THE CONDITION OF LATINOS
IN THE
CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

A report to the
Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs
and to the
Puerto Rican Council on Higher Education

by
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ABBREVIATIONS

CUNY = City University of New York
ESL = English as a second language
EPL = English as a primary language
PSAP = Freshman Skills Assessment Program
GPA = Grade Point Average
MAT = Mathematics Assessment Test
PRCHE = Puerto Rican Council on Higher Education
RAT = Reading Assessment Test
SAT = Scholastic Aptitude Test
SEEK = Search for Education, Elevation & Knowledge
SKAT = Skills Assessment Test
TESOL = Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages
WAT = Writing Assessment Test
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0. INTRODUCTION

This report represents the first effort at evaluating how well the City University of New York meets the needs of its growing population of Latino students. 1 The report was commissioned by the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, Dr. Carolynn Reid-Wallace, as part of a cooperative project with the largest of CUNY's Latino advocacy organizations, the Puerto Rican Council on Higher Education (PRCHE). The report is addressed both to the Vice Chancellor and to PRCHE. 2

As this writer's one-year visit to the CUNY Office of Academic Affairs comes to an end, the Vice Chancellor has requested that another faculty member with an interest in Hispanic issues continue the project through a second year of residence in the Office. 3 This report therefore does not aim at exhaustiveness, as it is likely to be followed by others that will elaborate on the topics covered here as well as no doubt address new ones.

Neither the Vice Chancellor nor PRCHE has had a hand in the research or writing involved in this report, the responsibility for which rests entirely with the author. Although the contents of this document are based on

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1 Hispanic students at CUNY constitute 21 percent of all undergraduates and 25 percent of all entering freshmen (CUNY Data Book, 1987-1987). In subgroups such as the SEEK program, Hispanics constitute 45 percent of all new admissions (Pereira & Cobb 1990).

2 Details of activities leading up to this writer's one-year visit at the CUNY Office of Academic Affairs can be found in: A Proposal to Establish a Task Force to Study the Condition of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos in the City University of New York, presented by the Puerto Rican Council on Higher Education to the Chancellor of the City University of New York.

3 The writer wishes to express his gratitude to the entire staff of the Office of Academic Affairs for their warmth and hospitality during my year of residence.
empirical findings and supported by quantitative data, they reflect also the writer’s judgment as to what constitute at present the most pressing problems of the Latino community at CUNY. The fact that priorities were ordered by the writer, and not by PRCHE or the Vice Chancellor, accounts for many details of emphasis that a different researcher might have handled differently.

There is, for example, not very much made here of affirmative action issues, even though the disparity between the proportion of Hispanics in the student body and on the faculty and administrative ranks at CUNY is staggering.4 Similarly, this report alludes to, but does not address directly, those issues, such as Spanish-medium courses and courses on Spanish as a native language, that affect Latinos exclusively. And it covers, but not as the primary item, issues such as instruction in English as a second language (ESL) that affect only a portion of the Latino population. Since most Latino students at CUNY have English as their main language, the questions that most directly impact on their well-being are not those related to second-language acquisition, but rather those more general ones that affect them through their membership in the student body as a whole.5

4 Even though Hispanics at CUNY make up 21 percent of all undergraduates and 25 percent of all entering freshmen, the proportion of Hispanic faculty members is only 5 percent and that of college deans 8 percent. In contrast, whites make up 38 percent of the student body, 75 percent of the faculty, and 58 percent of the deans (See CUNY Data Book, 1986-1987, and the University Affirmative Action Office’s Affirmative Action Summary Data by College, Sex, and Ethnicity, 1989).

5 In the large sample studied by Pereira & Cobb (1990), 68 percent of entering freshmen said they spoke a language other than English, that language being for the most part Spanish. But 64 percent of these students said that the language they were most comfortable in was English. This suggests that for a little under two-thirds of Latino students at CUNY the primary language is English, leaving
Hispanic students at CUNY have benefited from many of the University's efforts to serve their needs at both the high and low points of the ability continuum. And they have profited from activities created for them especially as well as from those that have been put in place to serve the entire student community. In those departments that offer Spanish for native speakers, Latinos have been able to reach high levels of literacy and formal oral expression in the language of their families. In programs of bilingual teacher education, Latinos with special linguistic skills have obtained training leading to rewarding professional positions. In units that offer subject-matter courses in Spanish, Latinos have had the rewarding experience of using their home language for intellectually challenging tasks, and those for whom English is still a developing language have used these offerings as a way to take college courses that they might otherwise have missed.

Similarly, Latino students have benefited from both new and long-standing initiatives that have served them as members of the larger student body. In ESL programs, Latino students have been able to receive specialized English instruction. In departments that have made efforts to create bridge courses and courses with supplemental instruction, underprepared Latinos have been exposed to college work while at the same time grown in their mastery of high-school level skills. Similar opportunities have been offered to Latinos in programs that link content and remedial instruction, and in units that provide special tutorial support. And in a larger sense, from doctoral programs at the CUNY Graduate Center to Masters and Bachelors programs throughout the colleges, the University has helped countless

roughly a third for whom Spanish is still the language of stronger command.
Hispanic men and women to advance their intellectual, educational, and professional goals.6

But despite these accomplishments, CUNY’s record with regard to Latino students is still not one to which the University can point with pride. Hispanics who enter CUNY are for the most part survivors of an elementary and high school system where their drop-out rate is well over 50 percent, and where they are confined to Special Education classes in disproportionate numbers. At CUNY, Hispanics continue to be over-represented in remedial courses.7 And of the four major ethnic groups served by the University, Hispanics suffer from the highest drop-out rate.8

Not all the causes of Latino over-representation in remedial, non-credit work, or of their high attrition rate at CUNY, can be addressed directly by the University. To an important extent, the problems of Latinos at CUNY are due to social and economic factors existing outside the institution. For example, among student characteristics that lead to attrition at CUNY, holding a full-time job is the

6 An awareness of how much the University has given to some Latinos comes easily to this writer, who himself holds Masters and Ph. D. degrees from the City University of New York.

7 In the 1989 study of retention conducted by the CUNY Office of Institutional Research, it was found that Hispanics and members of other minority groups failed the University entrance tests and placed into remediation at disproportionate rates (Murtha, Blumberg, O’Dell & Crook, 1989:32).

8 In the same report by the CUNY Office of Institutional Research, the study of individual characteristics associated with attrition showed that being Hispanic ranked above any other ethnic or racial affiliation in its association with attrition. A regression analysis measured statistically significant factors that predicted graduation rates among BA entrants. Expressed in percentage point changes in the probability of graduation, being Hispanic, at minus 9.0, was the only racial or ethnic characteristic to have predictive value, and a significantly negative one, on chances of graduation (Murtha et al., 1989:32).
biggest contributor. 9 And among students admitted under the SEEK program (Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge), the need to raise money to support one's household is an important contributor to the decision to drop out. 10 Insofar as Latinos experience these problems more than other groups at CUNY, their difficulties here cannot be easily addressed by the University.

But to a considerable extent, the problems of Latinos at CUNY do stem from factors over which the University has a large measure of control. Not all these are of equal importance nor can they all be dealt with by the institution simultaneously. In the opinion of this writer, if PRCHE and the University are to effectively work together to improve the lot of Latinos at CUNY, they first need to concentrate on (a) the reception and placing of incoming students, in particular the University freshman testing program; and (b) issues relating to instruction for speakers of other languages.

It is suggested that PRCHE and the CUNY Office of Academic Affairs start by developing action plans to obtain the following four goals:

(1) The University must re-establish its policy of Open Access by admitting freshmen from the start into substantive, credit-bearing, college-level work. Such work is to be taken, in proportions to be determined by the faculty, concurrently with any work that may be required in pre-collegiate skills development. As matters stand now, large numbers of Latino students enter the University only

9 A regression analysis measured statistically significant factors that predicted graduation rates among BA entrants. Expressed in percentage point changes in the probability of graduation, full-time work, at minus 16.5, was the second highest ranked factor, outpaced only by Grade Point Average at plus 18.9 (Murtha et al., 1989:37).

10 For information on the causes of attrition among SEEK students, see Pereira & Cobb (1990).
in name, since the instruction in remedial programs that they mostly receive is for the most part at the secondary level and bears no credit, and since instruction in ESL programs, despite being at tertiary levels, is also usually not granted credit. While some developmental, compensatory, bridge, and supplemental instruction courses already embody a concurrent approach, such courses do not constitute the prevailing form of instruction for incoming students, who continue to spend exceedingly long periods in the University before receiving college-level instruction or accumulating any substantial number of credits.

(2) The University must return to a position of compliance with the mandates of the Board of Trustees by limiting its Skills Assessment Tests (SKAT) to the certification of minimum competency for students who reach 61 credits. The University must thus cease the practice of using the Skills Assessment Tests (SKAT) as an instrument for the testing of incoming students. In their use as Trustees-mandated certification instruments, the SKATs must be subjected to a thorough program of validation research.

(3) To replace, at the level of entry, the currently misused SKATs, the University must develop a set of diagnostic procedures that would meet modern standards of large-scale testing, that would be supported by a program of validity research, produce scalar scores disconnected from notions of success or failure, and aid in placing students along a concurrent curricular continuum combining substantive college-level instruction with attention to the development of pre-collegiate skills.

(4) The University must expand its support of ESL programs by housing them within traditionally defined departmental units, providing them with full-time lines proportionate to other units in the University, increasing
faculty development, and granting credit for those offerings that in the judgment of the ESL faculty are taught at a tertiary level and fall within the age-old role of universities as language-teaching institutions.

This report has two sections. The first deals with the University freshman placement program and its impact on all Latino students throughout the University. The second deals with programs of instruction for students who speak languages other than English, and their role in the education of those Latinos for whom the primary language is Spanish.
1. THE CUNY PLACEMENT PROGRAM

1.0 Introduction

The following sections provide a detailed criticism of the CUNY placement program for freshmen, leading to several recommendations. These include the suggestion that a new program be developed; that it be planned and used exclusively for placement; that it make explicit provisions for testing speakers of other languages; that it be supported by a thorough program of validation research; that it be based on multiple measures; that it produce scalar results and be impossible to pass and impossible to fail; that its results be free of racial and ethnic biases; that it be predictive of performance in college; that it be under effective and representative control of the CUNY faculty; and that it promote a rich, complex and constructive view of incoming students, one under which freshmen can be offered a real program of open access in which remedial instruction is not absolute, free-standing, and prior to college work, but rather offered in the context of, and concurrent with, collegiate, freshman-level courses.

1.1 The Skills Assessment Tests (SKAT)

The City University of New York's Skills Assessment Tests includes tests in Mathematics, Reading, and Writing.1 Students planning to attend the University take these tests during their last year in high school or right before beginning college. Results are usually expressed in pass-fail terms. Students failing any of the three tests are

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1 The program is collectively referred to as the SKAT (for Skills Assessment Tests), and the individual tests in Mathematics, Reading, and Writing are referred to as the MAT, RAT, and WAT respectively. The term FSAP (for Freshman Skills Assessment Program) is sometimes used interchangeably with SKAT when the SKATs are used to test freshmen.
required to attend remedial, usually non-credit, courses in the failing area.

In addition, SKAT results are used for purposes not directly related to placement. On all campuses, and in accordance with Board of Trustees policies, the SKATs must be passed by students moving into the upper division (i.e., going beyond their 61st credit). On many campuses, a passing score on the SKAT is required in order to be admitted into freshman-level core and required courses. In other CUNY institutions the SKATs are required to get into certain professional programs such as Nursing.

Thus the SKATs serve as tests of placement (in or out of remediation), admission (into freshman courses and professional programs), and certification (as able to take Junior and Senior level courses). These placement, admission, and certification decisions made on the basis of SKAT results in turn color much of the student’s career at CUNY. They affect in a major way the quality of the education the student will receive, and whether he or she will be able to complete this education at all. Students, administrators, and trustees all make major academic and budgetary decisions based on SKAT results. And faculty members, particularly those whose major teaching responsibility is at the freshman level, regard the tests as one of the most potent forces shaping their work.

Therefore the importance of the SKATs, particularly in their use as placement devices, cannot be overstated. The issue of whether the tests are valid, of whether they test what they purport to test, and more generally of whether they do what University authorities believe they do must occupy a central place in any evaluation of how well CUNY is performing its mission for any group of students. In evaluating CUNY’s performance with Latino students, the question of the validity and efficacy of the SKATs must be a primary concern.
One of the major items of focus in this report is the fact that the University does not have in place a well planned, carefully designed, curriculum-based placement program. Instead, it uses for placement the SKATs, which were designed for, and still serve, a very different purpose. Another major item of focus in this report is the fact that the University does not have in place a systematic program of in-house validation research on the SKAT; that the indirect and fragmentary research that is available shows that the SKATs are seriously flawed both substantively and administratively and do not measure up to current standards of testing; and that in particular their use as placement instruments is at variance with Board of Trustees policies and detrimental to the best interests of both the University and its incoming students.

1.2 Policies and practices governing placement at CUNY

There exists no Board of Trustees policy mandating the use of the SKAT, or any other set of tests, for the placement of freshmen at CUNY. Despite the frequent use of the term Freshman Skills Assessment Program (or FSAP) to refer to the SKATs when they are used for placement, the tests were originally designed in response to a Board of Trustees policy requiring that students be able to demonstrate mastery of the basic skills necessary for advanced work before moving beyond their 61st credit. The Board resolution said nothing about freshmen and did not envision the creation of Freshman-level placement instruments at all, but rather suggested that Junior-level tests had to be developed. Thus the current system of placing freshmen at CUNY does not constitute an implementation of Trustees-mandated policies. Rather, the system represents simply an array of accepted practices rooted for the most part in decisions made, not by the CUNY Trustees or the faculty, but by the central Office of Academic Affairs.
These decisions of the central University administration regarding the SKAT, made primarily in 1977, deviated significantly from the intent of the 1976 Trustees resolution on demonstration of basic skills as well as from the March 1977 recommendations of the faculty group that was asked to suggest ways to implement the resolution. As suggested by the words "movement to the upper division" that appear in the March 1977 faculty recommendation, the faculty intended the creation of an instrument to be administered to upper Sophomores and Juniors. Instead, in July of the same year, the Office of Academic Affairs ignored the formal faculty recommendations and published its Freshman Skills Assessment: A Proposal.

Despite its modest claim to being simply a proposal, this Office of Academic Affairs document, the first to introduce the term "freshman," altered radically the nature of the testing program and made it into a placement operation aimed at entering students. Even though it could well be argued that the contents of this proposal so run counter to the Trustees' policy as to hardly qualify as its implementation, the Proposal has never been publicly challenged and continues in force today.

The origins of the placement tests in instruments that were designed for a totally different purpose are still discernable as the root cause of many of the difficulties associated with the SKAT, several of which are detailed below. Right after the central University administration decided to start using the sophomore/junior tests to place freshmen, the University was warned by an outside consultant invited to evaluate the program that "the three tests, Mathematics, Reading, and Writing are being used for too many different purposes" (Mitzel 1979:1). The consultant

2 The recommendations of the faculty on ways to implement the Board of Trustees' resolution appear in the Report of the Chancellor's Committee on Movement from the Lower to Upper Division (1977).
advised that the testing program be returned to its Trustees-mandated function as screening devices "and that its use be specifically discouraged for the other purposes," adding in a specific reference to the placement and diagnostic function that the tests "are not at all well suited for such a task" (1979:2).

Eleven years later, the University is actively encouraging precisely the use of the tests that it was advised to discourage, and sponsoring in a massive scale the utilization for placement purposes of an instrument that it was explicitly advised was not suitable for the task.

1.3 Lack of placement validation research at CUNY

One of the most serious problems facing CUNY today is the absence of a systematic program of validation research for the SKATs. A widely accepted tenet of proper large-scale testing is that the institution that administers a test is responsible for having in place its own placement validation program. At CUNY, such a program would address such questions as whether the SKAT tests measure what they claim to measure, whether they place students appropriately, whether the purpose for which they are being used is the one for which they were designed, whether their predictions about subsequent behavior are borne out, whether test scores are being interpreted correctly, whether alternate forms deemed to be equivalent are in fact so, whether the test yields differential results for different racial or ethnolinguistic groups, and whether their impact on the curriculum is a desirable one.

That this is a responsibility of the institution that administers the tests has been explicitly recognized by most national organizations dealing with large-scale testing. The 1988 Guidelines on the Uses of College Board Test-Scores and Related Data Guidelines prepared by the College Board, a membership organization to which CUNY belongs, offers advice to "users who wish to avoid inequitable or otherwise
injurious practices related to test use" (1988:11). To avoid such practices, the Board warns against using test scores "without proper validation on the basis of students' performance within the institution" (1988:11).

Although several branches of CUNY, including the central Office of Academic Affairs, occasionally conduct research on different aspects of the SKAT, these efforts are unsystematic and fragmented, and seldom address fundamental questions of validity such as the ones listed above.

The absence of an active, watchful validation project on the SKATs has allowed several negative features of the tests to go unchecked for years. Some of these flaws are routinely warned against, and systematically avoided, in the administration of large-scale testing programs elsewhere. Others are more peculiar to the City University but are by no means unrecognized elsewhere as problems to be solved. Yet they all continue to go unaddressed at CUNY. They are detailed in the sections that follow.

a) Placement through pass/fail tests

One of the most unfortunate features of the CUNY approach to incoming students is the University's reliance on a pass/fail approach to placement, and on an either/or conception of freshmen with regard to remedial status. For a substantial proportion of entering CUNY students, the first piece of information they receive from the University is that they have failed something, and that they are not ready for the institution's offerings.

Yet there is at CUNY no research, or not even a rationale, showing that this simple-minded and punitive approach to placement is necessary, or even just preferable to the obvious alternatives. One can easily imagine very effective placement tests that students cannot pass, and cannot fail, the results of which are expressed in scalar terms. And one can easily imagine freshman curricula that, based on such a scale, would not so grossly classify
students into two groups—the passing and the failing, the collegiate and the remedial—but would rather place each somewhere along a continuum of increasingly demanding academic curricular offerings.

Recommendations to this effect have been available to, but ignored by, CUNY for more than a decade. As part of his warning to the University that the SKAT tests did not constitute a valid placement program, the consultant brought in to evaluate the tests said that "a placement test to be effective must be constructed in such a way that it models a hierarchy of courses in a particular curriculum" (1979:1).

Under such an approach, all CUNY freshmen would be the same in that all would receive an education tailored to their needs, one that, depending on the individual student, would combine different amounts of prefreshman and collegiate work.

b) Placement through single measures

Another unfortunate feature of the CUNY placement program that is not backed by any research or rationale is its reliance on single measures. A well established principle of testing is that placement decisions based on results from a single instrument are detrimental to both the student and the institution. The point is made succinctly by the College Board, when it lists under tests uses that should be avoided: "Using test scores as the sole basis for important decisions affecting the lives of individuals, when other information of equal or greater relevance and the resources for using such information are available" (1988:11).

Closer to home, the New Jersey Basic Skills Council (1989) urges "that placement be based not on one subtest score but on a combination of several test scores and other information." The New Jersey group builds this approach right into its Verbal Proficiency score, which is a composite derived from the scores obtained by students in
two multiple choice tests and a direct writing test. Indeed, in the colleges of the New Jersey state system, "[m]ost public colleges and universities in the state use multiple criteria for placing students" (1989:4).

Reliance on single measures, which is unfortunate in the case of students for whom English is the primary language, is even more problematic for speakers of other languages. In its Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing, the American Psychological Association warns that "English language proficiency should not be determined solely with tests that demand only a single linguistic skill" (1985:75). Yet all CUNY knows about a student who is still developing English is that he or she can or cannot pass the reading and writing SKATs.

Combined with the absence of placement validation research and the use of either/or approaches to testing and curriculum, the reliance on single measures should raise serious doubts regarding the SKAT.

c) Placing students who speak other languages

There is at CUNY no systematic policy that would distinguish test-taking freshmen depending on their degree of proficiency in the language of the test. The University's placement program is designed as if the University were in a linguistically homogeneous city and faced no problems of language diversity. But CUNY is located in a multilingual metropolis (whose level of multilingualism has traditionally been particularly high in the social stratum the University serves); and a very large number of its entering students speak English as a second language.3

With rare exceptions, language minority students at CUNY are given the same tests, administered under the same

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3 Approximately 20-30 percent of the entering freshman class CUNY-wide consists of students for whom English is a second language (Kehl 1988:3).
conditions, allowed the same amount of time, and graded according to the same criteria as their English-monolingual counterparts. The expected result is that students for whom the strongest language is other than English fail the SKATs, particularly those in reading and writing, in considerably larger numbers than their counterparts, and are therefore confined to remediation, and kept away from content courses, also at considerably larger rates than students for whom English is the primary language.

With rare exceptions, once these students fail their SKATs the only special provision made for them is assignment to remedial programs in English as a Second Language. In every other respect, including the important one of being denied access to college courses, their treatment is the same as that of other students. In their remedial ESL classes, it is often not clear what exactly it is that needs to be remediated. The University has no way of distinguishing, for instance, between language minority students who fail the Reading and Writing SKATs because of poor skills in language in general or because of poor skills in English. And, with some exceptions, the same is true of the Mathematics test.

Serving as the instrument that disables the University from making even these elementary distinctions, the SKAT also makes it impossible to raise such more sophisticated questions as whether the students' lacks in English are in oral comprehension, oral production, reading, or writing. Such questions need to be raised in order to know how much exposure the student is ready to receive to different kinds of courses conducted in English. As it is, the SKAT simply serves on most campuses as the gate that keeps speakers of

4 At the College of Staten Island, the difference between students for whom English was a primary language and those for whom it was a second language in passing rates in the WAT was 37.6 percent; for the RAT the figure was 25.6 percent (Nunez-Normack, Astone, Smolak & Whippe 1989).
other languages, in an undifferentiated mass, away from the college offerings that they were looking for when they came to CUNY.

1.4 Remedial placement at CUNY and nationwide

The lack of placement validation research on the SKATs acquires special significance in light of the fact that the CUNY placement program produces results that differ considerably from national and regional norms. In neighboring New Jersey, the placement tests given to freshmen entering the State college system define 33 percent of test takers as lacking proficiency in verbal skills; at CUNY, the writing SKAT defines 52 percent of test takers as lacking proficiency.5

Similar contrasts are found when CUNY results are compared to national norms. Details on the proportion of entering freshmen that are found in need of remediation nationwide vary slightly depending on reports. Tables 1 and 2 show the same comparison of CUNY figures with national norms on the basis of two different sets of data, one provided by Suss & Goldsmith (1989) and another by the 1988 Annual Report of the University Faculty Senate Remediation Committee, which is also the source for the CUNY figures in both tables.

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5 See New Jersey Basic Skills Council (1989:4) for New Jersey figures; for CUNY, see the 1988 Annual Report of the University Faculty Senate Remediation Committee.
Table 1.
Percentage of CUNY students needing remediation in three subject areas compared to national norms*

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<th>Mathematics</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
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<tr>
<td>% National</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% CUNY</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>52</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*National data are from Suss & Goldsmith; CUNY data are from CUNY Faculty Senate

Table 2.
Percentage of CUNY students needing remediation in three subject areas compared to national norms*

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Mathematics</th>
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<th>Writing</th>
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<td>% National</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% CUNY</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*National and CUNY data are both from the CUNY Faculty Senate

Using either set of national figures, Tables 1 and 2 show that, relying on the SKAT, CUNY places students into remedial programs at rates much higher than the rest of the country. Depending on the sample used for comparison, the CUNY rates are in some subject areas twice as high as those of other universities.

One conclusion that could perhaps be drawn from Tables 1 and 2 is that the preparation of high school seniors in New York City is so much more inferior than that of their counterparts elsewhere that they naturally need remediation in much greater proportions. But given that the placement tests that produce the CUNY results have not been validated and were not designed for placement purposes, the findings are susceptible to another explanation. It may very well be the case that CUNY is misdiagnosing a significant number of its entering students, that it is incorrectly placing them
into remediation, and that it is unfairly excluding them from college-level work that they would have been able to pursue had they attended another institution.

1.5 The impact of remedial placement on retention

A significant aspect of the SKATs is their impact on student retention, which is lower among Hispanics at CUNY than among any of the other ethnic groups that attend the University.6 According to the College Board’s 1988 Guidelines, one of the primary responsibilities of educational institutions is “to consider the consequences of any test on those tested” (1988:11). Passing or failing the three SKAT tests has a noticeable short-term effect on the likelihood of CUNY students returning to college after the first year as well as a long-term effect on the likelihood of their eventually graduating from CUNY.

Researchers at one of CUNY’s own institutions, the College of Staten Island, have come to the following conclusion:

The risk of not returning to College after the first year increases significantly for students who fail all three SKAT tests. Of those who failed [in 1987], 55.7 percent returned, whereas of those who passed all three tests, 64.8 percent returned (Nunez-Wormack, Astone, Smolak & Whipple 1989).

And according to research by the CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Analysis, the more tests that a student fails at the point of entry, the more likely he or she is to leave CUNY without a college degree. Looking at CUNY as a whole, these University researchers found that the number of tests passed directly correlates with graduation and persistence:

6 For students who entered CUNY in 1980, the persistence rate in 1985 was 40 percent for Hispanics, compared to 43.2 percent for Blacks and 54.6 percent for Whites (Murtha et al. 1989:23).
While about 15 percent of AA entrants failing all three skills assessment tests graduated, 38 percent of those who passed all three tests graduated. Among BA entrants the difference is even more marked, with 8 percent of those who failed all three tests graduating after five years, compared to 39 percent of those who passed all three tests (Murtha, Blumberg, O’Dell, and Crook 1989:17)

Under one interpretation, these findings merely confirm that the same underpreparation that prevents students from passing the tests later makes it impossible for them to succeed in college. Lacking either the capacity or prior experience that is required to do well in the tests, they also cannot do well in remedial courses or in whatever college-level courses they eventually take. But this interpretation assumes that the tests that diagnosed the underpreparation in the first place are valid, an assumption that cannot be made at CUNY because of the absence of a systematic program of research to support it.

An alternative interpretation is that test failure, assignment to non-credit remediation, and exclusion from practically all forms of college work place incoming students into a situation that is unnecessarily harsh and unproductive, and whose demoralizing effect becomes an independent contributor to attrition. Research carried out through questionnaire surveys with selected groups of entering CUNY students suggests that this is the case. Many CUNY students drop out precisely because the slow accumulation of credit experienced while in remedial instruction makes them give up hope of ever receiving a degree (Pereira & Cobb 1990:40). Under this interpretation, the absence of any clear evidence for the placement validity of the SKAT becomes a problem of serious proportions.
1.6 Inferences based on SKAT scores

The colleges of CUNY use SKAT results to arrive at slightly different conclusions, so that generalizations in this area are always subject to some local exceptions. But by and large, failing scores on the SKAT lead to inferences on the part of the colleges that are not supported by research, and that appear arbitrary and unfounded. In many cases, these inferences are contradicted by research carried out outside of CUNY or in some of the University's own colleges.

While the problem of incorrect inferences applies to all three SKAT tests, we will use as our primary illustration the problems associated with the Writing Assessment Test (WAT).

A failing score on the WAT leads colleges to the following two inferences: (a) The student who fails the WAT does not possess even minimum levels of competency in writing; and (b) This unacceptably low level has to do with overall writing ability, not with localized problems affecting only a particular type of writing.

On the basis of these two inferences, the colleges reason: (a) There is no responsible way to offer failing students even freshman-level classes in composition; consequently, all writing instruction for such students must be of a pre-college, non-credit nature. (b) The failing student is not ready for college-level content courses; consequently there must be registration stops placed on courses to keep off students who have not passed the WAT, for whom all, or nearly all, instruction must be remedial.

The trouble with these inferences, and with the decisions based on them, is that they have never been subjected to empirical verification. A generally accepted principle in institutions of higher education nationwide is that decisions of such major consequences (for the students' life and for the institution's budget) should not be made without first conducting validity studies on the inferences
that underpin them. Yet, CUNY has conducted no studies showing that the two inferences made from a failing WAT score are warranted. Worse, the research carried out by others contradicts the CUNY position.

a) SKATs as tests of minimum competency

In its first administration, the WAT is given to students in the 12th grade or who have just completed high school. One would expect the claim that the SKATs are tests of minimum competency—and the inference that those who fail it lack this competency—to rest on findings that significant samples of well prepared high school seniors can in fact perform well on the SKAT. While this information may be derivable from grade-level calibrations in the MAT and the RAT, the University has never conducted research aimed at producing this empirical determination of the WAT's level of difficulty. That the WAT is a test of minimum competency is thus simply an assertion, lacking any manner of objectively verifiable support. 7

This absence of placement-level validation research is brought into sharp relief by evidence available elsewhere which contradicts University assumptions. Investigators who have raised the question of what level of writing proficiency should be expected of high school seniors have found that highly skilled 12th graders can do well on all writing tasks except on the type of persuasive essay demanded by the WAT.

7 When pressed on how they know that the WAT is a test of minimum competency, advocates of the test tend to simply assert that this is their academic judgement. While University faculties should have broad powers to establish policy on individual curricular items, their decisions, even at that level, cannot be arbitrary. When it comes to setting policy on matters that every year affect the lives of tens of thousands of students and the expenditure of tens of millions of dollars, something more than unexplained, unchallengable ex cathedra statements would appear to be required.
In their study of Canadian 12th graders (from affluent, English-monolingual areas of Ontario), Ian Pringle and Aviva Freedman concluded: "Although in many respects the students sampled showed themselves to be very literate, there were too many, even at the highest educational level, who lacked the ability to write argumentative discourse" (1985:124). This finding is by no means limited to the sample studied by Pringle & Freedman. Other researchers have also found that the inability that places students into mandatory remediation at CUNY appears in fact to be the norm throughout English-speaking North America. The results of research projects conducted for the state of California (Claggett, Cooper & Breneman, 1989; Cooper & Breneman 1988) converge with the conclusions of Pringle & Freedman's Canadian studies in finding that high school seniors who can write well cannot produce adequate persuasive essays.

In summary, the first inference made by CUNY regarding the WAT, namely that it is a test of minimum writing competency, has never been supported by validation research conducted by the University and is contradicted by the research that has been conducted by others. It appears that the WAT is not testing minimal composing skills, but rather skills at a more advanced level of writing that has not generally been developed by students of the age group that takes the WAT.

b) SKATs as tests of general ability

Besides having no research showing that the SKATs are tests of minimum competency, the University has no research showing that they are tests of overall ability, as opposed to being tests of, for example, specialized reading skills, such as that of answering multiple choice questions after quick-reading a paragraph, or such as writing persuasive-agree-disagree essays. The distinction is important, for overall abilities must be acquired in remedial courses, and their lack justifies excluding students from college-level
work. In contrast, specialized skills might well be learned in college courses and for credit. The absence of CUNY validation research on this second important inference made on the basis of SKAT scores should also be seen in light of results of investigations conducted elsewhere.

With regard to the WAT, recent studies of college writing assessment warn that one cannot conclude that a student has a poor overall level of writing ability on the basis of a single writing task applied to a single topic. In discussing results of a 1989 study of South Carolina college students sponsored by the Educational Testing Service, investigators state flatly that "none [of the tasks] reveals how well students can write overall, for each is bound by the parameters of the task or set of tasks in which students are asked to engage" (Applebee, Langer, & Mullis 1989:13).

In a discussion of whether the standard categorization of writing tasks into expository, literary, and persuasive is adequate the same authors state: "Debates on how to divide the universe of writing tasks would be irrelevant if performances on various tasks were closely related to each other; then it would matter little what types of task were given, and it would be meaningful to talk about writing achievement in a general sense. In fact, this does not seem to be the case..." (Applebee et al. 1989:20)

The simple fact that invalidates inferences made by the University on the basis of WAT scores is that students who write poorly when given a certain writing task turn out to write adequately when faced with a different one. "Recent studies by NAEP and by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) have addressed this problem by administering relatively large numbers of tasks to overlapping samples of students. Correlations between writing tasks given in the NAEP assessments have been moderate at best, ranging from .10 to .40." (Applebee et al. 1989:20)
Students will produce writing samples of widely differing quality not only depending on the writing task but depending also on the topic. The authors of the South Carolina study found that results "varied enormously" depending on topic. They therefore concluded: "[R]esults form any one task cannot be taken as a good indicator of the general level of student performance and instead need to be viewed as an indicator of the performance represented by a particular kind of writing about a particular topic." (Applebee et al. 1989:23)

These results of the South Carolina study converge with the California and Canada studies reported above. As reported by Pringle & Freedman (1985) and by Claggett, Cooper, & Breneman (1989), existing methods of writing assessment simply do not produce results that allow one to draw conclusions about a student's overall writing ability.

In summary, there is no evidence that the SKAT tests are measures of minimum, overall ability. Students who fail, for example, the WAT, might very well have succeeded at a different writing task, or at task calling for a different genre and topic, or have done better if they belonged to a different racial or ethnolinguistic group. Moreover, there is not even evidence that the WAT is a measure of the ability to write essays on certain types of genres and topics by students of certain ethnic or racial groups. Students who fail it under current time conditions may have written a passing essay on the identical topic had they been given more time, for either prior reflection or for actual composition. Similarly, there is no evidence showing that the ability to pass reading tests rests on a general ability to read all forms and manner of texts. In all these questions, the lack of positive evidence gathered at CUNY should be seen in light of abundant counter evidence gathered elsewhere.

Since most likely the SKAT tests are not measuring minimum overall abilities in the three subject areas,
decisions premised on such a belief are arbitrary. The University is mandating no-credit remediation, and preventing students from receiving freshman-level instruction, on the basis of inferences that it has no grounds to make. The first obligation of a testing organization, to know what it is that its test is measuring, has not been met by the University.

1.7 Impact of SKAT on racial and linguistic minorities

One way to increase the certainty that a test is measuring what it purports to measure—that it enjoys construct validity—is to eliminate other possible sources of explanation for differences in test results. Testing organizations typically want to know whether ethnic and racial factors play a significant role in explaining such differences. A test that is not otherwise validated, and in which groups of students who differ only in their racial or ethnic background perform markedly differently, is likely to be measuring little more than membership in a particular group.

Given the lack of validation research on the SKATS, one would want to know, before concluding, for example, that the WAT is measuring "minimal overall writing ability," or that the RAT is measuring "minimal reading ability," whether these tests are not instead simply measuring group membership.

At CUNY, the SKAT tests produce results that are skewed with respect to race and ethnicity. Blacks, Latinos, and Whites of similar prior high school preparation do not fail these tests in rates proportionate to their numbers in the

8 In the technical jargon of psychometricians, the first obligation of a testing organization is to establish a test's construct validity. In our case under, a claim has been made for the existence of a construct "minimal overall writing ability," but the claim has remained at the level of unsupported assertion.
test-taking population. Rather, Blacks and Latinos fail at a disproportionately high rate. In their study of CUNY entering freshmen, Murtha et al. found that:

The disadvantages associated with poverty and minority status cannot be explained entirely in terms of the ramifications of poor grades and fewer preparatory courses, however. Even when members of minority groups and the poor are matched statistically with more advantaged students who had high school records of equal quality, disadvantages persist in performance on skills tests (1989:32).

These unexplained group differences found in results on the SKAT by Murtha et al. converge with the findings of the ETS study of South Carolina college writers cited above and with those reported for the RAT in Everson (1990).

In a study on the time allowed for students to complete the RAT that will be more fully described below, Everson found that shorter time allotments depress the scores of all students, but that they depress in particular the scores of Blacks and Latinos for whom English is the primary language, as well as the scores of all students for whom English is a second language. In the South Carolina study that found that essays on different topics provided a very different picture of a student's ability to write, researchers also found that such differences were particularly sensitive to the writer's group membership. "From these data, we have to conclude that topic differences not only produce different estimates of overall writing performance, but also may have differential effects on the performance of subgroups within a population being studied" (Applebee et al. 1989:24)

In short, even though there is no evidence that the WAT is sorting students according to minimal overall writing ability, there is evidence that it is sorting them in part according to race and ethnicity. This further undermines the validity of inferences made on the basis of failures in these tests.
Insofar as SKAT results are used to track students into collegiate or remedial work, the sorting by racial and ethnolinguistic affiliation that they produce can have detrimental consequences for the integrity of the University's academic program. In a racially and ethnolinguistically diverse institution struggling with the problem of retaining minority students, the fact that a placement test that is not supported by validation research is producing this type of result should be of particular concern.9

1.8 The effect of time limitations on SKAT results

Besides establishing what it is that a test is measuring prior to large-scale administration—and besides establishing in particular that it is not measuring group membership—a responsible educational organization needs to establish whether the amount of time given for a test is adequate. As far back as 1979, CUNY was warned by its outside consultant, as part of his opinion that the SKATs should not be used for placement, that "the tests are speeded" (Mitzel 1979:2). The University not only ignored this warning but has since produced no systematic research supporting the existing time allotments for the SKAT tests.

Moreover, the only research that the University has carried out shows that the present format does not provide enough time for any group of students, and that it particularly penalizes students who speak languages other than English.

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9 Again in the language of psychometricians: Even though there is no evidence that results in the WAT are predicted by an underlying overall level of writing proficiency there is evidence that they are in part predicted by membership in a particular racial or ethnic group. Predictability of results on the basis of unexplained group differences, especially in the absence of other validity studies, represents a serious threat to the construct validity of a test.
With regard to the WAT, the absence of time validation research at CUNY stands in contrast to research from other large-scale testing programs showing that direct writing tests yield different results depending on how much time students are given. The more time given to produce a writing sample, the more passing scores that are obtained (Applebee et al. 1989:32).

Time has another dimension besides how much of it is allowed during the actual writing task. The WAT asks students to write on a topic about which they have had no time to reflect. Yet experience with direct writing tests has shown that students prefer to write under a format that, even if it provides the same amount of time to write, allows for a longer period of prior preparation and reflection.10

With regard to the RAT, the question of whether sufficient time is allowed has been the subject of investigation by the central Office of Academic Affairs. Everson (1990) reported on research conducted at nine CUNY colleges showing that the present 30-minute format does not allow students enough time to complete the test and produces, therefore, a large number of spurious failures. The research shows that a shift to a 40-minute format allows many more students to complete the test and significantly increases the number of passes.11

The finding that the RAT, and perhaps other SKAT tests, are speeded tends to further undermine the validity of

10 Information provided on October 16, 1989 by Professor Pat Lawrence, Coordinator of Basic Writing at City College, who described an approach to the College Writing Exam under which students are given a reading passage at the time of registration but are not asked to write on it until several weeks later.

11 In the language of psychometrics, the results of Everson (1990) on the RAT, and the results reported in the literature for tests like the WAT, show that these SKAT tests are speeded. Unless speed is explicitly and specifically being tested for, speededness is regarded as a very serious threat to test validity.
inferences made on the basis of SKAT failures. The same student who failed the test in 30 minutes—and about whom the University concludes that he or she lacks minimum competency and belongs in remediation—will pass the test in 40 minutes, leading the University to conclude that he or she does have minimum competency and needs no remediation. That such major decisions are being made on the basis of such simple factors as a ten-minute extension, and that such factors have gone unexamined for years, casts serious doubts on the integrity of the testing program.

The time problems associated with the SKAT have a particularly negative impact on students who still do not have English firmly under control. The difficulties associated with composing essays, figuring out items in a reading test, and understanding arithmetical problems are exacerbated when these activities are performed in a second language. However, given sufficient time, these additional difficulties that the SKAT tests pose for language minority students can be partially overcome.

That time limits present second-language students with special difficulties, and that extra time allotments can solve many of them, are conclusions clearly supported by the results of Everson (1990). As shown in Table 3, increases in passing rates on the RAT when time allotments are increased are much larger for students for whom English is a second language (ESL) than for those for whom English is the primary language (EPL).
Table 3

Passing rates in the 40-item form of the RAT for ESL and EPL students depending on time allowed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>30 minutes</th>
<th>40 minutes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ESL</td>
<td>20 %</td>
<td>46 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPL</td>
<td>60 %</td>
<td>73 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ESL = Students for whom English is a second language
EPL = Students for whom English is a primary language
Data from Everson (1990)

The table shows that giving students for whom English is the primary language more time to complete the RAT increases their passing rate by 13 percentage points. But when the same time increase is granted to students for whom English is a second language, the passing rate increase is 26 percentage points.12 This finding is convergent with the results of other investigations into reading tests and their effects on minorities (Davis et al. 1990).

The finding that the time limits imposed on the SKATs have a particularly detrimental effect on students for whom English is a second language further erodes the validity of inferences made by the University on the basis of these tests. For these students, the conclusion that they lack minimum competency that is drawn from test failures could apparently be substituted by the conclusion that they indeed have such competency but that the testing program artificially precludes them from demonstrating it.

1.9 Correlating SKAT results and success in college

Advocates of the SKAT as a freshman placement program have traditionally justified placing students who fail the tests into remedial activities by claiming that these

12 When comparisons are made between percentage point increases correlated with time increase for ESL and EPL students in the 45-item form this effect is not noticeable.
students are not ready to take college courses. Many colleges in CUNY have extended the logic of this claim by also barring altogether students who fail the tests from content courses until remediation is completed. For example, most colleges require passing the WAT before entering into Freshman Composition.13 Others require that it be passed by the end of three semesters after entry into the college. Yet others require it in order to take core courses. And many require it in order to take a whole array of required and distribution courses.14 The cumulative effect of these restrictions is to severely restrict the policy of Open Admissions. While students are formally admitted into the University, they are effectively barred from pursuing University work.

At the heart of the claim that students who fail the SKATs are not ready for college is the proposition that the SKAT tests are predictive of performance in college courses. Based on this proposition, advocates of these restrictions argue that students who fail the SKATs would be headed for certain failure if they were allowed to sign up for content courses while still going through remediation.

Unfortunately, the University has never conducted research to test the value of this proposition.15 Through

13 For details, see The City University of New York Freshman Year Programs: Writing, published by the Instructional Resource Center, Office of Academic Affairs, CUNY, 1989.

14 See for example: Getting Started, A Guide to Planning for Registration and the First Semester (1989-1990), prepared by Bonnie Kaplan of the Office of Student Services at Hunter College, where considerable effort is devoted to guiding students through registering, or refraining from attempts to register, for courses that have as requirements developmental courses that in turn have as exit requirements the SKATs.

15 In the technical language of the test researchers, the University has never established the predictive validity of the SKATs. Coupled with the absence of research tending to establish construct validity, this lack further undermines
its long history of asserting that students who do not pass the SKAT are not ready for college, no effort has been made by the central administration, nor by most of the colleges, to establish that there is indeed a correlation between failure in the SKAT and failure in college courses.

The research that does exist, conducted either outside of CUNY or in isolated instances by some of the CUNY colleges, suggests that students who pass their SKATs very often do very poorly in college courses, and that students who fail the SKATs, if given a chance, can be quite successful in college courses, thus making their exclusion from such courses a highly arbitrary act.

In their comprehensive study of community colleges nationwide, Cohen & Brawer (1987:108) take it as a given that placement tests in general show low correlations with course grades. With regard to direct writing tests like the WAT, the large study by Bridgeman (1990:14) also found very low correlations. In fact, in comparison to such measures as scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), Bridgeman found that direct writing samples are the worst predictors of performance in freshman level courses (1990:10). This led him to conclude that once other scores (such as high school grades) are known, direct writing tests add "practically nothing" to predictions as to how well students will do in college.

Throughout CUNY, many faculty members provide anecdotal, but nevertheless valuable, confirmation of the lack of correlation between success or failure in the SKATs and success or failure in college courses. In interviews conducted with faculty members from many of the CUNY colleges during the 1989-1990 academic year, this writer found widespread cynicism toward the value of the SKATs as indicators of whether a student can or cannot succeed in college courses. Many members of the faculty regard the University’s justification for continuing to use the tests.
testing program simply as another hurdle that they have to help their students overcome, without there being any connection between it and what the students will or will not be able to do in college courses. One cannot go to a CUNY campus without finding prominently posted signs inviting students to participate in specialized workshops designed to help them pass the MAT, RAT, or WAT. To hear the faculty describe them, these activities are generally not aimed at helping students get ready for the reading and writing they will have to do in college courses; they are simply designed to get them through the reading and writing tests.

Students themselves partake of this cynicism. The evidence suggests that the University has been unable to convince students that the SKATs are in any way indicative of whether they are headed for success or failure in college. For example, testimony from several students at the September 20, 1989 session of the Language Forum showed that they had been able to do quite well in course work without however being able to pass the SKATs. On some campuses students look for ways to sign up for content courses without taking the tests, a favorite scheme being to register as a non-matriculant student. In some CUNY institutions, this has been part of the motivation for eliminating the nonmatriculant as a student category.16

These moves and countermoves have all the characteristics of a cat-and-mouse game played between the students and the colleges, with the students trying to sign up for content courses and the colleges trying to keep them away. No educational institution that wishes to command respect from its students can impose such limitations unless it has very strong evidence that the exclusionary measures are for the students' own good. Yet the data that is available from CUNY institutions where the exclusions are

16 Such a restriction was imposed during the Spring 1990 semester by, for example, Hunter College.
less severe, and where the proposition that SKAT results are predictive of college results can actually be tested, tend to side with the students. In its 1987 Annual Report on Freshmen, the College of Staten Island reports the following conclusion with regard to its Fall 1987 freshmen:

Success on FSAP tests alone cannot be said to predict accurately academic success, since in 25 percent of all cases, students who passed all three tests achieved grade point averages below 2.0 one year later ... The reverse is perhaps even more notable because the percentages involved are so much higher and because policy decisions are more likely to affect this group: more than half of women who failed all three tests (55 percent) and 34.8 of men who failed, went on to achieve Grade Point Averages of 2.0 or better the first year. Consequently, failing the FSAP tests is also not an accurate predictor of academic difficulty ... (Nunez-Wormack et al. 1989:12).

The data from the College of Staten Island are particularly significant because they are consistent from year to year. Using the latest data, provided in advance of publication to the CUNY Office of Academic Affairs by the director of the College Testing Office, Professor Ivan Smolilaka, Table 4 reports the experience with courses in Science and Math of Fall 1989 freshmen who passed the reading test compared to that of those who failed it.

Table 4
Grades in selected Science and Math courses received by Fall 1989 freshmen who took the Reading Assessment Test at the College of Staten Island

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Passed</th>
<th></th>
<th>Failed</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C or above</td>
<td>(101)</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>(14)</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other grade</td>
<td>(65)</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>(9)</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>(166)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>(23)</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4 shows that passing or failing the RAT had nothing to do with how well the student did in Science and Math courses. The proportion of those who failed these courses was exactly the same (39 percent) among the group who entered the courses having passed the RAT as among the group who entered them after having failed it. The proportion of passes in the courses (61 percent) was also identical for both the test passers and the test failers.

These data suggest that (a) the RAT is not testing a skill that is needed for passing Science and Math courses, and that (b) to have excluded from such courses the 14 students who passed despite having failed the test would have been unfair and counter-productive. Similar results are obtained when one looks at courses in the Social Sciences, as shown in Table 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Passed Reading</th>
<th>Failed Reading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C or above</td>
<td>(606)</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other grade</td>
<td>(348)</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>(954)</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Table 5 there is a difference between the experience of students who passed and those who failed. Still, 49 percent of those who failed the test went on to pass the courses. Again here, to have closed the course to those 61 students who failed the test but passed the course would
have been unfortunate, since it appears that the skill they failed at is not one needed to pass courses in the Social Sciences.

Tables 6 and 7 show the experience of the same cohort but now looking at the difference between those who passed and failed the WAT.

**Table 6**
Grades in selected Science and Math courses received by Fall 1989 freshmen who took the Writing Assessment Test at the College of Staten Island

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passed Writing</th>
<th>Failed Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C or above</td>
<td>(132)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other grade</td>
<td>( 74)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>(206)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 7**
Grades in selected Social Science courses received by Fall 1989 freshmen who took the Writing Assessment Test at the College of Staten Island

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passed Writing</th>
<th>Failed Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C or above</td>
<td>(500)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other grade</td>
<td>(253)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>(753)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As was the case with the RAT, in the cases detailed in Tables 6 and 7 the experience in college courses of students who failed the WAT is not significantly different from that of students who passed. (In some cases the WAT failing students actually did better in courses than those who passed). Once again, to have excluded from Science and Math
courses the 63 students who failed the WAT but passed their Science and Math courses, and to have done the same with the 163 students who failed the WAT but passed the Social Science courses would have been unfortunate. Whatever skill the WAT is testing, it is not apparently one that is needed by the scores of students who seem to lack it and yet can do well in college.

A final correlational observation bears making before leaving this subject. Researchers in the area of testing commonly recognize that the best predictor of performance in credit-bearing, non-remedial freshmen courses is high school average. Thus an indirect case could be made for the predictive validity of the SKAT by showing its correlation with high school Grade Point Average (GPA). But looking at the same College of Staten Island cohorts described above, it turns out that the opposite is the case. Average to good high school grades, it turns out, do not correlate well with successful performance on the SKAT tests in Reading and Writing (Nunez-Wormack et al. 1989:9)

In summary, the placement tests used at CUNY do not succeed in distinguishing between students who will do poorly in college and those who will do well. The belief that students who fail the SKAT are not ready for college, and the widening practice of actually stopping such students from registering for college courses, are based on assumptions that are not supported by any body of systematic research and that are directly contradicted by the available evidence.

1.10 Structural and administrative problems

The problems outlined above are aggravated by weaknesses in the structure and administrative governance of the tests. Two areas are worth highlighting. One, the question of who has responsibility for the SKATS; two, the Chancellor’s Task Forces.
a) Whose tests are these?

Around CUNY campuses, this writer finds a widespread belief that the testing program belongs to the central University Office of Academic Affairs, that it is the Office that imposes the tests on the colleges, and that it is the Office that is responsible for whatever may be wrong with the SKATs. Back in the Office, one learns that University officials regard the tests as essentially belonging to the colleges and hold them responsible for whatever may be wrong with the tests, a belief that often takes the form of assertions that there is nothing wrong with the SKATs themselves, that it is just some of the uses to which the campuses sometimes put them that may be flawed.

This is an unfortunate situation that cries out for corrective action and assertive leadership. The students, and the public at large, expect more from the University than sophisticated buck-passing. The SKATs were created by the central Office of Academic Affairs, and it was the Office that sponsored their metamorphosis from tests given to upper college sophomores for certification purposes into tests given to high school seniors for placement purposes. In addition, there are no known documents, instructions, directives or campaigns on the part of the Office of Academic Affairs to urge the colleges to cease and desist from using the SKATs for the many new purposes that have cropped up since that initial metamorphosis. Therefore, both by commission and by omission, it is the Office of Academic Affairs that is rightly held responsible for the uses and misuses of the tests. And it is from the Office that the solutions have to start to emanate.

b) The Task Forces

In connection with the establishment of the SKATs, the central University administration created three groups, known as the Chancellor’s Task Forces in Reading, Writing, and Mathematics, whose charge it is to look after the
integrity of the testing program. The dedication of both faculty and administrators on the Task Forces is remarkable. Faculty members serve on the Task Forces without compensation and are asked to grapple with some of the most difficult issues facing higher education in the country today with scant guidance and little or no staff support. The problems faced by Task Force members in connection with the placement and certification of underprepared students is a difficult, often intractable one, and their efforts on behalf of these students deserve the appreciation and consideration of the entire University community.

However, given the information provided above on the deep flaws of the testing program, it would appear that the performance of the Task Forces needs to be scrutinized carefully. If CUNY is going to extricate itself from the difficulties created by the current, SKAT-based placement program, it would appear that those during whose watch these problems have proliferated need to reform their procedures or be replaced by groups more responsive to the needs of the University.

The Task Forces that have responsibility for the placement program suffer from unclear and uncertain structure and from lack of substantive faculty representation. The faculty community as a whole has little knowledge about the Task Forces, and many professors throughout the University do not even know of their existence. Minutes of Task Force deliberations, when they exist at all, are not easily accessible. Meetings of the groups seem to be sporadic. (For example, during the year this writer spent at the Office of Academic Affairs, the Writing Task Force appears to have met only once, hardly a pace conducive to solving the many writing problems faced by the WAT.) The agenda for Task Force meetings appears in some cases to leave to others some of the most pressing problems in the area. (For example, the time-limit research on the RAT discussed above was requested by, and results first
presented to, not the Reading Task force, but a research and advocacy group.)

Moreover, and unlike faculty committees having responsibility for academic questions throughout the campuses, the members of the Task Forces do not appear to be formally elected by their peers in the colleges. Rather, they are selected according to a procedure that is not explicitly spelled out in any widely accessible document, perhaps not anywhere at all. And unlike such faculty groups as Curriculum Committees throughout the University, members of the administration, in this case the central Office of Academic Affairs, are a strong presence in these meetings and play an active role in both deliberations and the setting of agendas. Thus the representativeness and independence of the Task Forces as truly faculty groups seems questionable.

Even setting aside the unusual procedure for selecting members, the Task Forces represent a very small group of University faculty—those teaching in remedial programs—even though the tests they sponsor and the decisions they make have an impact that goes well beyond the confines of a single profession. Moreover, these faculty members represent a narrow range of expertise—that of professionals teaching in the area of remediation. While the knowledge, integrity and professionalism of these faculty members are of the highest quality, it is almost certain that the University could benefit from additional expertise from faculty members in areas of language and mathematics who are not necessarily teaching remedial courses or housed in remedial programs. In addition, given the importance of placement for the entire University, it is almost certain that the Task Forces could benefit from having members who have nothing to do with language, mathematics, or remediation, but who can bring a wider perspective to the work of these groups.

Correction of all these problems associated with the Task Forces would appear necessary before these groups can
be trusted to play a meaningful role in the reform of the placement program that the evidence presented in this report suggests is urgently needed in the University.

1.11 Summary

The preceding sections have provided a detailed criticism of the freshman placement program presently in use at CUNY, a program that relies on the SKAT tests as the primary instrument for making decisions about incoming students.

It has been shown that the SKATs are used for placement purposes in complete obfuscation of the testing mandate from the Board of Trustees and against specific objections from impartial outside consultants. It has also been shown that the CUNY placement program, which to this day is unsupported by systematic validation research, unnecessarily defines entering students in harsh, pass/fail terms; relies on single measures against the unanimous advice of authorities in the area of testing; places arbitrary time limits on test takers; ignores the special placement needs faced by the University with regard to speakers of other languages; and produces results that put Black and Latino students at a distinct disadvantage.

Under the current program, the rate of placement into remediation (and the usually concurrent barring of students from college courses) at CUNY has come to exceeded national norms and has had a measurably negative impact on retention. The program, moreover, labors under an uncertain governance structure that offers the appearance without the substance of faculty representation and control.

Perhaps most important, the University through its testing program has promoted a conception of the SKATs as general ability tests of minimum competency required to do college work, without however producing any evidence to support this position, and without attending to contradicting evidence, in particular to the well-
established look of correlation between SKAT results and results in college courses.

This false conception of the SKATs as general, minimum ability tests has in turn given wide currency to the idea that with regard to each of the three areas of Mathematics, Reading, and Writing incoming students are of two kinds, those who are prepared for college and those who are not. This simplistic, either-or approach to freshmen has provided a rationale for the widening practice of keeping remedial students away from freshman courses, has fostered the unfounded idea that skills are learned prior to and in isolation from collegiate subject matter, and has had a retarding effect on innovation and reform, keeping the colleges from developing the freshman curriculum of inclusion that the University so sorely needs.
ESL instruction at CUNY, unlike instruction in most other areas, is carried out primarily by part-time adjuncts. While part-timers are often excellent teachers, they cannot devote to their students and to the institution the time and energy of full-timers. At CUNY, the proportion of instruction that is carried out by full-time faculty members is much lower in ESL than in other undergraduate disciplines. And this is not simply a function of ESL being one of the remedial disciplines, all of which may be thought to suffer equally from a lack of full-time faculty. When one compares ESL with other remedial areas such as Remedial English, the proportion of full-timers in ESL is still considerably lower.

Table 8 presents data from seven CUNY colleges. The table compares the extent to which instruction is in the hands of full-timers in undergraduate courses overall (column I); in ESL (column II); and in Remedial English (column III). The last two columns show for each college the percentage point difference between the overall full-time rate and the full-time rate in ESL (column IV); and then again between the overall full-time rate and that in Remedial English (column V).

The table shows that unlike overall undergraduate instruction, which shows rates of participation by full-timers that exceed 50 percent, ESL instruction by full-time professors is the exception rather than the rule. With the exception of Evers and Hostos, all the colleges show a much smaller proportion of full-time instruction in ESL than in the college overall undergraduate instructional effort. And while there is also a smaller proportion in Remedial English, the difference when compared to the overall college rate tends to be of a lesser magnitude than in ESL.

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1 These were the colleges for which fully comparable data on proportion of full-time instruction in the relevant areas are available in the University's Teaching Load Analysis.
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All data is from the **1988 CUNY Teaching Load Analysis (Derived Data)**, published in 1989 by the CUNY Office for Institutional Research and Development.

1 Data on proportion of instruction by full time faculty in all undergraduate courses is taken from the totals lines.

2 Data on proportion of instruction by full time faculty in ESL courses is taken from line 649.

2 Data on proportion of instruction by full time faculty in Remedial English courses is taken from line 796.

Another measure of institutional support for a teaching discipline is the extent to which faculty members are burdened with large teaching loads. The size of the teaching load has a direct effect on the extent to which faculty members can engage in research, retrain themselves or their peers, attend conferences, work on advanced degrees, etc. It seems clear that the teaching loads at CUNY are much heavier
for ESL faculty members than for professors in other areas. And again here, this overburdening of the ESL faculty does not seem to be merely a function of their being in a remedial area, where everyone may be thought to suffer from heavy teaching loads. When ESL is compared to Remedial English, it emerges that the ESL loads are still disproportionately heavy.

Table 9 presents data from seven CUNY colleges.2 The table compares average teaching loads for undergraduate faculties overall (column I); for ESL faculties (column II); and for Remedial English faculties (column III). The last two columns show for each college the percentage point difference between the average teaching load overall and the ESL average (column IV); and between the average teaching load overall and that in Remedial English (column V).

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2 These were the colleges for which fully comparable data on teaching loads in the relevant areas are available in the University's Teaching Load Analysis.
All data is from the 1988 CUNY Teaching Load Analysis (Derived Data), published by the CUNY Office for Institutional Research and Development.

* Data on proportion of instruction by full time faculty in all undergraduate courses is taken from the totals lines.

# Data on proportion of instruction by full time faculty in ESL courses is taken from line 649.

@ Data on proportion of instruction by full time faculty in Remedial English courses is taken from line 796.

The data in Table 9 show that, with the exception of Hostos, all colleges place heavier teaching loads on ESL instructors than on their other faculties. And it shows that while the same problem exists with faculties in Remedial English, it tends to be greater in ESL. It thus seems, from the results of Tables 8 and 9, that despite the recognized importance of ESL instruction to the well-being of the University, the investment in faculty resources in this area is quite small when compared to other disciplines, both in and out of the remediation area.

2.2 ESL curriculum

The field of ESL teaching, and the related area of second-language acquisition, have experienced a great deal of creative growth in both theoretical and methodological aspects in the recent past. Yet the University seems to have done little to help professionals in its ESL programs absorb the full impact of these innovations. Given the dearth of full-time faculty members (who are the ones who can take a leadership role in curriculum development), and given the heavier than normal teaching loads that burden all ESL faculty, it does not seem that the University has created conditions under which the quality of ESL teaching can improve.
Among the many issues that ESL faculties could be encouraged to examine through adequate support is whether ESL instruction is in fact preparing students for further collegiate work. There is some evidence that students at CUNY see the ESL courses as helping them improve their English in some general way, but that they do not regard them as helpful for learning to take English-medium college courses.3

In addition to establishing the fit between the ESL curriculum and the demands of content courses to follow, properly supported ESL faculties would be able to examine the effect that the University’s testing program is having on ESL students. On most campuses, students must pass the Writing SKAT in order to pass the highest level of ESL. (Exit criterion from ESL is one of the many uses for which the SKATs were not designed and for which, as we saw above, no supportive validation research is available.) Yet many ESL faculty members feel that this is not an appropriate measure of their teaching efforts, and that the Writing SKAT should not be the exit criterion from their courses. Similar feelings have been expressed by faculty members from minority groups who have a special concern for the well-being of students whose primary language is other than English.

Given the lack of validation research on the SKAT as a whole—and especially the flaws of the Writing test—that were outlined in Section 1 of this report, it comes as no surprise that the relation between the SKATs and the ESL student should be in need of reexamination. As we have seen, the many shortcomings of the SKATs for the student body as a whole are aggravated when the tests are given to people for whom English is still developing.

3 See results of surveys conducted among former ESL program students in Smoke (1988).
One aspect of the relationship between the Writing SKAT and the ESL curriculum that is particularly in need of scrutiny is the extent to which the test is placing artificial limitations on what is taught in upper-level ESL courses. In the minds of instructors as well as students, learning to pass that test has become the primary objective of these ESL courses. The question needs to be raised whether the content courses that these students have to take in fact require them to write essays of the type required in the ESL exit exam, or if there are other skills that may be more important for subsequent work but the that ESL courses may be ignoring.

There is some evidence that ESL students find little connection between what they learn in the SKAT-driven advanced ESL courses and what is expected of them later. When asked in a survey to list difficulties they encountered while taking content courses after finishing ESL, the most frequent answer (given by 92 percent of respondents to a survey) was the inability to "read and study from textbooks" (Smoke 1987:25).

The students' expressed dissatisfaction with the Writing SKAT as an exit test, and with instruction that is overly centered on this test, seems to find support in the predictive validity data discussed in Section 1 of this report. It was shown there that there is no correlation between being able to pass the Writing SKAT and doing well in courses, and that a program of instruction centered on the passing of this test is necessarily going to exclude abilities that students in fact need to acquire to do well in college courses.

2.3 Content courses for ESL students

In conversations with advocacy groups, in discussions with students, in the writings and professional-presentations of ESL faculty, in meetings of interest groups such as CUNY's Language Forum, and in discussions with all
those interested in Latino students in higher education, the availability of regular subject-matter offerings to students who are still taking remedial courses, especially those taking ESL, emerges as an issue of central importance. As colleges throughout CUNY place more restrictions on the availability of credit-bearing courses for such students, concern grows that, first, opportunities for exposure to, and use of, academic English are dwindling, and second, that the University's policy of Open Admissions is being seriously eroded.

(In discussing content courses, it is important to distinguish between courses conducted in English and those content offerings that, at some of the colleges, are available in Spanish. In addition, within the English-medium courses a distinction must be made between, on the one hand, content courses that are available to everyone and where no special provision is made for students taking ESL and, on the other, content courses specifically designed with these students in mind, such as bridged, paired, or linked courses.)

Two factors contribute to making the availability of content courses to students taking ESL an important question. One, the issue of effective ESL pedagogy; and two, the issue of meaningful access.

a) Effective ESL pedagogy

It is widely believed that language skills improve at a faster rate when they are used for authentic communicative purposes--such as listening to lectures, asking questions, and writing class assignments in credit-bearing content

4 Spanish-medium offerings are found not only in bilingual programs such as those at Lehman and Hostos, but also in courses associated with departments of Puerto Rican Studies, Latin American and Caribbean Studies, Romance Languages, as well as in programs of bilingual teacher preparation in Schools of Education throughout the University. A good description of special content courses designed for ESL students can be found in Benesch (1988).
courses—than when they are used only in classes specifically devoted to the teaching of a language. 5

The professional organization Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), is on record as opposing the separation of ESL students from content courses, and as favoring the concurrent programming of ESL experiences and content activities (Benesch 1988:1). This view is not limited to the scholarly literature or the professional organizations, but is also widespread among professionals in the University. Calls emanating from CUNY faculty for more pairing of ESL instruction with content offerings are documented in Smoke (1988). As to the value of such courses, it has been suggested that "[n]ationally, the pairing of [ESL and content] courses has been found to be an effective method of instruction for reinforcing basic skills, while also advancing college credit" (Everson & Kwalick 1987:11)

The belief that English skills are best learned in actual real-life contexts suggests that reducing the exposure of ESL students to subject-matter courses may be counterproductive, since it amounts to depriving them of the very experiences that are needed to achieve the desired goals. Yet, the tendency on many campuses is precisely to require successful completion of ESL courses and explicit demonstration of English proficiency before being allowed access to most subject-matter offerings. This apparent contradiction between pedagogical beliefs and current practices at the colleges needs to be addressed if the University is to truly become an institution where speakers

5 This is part of a wider current of opinion that considers the acquisition of basic skills as a derivative process, resulting mostly as a by-product of the apprehension of meaningful content. Approaches that regard the teaching of basic skills as in some-sense independent of, and preparatory to, the teaching of content are, in this view, unlikely to produce very positive results (for some discussion see Smith 1986).
of other languages can successfully acquire a college education. 6

Our understanding of the issue of the advisability of concurrent content courses in English for ESL students will not be at all furthered by the straightforward reasoning that people who do not know English cannot very well be expected to benefit from English-medium courses. 7

Knowing English is not a simple, one-dimensional construct, but is rather made up of a multiplicity of variables. At the very least, it must be kept in mind that students taking ESL find themselves at many different stages in the process of second language acquisition; that the ability to understand spoken and written material in a second language almost always outpaces the ability to produce speech and writing; that many ESL students have highly developed receptive skills in English; and that therefore many of them are capable of following with a modicum of success at least some regular, English-medium content courses. In addition, many of these students have productive skills that are developed enough to profit from

6 There is a considerable body of scholarly opinion that holds that the improvement of language skills that results from the taking of concurrent content courses holds even when the courses are taken in languages other than English. Thus for Latino students whose level of English proficiency is still too low to profit from instruction conducted in that language, the University should be encouraging the taking of content courses in Spanish. Many of the skills that students learn in English-medium courses are not in fact English skills, but rather general reading and writing abilities that can be learned in one language and then transferred to another.

7 There is some suggestive evidence that at least some faculty members welcome the presence of ESL students in courses that require writing. In a study at Brooklyn College, it was found that "[a]lthough instructors often had not known that a particular writer was an ESL student, they believed that ESL students in their classes were as good or even better than native writers despite second-language problems" (Brooks 1988:14).
using them in real communicative contexts, with special tutorial or bridge support in some cases, and without it in others.8

When considering the impact of restricting access by ESL students to subject-matter courses, questions must be asked about the student’s total daily or weekly curriculum. Speakers of other languages who take only ESL courses are being treated as if they were attending a preliminary, preparatory program to get them ready for college. But programs that are preliminary and preparatory, and that must be completed prior to acceding to some other educational level, only make sense when they are intensive and of short duration. Yet ESL offerings at many of the colleges are anything but intensive, and can last through three, four, or more semesters.9 There is reason to question whether this non-intensive approach to ESL, coupled with the separation from English-medium content offerings, constitutes the best approach to acquiring any second language.

b) Meaningful access to college offerings

Whether or not concurrent content courses redound to the benefit of students taking ESL because they help them develop English skills, such courses are certainly beneficial in that only they constitute meaningful access to the University. Open admission into an ESL program, if it does not lead to entry into significant, credit-bearing

8 For descriptions of highly successful programs in which ESL students take tutor-supported content courses, see Hirsch (1988).

9 A student taking, for example, ESL 10 during a regular semester at City College appears to receive 9 hours of ESL instruction a week. (In comparison, a student participating in one of the Pre-freshman Summer Programs sponsored by CUNY receives 4 to 6 hours of ESL instruction a day.) For information on the structure of ESL curricula, see Freshman year programs: ESL, prepared by the CUNY Office of Academic Affairs.
content activities within a reasonable time for reasonable numbers of students, is not open admission.

The issue of whether the policy of Open Admissions is to be in any way interpreted differently for ESL and EPL students has been explicitly raised by the University. The 1984 Report of the CUNY Task Force on Student Retention and Academic Performance, chaired by President Leonard Lief of Lehman College, was asked to look into the matter. The Task Force Report answered conclusively that no minimum level of English proficiency was required to enter CUNY.

The question of the role of content courses, and particularly of content courses conducted in English, in the education of Latino students is important not simply on pedagogical grounds, but on institutional and political grounds as well. Should it prove to be the case that, quite independently of issues of access, ESL is best taught in the context of regular college offerings, then we would have an important convergence of broadly institutional and narrowly pedagogical considerations. For it would turn out that the best teaching practice would also be the practice that most enhances meaningful access to college offerings, and that best serves to flesh out our policy of open admissions.

2.4 Administrative & structural problems

With rare exceptions, the offerings of ESL programs at CUNY carry no college credit. Related to this, and again with rare exceptions, ESL activities have no departmental status, but are rather constituted around programs housed within larger departments. Neither of these conditions seems justified, and neither benefits Latino students at CUNY.

Language instruction throughout the University, as throughout American higher education in general, is granted full credit in all cases when the students are primarily members of majority groups (who take courses in French, Spanish, etc., for full credit). To deny credit to language instruction when the students are primarily members of
minority groups taking English seems discriminatory. The unfairness of this policy becomes particularly glaring when one considers that the levels of proficiency reached by the recipients of the no-credit activity far exceed those reached by the ones who get credit. (That is, the level of proficiency reached in English by ESL students who receive no credit is far greater than that reached in French or Spanish by students who do receive credit).

Language teaching as a legitimate, proper function of a university has been around as long as universities as we know them today have existed. The policy of de-crediting the learning of the language in which the university conducts its business reverses a tradition in higher education that has stood firm since the days when students developed in their grammar courses the same Latin that instructors used in their lectures. The English that is learned in ESL and used in content courses presents us with a situation that is essentially no different from this traditional one. It is thus not too soon for New York to reach the level of understanding of the role of language in education that was already available in Bologna and Salamanca six hundred years ago.

The question of departmental status is related to the question of credit, as well as to issues of curriculum improvement discussed above. As befits a language teaching activity, ESL offerings in college belong in the same structures that house the other Humanities. These may be divisions of arts, of arts and science, etc. But there seems little justification for housing ESL, as presently happens in much of CUNY, in divisions that deal primarily with remediation.

Within a Humanities division of some type, ESL would make sense constituted as a separate ESL Department, or housed in departments of English, of Languages and Linguistics, or of Language Studies. Under either arrangement, ESL faculty members would be able to combine
teaching and research in a manner that is difficult to do now. And the University would be able to attract into its ESL programs researchers and scholars whom it is difficult to attract under prevailing arrangements.

2.5 Summary

This section has provided details on the contradiction that exists between the professed interest in developing the English skills of Latino students whose primary language is Spanish and the extraordinary lack of support that the University has shown for programs where Latino students are offered instruction in English as a second language. It has also outlined problems that affect the ESL curriculum, especially as it is impacted by the University testing program. And it has provided details on the reasons for promoting greater access by ESL students to subject matter offerings. Finally, we have offered suggestions on improving the administrative and credit structure under which ESL offerings operate.
3. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 Summary

This report has provided a detailed criticism of the freshman placement program presently in use at CUNY, a program that relies on the SKAT tests as the primary instrument for making decisions about incoming students.

It has been shown that the SKATs are used for placement purposes in obfuscation of the testing mandate from the Board of Trustees and against specific objections by impartial outside consultants.

It has been shown that the CUNY placement program lacks systematic supporting validation research; defines entering students unnecessarily in harsh, pass/fail terms; relies on single measures against the unanimous advice of authorities in the area of testing; places arbitrary time limits on test takers; ignores the special placement needs faced by the University with regard to speakers of other languages; and produces results that put Black and Latino students at a distinct disadvantage.

Under the current program, the rate of placement into remediation (and the usually concurrent barring of students from many college courses) at CUNY has come to exceed national norms and has had a measurably negative impact on retention. The program, moreover, labors under an uncertain governance structure that offers the appearance without the substance of faculty representation and control.

Perhaps most important, the University through its testing program has promoted a conception of the SKATs as general ability tests of minimum competency required to do college work, without however producing any evidence to support this position, and without attending to contradicting evidence, in particular to the well-established lack of correlation between SKAT results and results in college courses.
This false conception of the SKATs as general, minimum ability tests has in turn given wide currency to the idea that with regard to each of the three areas of Mathematics, Reading, and Writing incoming students are of two kinds, those who are prepared for college and those who are not. This simplistic, either-or approach to freshmen has provided a rationale for the widening practice of keeping remedial students away from many freshman courses, has fostered the unfounded idea that skills are learned prior to and in isolation from collegiate subject matter, and has had a retarding effect on innovation and reform, keeping the colleges from developing the freshman curriculum of inclusion that the University so sorely needs.

This report has also provided details on the contradiction that exists between the professed interest in developing the English skills of Latino students whose primary language is Spanish and the demonstrable lack of support that the University has given to programs where Latino students are offered instruction in English as a second language. This report has also outlined problems that affect the ESL curriculum, especially as it is impacted upon by the University testing program. And it has provided details on the reasons for promoting greater access by ESL students to subject matter offerings. Finally, this report has offered suggestions on improving the administrative and credit structure under which ESL offerings are made available to students.

3.2 Recommendations

The causes of the unusually low retention rate among Latinos at CUNY are many, and the problems affecting this group of students are numerous and difficult to solve. It is therefore recommended that the cooperative effort between CUNY and PRCHE focus first on only two areas, the placement tests and the ESL programs. The energies of CUNY and PRCHE
should be directed at developing action plans to obtain the following four goals.

a) The University must re-establish a credible policy of Open Access by admitting freshmen from the start into substantive, credit-bearing, college-level work. Such work should be taken, in proportions to be determined by the faculty, concurrently with any work that may be required in pre-collegiate skills development. As matters stand now, large numbers of Latino students enter the University only in name, since instruction in remedial programs is mostly at the secondary school level, and since instruction in ESL programs, despite being at tertiary levels, is usually not granted credit. While some developmental, compensatory, bridge, and supplemental instruction courses already embody a concurrent approach, such courses do not constitute the prevailing form of instruction for incoming students, who continue to spend exceedingly long periods in the University before receiving college level instruction or accumulating any substantial number of credits.

b) The University must return to a position of compliance with the mandates of the Board of Trustees by limiting its Skills Assessment Tests (SKAT) to the certification of minimum competency for students who reach 61 credits. The University must thus cease the practice of using the Skills Assessment Tests (SKAT) as an instrument for the testing of incoming students. In their use as Trustees-mandated certification instruments, the SKATs must be subjected to a thorough program of validation research.

c) To replace, at the level of entry, the currently misused SKATs, the University must develop a set of diagnostic procedures that would meet modern standards of large-scale testing, that would be supported by a program of validity research, would produce scalar scores disconnected from notions of success or failure, and aid in placing students along a curricular continuum that would combine
from the start substantive college-level instruction with attention to the development of pre-collegiate skills.

d) The University must expand its support of ESL programs by housing them within traditionally defined departmental units, providing them with full-time lines proportionate to other units in the University, increasing faculty development, and granting credit for those offerings that in the judgment of the ESL faculty are taught at a tertiary level and thus fall within the age-old role of universities as language-teaching institutions.
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