

What Taking Stock of CUNY ESL from Another Perspective Might Show

A Response to: Effie Papatzikou Cochran and Lubie Grujicic-Alatrisme's "Taking Stock of CUNY ESL: What a Survey of ESL Faculty and Administrators Says about the Past, the Present, and the Future" (Vol. 3, No. 1, 2016)

Elaine Brooks*

Brooklyn College, City University of New York (CUNY)

I was one of the respondents to this survey, and I share the sense of disappointment expressed that CUNY compromised its core values and "shows no institutional will to make language teaching the responsibility of faculty across the curriculum" (Cochran & Grujicic-Alatrisme, 2016, p. 18). Around the time the authors were surveying colleagues in CUNY, I undertook a project to document changes that had occurred in CUNY ESL programs by examining data about various ESL programs collected by the CUNY ESL Discipline Council. The data indicate that much has changed, although possibly not for the benefit of students served by these programs. Maintaining opportunities in public higher education for all students is an investment in our society.

I am concerned that Governor Andrew Cuomo's recent Excelsior Scholarship, which claims to make "public college tuition-free," will assist some students but decrease opportunities and resources for less "traditional" students (see <http://www.ny.gov/programs/tuition-free-degree-program-excelsior-scholarship>.) Among CUNY's current student population, typical students are often "non-traditional," as Chen (2017) indicates. In contrast, nontraditional students do not usually enter college directly after high school and are often unable to attend college full time because they do not or cannot depend on the financial support of their parents and therefore have to work. This is true for many CUNY students, almost 70 percent of whom come from NYC public schools, and almost half of whom are from homes with a language other than English, according to Cochran and Grujicic-Alatrisme (2016). That could mean they might not meet the requirements for an Excelsior Scholarship.

In 1969, the CUNY Board of Trustees endorsed the Open Admissions policy, inspired by the Original Free Academy, which sought to see "whether the highest education can be given to the masses" (Reitano, 2008, p. 11). Higher education was seen as key to social mobility; it still is. Attewell and Lavin (2007) examined the impact of Open Admissions over thirty years with respect to how well students had done in terms of graduation and returns for college degrees. They found the rates of graduation were higher and the payoffs robust. Furthermore, the educational attainment of one generation positively influenced the educational choices of the next. According to Attewell and Lavin, "disadvantaged women complete college degrees in far greater numbers than scholars realize," although it can take them a long time (10+ years, not 4 to 6) (p. xvii). They get financial benefits even without completing a degree, and, the authors

report, "democratization of public higher education has not generated unemployable graduates or worthless degrees (pp. 5–7)." Access to higher education may not eradicate disadvantage, but it does reduce its influence and ease upward mobility.

In spite of these positive outcomes, objections were raised to Open Admissions, which had nearly doubled the size of the university. Attewell and Lavin (2007) note that criticism of such public policy often led to repercussions such as the loss of free tuition in 1976, tightening of admissions through high-stakes exams, and cutting the funds for remediation via reduction in state funding. In response to more than one fiscal crisis, CUNY ended its Open Admissions policy at four-year colleges and required students who were deemed less prepared to begin at community colleges.

Considering how ending Open Admissions has had a negative impact on vulnerable student populations, such as ESL students, enables one to understand the ways recent changes occurring in public higher education reflect our society's priorities. Otheguy and O'Riordan (2000) provide "educational, economic, and demographic statistical evidence pointing to the success obtained by CUNY in educating its students, particularly those who are speakers of other languages (pp. 7–8)." This evidence also shows "a disturbing decline in the number of ESL students enrolled in CUNY (p. 2)," especially striking at its four-year colleges. The authors believe political factors explain this decline. They stress that "[c]orrecting this imbalance and returning these students to CUNY must become a top priority" (p. 1).

I believe no such correction occurred between 2000 and 2017, and offer an example from the CUNY ESL Discipline Council data reflecting the continuing trend. In 1991–92, at a four-year liberal arts college of CUNY, the ESL program served 800 to 1,400 students with one full-time counselor, approximately 10 full-time faculty, and 30–40 part-time adjuncts. Five levels of courses were available to meet students' language needs prior to their entering Freshman Composition. Since then, the program has become increasingly dependent on part-time instructors. It began losing funds for support services (such as tutoring); its director and full-time faculty who retired were not replaced. In the 90s, the ESL program was required to redesign itself due to budget cuts. When it went from five to two levels, students whose skills were deemed "beginner" were no longer accepted at the college. These students were often referred to community colleges or language immersion programs to accommodate their needs. Increasing limitations on the courses students could take affected their financial aid. By spring 2015, the total number of students in the ESL courses was between 40 and 50, with only two or three courses offered. The program now relies on one adjunct and a couple of part-time tutors in addition to its administrative person (non-faculty). Given that faculty who have retired were not replaced, there is concern that this administrative person may not be replaced when she retires. The current state of this ESL program is probably not the result of demographic changes, such as fewer immigrants to New York City. More likely, it reflects the trend of sending students from four-year to two-year colleges. In 2014–15, a CUNY community college had approximately 1,120 students in seven courses, with over 100 sections taught by 24 full-time faculty and 22 adjuncts.

There are differences in the number of ESL students, instructors, and services provided among the various CUNY colleges; yet, there is a clear overall pattern that has been noted for quite some time. Four-year colleges have fewer of these students, instructors, and support services than do the community colleges or hybrid units (offering both two- and four-year degrees). While Otheguy and O'Riordan (2000) noted a 45 percent drop in enrollment in CUNY ESL programs between 1994 and 1998, there was "a particularly precipitous decline of 70 percent in the senior colleges," compared to a drop of 24 percent in the community colleges. The authors do not think the decline in ESL enrollment is explained by students being pushed out or by increased pass rates on assessment tests, or even the cost of instruction—which, they state, "appears to take a very small bite out of the University budget (p. 10)." They claim that ESL students generate more revenue than it costs to educate them, and that the university succeeds in its work with them. The authors conclude that "the loss of ESL students at CUNY is the result of a political decision to reduce the size of the University as a whole, starting with those groups that, having the least

political power, are least expected to oppose their exclusion" (p. 11), and they link these findings to "the reduction of funding for the University starting in the late 1980s" (p. 11). They also see connections to city and state reduction of funding (such as the Supplementary Tuition Award program for ESL and other "remedial"¹ coursework) and tuition funding increases (93%), with a disproportionate effect on ESL students (p. 12).

Otheguy and O'Riordan caution that the exclusion of ESL students should "serve as a warning to others that the narrow doors to CUNY are becoming even narrower (Otheguy & Riordan, 2000, p. 14). As Cochran and Grujicic-Alatrisme (2016) point out, CUNY's varied programs were intended to help the most financially and educationally disadvantaged students. Such programs are affected by the changing political climate and the availability of state and city funding. In addition, O'Riordan (2016) concluded that "there is a need to make sure that New Yorkers of all different walks of life who speak English less than very well but who would like to pursue a higher education have equitable access to excellence at the city's public university and to all it has to offer, not only for their benefit, but for the benefit of New York City and New York State" (p. 8).

We should consider all factors when deciding whether a college degree for all who want one is in our interest as a society. I hope that plans for the future of CUNY and SUNY will continue to include access to public higher education for these "non-traditional students" as well, since it remains key to their social mobility. Opportunities for these students embody the priorities our country has traditionally held in our efforts to "implement the principles of democracy" (Reitano, 2008, p. 11). Access to and support for public higher education for all students, "traditional" or not, is an essential investment for all of us, not just individual students. Access to public higher education may be the only option for non-traditional students.

References

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Additional Reading

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- Chen, D. (2016, May 29). Dreams stall as city's engine of mobility sputters: Woes at CUNY mirror a trend in higher education. *The New York Times*, p. 1.

¹ESL coursework is sometimes included with other pre-mainstream coursework and so considered "remedial"; ESL professionals, however, have consistently advocated against such terminology for these students.

- Harris, E. A. (2017, March 19). CUNY to revamp remedial programs, hoping to lift graduation rates. *The New York Times*, p. A20.
- Pope, D. G. (2017, March 19). How to admit better students. *The New York Times*, Sunday Review, p. 4.
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[†]Corresponding author: ebrooks@brooklyn.cuny.edu