

End of remedial courses at four-year colleges

City University of New York to exclude thousands of students

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The exclusion of thousands of students who fail to pass college placement tests will officially begin at the City University of New York in January, following approval by the State Board of Regents of a plan originally passed last year by the CUNY Board of Trustees. The plan, backed by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and Governor George Pataki, will end remedial courses at the city university's four-year colleges.

Students who do not pass proficiency tests in mathematics and English will immediately be barred at four senior college campuses—Brooklyn, Queens, Baruch and Hunter. Letters have just been sent to 248 students who could have been admitted to these schools but no longer qualify because their placement test scores are not high enough.

CUNY's four-year colleges will be among a small number nationwide who bar students, even those who have the necessary high school averages and standardized test scores, if they fail to pass placement tests. Although there have been significant attempts to raise admission requirements and cut back on remediation elsewhere, 81 percent of public four-year colleges in the US still offer remedial courses. The New York schools will be among the few who do not.

The result of the new policy will be to steer thousands of students into the two-year community colleges, where they will be unable to pursue the bachelor's degree programs necessary for higher-paying and more challenging jobs.

According to figures compiled by the City University, about 10 percent of the 14,000 freshmen entering the four-year colleges each year will be kept out by the new policy. Many other students will be discouraged from applying to the senior colleges.

The State Regents' vote is a further step in the rollback of social reforms enacted over generations. The New York city colleges have long provided working class, minority and immigrant students access to higher education, and until 1976 admission was free. Tuition was first imposed at that time, and has grown substantially in the last decade. Now not only is a free higher education a thing of the past, but the right to enter the four-year colleges is itself being further restricted.

The 9-to-6 vote by the Regents reflected some nervousness over the social implications and political consequences of the decision. The final proposal incorporated several “compromises” designed to placate supporters of broader access to public higher education.

There will be a 12-month delay, until September 2001, for the starting date of the new policy at City College and Lehman College, whose student populations would be most affected. About 2,000 entering freshmen who have not passed the required tests will also be allowed in under special temporary exemptions. Students who are denied admission to senior colleges will be able to petition for permission to take specific senior college courses.

The new policy also has been approved only through December 31, 2002, so that the Regents can review the consequences of the change.

None of these provisions alter the fact, however, that a fundamental attack on access to public higher education has taken place.

One of the most significant aspects of the Regents vote was the assistance provided in ending remedial courses by professed opponents of this attack on

education pushed by the Republican mayor and governor. Leaders of an informal group called Friends of CUNY, including Democratic Party officeholders, college administrators and union officials, helped to broker a deal that would secure the nine votes needed for passage.

Those working behind the scenes for the “compromise” included Edward Sullivan, chairman of the New York State Assembly's higher education committee; Irwin Polishook of the CUNY faculty union; former CUNY chairman James P. Murphy; and former Bronx Community College president Roscoe Brown. These erstwhile opponents of the attack on remediation provided the political cover for many of the Regents, who could justify their vote by pointing to the backing for the “compromise” by the Friends of CUNY.

Many students and faculty were bitter over the compromise deal. Lawrence Rushing, a psychology professor at LaGuardia Community College, called the role of Friends of CUNY “reprehensible” and “joining the enemy.”



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