Task Force calls for major attacks on City University of New York

Crisis threatens public higher education

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19 July 1999

The report issued last month by the Mayor's Advisory Task Force on the City University of New York provides graphic evidence of the crisis of the public higher education system in the financial and cultural capital of the United States.

The Task Force, appointed by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani in May 1998, spent more than a year before issuing its findings. The panel gathered data, audited CUNY's books and records, reviewed thousands of documents and conducted hundreds of interviews before producing its 109-page report and recommendations.

The failures of the existing system are apparent. The 19 junior and senior colleges in the City University, with nearly 200,000 students, are struggling with low graduation rates and huge numbers of students unable to do college-level work. Not a single one of the four-year colleges is in the "top tier" of public institutions nationwide as measured by the academic level of its entering freshmen or its graduates.

87 percent of freshmen at CUNY's community colleges (two-year institutions) require remedial courses when they enter, compared to about 40 percent of freshmen at public community colleges in the U.S. as a whole. For the senior (four-year) schools the corresponding figures are 72 percent of CUNY freshmen and 22 percent at public colleges nationally. 55 percent of CUNY freshmen fail more than one remediation placement test. Fully half are deficient in basic reading skills, while 19,000 students annually enter CUNY needing special courses in basic reading, math and other skills.

The four-year graduation rate at CUNY's senior colleges is between 6 and 7 percent. Their six-year graduation rate is roughly 30 percent, about half of that at the State University of New York. CUNY's eight-year graduation rate is about 42 percent. For the junior colleges, the two-year graduation rate is only about 1 percent. 17 percent receive their associate degree diplomas within four years, compared to 35 percent at the State University. The longer time spent in school and the smaller percentages graduating translate into lost job opportunities and continued low-wage jobs for many thousands of working class youth.

The problems of the City University are closely related to those of the New York City public schools, as the Task Force report acknowledges. Each year, about two-thirds of the full-time freshmen at CUNY are recent graduates of the city's public high schools. This represents about 35 percent of all public high school graduates. In the words of the report, "We recognize that our mandate does not explicitly extend to the public schools, but the fact is that CUNY and (the public schools) together constitute New York City's public education system, and for better or worse they shape one another."

The condition of the city's public elementary and secondary schools, which are supposed to prepare their students for higher education, is a scandal. Fewer than one-quarter of public high school graduates now earn regular academic diplomas, and huge numbers fail to graduate. Public school enrolment, fueled by immigration, has soared from 937,000 to 1,057,000 in the past decade, with almost no new school construction. Students face literally crumbling schools, with thousands forced to double up on classroom space or to meet in "refurbished" closets, hallways and bathrooms. Class sizes have grown. City schools lost billions of dollars in funding during the 1990s beginning under the administration of Democratic Mayor David Dinkins and continuing under Republican Giuliani even while the student population was growing rapidly.

What does the Task Force propose in the face of this disastrous situation? In its report it sets as its aim the "saving" of the City University. Calling CUNY "an institution adrift," it nevertheless affirms its support for "broad access to a range of higher education opportunities of quality suited to New York City's diverse population and to the City's needs."

At first glance this may sound reasonable, or at least innocuous. The Task Force does not repeat the language of Giuliani, who has been waging a campaign against CUNY similar to the one he has conducted for much of his tenure in office against the city's public school system. Last January the Mayor said that the City University should be "blown up," using the phrase to dramatize his demagogic charge that the system was irremediably bureaucratic and a waste of taxpayer funds.

In fact there is little or nothing that separates Giuliani's policy and the recommendations of the Task Force, and the Mayor welcomed the report of a panel he had carefully selected. A look at its composition and the proposals it has come up with shows why.

The Task Force was chaired by Benno Schmidt, a former president of Yale University who has become well known over the past decade as the chairman of the Edison Project, a private company that runs public schools for profit. Schmidt is perhaps the most visible spokesman for the introduction of "competition" and the profit motive into the educational system, including the use of vouchers and other techniques to undermine the public schools. This man, who has devoted years to "proving" that for-profit schools are the solution, was asked to pass judgment on the largest urban public university system in the country.

Most of Schmidt's colleagues on the seven-member panel share his ideology. They included former Congressman Herman Badillo, a Democrat-turned-Republican who is one of Giuliani's closest allies; Heather MacDonald of the Manhattan Institute, a right-wing think tank which has been in the forefront of the campaign for privatization of public services; and Richard Schwartz, a former senior adviser to Giuliani who designed the campaign which led to the removal of hundreds of thousands from the welfare rolls, and who is now the president and chief executive of Opportunity America, a company that runs workfare programs.

Taking a closer look at the recommendations of Schmidt and his fellow

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Task Force members, perhaps the most important element is what is ignored. The report says nothing about the enormous budget cuts that have taken place in the past decade. Schmidt was quoted as saying a discussion of school funding on the Task Force would have been “very contentious.” Far from holding government responsible for its actions in gutting the budget for public higher education, the report goes out of its way to praise the politicians currently presiding in Albany and New York's City Hall.

The report's official recommendations, 29 in all, take the cuts for granted, and do not include a single demand for the funding that is so desperately needed. Some of the proposals are platitudes or vague prescriptions “CUNY must strengthen the quality and consistency of its teacher education programs and provide (the public schools) with well-prepared teachers,” for instance. How this is to be done is never spelled out.

Other recommendations fall into the category of ideas which could make some difference, but which will require huge new spending, about which the report is totally silent. The authors call on the Board of Education, for instance, to “provide special after-school and summer-school interventions to help students who are not meeting standards.” It has been pointed out that 85 percent of the current public schools lack air conditioning, and would be unable to cope with hot-weather conditions. Nor is there any idea of where the teachers for extensive summer school classes would come from.

The most significant of the report's proposals are those dealing with admissions policy and remediation. The report calls on CUNY to adopt the policy of “mission differentiation.” The most important task facing the university right now, it maintains, is attracting some academically-qualified students and developing one or two “elite” schools.

Remediation, the report states, must be “recognize(d) for what it is: an unfortunate necessity, thrust upon CUNY by the failure of the schools, and a distraction from the main business of the University.” Remediation must be banished from the four-year colleges entirely, the report states. Students who need such courses must be kept out of the senior colleges and dumped into the two-year schools.

Thus the concrete proposals the Task Force has come up with are purely negative. The main thing it wants to accomplish is kick students out of the four-year colleges. These proposals are not merely inadequate. They are part of an assault on education. It does not take too much imagination to figure out where the changes in admissions policy will lead. Even if CUNY is successful in upgrading one or two schools out of 19, the system will be rigidly segregated along class and academic lines, and tens of thousands who want four-year degrees will either be left to stagnate in the community colleges or tossed out of school entirely. Many will become discouraged and leave school, and one gets the distinct impression that this would not disturb the Task Force at all. A decline in enrolment will also be used, in a kind of vicious circle, to justify further cutbacks.

The Task Force's choice of words is significant. The document does not speak of universal access to higher education, but only “broad” access. According to its members, youth do not have the right to higher education, and many will have to do without it, even though Schmidt himself was quoted as saying that a college degree has become “virtually the only source of opportunity.”

Elsewhere the report declares that CUNY suffers from a “leveling trend and anti-meritocratic mindset.” This is the language of opponents of social equality, worshipers of the profit motive who demand that ruthless competition be the rule in the field of education as everywhere else in capitalist society.

Unprepared students are “inundating” the city colleges, the report states, conjuring up the image of a hostile wave of disruptive elements. Similarly, CUNY's programs are termed “ *vulnerable* to the presence of large numbers of students who are not prepared to do college-level work” (emphasis added), a formulation which depicts these youth as a kind of infection on the campus who should presumably be rooted out as one would any other infection.

A particularly important recommendation in the report is entitled “Competition and choice in remediation.” “Prospective CUNY students must be afforded a variety of remediation options that meet their individual needs,” the authors write, as if discussing consumers shopping for the latest in computers or cell phones. “Students who require remediation should be given education vouchers, funded by a mix of public sources... The Task Force believes that many organizations could potentially participate in remediation including for-profit education companies, local independent colleges and universities, publicly-funded adult education programs and, of course, CUNY itself.”

This proposal would turn the crisis of the City University into a means of enriching private entrepreneurs. Schmidt, who has now been rewarded for his work on the Task Force by being appointed Vice Chairman of CUNY, is also continuing to hold his position in the Edison Project. So blatant is the conflict of interest between his career and his role in relation to CUNY that the report felt it necessary to add a footnote to the proposal for vouchers, stating that “it should be noted that The Edison Project has no interest in participating in such activities.”

While the Task Force's proposals would further weaken and shrink the City University, they also reflect a concern within the ruling establishment with the crisis at CUNY. Big business faces a certain dilemma. While the Task Force and the ruling circles for which it speaks would like to see the majority of working class youth forced to compete for low-wage jobs, they also need a trained workforce in New York's banks, law firms and other sectors of the economy. Many employers are having increasing difficulty finding qualified workers. The collapse of the entire municipal college system would leave them without trained personnel.

Hence the talk of “saving” CUNY. In essence, these hypocritical phrases resemble the “compassionate conservatism” that Republican presidential aspirant George W. Bush has made his slogan for 2000. This is a bipartisan program identical in all major aspects to the policies followed for the past 6½ years by the administration of Bill Clinton: empty words of sympathy combined with ruthless attacks on jobs, benefits and public services. The bipartisanship was manifested on the Task Force, one of whose members was a well-connected New York Democrat, Manfred Ohrenstein, a former leader of the New York State Assembly. The *New York Times* also welcomed the Task Force report, saying that it offered “thought-provoking suggestions of ways CUNY could become the model for a public urban university system.” What both Giuliani and the *Times* are looking for, however—at most one or two “top tier” schools in CUNY—will do nothing to meet the needs of hundreds of thousands of working class students for a good college education.

The attack on CUNY cannot be answered with support for the status quo. CUNY *has* failed, but for reasons which the Task Force is unwilling to examine.

The “open admissions” policy inaugurated at CUNY about 30 years ago was an extremely limited reform which never became a genuine policy of higher education for all. It coincided with the growth of poverty in New York City and a change in the city's population, which came to include far higher percentages of impoverished immigrant and minority workers. While the next generation of New York City high school graduates needed additional help to cope with these problems, what they got instead was budget cuts, the imposition of tuition for the first time (beginning in 1976), and the replacement of full-time teachers by part-time, low-paid adjuncts (full-time teaching staff has fallen from 60 to 40 percent of the total).

In the past ten years, funding for public higher education in New York has been cut 29 percent, while spending for prisons has jumped 76 percent. Tuition, first imposed 23 years ago, was raised from $1,250 in 1991 to $3,400 six years later, a huge jump which forces many students to

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cut back on the number of classes they are able to take. If the Task Force wanted to know why it takes many students eight years to graduate, this is one factor it could have looked out. It is not mentioned in the report.

The children of the middle class strata and better-off sections of workers have been directed to the State University campuses in Albany, Binghamton and other towns around the state. The municipal colleges were left to fend for themselves. As the Task Force report concedes, “CUNY gets very few students from New York City's best high schools...Students with choices go elsewhere.” The result is that the working class was divided in the sphere of higher education, just as it is in the neighborhoods of most cities and suburbs.

This is not simply a crisis of the City University, or simply of the schools themselves. A recent national study reported that nearly 25 percent of children in the US under six years of age are growing up in families whose income falls below the federal poverty line. For New York City, the figure is nearly twice this. The lives of most students in New York are scarred from birth by poverty, homelessness, inadequate nutrition and health care, epidemics of child abuse and AIDS and other chronic illness.

These are the youth that the Task Force callously complains are not ready for college when they get out of high school. This is true and it will take more than remediation to get ready. The wonder under current conditions is not that only 42 percent graduate after eight years, but that this many beat the odds that have been stacked against them.

The latest assault on CUNY is connected to an entire trend in social policy that goes far beyond the confines of New York. The failures of the reformist policies of the past are being seized on to eliminate social reforms and turn the clock back a century or more. The “two-tier” society is becoming the norm. In New York wealthy neighborhoods have their own sources of funding for maintaining “their” parks and providing extra sanitation services, while working class neighborhoods see these services decline. The Task Force seeks to apply this conception to higher education, with a few “elite” schools while the great majority of youth are ignored and neglected.

The answer to the proposals for further retrenchment, cutbacks and vouchers must be a multi-billion dollar program of renewal and rebuilding of the whole system. Class sizes should be reduced to 20 throughout elementary and high school, with the building of new schools and the hiring of thousands of new teachers at decent pay. New equipment and programs will go a long way toward helping students prepare for college-level work. In the City University, the issue of free tuition also arises, along with financial aid to make it possible for youth to go to college without having to work full-time at the same time. Child care assistance for students who are parents must also be addressed.

These specific demands are bound up with the conditions of life facing the working class. Students cannot be expected to achieve their full potential under the present conditions of growing poverty and the struggle against hunger and homelessness. A socialist program is needed, reorganizing economic life to meet the needs of the population as a whole. A radical redistribution of society's wealth and priorities is needed, away from the needs of the super-rich and to meet the needs of the vast majority.

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