



Access to what? Mission differentiation and academic stratification in U.S. public higher education*

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Abstract. Academic policy initiatives have long been a powerful lever for mission differentiation within U.S. public higher education. Although the higher education literature has examined basic issues in the design of public systems, the tension between access and differentiation has not been explored. Drawing upon comparative case studies of public higher education in Massachusetts and New York, this article examines recent policy initiatives to terminate academic programs, eliminate remedial education, and promote honors colleges within each state system. The analysis depicts how these policies contribute to increased stratification of programs and students within a state system as well as within particular campuses in a system. The authors argue that policy analysis in higher education should develop a more refined conceptualization of access that examines the cumulative impact of contemporary policies on the stratification of student opportunity.

Keywords: access, differentiation, diversity, policy, public colleges, stratification, system

It has become a cliché among higher education researchers that when someone broadly refers to “accountability,” someone else retorts, “Accountability to whom? For what?” The reply is for good reason, for without specifying the relationship between the “to whom” and “for what” questions, accountability fails to be meaningful. Policy analysis in higher education has not yet reached this level of scrutiny with regard to student access. Although researchers have been intensely interested in the rates at which minority and low-income students attend higher education, and their initial enrollment into two- and four-year colleges, there has been far less attention to the academic programs that are available to students once they have been admitted (Eaton 1995).

Equality of opportunity for all students to attend public higher education in their state, without regard to their background or preparation, is a foundational principle of higher education policymaking in the United States. Opportunities to attend open-admissions institutions, usually community colleges, exist in nearly every state, and transfer and articulation policies in principle provide the opportunity to earn a baccalaureate degree. Since the GI Bill, financial aid mechanisms have been developed to provide grants, loans, tax credits, and savings incentives to encourage college attendance. In addition to providing access, a second tenet of policymaking is that state

systems of public higher education can concentrate resources on various campuses to achieve different missions. Particularly in times of resource constraint, mission differentiation has gained momentum in the name of avoiding unnecessary program duplication. The consequences of policies that promote differentiation warrant scrutiny, however, especially for the ways in which they limit access. Indeed, an ongoing tension exists between the twin principles of access and differentiation in the design of public systems. As Marian Gade has observed, "Citizens need a choice of educational opportunities, institutions and programs with minimal geographic and demographic gaps, or access becomes a hollow promise" (Gade 1993, p. 1).

Against the backdrop of this policy climate, this article aims to move the access discourse forward by posing the question, "Access to what?" While ensuring affordable access to some form of higher education will always be a cornerstone of state policymaking, we want to extend the analytical focus to the array of academic programs available to students once they have been admitted. We illustrate this proposed focus by examining a series of contemporary academic restructuring initiatives within state systems, bringing to light how policies that differentiate academic programs and students by level contribute to the stratification of student opportunity within state systems.

Conceptual background

State policymakers in the U.S. have engaged in ongoing redesign of their public higher education systems. During the 1990s, accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness were at the forefront of their agenda (MacTaggart 1996; Gumport and Pusser 1999; Richardson et al. 1999). There were visible attempts to accelerate mission differentiation in various states (Davies 1986; Benjamin and Carroll 1997), and more specifically, to develop academic policies that increase the stratification of students and academic programs (Gumport and Bastedo 2001). States increased the differentiation of systems by targeting resources to "strong" academic programs (Barrow 1996) and by consolidating and terminating "weak" academic programs in the name of reducing duplication (Gumport 1993; Morphew 2000a; Slaughter 1993).

In historical perspective, mission differentiation became prominent in the 1950s and 1960s, when state coordinating boards developed and enrollments expanded. Over the past four decades, statewide coordinators, planners and governing boards have considered various structural alternatives for achieving excellence and affordable access for diverse student populations. These alternatives included diversifying campus missions, facilitating transfer and articulation agreements, and providing mechanisms to demonstrate accountability. But even in states with master plans specifying a

division of labor and responsibilities, colleges and universities at the same segmental level were able to develop an array of academic programs that were virtually identical from one campus to the next.

During the 1990s, new approaches to policy making in general strongly influenced the state policy environment for public higher education. On the forefront of these new approaches was the movement to “reinvent government,” which encouraged mission differentiation to increase efficiency (Osbourne and Gaebler 1997; Moore 1995). Advocates of reinventing government urged government agencies to move from being rule-driven, which increases regulation and bureaucracy, to being mission-driven. Indeed, they have criticized government agencies for being driven by managers who increase bureaucracy and dysfunction in the system to maintain their own prerogatives. As a corrective, proponents wanted government agencies to become goal-oriented by pursuing specific missions that will make them more effective, efficient, innovative, and adaptive. Becoming mission-driven requires moving the focus from process to product, and using agency goals as the criteria for evaluating effectiveness. As applied to higher education systems, this mandate encourages the redesign of public system structures and processes, and has prompted initiatives for academic program review and termination, assessment, and administrative restructuring. Further, the reinventing government movement has provided an opportunity for campus leaders to depart from established routines, even as they are subjected to increased scrutiny of institutional performance.

Mission differentiation has also been a key issue in the international arena, where much of the focus has been on examining the diversity of institutional types within national systems of higher education (Meek et al. 1996; Meek, Huisman and Goedegebuure 2000). Increased mission differentiation has become an imperative for national systems in Europe, despite a number of governmental and policy forces that serve to constrain it, most recently through the development of the European Union (Neave 1996). This has led to a higher degree of convergence than is presently seen in the U.S.; indeed, the U.S. has long been positively regarded for the wide variety of institutional types that are contained within its system, even as convergence pressures persist (Birnbaum 1983; Clark 1983; Rhoades 1990). It remains to be seen, however, whether differentiation pressures at a policy level will result in substantial increases in system diversity, which are a separate dynamic from institutional-level forces towards specialization carried by new faculty and the disciplines (Clark 1983; Morphew 2000b).

In addition to having momentum in the contemporary policy climate, mission differentiation can also be substantiated in theory. Mission differentiation, either planned or ad hoc, is consistent with a functionalist approach

to organizations and system design. Functionalist theorists in higher education have viewed differentiation as a necessary accompaniment to growth, yielding greater structural heterogeneity across campuses in a system (Birnbau 1983; Clark 1983; Trow 1987). In the face of complexity, differentiation has been used as a solution to wider value conflicts, mediating normative tensions between egalitarianism and competitive excellence (Smelser 1974). The prototype for this type of structural redesign is undoubtedly the California Master Plan of 1960 (Kerr 1963; Smelser 1974).

Although this functionalist model is simple and transparent, observers of higher education have critiqued the way in which it obscures dysfunction in the system (Rhoades 1990; Slaughter 1990). One problem is with the principle of concentrating talent and resources: the most capable undergraduate students are encouraged to attend research universities that rarely make their education a priority, while underprepared students end up in community colleges, which have fewer resources for each student. Ironically, research has found that attending highly selective universities in the U.S. adds little if any value to the subsequent earnings of most graduates (Brewer et al. 1999; Dale and Krueger 1999), but it provides substantial gains to minority students and their communities (Bowen and Bok 1998). In addition to questioning the principle of concentration of talent, there is an increasing consensus among researchers that the sorting criteria are problematic (Crouse and Trusheim 1988; Jencks and Phillips 1998). Furthermore, the possibilities for ascending this hierarchy are rarely realized, as research has shown that students who begin their postsecondary education at community colleges are 13% less likely to attain the baccalaureate degree than students who begin at four-year colleges, *ceteris paribus* (Whitaker and Pascarella 1994).

As a second line of critique, this functionalist model understates conflict within a system, particularly frustration from students who have been excluded from access to the upper levels of higher education. An awareness of persistent stratification has fueled the contested arena in which students compete for access to a stratified array of institutions that offer different educational opportunities and prestige. Although the educational and direct economic benefits of elite education for the majority of students may be minimal, a degree from one of these institutions continues to serve as a status marker of high achievement (Collins 1979). Students are also increasingly aware that the sorting of students into different levels of higher education is the culmination of prior sorting practices, including tracking in elementary and secondary education. Indeed, some scholars have proposed that the entire process of schooling reproduces stratification in the wider society by allocating students to their respective roles in the division of labor (Bowles and Gintis 1976).

Pulling together the conceptual threads from these scholarly literatures, we can see how mission differentiation has been proposed as a viable solution to value conflicts, even as it, in turn, contributes to conflict within state systems of higher education. Among the many tensions that exist in system design between centralization and decentralization, it is the tension between access and differentiation that we believe warrants immediate attention.

Research design and state contexts

The authors conducted two case studies of public higher education systems in Massachusetts and New York, from 1990–2001. The comparative case study approach was chosen to permit a richness of detail in the sites and to enable analysis of cross-site differences (Yin 1994). Following Yin's dicta on purposive sampling, the cases of New York and Massachusetts were selected as critical cases to explore the nature of contemporary policy dynamics in public higher education. For each case we collected systemwide data and archival documents (reports, policy briefings, academic plans), as well as media coverage (newspaper articles and editorials). Content analyses were conducted and data were examined for the rationales underlying policy initiatives, evidence of stratification effects, as well as emergent themes. We also examined the rationales of system officers, trustees, and elected officials, to determine if their perspectives differed from the campuses in the system. In addition, we scoured the data for evidence of sorting of students into lower-level institutions or stratification of access to knowledge areas.

The Massachusetts system consists of 29 campuses coordinated by a Board of Higher Education, whose members are appointed by the state governor. There are three segments of public higher education: the 15 community colleges, the 9 state (comprehensive) colleges, and the five campuses of the University of Massachusetts, with a total Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) enrollment of about 120,000. The system is led by a chancellor who reports to the Board of Higher Education. There are campus boards of trustees, appointed by the governor, at the University of Massachusetts and each community and state college campus. The Board of Higher Education has varying levels of statutory authority over the segments, having governing-level authority over the state and community colleges and coordinating-level authority over the University of Massachusetts (Crosson 1996).

James F. Carlin, an insurance magnate and former trustee of the University of Massachusetts, led the Board of Higher Education from 1995 to 1999. During the 1980s, he was well known as the Secretary of Transportation and state-appointed receiver for the troubled city of Chelsea. Carlin's appointment by Governor Weld was, in part, due to Carlin's leadership of the "Democrats

for Weld” during his first campaign for governor against Boston University president John Silber. Carlin joined the Board with a clear agenda to reform public higher education: increasing admissions standards, lowering tuition and fees, eliminating duplicative academic programs, and reforming the system of faculty tenure (Carlin 1997; Massachusetts Board of Higher Education 1998). He was highly successful at implementing his agenda, to the ire of the state’s relatively weak faculty unions. After some health problems, he resigned the post in 1999 and has vowed to take his agenda for higher education reform to the national level. The Board’s chancellor during the Carlin years, Stanley Z. Koplik, died in January 2000 and was replaced with his vice chancellor, Judith I. Gill, marking the end of a turbulent era.

In contrast to Massachusetts, public higher education in New York is divided between two large systems, organized geographically, with the City University of New York (CUNY) serving New York City and the State University of New York (SUNY) serving upstate New York and Long Island. Each system is distinct and heterogeneous and managed by its own chancellor and governing board. A Board of Regents governs all education in the state, but its influence is relatively weak in higher education, because its priority tends to be K-12 education. We focus our New York case study on CUNY. A wide range of political actors in New York have substantive and political authority over CUNY, including its chancellor and Board of Trustees, the state Board of Regents, the Mayor of New York City, the Governor, and the Legislature. The relationship between CUNY and its multiple levels of governance is probably the most complex in the country. It is no surprise that observers and policy analysts alike see the CUNY system as more over-governed and politicized than is healthy for a public higher education system (Gill 1999). Turnover of key leaders was salient here as well.

Enrolling over 200,000 students, CUNY is a system of 18 campuses, constituted by 6 community colleges, 11 senior colleges that grant the baccalaureate and master’s degrees, and a graduate center as the only doctoral-granting university. Along with the segmented structure, CUNY is known to have a fragmented political structure dominated by “regional biases and political divisions” that hampers statewide planning and information gathering (Richardson et al. 1999, p. 73). Within CUNY, City College is the oldest and most well-known campus, but it has never been officially identified as the system’s flagship. Indeed, in recent years other senior colleges, such as Brooklyn, Hunter, and Baruch, have often had better academic reputations. The CUNY faculty union, called the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), is active in promoting faculty and student interests within the CUNY system.

In both Massachusetts and New York, policymakers launched visible and at times controversial academic policy initiatives during the 1990s. Our

analysis focuses on three initiatives that occurred simultaneously in the two cases. Our objectives were to explore the rationales of state policymakers, the potential impact of these policies on mission differentiation, and the implications for academic stratification. In the first section, we examine academic program review, consolidation, and termination policies. The second section on remedial education analyzes the implementation of limits on the number of students who may take remedial courses and the mandate to move students with remedial education needs to community colleges. The final section looks at initiatives that foster elite functions, including the creation of specialized honors programs and to attract the highest-performing students.

Data and interpretation

Academic program termination

In September 1996, Massachusetts began implementing its Program Productivity policy, designed to eliminate programs that graduated few students each year and were offered at other campuses within the system. All programs with five graduates or less per year averaged over the prior three years were targeted for review. The policy quickly sparked debate on campuses about what it means to be a college at all. As one state college philosophy major put it, "Aren't state colleges supposed to provide a well-rounded education at an affordable price?" (Dembner 1997, p. B1). System chancellor Stanley Z. Koplik, however, responded that eliminating programs did not cause any serious harm to the state. "Sure, there's some dislocation for the student," he said, "but we have to look at the public system as a whole. It's a question of priorities. For programs in low demand, it's fine if they're offered only in one public college in the state" (Dembner 1997, p. B1).

In 1997 and 1998, 52 programs were eliminated across the 29 campuses (Massachusetts Board of Higher Education 1998). According to campus presidents, however, the cost savings have been minimal (Van Voorhis 1998). Some of the terminated programs were taught primarily by part-time faculty, while others were taught primarily by faculty from other programs in the college. At the same time, the potential for program closure enabled many presidents to retool an existing program into a new one. For example, the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts eliminated its chemistry major, only to move all of its existing courses into a new program in environmental sciences, leaving the Board open to the charge that nothing substantively has changed, since all of the courses and faculty continue to exist.

Nevertheless, the Board considered the program to be a success, and to a large extent, the state's newspapers have agreed. "It has caused all the

campuses to look very, very hard at their programs and if that is all it did, it would be worth the effort," according to Board Chairman Carlin (Van Voorhis 1998, p. 41). In addition, although short-term savings are minimal, Carlin argued that there will be substantial long-term savings are advanced courses and the faculty who teach them are discontinued. The editorial board at the *Worcester Telegram and Gazette* agreed, saying, "With funding for mainstream courses of study at a premium, it makes little sense for public colleges and universities to dabble in frippery, duplication and academic arcana" (Editorial Board 1998, p. A6). Plans are going forward to target more programs during 2002, and other states such as Illinois and Virginia have continued to target programs as well.

Academic program termination was launched in New York even earlier than in Massachusetts. In 1992, new CUNY chancellor W. Ann Reynolds initiated a systemwide review of academic programs, due to a fiscal crisis in the university. A committee chaired by Leon Goldstein, the president of Kingsborough Community College, developed a plan to eliminate programs throughout the system, in a bid to centralize authority at the system office. The faculty reacted angrily, seeing the report as a bureaucratic infringement upon their traditional rights to evaluate and maintain academic programs. The president of the faculty union said, "If the purpose is to give more authority to the Chancellor, then it won't work. That would amount to an academic dictator, an academic Führer. I don't believe the Chancellor would want such a designation" (Newman 1992, p. A1).

The faculty was unified in its opposition to this program. "It's been an amazing sort of thing, because it's a proposal that has unified faculties in a way that I haven't seen in a long time. The traditional left-right divisions or whatever just don't exist on this. There is a very intense sense of outrage about this," Hunter College's faculty senate chair said (Newman 1993). Faculty opposition turned out to be very effective, and Reynolds dropped the plan within six months (Weiss 1993a). The attempt was not entirely a failure, however: Forty-five programs were eliminated voluntarily by the campuses, and the CUNY Board voted to institute academic program reviews throughout the system and to give the chancellor more authority in evaluating their results (McFadden 1993). Reynolds later used her power of the purse to distribute an extra \$15 million to colleges that backed the new proposal by terminating additional academic programs (Weiss 1993b).

The new CUNY administration, headed by Chancellor Matthew Goldstein, has encouraged the development of elite functions within CUNY. The *CUNY Master Plan for 2000–2004* articulates a vision for the future that entails creating a "flagship environment" within highly selective colleges and a university-wide honors college. There will not be a single flagship

campus; instead, academic programs of strength will be identified throughout the system and receive a special infusion of resources. One strategy has been cluster hiring, where new full-time faculty have been hired to enhance the identified programs. Since 1999, 20% of all new faculty have been senior professors hired for identified programs of strength, including photonics, structural biology, and art history (Arenson 2000b). The program has been very well received by the government and local media, and is the core effort of a comprehensive strategy of institutional renewal for CUNY, tied with the goals of high standards and accountability.

Nevertheless, we are concerned that restructuring will create greater stratification of academic programs, ultimately depriving low-income students of broad access to fields of knowledge. Although the flagship environment proposals in New York have been more palatable, mostly because they have not required the reallocation of existing resources, the impact will be similar to earlier program review processes. Research has shown that academic restructuring tends to occur in fields that are low-status, often because they are dominated by women or minority interests (Slaughter 1993). In addition, low-income and female students are more likely to be affected, since they are less likely to select the high-paying fields of study that are supported by the state (Davies and Guppy 1997; Jacobs 1995). So although academic program review is often a necessary, if painful, process for public universities, the inadvertent impact of these policies will be to increase the stratification of academic programs within these public universities in a way that disproportionately affects certain student populations.

Remedial education

Massachusetts made remediation issues a priority with the ascension of Board Chairman James Carlin in September 1995. When he was appointed, 24% of entering freshman at state comprehensive colleges needed remediation, as did 22% at the University of Massachusetts (Massachusetts Board of Higher Education 1998). A series of articles in *The Boston Globe* focused attention on high remedial enrollments in the state's selective public colleges (Dembner 1996a, b; Mazzeo 2000). In response, the Board of Higher Education set strict policies in September 1996 to reduce remedial education and to increase admissions standards simultaneously.

By fall 1997, only 10% of first-time freshmen at four-year colleges were permitted to enroll in remedial education courses, and by fall 1998 that was reduced to 5%. Community colleges were identified in the segment's mission statement as the site of remedial education in Massachusetts, and the four-year colleges were encouraged to create partnerships with local community colleges to eliminate remedial education at the four-year campuses altogether.

Summer academies were developed to help students meet the new standards prior to fall enrollment. Incentive funds to develop these partnerships were provided through Campus Performance Improvement Program grants, a \$6 million fund set aside by the legislature for the Board to use at its discretion.

At this point, no extensive analysis of the impact of the remedial education in Massachusetts has been conducted. Examination of IPEDS data, however, reveals no consistent pattern of impact on the proportion of minority students in Massachusetts public higher education. Since fall 1996, the proportion of minority students at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, as well as all campuses of the University, has increased slightly (NCES 2001). This is true at seven of the nine comprehensive colleges as well. These results are good news for the BHE staff, who have worked with a multi-segment advisory group to develop appropriate placement standards and to establish collaborative arrangements between two- and four-year colleges (Shaw 2001).

Compared to Massachusetts, CUNY's remedial education initiatives were developed in an even more politicized environment.¹ The CUNY remediation controversy began in 1995 when the planning committee of the CUNY board recommended moving students who needed more than a year of remediation from its senior colleges to community college or night school. At that time, two-thirds of all entering freshmen at senior colleges needed at least one remedial course, and 15,000 students were enrolled in remedial courses in fall 1994 at a cost of \$17 million per year (Hevesi 1995). The planning committee's proposal to reduce remediation was not driven by a call for academic standards, but by the need to reduce costs during the financial exigency declared by Chancellor Reynolds in 1995. It was estimated that the committee's proposal would save \$2 million per year, and the plan passed the CUNY board with relatively little debate in June 1995.

The topic was revisited in January 1998, when New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, supported by Governor George Pataki, called for an end to open admissions at CUNY. Giuliani and Pataki lacked the authority to move on the issue themselves, however, so they used the power of appointment and budget to force the CUNY board to meet their demands. The CUNY board, after a great deal of discussion and compromise, approved a plan in June 1998 to eliminate remedial education at four-year colleges and to establish transition programs for students to meet the new standard (Healy 1998). The New York State Board of Regents demanded to review the policy in 1998. They approved it in November 1999 after a favorable review by an outside panel (Zemsky et al. 1999) and a number of controversial compromises negotiated by members of the Friends of CUNY, who had previously opposed any change in remedial policy (Arenson 1999).

At the same time, Mayor Giuliani established a Task Force to investigate CUNY from top to bottom. The Task Force was chaired by Benno C. Schmidt, former president of Yale University and the current president of the Edison Group, a corporation that provides private sector alternatives to public school problems. Other members of the committee included Manhattan Institute fellow Heather Mac Donald, who previously called for the end of open admissions and the termination of all remedial programs in the CUNY system, and Herman Badillo, chairman of the CUNY Board of Trustees and a principal architect of the new policy on remedial education.

The Schmidt report claimed to be “shocked by both the scale and depth of CUNY students’ remediation needs” (Schmidt et al. 1999, p. 21), the result of being “inundated by NYCPS graduates who lack basic academic skills” (p. 5). The Schmidt report, if implemented, would allow some of the CUNY community colleges to offer remedial education, but only under certain conditions. The primary condition was that, “CUNY must recognize remediation 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” (p. 35).

The immediate effects of the new remediation policy have been unclear, although there seems to be greater differentiation and stratification within the CUNY system, but also increasing enrollment and legitimacy for the system. Increasing standards for transfer students has forced CUNY to reject 2,000 applications for intra-CUNY transfers from community to senior colleges (Renfro and Armour-Garb 1999). In spring 2000, approximately 250 students were barred from enrolling in the senior college that admitted them (Arenson 2000a). Clearly, the long-term effect of the remediation policy will be to increase the stratification of students among institutions within the CUNY system, which may well be the express intent of the policy (Gumport and Bastedo 2001).

At the same time, growing evidence suggests that the overall minority profile of the senior colleges has remained relatively stable. In 2000, when remedial education was eliminated at seven senior colleges, minority student enrollments remained within one percent of the previous year. In 2001, when the remaining four senior colleges implemented the new policy, only City College saw a reduction in its freshman enrollment, by a substantial 17% (Arenson 2001). This was seen as a result of a reduction in the number of students admitted to City’s SEEK program, which is intended for underprepared students with potential. Although, because of demographics, colleges across the country have seen recent increases in enrollment, it is also notable that the CUNY colleges have implemented a number of summer immersion and dual enrollment programs that have softened the blow of the new policy while maintaining the new standards. Enrollment in summer

immersion courses is up 17% from 1999 (Hebel 2002). Minority enrollments seem not to have decreased in the four senior colleges, but there has been a staggering reduction in ESL (English as a Second Language) students, down 7% from 1999–2000 and 46% since 1995–96 (Arenson 2002; Hebel 2002).

Honors programs

In September 1996, Massachusetts Board of Higher Education member Aaron Spencer proposed to create an elite public college to attract honors students from around the state to the public higher education system (Dembner 1996). A concept paper for “Commonwealth College” was circulated by the Board in December, advocating a college that would support 1500 to 2500 students, have tough admissions criteria, enforce a strict honor code, and require a thesis from all graduating seniors (Massachusetts Board of Higher Education 1996). The original idea was to transform one of the state’s comprehensive colleges into the new Commonwealth College, and thus to make it a specialty college much like the state’s College of Art and Maritime Academy. In turn, it was expected that there would be a “halo effect” for the rest of the campuses in the system, increasing resources, attention, and legitimacy from state policymakers and the public.

In March 1997, campuses from throughout the state presented proposals for the new college in one of the legislature’s committee rooms, with Spencer chairing the effort. After considering the proposals, the Board supported renaming the honors program at University of Massachusetts Amherst, the system’s acknowledged flagship, as Commonwealth College. The Board also supported directing additional funds at the program, and providing it with additional facilities, faculty, and administrative resources, including \$15 million for a new complex on the campus’s highest point to house the entire operation. (The state legislature refused to fund the project.) Today, the project is controversial: some students and faculty see the program as elitist, stealing resources from the mainstream students, while others believe it has increased the standards at the flagship campus (Healy 2000). The minority profile for Commonwealth College is not encouraging – black and Latino students are enrolled at less than half of their rates in the general undergraduate population (University of Massachusetts Amherst Office of Institutional Research 2001).

CUNY has also embraced the development of its systemwide honors college, pouring funds into the program and earning accolades from local media and politicians. Students in the honors college get a full scholarship, a laptop computer, a cultural passport that offers free admission to museums and events in the city, and a \$7500 academic spending account for research or study abroad. There are currently about 200 students in the program

(accepted from over 1400 applicants), with an average SAT score of 1300 (Goldstein 2001). According to Executive Vice Chancellor Louise Mirrer (CUNY Matters 2001), these students

“... will be taught by a pool of the most talented, most creative faculty from our undergraduate, graduate, and professional schools if an upper division student wants to study with, say, a scientist working on huge magnets at City College’s Structural Biology Center, that could be done. If an Honors College student wants to study with a leading scholar anywhere in the University, we’ll facilitate that”.

This level of special treatment sparked early criticism from CUNY trustee John Morning, who called the program “an example of the gentrification of the university . . . We have to find a way to make sure that we’re not turning away from our traditional mission” (Shin 2000). In general, however, the initiative has been warmly welcomed as a way to restore CUNY’s reputation while maintaining access. In July 2001, the Mellon Foundation awarded \$1.5 million to the systemwide honors college, and the Muehlstein Foundation did the same for City College’s program. In addition, a grant for \$500,000 was developed to fund scholarships for minority students. As another indicator of success, applications for fall 2002 are up a staggering 91% (Hebel 2002).

Conclusion and implications: Reframing the access debate

The internal dynamics of establishing these academic policy initiatives in each state system are noteworthy for the differences in the degree of conflict that was evident. In Massachusetts, all three sets of policies were approved with little public debate and were barely opposed. Yet in New York, the entire CUNY system has been under intensive public scrutiny since at least the 1970s. Differences in the environmental context of each state may account for these vastly different outcomes. In New York, there was weak administrative leadership, a long history of protest movements related to higher education since the advent of open admissions in 1970, a highly organized faculty union, and geographic proximity among institutions and actors that facilitated communication and contact. In Massachusetts, on the other hand, there was strong administrative leadership from the system’s coordinating board, a weakly organized faculty union that was split among the three major segments of higher education, and a lack of geographic proximity that made coordination of protest more difficult than in New York.

There were notable differences in political resources between the leaders of the two systems. In New York, there was a great deal of personnel turnover at the campus, chancellor, and trustee levels within CUNY, due to the low

level of financial resources and the high-pressure environment of an urban university. In addition, due to the large number of political actors who have substantive or process authority over the university – including the governor, legislature, board of regents, mayor of New York City, board of trustees, and campus presidents – there was a severe fragmentation of leadership for the system. In Massachusetts, a single leader, Board Chairman James F. Carlin, had the political, financial, and personal resources needed to impose his will upon public higher education. Facilitating this was a unified and coherent hierarchy of authority within the system that allows decisions to be enforced through accountability to only one authority. The shared values among Board members, the legislature, and the executive office ensured that Carlin's plans would not be derailed.

In both case studies, the policy changes in public higher education were mission-driven and the objective was to promote differentiation both across and within institutions. The underlying rationales were clear and often explicit: to increase the legitimacy of the system, to reduce duplication and concentrate resources in programmatic areas of identified strength, and to provide more academic opportunities for high performing students. These policies have unexamined consequences for the stratification of students and programs within the system as well as within particular college and university campuses. In our view, those who promote mission differentiation are trying to manage the competing demands of egalitarianism and competitive excellence. Yet there may be substantially negative effects on students, academic programs, and even the faculty who are left out. Ironically, without anticipating and attempting to mitigate these effects, policymakers will face continued – if not heightened – conflict over access, not only to the system as a whole, but also to those campuses and programs with the most resources within that system.

Successive initiatives for mission differentiation by state policymakers make it even more imperative to reframe the access debate in higher education to consider the question, "Access to what?" In the case of academic program termination, the question is what programs and knowledge areas will be available to which students within a public system. Well-prepared students at research universities have access to a wide variety of academic programs and disciplines, while students at state colleges may face a situation where comprehensive coverage of the disciplines is no longer a priority. Students who cannot travel outside of their local area may find that they have limited access to areas of study and thus potential careers, and these place-bound students are more likely to be from low-income families and members of ethnic and racial minorities. Similarly, resource concentration may sustain high-status programs, while lower status programs are allowed

to falter. Selective excellence may satisfy some policy objectives but it does not serve all students well.

With regard to remedial education, the question becomes whether equitable access is provided when those who are underprepared for college are encouraged, and even mandated, to attend community colleges. There is no evidence that community colleges provide a better education in remedial courses than four-year colleges. And as stated earlier, students who begin their education at community colleges are less likely to ultimately attain the bachelor's degree. Nevertheless, state policymakers have relegated remedial education to community colleges, as part of their strategy to promote a concentration of talent in the highest levels of the higher education system. A concern for the impact of these policies on minority students is obvious as both states in these two states are now monitoring this situation; preliminary data show no substantial decline in minority enrollment. It remains to be seen, however, what the long-term impacts will be not only for minority enrollment, but also for student transfer to four-year campuses. As the proportion of minority and low-income college students increases in both Massachusetts and New York, the public will not be served if a disproportionate number of them are "cooled out" into community colleges, or fail to graduate because they cannot escape remedial status.

Serving the needs of an increasingly diverse student population should not be eclipsed by efforts to create opportunities for high-performing students. Honors students have been purposefully separated from their less-prepared counterparts into specialized programs and colleges to encourage academic excellence and provide a "halo effect" for the rest of the public system. The availability of community colleges and financial aid programs for all students obscures the fact that minority and low-income students are less likely to be admitted into the highest-prestige programs in the system. If minority and low-income students are disproportionately represented in lower-level programs and schools, it remains questionable whether equitable access has truly been provided. Conversely, a credential from these honors programs will undoubtedly provide the most opportunities for future wealth and prestige. Although these programs will provide an opportunity for high-level education for a small number of students, they may simultaneously devalue standard degrees from the university system.

Clearly, student access to the system as a whole does not mean access to the whole system. Access to public systems of higher education must be treated far less monolithically than has been done in the past, by examining access to specific segmental levels, academic programs, and honors colleges. Asking the question, "Access to what?" can advance the research agenda within higher education to address shifts in the stratification of student oppor-

tunity. Further research on the effects of heightened mission differentiation within public systems and institutions is needed to more fully understand the effect of state policy on the stratification of opportunity. Data on the differential impact of academic program termination policies and the characteristics of academic programs “of strength” should be collected by state boards of higher education to analyze the differential impact across academic programs and the availability of quality academic programs more generally. In addition, states should collect data on the demographics of students enrolled in honors programs on public campuses. Finally, at the national level, there is a need for better data on remedial education to identify effective practices and programs. These data collection efforts will be vital to informing policymakers and higher education leaders about the cumulative impact of mission differentiation on the stratification of students and academic programs.

Notes

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1. For expanded analysis of the data on remedial education at CUNY, see Gumport and Bastedo (2001).

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