

CENTER FOR NEW YORK CITY AFFAIRS
THE NEW SCHOOL

Creating College Ready Communities

Preparing NYC's Precarious New
Generation of College Students

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Creating College Ready Communities

Preparing NYC's Precarious New Generation of College Students

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More students than ever before are graduating high school in New York City. More high school students have access to college-level and college-preparatory classes. And many more are applying to—and attending—college. These are trends New York City can be proud of.

The number of New York City public high school graduates has increased by a third in recent years; the on-time high school graduation rate reached 64.7 percent in 2012, up from 46.5 percent in 2005. And nearly 73 percent of 2011 graduates went on to college in that year.

Unfortunately, college completion rates for the city's public high school graduates remain low. Many of those who enroll in higher education do not complete a college degree. At the City University of New York, by far the most popular choice for the city's students, just over half of incoming freshmen in fall 2006 got a bachelor's degree within six years at CUNY's senior colleges. At the community colleges, just 16 percent of students entering in 2009 earned a two-year associate's degree within three years. These numbers are in line with national trends, which also show a leap in the number of low-income and minority students going to college, but show little change in the college diploma rate over the last 10 years.

Increasing the numbers of New York City high school graduates going to college and earning a college degree has proven to be an elusive goal for local policymakers. This report seeks to illuminate the latest college access efforts here, and to shed new light on the complicated circumstances that allow some students to go to college and succeed—and so many others to fail.

The Center for New York City Affairs has enjoyed a useful vantage point for this work. Our researchers have spent four years in 12 low-income high schools and two middle schools, serving as evaluators for a foundation-funded initiative called College Ready Communities. The initiative paired up schools with community-based organizations and advocacy groups with the goal of increasing the number of students matriculating to four-year colleges.

The goal seemed clear enough, but it didn't take long for the schools and their partners to realize that college matriculation and success requires far more work than simply increasing the number of students who fill out applications and get accepted to college.

Center researchers fanned out across the city to speak with educators, nonprofit practitioners, student leaders, philanthropists and a wide variety of college experts. We had discussions with officials at the city's Department of Education and the City University of New York (CUNY). And we benefitted from the perspectives of top scholars on this issue, many who are now calling for a radical restructuring of the nation's public education system to better prepare all students—not just the elite—for college success. "We've baked inequality into this system and we will never get it out unless there is an intervention," says University of Oregon Professor David T. Conley, one of the field's top experts. "We need to equalize this opportunity."

Increasing the number of high school graduates who make it to college and earn a degree has been an elusive goal for policymakers.

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Living-wage jobs increasingly require some kind of college credential, ranging from a technical certificate to a four-year degree. The federal government estimates that by 2018, 63 percent of all jobs will require both a high school degree and some post-secondary training. A recent report by the National Skills Coalition predicts that the greatest growth nationally will be in “middle-skilled” jobs in fields like plumbing, electrical work, legal support and health care; employers are predicting a shortage of these workers in the years to come. Alas, in New York City, competition remains stiff for coveted mid-skilled jobs—and the city’s graduates compete with an influx of young people from all over the world for jobs. Students here frequently need a degree just to get a foot in the door with employers.

It is imperative that we understand what is required of our public education system to fully prepare high school graduates for either college or a credential that will allow career success. We also need to better understand the responsibility that students, families and communities have to guide their own preparation for life after high school. Colleges, too, have a tremendous responsibility to improve their own support systems for first-generation college-goers. While this report focuses primarily on what is happening in New York City high schools, we hope this research will also begin a discussion about what needs to happen in other arenas—including our communities and colleges—as we move toward a time when almost every student is fully prepared to get a useful college credential or degree.

UNDERSTANDING NEW YORK CITY’S “ASPIRATIONS GAP”

More city students are graduating from high school, and most are aware that a high school diploma is not enough. They know they need college, and they are excited about the opportunities that college offers. Surveys of students in eight public high schools, conducted by the Center for New York City Affairs in 2011 and 2012, found that most 10th and 11th graders fully expect to go to college—and their parents expect them to as well. These students were nearly all from low-income and working-poor families; many were English Language Learners and few of their relatives or family members had ever been to college. Yet more than 40 percent of the 10th graders we surveyed hoped to work in business or become professionals, like doctors or lawyers. Fully two-thirds of these 10th and 11th graders expected to finish at least a four-year college degree.

At the same time, this group was uncertain—or completely in the dark—about what they needed to do to get ready for college in high school. Nearly 70 percent believed that a high school diploma alone would prepare them for college-level work. And most thought that only their junior and senior years in high school would count when it came time to compete for college spots. Only 12 percent of students surveyed understood that colleges would look at their “cume,” the cumulative average grades from their entire high school career. (See “High Hopes...Fragile Expectations,” page 18.)

Scholars, including David Conley, call this stark juxtaposition of big ambitions and naïve (but reasonable) assumptions an “aspirations gap.” Nearly all middle school students, when polled, expect to go to college and get a degree. Of these students, 70 will graduate high school, 44 will enroll in college and only 26 will get a bachelor’s degree within six years of enrolling, Conley says.

New York City’s numbers are similar. For every 100 high school freshmen enrolling in 2007, 66 graduated on time and 49 enrolled in college the following fall. Then the numbers sink. Persistence statistics tracked by the city’s Department of Education show that nearly one in four students typically drops out of college by the end of his or her first year. At CUNY, the number of students earning a timely bachelor’s degree ranges from a high of 66 percent at Baruch College to 23 percent at Medgar Evers. And rates for a timely associate’s degree are quite low, ranging from a high of 22 percent at Kingsborough to lows of 10 percent at Bronx and Hostos Community Colleges.

Nationally, there has been a drumbeat of criticism from the business community for the past decade about the inadequate preparation of the future skilled workforce. A coalition of business groups and prominent education think tanks has been working with state governors and educators on improving the quality of K to 12 schooling so that more students will graduate “college ready.” The culmination of this work is the new Common Core State Standards, which provide national benchmarks aimed at increasing the numbers of high school graduates genuinely prepared for college or careers. New York State has begun implementing these standards, along with other federally funded efforts, to create a coherent “PK to 16” system and push for higher quality schools and stronger teaching.

New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg publically entered the fray with the appointment of Department of Education Chancellor Dennis Walcott in April 2011. Walcott announced on his first day that the city’s new goal for students would no longer be focused on graduation alone but rather on “making sure *all* of our children are college ready and ready to work.”

It has been two years since Chancellor Walcott’s inaugural speech. Center for New York City Affairs researchers were in the College Ready Communities schools for two years before the chancellor took office and witnessed what happened in the two-year aftermath. Three notable changes have occurred:

HIGH SCHOOLS ARE NOW HELD PUBLICALLY ACCOUNTABLE FOR COLLEGE AND CAREER

READINESS: The Department of Education’s primary tool for driving system change is its annual high-stakes Progress Report for each city school. In the past, the Progress Report for high schools focused primarily on moving students successfully from ninth grade to graduation. Many criticized the department for putting too much emphasis on graduation rates and Regents test scores, arguing that schools were incentivized to reduce the rigor of their courses and graduate students by any means necessary. A new “college and career readiness” grade now assigns an “A” to “F” grade to each high school that is worth 10 percent of their total score; it is based on the school’s college matriculation rate, how many students have test scores high enough to enter CUNY without remedial courses and the number of students who take and pass at least one college preparatory course. (See “Making Progress After Graduation,” page 17.)

ISSUE HIGHLIGHTS: FACTS AND FIGURES

MOST HIGH SCHOOLS IN NYC DO NOT OFFER A FULL COLLEGE PREPARATORY CURRICULUM.

Students should have access to advanced math and science courses to prepare for college. An analysis of citywide Regents exams for Algebra 2, Chemistry and Physics revealed that only 28 of 342 schools reviewed had all three of these courses—and 46 schools had none. (See “Access to Advanced Classes in High School,” page 13.)

NYC’S NONPROFIT SECTOR PLAYS A CRUCIAL ROLE FILLING COLLEGE GUIDANCE GAPS:

High school counselors are typically able to offer only basic application and financial aid help. The nonprofit sector provides a crucial assist with the many additional supports students need. (See “Filling NYC’s College Guidance Gaps,” page 47.)

**NEW YORK CITY FACES A TREMENDOUS
CHALLENGE IN ITS EFFORTS TO GET ALL
STUDENTS ACADEMICALLY READY FOR
COLLEGE OR WORK.** Just 29 percent of graduates in the Class of 2012 had test scores high enough to avoid remedial courses at the City University of New York. (See “Chancellor Walcott’s Steep Challenge,” page 5.)

**MANY SCHOOLS OFFER ACCESS TO ONE OR
TWO COLLEGE-LEVEL COURSES—AND
PASSING EVEN ONE COURSE IMPROVES
OUTCOMES.** An internal Department of Education analysis found that taking even one CUNY College Now or AP course, for example, reduces the likelihood that students will need remedial classes in college. (See “Access to Advanced Classes in High School,” page 13.)

**THIS ACADEMIC CHALLENGE
BEGINS LONG BEFORE HIGH
SCHOOL.** Only 39 percent of ninth graders arriving in high school met state standards for reading in the 2011–12 school year. Among schools serving primarily low-income communities, the number is often closer to 20 percent. College preparation is daunting when reading skills lag so far behind. (See “High Hopes...Fragile Expectations,” page 18.)

**GUIDANCE COUNSELOR CASE-
LOADS ARE TOO HIGH TO GIVE
STUDENTS THE HELP THEY NEED
PREPARING FOR COLLEGE:** In 61 percent of schools, counselors have caseloads of 100 to 300 students—and in most of the remaining schools the caseloads are even higher. (See “Guidance Counselor Caseloads Vary Widely,” page 31.)

In low-income high schools, struggling readers are frequently the norm. This has major implications for teachers trying to get students to read and write at a college level.

PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS NOW KNOW MUCH MORE ABOUT THEIR STUDENTS AFTER

GRADUATION: In the past, principals and teachers could be forgiven for focusing exclusively on their students' graduation. No more: The Department of Education has created new "Where Are They Now" reports that offer a vivid picture of what has happened to each school's past graduates. Principals and teachers can see how many of their students matriculated to college, what kinds of colleges they went to, and how many are still enrolled. Students who attend CUNY are tracked even more carefully. High schools can see how many students required remedial courses, their average GPA, and how many credits students took and passed. With this information, "college readiness" is no longer a vague term. Teachers and principals now know whether their academic preparation and college guidance is working—or not. (See "Turning High School Graduates into College Graduates," page 10.)

SCHOOL LEADERS ARE TAKING STEPS TO IMPROVE COLLEGE AND CAREER PREPARATION:

Principals in the College Ready Communities high schools struggled with budget cuts, teacher turnover and students who arrived as freshmen poorly prepared for high school work. Yet most of these principals strive to meet the new college-focused mandates that the city has set out for them in the annual Progress Report. For example, one College Ready Communities high school, the Pan American International High School in Elmhurst, struggles to graduate even half of its new-immigrant students on time—yet, nonetheless, the school has added Advanced Placement and higher-level math courses in an effort to provide more rigorous options for students who seek them out. We see in such schools that principals, including some in small schools with smaller teaching staffs, are attempting an academic balancing act by offering catch-up courses for struggling learners as well as higher-level courses for students who need and deserve solid college preparation. (See "Creating College Counselors," page 34.)

WHAT'S MISSING: ACADEMICS AND ATTENTION TO THE COLLEGE DREAM

The Department of Education's efforts are a good start. However, they do little to address the "aspirations gap" and the challenges that low-income students face as they attempt to manage the steep demands of high school and begin to think about college and what they want to get out of it. The Center's experience observing the collaborative work that took place between the schools and nonprofits in College Ready Communities was particularly illuminating on this point. Here are a few of the most important things we learned in our surveys and analysis:

DEVELOPING TRUE COLLEGE-PREPARATORY ACADEMIC SKILLS IS IMPLAUSIBLE WHEN STUDENTS CAN'T READ WELL:

A Center for New York City Affairs analysis of ELA test scores determined that only 39 percent of eighth graders met state standards for reading in 2012. In our College Ready Communities schools, which serve almost exclusively low-income students, struggling readers were the norm—more than 80 percent of these students had scored below grade level on their eighth grade tests in 2010. This, obviously, has major implications for teachers trying to get students to the point where they can read and write at a college level. It also presents a challenge for science and social studies teachers who, in an ideal world, would assign material from grade-level textbooks. Instead, these teachers present the facts in class and avoid reading assignments. "Reading is fundamental" to college readiness, one teacher told us in a survey. "Yet, most of my students dislike reading and make no effort to read, either for recreation or for coursework." (See "High Hopes... Fragile Expectations," page 18.)

BOTH TEACHERS AND STUDENTS ARE FRUSTRATED WITH THE LEVEL OF TEACHING AND

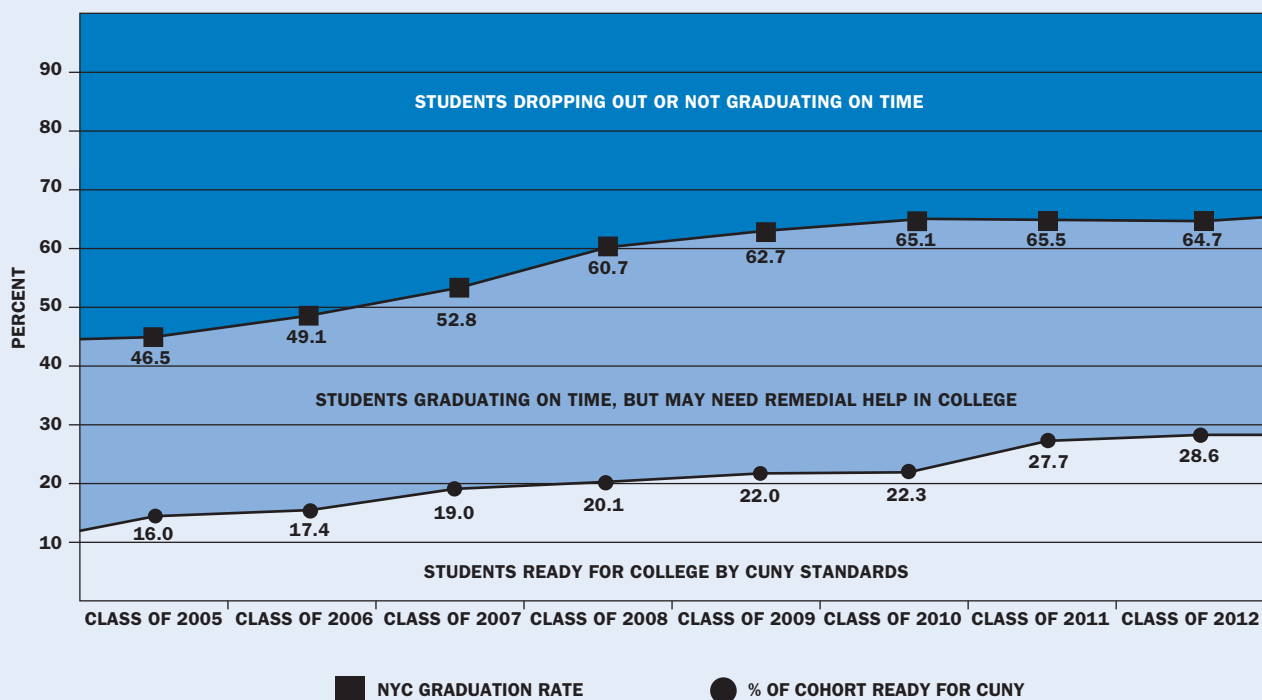
LEARNING: Students were appreciative of how supportive their teachers were, but many, in a candid set of focus groups, told researchers they were bored with their classes. "It's almost like a review of what we learned...in eighth grade," said one 10th grader. "Every teacher wants you to get a better grade, but they don't force you," said another. In surveys, teachers did not dispute this, noting that

THE CHANCELLOR'S STEEP CHALLENGE: GRADUATING "ALL" STUDENTS READY FOR COLLEGE OR CAREER

As the Bloomberg administration enters its final stretch, the focus at the Department of Education has shifted from graduation to college. On his first day in office in 2011, Chancellor Dennis Walcott promised that he would work to create a school system that prepared all students for college or a good career.

The challenge is steep. As the chart below illustrates, the city has made substantial gains in both the graduation rate and the number of students capable of entering the City University of New York without taking remedial courses (the city and state's de facto definition of "college readiness.") However, nearly three out of four high school students are either failing to graduate on time or lack the basic academic skills needed to hit the ground running at CUNY. The Department of Education is now measuring the quality of high schools with new post-graduation goals in mind.

MORE STUDENTS ARE GRADUATING ON TIME AND READY FOR COLLEGE, BUT NEARLY THREE OUT OF FOUR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS STILL LAG BEHIND



NOTES: The college-ready trend line on the bottom of the chart is based on the NYC Department of Education's "College Readiness Index" in June 2012. For each cohort, this number includes the percent of August graduates who earned a Regents diploma and met CUNY's standards for college readiness in English and math, meaning that they would be permitted to start classes at CUNY without taking remedial courses. (Beginning this fall, this number will be called the "Four-Year Non-Remediation Index.")

To be included in the index, students in the classes of 2011 and 2012 did at least one of the following:

1. On Regents exams, earned a 75 or higher in English and an 80 or higher in a math.
2. On the SAT, earned a 480 or higher in English and math.
3. On the ACT, earned a 20 or higher in English and math.
4. On the CUNY Assessment Test, passed reading, writing and math.

Data from prior classes does not include CUNY or ACT test data. This at least partially explains the dramatic jump between 2010 and 2011.

SOURCE: New York City Department of Education graduation rate report for the Class of 2012. Data provided in a June 2013 presentation.

classes were mostly focused on making sure students understood the material they needed to pass New York State's Regents exams, which are required for graduation. The graduation mandate was more important than creating rigorous demands or exposing students to college-level work, some said. Wrote one teacher: "Too much energy is spent on short-term passing—and not enough energy on long-term college planning." (See "High Hopes...Fragile Expectations," page 18.)

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EARLY ATTENTION TO COLLEGE ACADEMICS AND CAREER DREAMS COULD INSPIRE HARDER

WORK: To some degree, high school teachers are boxed in by the academic abilities of their high school students. If more students were fully prepared for ninth grade, high school classes could be more fast-paced and rigorous. The level of academics clearly must improve from kindergarten through eighth grade. The Department of Education is counting on the new Common Core standards to help accomplish this. Students will also have to be willing partners as schools attempt to impose more rigorous demands upon them. An obvious step is to have honest conversations about careers and college much earlier, ideally beginning in sixth grade. Guidance counselors and students tell us that most young people don't become serious about college until 11th grade—and by then, it is too late to do genuine college preparation. The Department of Education should consider providing a formal grade 6 to 12 curriculum on career and college planning and guidance, and work to create a “college culture” in the public schools that incorporates high expectations and richer, more thoughtful assignments for all students. (See “Bringing College 101 to the Classroom,” page 35.)

FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS REQUIRE HIGH-QUALITY PROFESSIONAL HELP WITH

THE COLLEGE SEARCH: Getting the help of a professional guidance counselor is tough enough: a majority of high schools in NYC have guidance caseloads ranging from 100 to 300 students per counselor. The challenge is even more daunting given that these counselors typically have many other responsibilities—and are often not fully trained to be college counselors. (See “Guidance Counselor Caseloads Vary Widely,” page 31.)

THE NEED FOR HIGH-QUALITY HELP WAS PARTICULARLY APPARENT IN OUR COLLEGE READY COMMUNITIES SCHOOLS, WHERE THE NONPROFIT PARTNER GROUPS STEPPED IN TO PROVIDE ESSENTIAL ASSISTANCE TO STUDENTS IN THE APPLICATION PROCESS:

Surveys revealed that students and families were justifiably confused and intimidated by the torrent of demands, deadlines and decisions associated with applying to college. Overloaded school guidance counselors can offer a few workshops and make sure their students fill out a CUNY common application. But others, like the College Ready Communities nonprofits or teachers in the school, provided crucial extra time to help students with college visits and financial aid—not to mention other demands, like writing essays and taking the SATs, associated with applying to more competitive colleges. This extra person-power and expertise is particularly important if students seek to avoid New York City's overloaded community college system, where graduation rates are so poor. There is a legitimate debate over whether all schools require a full-time college counselor, but almost everyone interviewed by the Center on this project agreed that schools need high-intensity college guidance of some kind. (See “College Counselors Count,” page 29.)

Finally, the missing player in this report's discussion is, of course, the many colleges in which New York City students enroll with great hope, only to quickly drop out. Guidance counselors and nonprofit workers are particularly rankled by how hard it is to compare seemingly simple things at CUNY such as graduation rates, the quality of remedial classes and institutional supports for low-income students. The Center's conversations for this report started with the high schools but inevitably led to the colleges. Both the New York City Department of Education and CUNY have made great strides over the past decade in improving their data sharing and developing effective partnership programs. But these two institutions must continue to work together to provide stronger college preparation for students along with a bridge to an equally strong set of college classes and supports. Then we may finally see New York City's impressive new generation of graduates succeeding as they ought to, prepared for both college and the growing challenges of the workplace. ✱

Recommendations From the Field

The New York City public schools have dramatically increased the number of students graduating from high school, and the leaders of the school system have ratcheted up the intensity of efforts to prepare more students for post-secondary education and training. Nonetheless, critics accurately point out that the value of the city's diploma is not what many students and families believe it to be. The education policies of Mayor Michael Bloomberg have focused on preparing as many students as possible to meet basic marks of academic proficiency, which is important for moving low-performing students forward to graduation. But an education focused most heavily on the demands of standardized testing is of only limited use in a world where deeper academic preparation and critical thinking are prized by colleges and employers.

Schools Chancellor Dennis Walcott and his top brass have acknowledged this in recent years, with Walcott declaring upon his appointment in 2011 that the city would rework its educational priorities to focus on “making sure all of our children are college-ready and ready for work.” The Department of Education has taken important first steps in this direction, beginning an overhaul of the curriculum to incorporate the college-focused Common Core State Standards, providing principals with new data on how their students do after high school, and adding a highly visible college and career readiness grade of “A” through “F” to each high school's annual Progress Report.

The next mayor will have to do more. He or she will bear responsibility for a deeper transformation of the system, one that succeeds at providing students at an earlier age with much stronger reading, writing and analytic skills. Just as important, schools will need to become much more effective at college guidance and life skills training, beginning in middle school, so that students understand their options for education and careers as early as possible. This is important if students are to enter high school prepared and motivated to do higher-level academic work—and if they are to learn exactly what it takes to choose, qualify for and finance the best possible college or career training. Such “college knowledge” takes time and attention to develop.

This will be a big lift given that the great majority of New York City students today enter high school either reading or doing math (or both) below grade level. Yet without these skills, and without the college knowledge students need in order to successfully pursue their education beyond high school, thousands of graduates each year will struggle to achieve economic independence. Until relatively recently, college was reserved for elites—those who had the good fortune to belong to the upper socioeconomic classes, for whom graduating from college was taken for granted—and for the most impressive academic performers in society. The infrastructure to support the “college for all” imperative doesn't yet exist. But New York and other cities are beginning to figure out what has to be done.

The recommendations that follow are intended to provide a basic framework for the next mayoral administration. They draw from extensive interviews and data, and from four years of research conducted by the Center for New York City Affairs in 12 low-income high schools and two middle schools associated with the College Ready Communities initiative, which brought together schools and nonprofit organizations to improve college access, knowledge and preparation for students and communities. Strong, system-wide solutions to these challenges are still very much a work in progress, and we hope these insights spur a much deeper conversation about the development of more effective, college-focused school structures and student supports.

RECOMMENDATION 1: The city Department of Education should institute additional Progress Report measures that identify and reward those schools that are most effective at preparing students for independent work and the demands of college: The department's high-stakes high school Progress Reports are effective in shaping priorities and guiding the work of teachers and entire schools. Although the administration has begun to change its metrics in recent years, the emphasis remains primarily on making sure students pass state-mandated classes and Regents exams so they can graduate. This contributed to the city's impressive graduation gains, but at a cost. "Most of our students are babied and passed along even if they don't meet course requirements," one teacher told us in a survey. The focus is all wrong for college preparation says another: "Too much energy is spent on short-term passing—and not enough energy on long-term college planning." While no one wants to see the graduation rates erode, it is important that the department move toward a more balanced set of incentives. A good first step will be to increase the value of the Progress Report's College and Career Readiness score, which measures important things like college matriculation and the number of students with access to college prep courses. The department should also incorporate "extra credit" for schools that offer a coherent set of opportunities to prepare students for independent learning, including carefully managed internships, senior-year thesis projects, robust writing preparation or extended-day options that give students leadership and work opportunities. The College and Career Readiness grade should recognize and reward schools that do more to offer strong post-secondary preparation for their students.

RECOMMENDATION 2: City Hall and the Department of Education should press the New York State Education Department to allow more "portfolio" high schools, which use different—and potentially better—assessments than the Regents exams: The current Regents testing and accountability models are designed to measure and reward basic academic skills, not long-form writing, effective communication and project-based learning associated with college. While the new Common Core State Standards and assessments may help deal with this problem, they will not address the need to do more original research and long-form writing aligned with the kind of assignments students will actually see in college. Policymakers should pay more attention to the city's "portfolio" high schools, which have been exempted from most Regents exams and instead rely on a richer set of assessments, called "performance-based assessment tasks," which test each student's research, writing, analytical and speaking skills. In the near term, more schools should be allowed to become portfolio schools, so we can see and learn from this approach. (State education officials have actively resisted this.) Over the long term, New York should integrate high-quality portfolio-based teaching and learning into the high school standards.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The Department of Education should develop a system-wide post-secondary counseling curriculum to ensure all students are taught about their college options, how to prepare for college and what to expect in the workforce. Right now, conversation about college and careers is haphazard, at best, in the city's schools. Happily, most students report on the city's annual Learning Environment Survey that their teachers expect them to go to college. Yet students receive little formal training or counseling on the topic until the college application process begins in their junior year—even though a high percentage of city students come from families with little or no experience of higher education. Junior year is far too late to start a serious conversation about the demands of college and employment. Ideally, all New York students would benefit from a series of meaningful, content-rich classes built into their school day that focus on post-secondary options and requirements, beginning in sixth grade. And students' parents should be encouraged to attend workshops and assemblies as well. Students and their families need ample time to absorb the many complicated details they need to make good choices around college and financing.

RECOMMENDATION 4: City Hall and the Department of Education must provide schools with either a full-time, trained college counselor or sufficient outside help from nonprofit partners and other paid providers. Currently, school principals can choose to offer whatever level of college and career guidance they can afford in their school budgets. There are no standards and no monitoring of this work. Nor is there a direct budget line, similar to that for parent coordinators, to guarantee that college guidance is managed by someone in the school. We know from our research that different guidance models, ranging from fully staffed college offices to teacher-led advisories, work for different schools. But in nearly all cases, school staff and their nonprofit partners struggle to adequately meet the demands of first-generation college aspirants and students from low-income and immigrant families. School budgets are tight, and too often schools must lean on a patchwork of volunteers and part-time assistants to help students make decisions about college and get financial aid. City Hall and its education officials should respect the complexity of the college application and career planning process and give students the support of professionally trained college guidance staff. If the city is serious about “college for all,” funding for professional counseling is part of the equation.

RECOMMENDATION 5: The Department of Education should help schools harness the nonprofit sector by training staff on how to find effective partners and build strong inter-organizational relationships and supporting those relationships with funding. School counselors typically wear many hats and have large caseloads. If they’re lucky, they have the time to help their juniors and seniors get through the college application process and fill out the forms necessary to receive basic levels of financial aid. Even this is a big stretch for most counselors. Yet New York City is lucky to have a robust nonprofit and community development sector capable of assisting students with valuable supports and experiences—including college visits, SAT prep, essay writing, financial aid planning and building a “summer bridge” to college—for which guidance counselors have little time. One simple idea is to add a module to the excellent college guidance training currently being offered free to schools by Goddard Riverside Community Center’s Options Institute, dedicated to finding and building nonprofit relationships. Other opportunities may also exist through the department’s school support organizations or youth development office. Of course, without targeted resources to support them, such relationships are difficult to manage.

RECOMMENDATION 6: The City University of New York must step up and take greater responsibility for improving college graduation rates by greatly expanding its proven, successful but small programs that help students prepare for and succeed in higher education. The end goal of all this work is to increase the number of students completing a marketable college credential. CUNY has a great deal of work to do on this front. Many of its community college diploma rates are in the single digits. Yet the university has a number of excellent academic supports, including the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs, or ASAP, which invests about \$6,000 per year, per student, in financial, academic and social supports—and in the process, has doubled the completion rate and actually cut the total cost of a two-year degree by 10 percent. CUNY can also brag about terrific programs in the public schools, such as College Now and At Home in College. There is also CUNY Start, a program for incoming community college students who have significant remedial needs. All of these programs should be expanded. In addition, the colleges themselves must be open to a new level of accountability for the success of their students.

As an immediate start, CUNY should provide a user-friendly website with helpful and honest comparisons of its colleges’ and programs’ graduation rates and other important information that guidance counselors could use and explain to students, like remediation-related exit rates and slots available in support programs like ASAP. Right now, this information is almost impossible to find. This would allow students to think about CUNY more carefully—and would help them make better choices. ✱

Turning High School Graduates into College Graduates

Chancellor Walcott promised NYC students an education that prepares them for college or a good career. Will the next mayor be able to follow through for the city's rising number of high school graduates?

When he walked into the Tweed Courthouse rotunda in early April 2011, Dennis Walcott was met with cheers and applause from the assembled staff and press. The longtime City Hall deputy was Mayor Bloomberg's latest pick to head New York City's schools. After perfunctory remarks and a few friendly laugh lines, he described the core of his new administration's education agenda: "Making sure *all* of our children are college-ready and ready to work." What Walcott left out of his remarks, however, was just how difficult this ambitious goal will be to achieve. Getting all students ready for college and the workforce is a major challenge for both New York City and the nation.

Walcott and the Department of Education can point to encouraging trends: More students than ever are graduating high school in New York City. More are taking college-level courses while still in high school. And many more are applying to—and attending—college. New York City recently announced a 64.7 percent four-year high school graduation rate for the Class of 2012, compared to 46.5 percent in 2005. College enrollment has also climbed dramatically during the Bloomberg years. The City University of New York—the college of choice for most New York City public high school students—had a record enrollment of 272,000 students in 2011. The number of New York City public school students enrolling as CUNY freshmen increased 61 percent between 2002 and 2012, rising to 26,199 from 16,254. (See "NYC Student Enrollment at CUNY Has Skyrocketed," page 12.)

Yet many of these young people will never complete a college degree. At CUNY, by far the most popular choice for the city's students, just over half of the incoming freshmen in fall 2006 got a bachelor's degree within six years. And the record of the community colleges, colloquially known as "13th grade," is far worse. Just 16 percent of students entering in 2009 earned a two-year associate's degree within three years.

It is CUNY, of course, that is responsible for improving its own graduation rates. Officials acknowledge that CUNY could better support its students, particularly its lowest income students and those who are the first in their families to go to college. CUNY has launched a number of well-regarded programs in recent years, such as Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) and CUNY Start. Their success rates to date demonstrate that CUNY's diploma numbers can be improved with attention and resources.

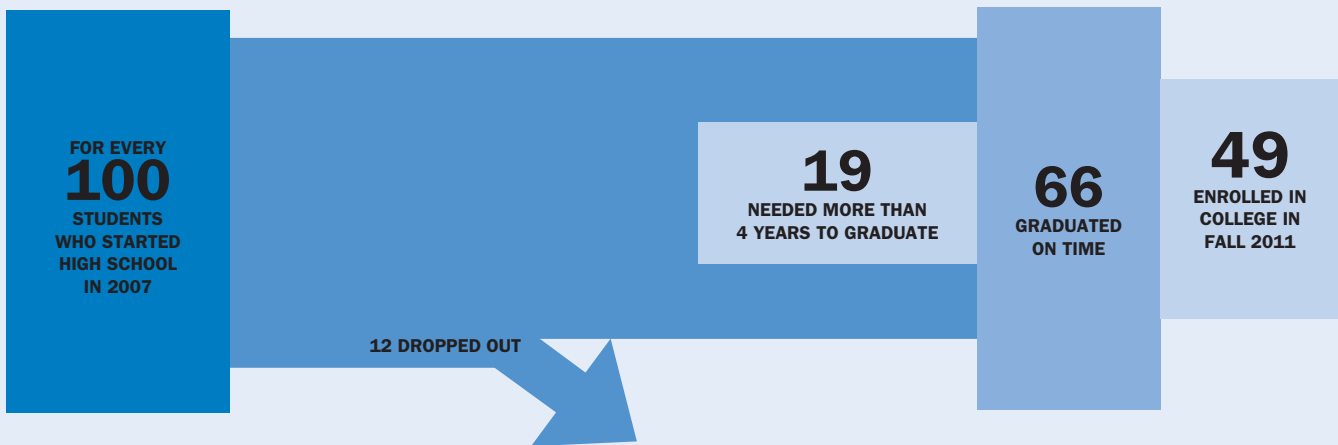
But the pipeline begins in the NYC public schools. And despite Chancellor Walcott's public ambitions, the city has a long way to go before most of its high school graduates will be ready to succeed in college.

Only 29 percent of the freshmen who started high school in 2008 graduated on time with the academic skills needed to enter CUNY without taking remedial courses, according to the DOE. This number is particularly important because these "catch-up" classes are often blamed for the fact that many students never get a degree. They drain students' financial aid and morale before they can start earning course credits. And even fewer students are prepared for competitive colleges at CUNY, SUNY and elsewhere. Only 16.6 percent of students in the Class of 2012 cohort had taken and passed enough Regents exams to earn an "advanced" Regents diploma—a good indicator that students have passed important higher-level courses, like Algebra 2, Chemistry and Physics.

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THE COLLEGE PATH FOR NYC STUDENTS WHO BEGAN HIGH SCHOOL IN 2007

ONLY HALF FOLLOWED A STANDARD PATH TO COLLEGE



SOURCES: New York City Department of Education Graduation Results: 4-Year Outcome Cohort for 2007.

The trends in New York City mirror those seen nationwide. And there are tremendous costs associated with sending so many students to college who are academically and financially ill-prepared. New York State, along with California and Texas, consistently top the lists of local and federal aid spent on students who drop out of college before getting a degree. A prominent academic think tank, American Institutes for Research, released a report last year estimating the “combined costs of attrition” at New York State’s community colleges to be around \$290 million for students attending between 2004 and 2009. (And nationally, this figure is a staggering \$3.85 billion.) Importantly, this is just the cost to taxpayers. Researchers have only begun to measure the cost to students themselves in wasted personal savings, pointless loans and dashed hopes—not to mention the time and effort that could have been saved if the students had been more firmly prepared in high school. (See “Dropping Out of College Is Costly,” page 16.)

The stakes are high for both Chancellor Walcott and the next mayor. Can the city maintain its graduation rate *and* dramatically ramp up the demands of high school? And what final initiatives are possible in these last days of Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s administration? The answers are complicated. What follows is a “cheat sheet” outlining the national context of this work and the Department of Education’s current strategy, which relies on four key elements:

1. New college-focused PK–12 academic standards, developed by the Common Core State Standards initiative, are being put into place nationwide by state governors and education officials. The standards will be accompanied by tougher and more frequent exams at every level. Both New York State and New York City have embraced the Common Core and are working with national leaders on standards and test development. The Department of Education is banking on the Common Core to help deal with one of the toughest issues associated with the universal college readiness goal: delivering a coherent college preparatory curriculum to all.

2. The city's Department of Education is creating new, "high stakes" accountability measures for high schools. The department uses such metrics to measure school performance in a number of different areas, including academic preparation and college matriculation. Ten percent of every high school's Progress Report grade, which can be used to reward or sanction schools, will measure college- or career-focused preparation and results.

3. The department has given principals and school staff the power to track the success of their graduates after they leave with reliable data on whether students arrived at college, what colleges they attend, how long they remain in college (since many drop out) and, in the case of CUNY, whether or not those students need to take remedial courses.

4. Finally, the department is working on staff training and developing new high schools with an explicit college or career focus. These include early college high schools like Pathways in Technology Early College High School, mentioned in President Obama's State of the Union address, and new Career and Technical Education high schools.

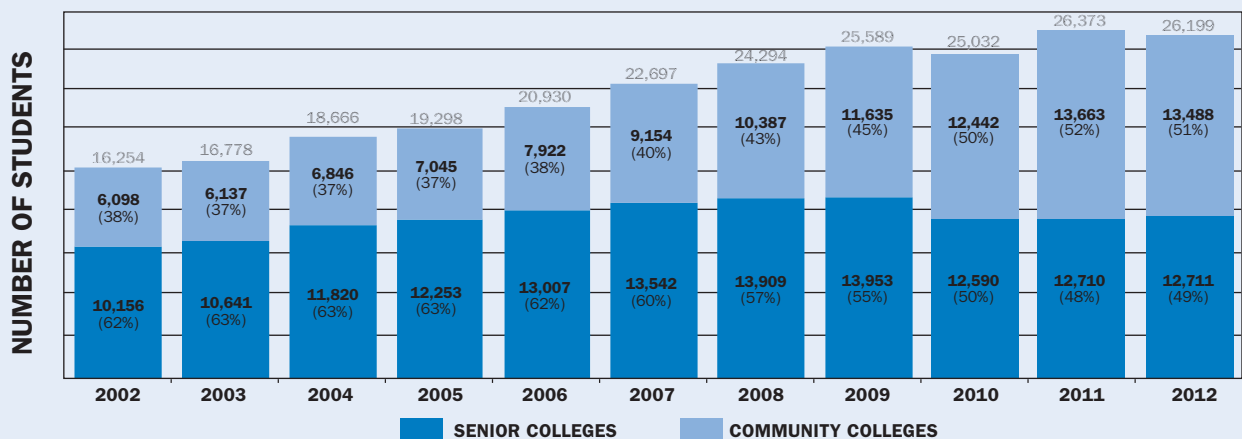
The big question mark for Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Walcott is time—and whether these initiatives will be embraced by the next mayor. It took the city ten years to generate its large increases in high school graduation rates, and it will realistically take five to ten years to see similar results on college preparedness, says Walcott's chief deputy, Shael Polakow-Suransky. He says he hopes the next mayor will be committed to this work. "This is not something that happens from one year to the next," he says. ✱

NYC STUDENT ENROLLMENT AT CUNY HAS SKYROCKETED SINCE 2002, REFLECTING HIGHER HIGH SCHOOL GRAD RATES AND INCREASED INTEREST IN COLLEGE

The City University of New York is colloquially called "13th grade" for New York City public school students because it is such a popular destination. Seventy percent of CUNY freshmen come from NYC public high schools. As the city's graduation rate has increased, so has CUNY's freshmen enrollment. The number of NYC students going to CUNY has increased 61 percent since 2002.

The increase in students enrolling in two-year community colleges (versus CUNY's more selective senior colleges) has been particularly dramatic. The number of NYC freshmen has more than doubled since 2002. This is an important trend to watch because CUNY's community college graduation rates are quite low. Only 16 percent of students entering in 2009 earned an associate's degree within three years. While more students are going to college, many still fail to get a college degree.

TOTAL NUMBER OF NYC PUBLIC SCHOOL GRADUATES ENROLLING IN CUNY AS FIRST-TIME FRESHMEN



SOURCE: Chart provided by the New York City Department of Education. Data generated for the DOE by CUNY's Office of Institutional Research and Assessment.

NOTES: Data includes all students who report to CUNY that they have graduated from a NYC high school. In 2010, CUNY saw a decrease in overall first-time freshmen enrollment following a change in enrollment policy: from rolling admissions to a formalized application deadline. The 2012 CUNY enrollment numbers are preliminary as of March 2013.

HOW ACCESS TO ADVANCED CLASSES IN HIGH SCHOOL INCREASES THE PROBABILITY OF COLLEGE SUCCESS

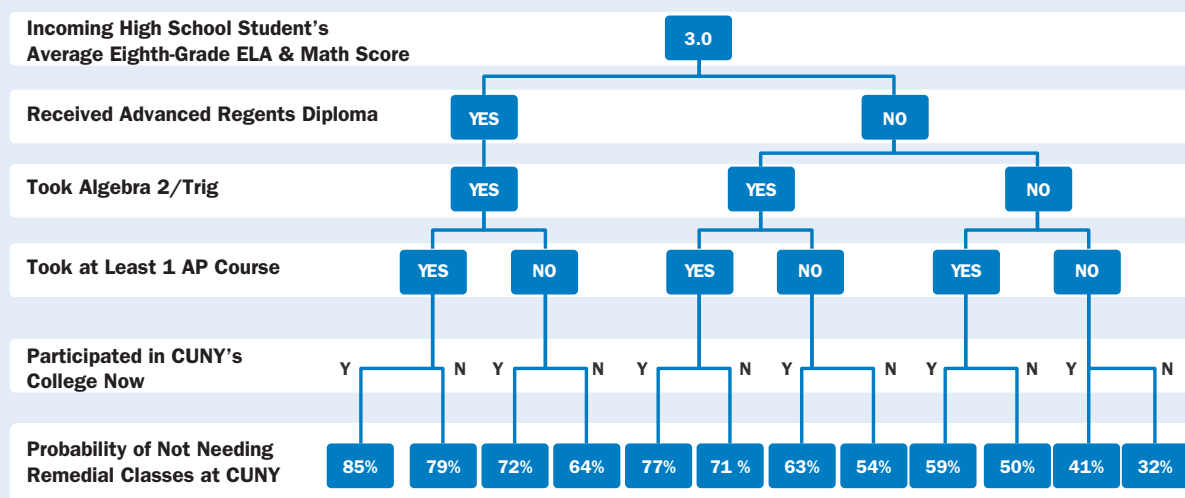
As the city moves its focus from graduation to college preparation, the New York City Department of Education is pressing high schools to offer more rigorous courses and a college preparatory curriculum. There is much work to be done.

Students, for example, should have access to advanced math and science courses to prepare for college. A Center for New York City Affairs analysis of 2011–12 Progress Report data revealed that only 28 of 342 high schools analyzed had students taking Regents exams for Algebra 2, Chemistry and Physics. Most schools offered only one or two of these courses for possible advanced Regents credit in that year—and 46 schools appeared to offer none.

That said, most high schools offer at least a few advanced or college-level courses. And taking even just one course can improve the probability of success in college. The analysis below was done by the education department, looking at two cohorts entering college in 2009 and 2010. This chart illustrates the path of those students who entered high school with average 8th grade ELA and math scores of 3.0. (To note, most students in NYC enter high school with lower scores than 3.0.)

The best possible scenario is seen on the left: The student will get access to a rich array of college preparatory classes, allowing him to earn an Advanced Regents Diploma and experiment with at least one college-level course, like those offered through CUNY's College Now program. A worst-case scenario is shown on the right: The student gets no exposure to college prep classes. The differences are stark. The student with access to a college prep curriculum is likely to start college on time, avoiding CUNY's time-consuming remedial courses. The student with no college prep experience is likely to need the remedial help. Starting on time, with no remedial help, is an important predictor of college success at CUNY.

PROBABILITY OF STUDENTS NEEDING REMEDIAL CLASSES AT CUNY GIVEN COLLEGE PREP OPPORTUNITIES AND WORK IN HIGH SCHOOL



SOURCE: The chart was provided by the New York City Department of Education. The Center's analysis uses the Regents test-taking data from the 2011–12 Progress Report dataset.

How College and Career Readiness Became So Popular

A primer on where we have been and where we are going.

Six years ago, the nation was obsessed with closing “drop-out factories” and increasing the high school graduation rate. Since then, educators have observed that a high school diploma by itself does not mean much; and political leaders from President Barack Obama on down have moved to the next hot thing: college and career preparation.

Cities and states are reworking their education systems to better prepare students for college and high-level employment demands. In New York City, the Department of Education has revamped its high-stakes accountability system in an effort to make college and career preparation a top priority, while New York State is introducing tougher tests and adopting national standards called the Common Core.

When did the idea of “college and careers for all” become so important? And where will New York City be going next? What follows is a “cheat sheet” designed to offer a quick account of what has been happening nationally and what we can expect locally:

STEP ONE: COIN THE TERM “COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS”

In 2005, Professor David T. Conley of the University of Oregon published a groundbreaking book: *College Knowledge: What It Really Takes for Students to Succeed and What We Can Do to Get Them Ready*. At the time, plenty of people were talking about the importance of getting more low-income and minority students through high school and college. The tech boom and global competition increased the demand for more highly skilled workers, and scholars also noticed that adults in the lowest-income neighborhoods had not benefitted significantly from the Clinton-era jobs boom. Any effort to improve the lives of the next generation would require an improved high school degree and higher-quality college or training.

Conley’s book offered an important new perspective: kids needed to be prepared academically (e.g., have solid writing, math and analytical skills), socially (e.g., able to manage their time and hold their own in a competitive class) and culturally (e.g., able to resist outside attractions or demands and willing to study for long hours). Success in college could offer a leap in economic status for many students. Even if students weren’t interested in college, he noted, college preparatory skills and habits were important for landing a good, living-wage job out of high school. National think tanks and funders took note and ramped up their own work around these ideas, propelled in part by the powerful Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. By 2010, when Conley published his second book, called *College and Career Ready*, interest in college readiness was reaching a fever pitch among education influencers and technocrats. “In that five-year period, everything took off,” Conley recalls.

STEP TWO: DEVELOP HIGHER NATIONAL STANDARDS

Around the same time, education leaders across the nation began talking about what exactly would be required to get students to the next level academically. Annual news reports blared the fact that tiny countries like Singapore and Finland were outpacing the United States in international tests. State leaders were also grappling with the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which required all children to become “proficient” in English and math, as measured by standardized tests, by 2014. Educators and parents complained loudly that NCLB forced schools, particularly those in low-income neighborhoods, to focus almost exclusively on high-stakes multiple choice exams for English and math, to the exclusion of college-oriented skills like writing, analysis and scientific exploration.

Powerfully connected education think tanks, like Achieve, called for new national standards designed to promote a coherent, college-focused curriculum. Teams of educators and policymakers began to talk about what this would look like, eventually putting together a set of detailed guidelines that would be developed into the Common Core State Standards Initiative. The Common Core requires more writing, listening, speaking and higher-level mathematical analysis than are typically taught. Students will also be required to read more nonfiction and be able to interpret “original source” texts, such as historically important speeches.

Forty-five states and the District of Columbia have signed on. These states are now working in two separate consortiums to develop their own tests for the Common Core. The goal is to have the standards and tests in all schools by the 2014-15 school year. In New York State, the Common Core standards are now in place for all grades, Pre-K to 12. The New York State Education Department launched “Common Core-aligned” tests this past spring for grades three through eight; the high school Regents exams will begin to shift next year. And the plan is to adopt the more sophisticated, computer adaptive tests now being developed by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). However, this testing program will be expensive to create and administer—and no one can say who will pay for it at this point. So the future of the PARCC-developed tests remains a question mark in New York.

STEP THREE: BEGIN TO TRACK STUDENTS AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

There was another important development in this period. The NYC Department of Education, the City University of New York and the state Board of Regents began to talk publically about the importance of working together to develop a well-aligned, consistent approach from pre-kindergarten through four years of college—nicknamed “P to 16.” A huge part of this plan involved integrating the Department of Education and CUNY data systems, recalls Josh Thomases, the department’s deputy chief academic officer for instruction. This made sense, given that nearly two-thirds of CUNY’s incoming freshmen were from the public schools. The two institutions had shared data in the past so the necessary hardware was in place. It was a big job and took several years of technical work in both agencies for the new system to go live.

For the first time, the Department of Education had reliable numbers on what was happening to the large number of its graduates going to CUNY. The DOE’s Office of Research, Accountability and Data created a new report for schools called the “Where Are They Now” reports and gave principals their first look at the data in June 2010. These reports have since evolved, with new versions available for all school levels. Elementary school principals can see what happened to their former students in middle school and middle school principals can watch the fate of their former students in high school. The high school reports now have data on all students going to college, not just those attending CUNY. This allows principals and guidance counselors to see what kind of schools their students are attending and if their students are getting access to more competitive colleges (for example, attending four-year colleges instead of local community colleges).

This new information about NYC’s graduates allows principals and teachers to see the results of their work from a novel perspective. Even the earliest versions of the reports, with which principals could only see how their CUNY-bound graduates were doing, had an impact, Thomases says. “The big surprise for principals was how many of their students were taking remedial classes,” he recalls. This was an eye-opener for high schools that had been proud of the numbers they were getting into college. The reports “scared the bejesus out of them,” he says. “This is challenging all of us to raise our game to the next level.”

STEP FOUR: HOLD SCHOOLS ACCOUNTABLE FOR THEIR GRADUATES

The “Where Are They Now” reports were initially provided to schools in the hopes that staff would push students to graduate with academic preparation and test scores high enough to avoid CUNY remedial courses. Then in fall 2012, the Department of Education introduced a new “A” to “F” grade for college and career readiness on the high schools’ Progress Reports. This grade, which has been refined for the fall 2013 release, is determined by a number of factors. Schools are credited for how many students are prepared well enough avoid remediation at CUNY or, lacking that, still stay in school for three semesters after arriving. The grade also factors in the number of students who take and pass at least one high-level class, like an AP course or College Now. And it credits schools for how many students end up in meaningful places after graduation—college, vocational schools, licensed trade work or public service, like the military or Americorps.

The “College and Career Readiness” metric is worth only 10 percent of a school’s overall grade, meaning that other factors like graduation rates and Regents test scores are still far more important. But it is a big change to hold school staff responsible for choices that students make after graduation.

When officials went on an early roadshow to talk to principals about the Progress Report, most “were positive, or at least resigned” to the measures they felt they had some control over, like getting test scores high enough to avoid remediation, recalls Martin Kurzweil, who developed the new measures and is the department’s former executive director of research, accountability and data. “But the feeling about the college enrollment numbers has been more mixed.”

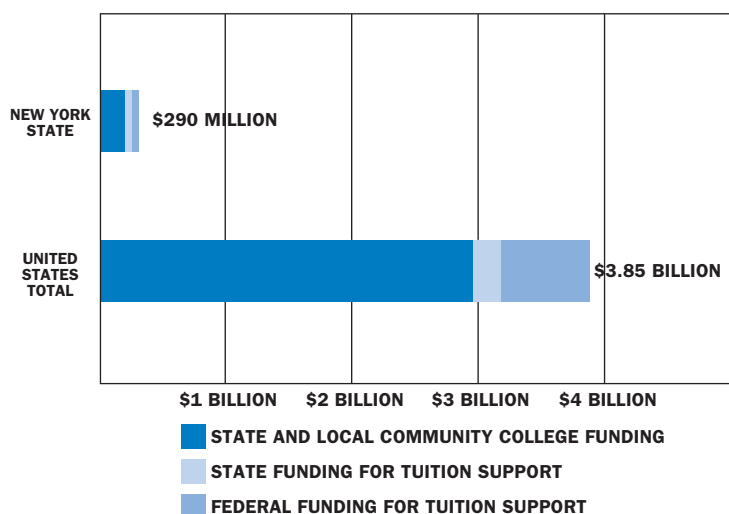
Now, a year after the release of that first college grade, principals are becoming more comfortable with the notion that they do have power over what happens to their students after graduation, says Simone D’Souza, Kurzweil’s successor. The post-graduation success measure is an important tool for seeing if a school’s guidance services are up to par, for example. Schools can also team up with nonprofits to provide programs like “summer bridge” that help graduates deal with problems that might prevent them from enrolling in college. “Just having this measure is shifting the conversation,” D’Souza says.

DROPPING OUT OF COLLEGE IS COSTLY FOR BOTH STUDENTS AND TAXPAYERS

More students than ever want to go to college, but it’s important they have the preparation and support needed to earn a degree. Otherwise, they are wasting their own time and money—and lots of taxpayer dollars. The think tank American Institutes for Research tracks state and federal dollars spent on students who enroll in community college but never get a degree. New York State, California and Texas consistently top the national lists for most dollars lost (due mostly to their large populations and extensive community college systems).

The costs are rising. In 2005, the total state and federal cost of students who dropped out was around \$675 million; by 2009, this number had jumped to more than \$900 million. Between 2005 and 2009, the nation lost a total of \$3.85 billion on community college students who never got their degrees. While community colleges are absolutely vital, the rising losses to taxpayers—and to the students themselves—demand that both high schools and colleges do a better job of preparing and supporting this growing generation of college-goers.

FIVE-YEAR CUMULATIVE COST OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO SUBSEQUENTLY DROPPED OUT SCHOOL YEAR 2004–2005 THROUGH 2008–2009



SOURCE: American Institutes for Research, “The Hidden Costs of Community Colleges” (October 2011).

STEP FIVE: WHAT’S NEXT?

The notion of college readiness is a work in progress. The effect of the Common Core and New York City’s experiment in college-focused accountability is a question mark at this point, officials admit, though early results are promising. Whatever happens, Thomases says, it’s unlikely that the city and the nation will return to the days when the focus was only on high school graduation rates. “It’s the kind of thing that none of us can walk back from,” he says. 🌟

MAKING PROGRESS AFTER GRADUATION: A GUIDE TO THE DOE'S COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS GRADE

In the fall of 2012, the New York City Department of Education added a new "College and Career Readiness" grade to the annual high school Progress Reports. This new high-stakes "A" to "F" grade is designed to give more attention to how well schools are preparing students for life after graduation. Importantly, the Progress Report is still mostly focused on graduation results. The college and career readiness elements contribute only 10 points toward a school's 100-point ranking. However, the grade itself is hard to ignore. Both staff and families are taking notice of it. What follows is a brief description of the new measures. While the image below is of the most recent Progress Report, the description reflects changes that will be seen in the 2012–13 report, which will be released this fall.

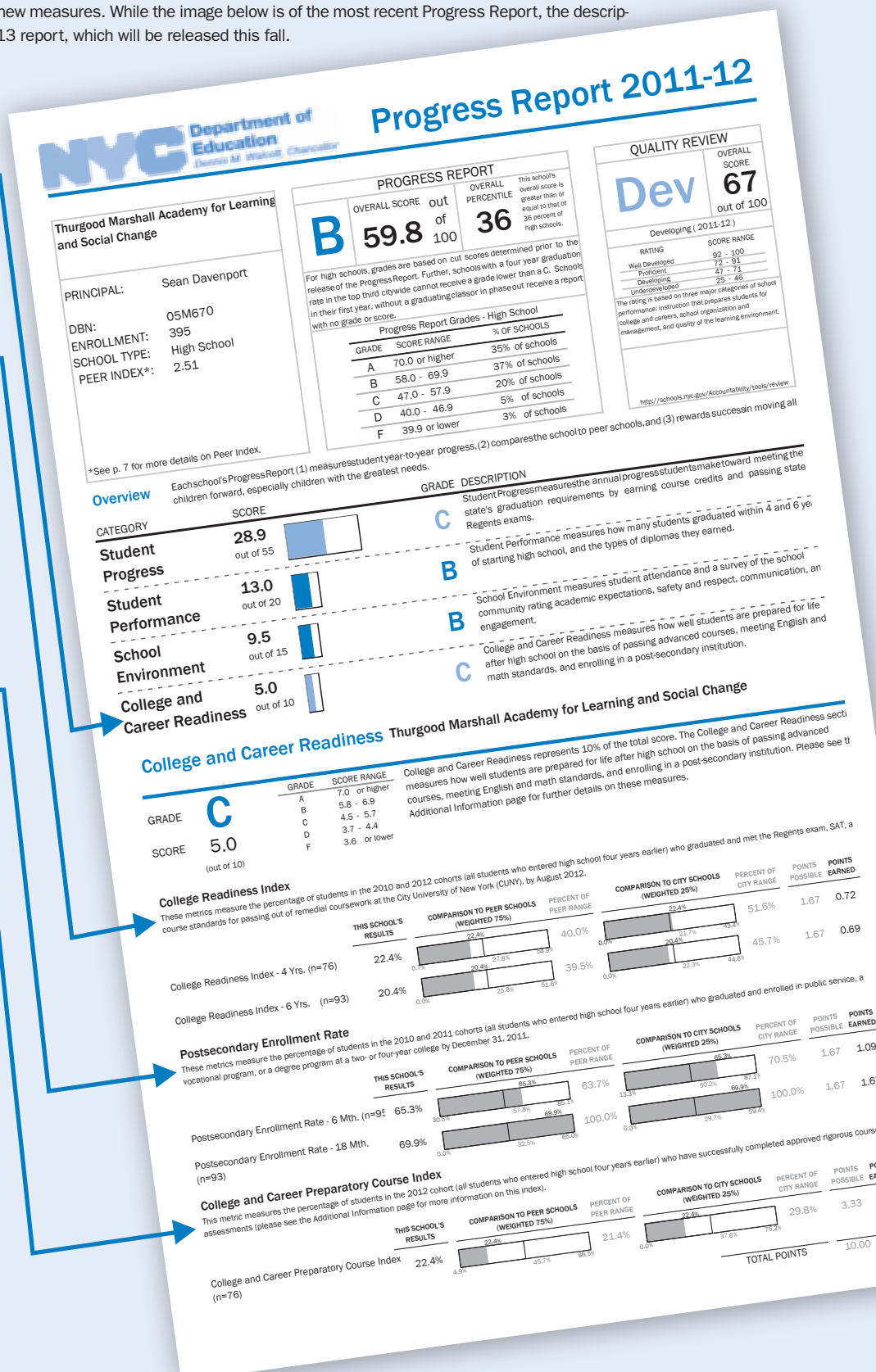
COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS GRADE:

The "A" to "F" grade attempts to assess how well high schools are preparing students to succeed in college and the workforce. Until recently, the high-stakes measures in the Progress Report focused exclusively on keeping students in school and ensuring they graduated. And these incentives appeared to work—graduation rates increased dramatically. But many students graduated without the skills they needed to succeed in college. The new grade is designed to increase attention to this problem and push schools to offer a stronger college prep curriculum.

COLLEGE READINESS INDEX (4 out of 10 points): This measure is focused on reducing the number of students requiring remedial courses at the City University of New York. Schools get credit for each student that has Regents, SAT, ACT or CUNY assessment scores high enough to enroll in CUNY without taking remedial courses. In this upcoming Progress Report, schools will also get credit for students who made it through at least three semesters of college, no matter their post-grad scores. (The fact that they persisted in college for more than a year demonstrates that, despite their test scores, the students were prepared for college to some degree.)

POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT RATE (3 out of 10 points): This measure credits schools for enrolling graduates into college, accredited vocational programs or public service, such as the military or Americorps. It is meant to measure, to some degree, whether students got the help they needed to get into college or take advantage of other promising postgraduate opportunities. However, the measure does not capture the quality of advisement or how much help students got from their school.

COLLEGE AND CAREER PREPARATORY INDEX (3 out of 10 points): This measure is designed to push schools to offer a richer, more rigorous curriculum. Schools are credited for any student who passes one class that is deemed to be advanced or college level. Examples include higher-level math, science and vocational courses; Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate classes; or college-level courses, like those offered in "early college" programs or CUNY's College Now. The measure, however, offers little information on the overall breadth and quality of a school's academic program. The grade is not a measure of whether a school offers a true college preparatory curriculum. This critical information is still hard for families to find.



High Hopes...Fragile Expectations

New York City students want to go to college and take on ambitious careers. Can the public schools change to meet the needs of this hopeful new generation?

Estrella is a South Bronx high-schooler and a newcomer to the United States. In slightly halting English, she speaks with great confidence about her plans to be a lawyer, someday, and her excitement about the college-level course she takes at nearby Hostos Community College. With such high aspirations, she is in good company.

Since 2009, researchers at the Center for New York City Affairs have interviewed and surveyed hundreds of students like Estrella.* In a 2011 survey of 10th graders in 11 New York City high schools, nearly one-third told us they planned to be a doctor, a lawyer or some other kind of professional. Just as many reported that their parents hoped for the same. (See “New York City Students Have Professional Ambitions,” page 21.)

In the South Bronx, however, reality can be unforgiving: According to census data, fewer than 18 percent of parents have a college degree themselves, and the college path for their children is rarely smooth. The prospects for Estrella’s legal career? A long shot at best, remarks her assistant principal. By spring break, Estrella had already missed 55 days of school.

Her story illustrates the “college aspirations gap,” a phenomenon that is vexing and yet also infused with hope. Over several decades, as the urban economy has shifted away from manufacturing and immigration has transformed the city and the nation, a growing number of families with no experience of higher education have gotten the message that their children must attend at least some college or technical school if they hope to have a secure future. As a result, more students nationwide are graduating high school than ever before—and college enrollment is at an all-time high and growing, with the numbers expected to hit 23 million students by 2020.

Yet most of these students will never earn a college degree, says David T. Conley, a professor at the University of Oregon and one of the nation’s leading authorities on college readiness. For every 100 middle school students, 93 say they want a college degree. Of these, 70 will graduate high school, 44 will enroll in college and only 26 will get a bachelor’s degree within six years of enrolling, he says.

New York City’s numbers are similar. Among students who entered ninth grade in a typical public high school in 2007, about half graduated and enrolled in college on time. At the City University of New York (CUNY), the destination of choice for a majority of public school students, the average three-year graduation rate for the community colleges is 16 percent and the average six-year graduation rate for the senior colleges is 54 percent. (See “The College Path,” page 11.)

“Our students are aspiring to have more education. We’ve succeeded as a society in convincing people to do this. But then we’ve set them up, essentially, for failure,” Conley says. One huge structural reason for this is the K–12 public education system, which has always tended to sort students by class, academic ability or personal motivation, he says. Conley’s message of “college readiness”—embraced over the last five years by business leaders, policymakers and foundations—says that this dynamic must somehow be upended, so that a much higher percentage of the U.S. labor force is well educated, capable of doing more complicated work and primed to make a living wage.

“The idea of having one set of high, challenging standards for all students is a relatively new concept,” Conley says. It is also, he adds, “antithetical to the DNA of high schools,” where many teachers and guidance counselors focus their energies on the most promising students. Letting large groups

*The name of this student has been changed to protect her privacy

More students are graduating high school than ever before, and college enrollment is at an all-time high and growing, with the numbers expected to hit 23 million students by 2020.

of students get by, graduating without college- or career-oriented preparation, should no longer be an option, he says. The demands of the labor market are changing rapidly and students in school today need to be prepared for jobs that may not even exist right now. Whether students prepare for college—or other options like licensed trade work, high-quality technical schools or the military—they will need the academic and social skills to make the most of new opportunities in their adult life. Unfortunately, today's high schools are often not up to this task, Conley notes. "The high school cannot be built around a model that some students can choose to *not* prepare and to *not* learn beyond high school. You just can't allow that anymore."

THE BALANCE BETWEEN MORE WORK AND LESS

Estrella's spotty attendance record is fairly common among New York City high school students. Last year, more than one-third of high school students were "chronically absent," missing more than 20 days of school. But that's not all that's holding students back. Students in her school—all recent immigrants—must master the English language, and all high school students in New York State must now pass five statewide Regents exams in order to graduate. Fewer than one-third of the students in Estrella's school graduated on time this year.

First interviewed in 2011, Estrella was taking classes at Hostos Community College through College Now, a partnership program in high schools run by CUNY. She went to the college campus twice a week to take an English class she described as "more advanced" with "lots of reading and essay writing," and for which she expected to get three college credits. Her high school, she added, was not as interesting or rigorous. "I don't like the over-explaining here," she said. "If you go to Hostos, I think it's better because you need to talk, and you need to make essays."

The assistant principal at Estrella's school sees a wide gulf between perceptions and reality among her students. They need to learn to be "high school ready" before they can learn to be "college ready," she observes, adding that many students don't take things like homework and regular attendance seriously. Estrella may have been enjoying her class at Hostos, she adds, but her attendance record was evidence that law school was out of reach. "How can she be a lawyer when she misses 50 days of school?"

Another Center survey in 2011 asked teachers to identify "college readiness" as it applied to their students. More than 130 teachers in six schools responded. About half opted to simply offer definitions: being academically prepared, able to cope with unexpected challenges, completing work thoroughly and on time, working independently—and being capable of analyzing data, writing thoughtful papers, reading long books and engaging in inferential thought. Some mentioned the importance of family. "Their parents have raised them to achieve."

The other half of teachers remarked on their students' poor academic preparation and insufficient study habits, often compounded by language struggles or academic apathy. Few offered much hope for their students' college prospects. "Most of them are going out into the cold neither having, nor realizing the need of, a coat to keep them warm," lamented one teacher. Preparation is "very poor," wrote another. "Students have been led to believe that high school is their 'admission ticket' to get into college."

"Reading is fundamental" for success in college, wrote another, "and yet most of my students dislike reading and make no effort to read, either for recreation or for coursework."

Their schools, some added, have been complicit in letting students slide by. "Most of our students are babied and passed along even if they don't meet the course requirements," wrote one teacher. The focus is all wrong, says another: "Too much energy is spent on short-term passing—and not enough energy on long-term college planning."

Experts say there are plenty of ways that teachers can increase the excitement and rigor of their classes without losing their lowest-level students.

Students seem aware of this Faustian bargain. In a series of one-hour interviews of 10th graders in 2011, they mentioned their teachers' support and the many "second chances" they tend to get in school. Plenty of students were happy with the arrangement. "I find it easy here," commented one student, in a typical refrain. "The teachers are nice and everything."

Others were perplexed or annoyed. "[My teacher] always says he doesn't want us to fail, he'll try to give us extra work and extra credit," said one student. "If he were more strict, it'd probably be easier for him and for the class." Students rarely reported being challenged by their coursework, with some remarking that expectations were higher in the countries where they spent their younger years. "In China, teachers said, 'Get an A,'" offered one student. "They support you here, but they don't say, 'Get an A,' like in my country. Every teacher wants you to get a better grade, but they don't force you."

"Classes are easy," declared another student in a different school. A classmate backed her up: "It's almost like a review of what we learned—well, what I learned—in the eighth grade." The others almost universally agreed.

It's important to note that the comments of these students and their teachers come from a small set of schools, all in very low-income communities. Students and their teachers contend with tremendous academic challenges (not to mention many personal challenges in students' lives). The most fundamental learning issue is that many students are reading well below grade level—a depressing reality that can hinder any teacher's efforts to ramp up the speed and rigor of the classes. Experts like Professor Conley acknowledge these issues, but say there are plenty of ways that teachers can increase the excitement and rigor of their classes without losing their lowest-level students. One simple idea: give students assignments "that can't be done in 20 minutes." Demand thoughtful coursework that must be done in phases over the length of a unit or semester, he suggests. If students are below grade level, all the more reason they need to be excited and challenged by their schoolwork. "We should challenge you *more*," he says. "We should up the ante."

COLLEGE A DISTANT THOUGHT

Asked if her 10th grade classmates were thinking about college yet, Estella replied that this was still a distant thought for many of them. "Some told me that when they get to 11th grade they'll start to stay still, but they're taking this year to play," she said. The attitude of Estrella's friends reflects another important trend seen across high schools we surveyed: A very high percentage of students are waiting until 11th grade before they begin to think seriously about college.

The late start is an important factor in understanding why Conley's "aspirations gap" is so wide. Our surveys and interviews of high school sophomores repeatedly turned up stories of students who had only a fuzzy conception of the true demands of college, particularly with respect to the amount of reading required and what professors look for in writing and analysis. There was a lot of confusion about what colleges look for in applicants. Students reported that they were in the dark about simple things. Nearly half didn't know that colleges would look at grades from their freshmen and sophomore year, or that colleges will be judging them on the number of advanced or college-level courses they take. (See "Few Students Understand What Is Required," page 22.)

"We start planning way too late," admits Rosemarie Thompson, a guidance counselor at Belmont Preparatory High School, a small high school in the Bronx, and guidance chapter leader for the United Federation of Teachers. Thompson says she does classroom presentations early in ninth and 10th grade, as do other guidance counselors, but the students themselves don't tend to get serious until the application process starts. "That's when they really settle down. Then they say, 'I need to get my average up because I need good grades in my senior year to get into college.'"

There is a bigger reason that the "college rush" in junior year is loaded with impossible expectations, says a college counselor who, until recently, worked in a small high school in the Bronx. Talking about

college this late, she recalls, “always felt like a game of catch-up. We were doing a lot of work with students about what steps they need to take to get into college, but it was like we missed a step. The most important step: Why are they doing all of this? I’m not convinced most of my students ever really got why college was important.”

Most of the students we surveyed had little clarity about the academic requirements and financial arrangements necessary to go to college. And many didn’t have the experience of parents and siblings to fall back on: just one in five of the high school students we surveyed had an immediate family member who had graduated college, and only three in 10 had a parent who had ever attended college. (See survey results on pages 22 and 28.)

Scholars have documented that first-generation college aspirants need powerful signals from their schools and adults in their lives to let them know they are college material and help them overcome the legitimate fear that college is not for them. In middle-class and wealthier families, college education is often part of the culture of everyday life. Joshua Steckel, the college counselor at Brooklyn School for Collaborative Studies in South Brooklyn, likes to tell his students a story about his nephew who, at the age of five, came home one day and asked his mother worriedly if he had to go to college. One of his friends had told him that he already knew where he was going. “His mom said, ‘You know, you don’t have to worry about it. No, technically, you don’t have to go.’ Then my nephew said, ‘Will you let them know I’m not coming?’”

“Here was a five-year-old kid who already knew in some unconscious way that college was holding a space for him, that he had a reservation, that he had to cancel it,” Steckel says. “For our students, it’s the opposite. Even the most successful students are kind of defying some belief or expectation that they feel has been set for them. They have assimilated or internalized that there’s not a space for them, and that they have to defy the odds to create one. That’s a pretty hard place to be.”

SCHOOLS RESPONSIBLE FOR BUILDING A COLLEGE PATH

When Department of Education Chancellor Dennis Walcott talks about the knot of issues associated with college, he invariably calls for “raising the bar on the high school diploma” or explains the importance of “creating a college culture” in public schools. These phrases have become rote. But for those who work in the schools, the refrains don’t begin to describe the true scope of effort that’s required.

Among freshmen who entered in high school in 2008, 64.7 graduated on time with the Class of 2012. Just over 28 percent of this hopeful group of freshmen had test scores high enough to exempt them from remediation at the City University of New York. This is a number that the education department has begun working to change with new accountability measures focused on college and career preparation.

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NYC STUDENTS HAVE PROFESSIONAL AMBITIONS

NYC students say they have high ambitions for their future. A Center for New York City Affairs survey of 10th grade students in seven low-income high schools found that more than 30 percent of students hoped to go into a profession that requires an advanced degree—and more than two-thirds aspired to careers that require some kind of college degree.

QUESTION TO 10TH GRADERS: WHAT JOB OR CAREER DO YOU THINK YOU WOULD LIKE TO HAVE IN THE FUTURE?

	# Students	Percent
Medical, Law or Other Profession	139	30%
Technology or Computers	21	5%
Teaching or Education	21	5%
Law Enforcement or Military	25	5%
Arts or Entertainment	37	8%
Service or Hospitality	11	2%
Professional Athlete	31	7%
Business	52	11%
Don't Know	30	6%
Other	44	9%
Multiple Answer	35	8%
No Answer	10	2%
Total	456	100%

SOURCE: Survey conducted by the Center for New York City Affairs in May 2011. Students were chosen from seven low-income high schools in various parts of the city. The schools were participating in an evaluation of community-based college readiness efforts.

FEW STUDENTS UNDERSTAND WHAT IS REQUIRED TO BE TRULY PREPARED FOR COLLEGE, AND MANY TRUST THAT A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA IS ENOUGH

Educators in New York State have long known that a high school diploma alone (even the fancy-sounding “Regents diploma”) is no guarantee that students have the higher-level writing, math and analytical skills required for college success. A Center for New York City Affairs survey of 10th graders revealed that almost 70 percent of students believe that a high school diploma is sufficient preparation for college—and most of the remaining students said they didn’t know. In addition, only half of students knew that their freshman and sophomore year grades would be seen and reviewed on their college applications.

These survey results point to the fact that teachers and guidance counselors must start talking to students early about the demands of college, making sure students know that the rigor and effort required in their high school courses will be crucially important in college.

The Center also asked students, “What kinds of grades do you need to get into the college?” More than 60 percent said they believed they would need an average grade of 80 or higher to get into the college of their choice. However, many admitted they weren’t meeting this mark. When asked about their grades at the end of their sophomore year, only 46 percent said they had grade point averages of 80 or above.

QUESTION TO 10TH GRADERS: WILL MEETING YOUR SCHOOL’S GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS PREPARE YOU FOR COLLEGE?

	# Students	Percent
No	24	5%
Yes	322	69%
Don’t Know	107	23%
Multiple Answers	3	1%
No Answer	12	3%
Total	468	100%

QUESTION TO 10TH GRADERS: WILL YOUR COURSE GRADES IN NINTH AND 10TH GRADE COUNT IN APPLYING FOR COLLEGE?

	# Students	Percent
No	248	53%
Yes	56	12%
Don’t Know	154	33%
No Answer	8	2%
Total	468	100%

QUESTION TO 10TH GRADERS: WHAT KIND OF GRADES DO YOU NEED TO GET INTO THE COLLEGE OF YOUR CHOICE?

	# Students	Percent
55 Average or NC	3	1%
65 Average or D	9	2%
75 Average or C	27	6%
80 Average or B	120	26%
90 Average or A	172	37%
Don’t Know	76	16%
Multiple Answers	25	5%
No Answer	36	8%
Total	468	100%

SOURCE: Survey conducted by the Center for New York City Affairs in May 2011. Students were chosen from seven low-income high schools in various parts of the city. The schools were participating in an evaluation of community-based college readiness efforts.

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Beginning in the fall of 2012, the DOE began holding high schools publically accountable for college-oriented outcomes. The metrics included both measures of academic preparation and how many students logged successful outcomes after graduation, like enrolling in college or public service. The attention to these numbers, which began in 2010–11, seems to be having an effect. The number of students graduating on time with test scores high enough to avoid remediation at CUNY has been climbing.

“The college readiness idea, as a policy and as a focus for schools, is relatively speaking quite new,” says Shael Polakow-Suransky, senior deputy chancellor and Walcott’s second in command. “We were pretty much one of the first districts in the country to make it a focus,” he adds. “And we are definitely one of the first places to introduce it into the accountability systems for our schools.”

The metrics are at the heart of the education department’s strategy for sparking a thoroughgoing change in the way high schools (and even middle schools) prepare students for college. In the past, the department’s numbers-driven accountability system has had a powerful track record—and has been central to the Bloomberg-era school transformation effort. Principals are largely given the freedom to manage their schools and budgets as they see fit in exchange for the promise that they will continue to improve their results, including test scores and graduation rates. Poor Progress Report grades can lead to closure, a demoralizing and dreaded consequence for school communities. Both the Department of Education and its critics credit the Progress Reports with creating a singular focus on increasing graduation rates in the city. Since 2005, shortly after Mayor Bloomberg took over the schools, the graduation rate has leapt 19 percentage points, from 46.5 for the graduating class of 2005 to 64.7 percent for the Class of 2012.

But while the department maintains the dramatic gains in the graduation rate have been real, critics argue that the gains were misleading—that teachers have been pushing kids through to graduation with a thin curriculum, full of the “second and third” chances that students describe—and heavily focused on getting students to pass New York State’s Regents exams. The pressure to focus on graduation, first and foremost, was evident in the Center for New York City Affairs’ survey of teachers in 2011. “We need to make sure they pass all of their basic high school classes so they can apply to college,” wrote one teacher, echoing the sentiments of others.

The reason for these worries is evident in the Regents scores and graduation rates analyzed in the Center’s sample of the 11 high schools participating in the Center’s research initiative. In seven of the eight schools with graduating classes in 2010, fewer than one in 10 graduates had Regents scores high enough to avoid expensive and time-consuming remedial courses at a CUNY college.

Most students in these high schools had to take their Regents tests multiple times in order to get a passing score of 65—the score required for graduation. Among those who graduated in 2010, only 38 percent passed the required math Regents exam on the first try and 48 percent passed the required English Regents on the first try.

There was also a hard-core group of students (about 10 percent for the tougher Regents exams) who displayed great perseverance, taking the test four times or more in order to eventually get the 65 they needed to graduate. This passing score was clearly the number students needed to vault: We found that nearly 30 percent of graduates in this set of schools scored between 65 and 69 on their final Regents.

While this analysis offers only a snapshot of the academic challenges in high-poverty high schools, it is a sobering reminder that graduation is no small feat for many students and their teachers. Moreover, the standards for graduation have been getting tougher as the New York State Education Department (NYSED) continues its efforts to align PK–12 standards to the needs of colleges and professional employers. The on-time 2010 graduates in the Center’s sample had the option of passing three of the

For now, the DOE's primary goal is to reduce the number of students who get stuck in remedial courses at CUNY and elsewhere, so they have a better shot of staying in college and earning a diploma.

five Regents exams with a 55 to get a “local diploma.” As of 2012, that is no longer true. This year’s graduates had to pass all five mandatory Regents exams with a grade of 65 or better.

Less than one in three New York City high school students is attaining the minimal level of academic preparation needed to hit the ground running at CUNY. Moderately competitive colleges, including those in the CUNY and State University of New York (SUNY) system, typically seek students with good grades, solid course loads, high Regents scores, high SAT scores, and a record of success in at least one or two college-level courses, like Advanced Placement or College Now. While there is no simple way to evaluate the transcripts of graduates, a proxy is the number of students receiving an “Advanced Regents” diploma, which requires passing Regents scores on eight or more Regents exams and is evidence that a student has mastered a true college preparatory curriculum. Only 16.6 percent of the class of 2012 cohort had passed the tests necessary to obtain an Advanced Regents diploma.

And that’s only part of the picture. High schools must also better prepare students for the much tougher work that college professors will demand, along with the multitude of financial and personal issues they will likely face. This includes obvious skills such as being able to write a coherent term paper and do independent research, notes Professor Conley. But as important, it includes a host of skills crucial to both college and workplace, speaking and listening well, managing time effectively delivering work dependably, meeting personal goals—and being able to constantly adjust and learn from one’s mistakes. “I would argue these noncognitive factors are more important” than traditional college-level academics, he says. While every student needs basic reading, writing and analytical skills to succeed in college, it is the ability to set goals and persist in working toward them that allows a student to succeed, either in college or the workplace, he says.

For now, the Department of Education’s primary goal is to deliver more graduates who won’t get stuck in remedial courses at CUNY and elsewhere—and thus will have a better shot at staying in college and graduating. “It’s a transition,” admits Deputy Chancellor Polakow-Suransky, but he says New York City’s school system can take on this challenge in the same way that it took on the challenge to graduate more students.

“We were a system ten years ago that didn’t believe it was possible to graduate kids, in many instances, period. And that has changed.” Some of the worst high schools had graduation rates hovering between 25 and 35 percent. “Now we know we can double that if we put the right systems and structures into place.” The goal, he says, is the same for raising the number of students prepared for college. “That’s a goal with college readiness—to shoot at doubling that in the coming years. And even if we doubled it we’d still only be around 50 percent. That would be a huge accomplishment.”

“This is a five- to ten-year process. This is not going to be a quick thing,” he adds. “But you definitely don’t get there unless you build—and that’s what we are trying to do.”

NEW MEASURES FOR COLLEGE PREPARATION

How do city education officials propose to build the organizational infrastructure that will make this possible? By building new, higher standards into the curriculum, preparing teachers to teach to those higher standards—and using the incentives built into the department’s numbers-driven accountability system to make sure schools stay focused on their students’ post-graduation prospects.

The city has been implementing new learning standards developed by the Common Core State Standards Initiative, organized by the National Governors Association, the College Board and a long slate of officials from almost every state in the union. New York State is one of 45 states participating in the project, and plans to adopt the Common Core statewide beginning in the 2013–14 school year. The initiative’s vision, according to its leaders, is to align K–12 education with the expectations of college and work, using “rigorous content” and “application of knowledge through high-order skills.”

What does this mean in the classroom? A stronger focus from an early age on writing, research skills, analytical thinking, and math skills that relate to real-life tasks, among other things. The tests that will accompany the new curriculum are meant to be more frequent but shorter and less of an ordeal for students. They will be built into the classes and designed to give teachers immediate feedback rather than as late-year, high-stakes finales, as statewide tests are today. The city's Department of Education has been quick to embrace these standards and has been working for the past year with principals and teachers, who are experimenting with new units and lesson plans and sharing their students' work on a public Common Core website developed by the city.

The second step is incentivizing the high schools to concern themselves, systematically, with how well students are prepared not only for graduation but for success in higher education and the workplace. For the Department of Education, the incentive comes in the form of integrating post-graduate success into the array of metrics for which schools and principals are held accountable.

"We're looking at college enrollment and persistence," says Josh Thomases, the department's deputy chief academic officer for instruction. "We're looking at what's called the 'College Preparatory Course Index' and the kinds of substantive courses that predict success in college. We're playing with trying to figure out how to create a similar metric on the guidance or academic and personal behavior side... You're now accountable not only for whether or not a student graduating from your school actually gets into college. You hug them at graduation, but do they actually attend?"

HOW BEST TO PREPARE FOR COLLEGE: THE COMMON CORE VS. PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENTS

State education policymakers have embraced the Common Core State Standards as the best way to improve college and career preparation. But a growing group of educators and parents question the wisdom of this approach.

This is partly due to the New York State Education Department's contentious decision this spring to push out new Common Core-aligned tests for grades three through eight before either teachers or students had sufficient time to learn the new material. But the controversy also surfaced a deeper question, which has been debated for years: Do standardized tests help—or hurt—students in preparing for college-level work?

Among the strongest voices against high-stakes testing are members of the New York Performance Standards Consortium, a group of progressive educators who have long opposed standardized testing in favor of an approach where students are measured on a body of work, known as a "portfolio," that they create in school.

The portfolios include a variety of "performance-based assessment tasks" that students must complete and present to a committee for evaluation before they can move to the next level or graduate. The portfolios include at least one thesis-level research paper and

an oral defense of that work, an original science experiment and a demonstration of higher-level math and statistics. Students are graded by a committee using a detailed rubric that is shared among the portfolio schools.

Proponents of the approach argue that portfolio-based assessments demand independent work, strong communication skills and research expertise—the exact skills students need to do well in college or the workforce. Martha Foote, a researcher for the Standards Consortium, argues that the Regents exams rely on multiple-choice questions and short essays and do a poor job of measuring real skills required after graduation. Under the portfolio system, "students are more responsible for their learning," she says.

Currently, 28 New York City high schools and secondary schools belong to the consortium and have state exemptions from most Regents exams so they can use this portfolio approach. The academic record of these schools, which serve a wide variety of students, has been mixed. But city Learning Environment Survey and "Where Are They Now" college data show that students in the 19 general education high schools tend to be far more engaged and are going to better colleges than their counterparts in similar schools (the other high schools serve special populations and are not easily compared). Foote says that many other schools statewide want to apply for portfolio status, but state education officials have thus far refused to take action, fearing a flood of requests. "It's a political battle," which is unfortunate, she says. "Parents want these options." ❀

This college enrollment number helps capture some important information, like the quality of a school's guidance systems and the strength of its college culture. The students "need to have gotten financial aid. And actually gotten some support to attend," Thomases says.

Top DOE officials are betting that the new post-grad information available to schools combined with the new high-stakes accountability measures will both inspire—and push—high schools to a new level. For now, the college and career readiness metric will remain a relatively small part of a school's overall Progress Report grade, says Polakow-Suransky, but the weight of this grade may increase with time. "They should be feeling the pressure," he says.

Realistically, building real college-level academic skills in students will take time. It will be years before New York City's high schools see the benefits of students trained under the new Common Core standards (if these standards do indeed deliver on their promise). In the meantime, high school teachers and principals will need to find ways to motivate and graduate their weakest students while also ramping up course content and building up students' academic preparation so that fewer of them are slammed in college by the requirement to take remedial courses or by completely unfamiliar levels

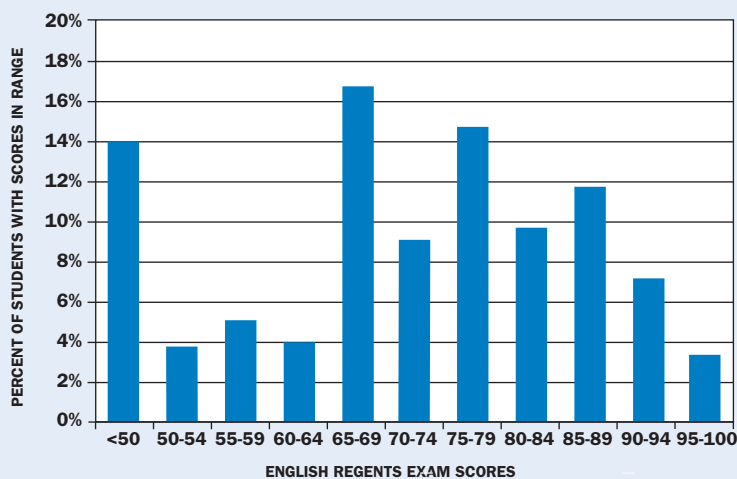
of academic rigor. The big question is how to do this well, given that the current graduation standards are still so heavily focused on passing the Regents exams.

THE ART OF PASSING

WHEN IT COMES TO ENGLISH REGENTS EXAMS TWO SCORES MATTER MORE THAN ALL OTHERS

There are two scores on the English Regents exam that are truly important to NYC public school students. A 65 means students pass, and can count the exam toward the five they need to graduate. And a 75 allows students to avoid remedial reading and writing courses at the City University of New York. An analysis of more than 96,000 student test scores reveals that these two scores are indeed big targets for students. Many students take the Regents exams repeatedly to either pass or get higher scores. The analysis below reflects students' final scores only.

ENGLISH REGENTS EXAM SCORES, GRADE EARNED ON FINAL ATTEMPT



SOURCE: New York City Department of Education Regents exam scores, individual student test data, school year 20011–2012.

NOTE: Similar patterns exist for math Regents as well, though the analysis is not as clear cut because students can meet both graduation and CUNY requirements using a wider variety of math Regents exams.

TEACHING FOR COLLEGE SUCCESS

There are plenty of teachers in high schools throughout the city who have long believed that their job is to prepare students for higher-level writing, analysis, research or mathematics. Yet the current state Regents exams don't incentivize this kind of teaching—in fact, they can undermine it. For example, the demands of the English Regents exam are relatively shallow by college standards, with the heaviest writing lift being the famous "five-paragraph essay" that New York City students learn and practice throughout their high school career. Most educators know that simply passing five Regents exams and getting an important-sounding "Regents Diploma" is not a measure of adequate college preparation. But most students and families are, understandably, unaware of this. The college-readiness challenge strikes directly at this tough issue: motivating and inspiring kids (and their teachers) to do more, even though the high-stakes tests don't fully align with those valuable skills.

A good place to start is by looking at what colleges offer their students—and to then work back from there, argues Danny Voloch, who has spent years in New York City working to improve students' college readiness, first at CUNY and now at iMentor, a one of the city's top education volunteer organizations. For his former job at CUNY, Voloch ran At Home in College, a CUNY partnership

program that helps lower-achieving high school students make a smooth transition into college with some training. The goal is to help students avoid the university's costly remedial courses by preparing them to pass CUNY's placement exams. In this work, Voloch enjoyed an important vantage point, seeing scores of students make the transition from high school to college.

One simple suggestion, he says: "There needs to be more conversations between high school and college faculty about what student writing should look like, what student reading should look like." Voloch continues, "Oftentimes, the colleges will say, look, these kids can't read. Well, they can read—they graduated high school—but maybe they've never been given the opportunity to read an original text on their own, which is often true." (Students in New York City tend to read short excerpts of important documents rather than full texts or original works. This is something that the Common Core seeks to remedy.)

More deeply, Voloch says, schools should start the conversation much earlier with students, giving them a full picture of the challenge so they can build their high school and college careers on realistic dreams and expectations. And students need to be encouraged to take increasing responsibility during their high school career for meeting those expectations. "I do believe that our schools inspire, elicit and require passivity from our students," he says. "They never get a chance to own their own education."

These two ideas—real course alignment with college and preparing students in an honest way for college-level work—are fundamental to any effort to increase college success, says Professor Conley. "The best example I have is writing. The tendency is to give students 'A's on papers in high school. They get an 'A' on a paper in April in high school. Six months later, they do a paper in college. It's comparably the same work and they get a 'D' on it. I argue that, at the very least, there should be alignment between 11th and 12th grade and that first year of college."

For Estrella in the South Bronx, such an approach would have delivered the more rigorous high school coursework and heavier demands, forcing her to attend class more often to keep up. But what about her friends, who preferred to take the 10th grade year off to "play"? What would happen to them if a new approach meant more "D's in their high school years? So be it, says Conley, who mentions that he spent his high school career purposefully slacking off, too, so he could comfortably hang out with his friends who had little appreciation for education. At least, he says, he knew that he was responsible for his low-grade education. Many of today's lower-income high school students, he says, don't benefit from the clarity of a hard assignment and tougher grades.

Honest communication and higher grading standards are essential if high schools are to move away from "sorting" large numbers of kids from the academic track—and in the process letting large numbers of students off the hook, Conley says. While more students may drop out, they have the chance of returning to high school before age 21 or go to community college with a GED. (It was California's strong, open college system that restored Conley's academic future.) And when they do, it's with a mindset that they know what they need to do to succeed, he says.

"If a student leaves school utterly bored and disillusioned with education, they're not likely ever to return," Conley asserts. "I would much rather have students challenged at a high level, developing a more solid set of academic skills, and having a clearer sense of the gap between where they are and where they need to be." *

NYC FAMILIES HAVE HIGH COLLEGE EXPECTATIONS FOR THEIR KIDS BUT MAY NOT HAVE THE SKILLS OR EXPERIENCE TO BE HELPFUL

Tenth grade students report that their families have high college ambitions for them, with 64 percent of students saying that their parents expect them to get at least a bachelor's degree. However, students say they are relying on information from their teachers and guidance counselors, rather than their families, to help them make this leap.

Just one in five of high school students surveyed had an immediate family member who graduated college. Students had some faith that their families would be helpful: 60 percent of 10th graders surveyed indicated that their family "knows what it takes" to go to college. However, when asked who would be able to offer "a lot" of information about college, students were expecting far more from their schools than their parents. More than two-thirds of students polled expected "a lot" of information from teachers or guidance counselors. Only one-third expected to get "a lot" of information from their parents.

QUESTION TO 10TH GRADERS: HOW FAR DO YOUR PARENTS EXPECT YOU TO GO IN SCHOOL?

	# Students	Percent
High School	13	3%
GED (equivalency diploma)	17	4%
Technical Training (computers, arts)	19	4%
Two-Year Associate's Degree	35	7%
Four-Year Bachelor's Degree	139	30%
Professional Degree (doctor, lawyer)	161	34%
Don't Know	63	13%
Multiple Answers	15	3%
No Answer	6	1%
Total	468	100%

QUESTION TO 10TH GRADERS: DOES YOUR FAMILY KNOW WHAT IT TAKES FOR YOU TO GO TO COLLEGE?

	# Students	Percent
No	73	16%
Yes	281	60%
Don't Know	100	21%
No Answer	12	3%
Total	468	100%

SOURCE: The first two questions were included in a survey conducted by the Center for New York City Affairs in May 2011; the last question was included in a survey conducted in November 2010. Students were chosen from seven low-income high schools in various parts of the city. The schools were participating in an evaluation of community-based college readiness efforts.

QUESTION TO 10TH GRADERS: HOW MUCH INFORMATION CAN YOU GET FROM EACH OF THESE PEOPLE ABOUT COLLEGE?

	A Lot of Information	A Little Information
Teacher	70%	20%
School Guidance Counselor	68%	17%
Parent/Guardian	32%	45%
After-School Program	28%	32%
Other Relative	28%	40%
Coach	19%	36%
Brother/Sister	19%	33%
Friends	18%	46%
Someone from Church	17%	31%

CHART NOTE: Students were asked how much college information, if anything, they expect from various people in their lives. Clearly, these 10th graders were hoping school staff would be able to help them in their college search. The answers also reflect uncertainty about how helpful their parents, families and community will be.

College Counselors Count

New York City students applying to college need the help of trained counselors—but gigantic caseloads and limited time mean many students miss out.

A simple mistake by a high school college guidance office derailed Alyssa DeFilippo's dream of going away to college. Even now, three years later, Alyssa expresses frustration and incredulity as she recounts her story.

Enrolled at Midwood High School, one of the better public high schools in Brooklyn, she had her heart set on SUNY Albany. With a high GPA, good SAT scores, extracurricular activities and strong references from teachers, she felt sure that her top choice would accept her.

Alyssa, the first in her family to attend college, was diligent about visiting her college guidance office, beginning in the second semester of her junior year. While her school had a large guidance staff, it had only two full-time college counselors for 800 seniors. Alyssa knew she had to take the initiative. "There weren't appointments at the college office, so you had to go yourself," she explains. "You had to approach them with questions, they didn't really approach you." She stayed on top of all her application deadlines and requirements in the fall of her senior year.

As winter of her senior year turned into spring, however, her confidence began to falter. While friends were receiving college acceptance letters, Alyssa was getting nothing but rejections, not only from SUNY Albany but also from her safety school, SUNY Cortland. "Even my mom thought something was weird," she says. "It's not like I was applying to Harvard or anything." Finally, after the third rejection, Alyssa and her mother paid a visit to the college guidance office.

There they discovered what Alyssa describes as a "glitch" in her transcript. Her guidance counselor explained that the grades of another student, with significantly lower grades than Alyssa, were mistakenly entered onto her transcript. To make matters worse, by the time the mistake was discovered, it was too late to apply to other SUNY schools.

"I still don't really know why they never caught it," says Alyssa. Instead of going away to college, she enrolled at the City University of New York, and she bounced around to four different commuter campuses before finding one she liked. Now settled at Brooklyn College, where she is studying early childhood education, she still wonders whether things would have been different had she gone away to SUNY Albany.

BIG CASELOADS AND COMPLICATED WORK

Alyssa's experience is not unique. From the smallest high schools with graduating classes of less than 100 to the behemoths with more than 1,000 seniors, New York City public schools are struggling, with mixed results, to provide the college counseling services their students need. Given the gigantic caseloads, the enormous needs of the students—many of whom are poor and the children of immigrants—and multiple responsibilities of guidance counselors, it is easy to see how small but potentially fatal errors slip through. Alyssa doesn't blame her counselor, who has since left Midwood, and she is grateful for the solid education she received there. But she is frustrated by a system that so easily goes awry.

Nationwide, public school guidance counselors provide only an average of 38 minutes of college admissions advice per high school student, according to a recent U.S. Department of Education

From small high schools with graduating classes of less than 100, to the behemoths with more than 1,000 seniors, NYC's schools are struggling to provide the level of college counseling that students need.

“You go to bed with lists, and wake up with lists,” said one counselor. “You can make or break a kid’s future by failing to turn in a piece of paper, or forgetting to submit a form online.”

(U.S. DOE) guidance survey. Huge caseloads are a big part of the reason. The ratio in the nation’s 100 largest public school districts is 455 to 1, with Los Angeles coming in at a staggering 612 to 1, according to the 2009 data provided by the U.S. DOE, the most recent data available at the national level. In comparison, New York City’s caseloads were estimated at 493 to 1 in this federal dataset.

Looking at more up-to-date data, provided locally, the picture looks a bit better in New York City. The Center for New York City Affairs obtained personnel data provided by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) for the past 12 years to examine citywide K–12 caseload trends and how caseloads varied between high schools. The ratio of students to licensed guidance counselors is currently 316 to 1 in grades K–12 in New York City’s general education public schools, according to an analysis of the UFT data done by the Center. (This number excludes charter school guidance and enrollment numbers. See “Guidance Counselor Caseloads Have Improved,” page 32.)

Analyzing 2012 numbers for the city’s high schools, Center researchers found that the student-counselor ratio varied significantly from school to school. The UFT provided a list that included the number and experience level of licensed guidance counselors for the 406 general education high schools listed in the city Department of Education’s 2010–11 Progress Report dataset. Interestingly, 36 high schools did not have any licensed guidance counselor on staff. (UFT staff speculated that the schools might still be growing or using licensed teachers to provide guidance services.) More than half, 246 schools, had caseloads between 100 and 300 students per counselor. The caseload numbers were much higher in many places: 68 high schools had student to guidance counselor ratios of more 400 to 1. (See “Guidance Counselor Caseloads Vary Widely,” page 31.)

Public high school guidance counselors spend only 22 percent of their time on college guidance, while their counterparts in private schools are able to dedicate 54 percent, according to a national survey by the College Admission Counseling Association. Other responsibilities include counseling students on job and personal needs, advising on high school coursework, testing students and teaching.

Guidance counselors in New York City face an even wider range of responsibilities that include scheduling, tracking attendance and looking out for students with excessive and unexplained absences. In schools without licensed social workers, guidance staff must provide counseling for emotional problems as well.

“That includes any of the behavioral issues, maybe meetings with parents, which you can imagine takes a lot of time and paperwork,” says Omar Morris, a long-time college and career pathways program officer for New Visions for Public Schools, who is now at CollegeBound Initiative.

“It could include lunch duty. I kid you not. Some guidance counselors serve almost as APs [assistant principals] in their schools. It’s not like there’s one job. Schools have to be very creative in how they use their staff. It’s quite possible that you can walk into any college advisors meeting and ask the counselors what their day-to-day jobs are, and you will get 20 different answers. But the one thing that would be clear is that each person wears 10 different hats.”

College counselors interviewed over the last three years by Center researchers describe a long list of responsibilities that routinely take precedence over college-related duties. For example, designated college counselors teach classes (at Flushing International and the Academy of Urban Planning), record attendance (at Cypress Hills College Prep), create student schedules (at Pan American International), serve as social workers (at Bushwick School for Social Justice) and carry out miscellaneous administrative duties (at the Academy for Environmental Leadership).

“You go to bed with lists, and wake up with lists, on what needs to be submitted to colleges for each student,” one counselor on the Bushwick campus explained. “You can make or break a kid’s future by failing to turn in a piece of paper, or forgetting to submit a form online.”

Compounding the difficulties is the fact that poor students, new immigrants, and those who are the first in their families to attend college need much more help than their middle-class peers.

“Students often feel that the process is so overwhelming and so stressful that they end up shutting down,” says Carmen Pena, a former CollegeBound Initiative college counselor at East Side Community High School in Manhattan. “You have to reinforce it so many times for them to actually get it.”

Many students don’t have even a basic understanding of what it means to be prepared for college. The large majority of 10th graders responding to a survey conducted by the Center for New York City Affairs believed that simply graduating from high school—whatever their grades or coursework—would be sufficient preparation for college. Of the 468 students polled, nearly half thought their grades from ninth and 10th grade classes wouldn’t be included in their college applications. Eighty percent of the students surveyed do not have an immediate family member who graduated from college—and therefore cannot rely on their relatives’ experience to help them. (See a summary of key survey results on pages 21, 22 and 28.)

In middle-income communities, the student’s parents typically guide him or her through that process, and other relatives or family friends offer the benefit of their own experience. But poor students must take the responsibility on their own shoulders—or rely on their school’s guidance counselors. This can be arduous, particularly if a student needs help applying to more competitive colleges, signing up for tests like the SAT or seeking financial aid. (See “Fearing the Federal FAFSA Form,” page 36.)

“We do a lot of the heavy lifting,” says Monique Darrisaw, who joined the Department of Education’s school support structure two years ago after serving for years as principal of Academy of Urban Planning in Bushwick. “The teachers and the counselor pretty much register all the kids for the SAT. We give fee waivers for them. My teachers, sometimes they make baggies for them that have their ID cards, their pens, their TI-83 calculators. Some teachers have gone so far as to arrange cab rides, because sometimes when the kids register later they can’t get to a closer school. Some teachers meet them here and travel with them. You can’t always get 80 kids into Grover Cleveland, which is down the block, so some kids are going to other sites in neighborhoods they’ve never been to.”

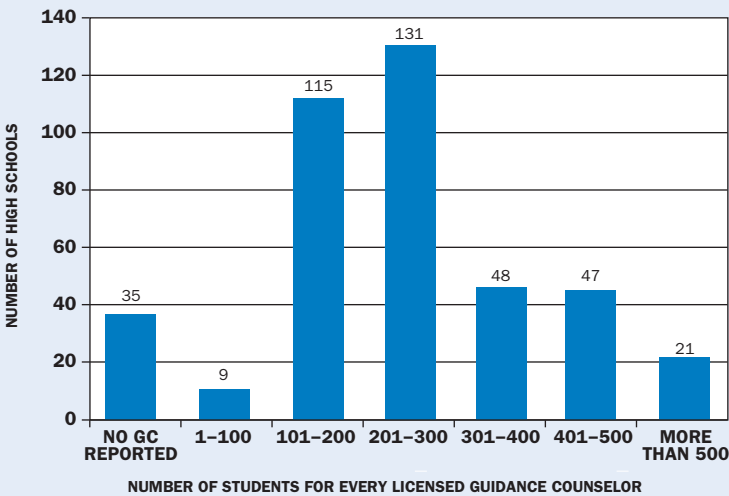
In many schools, the college application process typically begins—and at some schools, ends—by sitting a classroom of students down at a bank of computers and overseeing their online application to CUNY. Students need to input a Social Security number, which may involve a delay as they try to get that information from home. (It’s at that point that some discover they’re undocumented.) They can list six colleges within CUNY on their application, but may not know the difference between the schools or, for that matter, appreciate the distinction between a two-year and four-year college. If they are low-income, they may qualify as SEEK (at CUNY) or EOP (Educational Opportunity Program, at SUNY) candidates, which improves their chances of being admitted with subpar GPAs and SATs, but the counselor needs to ensure they check the appropriate box on the form.

GUIDANCE COUNSELOR CASELOADS VARY WIDELY AMONG HIGH SCHOOLS

SOME SCHOOLS HAVE NO LICENSED GUIDANCE COUNSELORS AND THE QUALITY OF COLLEGE COUNSELING IS NOT TRACKED

Officials at the New York City Department of Education give high schools the freedom to choose their own approach to guidance and college counseling. Staff data provided by the United Federation of Teachers shows that the number and caseload of licensed guidance counselors varies widely among New York City’s high schools. Interestingly, 35 high schools in New York City had no guidance counselor on staff, a possible violation of state law. Some high schools are new and growing and may not need full-time positions; others use licensed teachers or nonprofit providers to fill the gap. There is no easy way to know the quality of college counseling or guidance services in a school. This is not tracked or measured by the Department of Education.

HIGH SCHOOL GUIDANCE COUNSELOR CASELOADS



SOURCE: New York City Department of Education, 2010-11 Progress Report database for list of high schools. United Federation of Teachers, Membership Benefits System database, current numbers of licensed guidance counselors for all high schools on DOE’s 2010–11 list.

NOTE: D75, D79, charter schools and transfer schools excluded.

“Some kids are completely perfect candidates for HEOP [Higher Education Opportunity Program, for other colleges] or EOP,” says Dion Reid, director of college counseling at the Young Women’s Leadership School of East Harlem and a veteran counselor affiliated with CollegeBound Initiative, a college access group affiliated with Young Women’s Leadership Academy. “But they won’t ever know about it because they don’t stumble upon it when they’re going through this process by themselves and no one takes their hand and says, ‘Hey, did you know about this? Did you know if you went here, you could do that?’ And they end up at a school that’s a school and a financial aid package that’s a package, but it’s not what it could be.” Some students run out of steam after completing the college application and never get around to applying for financial aid.

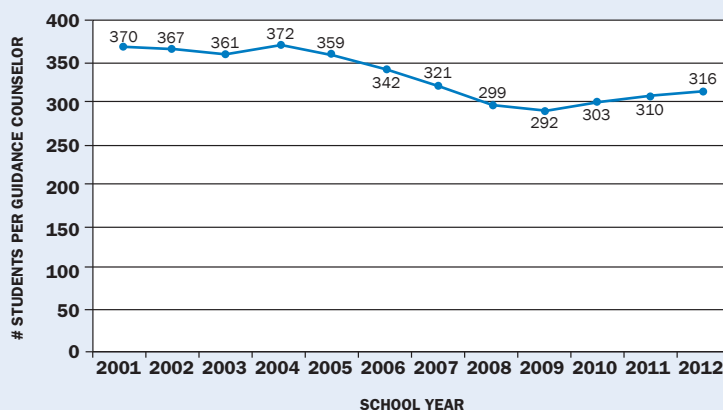
“I’ve seen three types of students,” he says. “There are the students that will never leave your office because they care so much. These top-tier kids are not going to be discouraged by the fact that they have to stand on line at CUNY with their income tax returns in order to have verification. There are the students in the middle. Their friends are going, they know they’re going to go, they’re just going to do things in their own time.”

GUIDANCE COUNSELOR CASELOADS HAVE IMPROVED, BUT THE WORKLOAD REMAINS HUGE

Guidance counselors play a critical role in schools. In their counseling role, they take on tough work like mental health counseling, bullying and family interventions. In junior high school, they deal with a myriad of adolescent issues and are responsible for helping students navigate the city’s often-overwhelming high school choice process. And in high school, guidance counselors need to keep students on track to graduation and help them apply for college and finance college. They are also often responsible for lots of important bureaucratic details, ranging from attendance improvement to keeping students’ special education plans up-to-date.

So what’s the workload? Guidance caseloads vary greatly from school to school, but on average, each licensed guidance counselor in New York City is responsible for 316 students. This number is down from the beginning of the decade, when counselors had an average caseload of 370 students. The numbers are still very high, given the intensity and importance of the work.

AVERAGE NUMBER OF STUDENTS PER LICENSED GUIDANCE COUNSELOR IN NYC, GRADES PK-12 FOR SCHOOL YEARS 2000-2001 TO 2011-2012



SOURCE: New York City Department of Education enrollment numbers, SY 2000-01 to SY 2011-12. Guidance trend numbers provided by the United Federation of Teachers, HR Masterfile, SY 2000-01 to SY 2011-12.

NOTES: Enrollment and guidance numbers include all schools citywide except charter schools. The guidance counselor numbers include only licensed guidance counselors, employed by the DOE. Schools may use licensed teachers as guidance counselors or contract with a nonprofit provider for guidance or college guidance services, but these numbers are not tracked by the DOE or UFT and thus cannot be reflected in the overall caseload numbers.

“And then there are the kids that want nothing to do with you,” he continues. “They’ll complain to their parents that their college advisor is bothering them too much. They’ll turn and run the other way when you try to get them in a hallway. You might manage to get them to apply to college, to give you information, to do all the stuff while you have them in school, and then you say, ‘Now, all you have to do is deal with this long line at John Jay and then go to school in September.’ You’ll have prepped them as much as possible and they’ll get there and they’ll be frustrated, they’ll lack confidence. ‘I’m not even going to do well in school anyway, why am I even standing on this line? Why am I fighting to get this from welfare when my mom is going to make me babysit anyway?’”

Claire Sylvan, executive director of the Internationals Network for Public Schools, which educate recent immigrants, agrees that when “kids show up, nobody is going to turn them down. It’s the kids who don’t show up that are more troubled. The kid who gets something in the mail and looks at it and freaks and just says, ‘Ah, I’m going to get a job.’ Or, ‘I don’t know how to do this, and I can’t, and I am overwhelmed.’”

TRAINED COLLEGE COUNSELORS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Even if a guidance counselor had the luxury of concentrating on college advising full time, it would still be a big job. According to a Department of Education “college action plan outline” recommended to all students considering college, a college application has six basic components: the application itself, including the application fee; a personal

essay (if required); test scores like the SAT or ACT (if required); the high school transcript; teacher recommendations (if required); and the financial aid application, generally the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and, for those going to school in New York State, the TAP. In addition to these components, would-be college-bound seniors must gather documentation such as parent or guardian tax income forms, learn about student loans and investigate other scholarship sources.

The outline also suggests that New York City students apply to about five colleges each. Multiply this by a caseload of 200 or more students per counselor, and it becomes clear how mistakes are made—and Alyssa DiFilippo's transcript fell through the cracks.

Faced with the endless onslaught of needs, many college counselors focus on what absolutely must happen. Like overwhelmed physicians in an ER, they practice triage, helping those students who are the highest achieving or simply the most demanding. "The guidance counselor would pick and choose who they knew would do well in college," said Reggie Leveille, who graduated from Midwood and went on to Brooklyn College. "I don't blame the college counselors, there just weren't enough of them. Too many kids and not enough of them to help us all."

Of course, the best college counselors don't just help students fill out the forms. They also forge relationships with college admissions offices—and advocate for their students individually. Sometimes a student seems unqualified on paper for a particular school, yet school staff know that he or she would excel there if given a chance. This is frequently the case with immigrant students, for example, who may have a high school transcript coded with many English as a Second Language classes and low English Regents scores, yet are entirely capable of handling the curriculum of a four-year college.

"A computer only looks at grades, transcripts and SAT/Regents scores," says Joanna Yip, a teacher and former counselor at one of the schools in the Internationals Network. "You need a college counselor who can advocate for students." College counselors can do this most effectively if they have good relationships with colleges and their admissions offices, and that requires years of networking. Such relationships can be cultivated by organizing college fairs at the school, arranging visits from individual representatives or going to the campuses to meet with admissions officers—trips for which few counselors have the free time.

Josh Steckel of the Brooklyn School for Collaborative Studies (BCS), a small school that serves students in grades 6–12, has assiduously courted college admissions officers, bringing them to his school for visits and, in turn, sending seniors to their campuses. His students have led tours of the school for the college officials, demonstrating both what makes them compelling applicants and what's special about BCS. "These visits have gone extremely well," he says. "Skidmore was so impressed by the students who gave the tour that their rep immediately invited the four guides on an in-depth, 'day in the life' program on the campus in November, travel expenses paid."

Hampshire College conducted student interviews on site, in BCS's library, and subsequently paid the way for three students to make an overnight visit. The Wheaton College rep covered the cost of train tickets for a group of students to stay overnight on the Massachusetts campus. Muhlenberg College in Pennsylvania agreed to host an overnight for 15 seniors, all expenses paid.

But many counselors, scrambling to complete applications and meet deadlines, simply don't have the time to cultivate those good relationships. Furthermore, Angela Reformato, a retired guidance counselor and a longtime UFT guidance leader, divides counselors into two camps—those who concentrate on processing paperwork and meeting deadlines, and those who "really follow a student throughout the application process, who will help students with the whole college process and write essay drafts with them and help them find recommendations."

In most cases, experts say, the distinction is a matter of time, not intention. "For the most part, I would say that the school counselors in New York City do a phenomenal job with what they've got," says Richard Alvarez, director of admissions for CUNY. "It's just that they don't have enough to do the level of counseling that needs to be done, particularly for this generation of college students." ❀

Creating College Counselors

Do schools need full-time college counselors? The debate over divvying up the work.

How important is it to have a college counselor in high school?

The question is surprisingly controversial, given the city's new focus on preparing more students for college. The Department of Education now holds high school principals accountable for how many students graduate and enroll in college. But New York City high schools are not required to have a college counselor—or any stated plan for college counseling. There is also little oversight or evaluation of the outside college support providers and volunteer organizations on which schools routinely rely for help.

Instead, high school principals are given the flexibility to provide college services as they see fit with the knowledge that the department is actively monitoring their college matriculation numbers. Every high school is being given a high-stakes grade, “A” to “F,” for work on “college and career readiness” in the school's annual Progress Report. (See “Making Progress After Graduation,” page 17.)

But requiring schools to hire dedicated, full-time college counselors, in the same way schools were required to hire parent coordinators in the early days of the Bloomberg administration, is not in the cards. “We looked at it,” the department's Chief Academic Officer Shael Polakow-Suransky recounted at a forum sponsored by the Center for New York City Affairs last June. “It would probably cost somewhere near \$600 to \$700 million to create that kind of position.” The cost would be hard to justify, particularly given all of the recent budget cuts.

Others question whether hiring college counselors would cost that much. City Comptroller John Liu, who is a candidate for mayor, has proposed hiring 1,600 new guidance counselors—all dedicated to college advising—at a cost he estimated at \$176 million. (There are currently 1,300 guidance counselors working in high schools, but they have a range of responsibilities, not just college counseling.) He says his proposal would ensure one college counselor for every 100 students.

The nonprofit and philanthropic sectors have been bearing a big chunk of the city's college counseling costs. For example, the Abyssinian Development Corporation has invested more than \$1.25 million since 2006 in college supports for Thurgood Marshall Academy, a public school it helped establish. “It's an enormous effort in terms of the level of guidance that's really needed,” says Sheena Wright, former president and CEO of the Abyssinian Development Corporation, who now leads the United Way of New York City. She says the education department should start putting its own money behind its heavily publicized college goals—rather than relying on nonprofits to foot the bill. “So if we say it's a priority—if it's *really* going to be a measure of our success—then there has to be an investment of resources that parallels how important we say it is,” she says.

SHRINKING BUDGETS

As the Department of Education has increased pressure on schools to prepare more students for college, the money available for college support has been shrinking. Chancellor Dennis Walcott announced the city's new educational focus on college readiness in his inaugural address in April 2011. Principals had already been dealing with budget cuts for more than two years at that point. In the two years since, they have had to tighten their belts further—and they are now facing another round of major cuts due to a potential loss of federal funding thanks to the ongoing battle in Washington over the sequestration. Every penny counts these days. Principals say that spending significant money on college counseling often requires that the school makes trade-offs in teaching time or other academic supports.

New York City high schools are not required to have a college counselor or any stated plan for college counseling.

Department of Education officials argue that schools can improve college advising without hiring a dedicated college counselor or spending a huge amount of money. Core to their argument is the idea that every school staff member, from the principal to the baseball coach, can be enlisted to provide college guidance to the students who need it. “As we look around the city,” Polakow-Suransky said, “we can see places within the constraints of the existing budget that have really invested in getting more than just guidance counselors or college counselors involved. They are building it into the fabric of what teachers do in the school.”

A math teacher, for example, can help students think about college budgets or deal with the complicated financial aid application forms. An English teacher can help students work on college essays. Athletic coaches are often some of the most trusted adults in a school; they can offer post-graduation advice and students will listen.

continued on page 58

Bringing College 101 to the Classroom

Teaching Students About College Requires More School Time

Want to help students make better decisions about college? Here’s a simple notion: teach them what they need to know during the school day.

In New York City, high schools typically provide a few workshops to juniors and seniors as they begin their college search and start the application process. But college readiness experts argue this doesn’t begin to meet the needs of students who may be the first in their families to consider higher education.

Adequately preparing for college and dealing with the complexities of the application process remain limited to an insider’s club for the middle and upper class, says David Conley, a leading expert on college access. “We’ve created a complex system and we have no means for people to learn about it, except through informal channels,” Conley says. “We’ve baked inequality into the system and we will never get it out—unless there’s a social intervention to equalize the opportunity.”

Schools are an ideal place to teach students what they need to know, says Lori Chajet, a director at College Access: Research and Action (CARA), which is based at the CUNY Graduate Center. Chajet has been pressing the NYC school system to provide a formal college access curriculum for years. In 2010, her agency piloted a program for grades 6 through 12 called “College Inquiry.” The curriculum is now in 13 schools and CARA is providing training to other guidance training groups including the Department of Education’s Office of Post-Secondary Readiness and Goddard Riverside’s Options Institute.

“People give lip service to this idea, but until they start really doing it, they don’t understand what it takes,” Chajet says. After school staff learn the material and begin teaching it, they see how useful it is for students, she says. “Once they realize what it takes, they want more time for it in their schools. This is not something that can be taught in just a session or two.”

School time is a big issue. CARA’s high school curriculum, designed to be taught over four years, comes in a dense 375-page binder with lessons and activities on everything from mapping the college landscape and understanding the college application process to paying for college and exploring possible careers. Ideally, principals need to find time for eight class periods in 9th and 10th grade and then one to two classes per week in the 11th and 12th grade.

The principals in CARA’s schools have found space in unstructured “advisory” periods that many small high schools have, or have built the material into mini-courses. Inventive schools, like Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School in the Bronx, divide the work between classes, with various teachers helping their students complete a full online college portfolio called a “Fannie Pack,” Chajet says.

CARA’s middle school lessons help students plan for a career and introduce them to the expectations that colleges have when they look at applicants’ high school academics and extracurricular activities. These classes are less time intensive but crucial for helping students prepare for high school. Principals need to find blocks of time in the day to teach college access classes, Chajet insists.

“There are always trade-offs, especially if you want something to reach *all* students rather than just some students,” she says. “Principals who decide to devote the time recognize that, without it, students are short-changed—and a ‘college-for-all mission’ cannot be realized.” ❀

Fearing the Federal FAFSA Form

The U.S. government's financial aid application process was designed for traditional families. How do New York City's unconventional families manage?

For students who manage to get through the college application process, the government's Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA as it is better known, is the next—and, for many, the biggest—stumbling block. For some students, it's simply insurmountable.

Take the case of a young woman who graduated from the Brooklyn School for Collaborative Studies a few years ago. At the time, she was living with her aunt in New York. But FAFSA required information about the income of her father, who lived in Jamaica. "Because of the distance, she couldn't get any of his documentation," recalls Joshua Steckel, who had joined the school as a college counselor late in the FAFSA process. The alternative would have been to establish the young woman's independence by proving that the family had been dissolved. But obtaining a "dependency override" can be time consuming, and by that point the school year was drawing to a close. "It didn't work," laments Steckel. The last he heard, she never enrolled in college.

The student's struggles are a worst-case scenario for what can happen when the constraints of FAFSA run up against the complexities of the lives of New York City public school students, many of whom live in nontraditional families with ever-changing housing and custody arrangements. Many students feel overwhelmed by the form, which includes questions about household finances, a sensitive subject for most families. Even reporting the number of people in the household—a factor that affects the amount of money a family is expected to contribute to tuition—can be complicated when there are step- and half-siblings, and living arrangements are fluid. Counselors often have a difficult time assembling all the data that must be entered and keeping up-to-date with changing requirements and deadlines. In fact, there's so much confusion and anxiety about the form that it's easy to see how some students and their parents get beguiled into going online and paying \$80 to a private service to complete what is explicitly a "Free" Application for Federal Student Aid.

Nonetheless, the FAFSA is a critical document. It is the main application that colleges and universities in the United States use to determine a student's EFC (Expected Family Contribution) and, on that basis, how much should be awarded in grants, work-study funds and loans. For New York residents attending school in-state, it is also the form that must be completed to get access to TAP (New York State's Tuition Assistance Program). And it is a necessary first step for students who are applying to the "opportunity" programs at CUNY (SEEK and CD, or College Discovery), SUNY (EOP, Educational Opportunity Program) and New York State's private schools (HEOP, Higher Education Opportunity Program), which provide financial aid to academically and economically disadvantaged students who might otherwise be denied admission.

In fact, the FAFSA is both a vehicle that enables students to attend college and a predictor of whether or not they will attend. According to the U.S. Department of Education (U.S. DOE), research indicates that 90 percent of those who complete the form will enter college. On the other hand, anecdotal evidence suggests that many high school graduates are so daunted by the FAFSA that they even give up applying to college. College financial aid expert Mark Kantrowitz has estimated that in 2007–08, students in New York State who would have qualified for a needs-based Pell Grant but did not file the FAFSA left the equivalent of about \$300 million on the table. Nationally, nearly one-quarter of the 6.5 million students eligible for Pell Grants failed to apply for the money, according to recent government figures.

The FAFSA enables students to attend college and is a predictor of whether they will attend. According to the U.S. DOE, 90 percent of those who complete the form will enter college.

FAFSA DESIGNED FOR TRADITIONAL FAMILIES

Why would students—least of all those who really needs the funds—let that kind of money slip through their hands? There are many reasons, starting, literally, with the first line of the form. Students must enter their names exactly as it appears on their Social Security card or FAFSA will send them a message that their application cannot be processed until the discrepancy is corrected. The Social Security number is itself an important issue.

If students are undocumented, they won't have a valid Social Security number. They cannot and should not apply for federal aid. Yet colleges may still want these students to complete and submit a paper version to the college directly, so these students can apply for private aid.

If the student is here legally but his parents are not, the parent can sign a signature page and mail it in. While the U.S. DOE maintains that their identities will be protected, many undocumented people are understandably afraid that immigration officials might be alerted.

However, the two most problematic areas of the form, particularly for many New York City public school students, concern the often interconnected issues of household income and dependency. For a start, “the most basic problem is getting hold of tax forms,” says Jeanine Boulay, a college counselor at High School of Telecommunication Arts and Technology in Brooklyn. “A lot of families are reluctant to release them, or are reluctant to give us their Social Security number, even if they're legal, so we'll sometimes have to send emails to parents or talk on the phone and tell them it is secure information. We have very complicated situations, noncustodial parents, where, for example, the student lives with the grandmother and has no interaction with either parent. I often have to remind students and parents that, just because the parent provides financial information, it doesn't mean they're responsible.”

The FAFSA form “is written for traditional families, and so many of our families don't fit into those little boxes,” notes Cassie Magesis, who counseled students directly and trained counselors for years at Options Center at Goddard Riverside Community Center. She is now at Urban Assembly, a NYC school support organization.

Applicants, for instance, are required to report the income only of “parents,” defined as biological parents, legally adoptive parents, or stepparents. A peculiarity of FAFSA is that it cares only about the student's custodial parents, so if the parents are divorced or separated and the student lives with his mother, it's the mother's income that gets reported even if the father, say, claims the child as a dependent. Curiously, this can actually work to the student's advantage, as Dzelika Daniel, an associate director of student financial aid at CUNY, points out, because the smaller income may be used to calculate Expected Family Contribution. The situation gets muddier when it involves a child of same-sex parents. Because the federal government doesn't recognize same-sex marriage, the student must fill out the FAFSA as if his parents were divorced even when they live together, and follow a maze of other rules regarding additional support and family members.

Students who are orphans, in foster care or homeless are automatically considered independent (although they may need documentation from a caseworker). The situation is more complicated for a student who is living with a grandparent, sibling, aunt or uncle, or family friends. In such cases, the student may apply for a dependency override, which may require multiple visits to the NYC Administration for Children's Services (which places children in and out of foster care) or other bureaucracies. And the student is still expected to report parental income, even when the parent is estranged, lives in another country or is serving time in jail. What's more, any money received from any source other than a parent must be reported as income and may reduce a student's eligibility for aid.

FAFSA officials communicate with students through email, an obsolete medium for large numbers of young people. As a result, students overlook last-minute problems in processing the form.

TAX CALENDAR OFTEN REQUIRES FAMILIES TO FILE TWICE

In recent years, it's become possible to "link" the online FAFSA to the latest tax return, a step designed to simplify the process and ensure that applicants' answers are honest (or, at least, conform to what they've told the IRS). But there's a crucial disconnect: Students are urged to submit their FAFSA as early as possible—preferably by February 1—to have a better shot at getting college scholarships. However, many people won't have filed their taxes by that time. "It's an unnatural calendar," says Steckel. "The FAFSA and myriad other forms from more selective colleges are asking for the current year's tax returns, but taxes aren't due until April 15. So for families, it's pretty confusing."

Many applicants simply estimate their previous year's income, hit "send" and think their task is complete. If they have reported a very low household income, they may even be overjoyed to get a message from FAFSA estimating their Expected Family Contribution at zero. "What happens is, once you submit it, you get a message, 'Congratulations, you've completed the FAFSA,'" says Omar Morris, a longtime college and career pathways program officer for New Visions, a NYC school support organization, who is now at CollegeBound Initiative. "We'll say to the student, 'You have to go back in and update it.' And that's a problem."

For a great many students, that is where the process breaks down. FAFSA typically communicates with the student through emails, an obsolete medium for large numbers of young people who prefer texting and Facebook. As a result, reminders that their FAFSA is still incomplete—that, for example, it must be linked to the last year's tax return, or that other information is missing—often go overlooked. "We lose a lot of kids to red tape, especially the CUNY-bound, during the summer," says Bouley of Telecommunication High School. One summer she contacted students to check on their registration status, but "I didn't have a very good response. I don't think they check their email." Now, she says, the school is trying to work through Facebook.

One program that could help prevent this breakdown is being piloted by the U.S. Department of Education in about 20 school districts across the country, including New York City. Each district sends the U.S. DOE a list of its 12th-grade students, and the U.S. DOE tells the district—which, in turn, tells the individual schools—whether those students have completed their FAFSA application, have started but not yet completed it or haven't even started it.

Potentially, it's a great tool for counselors who are struggling to keep track of all the moving parts but are out of the loop because FAFSA communicates with the students directly. Still, many counselors express reservations because they're afraid that it will eventually be used as an accountability tool—a way to hold guidance counselors accountable for the quality of college hand-holding they do. Other counselors wonder how they will fit quality FAFSA advisement into their already crowded schedules. "I was shocked at the level of hesitancy among the counselors," says Magesis. "I think it's because of the fear that this will be a metric added to the [city's] report card." Officials in New York City, however, maintain that there are no plans to use FAFSA completion numbers in the all-important Progress Report. They say the data has too many limitations at this point to be a useful accountability tool.

LOW-INCOME STUDENTS MUST DEAL WITH "VERIFICATION"

All of this is unfortunate, as students who fail to complete their forms properly are much likelier to be flagged for a process called "verification." In the past, the U.S. government required colleges to verify about one in three FAFSA applications. While this requirement has recently been abandoned, the government will likely seek to verify the application of any student who fails to "link" to his parents' tax return. And college financial aid officers may also seek verification independently if they find discrepancies or inconsistencies on a student's FAFSA, such as the number of people in the home.

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FIGURING OUT THE FAFSA

GUIDANCE COUNSELORS FIELD TOUGH QUESTIONS FROM NYC STUDENTS

Millions of students lose out on college money every year because they do not fill out the federal government's Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form. According to recent estimates, one third of students who fail to fill out the FAFSA would have qualified for at least a partial federal Pell grant scholarship—and one-sixth would have received a full grant. At least 1.7 million students fail to get the federal college money they deserve each year.

A poll of students who did not fill out the FAFSA shows that a majority thought they were not eligible for aid—even though many were. The form itself was also a big problem, with more than a quarter of students saying they didn't know how to deal with the questions, or how to apply at all. The FAFSA form can present a myriad of confusing issues and paperwork barriers for students in low-income communities who struggle with complicated family circumstances. The questions below are a sample of the many queries that school staff and counselors face in New York City. Students' questions can be complicated and personal—and the correct answers are not obvious. One wrong or missing answer on the FAFSA form can jeopardize a student's financial aid, and their quest for college.

FAFSA QUESTIONS: WHO AM I?

WILL I QUALIFY FOR FINANCIAL AID?

HOW DO I FIND MY LEGAL NAME?

WHO HAS MY SOCIAL SECURITY CARD?

WHAT IF MY PARENTS AREN'T IN THE COUNTRY LEGALLY?

WHAT IF I AM NOT IN THE COUNTRY LEGALLY?

FAFSA QUESTIONS: WHO ARE MY PARENTS?

WHAT IF MY PARENTS ARE DIVORCED?

WHAT IF MY PARENTS NEVER MARRIED?

ARE THEY STILL MY PARENTS IF I RARELY SEE THEM?

FAFSA QUESTIONS: WHO IS IN MY HOUSEHOLD?

WHAT IF I LIVE WITH ONLY ONE PARENT?

WHAT IF I LIVE WITH ANOTHER RELATIVE?

DO I COUNT EVERYONE WHO LIVES WITH US?

FAFSA QUESTIONS: WHAT IS MY FAMILY INCOME?

HOW DO I GET MY PARENTS' TAX RECORDS?

WHOSE INCOME COUNTS?

WHAT IF I SUPPORT MYSELF?

WHAT IF MY PARENTS DON'T FILE TAXES?

FAFSA QUESTIONS: HOW DO I GET MY FINANCIAL AID?

WHY DIDN'T MY FAFSA GET PROCESSED?

HOW DO I PROVE EVERYTHING TO THE SCHOOL?

WHAT OTHER AID AM I ELIGIBLE FOR?

IS THIS GOING TO BE ENOUGH MONEY FOR COLLEGE?

SOURCES: Kim Nauer and Sandra Salmans, "FAFSA: The How-To Guide for High School Students (and the Adults Who Help Them)," Center for New York City Affairs, January 2013. Mark Kantrowitz, "Reasons Why Students Do Not File the FAFSA," *FinAid.org*, January 2011.

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Some CUNY administrators and New York City counselors assert that, in their experience, most students can expect to be verified. “Every student I’ve ever worked with in the South Bronx over the course of eight years has been called in for verification,” says Dion Reed, a manager at CollegeBound Initiative, a program of the Young Women’s Leadership Network that promotes college access for urban youth. And at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, says CUNY’s Daniel, “it seems like over 50 percent get selected.” Reed thinks the high rate is due to the large number of FAFSAs on which the Expected Family Contribution is zero; Daniel suggests that, given the number of applicants from the city’s public schools, the forms are more likely to be chosen because they’re incomplete, contain errors or raise flags on issues like income supplements.

Either way, verification represents another potential stumbling block for the would-be college freshman. The process can be relatively perfunctory—requiring the presentation of documentation to confirm date of birth or citizenship, for example—or as rigorous as an IRS audit. Students may be required to prove other sources of untaxed income, such as public assistance and food stamps. And, starting this year, students who are unable to electronically “link” to their parents’ tax return will be required to get a transcript of that return from the IRS. (In the past, colleges were allowed to accept a photocopy of the return, but the U.S. DOE stiffened regulations to minimize the chance of fraud.) There are only a handful of cases where it’s impossible to electronically link—for example, an amended tax return or one filed from Puerto Rico—but in those instances the process will become more complicated. The person who filed the tax return—typically, the parent, not the student—will have to contact the IRS; the return will be mailed to his address, and the student must then bring it to the college’s financial aid office. “Everyone in the community, ourselves included and the colleges, are waiting to see how this will play out,” says Urban Assembly’s Magesis.

On the plus side, there can be a lot of flexibility in meeting the FAFSA deadline. Students can complete their FAFSA form a month before classes begin, although CUNY’s Daniel cautions that a down-to-the wire application can delay funding for months. That means the student will have to meet tuition and other education expenses out-of-pocket. In general, the later the application is received, the harder it becomes to get scholarships or campus-based grants, as that money depletes quickly. But some schools are more forgiving than others. Robert Gevertzman, who works in Kingsborough Community College’s financial aid office, notes that some students stroll in after the semester has begun to complain that they’re being billed by the bursar because they never filed a FAFSA or filed it late. “We don’t want to turn students away,” says Gevertzman. “We can plug the system for a month until they bring in their documents. I tell the student, ‘This is play money. You’ve got to bring in your documents in a few weeks. After that, you’ll owe the whole balance.’”

Annoying as it can be, it’s arguable that the FAFSA is not overwhelming when it is being completed as it was designed to be—by the parents of a high school senior. But increasingly, in New York City, that doesn’t happen. “If you look at our kind of low-income first-generation students, I would say probably 80 to 90 percent of them do everything themselves,” says Ritu Sen, director of college readiness at Urban Assembly. “Our kids, the really high-achieving ones, are totally doing everything themselves. They’re translating for their parents, they’re figuring out ways to get their hands on the tax returns when their parents might not want to release them. And even in the model family, where they’re really supportive but maybe not college-educated, the parents help, but I think that the kid is ultimately the one who ends up being responsible for completing the FAFSA.”

In many cases, that kid turns for help to a guidance counselor. And the counselor—who is still busy pushing seniors through the college application process, helping juniors start the process and probably devoting half of his or her time to teaching or to other areas unrelated to college admissions—may be ill-prepared, unable or unwilling to provide this complicated and time-consuming level of support.

“There are a lot of guidance counselors who still believe that the financial aid piece is not their responsibility,” says Morris. He attributes that attitude to counselors’ own experiences as college

“If you look at our low-income, first-generation students, I would say probably 80 to 90 percent of them do everything themselves,” says one NYC guidance expert.

applicants: While their own guidance counselors helped them through the college process, the financial aid application was traditionally viewed as the parents' job since many families do not want to share their financial information with school employees.

But FAFSA isn't going to go away. If anything, students' need for financial support will only continue to grow. What, then, is the best way to tackle it? Most college counselors interviewed maintain that the complicated cases need one-on-one hand-holding—and the city needs to allocate time or money to do that work well. “There's the ‘workshop approach’ and there's the ‘parent night approach’ and there's the ‘single-serving, come in and sit down and get it done and go home approach,’” says Dion Reed. “Given our demographics, the single best solution is to put ownership of the process in the hands of one individual who has the resources and time to allot to it. All those other options are a lot more cost-effective and manageable. But with all of the pitfalls that can befall students who lack the confidence, or the know-how, or the support networks to get from point A to point B, it doesn't really happen unless someone is there to help them.” ❀

HIGH SCHOOLS PICK AND CHOOSE FROM A VARIETY OF APPROACHES TO COLLEGE COUNSELING

Ask 10 different high school principals in New York City how their school manages college counseling, and chances are you will get 10 different answers. Here are four common approaches in New York City:

TRADITIONAL APPROACH: In most large, traditional high schools, the college office is housed in the larger guidance suite. The assistant principal for guidance oversees a staff of a dozen or more guidance counselors, one or two of whom are dedicated college advisors. Typically, each student will have the same guidance counselor from ninth grade through 12th grade. The guidance counselor, who has a caseload of several hundred, will meet with each student in the earlier high school years to help with course selection as well as any academic, social or emotional problems. Beginning in the junior year, the counselor may help the student weigh college options, write a letter of recommendation, gather paperwork and manage the FAFSA application. The college counselor, who may have a caseload of 400 or 500 students, typically meets each junior or senior once to suggest appropriate colleges based on his or her transcript. The college office and its clerical staff are responsible for making sure deadlines are met and paperwork is filed.

DISTRIBUTED APPROACH: In many small schools, the college advisors, classroom teachers and other school staff share the responsibility for college counseling. Students are assigned an advisor, who is often a classroom teacher and who offers support from ninth grade through 12th grade. Because all teachers and staff members serve as advisors, the caseload is much smaller—perhaps 20 to 30 students. (However, advisors also have other significant responsibilities as teachers or administrators.) Students may discuss social and academic issues in their “advisory” classes beginning in ninth grade, if the school provides advisory classes. By 11th grade, the discussion can center on college admissions, if the advisory teachers are comfortable teaching about college decisions and admissions. (Often they are not and this opportunity is wasted.) In addition to the advisors, these schools typically have at least one person who is responsible for overseeing college application and deadline activities. Many small schools use this model because it allows the small staff to divide up the work—and give more personal attention to students. Small schools also tend to have teachers who are accustomed to taking on multiple roles.

WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH: Students are encouraged to think about college in all of their classes. Teachers routinely talk about how their subject matter prepares students for college or other options, like the job market, that students might want to consider. Thinking about life after high school is embedded in the larger curriculum and teachers feel comfortable talking to students about their options and the decisions they will have to make. New York City's “transfer schools,” which serve students who would be likely to drop out elsewhere, are structured to be student-centered in how they teach and are among the best at using this whole school, or “youth development,” approach.

OUTSIDE PARTNER APPROACH: The guidance staff recruits a community-based organization or other nonprofit organization to help with college admissions. CUNY's partnership programs, such as College Now, are very popular. The Student Success Centers, an innovative citywide model employing students to help fellow students with college applications, is another example. The CollegeBound Initiative provides professional college counselors to its partner schools. And volunteer organizations, like ReServe, frequently provide crucial college guidance assistance to financially strapped schools. There are hundreds of examples of how nonprofits supplement college counseling in New York City. (See “Stepping into the Breach,” beginning on page 45, for a discussion of this topic.) ❀

CASE STUDY

Finding a Future at Flushing High School

A lone college counselor does what she can to get kids to college in one of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's "turnaround" schools. A rough year leads to a promising postscript.

The tiny college office at Flushing High School—tucked away in the basement of the massive, overcrowded building—is isolated in more ways than its physical location. For most of the 3,000 students and 160 teachers at Flushing High School, college counseling is an afterthought, an almost unaffordable luxury in a place where the hurdles to graduation are high and college mostly seems out of reach.

For several years, the school has been fighting for its very survival. Labeled a dropout factory, with just 60 percent of students graduating on time, the school landed on the state's list of persistently low-achieving schools in 2010 and was threatened with being shut down. Of necessity, the administration and staff focused their energy on trying to get as many students as possible to pass the bare minimum requirements for graduation—not necessarily to prepare them for college.

Still, Maria Berber, the lone college counselor for 491 seniors, does her best, assisted by a part-time secretary and two staffers from a community-based organization called Asian Americans for Equality, who have their offices elsewhere in the building. She focuses her limited resources on the students most likely to succeed. "Unfortunately I can't meet with every student one-on-one," Berber says. "I start with the top-ranking students and work my way down the list."

Her work was made even more daunting by Mayor Mike Bloomberg's decision in spring 2012 to close the school, rename the building, replace the administration and remove half the staff as part of a federally sanctioned "turnaround" plan to boost the school's lagging graduation rate.

Berber, not knowing whether she would have a job in the fall, scrambled to help her juniors prepare their applications early—and to get recommendations from teachers who might lose their jobs. "I tell them, in all seriousness, you have to get recommendation letters, you have a relationship with these teachers and you don't know if they're going to be here next year. Everybody is walking around with a big question mark," she says.

MANY STUDENTS DON'T GET PAST FRESHMAN YEAR

Flushing High School has a high-needs population. Sixty-eight percent qualify for free lunch and 20 percent have limited proficiency in English. Many students don't get past freshman year, much less earn a diploma: while there are 1,200 freshmen, there are fewer than 500 seniors. Few have parents or relatives who can help with college applications, and most are the first in their families to consider college.

There is a huge gap between students' aspirations and their knowledge of what it takes to go to college. In a survey of Flushing seniors conducted by the Center for New York City Affairs, most responded that they plan to earn a bachelor's degree after high school. But their rosy expectations bear only a glancing relationship to the facts: more than half of those same seniors say they don't know their cumulative GPAs and 70 percent don't know how they'll pay for college or how to apply for financial aid.

Leticia Garcia, a senior, says her parents live abroad and she lives with an aunt whom she says is "sort of" helpful. Leticia wasn't planning on college, but after Berber encouraged her, she decided to go to a community college, either Queensborough or LaGuardia at the City University of New York, she says.

Osdely Castillo, another senior, lives with her mom and dad, but they didn't go to college. "They don't really know very much about the college application, so I've been getting most of my help from school," she says.

Whatever the future of Flushing High School, Berber takes pride in the fact that the number of seniors going to college has increased since she arrived in 2008. That year, about 50 percent of seniors enrolled in two- or four-year colleges. By 2012, she says 65 percent of seniors were on track to enroll in college.

A LOCAL NONPROFIT STEPS IN

Berber shares credit for the increase with Matt Rider and Diana Yi of Asian Americans for Equality (AAFE), an organization that works with Flushing High School to improve college readiness as part of the College Ready Communities initiative. Rider is the go-to guy for all students when they fill out their FAFSA and TAP forms, for New York state financial aid. And Yi supports Berber however she can by helping students fill out forms and search for scholarships. When Berber went on maternity leave in spring 2011, Yi and Rider took responsibility for the bustling college office.

Berber's tasks are varied: one morning, she tried to renegotiate the status of an undocumented student enrolled at Stony Brook University, which mistakenly identified him as an international student despite the fact that he's lived in New York for the past seven years. She made calls for another senior who is, for financial reasons, in the midst of a last-minute switch from a private to public university. And she coordinated guidance efforts with Yi, whose office is upstairs on the third floor. All before 9 a.m.

Berber says the most difficult part of her job is getting students to realize college is right around the corner: "You can't procrastinate," Berber tells students. "You have to take the SATs junior year, you need to start studying, you need to attend college fairs and make a list of schools." Berber believes college prep "needs to start as early as 9th grade ... making college more tangible is vital."

So far, she has been able to make only one presentation to each freshman class and one to each sophomore class. "I'm getting to know them in the latter part of junior year into senior year," which may be too late to give thoughtful advice, she says.

Staff coordination is another hurdle. Berber says it is difficult to get the school's 13 guidance counselors in the same room more than once or twice a month, much less the school's 160 teachers, who run on different schedules to help ease some of the school's overcrowding. The school is so overburdened that lunch hours are as early as 9 a.m. or as late as 2 p.m.

Berber and Yi both say they would like to see a more holistic approach to college readiness, but that would require a cultural shift from the current focus—which is just getting kids over the hurdle to graduation. If guidance counselors and teachers could start conversations about going to college earlier, perhaps Berber wouldn't be stuck with so many students who think they are going to earn a bachelor's degree but have no idea how they'll get there.

Yi hopes to enroll some students in a summer leadership training program through College Access: Research and Action (CARA). But Berber doesn't know if she can go, because she doesn't know if she'll still have a job then. "They need two counselors to attend the training, but I don't know if I can put my name down," Berber said.

Whatever Berber's fate, AAFE will likely remain at the school. "I'm under the impression that AAFE will stay, if they didn't, it would be a nightmare, I really, really hope they stay, because it will be at least some continuity for these kids and a face that's familiar."

And if she's still around next year, Berber hopes to move the college office out of the tiny 300-square-foot space in the basement. "There's a space upstairs that I would love to share with Diana, just to have one central area that we could share, as a team!" she says.

A PROMISING POSTSCRIPT

This article was reported and first published in spring 2012. A lot of good work has happened over the past year and half. Flushing High School launched the 2012–13 school year with a new Career and College Pathway Center, an 800-square-foot guidance suite on the first floor. The office is shared by college counselor Berber, supplemental staff members provided by AAFE and a corps of five student peer counselors who assist students with the college and financial aid process. While many things about the school's future still remain to be settled, the interim acting principal has given the go-ahead for these expanded college efforts. Flushing High School's superintendent has declared that every high school should have a similar facility.

The heightened visibility has led to an increase in referrals by the general guidance staff and teachers looking to ensure that students get appropriate counseling and support for college. In the first three months, more than 800 students visited the center for counseling, information or to attend a workshop. Berber works out of her office within the suite, providing individual guidance to students, while AAFE's Yi supervises the AAFE staff and plans for expanded career and college activities. The new center has expanded its relationships with colleges, inviting college admissions representatives to come and meet selected groups of students, and has begun new career initiatives, partnering students with businesses, planning career fairs and disseminating more career information to go along with its college information. Five peer counselors were trained last summer by College Access: Research and Action (CARA). The peer counselors successfully assisted students with online college applications, financial aid forms or other details of applying to college. A program assistant, funded by AAFE, guides students through the financial aid applications and conducts financial health workshops at Flushing and two other high schools.✱

Taking a Look at Tele

A well-regarded high school serves as a college counseling model for larger schools citywide.

It is the first day of May and the seniors are parading into the college office at the High School of Telecommunication Arts and Technology in Brooklyn wearing T-shirts of the colleges they will attend in the fall, including selective schools like Williams, Barnard, Connecticut College, Wheaton, the University of Chicago, Skidmore College and SUNY Binghamton. In an annual ritual, they posted photocopies of their acceptance letters on the bulletin board in the front hallway as their college advisors, Eleanor Terry and Jeanine Boulay, looked on proudly.

Telecommunication serves a range of students, from high achievers to those who enter 9th grade reading well below grade level. Nearly 60 percent are poor enough to receive free lunch, 19 percent qualify for special education services and about 5 percent have limited proficiency in English. Yet Telecommunication, or “Tele” as it is better known, has a sterling record of college admissions—and two college advisors who will do whatever it takes to help students succeed.

Every single senior is expected to apply to college. Nearly two-thirds of the Class of 2011 graduated and went on to either college or public service, well above the citywide average of 49 percent. Fifty-two percent of students in the Class of 2012 scored high enough on the Regents exams or other tests to be exempt from remediation at CUNY—nearly double the citywide rate. Students do not only go to CUNY and SUNY, they go to hard-to-get-into schools like Stanford and Wesleyan. Some win sought-after Posse Foundation and QuestBridge scholarships. The secret to their success is the culture of the school that encourages every student to think of college, beginning with trips to college campuses during the freshman year.

The school has 250 to 300 students in each grade, which is large but a more manageable size than many New York City high schools. When students are juniors and seniors, Boulay and Terry—who work 12-hour days—have frequent meetings with them in small groups, as well as one-on-one. They offer FAFSA and SAT preparation workshops.

Most important, they hold all students to the same high expectations. All juniors must ask teachers or advisors for two college recommendations, even if colleges to which they are applying do not require them, and all seniors are expected to apply to six CUNY schools, four SUNYs and four other colleges even if a student is dead set on one or two. Their user-friendly, information-

packed website is consistently updated by the college admissions office, and students are expected to consult it frequently.

“We give the same message to everyone, and then modify it at different points throughout the process when need be,” Terry explains. “That way all students know what is expected of them very early on, and we can keep track of where each student is throughout the process.”

The college application process culminates for seniors with an “application day” the Friday before Thanksgiving. Seniors, dressed in professional business attire, are required to bring in application packages for all schools to which they are applying to the college advising office. Boulay and Terry go over each envelope with students, processing their applications during students’ lunch period. They also go over things like financing and SAT scores during this time. At the end of each student’s appointment, they receive a sticker heralding, “Hooray! I applied!” and record all the colleges applied to on a large sign outside the college advising office.

“We make it an official process,” Terry says. “It’s a whole school event that’s visible to everyone, so even younger students see what they will be doing in a few years. It’s a transparent thing for all students so that it sets that standard for all students.” Students learn real-life skills, like meeting deadlines and how to dress in business attire, and come to trust their advisors.

Boulay and Terry also build trust with students through their teaching, as they do not only advise on college but also teach a few periods of math and English, respectively. Terry believes that teaching, while slightly complicating their jobs at times, is what encourages students to put their trust in them. “We have reputations in the school as teachers *and* advisors so we’ve established that trust,” Terry points out. “And, families trust [us]. We know what classes you take, homework, the pressures outside of schools. We get it all.”

“Students and staff aren’t competitive or secretive. Everyone runs around with parents’ tax forms and reads each other’s essays,” she adds. While other college advisors say it’s difficult to collect FAFSA and tax forms or give feedback on college essays, it’s a much easier process for Boulay and Terry.

Telecommunication also relies on partnerships with outside organizations. For example, St. Francis College in Brooklyn offers FAFSA workshops for parents; staffers from Kingsborough Community College work with students on the FAFSA form. Minds Matter, an organization that offers intensive college support for high-achieving, low-income students, helps about 20 students with applications, SAT preparation and mentors—playing what Terry calls “the role of a middle-class parent for students who need that kind of support.”

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Stepping into the Breach

Nonprofit organizations can't fully replace college counselors, but they offer crucial assistance to both students and schools.

In New York City, nonprofit organizations are the steady two-cylinder engines helping tens of thousands of high school students find their way to college. These organizations don't have much horsepower, they aren't designed for long-hauls or heavy pulls and they don't pick up everyone along the way. Nonetheless, without their work, far fewer teenagers would make their way on the sometimes hazardous road to higher education.

Most city high schools, recognizing their own limitations, accept and even welcome the involvement of these organizations. Perhaps inevitably, some principals express concern or regret about relying on external groups to meet a need that, by rights, is the schools' responsibility.

"From my point of view as a school leader, a CBO [community-based organization] or a partner organization can't supplant what I feel is my responsibility," says Monique Darrisaw, former principal of the Academy of Urban Planning in Bushwick, Brooklyn, now working in school support for the Department of Education. "It's like sending your child to visit somebody. Dinner is my responsibility. If someone gives them a snack, I'm very thankful. You know they went to your house and they had a snack, but it's still my responsibility to feed and clothe that child."

Nonetheless, there is a general recognition that the outside groups serve a very important function, especially considering how overburdened the high schools are. "With all of the paperwork guidance counselors have to fill out, and with union rules about working overtime, schools are hampered from doing things the way a CBO can," says Lan To, director of post-secondary initiatives at Good Shepherd Services, a social service and youth development agency. "It's not that schools don't want to do things, they just aren't able to."

In 2011, Graduate NYC!, a Gates Foundation-funded community collaboration led by the city school system and the City University of New York, identified 253 organizations doing college readiness and transition programming in New York City. Of these, 156 nonprofits replied to their survey. They counted nearly 93,000 New York City teens and young adults who looked to these groups in 2010 for help with college essays and applications, financial aid paperwork and preparation for tests like the SAT and the CUNY assessment.

In our own research at the Center for New York City Affairs, we have closely followed the work of 12 community and nonprofit organizations that are collaborating with 14 public high schools and middle schools as part of the College Ready Communities initiative, funded by the Deutsche Bank Americas Foundation. The initiative is premised on the idea that these nonprofit groups, with their neighborhood connections and knowledge of local communities, will mobilize new resources to help students prepare for college. They also aim to promote a culture of high achievement, parent engagement and community involvement in the schools.

On page 56, we provide short summaries of a number of programs, large and small, that nonprofit organizations have run with substantial success. The one common thread: they are all attempting to fill a vast gap in the services available to the city's students.

INTENSE HELP AND WORKING ONE-ON-ONE

Each summer, the University Program at East Harlem Tutorial Program welcomes 25 to 35 rising high school freshmen to a comprehensive four-year program designed to prepare students for college.

There is a general recognition that outside groups serve a very important guidance function given how overburdened the high schools are.

*Individual
attention is even
more critical
if personal
situations are
complicated—
when, for
example,
students come
from unstable
homes or are
undocumented
immigrants.*

The free program begins with a rigorous five-week summer institute that includes two weeks on a college campus outside of New York City, such as Syracuse University. Over the next four years, students take classes in English and mathematics at Harlem Tutorial, and have special opportunities such as taking anatomy lab classes at Touro Medical School or competing in a regional robotics tournament. The aim is for students to embark on an academic path suggestive of the college experience years before they ever formally enroll in college. Students participate in workshops that require them to think about the factors that go into becoming a successful college student; they take part in trust-building exercises and learn financial literacy. As juniors, students are required to attend a 10-week SAT preparation class; as seniors, they sit down with their family and program staff to work together on financial aid applications.

Admission to the program is not based on grades. Students are invited to participate if in the course of interviews they demonstrate a strong commitment and willingness to do what is required to succeed in college. Most participants are black or Hispanic and from low-income households.

In essence, Harlem Tutorial creates a web of support for young people. If students need Metrocards during the summer, Harlem Tutorial will buy them. If they need to babysit younger siblings after school, they can bring the children along and someone will be there to watch them. The proof of success is in the numbers. Last year the 20 seniors participating in the program were all accepted to four-year colleges, garnering over 150 acceptance letters among them. What's more, they received, in total, over \$450,000 in scholarship money.

The program is unusual in its intensity. But it is similar to many other community-based college prep programs in that it can serve only a few teenagers. For many nonprofit groups, it's an "either or" proposition: either do in-depth work with a few young people or serve a much larger number of students in a far less intensive way.

Even with a larger volume of students, nonprofits report a high level of personal interaction that can be helpful during the stressful college application process. In the Graduate NYC! study, organizations working on tasks such as essay writing and filling out FAFSA forms reported that about half their time was spent working one-on-one with students.

"What's most important when you're dealing with college is one-on-one counseling and making lasting personal connections," says Veronica Aguilar Hornig, manager of college guidance at the Opportunity Network, a six-year career development program open to high school sophomores. "A personal connection makes the difference between a student who gets through it, and does well in college, and the ones who may fall through the cracks." Individual attention is even more critical when, as is often the case, personal situations are complicated—when, for example, students come from unstable homes or are undocumented immigrants.

College readiness support by nonprofits is often available after school and during the summer, when high schools are closed. According to the Graduate NYC! report, 73 percent of surveyed organizations provide college admissions support after school, while 63 percent provide it during the summer months. The College Directions Program at Kingsbridge Heights Community Center, a settlement house in the Northwest Bronx, does much of its college programming during the summer. This includes a one-week Summer Literacy Institute at Manhattan College, during which students live on a college campus and work one-on-one with experienced tutors to prepare their college essays. "They hone in on their writing skills and also start to see what will be expected of them in college," says program coordinator Allison Torres. During the school year, the program works with students until 9 p.m. and serves about 200 registered students a year as well as others who drop in with quick questions or need urgent help.

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FILLING NYC'S COLLEGE GUIDANCE GAPS

The chart below lists college guidance services that NYC public schools try to provide—and those areas where families, nonprofits or volunteers must fill the gap. The level and quality of college guidance varies greatly among schools. Many schools provide a rich array of college supports that families are often unable to provide. Alternatively, nonprofits, community groups and volunteers often provide guidance services that are underfunded or missing in schools. Low-income students rely on this fragile mix of partnerships to get the college support they need.

WHITE BAR: College access work done primarily by families, nonprofit groups or volunteers (or not done at all)

BLUE BAR: College access work done primarily by schools

6-8TH GRADE

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early college talk and inspiration • Discuss importance of grades & attendance re high school choices • Assist attendance improvement, outreach • After-school enrichment or remedial help • Help parents set up IDAs, college savings plans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assist research on best-fit high schools • Help make critical choice among 440+ high schools • Ninth-grade summer bridge preparation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Middle school academic planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer specialized high school exams • Administer high school choice process • Some schools: Ninth-grade bridge preparation
6-7TH GRADE	8TH GRADE

9-10TH GRADE

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After-school enrichment, coaching on study habits • In class/after-school college academic talk and workshops • Assist attendance improvement, outreach to at-risk students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After-school activities, leadership opportunities • College resume-building, internship opportunities • Peer-led college workshops, alumni mentoring
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help students acclimate to high school • Begin college and academic talk with students • Attendance monitoring, outreach to at-risk students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prep and administer PSATs • Some schools: College resume guidance • Some schools: Begin internships, vocational opportunities
9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE

11TH GRADE

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SAT/ACT prep • College visits and college exploration • After-school Regents tutoring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College visits and college exploration • Organize college alumni visits, mentoring • Assist with college resume and essays 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer-led outreach, workshops • College visits • College alumni mentoring • Peer supports and college workshops • College fairs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SAT/ACT prep for top students • CUNY/SUNY exploration • Academic and Regents supports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administer SATs/ACTs • Some schools: Career exploring, college visits • Some schools: College admissions recruitment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft, finalize college resumes • Organize or send students to college fairs
FALL	WINTER	SPRING

12TH GRADE

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SAT/ACT prep and support • College research, application support • College essay writing, editing support • Financing, scholarship research support • Junior and senior year summer jobs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assist CUNY, SUNY, private school applications • Peer or CBO college application support • Assist initial FAFSA form submission • Advise, support undocumented students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assist final FAFSA form submission • Assist in FAFSA verification, state, local aid • Assist family, college, financing problems • Assist undocumented students: financing, legal issues
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administer SATs/ACTs • Introduce CUNY application process in class • Assist SUNY, private school applications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete CUNY applications, often in class • CUNY, SUNY, private school applications completed and sent • Transcripts sent to colleges • Some schools: Assist FAFSA process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some schools: Assist FAFSA completion, verification • Assist and log final college choice, post-HS plans • Help students successfully complete Regents, coursework • Graduation
FALL	WINTER	SPRING

SUCCESSFUL COLLEGE ARRIVAL

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assist in FAFSA verification process • Assist CUNY entrance exams, if lacking needed Regents scores • Financial aid, scholarship assistance • Assist last-minute family, college, financing problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help navigate financial, scheduling, academic problems at college • Academic supports and help navigating remedial class issues • FAFSA, financial aid and scholarship assistance • Financial assistance for undocumented students • Support dealing with family and job conflicts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No role unless school has dedicated guidance or volunteers • Graduate August graduates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No role unless school has dedicated guidance or volunteers
SUMMER BRIDGE	FALL ARRIVAL

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COLLEGE READY COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE

In the College Ready Communities initiative (which was evaluated by the Center for New York City Affairs from 2009 to 2012) four collaboratives of community organizations, schools and advocacy groups were tasked with helping more low-income students prepare and matriculate to college. The schools served mostly students of color from the Soundview section of the Bronx; Bushwick and Cypress Hills in Brooklyn; Central Harlem in Manhattan; and Flushing, Elmhurst and Corona in Queens.

Each of the community organizations had different resources, backgrounds and perspectives. The schools, too, differed in many respects. But the Center's three-year evaluation revealed a few overarching lessons.

Most important, the nonprofit groups provided crucial assistance boosting the number of young people applying to college. The collaboratives provided workshops and college advising, integrating college prep into the school day, often doubling the capacity of schools' college guidance staff. In the nine College Ready Communities high schools that had graduating classes in 2011, more than 900 seniors applied to college, substantially more than the previous year. And the proportion of graduating seniors who applied to college increased from 77 percent to nearly 88 percent.

This work was especially important because, even in small high schools, guidance counselors' caseloads were generally too large to ensure that all students who needed attention received it. In addition, many of the guidance counselors were teachers and most dealt with multiple job responsibilities. And as is typical in many schools, their level of knowledge and experience was inconsistent. Large guidance caseloads tended to jeopardize postsecondary access for low achieving students and favored those who have better grades and are motivated to seek help. (See "College Counselors Count," page 29.)

Another key objective of the College Ready Communities collaboratives was to develop a college-going culture. Almost every school participating in the project was able to provide students with more access to college-level course work over the three years, principally through CUNY's College Now program or Advanced Placement classes.

The groups pursued different strategies across the 14 schools. Make the Road New York and Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation each managed a "Student Success Center," one at the Bushwick High School campus and the other in the Franklin K. Lane building in Cypress Hills. Each Student Success Center was staffed by a director, an organizer and up to 10 paid "youth leaders" or "ambassadors." These centers provided college awareness workshops and, through the outreach of the youth leaders, encourage students to come in for advice and help applying to college.

The Pan American International High School Collaborative, on the other hand, primarily addressed non-academic barriers to college. The collaborative linked immigrant families to social services, provided support on college and financial aid applications and helped immigrant parents and students maneuver the complexities of U.S. higher education. One of the collaborative partners, the Internationals Network for Public Schools, helped establish the two small Pan American International High Schools, one in the Soundview section of the Bronx and the other in Elmhurst, Queens. These schools serve students from Latin America who have been in the United States for four years or less. The other partners were the South Bronx Overall Economic Development Corporation (SoBRO) and Make the Road New York.

Project College Bound focused on the needs of English Language Learners in two high schools in Queens, Flushing High School and Flushing International High School. The collaborative partners organized student and parent groups to build support for the notion of college as an achievable goal—

The nonprofit groups provided crucial assistance in boosting the number of young people applying to college. The proportion of graduating seniors who applied increased from 77 percent to nearly 88 percent.

and create a broader public agenda for changing the school culture. The partner organizations, Asian Americans for Equality (AAFE) and Coalition for Asian American Children and Families (CACF), provided invaluable college guidance and financial literacy services and ESL courses. CACF also trained students and parents to advocate for school reform and equity in services for recent immigrants and English Language Learners.

The fourth collaborative was the Harlem Middle Schools Project, based at Abyssinian Development Corporation. The project had two main goals: to create a culture of high expectations and college awareness and to increase the level of academic rigor in the middle school grades at Thurgood Marshall Academy for Learning and Social Change. Another community organization, Brotherhood/Sister Sol, ran leadership training for students.

Among the high schools participating in College Ready Communities, more than one-quarter of the students were English Language Learners and more than two-thirds were seeking to be the first in their family to go to college. Most were members of ethnic minorities and come from low-income and working-class families. The hurdles were high for these students to become emotionally and socially prepared for college. “Most of our students do not see beyond the day at hand,” wrote one high school teacher in a response to a survey we administered in 2011. “Many do not see the connection between what they are doing now and the future ahead. There seems to be a disconnect.”

There are promising signs that the high schools in the initiative are getting stronger academically, with big improvements in the numbers of students receiving Regents diplomas. A majority of the College Ready Communities schools posted increases from 2009 to 2011 in the percent of students scoring 75 or more on their English and Integrated Algebra Regents exams, critical gateway scores to avoid remediation at CUNY. And attendance improved in eight of the 11 schools with sufficient data to analyze. The schools have also begun to offer more Advanced Placement and college-level classes, despite budget pressures to cut back.

These trends are heartening, but the academic challenges remain huge. Failure rates on Regents tests are high; at most of these schools in 2011, fewer than 10 percent of test-takers in a given year received a 75 or better. And despite gains, graduation rates remained relatively low over the year, bouncing up and down at many schools. Three schools had four-year graduation rates above the 2010 citywide average of 65 percent. The remaining five schools with graduating classes that year had four-year graduation rates below 60 percent. (All the College Ready Communities schools have significantly better five- and six-year graduation rates. The extra time is particularly important for schools that serve newcomers, like the three Internationals schools, which need to give students time to learn English.) We do not yet know how many of the students who participated in College Ready Communities programs and applied to college have in fact matriculated and remained in school. Those results are yet to come.

The starkest lesson is this: Nonprofit partners can make a large difference in college awareness, guidance and the mustering of resources. And they can provide invaluable leadership training for students and parents. Ultimately, however, the full lift required for college readiness is much larger than nonprofits can provide. And this reality has many leaders from across the sector worried.

ETHICAL DOUBTS ABOUT STUDENTS WHO ARE UNPREPARED

Much as they strive to propel students to college, many nonprofit leaders and frontline staff struggle with some doubt about this work. After all the work they do to hold a teen’s hand through the daunting steps in the college admissions process, nonprofits often find that the student is simply not

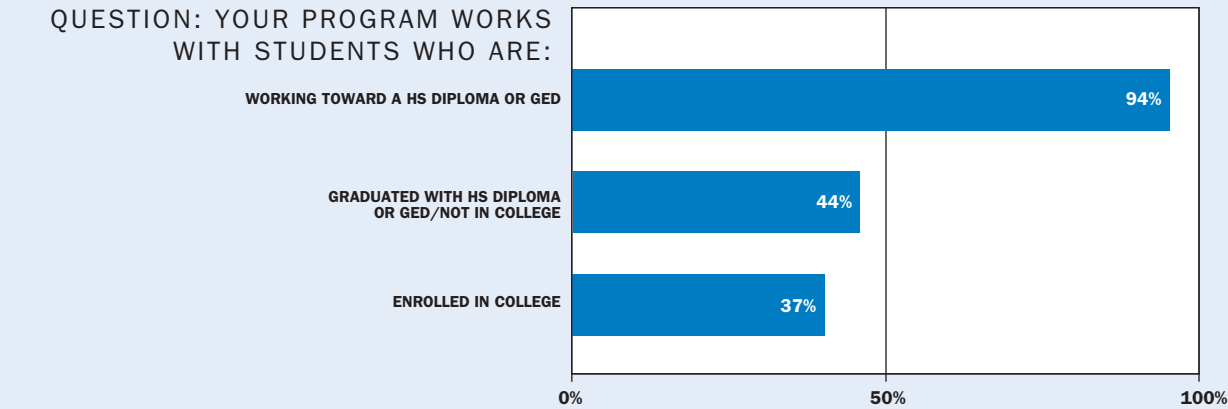
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NONPROFITS AND COMMUNITY GROUPS PLAY A MAJOR ROLE IN COLLEGE GUIDANCE

New York City’s nonprofit sector plays an important—and growing—role in college guidance and application assistance. Yet the sector’s contribution to schools and the success of aspiring college students is hard to measure. Graduate NYC!, a citywide collaborative group led by staff at the City University of New York and the NYC Department of Education, sought to identify and poll New York City’s nonprofit players to get a better understanding of the sector’s size and needs.

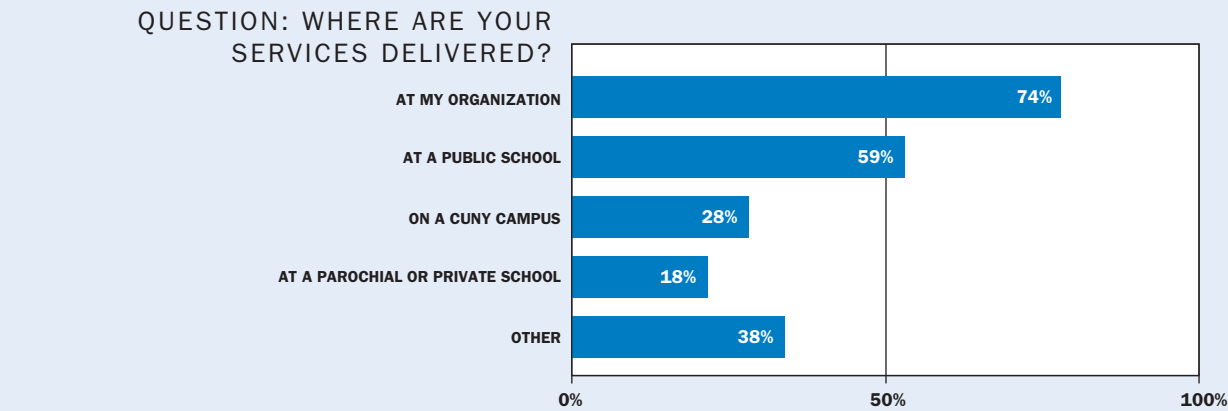
Staff and teams of volunteers were able to find 253 local agencies doing some aspect of college support. GraduateNYC! polled the groups and 156 responded, reporting a total of 92,677 students served over the 2009–10 school year and the following summer. The number of actual students served is probably lower, since students participating in more than one program at an agency may have been counted more than once. However, the total number served is still substantial. These charts offer a snapshot of the nonprofit sector’s size and role:

WHAT TYPES OF STUDENTS DO NONPROFITS SERVE?



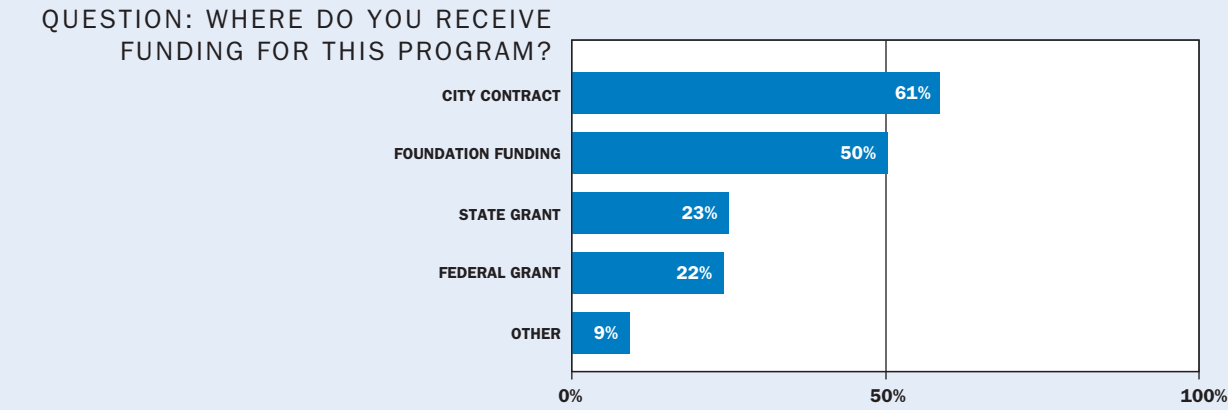
NOTE: Respondents could check all that apply.

WHERE ARE THE NONPROFITS WORKING WITH STUDENTS?



NOTE: Respondents could check all that apply. Other items listed included corporate offices, foster homes, hospitals, shelters, recreational centers, CBOs and other college sites.

WHO SUPPORTS NONPROFIT COLLEGE WORK?



NOTE: Respondents could check all that apply. Other items listed included private sector donations, NYS DOE funding, CBO funding and state assembly/City Council funds.

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ready for college. Staff at each of the two dozen groups interviewed for this report voiced deep concern that they are promoting high school graduates who are academically unprepared.

“If a student is a junior in high school with a GPA of 70 and has never written a research report, there are real ethical questions about exactly what colleges he should go to or if he will even get into one,” a former Cypress Hills Local Development Cooperation staffer. “Is it really fair to send this student to college if he may not be able to even pass out of remediation?”

Studies show that students who need remediation are far less likely to finish college than peers who go directly into college-level courses. Nonprofit staffers want to support students’ dreams of going to college, but they also want to save them from failure if it is clear they are not prepared for college work.

Thus organizations face a Hobson’s choice: Try to help students catch up academically or give up on college and help them find a different post-secondary pathway. While some organizations do extensive academic work, most find it too expensive and too time-consuming to compensate for years of an inferior education. One young woman at East Harlem Tutorial, for example, dreamed of becoming a doctor, but her school did not offer Physics, Calculus or any Advanced Placement classes.

“If the schools aren’t doing it, there’s nothing a CBO or another program can do, because there’s only so much we can do academically,” says Carlos Velazquez, who worked on college access for East Harlem Tutorial before becoming a college access manager at KIPP NYC.

WHAT LEVEL OF SERVICE DO NONPROFITS PROVIDE?

QUESTION: DESCRIBE THE ACTIVITIES AND SETTINGS OF YOUR COLLEGE SUPPORT WORK

COLLEGE & POST-SECONDARY PLANNING ACTIVITIES	# OF GROUPS	IN GROUP SETTINGS %	IN ONE-ON-ONE COUNSELING %	USING WEB-BASED TOOLS %	NOT OFFERED %	OTHER SETTING %
COLLEGE EXPLORATION	151	64	23	4	5	5
FINANCIAL LITERACY	148	65	18	3	3	11
COLLEGE RETENTION	150	28	45	1	19	8
ACADEMIC SKILLS	151	73	9	1	17	1
ACT/SAT/PSAT PREP	148	53	14	1	30	2
CUNY ASSESSMENT PREP	147	30	13	1	49	7
COLLEGE MATH PREP	148	41	9	1	43	5
COLLEGE READING/WRITING PREP	151	50	7	1	37	6
TUTORING	150	33	35	1	25	7
TIME MANAGEMENT/STUDY SKILLS	151	74	19	1	4	2
CRITICAL THINKING	152	74	15	1	5	6
PERSONAL ADVOCACY/DEVELOPMENT	151	60	28	2	4	6
CAMPUS VISITS	149	72	N/A	N/A	11	17
COLLEGE APPLICATION HELP	148	33	53	1	9	4
FAFSA/FINANCIAL AID HELP	148	30	51	3	12	4

SOURCE: Results of a survey taken by Graduate NYC!, a collaborative program led by the City University of New York, the New York City Department of Education, the Office of the Mayor and a range of community partner organizations. The survey was sent to 253 agencies and 156 agencies responded over a four-week period. Participants were asked about services and activities over SY 2009–10 and summer 2010.

The moral dilemma is compounded when it comes to paying for college, either out-of-pocket or through borrowing. This, too, is an area that typically gets short shrift from high school counselors. Students often realize only at the last minute that they can't afford their first college choice.

"One of my students whom I'm very close with—I've had her all four years—was all excited to go to Hofstra," says one teacher in a small Brooklyn high school. "I made sure she was applying to CUNY and SUNY schools, but she was dead set on going [to Hofstra]. She got in. But then just last week she told me she wasn't going to go there anymore, she's going to York College." The deciding factor was cost. "I could have told her that," the teacher says. "I *did* tell her that. But financial awareness is something that our students just don't have and that our school just isn't preparing them for."

Nonprofits often assume the burden of helping students understand the cost of going to college. As a result, staffers face tough decisions: Should they urge students to spend scarce financial aid and household dollars on remedial courses in college? Or take out loans, despite the likelihood that they will drop out of college and have nothing to show for their efforts but several thousand dollars of debt?

FRICION BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND NONPROFIT PARTNERS

Despite the growing involvement of nonprofit organizations, there is no formal protocol from the Department of Education for how these groups and the schools can profitably work together. Some of the most successful are those in which the nonprofit is housed full time in the school, such as the Coalition for Asian American Children and Families with offices at two schools in Flushing. At each school, a site coordinator from CACF works closely with school staff; if the school does not have the capacity to provide extras such as college trips or financial aid workshops, CACF may offer it.

"The CBO presence and partnerships in schools are hard because there's friction sometimes," admits Mitchell Wu, one of the site coordinators. "Schools push back [against] folks coming in. We don't want to come in and reinvent the school, we just want to use our strengths and capacity-building skills to make things better." But for all the difficulties of a live-in arrangement, there are obvious benefits, such as having direct access to schools and the ability to forge relationships with teachers and staff. "Being inside a school, you become part of the school culture," says Wu, "so you have some influence over how much a school values college access and success."

Most nonprofits are not physically located *within* the schools, however. Andrea Soonachan, who has seen the relationship from both sides, from the Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation and currently as associate director of college and career planning at the Department of Education, notes, "Schools aren't always aware that CBOs are a resource to them. They struggle with how to assess the quality of a CBO. They don't know what they're looking for and asking for. There's no systematic way for schools to leverage those partnerships."

Power struggles are not uncommon, adds Lan To of Good Shepherd Services. "If we're in a school, and we want to do a workshop [on college or any other kind of issue], we have to go through the red tape and hierarchy," she notes. "And you also have to get people in the school and school staff to buy into and implement it. If we don't have support, or there is dissension, then it undermines the work."

Yet there are obvious opportunities for synergy. For example, both nonprofits and school counselors complain about the dearth of easily accessible information, including important updates. Lan To, who spends much of her time researching college admissions, has put together an e-news alert, *Futurefocus Flash*, designed to keep people up-to-date on changes in the application process and events such as college fairs. The *Flash* is distributed to nonprofit organizations and to high school counselors. In another instance, a group of ReServe volunteers in a high school guidance office realized that students were largely uneducated about FAFSA. On their own initiative, they organized a FAFSA workshop.

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My Guidance Counselor Left for the Summer. Now What?

A new and growing Bridge to College program helps college-bound graduates deal with a host of problems over the summer that could prevent them from arriving at school.

Two years ago, Urban Assembly's college readiness director Ritu Sen was in a meeting with her fellow Bridge to College program co-leaders, discussing the group's plans to use email to reach former students, when Ashanti, a college student working with them for the summer, hit the older group of 30- and 40-year-olds with a reality check.

"Guys," Sen recalls her saying, "no one checks email. We don't use email anymore. We email you because we're being courteous." Ashanti explained that even texting is for older people; she and her friends prefer Facebook.

Such revelations are important to Sen and her colleagues at Bridge to College, a program designed to help graduates who have been accepted to college deal with the many problems that can occur over summer and derail their college plans. The program debuted in summer 2011 as a collaboration among three organizations with experience helping low-income students make the transition to college: The Urban Assembly, College Access: Research & Action (CARA) and CUNY's At Home in College. The three organizations started working together after leaders in each spotted a troubling trend: students who graduated with college plans but mysteriously fell off track during the summer.

Similar trends have been identified across the country, especially among low-income students. Big Picture Learning is a national network of schools that employs a back-office staff to track students after high school, following graduates through their twenties, and compiling data to assess connections between students' high school experience and their postsecondary paths.

Big Picture's early findings, published in the *NEA Higher Education Journal* in 2009, illustrate what it has dubbed "the summer flood," a term coined to describe the large number of students who "continue fundamental decision-making about where—and even whether—to attend college" over the summer. The traditional pattern of application-acceptance-choice-matriculation does not hold for low-income, urban high school graduates, the researchers say.

DESIGNED TO FILL THE SUMMER GUIDANCE GAP

Of course, summer is the time when students have the least help, and Bridge to College is designed to fill that gap. High schools participating in the program nominate recent alumni who are now enrolled in college, like Ashanti, to serve as program coaches, shepherding the graduating senior class from high school to college. The alumni get a decent-paying summer job and provide fast-paced college counseling during this high-stakes time, when teachers and counselors are often unavailable and unfamiliar with potential hurdles. "It's really 2,000 bucks for a coach who brings all these resources to the table that we can't," says Sen.

The program initially worked with 44 schools in 2011. In 2012, the program grew to serve 75 schools and more than 5,200 students. In the coming year, organizers expect that more than 90 schools will participate.

Urban Assembly has been experimenting with empowerment programs to help students on their way to college over the last decade. There are 20 high schools in the Urban Assembly network of public schools in New York City, 12 of which have graduated seniors so far, and the network's mission is to

Summer is the time when students have the least help, and Bridge to College is designed to fill that gap. The program worked with 44 schools in 2011. More than 5,200 students took part in 2012.

build a strong college-going culture. They formalized an early version of the Bridge to College program in summer 2010. Sen says it was initially an experiment: “This started because we just didn’t get it, we just didn’t understand why half of our kids weren’t going to college.”

Daniel Voloch, the former director of At Home in College now at iMentor, contacted Sen in fall 2010, after Urban Assembly’s summer experiment. At Home in College is a CUNY collaborative program that allows high school seniors to take English and math courses that prepare them for both the CUNY assessment tests and college coursework. He had also seen his students deal with big problems between enrollment and matriculation. “There are so many hurdles,” Voloch says, “even simple logistics such as getting the diplomas, the final transcripts.”

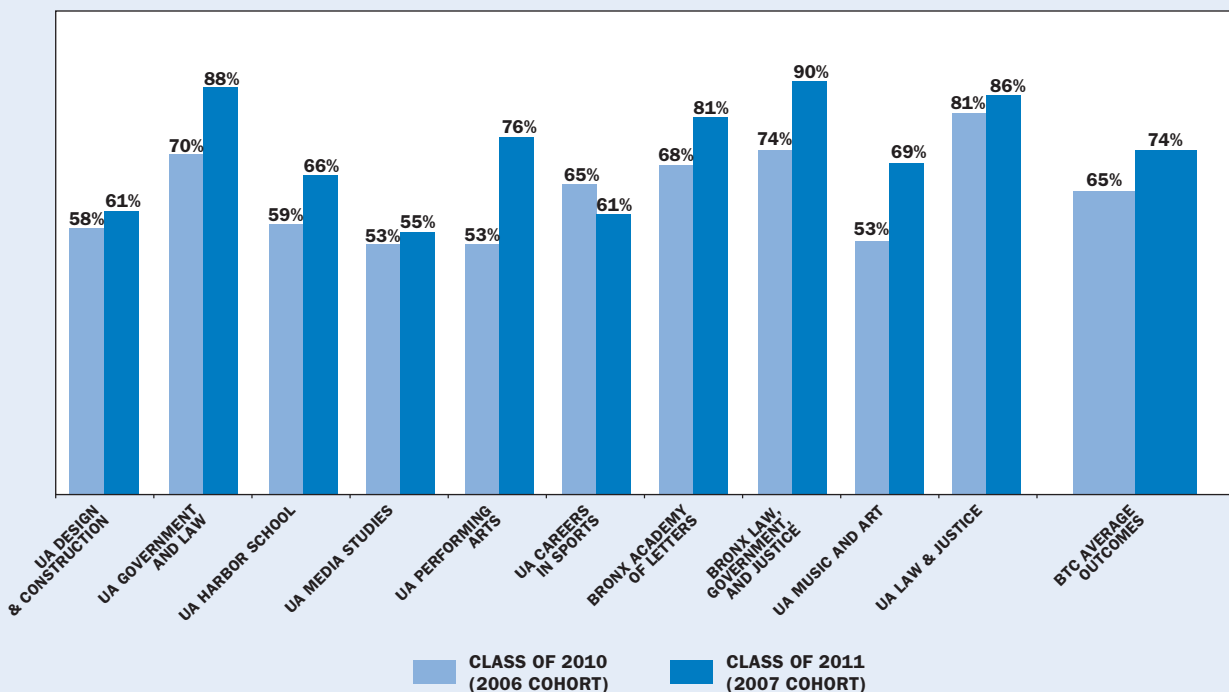
TARGETING ACADEMICS, FINANCING AND PERSONAL ISSUES

Voloch and Sen pulled in CARA, a community-based organization working in New York City public high schools to prep students for college. In late 2010, the three groups laid the groundwork to extend Urban Assembly’s alumni coach program. CARA and At Home in College replicated Urban Assembly’s coaching model at some of their partner high schools. They all pitched in to fund training and stipends for the coaches and make them “mini college counselors,” Sen says. The Department of Education has also provided funding for the past two years.

URBAN ASSEMBLY’S EXPERIMENT WITH “SUMMER BRIDGE” MENTORS RESULTS IN CONSISTENTLY HIGHER COLLEGE ARRIVAL RATES

A group of New York City public high schools affiliated with Urban Assembly provides “summer bridge” help to graduating seniors bound for college. The program pays trained college student alums to keep in touch with college-bound graduates to help them deal with last-minute enrollment problems that crop up. The help of the alums seems to be useful. College enrollment jumped in nearly all participating schools.

FALL COLLEGE ENROLLMENT OF 4-YEAR GRADS PARTICIPATING IN THE “BRIDGE TO COLLEGE” PROGRAM



SOURCE: Preliminary data from an internal evaluation, the Urban Assembly (December 2011). College enrollment data obtained from the National Student Clearinghouse Student Tracker Report prepared for the Urban Assembly in December 2011. Fall enrollment is defined as any enrollment that occurs between August 15 and October 31 of the high school graduation year. According to the Urban Assembly, 97 percent of graduates were included in the Bridge to College program.

The group developed targeted intervention areas—academic, financial and personal—based on interviews Urban Assembly had done with college-bound students who did not enroll in 2008 and 2009. The three intervention areas allow guidance counselors to more easily pinpoint students in the graduating class for the coaches to target.

Staff at CARA developed training materials that are easy for the Bridge to College coaches to deploy, like a list of 29 items a senior must complete “from application to enrollment.” It ranges from the nitty-gritty details (pay tuition deposit) to the bigger picture (talk with family members about [college] decision and make sure all agree” before responding to acceptance letters).

Voloch and his successor Ciji Gardner have been useful for the team: They have offered a direct pipeline to the bureaucracy at CUNY. Sen says this is particularly helpful because so many graduating seniors change their plans over the summer. An insider at CUNY to help deal with these emergencies is helpful. “Their mom might refuse to pay for one loan and so they need to switch their college plans. So at the last minute they might need to know which college is still enrolling students,” she says. Normally there would be a lag time to locate the right person at CUNY and find out which colleges still have space, but since Voloch works there, he can get the information quickly and distribute it to all the college coaches.

The group refined its program in 2012 and has continued to refine its plans for this summer. They realized, after hearing anecdotes from their 2011 coaches, that students who weren’t flagged as needing targeted intervention stumbled on unforeseen problems. Coaches have reported that graduating seniors are indecisive and don’t view enrollment as final. Raymond Duran described a student from last summer who didn’t want to go to school because his mom kicked him out of the house. Another student, who planned to go to a small Catholic college, couldn’t secure private loans to afford the school. Her coach, Naya Gary, says she helped her get into SUNY’s Clinton Community College at the last minute.

Instead of trying to predict which students are most likely to abandon college plans over the summer, the collaborative developed a more nuanced checklist for college coaches to log the progress of each student and organize their work.

That log, in turn, informs their work for the following year. “Part of what we want to do with this is just surface a lot of information around what does it take to actually matriculate. What does it look like for the average student, whether it’s CUNY, SUNY or a private [college]; what kind of support does she need to be able to do it?” Voloch asks. Lori Chajet, a director at CARA, says one big shift for the coming year is that the program will bring college coaches into the schools earlier. There will also be more training for school-based supervisors.

It’s difficult to know how well the program is working at this point. Early data from the 11 Urban Assembly high schools that participated in Bridge to College suggest the average college matriculation rate for the class of 2011 jumped nine percentage points above the rate for the 2010 class—to a college arrival rate of 74 percent of the 2010 graduating cohort. So far, however, Urban Assembly is the only Bridge to College partner with consistent access to reliable metrics. They have data from the Department of Education and National Student Clearinghouse, a federal student tracking database. (See “Urban Assembly’s Experiment with Summer Bridge,” on opposite page.)

Chajet is unsure how feasible the program would be at large high schools, since it’s only been tried at small ones. “Large schools could do the same, but it would take more money and more staff,” Chajet says. “At this point most of the schools in New York City are small schools.”

At this point, the group is analyzing the results of a formal evaluation, courtesy of the Department of Education, which funded Bridge to College to hire CUNY’s Center for Advanced Studies in Education as an outside evaluator. “It will help us understand the different ways this program works and doesn’t, depending on the school population,” says Chajet. She notes, “I also think it will help the DOE and others to understand how complex this time period is.” ❀

Nonprofit College Access Partners: A Sampling of Approaches

In recent years, the city has made a major shift in its educational goals: Rather than simply pushing students to graduation, schools are expected to get them into college.

It's a demand that requires additional resources and new approaches—especially for students not traditionally on the college track. While public schools in some communities have invested in college preparation programs, most struggle with limited or diminishing resources, staffing and knowledge to support more than the top academic tier of college-ready students.

Increasingly, universities and community-based organizations have stepped in to fill this large gap, partnering with schools, students and families who want access to higher education but have historically been left out of the process.

In 2011, a foundation-sponsored collaborative organization called GraduateNYC! identified 253 organizations providing a wide range of college readiness or access services, from taking students on college visits and helping them with applications to offering college-level classes on high school campuses. What follows is a sampling of common projects and approaches:

1. THE COLLEGEBOUND INITIATIVE (CBI) partnered with 15 NYC high schools in 2011–12, placing full-time college guidance experts in schools to work one-on-one with every student. Counselors coordinate college trips and fairs; provide 9th and 10th graders with college awareness workshops; connect students to school alumni who are enrolled in college; and help teachers incorporate college and career awareness into their classes. They assist students with registering and preparing for the PSAT and SAT exams and provide financial aid counseling and assistance for students and parents, including individual help with college selection, interviewing skills and essays. Counselors help manage students' application processes and advocate on behalf of students via direct communication to admissions officers.

2. THERE ARE SEVERAL PROGRAMS THAT TRAIN VOLUNTEERS, either as mentors or to provide extra support in schools. One good example is **iMentor**, which partners with 15 NYC public high schools to support more than 1,900 mentorship pairs. Mentees and mentors exchange emails each week and meet in person at least once per month. iMentor's partner schools make space in the class schedule to accommodate the "iMentor Session" and ensure students have email accounts and access to computers so they can maintain regular communications with their mentors.

The goals and structure of the mentor relationship varies from school to school, sometimes focusing specifically on the college process but also internship experiences, retention in school, developing English language skills or personal decision-making. Mentor relationships can last from one to four years, depending upon the school and can bridge the transition from high school into college. In 2011–2012, iMentor supported 1800 pairs of students and mentors at a cost of \$1000 per pair.

3. COLLEGE SUMMIT works with schools to develop post-secondary planning structures, including a for-credit College Summit class with a pre-set curriculum and online tools to help both teachers and students manage college applications. Peer leadership is central to the program—College Summit trains student leaders to help build a college-going culture in their schools. Each school sends a group of rising seniors to attend a four-day workshop on a nearby college campus where they get a head start on college applications, meeting one-on-one with a guidance counselor, writing personal essays and learning the basics of financial aid. The goal is that these students will return to their schools and spread their enthusiasm to their peers. College Summit offered programs in 31 NYC schools during the 2011–12 school year, reaching 5,000 students. The cost of the school-based program to each school is about \$10,000, while additional costs are paid by the partnering colleges and universities, along with volunteer services.

4. THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION provides a major source of support for students seeking access to higher education through its **TRIO Program**, a menu of eight grants targeting students from disadvantaged backgrounds. There are currently 28 projects funded in New York City, providing direct services to almost 10,000 students. The programs primarily operate through colleges and universities, but many students also receive services through nonprofits such as ASPIRA, Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation, University Settlement and Boys & Girls Harbor, Inc. The two largest grant programs, Talent Search and Upward Bound, are designed to meet the needs of students who are traditionally underrepresented in post-secondary education, especially those who are limited English proficient, have disabilities, live in transitional housing or are in foster care or aging out of the foster care system.

Through **Talent Search**, colleges and nonprofit organizations provide academic, financial and career counseling, including advice on entry or reentry to secondary or post-secondary programs. They also offer visits to college campuses, assistance in completing admissions and financial aid applications and help preparing for college entrance exams, as well as workshops for participants' families. Talent Search funds 12 projects with 8,784 participants, at an average cost of \$431 per participant.

Upward Bound projects provide academic instruction in mathematics, laboratory sciences, composition, literature, and foreign languages, in addition to tutoring, counseling, mentoring, cultural enrichment, work-study programs and services designed to improve the financial and economic literacy of students. Upward Bound funds 16 projects with 1,123 participants, at an average cost of \$5,085 per participant.

5. LIBERTY PARTNERSHIPS is a New York State initiative with 39 programs across the state, including 14 in New York City. Services are offered in schools, on college campuses and at community-based organizations, with the goal of helping students in grades 5–12 graduate from high school and enter college and the workforce. While the program specifics vary, the basic design includes academic skills development through special classes and tutorial services; mentoring; educational, personal and family counseling; and career and college exploration activities. The program serves approximately 4,000 NYC students at a cost of about \$1,200 per student.

6. COLLEGE FOR EVERY STUDENT (CFES) helps students in 18 New York City high schools take steps toward college through a combination of mentor relationships, partnerships with colleges and a student leadership program. CFES scholars visit college campuses, interact with college students and faculty, and gain exposure to admissions and financial aid processes. Local mentoring relationships are developed with local business organizations or corporations to support academic and personal growth, and to give students someone outside of school and family they can turn to for advice. Participants also engage in service activities, with the goal of building their leadership potential. The cost per participant is \$250.

7. SETTLEMENT HOUSES AND COMMUNITY CENTERS provide a range of academic support and college preparation services to their local service populations. **Kingsbridge Community Center**, in the Bronx, offers a College Directions Program to help local high school students and adults through the application process, including one-on-one guidance to complete college and financial aid applications. The **Grand Street Settlement** offers a number of programs geared to help students finish high school and gain access to college or good jobs. In Manhattan, for example, the College and Career Discovery Program works with two local high schools to offer individual college counseling, campus visits, application and financial aid workshops and SAT prep classes. **South Asian Youth Action**, based in Elmhurst, Queens, has both school-based and off-campus programs to help guide students through high school and into college and careers, including SAT and exam high school prep courses offered in partnership with professional testing companies. Through group workshops and individual counseling sessions, **Chalo College!** helps students choose colleges, prepare applications, develop personal statements and apply for financial aid.

8. LIFE LINK, provided by Good Shepherd Services, offers practical counseling and peer support to help young people from the Bronx and Brooklyn to enter and succeed in college. About 85 percent of the students in the program come from Good Shepherd collaborative high schools, transfer schools and Young Adult Borough Centers (YABCs). Students attending Bronx Community College and New York Technical College have dedicated, on-site staff members to provide personal support, including mentoring and counseling; help with admissions, registration and financial aid; assist in negotiating issues with professors; help with homework; arrange for tutoring; and support students to find jobs.

9. SUMMER SEARCH takes a multifaceted approach to college readiness, offering low-income students rich summer experiences, mentoring, college advisement and post-secondary resources. Working with 18 NYC high schools, Summer Search provides groups of students in their sophomore year with fully paid opportunities to participate in experiential summer learning programs—from wilderness expeditions and academic enrichment on college campuses to community service programs in the United States or abroad. In their junior year they receive mentoring support, helping them to keep focused on school and to begin exploring college options. After a second summer spent out of the city, they receive individualized college and financial aid advising throughout the college application process.

10. BOTTOM LINE works with low-income and first-generation-to-college students who are in good academic standing (an 80 GPA or higher), to get to and through college. Working in 14 NYC public schools and CUNY and private colleges, Bottom Line provides one-on-one guidance and mentoring throughout the application process to help students gain access to college. There is also a strong focus on retention and success, and Bottom Line provides support for students throughout college. The Access Program starts working with students in their junior or senior year and helps them navigate the college application process, from developing their initial list of colleges, through the application process to reviewing college acceptances and financial aid packages. The focus of the individualized advisement and counseling is on finding the most suitable college for the student's interests and skills, and where they can be successful. More than half of the Bottom Line students continue to receive up to six years of support through College Success Program. Beginning with summer transition programs, the college support focuses on academic, financial, career, and personal challenges—the main causes of students leaving school. As students work toward their degrees, Bottom Line serves as their financial aid advocate, academic advisor, career counselor, and mentor. As a result, Bottom Line reports that 80 percent of their students have completed their bachelor degree program within six years. ✱

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“The school that relies on one person to be the fountain of knowledge about all of this is going to run that person into the ground,” says Julian Cohen, DOE director of postsecondary planning and pathways. “It can’t happen that way.”

SHARING THE WORK

But “distributing” college guidance work without the help of a full-time college counselor is no easy task. Even small schools with long traditions of staff collaboration can have a hard time keeping up with the demands—particularly in the face of budget cuts.

The Pan American International High School (PAIHS) in Elmhurst, Queens, exemplifies the distributed guidance approach that the DOE admires. At PAIHS, part of a network of schools for new immigrants, teachers and the guidance counselor share the work of college advising. They work together as a team to help students navigate the complicated process of filling out applications and financial aid forms, and gathering recommendation letters and residency documents. A nonprofit organization, Make the Road New York, provides additional college guidance. (See “Making the Road to College,” page 61, for a profile of this partnership.)

However, budget cuts and new administrative demands have reduced the amount of time teachers and advisors can spend on college planning with students, families, and each other, says Claire Sylvan, executive director of the Internationals Network for Public Schools, of which PAIHS is a member. In the past, teams of four teachers and one guidance counselor served 75 students. But this is a luxury that schools may no longer be able to afford.

PAIHS, which admits students who have been in the United States for less than four years and who have limited knowledge of English, has a difficult time getting students to graduate—much less prepare them for college. Nonetheless, the school has added more college preparatory courses, including Advanced Placement U.S. History and Algebra II/Trigonometry, in response to DOE pressure to offer a more demanding curriculum. But the new courses and administrative demands have whittled away at both teacher and guidance counselor time. As a result, the staff has had to reduce the amount of time they can spend with students on college planning. The school no longer offers a twice-weekly “advisory” period for juniors, which had been a critical part of the college application process in the past. There is also less time for teachers to meet with the guidance counselor, Lauren Maggiacomo, to talk about student college plans. Maggiacomo said she used to meet weekly with teachers; now they are “lucky” to meet once a month.

The good news is that the students themselves seem to be taking the prospect of college more seriously, Maggiacomo said. But because

she is a guidance counselor—not just a college counselor—she has multiple demands on her time. This year, for example, she needed to counsel a number of students who discovered they were pregnant.

She also gets queries from recent graduates who are in college and need help with FAFSA, the federal government’s financial aid application form. “Just in January, I logged 17 or 18 phone calls saying, ‘Help me with my FAFSA!’” Maggiacomo said. In the meantime, her PAIHS-Elmhurst seniors had to wait for their own FAFSA help. All of it becomes a blur, even for an experienced professional like Maggiacomo who has help from teachers and nonprofit partners.

“My perspective—and I see it up close—is that the students are progressing tremendously,” she says. “But the city may look at it differently. It’s just slow.”

MONITORING QUALITY

How does the city monitor and improve college guidance? It’s a tough task, partly because college guidance differs radically from school to school.

A 2011 survey of guidance counselors by the Center for New York City Affairs illustrates this variation, even among schools serving students with similar family incomes and academic backgrounds. Eight counselors were interviewed as part of the College Ready Communities project, which included schools ranging in size from 300 to nearly 3,000 students.

Guidance counselors reported that they spent anywhere from 10 percent to 100 percent of their time on college counseling. All said they helped students with college applications and filling out the federal FAFSA financial aid form. But few could help with more time-consuming items, like college essays, resumes and scholarships, or dealing with the important last-minute details of actually matriculating to college. When asked for recommendations to policymakers, four of the eight counselors said schools should have a full-time position for college counseling. Among the four remaining counselors, two said that teachers and other staff need to assist guidance counselors with college admissions.

Center researchers also observed that the College Ready Communities schools were usually thinly staffed and heavily reliant on outside nonprofit help. Over the three years we observed these schools, we saw several occasions where applications of an entire senior class were put at risk when a guidance counselor left on maternity leave or when there was a major change in school leadership. Even though nonprofit partners and other school staff stepped into the breach, there was a remarkable degree of instability in college guidance in many of these schools.

Few see this phenomenon more vividly than those who participate in the school volunteer programs. Carla Shere, a former college-planning specialist for the school volunteer group Learning Leaders, spent the winter of 2011 serving as a part-time college counselor after the school lost its full-time guidance counselor. The school relied on Shere to fill the gap despite the fact that she couldn't be there anywhere near full time. "They hired me for just one day a week."

Shere said she saw similar problems citywide as she tried to help schools get volunteer college counseling. Many times, there was no one in the guidance office to take her calls," she said. "The job has been given to an English teacher in the school." (Sandra Salmans, one of this report's authors, had a similar experience working as a college counselor for another well-regarded citywide volunteer organization.)

Shere questions Walcott's stated ambitions to make college a reality for the city's students. To her, it feels like the Department of Education is abdicating its responsibility by leaving college guidance exclusively in the hands of the schools, which in turn, can opt to leave the work in the hands of volunteers, if they choose. "I just don't see how that's evidence for pushing college for all students."

At the Department of Education, officials say they have no choice but to leave this to the school leaders, given the city's tight budget situation. It would be impossible to accurately monitor the quality of college guidance among the hundreds of city high schools, says

Josh Thomases, the education department's deputy chief academic officer for instruction. What the city *can* do is monitor what percentage of students graduate and enroll in college within six months or eighteen months. These are two numbers the DOE uses in calculating a school's college and career readiness A through F grade. Schools that do a good job with college guidance and in fostering a college culture among teachers and students should see better college matriculation numbers over time, Thomases says.

To help schools improve their college services, the city is paying for high-quality college counseling training provided by the Goddard Riverside Community Center's Options Institute. The education department launched the program three years ago with the goal of getting at least one Goddard-trained adult into every high school. The program has been going well and the department has upped the goal to providing Goddard-trained assistance—whether it is in the form of guidance counselors, teachers, and coaches or outside nonprofit help—for every 35 seniors.

"Schools are now accountable for whether or not their students *actually* attend college," and that is a major step forward, Thomases says. Better matriculation numbers mean that students were urged to attend and got the help they needed with applications and financial aid forms. "It is essentially a proxy for guidance. They actually got some support to attend," he says. "What we've done is to say: You are accountable for a set of outcomes. And you've got the discretion over your budget to do it." ✱

Start the Conversation Early

Ninth graders begin to struggle with the idea of going to college in a Student Success Center workshop.

It's a Friday just before lunch and 15 ninth-grade students sit at desks facing Deshaun Houston, a college counselor at Cypress Hills Collegiate Prep, and Shevanna Cole, a 12th-grade student youth leader at the front of the room.

They're here for "Mythbusters," a workshop sponsored by the school's Student Success Center with the aim of getting students to start thinking about college long before their applications are due.

For many of the students at Cypress Hills, the idea of college is not something they've talked or thought about much. It's still a somewhat abstract notion in a community where many of the residents are foreign-born and only 8 percent of the adults have completed college.

The main activity of the morning is called "Agree or Disagree." Houston and Cole read out a series of statements related to college,

and the students have to indicate whether they agree or disagree by moving to one side of the room or the other. (The "unsure" stand in the middle.) "There are not many people to talk with about college," Houston reads aloud. Most students linger, unsure, in the middle of the room before everyone eventually disagrees. A few students affirm that there are lots of people to speak with, "and there's the [Student Success] Center downstairs," one points out.

"We want to start the conversation from where they are about college and what they understand, and build on that," Cole says later. "They know about college, but they don't know about what they need to do to get there and be successful," Houston adds. "That's our job to give them that information and help them work through the steps."

Some statements, such as "people who go to college make more money than people who don't," generate some discussion. While everyone agrees that you make more money if you go to college, students raise examples of people who don't go to college but are successful. Houston tells them that college graduates will make a million dollars more in their lifetime.

The next statements about paying for college, eligibility for undocumented immigrants and SAT test scores turn the mood in

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KEY PRINCIPLES FOR CREATING A COLLEGE-GOING CULTURE IN SCHOOLS

The New York City Department of Education is pressing schools to develop a “college culture,” in which the entire staff is enlisted to promote college and help students understand what it takes, academically and personally, to get to college and succeed. But the term is vague. What specifically do schools need to do so students and their families understand the possibility of college and how to best to prepare? Patricia McDonough, a professor at the University of California in Los Angeles, has created a popular checklist of “critical principles” for school staff to follow. The takeaway? It’s a lot of work, but schools need to step up and offer college help when families cannot.

CRITICAL PRINCIPLE	DEFINITION	WHAT SCHOOLS CAN DO
COLLEGE TALK	Ongoing communication about college so students and families know that it is possible—and understand what’s needed to prepare.	Promote college conversation with teachers and in newsletters and emails to parents; form college clubs; hold essay contests based on college application questions.
CLEAR EXPECTATIONS	Explicit goals around college preparation that are communicated consistently.	Have frequent talks with students about college options; share four-year academic plans; set college prep goals for each student.
INFORMATION & RESOURCES	Up-to-date college information and resources that are easily available to students, families, and school staff.	Provide college search books; SAT/ACT prep; financial aid training; workshops on college admissions and financial planning.
COMPREHENSIVE COLLEGE COUNSELING	All counselors serve as college counselors and all conversations are potentially college advising opportunities.	Train HS counselors in college admissions, including having them attend conferences; train and update school staff on college demands.
TESTING & CURRICULUM	Students must understand the importance of “gatekeeping” tests and courses—and be given the opportunity to take them.	Provide early counseling on the importance of GPA and doing well on gateway tests; make college prep and college-level classes available.
STAFF INVOLVEMENT	Teachers and faculty must partner with counselors to provide high-quality college information and preparation.	Encourage college talk during class; have teachers use expertise to provide training on parts of the college application; communicate importance of grades and tests.
FAMILY INVOLVEMENT	Family members must be given opportunities to learn about college and their role in supporting students.	Provide evening/weekend workshops on college prep, financial planning, FAFSA; help parents understand their kids are “college material.”
COLLEGE PARTNERSHIPS	Schools should actively link to colleges and provide trips, college fairs, and academic enrichment programs.	Ensure students at all grade levels visit college campuses and get access to college speakers and early college programs.
ARTICULATION	Students get college talk and information seamlessly from elementary school through high school graduation.	Ensure students hear a consistent message about college at all grade levels K–12; counselors in schools coordinate their message on academic preparation.

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the room more serious, and it doesn’t feel like they are playing a game anymore. One young man says he knows the SAT is some kind of test and asks what kind of score he would need to get into an Ivy League school. On other questions, only a few students can express the reasoning behind their choices. Some switch sides after hearing another student’s response. But regardless of which side of the room they end up on—agree or disagree—they seem unsure. At this point in the workshop, Houston and Cole are doing most of the talking.

At the end of the session, Houston invites students to come down to the Student Success Center during their lunch periods or after school. “You don’t have to wait until 12th grade,” he tells them. One student shoots her arm up to ask if she can come today. For most of the other students, connecting this new knowledge to their own lives will probably wait until sometime in the future. ✱

CASE STUDY

Making the Road to College at the Pan-American International High School in Elmhurst

New immigrant students with ambitions to go to college face huge hurdles. Community help can make a big difference for the kids—and their parents.

In many respects, the story of Almira P. and her mother Clara can be considered a classic tale of immigrant success. Almira was 13 years old in 2007 when she came to New York from Ecuador, escorted by a hired coyote to join her mother, who had arrived four years before. Almira remembers that the journey was long and arduous, but, as she says in competent English, she prefers to focus on the present—like dancing in her school’s annual talent show each May—and on the future. Clara is proud of her daughter and shares the girl’s dream that Almira will go to college. That would justify all her sacrifices: long hours of work at two jobs, years in New York without Almira, continued separation from her other children.

But from a different perspective, theirs is a depressingly familiar tale of failure. Almira was scheduled to graduate from high school in 2011, but, like many of her foreign-born fellow students, she missed her graduation date because she did not pass her English Regents. She has another chance to take the exam this year but, even if she passes, it’s virtually certain that she’ll still need to take, and pay for, remediation in college before she can take classes for credit. And in any event, both mother and daughter are undocumented, so their options, particularly for financial aid, are especially limited.

Although every student and parent’s story is different, in many ways what is happening to Almira and her mother is emblematic of the experience of Latino immigrant families grappling with the opportunities and obstacles of the education system of their new country. Children typically make a relatively quick transition, while their parents are held back by language and long working hours. College—the ticket to a good job and a better life—is the universal goal. Yet it is an increasingly remote one as students head toward graduation; neither they nor their parents, who may have only completed high school, have any idea how to get into college or, if they succeed, what it will involve.

It was to address precisely such problems that Pan American International High School (PAIHS) was founded in 2007, occupying one floor in a renovated industrial building in Elmhurst, Queens. The school is one of two PAIHS

establishments—there is another in the South Bronx—and also operates under the aegis of the Internationals Network for Public Schools, a support organization for 14 New York City schools designed specifically for students who have been in the country for fewer than four years and learning English.

TAKING A DIFFERENT APPROACH

Because Spanish is the first—and for many, initially, the only—language of its students, PAIHS takes a different approach from the typical New York City school to teaching English. Rather than offer English as a Second Language classes that are segregated from the other courses, the school blends English into the curriculum of all its classes, including history, science and math.

But getting students on track for college presents a major challenge. Like other public schools in New York, PAIHS’s resources have been stretched to the breaking point. Lauren Maggiamo balances college counseling with a variety of duties that change every year, including scheduling the students, running the school’s internship program and teaching. “Every school needs a separate college advisor,” says Maggiamo, who estimates that, given her other responsibilities, she can devote only 40 percent of her time to college counseling. “And that’s only because I prioritize it and let other things go undone.”

In order to bolster its capacity, the school partners with a nonprofit agency called Make the Road New York (MRNY). Historically, MRNY has been primarily an advocacy organization focusing on its Latino constituency and working for social justice in areas from housing and civil rights to the workplace and schools. Recently, however, the organization has become increasingly service-oriented. For MRNY, getting young immigrants into college became another means of ensuring the delivery of social justice.

MRNY’s task is to get more students into higher education by tackling areas such as college applications, testing and financial aid. At PAIHS, that means dealing with families on a number of issues that aren’t even on the radar at many high schools. According to

¹ Names and some other characteristics have been changed to protect privacy.

school data, almost three-quarters of the students at PAIHS come from families with incomes below the poverty line. Many parents look forward to the day their children can get jobs and contribute to the household income, an expectation that many of the children themselves share. In addition, many of these families have been separated for years as parents left for the United States first, leaving their children behind with grandparents and other relatives; there may thus be a reluctance to let the family splinter again by allowing a child to go away to college.

GETTING UNDOCUMENTED PARENTS INVOLVED

In addition, it can be difficult for immigrant parents to understand where their children are in the system, in terms of both how they are doing in high school and how to get into—and stay in—college. For many parents, the college process is one of the most alien aspects of what is often a very alien country. In the first year of PAIHS, says its founding principal, Marcella Barros, “We surveyed the parents. We found that college wasn’t something that was talked about at home. It wasn’t discussed.” There is a widespread belief that college is simply beyond their financial means. For many, that may be true: Some 60 percent of the students at PAIHS are undocumented, which puts off limits government financial aid and many scholarships as well as more basic goals like getting a job. There are also popular misconceptions that students cannot go to college if they—or their parents—are undocumented, don’t have a Social Security number and don’t pay income taxes.

Since many parents work long hours, PAIHS has developed nontraditional strategies to get them involved. Parents are invited to evening and weekend classes in the building to learn English and computer literacy. The ESOL classes draw between a half dozen and a dozen parents, the computer class attracts more and both are a good way of creating a captive audience for PAIHS’s college message. Juana Adama, PAIHS’s parent coordinator, sometimes shows up at the school on Saturday in order to talk to parents whom she’s been unable to reach during the week.

There is no question that the goal is to launch the students into a world that, as far as many parents know, could be in another galaxy. The PAIHS-MRNY partnership implemented an 11th grade internship program, which helps prepare juniors for life after high school by getting them part-time positions in community businesses or nonprofit organizations. In addition to learning how to conduct themselves in the work world and practicing their English, they acquire job-application skills such as crafting a resume and presenting themselves well in job interviews. As seniors, they attend college seminars in which they learn how to research colleges, draw up a list of schools to which they may apply, write

a personal statement and prepare for the SAT. Through LYHEP (Latino Youth for Higher Education Program), a program created by immigrant Latino students who had an interest in improving quality education for low-income students, about five college students volunteer 10 to 15 hours a week, organizing book groups, providing tutoring and mentorship and running college and career fairs. “Outside resources are so important to starting to create a college-going culture in our school,” says Barros.

GUIDING PARENTS THROUGH A STRANGE NEW WORLD

The lynchpin for most of these efforts is Sonia Sendoya, a 25-year-old from Colombia who runs MRNY’s programming at the school. Although she technically is not part of PAIHS, for many of the parents, Sonia, quite simply, *is* PAIHS—an ever-present guide who ushers them through this strange new world. Many parents don’t realize that she isn’t on the staff of the school or that her chief mission is to work with them and their children on college readiness.

Sendoya, for her part, says that working on college readiness with the juniors and seniors at PAIHS has shown her how easy it is for new immigrants to fall through the cracks in the public school system. Some of the seniors who applied to college were not even aware that they were undocumented until they had to ask their parents for their Social Security number. Another barrier that often seems insurmountable is getting complete transcripts for the recent arrivals. Students who began high school in other countries may be able to show colleges only their 10th and 11th grade results, since the cost of getting transcripts, at \$100 to \$200 apiece, is prohibitively high. Many of the students who seemed to be doing well turned in disappointing performances on the Regents exams, particularly in English and U.S. History. Then SAT results started coming in, and students were scoring as low as 200 on individual tests, a formidable barrier to admission at some colleges. As a result, in the last year, PAIHS has had to do a lot of remediation, support and test preparation to prop up its graduation rate and its pool of potential college applicants.

And for seniors, particularly in their last semester, Sendoya has become both the students’ and parents’ main resource for understanding a financial aid system that can be impenetrable even for native English speakers. She helps students who are here legally apply for FAFSA and TAP grants; she often accompanies the many who are not and their parents to colleges to work out financial aid payment plans and to seek answers to any questions they may have. Thanks to her efforts, two undocumented students who graduated in June 2011 got full scholarships to private schools through COIN (Civic Opportunities Initiative Network), a community-based organization under the New World Foundation that provides gap funding.

Sendoya's efforts on behalf of Almira illustrate how much MRNY does to support both students and their parents, often against formidable odds. Last year, Almira began working with Sendoya to establish legal residence, or at least to get the paperwork that would allow her to study legally in the United States on a student visa. Sendoya also took Almira to LaGuardia College to discuss procuring an affidavit that would allow her to pay in-state tuition, and creating a payment plan under which she would pay the \$4,000 annual tuition in monthly installments. When Almira failed her English Regents, she had to put her applications on hold and prepare to take the exam again. At first, Sendoya says, Almira was sticking to her plan—attending a test prep class at PAIHS in the morning and pursuing a certificate for doing manicures and pedicures in the afternoon. But after a few months her attendance fell off, and no one at the school has seen her since last fall. "It makes me really sad," says Sendoya. "She worked really, really hard, and all that's standing in her way is that one exam. It really discouraged her."

How well PAIHS and MRNY are succeeding at their shared mission is hard to say. Out of its first class of 66 seniors, 35

graduated in June 2011, a rate that is slightly below the citywide average but seems respectable when one considers that all these youngsters arrived in the United States less than four years earlier. (According to the Department of Education, the average rate for graduation in 2010 was 60.1 percent, with 58 percent for Latinos.) Of those who graduated from PAIHS, 30 were reported to be continuing their education, mostly at two-year colleges that are part of the CUNY system, and two more have placed their CUNY acceptances on hold for a semester while they work. But such numbers are written in water. The college dropout rate is anyone's guess, particularly given the need for remediation and the lack of financial aid for students who are undocumented. Still, other measures are unequivocally impressive: The school's attendance rate tops 90 percent, compared to an average of 86 percent for New York City high schools. ✱

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This article was reported and written in 2011. Sonia Sendoya left PAIHS last year to pursue a master's degree in social work. She was replaced by Natalia Lopez, who filled the position part time. We were not able to get an update on Almira P.*

Taking a Look at Tele (continued from page 44)

The summer before Terry came into the job as college advisor two years ago, she and Boulay, who had already been in the college office for a number of years, went on a road trip together, visiting 15 colleges along the way.

"It was kind of a passing of the baton process," Terry says. She contrasts this with many newer, small high schools, explaining, "When I go to a conference and meet people from new schools and they don't have a profile or a reputation of a system, that's hard. We have an established system so we don't have to reinvent the wheel. I can't imagine being a school that doesn't have that."

Boulay and Terry understand the complicated and diverse needs of their sizeable student body. "The college admissions process is hard. Kids have to lay it all on the line. They have to be upfront about things like money and citizenship. It's all very emotional. So we do that too," Terry says. We lay it all on the line for our students." ✱

Stepping into the Breach (continued from page 52)

While the target audience was students and families, who turned out in impressive numbers, school counselors would also benefit.

There is general agreement that the nonprofits provide an essential service to city students. Still, Soonachan believes that the Department of Education—or some other organization—should help schools learn to better work with CBOs.

Some CBOs agree with a caveat: "Of course, we feel there should be more expertise within the schools, and we want to support that," says Lily Morgan Owen of the Goddard Riverside Community Center. "Still, we would never let go of our community-based approach, for the reason that it just offers a deeper, richer experience than the schools can provide, at least the way they're structured now." ✱

SOURCES AND RESOURCES

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CHILD WELFARE WATCH, Volume 22
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New York City has transformed its treatment of children and young adults who get in trouble with the law, reducing the number of kids it sends to juvenile lockups by two-thirds and investing in a system of alternative programs. For older teens and young adults, criminal justice agencies have launched services designed to get probationers and parolees connected to community-based supports. The goal is to move young people out of the criminal justice system more quickly, divert them away from jails and prisons and keep communities whole. Child Welfare Watch considers the progress of reforms, the places where they’ve been stymied, and the impact on communities that have long been destabilized by cycles of crime, police scrutiny, arrest and incarceration. Published January 2013.

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

More students than ever before are graduating high school in New York City. More high school students have access to college-level and college-preparatory classes, and many more are applying to, and attending, college. These are trends New York City can be proud of. Yet college completion rates for the city's public high school graduates remain low—and living-wage jobs are increasingly hard to find for students lacking some kind of college credential. More than ever, college matters. But increasing the number of students successfully completing a college degree has been an elusive goal for policymakers.

This report examines the latest efforts to improve college access and preparation in New York City public schools and sheds new light on the complicated circumstances that allow some students to go to college and succeed—and so many others to fail. Center researchers spent the past four years in 12 low-income high schools and two middle schools, serving as evaluators for a foundation-funded initiative called College Ready Communities. We detail the hard lessons learned from the initiative and other projects citywide. And we present advice gleaned from dozens of educators and college experts on how New York City can improve college knowledge, readiness and guidance with this generation of high school students and those who follow.

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