

Mina Shaughnessy and Open Admissions at New York's City College

By LaVona L. Reeves

From 1847 until 1965, the College of the City of New York (CCNY) provided a free education to thousands of academically outstanding men and women who had traditionally been poor but were also among the best learners that New York City's high schools could produce.

Patrick Healy writes, "City has helped generations become politicians, teachers, artists, and scientists. Ira Gershwin, Bernard Malamud, and Colin L. Powell went here. So did eight Nobel Prize winners."¹

But by 1965, with New York City's changing demographics, City College had become a white oasis in a predominantly Black and Puerto Rican section of Upper Manhattan.

The time had come for the college to become more relevant to its community. The answer was SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge), a pre-baccalaureate program designed to bring small groups of minorities into the

City University of New York, a system of ten senior and eight community colleges that included CCNY.

Through some miracle of fate, City College hired Mina Shaughnessy to oversee this new endeavor. She took up her task in the face of powerful opposition from those who wished to maintain the CCNY of old. Some critics of open admissions—which followed on the heels of the SEEK pilot program—for example, argued that "open admissions was instituted in response to threats of race riots."²

In fact, SEEK was the forerunner of open admissions, not only at CCNY but also at the city's other senior colleges and community colleges. The program started out small, accommodating only 109 minority students who would not have otherwise been admitted to any college or university because of their low academic standing in high school.

In order to qualify for SEEK, students had to have a high school

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Mina Shaughnessy wanted ‘to give her students the power to command language, to say what they meant.’

diploma, live in a deprived area in New York City, be under age 30, and not have attended college before. Once a student was accepted into the SEEK program, the city paid for books, fees, tutors and a weekly stipend of \$50.00.³

The SEEK English department staff at City College included adjuncts who had been hired expressly for the program, but tenured faculty were also called upon to work with these special admissions students. Leonard Kriegel, a full-time professor on the SEEK staff, described Shaughnessy as she was in 1965 in his book *Working Through*:

She was one of the few people I had ever met who had actually thought about the problems involved in teaching essentially noncommunicative students how to write, how to grasp the idea that communication itself required logic and assertiveness. She was to spend her time with students who now had to be made aware of their right to formulate opinions and their obligation to formulate them thoughtfully and intelligently. Time and time again during our staff meetings, she would force us to concentrate on the problems of teaching these students.... She had a single thought in mind: to

educate. She had little tolerance for political rhetoric, but she had great tolerance and enormous feeling for the SEEK students.⁴

In Kriegel’s words, Shaughnessy wanted “to give her students the power to command language, to say what they meant. Her sense of what was real kept her sane and made her an effective teacher and administrator.”⁵

The first four years of the experimental—and costly—SEEK program went relatively well and continued to have the city’s financial backing through the 1960s.

The first SEEK student graduated from Baruch College on January 22, 1970, the same month the New York City Board of Higher Education voted to institute open admissions throughout the colleges in the City University of New York.

On January 23, 1970, the *New York Times* featured the first SEEK graduate, Patricia Stonewall. “Education is really where it’s at,” the 23-year-old sociology major said. “Once you’ve acquired education you can become part of the system. In order to achieve my goals, I must be in the system.”⁶

The young native of Alabama was one of nine children born into a working-class family. Stonewall knew she wanted to better herself

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and could not be content working as a “domestic” like her mother. Having completed the B.A. in three and a half years, Stonewall was on her way to a doctoral degree in sociology.

Though Stonewall had not been one of Shaughnessy’s students, she and Shaughnessy had something very basic in common: the belief that SEEK students had the potential to learn, to grow, and to become leaders in a society that had denied Blacks their rights for hundreds of years. Stonewall’s closing statement typifies this attitude: “There is so much latent, Black talent. If I have any advice to give poor Black students, it’s strike the word ‘can’t’ out of your vocabulary.”⁷

In June 1970, CUNY graduated 377 of the 1,125 original SEEK students.⁸ Over a third of them graduated as scheduled, despite their early need for remediation in reading, math or writing. Because many SEEK students needed to work to support families, they often took a year or two longer to complete the baccalaureate degree. But the majority of the students did eventually complete the degree program, and many went on for higher degrees.

The whole country watched as the colleges prepared to open their doors to everyone in September 1970. In a *New York Times* article, Albert H. Bowker,

Chancellor of CUNY, explained that the city-run colleges would open their doors to all high school graduates because “The public university in America has long been regarded as an agency for social change as well as a repository, conveyor and expander of knowledge.”⁹

He reassured students and parents that the incoming “disadvantaged” freshmen would be given remediation until they were better equipped for “normal college work.”¹⁰

The Board of Higher Education had to hire more teachers and find more space where classes could be held until facilities could be constructed to accommodate the increasing enrollment. The board announced they had received more than 3,000 applications from college teachers throughout the country who wanted to be part of open admissions in New York City.

The board expected the freshman class to total 35,000 students, including 8,500 from open admissions and 1,500 more in the SEEK program. The state legislature allocated \$15.7 million for the SEEK program, including \$9 million for CUNY which was to be matched by New York City.¹¹

Even then this did not seem to be enough money, so fees were increased. Night students were required to pay tuition and could not qualify for open admission to

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day school because they had not just graduated from high school. Over a thousand of them marched on City Hall, protesting the increased fees and imposition of tuition, though it was only eighteen dollars per credit. They felt it was unfair to pay for open admissions just because they were unable to attend classes during the day.

Senior faculty had their own reasons for questioning open admissions. They bemoaned the fact that there were fewer students in literature classes and more students enrolled in remedial classes that they had to teach.

Theodore Gross, chair of the City College English Department and Shaughnessy's boss at the time, described the situation:

The need for students to master English was clear to everyone, and on a fundamental level, instruction in basic writing was carried on intensively. In 1970 almost 90 percent of City College students took some form of remedial instruction in writing—an incredible situation for any American college, let alone one that had had a great academic tradition...¹²

The mission of the English Department was rapidly changing, as was the university. Gross soon made a statement that would

haunt him for years:

Few people wanted to confront the unappealing implication of language retardation.... But despite all the goodwill that a lifetime of liberalism and academic training dictated, the nagging doubt grew that we might not be able to take an eighteen-year-old who suffered deep linguistic shortcomings and bring him to college level verbal competence.¹³

For the students, these were fighting words. Young people at City College met Gross with jeers of, "Gross, you liar, we'll set your ass on fire."¹⁴

Gross's lifetime of "liberalism" had not prepared him for a truly open university. In the same decade and in the same city, linguist William Labov was researching and writing "The Logic of Non-Standard English." Labov notes:

The concept of verbal deprivation has no basis in social reality: in fact, Negro children in the urban ghetto receive a great deal of verbal stimulation...and participate fully in a highly verbal culture; they have the same basic vocabulary, possess the same capacity for conceptual learning, and use the same logic as anyone who learns to speak and understand standard English.¹⁵

Though Gross voted for the cre-

‘Negro children in the urban ghetto receive a great deal of verbal stimulation.’

ation of ethnic studies departments in 1971, he failed to give the minority students the credit they deserved. Eventually, he left his post as Dean of Humanities and became the provost at Penn State University, where he worked when his book, *Academic Turmoil*, was reviewed by Walter Goodman in 1980.

Shaughnessy, on the other hand, believed those students did belong in the university and could be taught to write standard American English. Through careful, long-term analysis of writing errors, Shaughnessy began to understand—and explain—why basic writing students made certain mistakes over and over again.

The key to controlling the written language did not take the form of instruction in prescriptive grammar for Shaughnessy. Students improved their writing skills, not by hearing lectures on punctuation, verb formations or paragraph writing, but by writing.

Shaughnessy argued that basic writing students hadn’t mastered the writing process partially because they hadn’t had ample opportunities to write. Hence, students did a lot of writing in Shaughnessy’s classes.

In 1972, Shaughnessy began to analyze more than two million words of student writing. She

was one of the first people to examine and eventually publish examples of student errors. What had been silently written in illegible handwriting, turned in for “correction,” returned marked throughout in red, perceived as failure by the student and immediately thrown in the wastebasket, was to be published for all to see. For Shaughnessy, developmental writing did not mean failed writing. It meant growth and eventual control of the written word.

Though there were many committed instructors like Shaughnessy in the City University, in the 1970-71 school year, 29.6 percent of the open admissions students dropped out of the senior colleges, and 40.1 percent left the community colleges—most leaving of their own volition, not because they were forced to do so.

The teaching of writing to open admissions students was inevitably tied to political ideology. Some faculty members were far more invested in equal access than others, and the lack of commitment to the success of open admissions students by many faculty members contributed to the attrition rate.

In an attempt to stem the flow of dropouts, 200 Black faculty and administrators met in November 1970 to demand “Blacks be given greater share in running the university (CUNY) and that the university hire more Black teachers.”¹⁶

Shaughnessy was able to classify errors and understand why students were making certain types of mistakes.

At this meeting, Brooklyn College Associate Professor Kennedy publicly claimed that he and other Black faculty members believed whites “conspire to keep Blacks second class citizens.”¹⁷ Other speakers demanded that university professors make an “extra effort to teach students admitted under open enrollment.”¹⁸ They warned that the program may “fail because some teachers take a disdainful attitude toward new students” and asked Chancellor Bowker for a “breakdown of Black faculty, administrators, and staff at each campus.”¹⁹

By the second year of open admissions, the size of the remedial classes had doubled, and many basic writing teachers felt overworked and discouraged by what appeared to be little or no progress in their students’ writing.

Shaughnessy spoke to this issue at a city-wide conference:

...writing teachers, sensing that their students’ growth as writers cannot be quantified, certainly not in semester segments, perhaps not at all, speak timidly of what is accomplished, or bow to the crude measures of attrition rates, grade-point averages, or objective tests.

She cited the examples of students’ writing, starting with the first day they entered City College

and ending with samples of improved writing. Clearly, what the students needed was not more test scores, but more positive writing experiences in a class where the teacher accepted their errors as a normal part of learning.

In an attempt to meet the needs of the less-prepared minority students, the Board of Higher Education adopted an affirmative action plan in 1971. As a result, CUNY colleges were required to submit a five-year timetable for increasing the number of women and minorities hired and promoted. If CUNY colleges failed to comply, the city would lose several million dollars of federal funds.

As the colleges began to comply by hiring more minorities, the culture gap between students and teachers lessened. But the entry of minority faculty members and the advent of Black and ethnic studies were points of contention for many conservative faculty members. City College Dean Gross suggested that new faculty hired to teach Black studies were not capable of teaching “real subjects.” Actually, Gross reflected the skepticism of countless other less articulate critics of open admissions who maintained low profiles and gave passing marks as they counted the months and years until retirement.

Not surprisingly, open admissions

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were often criticized as being but a euphemism for Black and Puerto Rican admissions. But, in July 1973, the *New York Times* reported that the biggest CUNY enrollment increase had been in non-Puerto Rican Roman Catholics, including the city's Italian, Irish, Polish, Haitian and German youth—first and second-generation Americans.

When critics also pounced on the 1973 statistics that indicated a two-thirds attrition rate among the original open admissions students, Chancellor Kibbee firmly held that the policy could be considered remarkably successful even if only 15 or 20 percent of the open admissions students completed a degree program. He was quick to explain that if more money had been available for more remedial courses and financial aid, perhaps some students would not have dropped out.

Money continued to be a major problem for CUNY through the first half of the decade. Finally, in May 1976, Mayor Beame announced that the city was nearly bankrupt and could not meet the \$15 million payroll of 12,000 CUNY faculty members.

The following day, CUNY Chancellor Kibbee announced the temporary shutdown of the CUNY campuses. Faculties were left unpaid, graduations were postponed, and final grades were delayed. The 129-year-old tradition of tuition-free education at CUNY

was over. On June 3, 1976 the Board of Higher Education voted 7-1 in favor of charging tuition.

Seven of the board members saw this drastic step as inevitable, but the only Black and only woman on the board, Virginia Quinones, did not. She chose to try to spare the poor students the burden of paying for an education that would lift them out of poverty. When the state legislators saw that the city was trying to balance its books by charging tuition, they stepped in and appropriated the funds that were needed to reopen CUNY.

Once again, CUNY was struggling to keep its doors open. In the fall of 1976, enrollment had declined 17 percent, making it necessary for several thousand faculty members to be laid off. As usual, the last to be hired were the first to be fired, and many of the newer minority teachers lost their jobs, despite massive student protests.

At City College, Shaughnessy was working on her book, *Errors and Expectations*. Basic writing classes were needed as much as ever. With the layoff of more faculty members, the class sizes increased once again, and teachers continued to wonder whether they would be paid on time—if at all.

Morale seemed to reach an all-time low, setting the scene for Shaughnessy's book, which was seen as a godsend by basic writing

Faculties were left unpaid, graduations were postponed, and final grades were delayed.

teachers throughout the country. Her book made many teachers feel that the struggle to help students write better had been worth all the effort.

CUNY had shown the country that there was a way to open the doors of higher education to under-represented minorities and ill-prepared high school graduates. Much of the proof of the success of open admissions lies on the pages of Shaughnessy's book. Little did anyone know that Mina Shaughnessy would live only one more year after publication of her book in 1977.

The impact of *Errors and Expectations* is still being felt in basic writing classes throughout the country and will continue to be felt in the years to come. Educators will remember Shaughnessy's industry and humanistic approach to teaching.

The entire field of basic writing has changed since Shaughnessy first arrived at City College in 1965. Most specialists in the field no longer view basic writers as beginners or outsiders or foreigners, and power relations in the classroom are changing. Basic writing instructors are more inclined to view themselves as members of the writing communities they are attempting to create in the classroom.

Since Shaughnessy's days, much has changed at City College also. Thirty-five years of open and modi-

fied open admissions appear to be coming to an end. Patrick Healy writes that many believe CUNY

made a terrible mistake in 1970, when it bowed to student and faculty agitators and adopted a policy of "open admissions" to enroll more minority students. Lowering standards meant that remedial education... became a mainstay.²⁰

By fall 1999, "almost 55 percent of first-time freshmen failed the basic writing test. About 33 percent failed reading, and 17.7 percent failed mathematics."²¹

This failure is, of course, blamed on the New York City public schools, and the assumption is that if enough pressure is put on the teachers, there will no longer be a need for basic writing courses in CUNY.

Having been a New York City public school teacher, I would argue that high school English teachers alone cannot prepare basic writers for college entry. It takes the whole country's commitment to literacy, access, and freedom for all. What critics of equal access policies may not comprehend is that one of the few ways that public school teachers have to keep students from dropping out is the promise of a better life if they stay in school and go to college, no matter how long it may take to finish. And we know

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that “high school dropout culminates a long-term process of disengagement from school.”²²

In the years since SEEK began, thousands and thousands of CUNY graduates have entered the workforce and have made a difference in education, government, and other professions.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 states that “no person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.”²³

It behooves educators to ask again whether we have done enough to ensure access to underprepared and underrepresented students. On the occasion of the ratification of the 1991 Civil Rights Bill, Senator Edward Kennedy reminded us, “Civil rights has always been the unfinished business of America, and it will continue to be our unfinished business for years to come.”²⁴

A current dispute over the top job at the U.S. Education Department’s Office for Civil Rights is one more example of our “unfinished business.” The position was still “empty, more than five months after President Bush announced

that he would nominate Gerald A. Reynolds as chairperson.”²⁵

Senator Kennedy, who chairs the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, has not scheduled a hearing for Reynolds yet, since the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, “a coalition that strongly backs affirmative action, is actively opposing”²⁶ Reynold’s nomination, primarily due to his past record against affirmative action.

At City College, the new president named in March 2001, Gregory H. Williams, is expected to work “to re-establish the college’s academic credibility while not shutting out minorities and other disadvantaged students, a difficult challenge.”²⁷

In May 1998, CUNY trustees had voted 9 to 6 in favor of ending remedial classes at the system’s 11 senior colleges by 2001. But CUNY professors in favor of retaining remedial classes filed a lawsuit because of the way the decision was made—the trustees held one meeting in a room too small to accommodate the public, and ousted dissenters.²⁸

It appears that because of the suit at least remnants of compensatory education were preserved. There was still a SEEK program at City College, as of September 2001, though Arenson reported that “the college is trying to limit the size of its SEEK program” and “enrolled

The NAACP is asking that colleges adopt recruitment policies that target racial and ethnic minorities.

only 160 SEEK students this year, down from 280 last year.”²⁹

In place of SEEK is a new Pre-clude to Success program that “allows students who are close to passing the skills test to take remedial classes at a community college but remain on the City College campus; if they pass the skills exams at the end of the semester, they can then enroll at City College.”³⁰

I would argue, however, that “the remediation phaseout” which is sweeping the nation will affect all of us. I believe Mina Shaughnessy would resist this movement vehemently if, in fact, it is a “phase-out” and not simply a renaming of Basic Writing at four-year colleges.

On the other hand, she would be pleased to see that the system emphasizes writing across the curriculum and has adopted a direct writing assessment that “moves away from standard multiple-choice tests and closer to the kinds of reading, writing, and critical analysis that students have to do in college.”³¹

Once again, the nation’s eyes

are on the racial achievement gap in education. Nearly 50 years after *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, in November 2001, NAACP president and CEO, Kweisi Mfume, has asked President Bush, Education Secretary Rod Paige and school leaders nationwide “to cut the racial achievement gap at least 50 percent over the next five years.”³²

The NAACP “recommends that all state school superintendents and governors submit to the NAACP by May 10, 2002, an outline of the steps that education agencies will take to bring more equality to education.”³³

The group is asking for accountability of resources, certified teachers, “incentives to retain experienced teachers... ways to increase the number of day care and preschool programs in low-income communities.”³⁴ The group is also once again asking that “public and private colleges adopt recruitment policies that target racial and ethnic minorities.”³⁵

As Senator Kennedy has said again and again, we have much “unfinished business.” ■

Endnotes:

Many colleagues and students responded to earlier drafts of this article: however, I offer my deepest appreciation to Dan Tanacito and to my beloved mentor and friend, Partrick Harwell, who passed away before it appeared in print.

¹ Healy

² Berman

³ Carmody

⁴ Kriegel

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ Carmody

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ "New York, CUNY."

⁹ Bowker

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ "New York, CUNY."

¹² Gross

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ Goodman

¹⁵ Labov

¹⁶ "New York, CUNY."

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ Healy

²¹ *ibid*

²² Alexander

²³ Hakuta

²⁴ Clymer

²⁵ Gose

²⁶ *ibid*

²⁷ Arenson, 27 March 2001: B1.

²⁸ Healy

²⁹ *ibid*

³⁰ *ibid*

³¹ *ibid*

³² Henry

³³ *ibid*

³⁴ *ibid*

³⁵ *ibid*

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