through continuing education. PwC found that in 1996-97, remedial headcount in the community colleges’ continuing education programs totaled just over 17,500. LaGuardia, Kingsborough, and Queensborough had the largest programs.<sup>319</sup> Of all the community colleges, only Hostos said that they encourage their most underprepared students to defer college entrance and attend continuing education instead. In 1996-97, however, just under 200 students took remedial courses through Hostos’ continuing education division.<sup>320</sup>

## 5. Conclusions

CUNY’s inconsistent remediation standards and practices give the impression that there is a great variety of remediation configurations at CUNY. In reality, however, the bulk of

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<sup>314</sup> University Budget Planning & Policy Options, 4.

<sup>315</sup> PwC, Report I, 14, Table 18.

<sup>316</sup> Baruch, interview, 2-10-99.

<sup>317</sup> Medgar Evers, interview, 7-16-98; PwC, Report I, Table 18.

<sup>318</sup> The Office of Institutional Research and Analysis prepared a worst-case scenario projecting a total decline of 40% in bachelor entrants as the Trustees’ May 26, 1998 resolution is phased in; they projected that City, John Jay, Lehman, N.Y. City Tech, and York would experience a decline of more than 50% in the number of entering students in the first year of implementation. Lavin and Weininger (1999) project slightly steeper declines.

<sup>319</sup> PwC, Report I, Table 18.

<sup>320</sup> Hostos, interview, 7-15-98; PwC, Report I, Table 18.

remediation at CUNY is conducted within a relatively narrow range, constrained by the traditional college framework. While there is some evidence of creativity – continuing education at Baruch; Self-Regulatory Learning at N.Y. City Tech; and the CUNY Language Immersion Program, for example – the system overall is very much “in the box.” The majority of remedial students – even those with deep remedial needs – use the same financial aid programs and pay the same tuition as prepared students, are funneled into the same traditional, full-time degree programs, and sign up for many of the same college-level courses. Remedial courses, like credit-bearing courses, are generally semester-length and meet only a few hours per week. The most extreme example of CUNY’s one-size-fits-all approach is Lehman’s policy of mainstreaming remedial reading and writing students into the same college courses as prepared students.

CUNY’s policy of funneling the vast majority of its remedial students into full-time degree programs has devastating consequences. Many students become overwhelmed, flunk courses, and drop out. Still others use their financial aid to pay for remedial courses, then find that they have exhausted their eligibility before accumulating enough credits to earn a degree.

## ***B. Assessment***

### **1. The Freshman Skills Assessment Tests**

For 20 years, CUNY’s assessment program has consisted chiefly of a set of skills assessment tests in reading, writing, and mathematics. These three tests are known by different acronyms at each college, but for the sake of consistency we refer to them as the FSATs. Students first encounter the FSATs upon admission to CUNY (but prior to enrollment), when all freshmen and transfers are required to take the tests for placement purposes. The pre-enrollment test results are used to determine whether a student may proceed directly to college-level work or whether a particular level of remediation is needed. The results are also used – often in conjunction with other indicators such as self-identification and interviews – to place students in ESL.

As students are admitted, UAPC schedules them to sit for the FSATs at the college at which they have been admitted. Scoring is by machine for the reading and math tests, which are multiple choice. The writing test, which is an essay, is scored centrally by CUNY-trained readers throughout the spring and early summer; in mid-summer, however, scoring of the writing test is delegated to the individual campuses, each of which has its own CUNY-trained readers.

In addition to the pre-enrollment placement test, the CUNY colleges also administer the FSATs at various times after enrollment. Those results are used for other purposes, including certification, graduation from associate degree programs, and, at some colleges, exit from remediation.

### a) The Reading Assessment Test

CUNY uses the Reading Comprehension Test of the College Board's Descriptive Tests of Language Skills ("DTLS") as its reading skills assessment test ("RAT"). The RAT is a 45-minute multiple-choice test containing 45 questions. The questions cover three aspects of reading comprehension: (1) identifying word and phrase meaning through context; (2) understanding literal and interpretive meaning; and (3) understanding writers' assumptions, opinions, and tone.<sup>321</sup>

The minimum passing scores for the two forms of the RAT currently in use is 30 out of 45. The test is normed on college students. According to numerous CUNY sources, the passing score represents an 11<sup>th</sup> grade reading level, more or less.<sup>322</sup>

### b) The Mathematics Assessment Test

The mathematics skills assessment test ("MAT"), developed by CUNY mathematics faculty, consists of 80 questions and is divided into two sections: (1) arithmetic and elementary algebra; and (2) intermediate algebra, trigonometry, and precalculus. Placement into required basic mathematics courses is based on the results of the first section, which contains 40 multiple choice questions and has a minimum passing score of 25 (or 62.5%), which represents, at most, 9th-grade-level competency.<sup>323</sup> Placement into more advanced mathematics courses is based on the second section of the test, for which the individual colleges set minimum passing scores based on their requirements and curricula. Students have two and a half hours to complete the MAT.<sup>324</sup>

### c) The Writing Assessment Test

The writing assessment test ("WAT") was developed by the CUNY Task Force on Writing. Students are given 50 minutes to write an impromptu, persuasive essay in response to one of two topics. Each topic consists of a brief statement about a common, pop-social issue. The directions ask students to take a position in response to the statement and to support or explain their position by drawing on their own experiences, observation, or reading. The directions suggest that students allot part of their time to planning and proofreading.<sup>325</sup>

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<sup>321</sup> FSAP Student Information Bulletin.

<sup>322</sup> *E.g.*, Crain v. Reyonolds, Defendants' Trial Exhibit E, 1331.

<sup>323</sup> (Baruch, interview, 2-10-99; John Jay, interview, 7-22-98; Lehman, interview, 7-23-98.) Whereas CUNY officially considers intermediate algebra to be college-level math, most other U.S. colleges and some CUNY colleges consider intermediate algebra to be a remedial course. (Adelman, 1996.)

<sup>324</sup> FSAP Student Information Bulletin.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*

Each essay is read by two trained readers and scored holistically on a six-point scale. In order to pass, an essay must receive a rating of at least 4 from each reader, for a total of at least 8 (out of a possible 12). If one reader rates the essay at 3 or below and the other rates it at 4 or above, a third reader resolves the disagreement. For example, an essay with successive scores of 4-3-4 receives a passing total of 8, while an essay with successive scores of 4-3-3 receives a failing total of 6.

## 2. The Task Force's Analysis of CUNY's Assessment Program

Testing experts at RAND evaluated CUNY's assessment program according to the following criteria:

- a) **Reliability** – What is the likelihood that a student's pass/fail status on a test would remain the same regardless of which form of that test the student took or which grader scored the test?
- b) **Validity** – How well does a test accomplish the specific purpose for which it is being used? For example, in the case of a remedial placement test, how well does the test distinguish between students who truly need remedial instruction and those who do not?
- c) **Fairness** – Are the tests secure against cheating? How are passing scores chosen? How weighty are the decisions that are made based on the test scores?
- d) **Cost** – What are the total and per-student costs of the assessment program and its components?<sup>326</sup>

The Task Force's analysis reveals serious problems with CUNY's assessment program. Note that our criticisms of CUNY's assessment program should not be construed as a criticism of standardized testing in general. To the contrary, the Task Force's research consistently found that standardized testing, done properly, is a critical tool for assessing not only student achievement and progress, but also the effectiveness of educational policies and institutions.

### a) Placement and pre-testing

In order to be effective, a placement testing program should sort students into the correct categories. In order to be efficient, it should also yield diagnostic-prescriptive information about

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<sup>326</sup> RAND calculated the costs of initial FSAT administration only. PwC did a more comprehensive analysis of the costs of remediation testing at CUNY, and found that CUNY's annual expenditures total approximately \$1.5 million – which works out to an average of \$46 per new student (freshmen and transfers). (PwC, Report I, 27; CUNY Student Data Book: Fall 1997, Vol. I, 56, 63.)

each student's strengths and weaknesses, which instructors can use to tailor curricula and instruction to student needs. CUNY's placement testing program fails on both counts. Not only do the FSATs lack sophisticated diagnostic-prescriptive capacity, according to CUNY interviewees; the FSATs do not sort students properly either, for at least three reasons. First, RAND found that there is no assurance that CUNY has set FSAT passing scores at appropriate levels; second, RAND found that because the WAT requires students to answer only a single essay question, at least 25% (and probably more) of first-time WAT takers are erroneously categorized (*i.e.*, they fail when they should pass or pass when they should fail); and third, CUNY interviewees stated that the FSATs are inadequate to assess the language abilities of ESL students (we discuss this point in more detail in Section c, below).

(1) Validity and fairness of passing scores

According to RAND, in order for the FSATs to be effective in separating those students who require remediation from those who do not, CUNY would need to determine what the various possible test scores mean in terms of student readiness for college-level work, then set passing scores accordingly. Yet CUNY does not conduct the kind of controlled, systematic research on passing scores that would be necessary to ensure that the FSATs are valid and fair.

(2) Reliability, validity, and fairness of the WAT

For several years, CUNY has been aware that the WAT has reliability problems. CUNY's ongoing WAT Audit program, which assesses the degree of consistency among colleges in scoring the WAT, discovered that the inter-reader disagreement rate in scoring the WAT ranged from 13% to 22% between 1984 and 1993.<sup>327</sup> According to RAND, however, CUNY's audits of inter-reader consistency shed light on only a small part of the WAT's reliability problems. A thorough reliability analysis typically involves examining the degree to which a student's performance is consistent across different questions, not just the consistency with which different readers score the same answer. RAND found that inter-reader consistency is not the major source of the WAT's reliability problems. Rather, the reason that single-question essay tests such as the WAT are problematic is that students are not highly consistent with themselves in their writing ability across questions. "In other words, a student's score is as much or more a function of the student's unique response to the particular question that is asked as it is of the student's overall ability to write."<sup>328</sup>

Although it may be counterintuitive to think that a straightforward-seeming exam could yield results that are little better than the flip of a coin, psychometric studies of essay tests show that, on a single-essay test, a single question does not produce a score that even comes close to the

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<sup>327</sup> The CUNY Writing Assessment Test Audit Results 1984-1993, Oct. 1994, 2.

<sup>328</sup> RAND (Klein & Orlando).

acceptable reliability of .90 on a zero to one scale. Indeed, based on studies of similar single-question essay tests, RAND estimated that the WAT's score reliability is in the range of .25 to .60, and that at least 25% (and probably more) of first-time WAT takers are erroneously categorized – *i.e.*, they fail when they should pass or pass when they should fail.<sup>329</sup> RAND's findings are supported by the observations of CUNY's writing instructors. For example, one Kingsborough writing instructor said that remedial students view passing the WAT as like winning the lottery.<sup>330</sup>

When large-scale, high-stakes assessment falls into the wrong hands, students are mislabeled and unfairly stereotyped by the results. For example, CUNY students who repeatedly fail the WAT are encouraged to register for learning-disabled status or to meet with a psychologist who will “diagnose” the difficulty.<sup>331</sup>

Moreover, CUNY faculty and administrators have developed several theories as to why various minority groups performed poorly on the WAT; these theories vary with the demographics of the college. For example, at Hostos, we were told that Hispanics take longer to make their point, but they get there eventually. (Translation: many students failed to write concisely.) At Queens, we were told that Asians are not taught to argue for a position, and that they do better if they are coached to write their WAT essay as though they were telling a story. (Translation: many students failed to write persuasively.) And at Medgar Evers, we were told that Caribbean students learned a British dialect. (Translation: many students lacked facility with standard written English.)

Another faculty response to the perceived unfairness of the WAT is the urge to give students passing scores even if the test essay is poorly written. For example, Sternglass suggests training WAT readers to “look below the surface” of student responses to identify students who “deserve” to pass because their responses, although poorly expressed, are “thoughtful.”<sup>332</sup> This approach does not get at the root of the WAT's reliability problem, however, and might actually decrease inter-reader consistency and the test's validity as a measure of writing skills.

Finally, CUNY's Office of Academic Affairs has proposed lowering the passing score on the WAT from 8 to 6.<sup>333</sup> Again, this proposal would do nothing to improve the test's reliability.

### (3) Diagnostic-prescriptive capacity of the FSATs

FSAT results are not used systematically to diagnose individual students' particular problems. Remedial instructors know that their students have failed one of the FSATs, and they may even

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<sup>329</sup> RAND (Klein & Orlando).

<sup>330</sup> CAWS Conference – Markson.

<sup>331</sup> CAWS Conference – Markson, audience.

<sup>332</sup> (Sternglass, 144-47.)

<sup>333</sup> See Crain v. Reynolds, Testimony of Louise Mirrer, 819-22, 856-58, 866.

know each student's numerical score. Generally, however, they do not see the actual test papers, nor do they receive an analysis of the test results.<sup>334</sup> Indeed, in the case of the WAT, which is scored "holistically," the readers do not create any record of how they decided to assign a particular score to a student's test. Thus, writing instructors interviewed by the Task Force staff explained that they would have to re-read each test to determine whether a particular student has major problems with grammar and spelling, for example, or whether she failed because her essay was badly organized or unresponsive to the question. Because the FSATs are not used diagnostically, valuable instructional time is lost as remediation instructors spend the first part of the semester trying to become familiar with students' individual needs.<sup>335</sup> Moreover, to the extent that instructors are unable to pinpoint individual students' problems, they cannot know whether they are giving them the instruction they need.

Indeed, widespread dissatisfaction with the FSATs has led remediation instructors throughout the university to develop an elaborate "shadow assessment" network. Their approaches vary considerably from college to college and classroom to classroom. For example, BMCC, Queensborough, and N.Y. City Tech readminister the WAT to every remedial student at the beginning of the semester to verify placement. N.Y. City Tech uses the Degrees of Reading Power exam to determine students' reading levels and measure progress through remediation, and they are experimenting with an off-the-shelf, computer-adaptive math assessment test that has diagnostic-prescriptive capacity. LaGuardia administers an essay test during the second meeting of its remedial writing classes to determine whether students need to go to the writing center, and uses a commercially-available test (the Nelson-Denny) to refine its assessment of all remedial reading students early in the semester. Staten Island goes through a labor-intensive diagnostic process to create homogeneous groupings of remedial students in its summer programs. Moreover, as we discuss later, each college has developed its own ESL placement methods and remediation exit standards.

**b) Progress testing, post-testing, exit from remediation, and certification**

Defenders of postsecondary remediation have recently been heard to argue that there is no consistent standard for what constitutes "college-level" work.<sup>336</sup> Whatever truth there may be in this apology for the *status quo*, it is of little use to the Task Force, whose interest is in recommending reforms that will strengthen CUNY and improve the education that it provides to

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<sup>334</sup> To the extent that they receive diagnostic information based on the RAT, some instructors do not find that information particularly helpful. (York, interview, 7-27-98.)

<sup>335</sup> Additional time is lost during the month-long, centralized WAT-scoring process. Some students reportedly arrive on campus before their FSAT scores are forwarded to the college. These factors further frustrate the colleges' ability to use the FSATs to diagnose students and place them to maximize their chances of success. (N.Y. City Tech., interview, 9-23-98; Queensborough, interview, 7-14-98.) Some interviewees recommended switching to a commercially-available writing test that can be scored much more quickly. (See Section V.B.3, The Task Force's Analysis of Off-the-Shelf Writing Assessment Instruments.)

<sup>336</sup> The Institute for Higher Education Policy ("IHEP"), 1998.

its students. While different institutions may set different standards of what constitutes college readiness, that does not absolve each institution from setting its own standard and adhering to it.

CUNY is no exception. In its published guidelines for university assessment programs, the Commission on Higher Education (“CHE”), CUNY’s accrediting agency, states that institutions should assess student progress through remedial programs

relative to carefully articulated exit proficiencies, the achievement of which certifies that a student is ready for college-level work. It is necessary therefore to establish the congruence between exit proficiencies for developmental courses and entrance criteria for credit classes . . . . The use of standardized test instruments to assess progress also may be appropriate, given the wide range of coordinated placement, diagnostic, and value-added proficiency instruments available at the college level.<sup>337</sup>

CUNY falls far short of these guidelines:

- **Progress testing.** CUNY has not established university-wide an effective and efficient way of measuring student progress through remediation. The colleges use a combination of teacher-developed measures, off-the-shelf standardized tests, and thinly disguised versions of the FSATs to assess student progress.
- **Remediation exit standard.** There is no CUNY-wide standard for when students may exit remedial sequences. As the Trustees’ scrutiny of remediation has increased in recent years, so have the incentives for CUNY instructors and administrators to shorten remedial sequences and move students out of remediation as quickly as possible.<sup>338</sup> Because CUNY has no objective, uniform exit standards, however, there is no assurance that students who have exited remediation are actually prepared to enroll in credit-bearing courses.

There is wide variation in the exit standards that the different colleges have adopted. Table 19, below, shows the official standards used by each college, but in some cases the practice may deviate from these standards. According to Table 19, N.Y. City Tech is the only college that requires all remedial students to pass the FSATs in order to exit remediation. At the opposite extreme, LaGuardia requires only that the student pass a relatively high course in the remedial sequence, Queens College uses a “writing portfolio,” and Hostos uses “multiple measures” to determine when students may exit writing skills courses. The downside of such approaches may be the amount of discretion wielded by individual instructors. To get around this problem, most colleges use some combination of the FSATs

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<sup>337</sup> CHE, 44.

<sup>338</sup> This is consistent with a national tendency, reported by The Institute for Higher Education Policy, for colleges to understate the amount of remediation they perform because they fear that their reputation for academic excellence would be threatened. (IHEP, 1998.) We believe that accurate information is key to good decisionmaking.

and passing the course. Some campuses, such as John Jay, BMCC, and Kingsborough, limit discretion by using departmental exams and standardized reading tests.

- **Post-testing.** CUNY has no university-wide policy on post-testing remedial students. Post-testing is conducted sporadically, on a college-by-college basis. Some colleges use the FSATs as post-tests,<sup>339</sup> but RAND found that CUNY cannot draw any meaningful conclusions about student progress from these post-tests. This is because colleges readminister the FSATs for a variety of reasons, with little or no regulation, throughout the school year, which has led to breaches in test security.<sup>340</sup> For example, due to frequent recycling of the WAT, students familiarize themselves with the 50 or so possible topics, do research on the issues, and try to memorize an essay for each one.<sup>341</sup> CUNY's failure to institute uniform post-testing using valid and secure instruments undermines the Trustees' efforts to (1) ensure that remediation is effective and efficient; (2) maintain academic standards; and (3) facilitate articulation and transfer among the colleges.
- **Standards of college-readiness.** CUNY has not established meaningful, university-wide standards of readiness for credit-bearing classes. The consequences of this problem are discussed further in Section V.C, "Remedial Curricula and Instruction."
- **Certification.** Although the FSATs were originally established to certify student readiness for upper-division study, CUNY faculty oppose their continued use for that purpose because, among other reasons, the FSATs measure "minimal competency" in "sub-college skills" rather than gauging the impact of the freshman and sophomore curriculum.<sup>342</sup> Thus, after years of controversy, the Trustees have voted to require a new certification test for students entering in Fall 1999.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> See Table 19.

<sup>340</sup> (RAND (Klein & Orlando).) In addition, through its College Now, Early Warning, and Bridge to College programs, CUNY administers the FSATs to high school students – which could potentially compromise test security even further. (Staten Island, interview, 7-29-98; Queensborough, interview, 7-14-98; Lehman, interview, 7-23-98.)

<sup>341</sup> CAWS Conference – August, 10-30-98; Bronx, interview, 10-1-98.

<sup>342</sup> CUNY Assessment Review Report, 9.

<sup>343</sup> See Section III.I.3, "Testing Policy," for more on the recent history of CUNY's assessment program.

**Table 19. Remediation Exit Standards, by Subject Area and College**

<b>Senior Colleges</b>	<b>READING</b>	<b>WRITING</b>	<b>MATH</b>
<b>Baruch</b>	(Students who fail the RAT are placed in the writing sequence.)	Pass WAT	Pass course <sup>344</sup>
<b>Brooklyn City</b>	Pass RAT	Pass WAT	Pass course or MAT
<b>Hunter</b>	(Pass RAT) or (pass course & close to passing RAT)	(Pass course, final, and WAT) or (close to passing RAT and WAT)	Pass MAT (students who will be taking further math courses must also pass departmental final)
<b>John Jay</b>	Pass course with departmental final.	Pass course with departmental final.	Pass course with departmental final.
<b>Lehman</b>	Mainstreamed	Mainstreamed	Pass course with C or higher
<b>Medgar Evers</b>	Pass course or RAT	Pass course or WAT	Pass course or MAT
<b>N.Y. City Tech</b>	Pass RAT	Pass WAT	At least 70 average in remedial math and pass MAT
<b>Queens</b>	(Pass RAT) or (pass course with B or higher & close to passing RAT)	Pass writing portfolio or WAT	Pass course
<b>Staten Island</b>	Pass RAT	Pass departmental test or WAT	Pass course or MAT
<b>York</b>	Pass course	Pass course and WAT	Pass course or MAT
<b>Community Colleges</b>	<b>READING</b>	<b>WRITING</b>	<b>MATH</b>
<b>BMCC</b>	Score 12 <sup>th</sup> grade level on national standardized reading test	(Pass WAT) or (complete course and demonstrate writing competency to instructor's satisfaction)	Pass course and pass MAT with score of at least 15 in algebra and score at least 70 on departmental final
<b>Bronx</b>	Pass departmental test (passing score is higher for students who have lower RAT scores)	Pass departmental test modeled on the WAT	Pass course and MAT
<b>Hostos</b>	Pass final	Multiple measures	Pass course or pass MAT with score of at least 14 in algebra
<b>Kingsborough</b>	Pass departmental test or Nelson-Denny	Pass WAT	Pass MAT or departmental exam.
<b>LaGuardia</b>	Pass course	Pass course	Pass course
<b>Queensborough</b>	Pass course and departmental test	Pass course and close to passing WAT	Pass course

Source: ESL and Basic Skills Courses by College.

<sup>344</sup> Throughout this table, “pass course” usually means that the student must pass one of the highest courses in the remedial sequence.

### c) **ESL Testing**

CUNY's assessment program has a disproportionate negative impact on ESL students. Students whose native language is not English are overrepresented in first semester basic skills courses (other than ESL), at 68% of those enrolled.<sup>345</sup> The WAT, in particular, snares ESL students – from the moment it is used to place them in an ESL sequence, to the day that it prevents them from graduating. In fact, it is not uncommon for a CUNY ESL student's principal English learning experience to be preparing for and failing the WAT.<sup>346</sup> In this section, we discuss the FSATs' shortcomings as ESL assessment instruments and the damage the WAT unfairly causes to students' academic progress.

#### (1) CUNY's ESL assessment system

CUNY has no adequate, university-wide system of assessing ESL students. Instead, university policy (until recently) been to use the FSATs for any and all assessment purposes, including ESL screening and placement. But the FSATs cannot assess whether a student's problem areas are in oral comprehension, speaking, reading, or writing – questions that need to be answered in order to know whether a student is ready for college-level courses conducted in English. As a result, ESL students are at risk of being unfairly barred from credit-level courses; allowed into courses that are too demanding; or placed into an ESL class with students who have completely different needs.<sup>347</sup>

In interviews, ESL instructors stated that some of the colleges have adopted shadow assessments in an effort to minimize this problem. John Jay, for example, invites all students whose initial WAT shows “ESL characteristics” to take the ETS Secondary Level English Proficiency (“SLEP”) test; the SLEP measures listening and reading comprehension and is used by many community colleges as an ESL placement tool. Similarly, Lehman has its own multiple-measure ESL placement test. LaGuardia reshuffles ESL students after the first two or three days of classes, once the instructor has “gotten to know” the students.

Unfortunately, however, these and other English-language ESL assessments do not distinguish between students who are well-educated in their native language and those who are not. At CUNY, that type of screening – if it is done at all – is accomplished informally, through classroom observation of students who have already been placed in an ESL sequence.<sup>348</sup> CLIP

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<sup>345</sup> Basic Skills & ESL Overview, Table 5a.

<sup>346</sup> This can be very stressful for students, many of whom fail the test numerous times. Not only are they subjected, over and over, to the burden of preparing for the exam, the stress of sitting for it, and the frustration of failure; faculty members report that ESL students have a tendency to become preoccupied with the WAT, which can overshadow their entire college experience. (Lehman, interview, 7-23-98; Bronx, interview, 10-1-98; CAWS Conference – Markson, Garretson; Sternglass, 14-17.)

<sup>347</sup> Bronx, interview, 10-1-98; Otheguy.

<sup>348</sup> John Jay, interview, 7-22-98; Otheguy.

is the only CUNY program that systematically uses native-language testing to assess ESL students' literacy, but even CLIP limits its native-language testing to Spanish.<sup>349</sup> CUNY's lack of sophistication in native-language testing is particularly problematic in view of the Trustees' desire to exempt ESL students who are not "otherwise remedial" from their efforts to limit remediation at the bachelor's level.<sup>350</sup>

(2) The WAT and the academic progress of ESL students

CUNY's use of the WAT as a graduation, certification, and remedial exit requirement (at some colleges) unfairly impedes the progress of ESL students. The story of one former student illustrates how this can happen:

"N" failed the WAT three times – or was it four? The first time he failed it, he was a new student, sure of himself and proud of his past academic successes. He had graduated from high school overseas, in the top half of one percent of the country's 12,000 graduating seniors. Based on his RAT and WAT scores, he was required to enroll in ESL every semester until he could pass the WAT; only then would he be allowed to enroll in the required two-semester English composition and technical writing sequence.

In ESL, N noticed that his grasp of English grammar was a lot stronger than that of his classmates; he mostly needed to build his vocabulary. Meanwhile, he signed up for a heavy course load – 16 or 17 credits per semester, plus 8 credits each summer. Although his liberal arts courses had essay exams and his engineering labs had to be written up, his limited English proficiency didn't seem to be a problem at all. He earned As and Bs, making it onto the Dean's List each semester and winning invitations into all the honor societies.

Yet at the end of each semester, N would re-take the WAT, and each time he would fail. One reason he had so much trouble with the test, he thinks, is that it required him to write a persuasive essay on a topic about which he knew nothing. A budding scientist, he felt the need to support his opinions with data, and he had no data. So N was forced to keep taking ESL – he even had to repeat the same ESL course twice – because he could not pass the WAT. In effect, he was being told that he was not equipped for college-level work, but he knew that wasn't true. It seemed to him that the WAT was meaningless exam, ill-designed to certify college-readiness.

Failing the WAT again and again was disappointing, but at least he was earning credits quickly and making the Dean's List. Then something happened that N still resents to this day: because he had not yet passed the WAT, he was placed on academic probation. For the next two semesters, he was ineligible for the honor societies and he was not allowed to be on the Dean's List – a degrading experience for someone so accustomed to academic success.

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<sup>349</sup> Bronx, interview, 10-1-98.

<sup>350</sup> Trustees Resolution, 5-26-98.

The last time he took the WAT, N was lucky – the topic was one they had studied in his ESL class, so he had enough facts at his disposal to weave together an essay. He had escaped. Everything else fell into place. The rest of college, he says, was smooth sailing. English Composition was a breeze. Sure, he didn't get to take technical writing until his last semester – too late for it to be of use in his engineering courses, but who cared?

N was not alone. He says he knows a lot of people who took so long to pass the WAT that they were unable to fulfill the college's remaining writing requirements by the end of their last semester, and so they never graduated – yet they went on to graduate school, or began wonderful professional careers.

N did graduate, however. A master's degree and a Ph.D. later, N is a successful academic, chairperson of his department, at the top of his game. He can only imagine that someone with less confidence might have been stopped in his tracks by the hostility of the WAT requirement, and he can only hope that future students will not have to go through what he did.

### 3. The Task Force's Analysis of Off-the-Shelf Writing Assessment Instruments

Unlike CUNY, many state colleges and universities – in Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Minnesota, Texas, Wyoming, and elsewhere – use off-the-shelf tests to pre- and post-test remedial writing students. CUNY's own accrediting agency has pointed out that there is a “wide range of coordinated placement, diagnostic, and value-added proficiency instruments available” to assess remedial students.<sup>351</sup> The Task Force staff researched whether the WAT could be replaced with an off-the-shelf test for purposes of placing and post-testing CUNY remedial writing students. We researched more than a half dozen tests published by several different companies,<sup>352</sup> and found that the best tests:

- are valid tools for assessing college remedial writing students;
- have multiple questions, to ensure reliability;
- can be used as both pre- and post-tests – so they can quantify remedial students' skills gains;
- are widely used – so national norming information is available;
- are computer-adaptive – which enhances test security, creates an instant student database, and enables instant results;
- have diagnostic capacity, to assist academic advisors and writing instructors in determining a student's strengths and weaknesses in specific skills;

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<sup>351</sup> CHE, 44.

<sup>352</sup> *E.g.*, the College Board's *Accuplacer* and ACT's *Compass*.

- cost just \$1 to \$12 per administration, per student, depending on volume and the desired level of sophistication;
- have companion math, reading, and ESL assessment tests;
- include assistance in designing a comprehensive assessment program and setting valid cutoff scores; and
- can be used by colleges as “early warning” tests for students at feeder high schools.

#### 4. Conclusions

CUNY’s assessment program suffers from serious problems. The FSATs are expensive to administer – averaging \$46 per student<sup>353</sup> – and are of questionable quality.<sup>354</sup> They also lack diagnostic-prescriptive capacity, which has necessitated the widespread use of “shadow assessments.” Moreover, there is no CUNY-wide mechanism for measuring student progress through remediation; no CUNY-wide standard for when students may exit remedial sequences; no university policy on post-testing remedial students; and no meaningful CUNY-wide standards of readiness for credit-bearing classes. In other words, despite more than 25 years in the mass remediation business, CUNY is failing at the first step in the remediation process – and at a cost of millions of wasted dollars each year.

CUNY faculty and administrators have long been aware that CUNY’s assessment system is flawed, yet have failed to overhaul testing policies to conform to modern scientific standards. In 1990, a report commissioned by CUNY’s Office of Academic Affairs called for CUNY to replace the FSATs with a set of diagnostic and placement tests whose validity has been proven, and to make explicit provisions for testing ESL students.<sup>355</sup> These changes have yet to be implemented.<sup>356</sup>

Over the years, CUNY’s faculty and administrators have designed and implemented CUNY’s assessment program with little evident input from independent testing professionals. While faculty and administrators have important roles to play, their track record suggests that they lack the expertise and independence to handle the technical side of assessment design. For example, in 1996 the university conducted what was ostensibly a comprehensive review of its assessment program, but the resulting report ignores the program’s fundamental reliability and validity problems – presumably because most college faculty are not trained in such matters. Instead, their recommendations focus on things like the need for faculty control of the assessment process, particularly the assessment of student progress through remediation.<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> PwC, Report I, 27 (total cost); CUNY Student Data Book: Fall 1997, Vol. I, 56, 63 (number of freshmen and outside transfers).

<sup>354</sup> See RAND (Klein & Orlando); PwC, Report I, 27 (finding that CUNY spends about \$1.5 million per year on remediation testing).

<sup>355</sup> Otheguy.

<sup>356</sup> See Section III.I.3, “Testing Policy,” for more on the recent history of CUNY’s assessment program.

<sup>357</sup> CUNY, Assessment Review Report, 1996.

This focus is revealing. High-level CUNY officials believe that faculty self-interest is an inertial force behind the university's assessment policies. Officials pointed out that certain faculty members have a vested interest in maintaining their grip on the assessment process because they earn money and released time for test development and scoring – based on the time they spend, rather than the results they achieve. There is also a widespread fear that the use of standardized test scores to make admissions decisions or to hold faculty accountable for student learning would “shrink the university.”

Faculty self-interest, lack of testing expertise, and a pervasive (yet factually baseless) feeling that standardized tests are biased against minority students have all conspired to prevent CUNY from overhauling its testing program to conform to modern scientific standards. The Task Force's analysis shows that off-the-shelf tests would offer proven validity, reliability, and fairness; tight security; faster scoring turnaround; and diagnostic and post-testing capability – all at a lower cost.

### *C. Remedial curricula and instruction*

In this section, we describe the goal of remediation at CUNY and CUNY's remedial curricula and instructional methods. We then describe CUNY's remedial writing program in more detail.

#### 1. The Goals of Remediation at CUNY

In CUNY's volatile policy environment, defining the goal of remediation is a politically loaded undertaking. The administrators and remediation instructors with whom we spoke generally agreed that CUNY's remedial programs are designed not just to prepare students to pass the FSATs, but to prepare them more broadly for the challenges they will face in their college-level courses.<sup>358</sup> But what exactly does this translate to in practice?

Remediation can pursue one of two major goals, the competing merits of which are the subject of an ongoing debate among remediation experts.<sup>359</sup> Is the goal of remediation to help students build a solid foundation in basic skills before they move into college courses? Or is it to “jump-start” underprepared students so they can move as quickly as possible into college-level instruction?

The CUNY remediation instructors with whom we spoke tend to belong to the latter camp: they are jump-starters. University policy and New York State's financial aid policies both

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<sup>358</sup> CUNY, Responses, 15.

<sup>359</sup> See Koski & Levin, 1998.

encourage this practice. Each fall, a new crop of underprepared students enters CUNY, and the mandate of remediation instructors at the senior colleges is to move those students through remediation and out the other end in one or two semesters.<sup>360</sup> Policymakers have been silent with respect to what skills a student must master in that time, however. As we discussed earlier, CUNY has not set any meaningful standards of college readiness.<sup>361</sup>

CUNY's preference for jump-starting is apparent in its institutional research practices. In the accompanying report, *Beyond Graduation Rates*, we show that CUNY does not collect valid, reliable, pre- and post-test data to determine whether remedial students are mastering basic skills, nor does CUNY conduct follow-up interviews with college-level instructors to determine whether remediation is effectively supporting the university's college-level programs, even though these should arguably be key goals of remediation that is provided in the context of a college degree program. By contrast, CUNY has collected extensive data on students' rates of progress through remedial programs and accumulation of degree credits – measures that indicate whether students have been jump-started.

The notion of jump-starting (a.k.a. accelerating) can be very attractive to remedial instructors. But for each of its features, there is a countervailing drawback:

- To the extent that jump-starting involves integrating college-level content into remedial curricula, it gives remedial instructors the sense that they are not merely basic skills instructors; they are college faculty members. Yet this approach requires instructors to skip over foundational competencies in favor of cookbook strategies that students can apply immediately in their college-level courses, to compensate for their lack of solid skills. Rather than systematically constructing the skills that they will need in college, jump-starting formalizes gaps in students' knowledge.
- Similarly, by moving students more quickly into college-level instruction, jump-starting gives instructors the feeling that they are moving students more quickly towards what they assume is students' ultimate goal: a college degree. In the first place, this ignores the fact that the mastery of basic skills is a goal in itself for many students. Moreover, what happens to students who are accelerated or mainstreamed into college-level courses, yet still have skills

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<sup>360</sup> (Trustees' Resolution, 6-26-95.) This focus on moving students quickly through remediation is relatively new at CUNY. In Spring 1992, a committee of CUNY faculty and administrators recommended that the colleges "expand programmatic options that bring basic skills students more quickly into credit bearing and mainstream programs" (*Report of the Chancellor's Advisory Committee on the Freshman Year*, ii, 12-13), but CUNY had no time limit on remediation until 1996. Prior to 1996, the only time limits were those imposed by the financial aid regulations. (See Section III.I.2, "Admissions Standards and Limits on Remediation," and Section V.A.2, "Financial Aid.")

<sup>361</sup> In some sense, CUNY deems all students college-ready as soon as they enroll in the fall of their freshman year: for financial aid reasons that we discuss in Section V.A.2, almost all CUNY remedial students are concurrently enrolled in college-level coursework during their first full semester in college – regardless of the depth or extent of their remedial need. (See Cilo & Cooper, *Bridging the Gap Between School and College*; RAND (Klein & Orlando).) In light of this policy, any effort to set remedial exit standards without also banning concurrent enrollment in college-level courses would lack teeth.

deficiencies? The last thing that regular college faculty members are interested in doing is taking away time from their syllabus to teach basic skills.<sup>362</sup> So the accelerated students either struggle to keep up, or they drag down the level of their college courses – in terms of both curriculum and grading. This, in turn, has an adverse effect on well-prepared students and leads to frustration among the regular faculty.<sup>363</sup>

- Finally, because there is some evidence that jump-starting boosts credit accumulation and short-term persistence rates, it can give remedial instructors the security of believing that they are improving students' life chances.<sup>364</sup> Yet studies suggest that the demands of college too often overwhelm students who lack necessary basic skills, leading to high drop-out rates (and correspondingly low graduation rates). Remedial reading students and students who require remediation in two or more subjects are particularly at risk.<sup>365</sup>

Some of CUNY's remediation instructors recognize the flaws in the "jump-starting" model and have instituted approaches that more closely resemble mastery learning. For example, Trudy Katzer, a CUNY writing instructor, believes that CUNY remedial writing students suffer because they are taught essay organization before they have mastered grammar and syntax. She says that the "simplistic" essay organization strategies that are taught in most CUNY remedial writing classes are, at this point in a student's development, constraining and stultifying rather than useful. What compensatory writing students really need, according to Katzer, is proficiency in grammar and syntax, which she calls "the all-important tools." Her evidence? "Students constantly say to me, 'Why didn't anyone ever *teach* this stuff to me? They let me write and fail and write and fail and never explained what I was doing wrong and how to fix it.'"<sup>366</sup>

York's remedial math curriculum is another good example of the rejection of the jump-starting model in favor of a mastery-based model. Each of York's remedial math courses is designed as a "building block to the next level." York's remedial math instructors contrast their approach with New York State's high school sequential math curriculum, which, they say, leaves gaps in students' knowledge. Rather than requiring students to master skills one at a time by starting with Pre-Algebra, then moving on to Algebra, Geometry, Trigonometry, Pre-Calculus, and so on, New York State's curriculum "spirals" through a variety of topics each semester, in such a way that students can get by without ever truly mastering fundamental skills.<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> (CAWS Conference, 10-30-98.) What if the student leaves CUNY and enters the full-time workforce, still lacking basic skills? If CUNY's regular faculty have mounted a silent protest by refusing to provide remediation, New York City's employers have voted with their feet: many have relocated rather than depend on workers who lack basic verbal, math, analytic, and cognitive skills. (Mac Donald, 1997.)

<sup>363</sup> Lehman, interview, 7-23-98; CAWS Conference, 10-30-98.

<sup>364</sup> Lehman, interview, 7-23-98.

<sup>365</sup> McMillan et al., 1997, 27-28; Adelman, 1996 & 1998.

<sup>366</sup> Katzer, 2 (emphasis in original); CAWS Conference, 10-30-98.

<sup>367</sup> York, interview, 7-27-98; Lehman, interview, 7-23-98.

The most striking example of the systematic application of mastery learning principles to remediation of CUNY degree students was at Queensborough's Department of Basic Skills, which publishes lists of specific competencies that remedial students must master at each level in their reading, writing, and ESL sequences. Along with the competency lists, written guidelines admonish instructors:

Students may be ready for [the next course in the sequence] if they are still having trouble with only one particular type of error. It is assumed that this error can be overcome in [the next course]. However, students who still have a broad range of errors in their writing are not ready [to move to the next level]. Students should not receive a passing grade in [this remedial writing or ESL course] merely because they have completed all the work and have made a strong effort. To pass the course, they must meet these performance standards.<sup>368</sup>

## 2. Remedial Curricula and Instruction

### a) **Quality and accountability**

CUNY's remediation instructors, like its regular faculty, "own" the curriculum. In other words, each remediation instructor has the "academic freedom" to design her own syllabus, choose her own textbooks,<sup>369</sup> develop her own lesson plans, and write her own tests. Because, however, there is no uniform remedial exit standard, CUNY cannot hold remediation instructors accountable for students' progress – or lack thereof. Moreover, CUNY collects no information on which remedial approaches work best for various student populations – leaving students vulnerable to a poor fit between their needs and the instructor's approach.

Based on our interviews with instructors and the classes and writing conference we attended, it seems that CUNY's writing instructors, in particular, develop their own "trademark" curricula, and that this can cause a mismatch between students' remedial needs and what the instructor chooses to emphasize. For example, some instructors have surrendered to the WAT, while others struggle to escape it. (See subsection 3, below.) Some emphasize essay organization, while others focus mainly on grammar. The following case illustrates this problem:

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<sup>368</sup> (B.E. Performance Standards.) We note that assessment instruments with diagnostic capacity would be important tools for enabling instructors to implement these guidelines.

<sup>369</sup> Many faculty members have written their own basic skills and ESL textbooks. For example, at one college we sat in on an ESL writing class taught by an adjunct professor who was collecting examples of student errors for use in her forthcoming grammar workbook. (Responses to 7-29-98 requests, 3; Queensborough, interview, 7-14-98.) There is nothing inherently wrong with this, of course. Faculty members should be encouraged to refine and share their techniques, and their effectiveness should be rewarded in the marketplace. Given that CUNY has no meaningful remedial exit standards and faculty are not held accountable for student outcomes, however, the fact that textbook authors have a financial stake in curriculum design is potentially dangerous. The danger is that authors will push their texts, regardless of their effectiveness, if doing so will enhance their reputations and their sales figures.

“L” teaches writing to students for whom standard English does not come naturally. Of course, L requires his students at Lehman to write some college-style essays in standard English. But since he believes that higher education should not seek to transform working-class students or separate them from their working-class origins, he alternates the standard English assignments with assignments that require students to write personal narratives in whatever dialect they speak at home.

After describing his teaching methods to a group of colleagues at a recent writing conference, L admitted that a student had once complained to him that she did not like doing the assignments in non-standard dialect, because she had come to college to learn standard English.

“I guess the students see standard English as the cash language,” L mused. The audience had an almost visceral reaction to his words. “It *is* the cash language.” someone cried out. Well, not according to L, who is apparently something of an amateur economist. “The fact that they don’t use standard English is not the barrier between them and the cash,” he retorted. “Unemployment is structural.”<sup>370</sup>

This real-life example illustrates how CUNY remedial instructors’ pet methods – and even their political beliefs – can dictate remedial curricula, without regard to students’ needs.

Of course, interviewees have argued that CUNY’s remedial instructors are the top experts in their field, and that their innovative teaching methods reflect the state of the art.<sup>371</sup> Yet there is no agreed-upon remedial exit standard, and CUNY does not collect data on the comparative effectiveness of various approaches for different types of students, so how can we say which approaches “work” best? Others have argued that students’ options are enriched by a variety of course offerings and approaches.<sup>372</sup> But CUNY does not provide students with information on comparative effectiveness so that they can choose intelligently among the available options. Students are assigned to an instructor on the basis of convenience, word of mouth, and luck.

At least one CUNY college has recognized the need for quality control in its remedial courses. Citing the large scale on which remediation is conducted and the difficulty of communicating standards to a largely adjunct (part-time) teaching force, the Chair of Queensborough’s Department of Basic Skills explained that Queensborough has implemented several measures designed to hold remediation instructors accountable and ensure that students’ needs are met:

- **Assessment.** Remedial reading students are pre- and post-tested on a departmental criterion-referenced test. Test results are used to determine whether students are ready to progress to the next level and to evaluate the effectiveness of instruction.

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<sup>370</sup> (CAWS Conference, 10-30-98.) In a similar vein, one CUNY faculty member pointed out that, based on her research, literacy is merely a “blip on the face of history.”

<sup>371</sup> CUNY, Responses, July 1998; LaGuardia, interview, 9-24-98; Queens, interview, 7-21-98; Hunter, interview, 7-22-98.

<sup>372</sup> Staten Island, interview, 7-29-98.

- **Book Lists.** The Department publishes a list of books approved for use in remedial classrooms.
- **Performance Standards.** The Department has established written performance standards for each remedial reading, writing, and ESL course. The standards detail the skills that students should have mastered by the end of the course. For example, the reading standards (for both ESL and non-ESL) cover vocabulary, comprehension, study skills, listening, writing skills, test-taking, and speaking, while the writing standards (ESL and non-ESL) cover rhetoric, style, grammar and mechanics, and formatting.
- **Instructor Guidelines.** Accompanying the departmental performance standards is a set of written guidelines for applying the standards, tailoring instruction to students' needs, assigning written work, grading, attendance and lateness, classroom conduct, and passing students to the next level.<sup>373</sup>

Some of the other colleges, likewise recognizing the issues raised by reliance on a largely part-time teaching force, have taken some small steps in the direction of standardization. The adjuncts who teach remedial courses at Hunter are trained by the full-time faculty, and interviewees described the exams given in Hunter's remedial math courses as "teacher-proof."<sup>374</sup> John Jay requires instructors to submit their syllabi for departmental review, and they require remedial students to pass a departmental final exam in order to move from one course to the next. But there are limits to John Jay's efforts: they say that "issues of faculty autonomy" complicate the use of student test scores to evaluate remedial adjuncts.<sup>375</sup>

If CUNY is truly committed to providing high-quality remediation services to its students, "faculty autonomy" and the "academic freedom" of remediation instructors must take a back seat to accountability.

#### b) Meeting individual students' needs

CUNY's remedial instructors frequently assign the same material to all students in a class. Yet CUNY remedial students, like the student body in general, are unusually heterogeneous and their skill levels vary widely.<sup>376</sup> As a result, some students may be over-remediated, while others will be under-remediated.

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<sup>373</sup> Queensborough, interview, 7-14-98; B.E. Performance Standards.

<sup>374</sup> Hunter, interview, 7-22-98.

<sup>375</sup> John Jay, interview, 7-22-98.

<sup>376</sup> See Section IV.A.4, "Diversity."

Interviewees cited the need for improved diagnostic assessment tools to enable them to understand their students and construct program to suit students' individual needs, without presupposing what method of instruction to use.<sup>377</sup> They also cited limited access to computer technology as an important challenge in the delivery of remedial instruction.<sup>378</sup>

In October 1997, a task force appointed to research and review university practices with respect to educational technology found that:

- “[T]he distribution of technology, both within and across colleges, is dramatically uneven.” Student and faculty access to computer workstations, electronic classrooms, e-mail, the Internet, and computer training opportunities all vary “tremendously.”
- Much of the technology that is available is based on “antiquated” equipment.
- The oldest technologies, such as film and video, are the most widely used (“and, indeed, are not all that widely used”); newer technologies appear only in scattered locations.
- The use of technology in classroom instruction, whether in the form of faculty-developed courseware or electronic presentation materials, “is still mostly experimental, and is touching few students’ lives.”<sup>379</sup>

The technology task force cited inadequate and unpredictable funding as a major problem, but they also found that, “for too long we have marginalized instructional technology decisions by treating them as piecemeal departmental and program issues.”<sup>380</sup> The task force called for a “systemic view” and advocated the publication of individual colleges’ “best practices” throughout the university. In particular, they recommended rethinking and reshaping remediation and ESL approaches, using “network-based instructional support strategies that allow students to access tutorial assistance ‘any time, anywhere.’”<sup>381</sup>

Instead of embracing these recommendations, however, the faculty has obstructed them. In June 1997, the faculty union imposed a moratorium on the use of educational technology at CUNY,<sup>382</sup> effectively halting university-wide initiatives and policymaking in the area of educational technology. As a result, there is little information-sharing among campuses

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<sup>377</sup> N.Y. City Tech., interview, 9-23-98. See Section 3, “Diagnostic-prescriptive capacity of the FSATs,” for a fuller discussion of this problem.

<sup>378</sup> Conference on Replacing Remediation in Higher Education, Jan. 1998, “Bronx Community College of the City University of New York: Team Description,” 5.

<sup>379</sup> City University of New York, University Library and Educational Technology Task Force, 10-1-97, Final Report, 10-11.

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>382</sup> (“D.A. [Delegate Assembly] may lift moratorium on educational technology,” Feb. 1999, Clarion.) Officially, faculty are concerned about intellectual property rights, workload, compensation, and the respective roles of campus governance groups and curriculum committees, *id.*, but interviewees said that people are really afraid of being replaced by computers.

regarding promising and effective technologies, and each campus is forced to reinvent the wheel.<sup>383</sup> Each campus acts independently to procure (or develop) instructional software and to design computer-assisted instruction modules. This reinforces our finding that whether a CUNY student has access to the remedial instruction she needs is left largely to chance.

Through campus visits and interviews, we were able to gather some information about individual colleges' use of computer technology to tailor remedial instruction and supplement classroom hours:

- **Baruch's** "Electronic Campus" enables students to hold class discussions and submit essays on line. Baruch's ESL director has developed software that allows teachers to mark student essays on line. The teacher can mark the electronic text to indicate which type of error a student has made – such as spelling, verb tense, or whatever. When the teacher is finished marking, the computer can analyze the essay, or a group of essays, to show how many errors of each type were made. Preliminary analysis indicates that, among Baruch's ESL students, many types of errors are relatively rare, while other types occur quite frequently. If this technology is used more widely, it will enable ESL teachers to focus their efforts on the kinds of errors that students make most often, rather than teaching all aspects of English grammar.<sup>384</sup>
- The CLIP site at **Bronx Community College** provides computer-based ESL instruction. The CLIP program's capacity is determined by the number of available computer terminals.
- **City College** credits its use of computer-assisted instruction labs with its ability to get students through reading and writing remediation in one semester, and is considering using computer-assisted instruction in its lower level math courses.
- **City College, Queens**, and **Hunter** each have writing center websites.
- **LaGuardia** conducts remedial math courses in the computer lab. The lab is equipped with LaGuardia's in-house review software, which allows students to work through problems or take practice tests.
- **Medgar Evers** has experimented with computer-assisted instruction for many years. They find that it works best for grammar and math.
- **N.Y. City Tech** uses computerized instruction in its Learning Center workshops to help students with specific basic skills and ESL problems.

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<sup>383</sup> Baruch, interview, 2-10-99; N.Y. City Tech., interview, 9-23-98.

<sup>384</sup> Dalgish, memo to Task Force Staff, 2-11-99

- **The College of Staten Island** is increasing its use of computerized diagnostics and instruction for remedial math students. Two to three hours per week of classroom lecture is supplemented with one to two hours per week in the computer lab. In the lab, students work with a commercially-available interactive math software program, which:
  - ⇒ randomly generates additional problems of the type that the student is having trouble with;
  - ⇒ requires students to input the answer rather than giving multiple choice; and
  - ⇒ lets students know immediately whether they have answered correctly.

### 3. CUNY's Remedial Writing Program

The WAT requires students to write a 50-minute impromptu essay, agreeing or disagreeing with a 50-word editorial on a pop-social issue, such as “women in the military” or “vigilante justice,” and using examples from their own experience to support their position. This is in stark contrast to typical college writing assignments such as term papers, lab reports, and essay exams, which call on students to analyze academic issues, describe scientific experiments, or criticize literary texts – not to discuss their personal experiences and off-the-cuff opinions. Not surprisingly, CUNY’s remedial writing instructors believe that teaching students to pass the WAT is “too narrow and limiting a goal.”<sup>385</sup>

During the 20 years of its existence, the WAT has evolved from a certification test designed to be passed midway through a student’s college career, to an admissions test for CUNY’s senior colleges.<sup>386</sup> Under current CUNY policy, students who have not passed the WAT cannot graduate from an associate degree program, transfer to a bachelor’s degree program, proceed beyond the 60<sup>th</sup> credit of study, or – at some colleges – receive credit for freshman composition, enroll in higher-level composition courses, enroll in academic courses, or exit remediation.<sup>387</sup>

Interviewees believe that, because of this increasing emphasis on passing the WAT, remediation instructors and students devote inordinate time and effort to trying to overcome this hurdle. At the same time, they believe, the WAT’s unaccountable emphasis on personal narrative relentlessly drives CUNY’s remedial writing curricula in an unproductive direction. As a result, there is – quite literally – a constant struggle between the forces of WAT-prep and the forces dedicated to developing college writing skills.

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<sup>385</sup> Trudy Katzer, unpublished paper presented at CAWS Conference, 10-30-98, “The 10 Day Immerse Program,” 1.

<sup>386</sup> Trustees’ resolutions 4-5-76; 9-29-97.

<sup>387</sup> It is also used as a gauge of the effectiveness of remedial faculty (CAWS Conference – Parisi) and as a budgeting indicator (Otheguy).

CUNY composition teachers say that they have been trying “desperately” for years to keep remedial courses focused on language and literacy development. Some colleges have adopted the following strategy: as a matter of policy, they do not use the FSATs as the final exam in their remedial courses, because if they did, students would focus exclusively on the test rather than on the other elements of the course.<sup>388</sup> Despite their best efforts, however, the WAT regularly interrupts students’ writing experience.<sup>389</sup> Students exert strong pressure on instructors to reduce the curriculum to WAT prep: they relentlessly steer the class toward their immediate goal and challenge their writing teachers to explain how the assigned classwork will help them pass the WAT.<sup>390</sup>

Not only does the WAT drive the remedial writing curriculum; it also influences ESL classes by diverting the attention of both teachers and students away from the basic activities of academic literacy in English.<sup>391</sup> Instead of addressing students’ individual English language weaknesses or practicing college-level reading and writing assignments, some classes degenerate into sheer WAT-prep. One interviewee told of an ESL class in which the students each researched an actual WAT topic and gave a presentation to the class. This exercise was designed to provide factual fodder for an essay, should the students be lucky enough to encounter one of these topics the next time they took the WAT.<sup>392</sup>

A WAT-prep curriculum would not be so bad, of course, if the WAT were a different kind of test.<sup>393</sup> The CUNY writing instructors’ criticisms of the WAT can also be read as a wish-list for the characteristics of a replacement exit exam.<sup>394</sup>

- **Criticism:** Teaching students to master the WAT does little to further their college education. **Wish:** A replacement exam should facilitate college learning.<sup>395</sup>

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<sup>388</sup> CAWS Conference – Kingsborough (WAT); interview, York (MAT), 10-30-98.

<sup>389</sup> CAWS Conference – Parisi.

<sup>390</sup> CAWS Conference – Parisi; Lehman, interview, 7-23-98.

<sup>391</sup> Lehman, interview, 7-23-98.

<sup>392</sup> Bronx, interview, 10-1-98.

<sup>393</sup> Ironically, many interviewees said that remediation should not be privatized because private education companies teach to tests rather than preparing students for college. (Queensborough, interview, 7-14-98; York, interview, 7-27-98.) At one college, we were told that the faculty are scared by the prospect that remediation will be privatized and college readiness will be defined by passing the WAT. (LaGuardia, interview, 9-24-98.)

<sup>394</sup> Indeed, many of the items on the “wish list” are characteristics of a new 60<sup>th</sup>-credit certification exam that is currently being piloted. As RAND discovered, however, for all its supposed improvements, the pilot exam is also a single-essay test, and thus appears to suffer from the same reliability concerns that plague the WAT. (RAND (Klein & Orlando).) Ironically, some interviewees resist the notion of replacing CUNY’s home-grown tests with off-the-shelf instruments because they believe that such instruments test test-taking ability or lower-order thinking rather than college-level writing skills. Yet those criticisms apply more accurately to the WAT than they would to an off-the-shelf college writing test of proven validity. (It is almost axiomatic that a valid post-test would support the curriculum, since a test is only “valid” if it accomplishes the specific purpose for which it is being used.) See Section V.B.3, above, for a discussion of the inertial forces that have – for as long as anyone can remember – prevented CUNY from getting rid of the WAT.

<sup>395</sup> (CAWS Conference – Fisher.) The Hostos writing faculty say that the exam they developed to replace the WAT was intended to meet this criterion. (Ibid.) Given the Hostos test’s striking similarity to the WAT, however, this claim is suspect.

- **Criticism:** The teaching of writing has changed since the 1970s, when the WAT was developed; writing teachers now have students work with readings. **Wish:** A replacement exam should require students to write about college-level reading selections – challenging in concepts, structure, and vocabulary, but not requiring specialized knowledge.<sup>396</sup>
- **Criticism:** The WAT asks students to perform an unrealistic task. **Wish:** A replacement exam should replicate “actual process writing tasks” such as editing and producing multiple drafts.<sup>397</sup>
- **Criticism:** The WAT requires students to come up with an off-the-cuff opinion on a topic about which they may have no background knowledge. **Wish:** A replacement exam should measure useful analytical and critical skills.<sup>398</sup>
- **Criticism:** The WAT indirectly discourages regular faculty from giving writing assignments, in two ways. First, because the WAT is an invalid measure of college writing skills, it allows large numbers of poor writers into college-level courses. As a result, regular faculty find it unbearable to grade students’ written work. Second, although WAT statistics reflect on each college’s academic reputation, writing instructors are held uniquely accountable for WAT pass rates.<sup>399</sup> Because of the WAT’s non-academic nature, regular faculty are not held accountable for improving students’ writing skills. **Wish:** A replacement exam should encourage “writing across the curriculum.”<sup>400</sup>

Not surprisingly, because of the high stakes that are attached to it, the need to pass the WAT distracts students from their remedial and other work. One CUNY writing instructor has vividly described the almost obsessive hold that the WAT has over writing students:

Once [our students] enter a cycle of encounters with the exam, each failure making the passage to a degree less certain, the more ominous the face of that exam appears . . . . [S]till the WAT intrudes, repeatedly – generally at the endterm, but also in its sharper, more sudden forms throughout the semester – in students’ memories and associations with writing, in their anxieties about the future, and in their fears that “I won’t have time to do all this drafting, conferencing and revision when I have to take the CUNY WAT.” The specter of WAT failure inhabits students’ learning, their confidence, their trust in us, their English teachers.<sup>401</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> Lehman, interview, 7-23-98; Bonne August & Donna Morgan, memo to Vice Chancellor Louise Mirrer, 7-20-98.

<sup>397</sup> Sternglass; CAWS Conference.

<sup>398</sup> CAWS Conference – Italia.

<sup>399</sup> The remedial writing faculty perceive that they are in a catch-22: at the same time that the students expect the writing faculty to prepare them to pass the WAT, the regular faculty blame the writing faculty for their failure to prepare students for college writing. (CAWS Conference – Parisi.)

<sup>400</sup> Hostos, interview, 7-15-98; CAWS Conference – Parisi, August; interviews/testimony.

<sup>401</sup> Parisi, emphasis in original.

Thus, although they recognize that the WAT is deeply flawed, many remedial writing instructors paradoxically believe that their primary goal must be to help students pass the WAT.<sup>402</sup> Indeed, given the importance of passing the WAT to students' educational progress, teachers at a recent CUNY writing conference wondered aloud about the ethics of teaching students to write about a text, or to edit and re-draft their work over time, when such lessons could actually set students up to fail the WAT.<sup>403</sup> In CUNY's perverse policy environment, many teachers feel they have no choice but to conclude that teaching to the WAT is more important than giving students the kinds of skills they will need in college-level courses and in the outside world.

#### 4. Conclusions

CUNY's failure to set meaningful standards of college readiness has negatively impacted remedial curricula and instruction. Instead of defining the goals of remediation in terms of the regular faculty's standards for incoming students, then helping remediation instructors implement the most effective and efficient means of meeting those goals, CUNY colleges too often allow the remediation instructors themselves to define the goals of their own remedial classes. Furthermore, since CUNY has neither clear, uniform standards of college readiness, nor any reliable and valid system of pre- and post-testing remedial students, it cannot hold remediation instructors accountable for students' progress – or lack thereof. As a result, whether a given student gets the remediation she needs is left largely to chance.

The absence of meaningful standards and accountability has allowed four dangerous trends to develop in CUNY's remedial curriculum and instruction, each of which reduces the effectiveness and efficiency of remediation at CUNY:

1. When remedial instructors are faced with a choice between building students' skills systematically and incrementally, on the one hand, versus **jump-starting** them with shortcut strategies for surviving in college-level courses, on the other, CUNY policies (together with financial aid eligibility rules) push them towards the latter goal.
2. CUNY allows **unregulated variation** in the methods remedial teachers use to reach their goals, yet collects no information on which approaches work best for various student populations – leaving students vulnerable to a poor fit between their needs and the instructor's approach.
3. For the most part, CUNY subjects remedial students to a **one-size-fits-all** style of instruction.

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<sup>402</sup> CAWS Conference.

<sup>403</sup> CAWS Conference – audience.

4. Pressure from students desperate to pass the WAT forces remedial writing and ESL instructors to focus on **WAT-prep** rather than the development of college writing skills.