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THE DECLINE IN CUNY APPLICATIONS: Who and How Come

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In the fall of 1976 applications for admission to the City University of New York (CUNY) had dropped sharply. In total number they were down by almost 13,000 from 1974, a drop of approximately 18%. Several hypotheses have been posited for the sharp decline in student applicants to the City University. Analysis of data drawn from the computer printouts of the City University's allocations indicates that the end of open admissions, for example, does not, in and of itself, explain the application drop. Similarly, the change in allocation formulas at CUNY seems not to explain the enrollment decline adequately. Finally, the imposition of tuition, or the perception about tuition, appears by no means the single most important factor in the enrollment drop. This paper attempts to determine the characteristics of the students not applying and to examine the reasons contributing to the sharp enrollment decline.

Key words: CUNY; admissions; applications; tuition; enrollment decline

INTRODUCTION

The City University of New York (CUNY) has, since the 1930s, offered quality public postsecondary education to thousands of New York City residents. Originally available through the four oldest senior colleges of the system, then through additional senior colleges, and increasingly through eighteen community colleges throughout New York, the City University has extended tuition-free education to as high as 92% of New York's high school graduating class. Its commitment to open access culminated in 1970 with the implementation of the "Open Admissions" program which guaranteed students, regardless of high school average, admission into CUNY.

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Accompanying this trend, CUNY's enrollment in remedial, compensatory and developmental courses rose threefold. Programs limited to minority students from low income brackets and requiring specific academic assistance (e.g., SEEK and College Discovery Programs) increased both in number of students and campuses at which they were available. The City University became a national model of both access into, and opportunity to succeed through, postsecondary education.

In the spring of 1976 the financial conditions of New York City became so strained that municipal support of CUNY's senior colleges was greatly curtailed. In order to raise the revenues required to operate the University, CUNY was forced to impose tuition on students. Students were informed, however, that through the state's tuition assistance program (TAP) they would receive some reimbursement (based on need) for tuition costs which they were now required to bear.

Despite combined revenues generated by tuition and city and state support, CUNY faced, in the late spring and summer of 1976, a greatly reduced budget. In response to limited funds, the central administration was forced to eliminate positions and curtail services at the senior colleges.[1] The decision resulted in major retrenchment within the senior colleges which, because of its impact on the academic viability and professional morale of these institutions, was greatly publicized in the media. The reduced size of the senior colleges also forced the administration to reinstate academic admission requirements for these schools (in order to limit enrollment) and to allocate students from the senior colleges to the less utilized community colleges.

THE PROBLEM

In the fall of 1976 applications for admission to CUNY had dropped sharply. In total number they were down by almost 13,000 from 1974, a drop of approximately 18%. Although the high school pool from which CUNY draws its students was also shrinking, the natural decline in number of potential attendants at CUNY was by no means large enough to explain the sudden drop in applications.[2]

Several hypotheses have been posited for the sharp decline in student applicants to CUNY. Some contend that the imposition of tuition was the cause. Others feel that the reinstatement of admission requirements potentially disqualified students from their first choice schools and they therefore decided to reject the system altogether. Similarly, others believe that students knew that the allocation system would force them into schools they did not want to attend and they therefore decided not to go to CUNY at all. Yet another group holds that the

media coverage so emphasized the low morale and uncertainty on the campuses that students decided not to apply.

This paper attempts to determine the characteristics of the 13,000 students not applying to CUNY and to examine the reasons contributing to the sharp enrollment decline. Were those who did not apply middle income students who, with the imposition of tuition, decided to spend their money at private institutions? Were they students from low income families who could not afford the tuition and were unaware of the assistance benefits available to them? Were they students who anticipated assignment to schools they did not want to attend and therefore decided against postsecondary education altogether?

The answers to these questions are extensive and complex. In order to draw some conclusions about what does account for the drop, it is necessary to examine the profile of the students who did not apply to CUNY.

METHOD

Several sources of data were used to examine the potential CUNY freshman class. A primary source was the computer printouts of CUNY's allocations.[3] The printouts were supplied by CUNY's Application Processing Center at the request of the Chancellor's Office of the Board of Education. These data grouped the allocations to CUNY colleges by the high schools the applicants had attended and presented distributions grouped according to the sex, high school average, high school percentile rank, and college preference of each high school senior. Information was available for the years 1974 and 1976.

Figures were also drawn from the 1974-1975 High School Profiles published by the Board of Education which provided ethnic and additional academic data. The additional academic variables were the per cent of students in the high school who read at two or more years below grade level and the percent of graduating seniors who apply to college. (These two intercorrelate highly, above .90.)

Analysis of the data was conducted in two phases. During the first phase a sample of 14 high schools were selected for review. The sample accounted for 13% of the drop in allocations.[4] The sample was selected to be representative of a variety of student populations, and included one school—Stuyvesant—in which the student body is selected on the basis of achievement. Schools were selected from all boroughs except Staten Island, and represented various ethnic and socioeconomic distributions. Several schools were predominantly white, one was predominantly black, and most were predominantly

black and hispanic. The schools also represented a variety of socioeconomic classes, ranging from poverty level to middle class. In most cases, the socioeconomic distribution of the school tended to follow ethnic lines.

The sample of fourteen schools was examined in terms of student allocation by college according to high school. In this examination only students' ethnicity and the academic variables derived from the High School Profiles were taken into consideration. During the second phase, the sample of schools was cut to eight.[5] The new, smaller sample was analyzed in terms of the available data on sex, academic average, school percentile ranking, and choice of college.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS OF THE FIRST PHASE ANALYSIS

In examining the figures on student allocations, four factors were evaluated: (1) The overall growth (or shrinkage) in number of high school students allocated to each of the CUNY schools from each of the sampled high schools. 1974 was used as a base year. (2) The trend over the 1974 to 1976 period of students attending college in their home borough versus students going to college outside of it. (3) The trend in the balance of students attending the community and senior colleges. (4) The balance over time between students attending evening versus day programs.

On the basis of these considerations, the following observations were made from the first-phase data:

1. With one exception, all schools in the sample had fewer students allocated to the CUNY colleges in 1976 than they had had in 1974. Even when the shrinking of the high school graduate pool is taken into account, all but three of the fourteen schools had fewer students allocated to CUNY institutions than would be predicted from the 1974 data.
2. No high school had more students allocated to the four year colleges in 1976 than it had had in 1974.
3. Seven schools, all of them predominantly black and hispanic, six of them in what was called the low academic group, had fewer students allocated to the community colleges as well. Of the remaining seven schools (which had the same number or more students allocated to the community colleges in 1976), six were in the high academic group and five were predominantly white (this included *all* of the predominantly white schools in the sample).
4. Three high schools sent more students to evening programs in 1976 than they did in 1974. Two of these were high academic and predominantly white (including Stuyvesant).
5. Four schools had more students allocated to out-of-borough colleges in

1976 than they had had in 1974. One of these, however, was Stuyvesant which is an anomaly since it draws students from a larger area than most other high schools. Of the remaining three, two were in the high academic group. The remaining ten schools, with a cross section of ethnic and socioeconomic distributions, had both in-borough and out-of-borough allocation declines.

6. All of the group identified as low academic high schools (which was comprised solely of predominantly black and hispanic schools) had fewer students allocated to all types of programs—two year, four year, and evening.
7. All three of the high schools with the *largest* overall drop in allocations were in the group identified as low academic. All three schools with the *smallest* overall drop in allocations were in the group identified as high academic.
8. The colleges which experienced the largest allocation drop were the four oldest senior colleges, one younger senior college in the Bronx and one community college in the Bronx. The colleges which tended to *gain* students from some of the high schools sampled were underutilized community colleges in Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens.
9. Overall, the total application drop was approximately 18%. The average application drop from the high schools sampled was approximately 20%.

What conclusions could be drawn from these findings? It appears that high academic high schools were sending more students to community colleges, and low academic high schools were sending fewer students to CUNY in general. However, since the two academic groupings were highly correlated with ethnicity, this trend may be a function of factors other than academic performance. Furthermore, while the findings suggested that students were moving out of the senior colleges and into two year schools, the move into the two year schools was not large enough to account for the total drop in the senior colleges.

Because of the questions that remained, the second phase of the analysis introduced data on the ethnicity, sex, high school average, and percentile ranking of each student allocated to a CUNY college, arrayed by the senior high school from which he or she graduated.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS OF THE SECOND-PHASE ANALYSIS

The second stage of the study uncovered findings that differed from the initial conclusions drawn.

The total second-phase sample dropped approximately 22% from 1974 to 1976, thus representing a greater decline than the initial sample. The data analyzed in the second phase are summarized in Table 1.

Interestingly, among all the high schools in the second-stage analysis,

TABLE 1. Summary of Phase Two

Group	2 Year gain/'74 base— % diff.	4 Year gain/'74 base— % diff.	Total gain/'74 base— % diff.	Var.
1	70/500—14	(483)/1296—(37)	(413)/1796—(23)	T
2	42/702—6	(405)/1048—(39)	(363)/1750—(21)	T
1&2	112/1202—9	(888)/2344—(38)	(776)/3546—(22)	T
1	86/225—38	(285)/737—(39)	(199)/962—(21)	m
2	(28)/326—(9)	(221)/492—(45)	(249)/818—(30)	m
1&2	58/551—11	(506)/1229—(41)	(448)/1780—(25)	m
1	(16)/275—(6)	(198)/559—(35)	(214)/834—(26)	f
2	70/376—19	(184)/556—(33)	(114)/932—(12)	f
1&2	54/651—8	(382)/1115—(34)	(328)/1766—(19)	f
1	0/43	(162)/883—(18)	(162)/926—(17)	80+
2	(30)/83—(36)	(92)/291—(32)	(122)/374—(33)	80+
1&2	(30)/126—(24)	(254)/1174—(22)	(284)/1300—(22)	80+
1	70/457—15	(321)/413—(78)	(251)/870—(29)	80–
2	72/619—12	(313)/757—(41)	(241)/1376—(18)	80–
1&2	142/1076—13	(634)/1170—(54)	(492)/2246—(22)	80–
1	88/102—86	(216)/807—(27)	(128)/909—(14)	+ 50%
2	79/167—47	(197)/683—(31)	(118)/805—(15)	+ 50%
1&2	167/269—62	(413)/1445—(29)	(246)/1714—(14)	+ 50%
1	(12)/398—(3)	(267)/489—(55)	(279)/887—(31)	–50%
2	(37)/535—(7)	(208)/410—(51)	(243)/945—(26)	–50%
1&2	(55)/933—(6)	(475)/899—(53)	(524)/1832—(29)	–50%
1	(160)/316—(51)	(371)/958—(39)	(531)/1274—(42)	#
2	(164)/439—(37)	(393)/840—(47)	(557)/1279—(44)	#
1&2	(324)/755—(43)	(764)/1798—(42)	(1088)/2533—(43)	#

Key: Groups:
1 = predominantly white = Forest Hills, Sheepshead Bay, Stuyvesant
2 = predominantly minority = Jackson, Stevenson, E. District, Franklin, Monroe

Variables:
T = total
m = males
f = females
80+ = GPA above 80%
80– = GPA below 80%
+ 50% = PR above 50
–50% = PR below 50
= students allocated to their # 1 choice college

Parentheses indicate loss.

31% fewer men were allocated to the CUNY schools than had been allocated to them in 1974. However, among women, there was an overall drop of only around 12%.

The most interesting single datum to emerge from the second phase of the study was that the overall application drop for students with averages below 80% (the group which would have been most affected by the end of open admissions) was identical to the allocation drop for students with averages above 80%. Yet, the overall application drop for students in the bottom half of their high school class (for the schools sampled) was roughly 30%, while the students in the top half declined by only about 14%. This suggests that, to the extent that academic achievement was a factor in allocation drop, it was as a function of within-school achievement and not as a function of the imposition of academic admission criteria.

In terms of the two academic variables, high school grade point average (GPA) and percentile ranking (PR), the minority students with averages above 80% are down in allocation to four year colleges by about 35%, while the white students with similar GPA's are down by only about a fifth. Allocations to the four year schools of white students with lower GPA's represented the largest drop in terms of absolute numbers. They are down by 78% from 1974, while minority applicants with similar averages sustained an allocation drop of only about 50%. Students in the high PR group (the top half of the class) dropped by about 30% overall in all allocations to senior colleges. Students in the low PR group dropped about 46% overall. In the low PR group, the rate was somewhat higher for minority students than it was for non-minorities, while in the high group, it was almost twice as high for white students as it was for minorities.

In terms of GPA, the high GPA group is slightly down in the community colleges. The number of students in this group however is small. Essentially, the white high GPA student allocations have remained constant, while the minority ones have dropped by about 20%. This suggests two things. First, that the high GPA minority group are leaving the system at all levels. Second, that the high GPA students who were part of the allocation drop in the senior colleges are either not going to the community colleges or are replacing other high GPA students in the two year schools. This confirms the trend which was noted above—achievement does not seem to be a factor in the allocation drop.

The low GPA group is increasing in the community colleges. This obviously is at least partly the result of the end of open admissions, and is somewhat more striking among white students than among minorities (up 15% versus up 12%).

Interestingly, while the community colleges seem to be getting a larger number of low GPA students, an increasingly large proportion of the two year schools' students come from the top half of their class. To some extent this may be seen as the effect of the PR criterion which was added to the community colleges' application requirements for the entering class of 1976. However, the drop in students from the bottom half of their high school class is not very large (about 6% overall). Instead, what is happening is that there is a striking increase in the allocation of students from the higher PR group—up by over 60%. This indicates that the system is receiving the academically advanced students from the lower academic high schools. The net result of this pattern on the level of student in the CUNY system however is unclear from the data available.

Another interesting finding emerges concerning the senior and community colleges. As was discerned from the first phase of the study, very different patterns emerge when the senior and community colleges are analyzed separately. Taking a look at the second stage data we see that the sharp drop in applications in the four year schools is more extensive among men than women. In general, men's applications to the four year schools are down by about 41% while total applications to those schools have dropped roughly 38%. Women's applications are down by about 35%, a proportion which varies little according to ethnicity. Among the men, however, there is a significant difference based on ethnicity. The white males are down by about 40% while the minority men have dropped by roughly 50%.

Among the two year schools there is a relatively modest increase of roughly 9%, not a drop. In absolute numbers however only about an eighth as many students are being added to the two year schools' allocations as are being dropped from the four year schools.

Fewer white women are being allocated to the community colleges, down by about 6%. Many fewer minority men are being allocated to the two year schools, down by about 13%. Coupled with the similar finding that the number of minority males are dropping at the senior colleges, a major source of the total allocation decline may be identified. In general, minority men are simply not applying to CUNY with the same frequency that they did two years ago.

Balancing this out is the fact that about 14% more minority women are allocated to the two year schools. As a result, the ethnic balance does not seem to be shifting significantly. But when sex is taken into account things look quite different—while the sample studied still has an overall balance in the two year schools of about 40% white students to 60% minority, the white students are becoming increasingly male, while the minority students are tending more and more to be women.

CONCLUSIONS

The second-phase results suggest that the initial conclusions drawn from the first phase were questionnable, if not inaccurate. High achieving students were not moving from the senior colleges to the community colleges in substantial numbers. Low achieving students were not being pushed out the bottom of the system. Instead, it seems that achievement has relatively little correlation with the application drop, and that what is happening is that minority males are leaving the system in large numbers, as are nonminority males and females. Apparently academic achievement had been masked by ethnicity in the first analysis. The second examination indicated that high achieving white students are leaving the system less than high achieving minorities and low achieving white students are leaving more than low achieving minorities.

What does this mean? The drop in allocations seems to be resulting from a significant decline in allocations to the four year schools—a drop which is so large that only about an eighth of it can be accounted for by the increase in the community college allocations. The people who are leaving the applicant pool tend to be white students who had previously applied to the four year colleges. Many of these are people who would still qualify for placement in a senior college. In addition, there is a marked drop in the allocation of minority males, at both the two and four year colleges.

The decline in allocations of minority males may well be a response to a feeling that college serves no function in terms of finding a job, or may be due to skepticism about the future of the CUNY system. It may also be due to misinformation about the availability of financial aid.

Part of the enrollment decline may be accounted for by the imposition of tuition. White students, who frequently are not eligible for financial aid, but whose averages are good enough to get them into private schools, may be going to institutions other than CUNY. This, however, accounts for only about a fifth of the allocation drop at the four year schools.

A more subjective examination of patterns in New York's private postsecondary institutions[6] seems to confirm the latter conclusions. In general, the private schools seem to be picking up some of the students who aren't going to CUNY. However, they don't seem to be experiencing increases which would account for all or anywhere near all of the missing CUNY students. Of particular interest is the fact that none of the private schools' increases follow the patterns which have become clear in the CUNY drop. Perhaps this suggests that the two

significant groups of students who failed to apply to CUNY—black males and white students who had previously gone to four year CUNY colleges—are together, for different reasons, going to private schools instead. Or, as previously noted, perhaps an increasingly large group of high school graduates who had once gone to college have suddenly decided to enter the job market.

Overall, then, one can conclude that the end of open admissions, for example, does not, in and of itself, seem to explain the application drop: the allocation figures show that the drop, expressed as a percent of the 1974 base, was almost identical for students with high school grades high enough to get them into a four year college and for students whose grades only guaranteed them seats in two year schools. Similarly, the change in allocation formulas seems not to explain the enrollment decline adequately. While the bulk of the drop occurs in the senior colleges, it appears to be reflected there at every level of academic achievement—even those with averages above 90% dropped in applications by over 10%. Finally, the imposition of tuition or the perceptions about tuition appears by no means the single most important factor in the enrollment drop.

WHAT NEXT?

The analysis that was conducted was rudimentary and unsophisticated. However, it suggests quite strongly that there are trends which may be isolated, and that the CUNY application drop was not random. Further, it suggests that it was not directly linked to the end of open admissions or the imposition of tuition. There are relatively broad implications inherent in these suggestions; they merit further examination.

In addition, the data analyzed were based on allocations, not enrollment. It may be anticipated that the enrollment drop from 1974 to 1976 was even larger than the allocation drop, at least in raw numbers, if not in proportion to the base.[7] The drop between application and enrollment, and the trends, if any, which can be identified over time, should shed additional light on the question of which students are actually not going to CUNY, and what characteristics they share.

Additional data on student background variables and the types of CUNY schools most affected by the enrollment decline is now available. With this information it would be useful to analyze the patterns not only in terms of the two year/four year school dichotomy but also in terms of in-borough versus out-of-borough attendance, the four old senior colleges versus the rest of the CUNY schools, underutilized schools versus the rest, the SEEK/College Discovery programs versus the regular program, the day sessions versus the evening sessions. The

results of this type of detailed, rigorous examination of the available data will be a specific profile of the change in allocation and enrollment at the CUNY schools. Further inferences may be drawn about the imposition of tuition and the departure from open admissions—inferences which may have an impact not only on planning for the New York City schools, but for other urban public systems as well.

Finally, the analysis to date concentrates only on the drop in freshman students at CUNY. Data show a decline in enrollment among sophmores and juniors as well. Further studies should attempt to examine the type of students not returning to CUNY from one year to the next and the reasons for this behavior.

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FOOTNOTES

1. The senior colleges were much harder hit than the community colleges since the city is only mandated to maintain a 50% contribution to the community colleges while the state supports the other 50%.
2. For the same 1974–1976 period, the natural decline amounted to a drop of only about 700 seniors graduating from high school—less than 1% of the 1974 base.
3. Data on allocations can be used as a proxy for determining trends in applications for the following reason: of all applicants to CUNY colleges, only 3.3% (1767 students) were not allocated to any CUNY school at all. The change from 1974 to 1976 was only a drop of 287 students (only 2.4% of the total applicant drop) and therefore could not significantly account for the total drop.
4. Although only 14 schools were studied, the number of students in the 1976 sample was large, almost 6,500, as was the size of the application drop, over 1,500 students. Furthermore, the types of schools and students included in the sample were representative of the total population under consideration.
5. With a 1976 sample size of 2,770 and an application drop of 776.
6. Based on interviews with admission officers and administrators at local public and private institutions including CUNY, Pace, and Long Island University.
7. The reason for this is that allocations represent only the potential enrollment.