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CUNY Trustees Vote to End Remedial Classes

Alisa Solomon

CUNY Graduate Center

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CUNY Trustees Vote to End Remedial Courses

In a decision that threatens to slam closed the door on thousands of CUNY undergraduates, the University's Board of Trustees voted on May 26 to eliminate remedial courses at the system's eleven senior colleges. For people interested in CLAGS — which is not involved in remedial education and is based at the Graduate Center — the new policy may not seem momentous, relevant, or even objectionable. Nonetheless, it has far-reaching political, economic, and practical implications for CLAGS. What's more, as hundreds of CUNY faculty, students, and community groups testified at public hearings over the last several months, it's a pedagogically and morally indefensible policy that CLAGS, as a vibrant part of the CUNY family, opposes.

The new rule prevents freshmen and transfer students from enrolling in a four-year college unless they have achieved a minimum score on a series of placement tests in math, writing, and reading. While this may sound eminently reasonable, it fails to take into consideration the realities of CUNY students' lives and backgrounds or the pedagogical expertise of those who teach remedial courses. To give just one of numerous examples of why this policy makes no

practical sense: A high proportion of CUNY undergraduates are returning adults, quite well-prepared to do college-level work in, say, humanities courses, but in need of brushing up their math skills to pass the test. (Do you remember your high school geometry?) Until the vote on May 26, a student like that would be able to enroll in upper-level literature and history courses while taking a remedial math class. Now that student will have to enroll at a community college for a semester to take a single course, then endure a cumbersome bureaucratic procedure to apply to transfer, thereby delaying the beginning of his/her college work by at least a semester. Life-threatening disaster? Of course not. But there's no reason for it. What's worse, studies have shown that students succeed better in remedial courses while they are also engaged in higher level work for which they are prepared. Worst of all, perhaps, the community colleges are already over-crowded and understaffed. There is no room in them for the 13,000 entering students likely to be barred — according to CUNY estimates — when the policy goes into effect in 1999.

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Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies

ROCKEFELLER RESIDENCY FELLOWSHIPS IN THE HUMANITIES

Citizenship and Sexualities: Transcultural Constructions fosters explorations of the relationship between citizenship and sexuality within the broader range of social settings that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people inhabit. The 1999-2000 program will focus on this relationship within national contexts.

CLAGS Residency Fellowships are open to all academic or independent scholars in any discipline who have shown genuine commitment to gay/lesbian/queer studies. Unaffiliated scholars and junior faculty are encouraged to apply. Fellows receive \$30,000 and up to \$2,000 for travel/relocation expenses. Applications must be received in the CLAGS office by February 15, 1999.

For more information and application materials, please contact:

The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies

33 West 42nd Street, Room 404N

New York, NY 10036

(212) 642-2924

clags@broadway.gc.cuny.edu

CUNY Trustees Vote to End Remedial Classes

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Nonetheless, under intense political pressure from Mayor Giuliani and Governor Pataki, and under the cover of an overheated rhetoric charging that CUNY bachelors degrees have "lost their value," the Trustees have effectively blocked from entry more than one-third of the students seeking BA degrees. They failed to mention in their attacks that students do not get credit for remedial courses — though they pay for them — and that students who begin with remedial courses graduate at the same rates as students who do not need them. They also neglected to mention evidence from several studies — including an independent research project commissioned by the Board of Trustees itself — that remediation works. In speaking against the policy shortly before the vote, Trustee Jim Murphy cogently summed up its dangers. "This is radical surgery on the mission and role of City University and of New York City," he warned, "the first step in a plot to downsize and marginalize this public university." Indeed, the conservative, anti-tax organizations that have been gunning for the elimination of remedial courses — The Manhattan Institute and CHANGE-NY/ Empire Foundation, to name two — are already on record calling for huge reductions in expenditures for CUNY. The Manhattan Institute's Heather MacDonald has written that the University should be cut in half — never mind its historical role as the only avenue of access for poor, working-class, and new New Yorkers.

All this affects CLAGS in direct and troubling ways. First, in practical terms, a reduced CUNY means a drastically reduced CUNY budget from both state and city coffers. Though CLAGS isn't entirely funded by CUNY, we do get office space and release time for our Executive Director, among other forms of in-kind support. These are typically the first things to go in a budget squeeze. Second, many of the graduate students who are drawn to CUNY by CLAGS and by opportunities for lesbian and gay studies, get their first cracks at teaching as adjuncts in the CUNY colleges. These positions give them the teaching experience they need as well as helping them pay for their own studies. In a downsized university, these positions will surely be lost — and so, as a result, will these students. Full-time faculty lines are also likely to be cut if the student body is nearly halved; out and active lesbian and gay professors at the senior colleges — and certainly those pursuing lesbian and gay scholarship — are often among the most recently hired, so they would be the first to be lost.

More philosophically, but no less alarming, the attack on CUNY has taken place in a context of demonization of

CUNY students: the tabloid press and the Mayor have depicted our students as remedial recidivists — academic welfare queens — who siphon off resources while doing nothing but goofing around. Apart from being false — CUNY students are incredibly driven and hard-working — this discourse coincides uncomfortably with growing attacks on lesbian and gay studies around the country, which also rely on exaggerated images of foul and fiendish students and faculty. The assault on a conference on women's sexuality at SUNY-New Paltz last Fall, and a recent tirade in the *Wall Street Journal* about a queer studies conference at NYU, used the same tactics and language as the attacks on CUNY. Indeed, they are promulgated by the same organizations and individuals. CLAGS could easily be subjected to such sensationalized slanders — and in a climate in which CUNY is repeatedly, if falsely, discredited, we can expect little space in the public discourse to present ourselves honestly.

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Perhaps the image that ties CLAGS's concerns most closely to the revoking of opportunity and assistance to thousands of undergraduates is one evoked by Anne Paolucci, Chair of the CUNY Board of Trustees. "We are cleaning out the four-year colleges," she asserted in describing the new remedial policy. Such talk of cleansing should make every queer quake.

Alisa Solomon
CLAGS Board Member