



**The Opposing Forces that Shape Developmental Education:
Assessment, Placement, and Progression
at CUNY Community Colleges**

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Abstract

The developmental education process, as it is typically implemented in colleges across the country, seems straightforward: underprepared students are assessed and placed into an appropriate developmental course sequence designed to prepare them for college-level work; once finished with the sequence, these students presumably then move on to success in college. Analyses of student progression through developmental education reveal, however, that this seemingly straightforward process is rife with complexity and confusion, and results in poor outcomes for the majority of developmental students.

Various explanations have been advanced to explain developmental students' lack of progression, including inadequate test preparation, insufficiently predictive exams, poorly aligned curricula, uninspiring skill-and-drill instruction, and the sheer length of time and financial resources required to finish a long sequence of courses (Edgecombe, 2011a; Grubb, 2010; Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011). Each explanation implies that the developmental system is broken and that one or more specific fixes will mend it. Yet underlying these issues is a deeper and more vexing question: *Why* is the system broken?

Based on a case study of the City University of New York's six community colleges, this report proposes a new *opposing forces framework* for understanding the dysfunction of the developmental system. We identify three sets of opposing forces that shape developmental policy and practice: system-wide consistency versus institutional autonomy, efficient versus effective assessment, and promotion of student progression versus enforcement of academic standards. Within each set, both goals are important and worthy, both are championed by key stakeholders in the system, and both have direct impacts on developmental policy. However, while the two goals may not be absolutely irreconcilable, they tend to work in opposition to one another and may create frustration on the part of administrators and faculty, confusion on the part of students, and poor outcomes overall.

We begin the report by outlining the opposing forces framework and by discussing how the tensions inherent in the framework are apparent at the national level. We then use CUNY as a case study to describe in detail how each of the three tensions shape developmental policies, practices, and student progression patterns. Finally, we provide suggestions on how colleges nationwide can bring apparently opposing forces into alignment and thus create a system that works to meet all its stakeholders' goals.

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1. Introduction

The majority of students who enter community college are deemed academically underprepared for college-level work (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006; Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010). As a result, most community colleges devote substantial instructional and institutional resources to developmental education—courses in basic reading, writing, and mathematics skills.

The developmental education process, as it is typically implemented in colleges across the country, seems straightforward. Incoming students take short, standardized placement exams designed to measure skill levels in reading, writing, and mathematics (Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011). Taking math as an example, students who score above a college-determined cutoff are viewed as ready to take college-level math courses. Students who score below the cutoff are referred to developmental math. Many colleges also use secondary cutoffs to sort developmental students into different course levels; for example, while a student scoring barely below the math cutoff may need to take only a developmental algebra course, a student scoring far below the cutoff may need to take a sequence of three courses (e.g., arithmetic, pre-algebra, and algebra). After completing the recommended developmental math sequence, the student proceeds to college-level math and presumably to success in other math-related courses in his or her program of study.

Analyses of student progression through developmental education reveal, however, that the system is more complex than the above description implies. One aspect of this complexity is that many students are unaware of the purpose and high-stakes consequences of the placement exams and thus often perform more poorly than their self-perceived ability, breeding confusion and frustration at the outset of the process (Venezia, Bracco, & Nodine, 2010). In addition, after receiving their recommended placement, many developmental students never enroll in the first course in the sequence. Some avoid developmental education by taking unrelated college-level coursework, others find ways to circumvent developmental courses and “skip ahead” into college-level math or English, and others disappear from the college entirely (Bailey, Jaggars, & Cho, 2010; Jenkins, Jaggars, Roksa, Zeidenberg, & Cho, 2009). Finally, the majority of students who do enroll in developmental education stall halfway through and never reach the end of the

sequence, much less move on to college-level courses and eventual completion of degrees (Bailey, Jeong, et al., 2010; Jenkins et al., 2009). For example, among recent high school graduates who took at least one developmental course in community college, only about a quarter earned a degree within eight years (Attewell et al., 2006).

Various explanations have been advanced to explain developmental students' lack of progression, including inadequate test preparation, insufficiently predictive exams, poorly aligned curricula, uninspiring skill-and-drill instruction, and the sheer length of time and financial resources required to finish a long sequence of courses (Edgecombe, 2011a; Grubb, 2010; Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011). Each explanation implies that the developmental system is broken and that one or more specific fixes will mend it. Yet underlying these seemingly straightforward issues is a deeper and more vexing question: *Why is the system broken?*

These complexities and unanswered questions provided the impetus for examining developmental assessment, placement, and progression in more detail. The City University of New York (CUNY), a higher education system comprised of 23 institutions scattered across the five boroughs of New York City, provides an excellent setting for an in-depth case study of these issues.

Developmental education has long been a critical issue for CUNY (e.g., Schmidt et al., 1999). In 1999, the system shifted the bulk of its remedial function to its six community colleges;¹ underprepared students aiming for a four-year college program were now required to successfully complete remediation prior to enrollment in that program. Across the past decade, the strong majority of students entering CUNY's community colleges were referred to developmental education in at least one subject (see Box 1).² These high referral rates are in part due to the disadvantaged populations that the system serves: Across the community colleges, 29% of enrollees are Black, 37% are Hispanic, 28% are 25 or older, 39% attend school part time, 48% are first-generation college students, and 46% have household incomes under \$20,000 (City University of New York, 2011). Moreover, many are immigrants and language minority students: 44%

¹ The CUNY community colleges focus largely on awarding associate degrees. The typical campus offers approximately 30 associate degree programs and five certificate programs, and has relatively low rates of enrollment in the certificate programs.

² In Box 1, writing includes students referred to ESL or non-ESL writing, and reading includes students referred to ESL or non-ESL reading. See Appendix C for details on how referral rates were calculated.

of CUNY’s community college students were born outside the U.S. mainland, and an estimated 46% speak a native language other than English (City University of New York, 2011).

Box 1
CUNY CC Developmental Referral Rates, 2004–2008 Cohorts³

Any developmental	82%
Mathematics	64%
Writing	56%
Reading	24%

CUNY has been contemplating developmental reform for several years, and interest in reform quickened as the system began planning a seventh community college, which administrators are explicitly designing around principles and practices thought to support student success. To help understand whether the system’s current policies and practices were bringing about their intended outcomes, we collected and analyzed both qualitative and quantitative data to answer two broad research questions:

1. What are the developmental education assessment and placement policies and practices at the community colleges of the City University of New York?
2. What are the impacts of these policies and practices on student progression and educational outcomes?

As we investigated these questions, we began to see that developmental assessment and placement policy are shaped by a variety of goals, each of which may work toward opposite ends. Based on this observation, the current report sets forth a new framework, the *opposing forces framework*, for analyzing developmental education policy and practice based on three sets of opposing forces: system-wide consistency versus institutional autonomy, efficient versus effective assessment, and promotion of student progression versus enforcement of academic standards. While the opposing forces framework was derived from our work with CUNY, the tensions described by the framework are immediately helpful in clarifying why the developmental education system is broken on a national level.

³ For a definition of *cohort* and other technical terms that appear throughout the report, see Appendix A.

We begin the report by outlining the opposing forces framework and by discussing how the tensions inherent in the framework are apparent at the national level. We then use CUNY as a case study to describe in detail how each of the three tensions shape developmental policies, practices, and student progression patterns. Finally, we provide suggestions on how colleges nationwide can bring apparently opposing forces into alignment and thus create a system that works to meet all its stakeholders' goals.

2. Three Sets of Opposing Forces

In order for any system to work smoothly, its component pieces must be aligned. Consider the design of a mechanical system, such as a wind-up watch, a watermill, or a steam-powered engine. If two interlocking gears are poorly designed, struggling against one another in opposite directions, the machine will seize up and may break under the strain. Simply mending the broken gears and reintroducing them into the same positions will not fix the system. Instead, the gears—and their relations to one another—must be rethought and redesigned. In this section, we apply this notion to the developmental education system and describe three sets of potentially opposing goals. Within each set, both goals are important and worthy, both are championed by key stakeholders in the system, and both have a direct impact on developmental policy. However, while the two goals may not be absolutely irreconcilable, they tend to work in opposition to one another and thus may create frustration on the part of administrators and faculty, confusion on the part of students, and poor outcomes overall.

2.1 System-Wide Consistency Versus Institutional Autonomy

In decentralized community college systems, individual institutions typically retain the autonomy to choose their own placement tests and cutoff scores, to determine whether developmental education is required or merely recommended, and to design their own developmental education course sequences. Such flexibility may allow institutions to tailor a developmental system that works as effectively as possible for its particular mix of students. For example, vendors of the most commonly used placement tests recommend that institutions reexamine cut scores every few years with an eye to the

school's changing student characteristics and course requirements (Morgan & Michaelides, 2005).

Yet decentralized systems are frequently criticized for creating confusion or even inequity through inconsistent standards. In Ohio, for example, Bettinger and Long (2003) found that a given student's probability of enrolling in developmental education varied quite widely across potential community colleges. As an illustration, "while an individual might have a 20 percent chance of remediation at one community college, they may have a 90 percent chance at another" (Bettinger & Long, 2003, p. 18). While a 70-point range in probability may initially seem an exaggeration for effect, their research found that the *average* student's range in probability was even wider (at 74.5 points). Such inconsistencies across colleges would likely confuse and frustrate students, if they were aware of them; however, most students choose a community college on the basis of proximity (Bettinger & Long, 2003) and seem generally unaware of the issue of remediation standards until after they apply (Venezia et al., 2010). Perhaps more consequentially, differing standards across colleges send mixed messages to high schools in terms of how to prepare students to be "college ready." Moreover, proponents of consistency note that common requirements make it more feasible for systems to track student performance across colleges and to smooth the process of student transfer between colleges (Prince, 2005). Due in part to these arguments, many states have recently moved toward common placement tests and cut scores across colleges in each system (Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011).

One example of the struggle between autonomy and consistency has played out in Texas, where at the turn of the 21st century, entering college students were assessed according to central standards on a statewide exam, and students could not exit developmental education until they met those standards (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [THECB], 2005). However, colleges argued that this "one-size-fits-all approach"⁴ did not make sense for all students, resulting in new legislation in 2003 that allowed colleges more flexibility in determining and ensuring the college readiness of their students, including the freedom to choose their own assessment exams from a set

⁴ From THECB Agenda Item IX-D, October 2003, *Consideration of adopting the repeal of section and adopting new sections of Board rules concerning the Success Initiative (S.B. 286 of the 78th Texas Legislature) (Second Consideration)*.

of state-approved instruments. Subsequently, evidence of confusion among incoming college students, inconsistencies across the state regarding how students were placed into and exited from developmental education, and a lack of predictive validity among the assessments chosen by the colleges prompted the state to begin designing legislation that would return to more standardized policies (THECB, 2009).

The case of Texas illustrates that higher education systems tend toward adoption of centralized policies that they believe will lead to the best possible outcomes for students. However, there is typically no evidence-based certainty regarding the effectiveness of any given policy; this situation, twinned with the fact that individual colleges each believe that they have the clearest understanding of their own students' needs, tends to push colleges to resist system-wide consistency in favor of the pursuit of their own strategies. Moreover, as we will see in our examination of CUNY community colleges, even under a system that has traditionally been strongly centralized, individual institutions and departments may continue to push back against central policy in a variety of overt and covert ways.

2.2 Efficient Versus Effective Assessment

Almost all community colleges use standardized tests to assess college readiness (Parsad, Lewis, & Greene, 2003; Primary Research Group, 2008). These exams are popular because they provide the efficiency necessary to process thousands of students in time for the first day of class: They can be administered quickly, scored by computer, and applied almost instantaneously to determine the appropriate placement for each student. The sorting process is also relatively straightforward. Typically, there is one sequence through math developmental education, one sequence through writing developmental education, and so on. Depending on test scores, students may start earlier or later in the sequence, but each step in the sequence is tied to a specific course. This standardized system of assessment and placement allows all the college's administrative systems—the student information system, registration, financial aid, classroom allocation, and teacher appointment—to work smoothly and efficiently together (ACT, Inc., 2006; College Board, 2003).

Yet this administrative efficiency goes hand-in-hand with high rates of student failure and attrition, such that the system itself is not at all efficient in producing college-ready students. Recent research suggests that standardized placement tests are part of the problem; they are only weakly predictive of student success and do not provide a diagnosis of each student's particular strengths and weaknesses (Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011). A more effective assessment system might incorporate diagnostic testing to determine students' individual academic needs, affective measures to identify non-cognitive factors related to academic performance, and/or multiple measures to provide a more holistic assessment of college readiness; yet such assessments and processes require substantial time and resources to administer and respond to with appropriate interventions (Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011). For many resource-constrained institutions, this is simply not feasible.

Colleges, then, are faced with a tradeoff. At one extreme of the efficiency-effectiveness continuum, institutions could achieve maximum efficiency if they abandoned testing altogether and allowed students to proceed directly to college-level courses, a tactic that would result in misplacement for some proportion of students (see Scott-Clayton, 2011). At the other extreme, institutions could maximize effectiveness by meeting with each student individually, placing them into courses based on a comprehensive set of information. Due to resource constraints, most colleges have chosen a middle way—standardized testing and placement—that lies closer to the efficiency end of the continuum. But as our case study of CUNY will illustrate, a highly efficient test often has the drawback of being only mildly effective in terms of placing students in the most appropriate treatment.

2.3 Supporting Student Progression and Enforcing Academic Standards

The ongoing push to improve college completion rates, a goal espoused by the federal government as well as by several major education foundations, is a worthy initiative. Yet some administrators and faculty worry that this push may have counterproductive consequences. In order to meet institutional and departmental completion goals, faculty could be subjected to subtle pressures to inflate grading and

“pass through” more students, which would eventually undermine academic quality and the value of a college degree.

Elite institutions have traditionally resolved the tension between strong academic quality and high student completion by selecting only the best-prepared and most-motivated students, who are likely to successfully progress through college regardless of the institution they attend. Community colleges, distinguished by their open-access mission, cannot screen out students who are likely to do poorly. Yet for decades, developmental education has served a similar function for these institutions’ college-level courses and their instructors. High placement cutoff scores, coupled with a developmental system through which only the most highly motivated students persist, create college-level classrooms filled with relatively well-prepared students who are likely to succeed in the course.

The strategy of funneling underprepared students into developmental education mirrors the system of tracking prevalent in secondary schools. The traditional tracking of middle and high school students into honors, general, and remedial courses has now been typically replaced with less blatant forms of tracking, such as allowing students to choose courses based on their academic level and interests; despite this change, secondary schools are still highly stratified, with lower income and lower ability students concentrated in remedial courses characterized by the “endless practice of the most basic skills, slowing down the pacing of the curriculum, and reducing its depth and breadth” (Levin, 2007, p. 1411). This approach to educating disadvantaged students has contributed to a widening achievement gap between low-income students and their more affluent peers; in contrast, accelerated strategies, such as implementing a challenging curriculum and placing struggling students into advanced courses while concurrently providing them with additional academic support, can improve the educational outcomes of the lowest performing students (Levin, 2007).

Accelerated strategies for underprepared postsecondary students are also becoming a popular alternative to traditional developmental course sequences (Edgecombe, 2011b). Recent research has revealed that many students deemed underprepared for college-level work can indeed succeed in college-level math and English if they are allowed the opportunity to immediately enroll in such courses (Jenkins

et al., 2009; Jenkins, Speroni, Belfield, Jaggars, & Edgecombe, 2010); however, many others will not succeed. As Scott-Clayton (2011) points out, while colleges could improve underprepared students' overall success rates by allowing more of them into college-level courses, instructors of those courses may view such a development with alarm. Given the strong variation in student skill levels, pass rates in the college-level course would inevitably decline, and in the context of an institutional push for higher completion rates, faculty may strongly feel the pressure to relax academic standards or to "teach to the bottom of the class." As our case study of CUNY will illustrate, while faculty and administrators may earnestly support the goal of helping students move as quickly as possible through the developmental sequence, their equally strong desire to ensure a high-quality academic experience in college-level courses tends to create barriers to speedy developmental completion.

3. The CUNY Case Study

3.1 Qualitative Data Collection

Across the fall of 2009 and the spring of 2010, CCRC staff visited each of the six community colleges, interviewing a total of 67 faculty and administrators. In our interviews, we focused particularly on math and English (i.e., writing) developmental education. At each school, we interviewed developmental and college-level math, English, and ESL faculty; administrators involved with developmental assessment, policy, or programming; and senior administrators. Interviews, conducted on an individual basis, were typically an hour long. Questions focused on developmental education programming and supports at each school, as well as on the perceived effectiveness of current policies and programs. Additional information on specific policies and programming were collected by analyzing documents provided by the university or by individual schools, including course catalogs and official web pages. See Appendix B for more detailed information regarding our qualitative methodology.

3.2 Quantitative Analysis

CUNY's Office of Institutional Research and Assessment provided CCRC with anonymized transcript information on nearly 75,000 students who first enrolled in one of CUNY's six community colleges between the fall of 2004 (when the system moved to a new math exam) and the spring of 2008; each student was tracked through the fall of 2009, or at least two academic years. Our examination of student progression required a complex array of descriptive analyses on multiple subsets of students. A more detailed description of the data utilized for this report is available in Appendix C, and details regarding each analysis conducted for this report are located in subsequent Appendices D through H.

3.3 System Policy During the Quantitative Study Period (2004–2009)

According to the typical criteria used for evaluating the centralization of developmental education policy (Collins, 2008; Ewell, Boeke, & Zis, 2008; Perin, 2006), CUNY is a strongly centralized system. Box 2 summarizes the most popular criteria of centralization, and the extent to which CUNY met each one during the study period from 2004 to 2009.

Overall, the system required specific placement tests and cutoffs into college-level work. In terms of math, students took both the COMPASS pre-algebra exam (covering topics such as integers, fractions, decimals, absolute values, percentages, and exponents) and the COMPASS algebra exam (covering topics such as equations, polynomials, formula manipulations, and algebraic expressions). In terms of writing, exams were qualitatively evaluated by two separate readers; the sum of the two readers' scores (each awarding a score from 1 to 6) was used to determine the student's score. Readers also used their qualitative judgment to determine whether non-passing students should be referred to an ESL sequence or to a traditional writing developmental sequence.

Box 2
Centralization of CUNY Developmental Policy

System specifies exemptions?	Yes; based on specific SAT, ACT, or New York State Regents exam cutoffs.
System requires nonexempt students to take placement test?	Yes; students must take the exam in the specific areas from which they are not exempt.
System specifies common test to be used across schools?	Yes; COMPASS pre-algebra test (ranges from 17–99); COMPASS algebra test (15–99); COMPASS reading exam (19–99); and the ACT/CUNY writing exam (2–12).
System specifies cutoff score into college-level work?	Yes; Pre-algebra ≥ 30 , Algebra ≥ 30 Reading ≥ 70 Writing ≥ 7
System requires developmental education for students who fail the exam?	Yes; and students cannot retake exam until completion of developmental coursework or other appropriate intervention.
System requires students to enroll in or complete developmental education within a certain timeframe?	No; however, successful developmental completion is enforced as a prerequisite for corresponding college-level courses.

Finally, the system used the COMPASS and ACT/CUNY exams not only as placement instruments but also as requirements to successfully exit developmental education.⁵ For example, students taking a top-level developmental course not only had to pass the course, but also had to retake and pass the exam that had initially placed them in the course.

In the next three major sections of the paper, we revisit each of the three sets of opposing forces and analyze how they helped shape CUNY’s developmental policies described above, as well as how they impact student progression and success at CUNY.

4. System-Wide Consistency and Institutional Autonomy at CUNY

Box 2 suggests that CUNY’s developmental education system is quite centralized, with the central policy comprehensively covering the key aspects of developmental placement and programming. Yet upon closer examination, the policy focuses most

⁵ The use of placement exams as a developmental exit requirement is quite uncommon. The CUNY administration implemented this exit exam policy in fall 1999 in concert with a phase-out of remedial course instruction in bachelor’s degree programs, in order to ensure that all students in associate degree programs met the same level of academic readiness in math, writing, and reading. Using the same exam as both a placement instrument and developmental exit requirement also allowed the system to assess the usefulness of developmental coursework in terms of improving test scores.

closely on defining the border between *developmental* and *college ready*, saying little about the governance of programming and coursework below the developmental cutoff. As a result, although each college adhered fairly closely to CUNY's stated policies, each also had the autonomy to define its own approach to developmental education, resulting in a degree of variation in developmental programming similar to that seen in less centralized systems (e.g., Edgecombe, 2011b). In addition, colleges also exercised autonomy in their (sometimes creative) interpretations of particular elements of the central policy. Below we discuss variation across colleges in terms of: (1) their implementation of placement testing, including test exemptions, college-level test cutoffs, and test cutoffs into different levels of developmental education; and (2) their developmental education programming, including the number of courses in each sequence, alternatives to developmental coursework, and the extent to which developmental requirements were enforced.

4.1 Placement Testing

Exemptions from testing. CUNY's admission requirements for four-year colleges include scoring at a minimum level of proficiency on the SAT, ACT, or Regents English and math subject tests. Community college students who meet at least one of these standards in math are exempt from placement testing in math; likewise, those who meet at least one of these standards in English are exempt from placement testing in reading and writing.⁶ However, colleges have the latitude to require math-exempt students (particularly those interested in STEM majors—science, technology, engineering, or mathematics) to take the COMPASS math exam for the purpose of placement in the most appropriate college-level math course. Two of the community colleges utilized this policy to require students in STEM fields to take more advanced math exams (i.e., the COMPASS college algebra or trigonometry exams) in order to place into STEM-specific mathematics courses; the remaining four colleges used only the pre-algebra and algebra exam. Some colleges tested very few math-exempt students, while others tested the majority; the percentage of math-exempt students tested ranged from 18% to 86% across the six community colleges. Among math-exempt students who

⁶ See Appendix A for the exact criteria that must be met to be determined English-exempt and math-exempt.

took the math placement test, some proportion failed it (for more information, see Section 5). Central policy indicated that these students' exemptions should be honored, thus allowing them to enroll in college-level courses. Some schools, however, required these students to enroll in developmental education. Accordingly, the proportion of math-exempt students who enrolled in math developmental education varied widely across schools, from 2% to 50%.

In contrast to math, colleges typically did not require English-exempt students to take the reading or writing placement exam. The percentage of English-exempt students tested across the community colleges ranged from 8% to 28%, and of these tested students, only between 1% to 8% of students (proportions that represent between 26 to 54 students) enrolled in developmental writing, ESL, and/or reading.

College-level placement cutoffs. During the 2009–2010 school year, most schools adhered to the system's cutoffs for reading and writing as set forth in Box 2 (p. 11)⁷ However, most schools were concerned that the central math placement cutoff into college-level math was too low, so four schools simply set higher cutoffs on the algebra exam and one of these schools also set higher cutoffs on the pre-algebra exam.⁸ Faculty and administrators at these four schools typically offered one of two explanations for the college's policy: (1) the CUNY-wide cutoffs indicate the *minimum* requirements for college readiness, which a college could raise if needed; or (2) colleges can control the *prerequisites*, in terms of both cutoff scores and coursework, required to enroll in specific college-level course. Colleges tended to employ the latter strategy to control entry into STEM-related college math courses; for example, developmental trigonometry might be a prerequisite for college-level calculus. At some schools, STEM-bound students were required to take the developmental prerequisite regardless of their test scores, while at other schools, students could avoid the prerequisite if they exhibited mastery via a college-specified standard (e.g., a high COMPASS algebra, college algebra, or trigonometry score). Among the four schools that employed higher math entry cutoffs,

⁷ The system's cutoff of 7 is typically achieved by one rater awarding a 3 and the other awarding a 4. Two schools allowed students with a cutoff of 6 (typically achieved by both raters awarding a 3) who also passed the reading exam to advance to a special section of college-level English.

⁸ Due in part to colleges' dissatisfaction with the math exam cutoffs, CUNY raised the community college math cutoffs from 30/30 to 35/40 for fall 2011 entrants.

the inconsistencies between system cutoffs and college- and course-specific cutoffs created two unusual and potentially confusing patterns.

First, as noted above, some schools subjected high proportions of math-exempt students to math testing. According to CUNY's central cutoffs, about 17% of math-exempt students subjected to the pre-algebra portion failed it, while 37% failed the algebra portion. According to individual schools' cutoffs (which tended to increase the algebra standard), about the same 17% failed the pre-algebra portion but an astounding 63% failed the algebra portion. These high failure rates may have reinforced the opinion, pronounced by several faculty, that the system's exemption standards were insufficiently strict. Second, schools with high algebra cutoffs faced an uncomfortable dilemma with regard to students who passed by central standards but failed by school-specific standards. As one math faculty member put it:

We have one score to place into the course and then once you're in the course you have a lower standard in order to successfully place out. So, there is this window between 30 and 38. Say you score a 35, you're placed into the [developmental] algebra course. But when you take the final exam all you need is a 30, so you're good to go. The 30 is the CUNY minimum standard. ... Not many students catch on to how crazy it is, but it really is crazy.

Placement cutoffs into different developmental levels. As discussed in more detail below, each school had very different math and English developmental sequences. For example, some schools had two levels of developmental math while others had three. Accordingly, cutoffs into different developmental courses also varied across schools. Even among schools with a similar number and type of courses in a given sequence, placement criteria for each level in the sequence were not necessarily consistent. For example, one school might determine placement into a particular level of developmental writing based on the writing exam only while another school might take into account reading exam scores; similarly, one school might determine math placement based primarily on the algebra exam score while another might rely on both the pre-algebra and algebra scores. Finally, even in the rare circumstance that schools used the same combination of exams to place students into a fairly similar sequence (e.g., at four schools the reading exam alone was used to place students in a two-course reading

sequence), the schools typically differed in terms of the exact cutoffs between courses (e.g., those four schools had four different cutoffs between the top-level and second-level courses). Thus, cutoffs across the community colleges might seem fairly consistent (with the exception of higher math cutoffs at some schools) to the small proportion of students who enter CUNY college-ready. For the vast majority of students who enter college underprepared, however, standards would not seem at all consistent across the six community colleges.

4.2 Developmental Education Programming

Variation across colleges in terms of placement testing was mirrored in colleges' developmental education programming. Each college required different numbers of developmental courses, offered different alternatives to developmental coursework, enforced different developmental requirements for various college-level courses, and had different proportions of students who adhered to developmental course requirements.

Number of courses. Each school created a very different set of developmental sequences to meet the needs of its students. Some schools had only one level of developmental education for a specific subject while others had two, three, or even more; some schools combined reading and writing developmental education into one sequence and others maintained separate sequences; some schools had an additional developmental math course for STEM⁹ students while others routed all developmental math students through the same sequence; some schools offered accelerated paths through the developmental sequence for students with certain exam cutoffs while others did not. As a result, for a student with a fairly low set of exam scores, the number of credit-hours required to complete developmental education varied widely across schools. For example, for non-STEM students who barely failed the pre-algebra exam, the number of developmental credit-hours required in math varied across schools from seven to 11.

Alternatives to developmental coursework. In line with recommendations from ACT regarding the appropriate circumstances for retesting (ACT, Inc., 2006), CUNY policy allows students to retest in a given subject area only if they complete an instructional intervention at least 20 hours in length. This policy allows incoming

⁹ See Appendix A for a definition.

students to improve their developmental skills over the summer through CUNY's extracurricular immersion programs, the CUNY Language Immersion Program (CLIP) or the University Summer Immersion Program (USIP).¹⁰ Such students can retest prior to fall entry, which may allow some to place directly into college-level courses.

Departments in some colleges also took advantage of the retest policy to develop other interventions for developmental test preparation. For example, at some schools, students could undergo documented self-paced tutoring at the computer lab; at other schools, students could take an intensive winter-break test preparation workshop. However, in general, colleges placed strong restrictions on student participation in these interventions (for example, the intervention might be only for incoming students who barely missed the college-level cutoff, or only for students who successfully completed the appropriate course but failed the developmental exit exam). Perhaps in consequence, very few students seemed to utilize such interventions, at least during the course of the first semester.¹¹

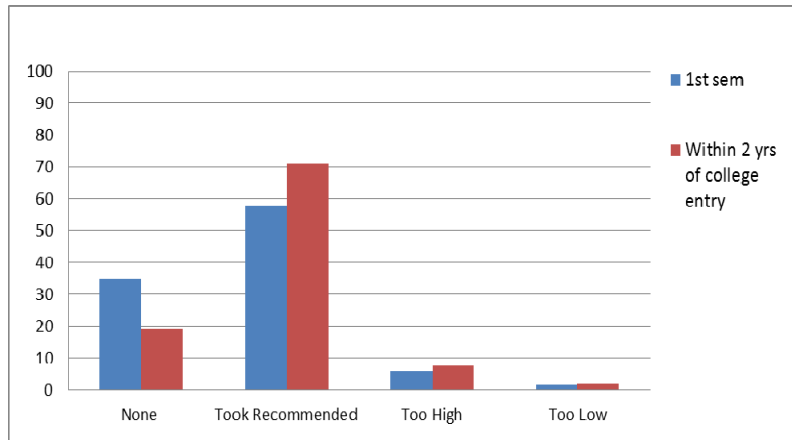
Developmental course-taking requirement. Across CUNY, developmental recommendations were strongly and consistently enforced as prerequisites to college-level math and English. In addition, at all six schools, most degree programs required key courses in the social sciences, humanities, or sciences that in turn required prior completion of developmental English; at three colleges, some of these subject-area courses also required completion of college-level English as a prerequisite. Thus while students might delay taking a math course until later in their program, students needed to move ahead with reading, writing, and English courses as quickly as possible. Accordingly, although students were not required to enroll in developmental education in their first semester, most students did so. Figures 1 and 2, which display the course-

¹⁰ In this study, we do not have data on CLIP or USIP participation. Students who complete CLIP or USIP typically retake the placement exam after the program but prior to actual college enrollment. Accordingly, throughout this report we define readiness according to the last placement exam prior to enrollment. (We are currently collecting CLIP participation data, and a subsequent report is expected to focus on that program.)

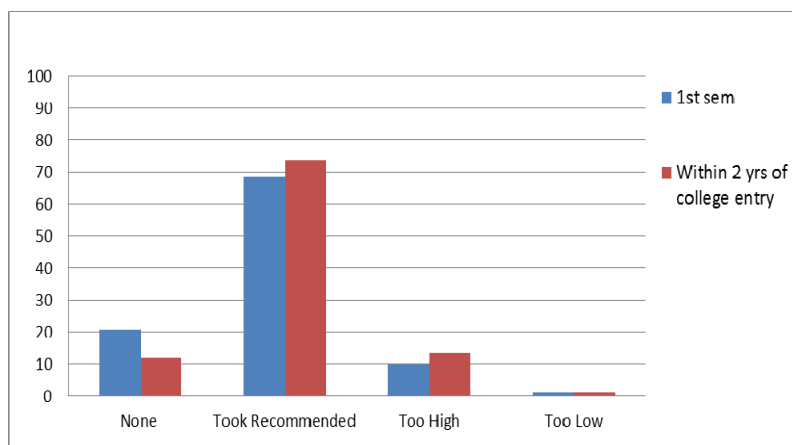
¹¹ While such interventions are not recorded in the data, they can be inferred if a student with a pretest took a posttest in that subject prior to the second semester without taking an associated developmental course. Only about 5% of the students who took a math or writing posttest prior to their second semester had a pretest in the same subject but no associated developmental course.

taking behaviors of students referred to developmental education, show that 65% of students took a math course and 79% took a writing course in their first semester.¹²

**Figure 1
Math Course-Taking**



**Figure 2
English Course-Taking**



Moreover, almost all students enrolled in the specific level of developmental education to which they were referred: looking across the first semester, 58% took a math course at the recommended level and 69% took a writing course at the recommended level. Taking the longer view, across the first two years of enrollment, 71% of students took a first math course and 74% took a first writing course that was at the recommended level. Very few students took their first course at a level that was “too low” (lower than the school’s

¹² For more details on these analyses, see Appendix C.

placement recommendation) or “too high” (higher than the school’s placement recommendation). There are two potential reasons why students may have enrolled in courses that were too high or too low.

First, some students may have been moved up or down in the developmental sequence based on diagnostics administered on the first day of class (see Section 5); however, only a very small proportion of students seemed to be affected by this practice. Second, some faculty claimed that advisors would occasionally register students for a higher level course, either because they did not understand the policies or because they didn’t think the student really needed the lower level course. These two practices may have been more common for English than for math: at every college, students were slightly more likely to enroll in an English course that was too high than they were to enroll in a math course that was too high.¹³

Despite some course enrollments that were too high or too low, student adherence to recommended placement was extraordinarily high,¹⁴ both overall and across individual colleges. However, colleges did vary in terms of the proportion of students who delayed or avoided their developmental requirements. For example, developmental education avoidance was rare at one college: of students referred to developmental math, only 17% in their first semester and 7% over the two-year period did not enroll in math, and of students referred to developmental writing, only 4% in their first semester and 2% over the two-year period did not enroll in writing. One possible explanation for this college’s low developmental avoidance rate could be its intake process, which faculty and staff described as extremely effective in terms of providing students with personalized advisement during the admissions and registration period.

At the other end of the spectrum, one college had unusually high rates of developmental avoidance in math and another had high rates in English. In the high-

¹³ Most commonly, students who barely failed the writing placement exam (i.e., scored a 6) enrolled in gatekeeper English.

¹⁴ As a basis for comparison, among students who entered Virginia’s community colleges in fall 2004 and were referred to math remediation, 41% did not enroll in developmental math within four years. Moreover, among those who were recommended to remedial math but did not take it, nearly half skipped ahead to enroll in college-level math (Jenkins et al., 2009). Among students who entered Achieving the Dream community colleges, typically 20%–30% of developmental students enrolled in a course that was higher or lower than the one to which they were referred (Bailey, Jaggars, et al., 2010).

math-avoidance college, 58% of students avoided math their first semester and 37% avoided it for the entire two-year period. Students at this college may have been able to avoid math due to flexible requirements for non-STEM students, who could often fulfill their program's math requirement by taking certain science courses. While most of these science courses had math prerequisites, some popular courses did not. In the high-English-avoidance college, 42% of students avoided developmental writing in their first semester and 29% avoided it for at least two years. Two factors seemed to contribute to this pattern: In contrast to other colleges, many popular business courses at this college did not have English prerequisites, and this college also had an unusually high proportion of students who, rather than taking a semester-long developmental writing course, took a 20-hour, non-course-based developmental intervention (see discussion of the 20-hour interventions in Section 4.4).

4.3 Subject-Area Department Autonomy

Our discussion in this section has focused on the tension between system-wide consistency and individual college autonomy. Yet within a college, there can also be a tension between institutional control and departmental autonomy. For example, some researchers advocate locating developmental courses within a dedicated basic skills department rather than within math and English departments (e.g., Boylan & Bliss, 1997). Such centralization of developmental education departments could have two benefits: Instructors may be more likely to have specific training and interest in developmental pedagogy, and such departments may be more responsive to the needs of other subject-area departments rather than be focused exclusively on the needs of the math or English department. However, there is no clear evidence regarding the impact of centralized versus localized developmental education departments. At CUNY, colleges typically chose to retain developmental programming within subject-area departments. At all six CUNY community colleges, developmental math courses were located in the math department. At five colleges, developmental writing courses were in the English department and three of those colleges also housed their reading and/or ESL courses in the English department. Only two colleges had developmental education departments:

one that housed developmental writing, reading, and ESL courses and one that housed developmental reading and ESL courses.

Thus, in general across the CUNY community colleges, the math department controlled math developmental programming and the English department controlled writing developmental programming. Colleges typically did not have an overall coordinator of developmental education to ensure that the system was aligned with the needs of other degree-granting departments, and faculty in math and English tended to have little connection to other academic departments. Perhaps as a consequence, developmental coursework tended to focus solely on preparing students for introductory composition or college-level algebra, with little reference to each student's larger program of study.¹⁵ Overall, math and English faculty tended to feel that all developmental students should be held to the same literacy and math standards, regardless of the individual student's academic or career goals. These expectations may be derived in part from the fact that the PhD-level faculty who design departmental programming are dedicated to their own fields and feel that mastery of that field is critical to long-term success in any area. However, some respondents felt that it may be counterproductive to hold all students to the same standards, particularly in math. For example, one college administrator said, "Students have to take real hardcore math to graduate from this college, even if they are going to be a graphic designer or filmmaker. ...That presents a real barrier to graduation."

Some colleges recognized that students in different programs may need to meet different standards in math. During the time period under study, three of the six colleges had different developmental paths for students in science, technology, engineering, or math (STEM) academic programs. For the most part, the STEM sequence was similar to the regular developmental path, with one additional course designed to prepare students for calculus. At no college were developmental math requirements amended for students in explicitly non-mathematical programs of study (such as fine arts). As we did not interview faculty from disciplines outside of math and English, it is unclear whether these faculty felt that the current developmental math requirements were appropriate for their

¹⁵ With some exceptions. During the time period under study, three colleges had developmental courses that were paired with disciplinary college-level courses and/or contextualized to the student's course of study. However, these were restricted to a small proportion of faculty and developmental course sections.

students. Even had other departments wished to amend the requirements for their own students, however, the system-wide requirement that all students must pass the pre-algebra and algebra exams would render such adjustments impossible.

4.4 Summary of the Tension Between Consistency and Autonomy at CUNY

The CUNY system appears on the surface to have a strongly centralized and consistent developmental education policy, yet in our study, individual colleges exhibited a strong degree of variation in developmental policy and programming. In particular: the system specified exemption criteria, but colleges could work around those exemptions through course prerequisites; the system specified college-level placement cutoffs, but colleges could raise them; the system required at least a 20-hour intervention for failing students, but the nature of that intervention, including the number of courses and credits that students must take, was very different across colleges and subjects; and while the system did not require students to complete developmental coursework within a given timeframe, individual colleges' intake systems, course prerequisites, and program requirements seemed to strongly shape the behavior of students in terms of when they took their developmental courses.

Taking the larger view, these observations suggest that even in highly centralized systems, colleges will pursue all opportunities to exert autonomy over their own developmental policy and programming. If a given centralized system's policy were objectively "correct," then such college autonomy would be counterproductive. However, as will be discussed in more detail throughout the remainder of this report, there is no objectively optimal way to calibrate policy—at least not on the basis of current evidence. Thus, unless and until an optimal strategy is established and proven, consistency across a system may guarantee only that all colleges must pursue what they perceive to be "incorrect" policy. From the perspective of a college, then, resisting consistency and designing their own policies and programming to be as optimal as possible for their own student population seems to be the only rational strategy.

5. Efficient Versus Effective Assessment at CUNY

The CUNY system adopted the COMPASS math test in part due to its efficiency. Students can complete the exam in less than an hour, and computer-graded results are available almost immediately. The writing exam is slightly less efficient; to quickly turn around grading, a large number of English faculty from across the university are trained to use a specific essay-grading rubric. Two readers independently grade each exam at central locations; if the two scores are similar, they are summed to create a total score.¹⁶ Although multiple readers grade each exam, the process is handled quickly: according to administrators, an experienced reader can grade an exam in two minutes, and students typically receive their score 48 to 72 hours after taking the test. Overall, CUNY's placement testing system is able to efficiently process very large numbers of students; over the course of the years we included in this study, 68,221 students, or 91% of all incoming community college students, were tested in at least one subject prior to enrolling. While the efficiency of the exam processes is admirable, the majority of faculty expressed dissatisfaction with the test's effectiveness in terms of its lack of diagnostic information, as well as in terms of its lack of alignment with the larger curriculum. In the following subsections, we discuss these themes in more detail, focusing first on the math exam and then on the writing exam.

5.1 Math Exams

The COMPASS math exam (like its sibling, the College Board's ACCUPLACER) is a computerized adaptive test and thus can be administered very quickly. The exam begins with questions in the middle range of difficulty, randomly drawn from a large set of problems and topic areas. Students who perform well on early items proceed quickly to more difficult topics; students who perform poorly on early items are routed to an easier set of questions and move on to more difficult questions only if they answer the easier items correctly. Given that early performance determines the test content, students may not see the same set of exam items or topics.

¹⁶ If the two readers' scores are different (particularly if one is 3, indicating a need for remediation, and the other is 4, indicating college readiness), then the essay is referred to additional readers. If all additional readers give the essay a score of 3, the student is referred to remediation.

Systems that adopt the COMPASS test have some discretion over the length of the exam, and most colleges would prefer the test to be as short as possible in order to process students efficiently. As the test's developer ACT explains, however, there is an inherent tradeoff between efficiency and diagnostic precision:

Institutions offering a wide array of entry-level courses in a given curriculum may need a fairly long and accurate test to ensure proper placement. Institutions that wish not only to place students but also to assess individual strengths and weaknesses across a broad range of skills will require even more testing time. At the other end of the spectrum, for institutions with only a small number of entry-level courses, highly precise measurement may not be a critical concern. These institutions can place students with only a minimum of testing time. (ACT, Inc., 2006, p. 70)

At CUNY, given that each student must take tests in multiple subject areas, the university felt that lengthy testing would not be feasible for most students and opted for a short version of the math exam. This exam summarizes each student's math skillset into two simple scores: the pre-algebra score and the algebra score. In the subsections below, we discuss CUNY faculty and administrator reactions to the COMPASS exam. Consistent with ACT's perspective, respondents pointed out that the exam's very efficiency hinders its effectiveness in terms of adequately diagnosing students' strengths and weaknesses. Faculty also complained that the exam was poorly aligned with course content. When both factors are combined, it is clear to see that the exam is not currently an effective tool in terms of aligning developmental treatment with individual students' needs and goals.

Poor diagnostic ability. A highly efficient adaptive exam does not cover the same topic for every student, and for an individual student, it does not cover every relevant topic within a given skill level. Many faculty expressed frustration with these qualities of the exam. Some felt the lack of consistency across students was unfair; others felt the topic coverage was too random, resulting in skewed results for some students; and others complained about the lack of individualized diagnostic reports, which are impossible to generate from an exam that does not cover a fairly comprehensive set of topics. Box 3 includes some of the comments from math faculty on their perceptions regarding the consequences of the adaptive nature of the exam.

Box 3
Faculty Describe the Adaptive Math Exam

"The COMPASS is unpredictable. It is random. On average the COMPASS does a good job with placement, but it does a bad job for a lot of students."

"The problem with the COMPASS is that it's a mystery. It's not entirely clear what a number means."

"Two students take an exam, they both get 45. They both proceed further up. One person does a lot better than the other in the next course. Well, you might say, why is that? They took the same exam, they've got the same grade. Why is one doing better than the other? Well, the full statement there is, they didn't take the same exam."

"The way they do it, they'll go in, they'll take the COMPASS ... and somebody will walk out ('cause I stayed there usually and waited for them to come out), and somebody will come out having completed eight questions, and the person behind him or her will have completed 14 questions, and the person beyond them 18 questions. ... I'm sure COMPASS would say it's all exactly the same, but I don't think it is."

The unifying theme across all the comments is that the adaptive exam does not necessarily generate the correct placement for every student because it is neither comprehensive nor sufficiently diagnostic.

Additional diagnostic modules are available from the test maker, and some faculty expressed a desire to "get our hands on" these modules. However, using the additional diagnostics is not particularly feasible for individual faculty. The diagnostic tests contain "live" test items and thus CUNY must administer them under secure conditions in the testing lab; faculty cannot simply administer the diagnostics in their own classrooms. As an alternative, some math instructors administered departmental diagnostic exams on the first day of each developmental course. For these instructors, the primary purpose of this "first-day diagnostic" was to identify misplaced students and to allow such students to move up or down in the developmental sequence as appropriate. Yet in practice, very few students were re-placed on the basis of these exams. Indeed, in one college, the proportion of students passing the first-day test and thus moving up to the next course in the sequence was said to be "practically zero," and the college eventually discontinued the practice.

Thus, while faculty were frustrated with the lack of diagnostic information provided by the COMPASS, additional diagnostic information did not seem to be helpful in terms of altering placement. This seeming paradox may be grounded in the fact that a traditional developmental sequence is not designed to be responsive to diagnostic input. Consider, for example, a student referred to a two-course math sequence. She takes a

first-day diagnostic and does very well in terms of multiplication and division, fractions, decimals, and signed numbers, but she does poorly with basic algebraic concepts, resulting in a score of 65 on the exam. Despite having mastered over half the content of the current course, she cannot move up to the next course in the sequence. And given that her instructor is overwhelmed with students who are even farther behind, chances are slim that this student will receive additional supports or instruction tailored to her specific diagnosed needs. For CUNY and many other colleges, then, it does not make sense to sacrifice efficiency for improved diagnostic power, because the system has no effective way to leverage the additional information.

Difficulty aligning with course content. During the time period of our study, developmental students at CUNY were required to retake and pass the COMPASS pre-algebra and algebra placement tests in order to advance out of the developmental math sequence. These exit exams inevitably impacted the developmental curriculum. Yet many faculty felt the exams were poorly aligned with the material that ought to be taught in their courses, noting that the exams cover too much ground, including extraneous and overly advanced material (see Box 4). Consequently, math departments felt caught between two undesirable choices: Align the developmental curriculum with the COMPASS exam, to ensure that students are able to pass the exam, or align the curriculum with the skills needed to succeed in college-level algebra, and take the risk that students who succeed in the developmental sequence may fail the exit exam.

Box 4

Faculty Discuss the Math Exam Content

“Some of the questions are of a level that, for instance, you would find designated as difficult problems in the course that is the next succeeding course.”

“If you look at the departmental exam we give, the algebra is what you would get in a ninth-grade course; it’s what they need to know, but students can pass that and still not pass the COMPASS. ... We don’t think the COMPASS is an indicator of what you know.”

“You have this vast amount of material in this COMPASS test. It goes all the way to graphs, and when they get to graphs, they’re giving them parabolas, and shifting parabolas. ... They have things in there that I feel are not appropriate for [my] students.”

Due in part to the fact that they could not know the exact material that would be covered on the wide-ranging and randomly generated exit exams, developmental math faculty felt they were “required to teach a perfectly extraordinary amount of material in a

very short period of time,” skimming quickly over each topic and sacrificing the ability to delve more deeply and conceptually into key content areas. One instructor complained that the college placed too much importance on grades and the exam, which robs the enjoyment from teaching and learning and results in “boring, meaningless, formula memorizing.” Similarly, another faculty member discussed her involvement in a program that encourages pedagogical innovation, with an emphasis on instructional techniques that encourage conceptual understanding. She felt handcuffed in her ability to integrate the desired project- and activity-based instructional approach in her developmental class, because the exit exam heavily emphasizes procedural skills rather than conceptual understanding. Moreover, some faculty felt that certain aspects of the material covered in their courses was unnecessary; for example, one noted that it would be appropriate to remove factorials from the developmental curriculum and instead cover them in the introductory portion of a college-level statistics course. However, given that these materials were covered in the exit exam, faculty felt they had no choice but to cover them in class.

In general, math faculty felt strongly that the COMPASS exam was not an appropriate arbiter of college-level math readiness.¹⁷ In order to ensure that their developmental students indeed learned the skills necessary to succeed in college-level algebra, most math departments designed an additional exit exam, which was typically used as the final for the highest level developmental math course. While practices varied, most schools barred developmental students from taking the exit COMPASS exam until they had demonstrated proficiency according to the college’s own math standards, such as passing the departmentally-designed exam or otherwise performing well in the highest level course. These additional testing and filtering practices constituted some sacrifice of efficiency and further decreased consistency and standardization across the six colleges. At this point in the process, however, faculty and administrators were less concerned about efficiency than about ensuring that each exiting developmental student was properly prepared for college-level work.

¹⁷ Due to these concerns, effective May 2011, community colleges had the option of using departmental exit exams instead of COMPASS exams, and effective January 2012, CUNY will eliminate the COMPASS exit requirement for math developmental education completely, to be replaced with faculty-designed uniform exit exams (A. Logue, memo, February 25, 2011).

Difficulty aligning with individual student needs and goals. The COMPASS algebra exam is explicitly designed to test student readiness for college-level algebra. While most faculty felt it was not an adequate measure for this purpose, some faculty went even further and questioned whether that underlying purpose was appropriate for all students. These instructors felt that students' goals should be taken into account in determining math testing and placement. For example, in many programs, students can fulfill their field's math requirement by taking introductory statistics. To succeed in this class, students need a mastery of addition and subtraction, multiplication and division, squares and square roots, order of operations, frequencies and proportions, and very basic algebraic notation. For additional examples, Box 5 provides the catalog descriptions for other courses that fulfill the liberal arts math requirement at one or more CUNY colleges.

The content of these courses does not directly build on the content taught in the typical top-level non-STEM developmental math course, which covers algebraic expression, polynomials, linear equations, and quadratic equations. That is, for the most part, many students could probably skip the top level of developmental education and do no harm to their chances of success in courses that fulfill their own program's college-level math requirement.

Box 5
Course Descriptions for Example Liberal Arts Math Courses

"Critical-thinking and mathematical skills useful in making informed decisions on many aspects of modern life involving quantitative concepts. Topics include logical analysis and inference, mathematics of finance, statistical reasoning and probability."

"Focus on math methods found in the social sciences, the arts, and in business. Topics will include fundamentals of statistics, scatterplots, graphics in the media, problem solving strategies, dimensional analysis, mathematics in music and art, and mathematical modeling."

"The study of math systems and the role of math in modern culture."

Had colleges wished to alter the developmental math curriculum to better serve the needs of students pursuing fine arts, liberal arts, and other areas of study that are not heavily math-oriented, the testing and placement system would not have allowed these modifications. The COMPASS exam's efficiency (which does not allow for individual student diagnosis), combined with the consistent cutoff score used as both placement

instrument and as exit standard (which does not allow for different standards for different student goals), would have made it impossible.

5.2 Writing Exams

During the time period under study, the CUNY writing exam required students to write a persuasive letter. The typical prompt presented students with two potential policy options and asked the student to write a letter to a policymaker endorsing one option and explaining why. Similar to math instructors' reactions to the COMPASS exam, English faculty unanimously felt that the writing exam was insufficiently diagnostic and misaligned with the skills needed to succeed in college-level English.

Poor diagnostic ability. In order to efficiently process the exams, centrally-trained readers assigned a single holistic score to each exam. Readers also flagged essays that appeared to have “ESL-type errors” with an “E”; these exams were typically then reread by ESL faculty at the given school to determine the appropriate level of ESL placement. Although the central readers were trained in a standardized rubric to evaluate writing quality, they did not receive formal training in detecting ESL errors. As a consequence, ESL faculty felt that the E flag was unreliable; as one noted,

The problem is we only get the ones that get marked E. The first couple years we were doing it the ACT scorers were not marking E very much and later on they started marking everything E. And sometimes we end up with native speakers in ESL classes and there are a lot of students where it is not clear where they ought to be.

Several instructors noted that the readers' difficulties may be due in part to the high number of generation 1.5 students, a term used to indicate those who immigrated to the United States at a young age. One ESL instructor explained that the E flag:

...mixes the generation 1.5 with ESL. So when we reread the papers we look for idiomaticity—the kinds of features students who have lived here all their lives have that ESL students don't have—and try to separate them out. Figuring that they identify more with English, we send them to English.

ESL faculty at all schools attempted to address these problems by rereading exams marked E to ensure the student was properly placed in ESL, and at one school, the ESL

faculty reread every non-passing writing exam, whether it was flagged with an E or not. At this school, faculty felt that the cost in terms of decreased efficiency was worth the improvement in terms of placement accuracy.

Outside of potential ESL misdiagnoses, faculty expressed two other concerns regarding the usefulness of the exam in placing students. First, several faculty felt that students received insufficient information prior to the exam in terms of its importance as well as expectations of performance. As one respondent explained:

The real tragedy is that when they are taking the test, they don't have a sense of the implications. They don't have a sense that this is a real high-stakes test. That if they fail, it is going to cost them time and money. ... At the end, when they take the writing test, they are exhausted by that time. And then on top of that it says write a letter. For any student who is not savvy, you tell them to write a letter, they are going to write something short and sweet because it's a letter. ... Not realizing that a short letter like that, half a page, three quarters of a page, will send them right into [the lowest level developmental writing course].

Second, faculty described the policy-oriented writing prompts on the exam as “terrible,” “awful,” “sterile,” and “boring,” which they felt affected the quality of students’ responses. As one instructor said:

Often times it's not a very interesting subject. Students are asked if they want to refurbish elevators or put in new escalators at their school, or whatever. And they find that, what do I care about that? When have I ever thought about that? How do I develop a paper like that?

Another instructor explained:

The topics are emptied of any kind of meaning for the students, for things that students can really engage in. ... I feel that if the topics were more meaningful, we'd get more meaningful writing, we'd get writing that would be more engaged, where students have something to say, because these students do have a lot to say. But that's not what they're given on these tests.

To help address the perceived problems with initial writing placement, some schools encouraged faculty to administer first-day diagnostics; as with mathematics,

however, these first-day writing tests resulted in very little re-placement. While faculty who administered the diagnostics said that the information regarding student weakness was useful, they also noted that it did not substantively change the way they taught the class. Thus, some felt that the diagnostics were not worth the time. However, one respondent argued that the attempt makes a real difference to students: “You ask that one student who was given a second chance and moved on to [college-level English], and that should be enough for you.” Within the traditional course-based developmental sequence, then, the most important function of the first-day diagnostic may be its symbolic value: it gives students the sense of having a second chance and communicates the faculty’s willingness to help move students out of remediation as quickly as possible.

Difficulty aligning with course content. English faculty were unanimous in their dislike of the writing exam. But their antipathy was not necessarily due to its potential for initial misplacement; despite its flaws, most faculty felt the exam did a reasonable job in terms of placement (or as one faculty member put it, “I don’t think we’re at a point where we feel students are being egregiously misplaced”). Rather, faculty directed their strongest criticism at the test in its capacity as an exit exam, due to misalignment between the exam and the skills that students needed to succeed in college-level English (see Box 6). The exam asked students to write a letter, an assignment that requires very different structures and rhetorical devices than those that students would use to compose papers for college-level courses. Many faculty felt they had to teach the course as test-prep in order to ensure that students were able to pass the exit exam and move on to college-level courses in their program area. And teaching the course as test-prep could result in boring, uninteresting, “formulaic” assignments. As one instructor explained, when speaking of the stigma that many students feel upon being assigned to developmental education:

They think it reflects on them, that they are dumb, they’re stupid, and especially if the class is taught as if they are stupid, and you don’t challenge them and give them challenging work and literature to read and short stories and things like that. ... It reinforces that sense they have that they’re dumb.

Box 6
Faculty Discuss the Writing Test as an Exit Exam

“We don’t like the current writing test; you’re probably going to run into a lot of people griping about the CUNY ACT exam. But not because it’s inaccurate, but simply because the mechanics of the exam kind of force instructors into a corner in their own classes, and they end up having to teach to a test. ... And that kind of annoys instructors, because they then have to devote a large portion of the semester—and if you’re not, you’re really shortchanging your students—to these tests, to these prompts.”

“The problem is, there is a very formulaic approach. ... So I think there is a weakness in the test, in that it gets [students] into a particular mold that’s a little binding sometimes, and then they expect to write that way for the rest of their college career. ... They can kind of figure out the formula and then plug it in, in a way that I’m not sure is ultimately helpful to them.”

“These students do just enough to pass that test. So when they get to [college-level English] and they have to write an expository essay that involves reading and responding to a reading, they are at a loss because they really didn’t get the skills that they really needed to perform well. ... But they mastered that little argumentative essay they needed to pass the ACT. So, the students are frustrated again because they say, well I passed the ACT so why am I not doing well in [college-level English]?”

Due to widespread faculty dissatisfaction with the exam, faculty were involved in designing a new CUNY-wide writing exam during the course of our study. Faculty were very enthusiastic about the proposed exam for three reasons. First, the prompt would require students to respond to a reading, an approach that would be similar to the type of writing that the students would do in college-level courses. Second, students would be allowed to use a wider array of rhetorical devices to respond to the prompt. For example, the previous exam strongly discouraged reflecting on the prompt using personal experience; as a result, this rhetorical tool was typically not taught in developmental writing. As one respondent noted, with the new exam “the sky would be the limit” in terms of the tools that could be taught in developmental writing. Third, rather than providing only one holistic score, readers would rate several different aspects of writing quality, allowing for a more diagnostic set of results.¹⁸

Difficulty aligning with individual student needs and goals. Societal expectations in terms of writing may be more uniform than in terms of mathematics skill. For example, workers in many different fields, both occupational and professional, can succeed and advance with relatively basic math knowledge (far below the level of skills

¹⁸ The new writing exam, which was implemented in the fall of 2010, now yields five separate scores: (1) critical response to writing task and the text; (2) development of writer’s ideas; (3) structure of the response; (4) language use: sentences and word choice; and (5) language use: grammar, usage, and mechanics. For more information, including a scoring rubric, see <http://www.cuny.edu/academics/testing/cuny-assessment-tests/faqs/StudentHandbookCATWeb.pdf>

taught in college-level algebra). In contrast, workers with an associate or bachelor's degree in any field are expected to produce college-level writing: clear, well-organized, and grammatically correct prose that appropriately responds to the task at hand. Accordingly, there may be few opportunities to modify the required English curriculum for students with different academic and professional goals. While minimal requirements for writing skills may need to remain fairly constant across schools and program areas, that observation does not necessarily imply that *treatment*—the method of delivering curriculum—should remain constant across different types of writing problems and weaknesses. Yet with only one holistic score with which to place students, departments had little choice but to place students who may have similar overall scores but very different writing needs together in the same course; for example, each developmental writing class may mix students who are proficient with the mechanics of grammar but who have difficulty formulating high-quality ideas together with students who have good ideas but poor grammar.

5.3 Summary of Efficiency Versus Effectiveness at CUNY

Administrators' and faculty's discussions of placement policy were grounded in the general precept that standardized tests were a necessary part of the process, due to their efficiency. For example, when asked to describe a more effective method of placement, one faculty member said, "You would have to meet individually with them, and that is absolutely impossible. We have more than 1,000 students. A test is what we have to do." Thus when we asked faculty how placement assessment could be made more effective, they tended to suggest better aligned, more comprehensive, and more diagnostic tests.

Increased alignment of the exam with college-level course material would not necessarily infringe on efficiency. However, comprehensiveness and diagnostic accuracy are directly in conflict with efficiency. Such exams would require more student time, as well as more computer lab time, challenging both the college's lab resources and students' patience. The latter issue is not a negligible one: CUNY, like most public institutions, is partially dependent on funding derived from student enrollment numbers. Requiring potential students to wait in long lines to take lengthy tests could result in

enrollment drops, causing real financial damage. Moreover, it is not immediately clear how the system would effectively leverage diagnostic testing if it were available.

Many of the faculty complaints regarding exam effectiveness were focused on the exam as an exit instrument. Yet the same faculty also tended to feel the same exams worked reasonably well for the purposes of initial placement. The juxtaposition of these two opinions is puzzling; after all, if it is reasonable to place a student on the basis of a particular exam in August, why is it unreasonable to place the student on the basis of the same exam in December? Our speculation is that the exit exam is much more relevant to the experience of developmental faculty than is the placement exam. The exit exam directly impacts their curriculum and pedagogy. Moreover, by the end of each semester, the instructor knows his or her students well and certifies to take the COMPASS exam only those students who have done fairly well in the course. If one of these students then fails the exam, the mismatch between the student's skills and the exam's ruling then seems obvious. In contrast, the instructor cannot directly observe such mismatches in the exam when it is initially used as a placement instrument.

Stepping back from the specific context of CUNY, the results of this section raise two main points. First, all stakeholders desire more effective assessment, but for the most part, they assume that the time and costs inherent in a better aligned, more comprehensive, and more diagnostic system are prohibitive. Second, most community colleges across the country do not use exit exams, and so CUNY's experience in this regard is instructive. The exit exam throws into relief the problems with the assessment exam, in particular its poor alignment, in a way that is salient to faculty. The same problems may not be as clear at other colleges where the exam is used solely for initial placement—but that does not mean the same problems are not present.

6. Supporting Student Progression Versus Enforcing Academic Standards at CUNY

We begin this section with a general overview of CUNY community college student success in terms of persisting in school, as well as progressing through developmental education and into college-level courses. We then discuss the potential tension between student progression and the maintenance of academic standards.

6.1 Student Progression

To paint a picture of developmental student success at CUNY, we first examine student persistence in school. Next, we discuss students' overall progression through the sequence, including the number of months required for successful students to complete the sequence, as well as the role of sequence length in student progression and eventual success in college-level math and English.

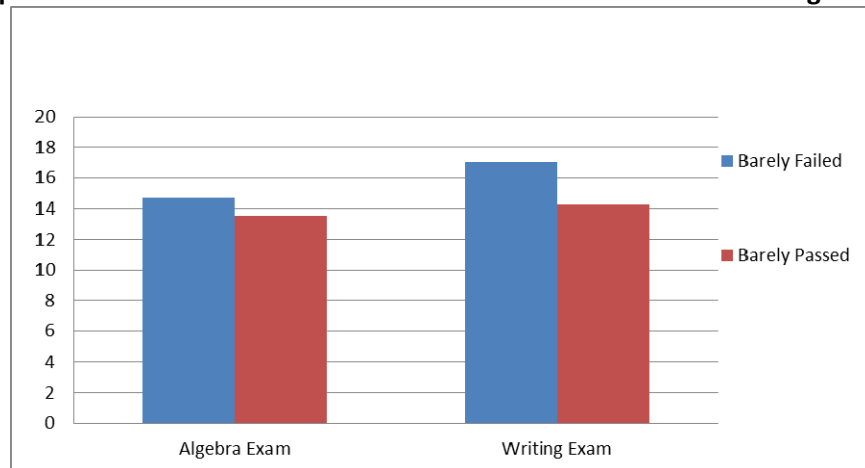
Persistence and attrition. Many community college students do not persist past their first semester of school for a variety of reasons related to poor academic skills, financial difficulties, or family or employment responsibilities. Recent research has suggested that beyond these factors, referral to developmental education may have a discouraging effect on persistence. Students are often surprised, confused, or angry when they discover that, despite graduating from high school or earning their GED, they are considered unprepared for college-level work (Strong American Schools, 2008; Venezia et al., 2010). These students may feel disappointed and discouraged by the unexpectedly long road ahead of them, which could dampen rates of initial enrollment or short-term persistence.

The CUNY institutional dataset available at the time of our analysis did not contain information on students who sat for the placement exam but never enrolled; accordingly, we could not assess whether referral tended to dampen initial enrollment rates.¹⁹ Among students who enrolled, however, we compared short-term persistence between students within a similar range of ability who were referred to developmental versus college-level courses (Figure 3). Overall, approximately 16% of students attend

¹⁹ However, the system is working to create these data, and in a subsequent report, we hope to include analyses addressing the impact of placement tests scores on initial enrollment.

for only one semester, leaving the CUNY system after their first term and not returning within four years.²⁰ Among students who were near the borderline in terms of needing developmental education, those referred to developmental math had similar attrition rates compared with those who were referred to college-level math; however, those referred to developmental English had significantly higher attrition rates than those referred to college-level English.

Figure 3
Dropout Rates After 1st Semester for Students Above and Below College Cutoffs



Note. For math, *barely passed* indicates scoring at the college-specific cutoff or no more than 3 points above; *barely failed* indicates no more than 4 points below cutoff. For writing, *barely passed* is a score of 7 or 8; *barely failed* is a score of 6. For more detailed information, see Appendix E.

Among developmental students, those who failed or withdrew from a remedial course in their first semester were least likely to return to CUNY again (Figures 4 and 5). Students who failed a developmental writing course in their first semester had a 26% chance of dropping out before the next semester, and those who failed a developmental math course had a 23% chance. Students who chose to delay their developmental coursework had only slightly better outcomes.²¹ In contrast, those who passed a

²⁰ The attrition results illustrated in Figures 3, 4, and 5 were conducted only for cohorts who entered in the 2004 or 2005 academic years because we can follow these students for at least four years, providing sufficient time to track long-term absence from the CUNY system, as well as long-term persistence and graduation. See Appendix E for more details about the sample used in the attrition analyses, and see Appendix G for a more detailed analysis of persistence by progression category.

²¹ Some students may delay math in order to avoid the developmental course, but others delay for more constructive reasons. Some colleges actively counsel students who are placed into both developmental English and math to begin their reading and/or writing first. In addition, some colleges have developmental

developmental math or writing course in their first semester were much more likely to return to school (and much more likely to graduate²² within four years). Of course, this descriptive analysis cannot answer the question of whether delaying or failing developmental courses *causes* dropout; rather, it may be that the type of student who tends to avoid or fail courses is already predisposed to drop out.

Figure 4
Long-Term Outcomes for Students Referred to Developmental Writing

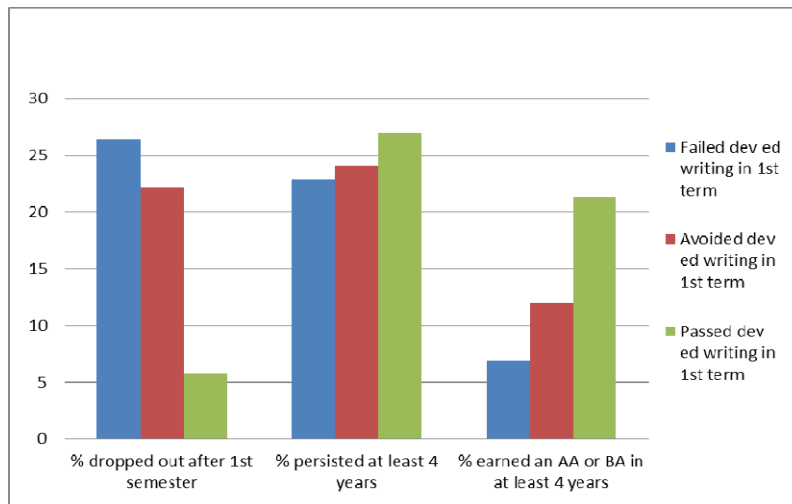
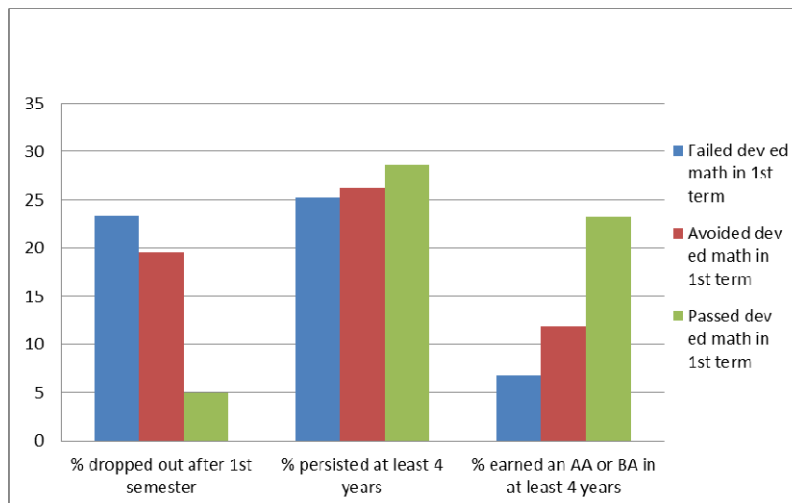


Figure 5
Long-Term Outcomes for Students Referred to Developmental Math



learning communities, which block courses in clusters that may not include developmental math in the first term.

²² We defined degree attainment as earning an associate and/or bachelor's degree. We did not consider certificates since less than 1% of students in our sample earned a certificate.

Progression through developmental education. Previous research drawing on data from several states (Bailey, Jeong, et al., 2010; Jenkins et al., 2009) has indicated that few developmental students complete their recommended sequence and move on to complete the introductory college-level math or English courses required for their program of study (here termed gatekeeper²³ courses). For example, in an early Achieving the Dream sample including seven states and 57 community colleges, only 20% of students referred to developmental math eventually enrolled in and completed college-level math within three years (Bailey, Jeong, et al., 2010). The likelihood of eventually completing a gatekeeper course is even lower for very poorly scoring students, who must proceed through a lengthy sequence of developmental courses.

Students drop out of the developmental-gatekeeper pipeline at multiple points. Some students never take a developmental course at all, some fail a course in the developmental sequence and never manage to complete it or move on, and some pass their first developmental courses but never enroll in the next developmental course in the sequence. Among those who complete the developmental sequence, some never enroll in a gatekeeper course and some enroll in gatekeeper but fail or withdraw from the course. We examined CUNY students' progression through the pipeline for math and writing, considering only those who actually enrolled in the developmental sequence, and tracked students for two years after their initial enrollment.²⁴

Figure 6 describes the progression of developmental math students through the non-STEM sequence.²⁵ These students were most likely to be referred to the first or second level of math developmental education (47% each); far fewer were referred to the third level (6%), in part because only one school offered a third level for non-STEM students during the timeframe under study. Across all levels, only 18% passed gatekeeper math within two years. In the top two levels, the most commonly-encountered barrier was failing a developmental course. Among students referred to the lowest level of developmental education, while course failure was still common, a substantial proportion

²³ See Appendix A for a definition of gatekeeper.

²⁴ Please note these figures are *not* directly comparable to those presented in similar studies of progression in other states (Bailey, Jeong, et al., 2010; Jenkins et al., 2009), as we use a different timeframe and baseline sample. Our figures include only developmental enrollees (ignoring referrals who never enrolled) and track students for only two years.

²⁵ For a definition of non-STEM sequence, see Appendix A, and for detail on the analyses presented in Figures 6 and 7, see Appendix F.

(37%) also became stalled in their progression by simply choosing not to enroll in the subsequent course in the sequence.

Figure 6
Progression of Students Through the Non-STEM Developmental Math Sequence

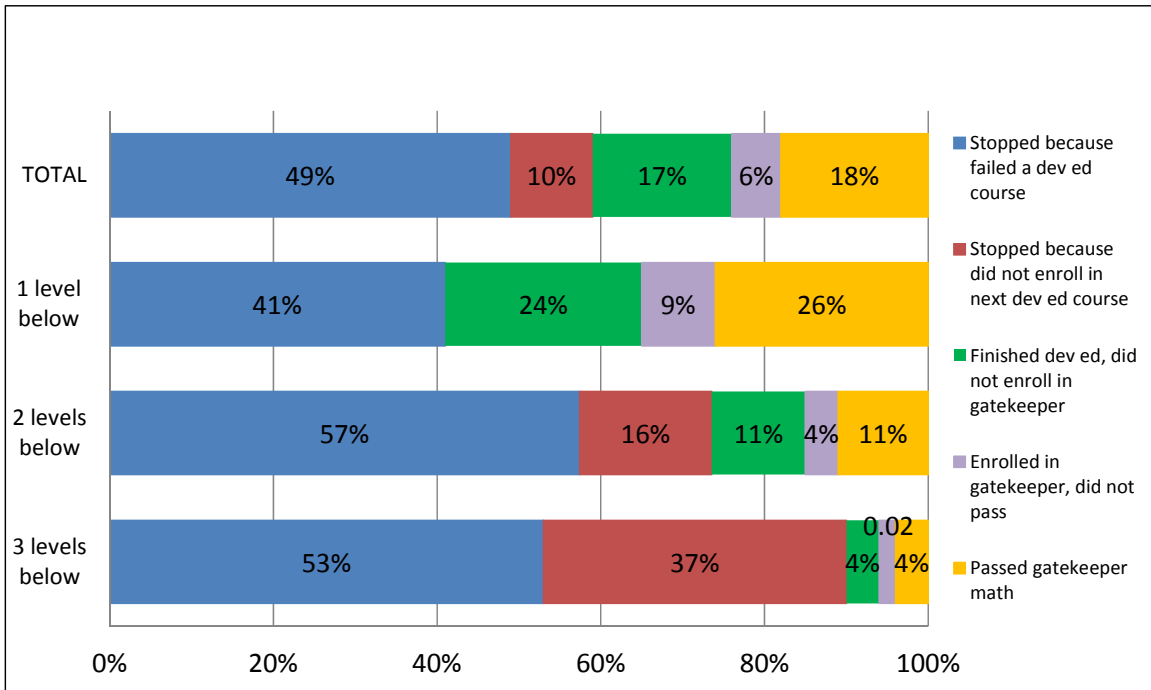


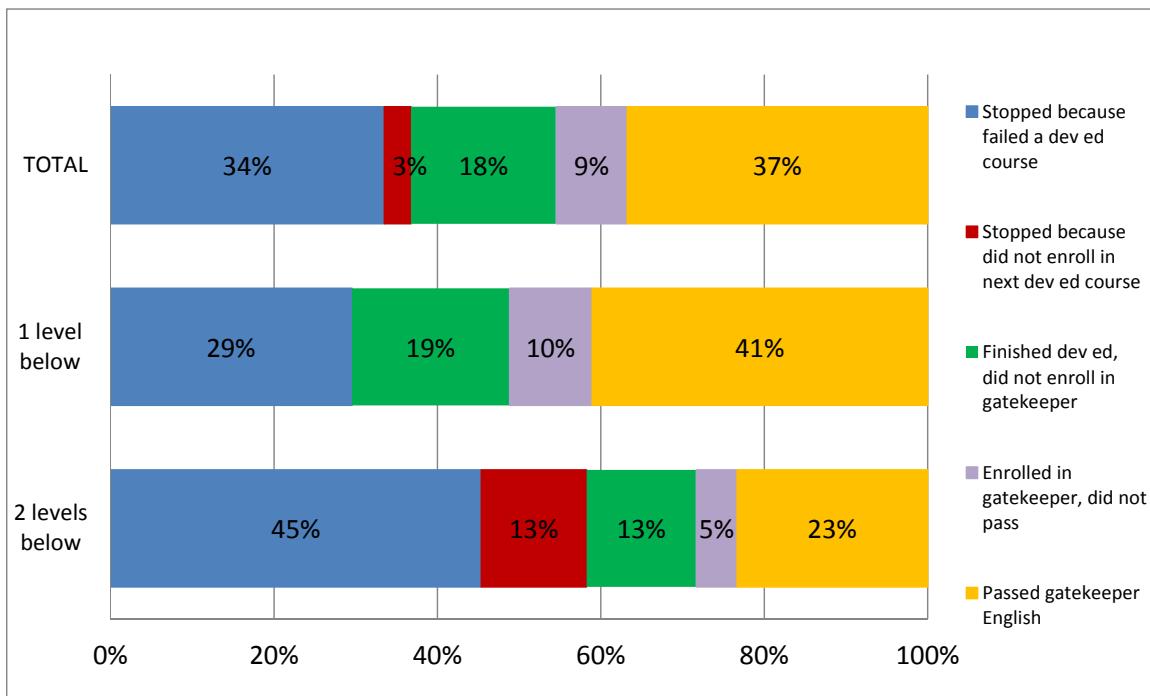
Figure 7 shows a parallel pattern for non-ESL²⁶ developmental writing students. Most students (75%) were referred to the top level of writing (in two schools, there was only one level of writing; thus all developmental writing students in those schools were referred to the top level). Students seemed to progress more successfully through the writing than the math sequence, with 37% eventually passing gatekeeper.

In the CUNY dataset, it is often difficult to determine whether a student failed a developmental course because of poor performance on class assignments, or because the student did relatively well on assignments but failed the system’s exit exam. These two possibilities tend to be mutually exclusive, as most schools do not allow students who perform poorly in the course to attempt the exit exam. Students who failed the exit exam were typically instructed to retake the associated course before attempting the exam again, although a few schools allowed such students to instead take a test-prep

²⁶ See Appendix A for a definition.

intersession workshop. Some students who failed the exit exam in their first semester buckled down to do the necessary coursework or intervention to retake the exam; however, the majority (91% of students who failed the pre-algebra exit, 72% of students who failed the algebra exit, and 62% of students who failed the writing exit in their first semester) stopped out of the developmental sequence.

Figure 7
Progression of Students Through the Developmental Writing Sequence



Among the developmental students who successfully passed the exit exams²⁷ within our two-year tracking period, some were able to do so within one semester of college entry while others required nearly the entire two years. Table 1 displays the 5th, 25th, 50th (median), 75th, and 95th percentiles in terms of the months required to pass the math and English exams for students referred to each level of developmental education in the given subject area. For example, for students referred to the second level of math, *among those who persist through to exit the sequence* (which, as Figure 6 points out, is only about 26% of those who initially enroll in Level 2), about 5% will have passed the

²⁷ These numbers are calculated based on college-specific standards.

exam in three months.²⁸ Twenty-five percent will have passed the exam within five months, about 50% within 10 months, 75% within 15 months and 95% within 22 months. Those requiring 22 months typically failed the algebra exit exam on the first try but passed on the second try.

Our two-year tracking period somewhat curtails the amount of time in which students may successfully pass the exam. If we examine earlier cohorts, which we can track for at least four years, then results among students referred to the top level of developmental education are similar to that seen in Table 1. For example, a top-level math developmental student who passes the algebra exam within the four-year tracking period will typically do so just four months after enrollment. However, among students referred to the second or third levels, the extended four-year tracking period reveals that the typical student may take even longer to pass the exam than is indicated above: the median is 15 months for those referred to the second level of math and 12 months for those referred to the third level of math, with the 75th and 95th percentiles lagging even further behind (see Appendix F, Table F1).

²⁸ Curiously, students referred to three levels below in math were able to complete their developmental requirements and pass the math retest more quickly than students referred to two levels below. To understand this pattern, we examined the records of this very small sample (N = 38) more closely. Their average algebra pretest score (21) was certainly not promising. Although half of the students followed the recommendation to enroll in a third-level course, all but one of those skipped at least one level in the sequence. The other half initially enrolled in a second or first-level math course (perhaps due to being moved up through first-day diagnostic testing). At the conclusion of their first course, all of these developmental “skippers” retested and successfully passed the algebra exam with substantially higher scores (more than doubling their initial scores, with a posttest average of 55). As a result, most were able to advance past more than one course in their first semester. Of this select group of 38 students who were referred three levels below and passed the algebra exam, 15 moved on to enroll in math gatekeeper within the two-year follow-up period, and 13 successfully passed it. This pattern of results suggests that, among students referred to three levels below in math, only those who were unusually motivated managed to exit developmental education within two years.

Table 1
Number of Months and Retests Required to
Pass Exit Exam (Within Two Years of Entry)

<i>Referral Level</i>	Algebra					Writing				
	5th	25th	median	75th	95th	5th	25th	median	75th	95th
1 Level Below										
Months to pass	3	3	4	9	15	2	3	3	8	16
# of exit exams	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	2	3
2 Levels Below										
Months to pass	3	5	10	15	22	3	4	8	11	20
# of exit exams	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	2	3
3 Levels Below										
Months to pass	3	4	8	11	20	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
# of exit exams	1	1	1	1	2	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Clearly, some students who successfully exited developmental education required an extended period of time to do so. Some may require the extra time because they delay their initial developmental course-taking or because they take breaks between courses. Others fail the exit exam the first time they attempt it and need to retake the associated course in order to attempt the exam again. Anecdotally, some faculty claimed that they had students who did well in a developmental course but failed the exit exam; these faculty tended to blame the exams, particularly the lack of alignment between the exams and the course curriculum, for barring the progress of otherwise prepared students.

The role of sequence length. The picture of student progression we painted above has one clear theme: Students referred to lower levels of developmental education are much less likely to successfully exit the developmental sequence, and among those who do, the sequence can take months or even years to complete. The primary factor behind these poor outcomes may seem obvious: students referred to the lowest levels are also the least well-prepared and may suffer from multiple academic and non-academic risk factors that limit their chances of success. Yet some students who have been deemed unprepared by placement tests can indeed succeed in college-level courses without participating in developmental education. A study of Virginia’s community colleges (Jenkins et al., 2009) found that, due to inconsistent enforcement of placement recommendations, large proportions of developmental students referred to all levels of

developmental education were able to enroll directly in college-level math and English. Those developmental education “skippers” were just as likely to succeed in college-level math and English compared with students who complied with developmental recommendations; moreover, in the long term, developmental skippers were just as likely to successfully earn a credential or transfer to a four-year school as were developmental compliers. Those results, however, do not shed light on why some skippers were able to succeed. Was this self-selected group particularly motivated to succeed or particularly savvy about navigating college? Did they select college-level courses and programs that were relatively easy? Or, all else being equal, does shortening or eliminating the developmental requirement reduce the likelihood that students will “stop out” of the developmental sequence, thus increasing their chances of long-term academic success?

At one school at least, faculty’s observations seemed to support the latter proposition. At this school, math faculty noticed that students were having difficulty completing the two-course non-STEM developmental algebra sequence. As one faculty member explained:

Many of them would take the first [developmental algebra] course, and then for whatever reason, even if they passed it, they would wait several semesters before taking the second [developmental algebra] course, at which point they had forgotten everything from the first course. Or, if they just squeaked through the first course with a D and then waited another semester, it was almost hopeless in the second course. We looked at the pass rate of the sequence over a two-year period, and it was very, very bad, just for that reason of students not following through and taking that second course immediately after the first course. So, instead of making liberal arts students take those two courses, we gave them one six-hour course. ... Even if the pass rates are not spectacular in [the new course], at least if you pass it, as a liberal arts student, you’re done with remediation and you don’t have to come back for another semester.

At the time of our study, the school had approved but not yet implemented the new six-hour single developmental algebra course for students in non-STEM degree programs. However, faculty were hopeful that the new course would have better overall outcomes than the previous two-course algebra sequence.

The variation in programming across the six CUNY schools provides an opportunity to more directly test the hypothesis that equally prepared students who are referred to shorter sequences will be more successful than those referred to longer sequences. We conducted several analyses to explore this question in more detail. In each analysis, we identified students who were similar in terms of their test scores, but (due to a difference in policy based on cohort of entry or school of enrollment) were referred to longer versus shorter developmental sequences.²⁹ The outcome for each analysis was whether the student was successful in passing a college-level course in the given subject within the two-year follow-up period.

For example, depending on their college of enrollment, non-STEM students who failed the pre-algebra exam (N = 15,700) were sometimes referred to three levels below gatekeeper math (14%) but much more often referred to two levels below gatekeeper math (86%). Figure 8a shows that those enrolled three levels below had lower rates of eventual gatekeeper completion (4%) compared with those who were enrolled two levels below (10%). If we further limit the same sample to students who failed the pre-algebra test with a very low score (21 or below, N = 7,153), the difference remains similar: 3% of those who enrolled three levels below eventually passed gatekeeper, while 9% of those who enrolled two levels below eventually passed gatekeeper (Figure 8b). Figures 8c through 8e show similar patterns. Figure 8c shows results for students scoring in the 27–29 range on the pre-algebra exam who were referred to the top versus the second level of math developmental education, Figure 8d shows results for students scoring in the 2–4 range on the writing exam who were referred to the top versus the second level of a writing sequence, and Figures 8e and 8f show the results for the small groups of students who took a 20-hour test preparation workshop rather than a semester-long top-level developmental course.

While these descriptive analyses are only suggestive, they each converge on the same conclusion: Students in the same range of ability who were referred to a shorter developmental sequence had an equal (or in some cases, substantially better) chance of

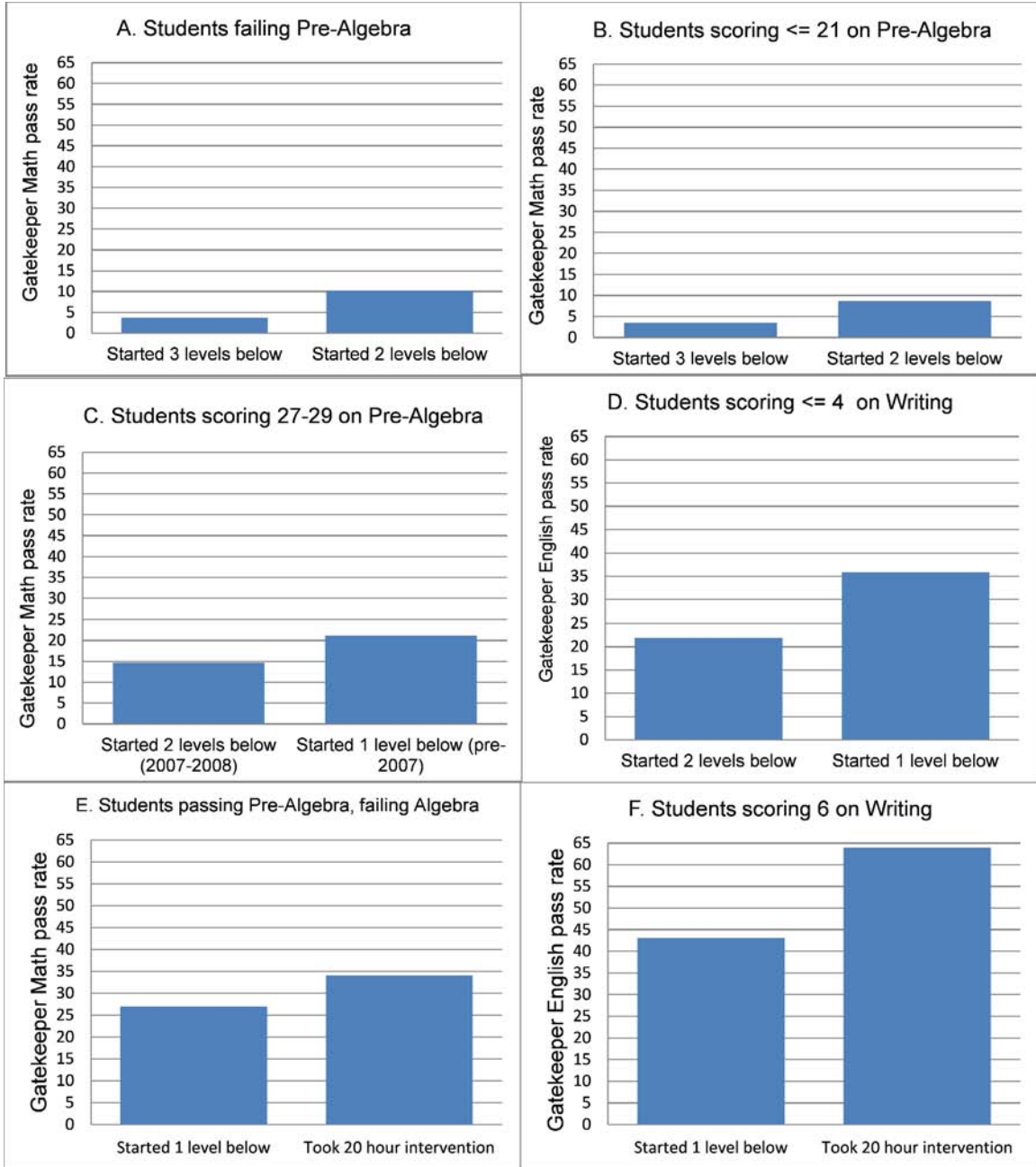
²⁹ See Appendix H for more detailed information.

eventually enrolling in and completing the related gatekeeper course in comparison with those who were referred to a longer sequence.³⁰

While some students will not be able to handle the increased difficulty of material in the shorter sequence, when we balance that against the fact that many students depart between courses in a sequence, it may be that *overall*, students are equally or more successful in terms of reaching and passing college-level math and English if they are referred to a shorter developmental sequence. Moreover, research on accelerated curricula in secondary education suggests that many underperforming students will rise to the challenge of high expectations, and given the proper supports, can indeed perform at a level that was previously thought to be beyond their skills (Burris, Heubert, & Levin, 2006).

³⁰ A smaller number of courses in a sequence does not necessarily indicate that the number of credit-hours in the sequence is fewer; for example, a school can choose to bundle two three-hour courses together into one intensive six-hour course. On average, however, the shorter sequences under examination also involved fewer credit-hours. For more information, see Appendix H, Table H1.

Figure 8
Gatekeeper Pass Rates for Students with
Similar Test Scores but Different Sequence Lengths



6.2 Enforcing Academic Standards

The foregoing discussion implies that developmental students may have a stronger chance of eventual success if they are referred to a shorter sequence. Yet our conversations with faculty and administrators at CUNY community colleges suggest that many would not be comfortable with the notion of shortening developmental sequences for fear of undermining academic standards. Respondents discussed these reactions within two intertwined contexts: their feelings about raising or lowering cut scores and their feelings about the importance of enforcing placement test policy.

Raising or lowering cut scores. If CUNY were to raise its central cut scores, the consequence for students on the borderline would be a lengthened developmental sequence. Conversely, lowering central cut scores would result in a shorter sequence for these students. When we asked faculty and administrators how they might feel if CUNY were to raise or lower cut scores, opinions differed. Some felt that cut scores were too low and ought to be raised. Others were ambivalent in their response and often explicitly referred to a tension between academic standards and student access (see Box 7).

Box 7

Faculty Discuss the Tension Between Standards and Access

“In general, I think [the cut scores] are too low. So, in that sense no, I wouldn’t have concerns [about raising them]. But I don’t know how useful it would be to raise barriers to the point where they are insuperable.”

“Here on this campus, we are not for lowering standards, but we are also not for increasing standards to the point where it starts to really exclude people and tampers with access.”

“There would be both good and bad things [about raising the writing cutoff from 7 to 8]. The bad is that more students would end up mired in the remedial system, never getting out, never passing the CUNY ACT exam. But [college-level English] would be a completely different environment probably, because you would have students that were more skilled. You’d have a test result that was more unequivocal. I would be anxious. I wouldn’t necessarily hate it. I would get used to it. But I would think about all the 7s.”

However, no respondents endorsed the notion of lowering cut scores. This negative reaction seemed to spring from three sources. First, departments seemed to worry that cut scores are interpreted by students, other colleges, and the community at large as a signal of academic rigor. In particular, during the time of our qualitative interviews, the system’s COMPASS exam cutoffs for college-level work were 10 to 15

points lower at the community colleges than at the system's four-year colleges; many respondents were not happy about this distinction. As one instructor said, "I am quite upset with the difference in the cut scores at the four-year and two-year institutions. How is it that a student with a 30 is ready for a college-level math course at a community college and yet one needs to get a 45 to be ready for a college-level math course at a senior college? That denigrates my program, my college-level material. It's the same college-level courses." Second, faculty worried about the difficulties inherent in teaching less prepared students. One English instructor, in discussing the mix of students in her top-level developmental writing class, explained:

Right now there's such a mix that it's so tough to try to address all of these different needs. You don't want to play to your strong students; on the other hand you don't want to just play to your weak students. But what I find is that when there's such a gap, it's really difficult to know what happy medium to strike. And I do think it's a matter of placement. Sometimes you'll get into a class and you'll think: "How can all of these students be here?" And there is such a jump, I mean there's a *chasm*, really, between students who officially are at the same point—but they just really aren't. And I do wonder whether raising some of the standards a little bit might help with that.

Third, faculty worried that if cut scores were too low, students who barely passed the exam and were placed into a college-level course would struggle and potentially fail the course. At its foundation, this perspective suggests that it is better for such students to be referred to developmental education, where they may do quite well, allowing them to move on with more confidence and preparation to the college-level course. Yet this perspective is predicated on the assumption that such students will indeed eventually move on to the college-level course—an assumption that is called into question by our analyses of progression.

All of the faculty we interviewed were strongly committed to student learning and it is unlikely that any of them relished the notion of having to fail an underprepared student. It is understandable, then, that they would prefer not to have to deal with less prepared students who may struggle in their courses. Yet the perspectives of faculty are limited: each instructor can see only the successes and failures of students within their

own course. They do not see the attrition that occurs *between* courses; those losses and failures are invisible and are emotionally salient to nobody except the student involved.

Enforcing placement policy. Each of the six colleges were quite strict in enforcing their testing and placement policy, and both administrators and faculty were in agreement regarding the importance of this enforcement. According to respondents, loopholes or alternate strategies for placement into a college-level course were few, and their experiences and perceptions are supported by quantitative analysis (see Figures 1 and 2). Most schools did not allow appeals from students who wished to contest their placement into developmental education.³¹ As one faculty member said,

I just spend a lot of time hearing the same story over and over again. “It was a bad day. I’m better than a 6 writer. Can I take the test again?” And no. What good is a test if you can keep taking it again until you get the result you want? That’s not what they want to hear.

While some schools offered 20-hour interventions to help students prepare for retest, the bulk of these interventions were offered to students who had completed the recommended developmental course but failed the retest. Several faculty and administrators felt that it was inappropriate to allow an entering student who barely failed the exam to take a 20-hour intervention rather than a full developmental course. One instructor explained that her school allowed the practice, “But we don’t like it. ... We feel that a semester in which they are reviewing the material prepares them better to succeed in the other courses. We are afraid that just passing the COMPASS because of the workshop doesn’t really prepare the student.”

As noted in an earlier section, most colleges restricted access to the COMPASS algebra exit exam (for example, to students who had completed the developmental math sequence, or to students who passed the department’s top-level departmental math exam with a grade of C or better). While faculty regarded these practices as necessary to ensure academic quality, administrators had another reason to restrict access to the COMPASS exit exam: institutional performance metrics. The CUNY system benchmarks each community college against the others in terms of a variety of student success measures,

³¹ While some schools allowed first-class-day retesting as a form of appeal, these tests were used to move students within the developmental sequence and could not be used to move students from a developmental course to a college-level one.

including pass rates on the developmental writing exit exam and the COMPASS math exit exam. According to administrators, the CUNY system typically allows each college to chart its own course as long as the institution's metrics remain satisfactory. College administrators, then, have a powerful incentive to ensure that only students who have a strong likelihood of passing the developmental exit exam are allowed to sit for the exam.

Overall, our discussions with faculty and administrators revealed a strong ambivalence about the role of placement exams in the enforcement of academic quality. Faculty and administrators do not necessarily believe that passing the placement exam signals readiness for a college-level course—and indeed, research on assessment exams shows that placement scores typically predict little of the variance in student success in college-level math and English (Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011). Yet institutional distrust of the exams is coupled with a strict adherence to testing and cut-score policies, with little opportunity for appeal—practices that clearly and publicly convey the implication that the exams are infallible.

6.3 Summary of Progression Versus Standards at CUNY

Similar to most community colleges across the country, students' progression through developmental education at CUNY is slow and uncertain. For example, among students referred to the second level below college in mathematics, only 26% exit the developmental sequence within two years, and the time required for each student to do so is typically at least 10 to 15 months. Students can progress through the sequence more quickly if they are offered shorter sequences, including 20-hour interventions that allow them to reattempt the exam without developmental coursework. Yet faculty worry that such shortcuts result in more underprepared students enrolling in college-level courses, which may in turn cause a slow erosion of academic standards.

When we consider efficiency versus effectiveness, the source of the conflict is clear: time and cost are the villains, forcing colleges to maintain efficiency at the expense of their desired goal of effectiveness. In contrast, when we consider the tension between progression and standards, there is no clear villain. Faculty and administrators, in general, want to support student progression. And faculty and administrators, in general, want to maintain the quality of the education they provide. Yet the two goals can tend to work

against one another. As a result, institutions and individual faculty members can hold positions that are internally inconsistent, such as recognizing that placement exams are unreliable yet strictly adhering to their results, or expressing anger and frustration about the flaws of an exit exam yet feeling that same exam is a perfectly reasonable instrument for initial placement.

In the concluding section, we discuss each of the three tensions that we identified at CUNY in terms of their larger context and implications and suggest some initial recommendations in terms of how systems and individual colleges can reconcile the tensions to create policy that optimizes consistency, autonomy, efficiency, effectiveness, student progression, and academic standards.

7. Discussion: Reconciling Opposing Forces

Nationwide, the goals that help shape developmental education policy and practice often seem locked in mutual struggle, resulting in a dysfunctional system that achieves none of its goals. By examining how the opposing forces that shape developmental education play out within one community college system, we hope to identify strategies occurring in the CUNY system and across the country that may resolve those tensions, allowing the goals of the developmental system to work together rather than in opposition.

7.1 Consistency that Allows for Flexibility

CUNY's common placement exams present a broadly consistent message to New York City's high schools and their students. This consistency laid the groundwork for CUNY's recently launched collaboration with the Mayor's Office and the city's Department of Education to align academic standards between high school and college.³² While plans are still under development, it is clear that CUNY's placement exams will be critical to the alignment process. Recognizing the importance of the exams, CUNY

³² Alignment between high school and college comprises two of the seven goals of the Graduate NYC! project, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. See <http://www.cuny.edu/about/administration/offices/ue/CUNYDOECollgeReadiness.html> for more information.

recently undertook a serious effort to improve the tests and ameliorate or eliminate their flaws. As discussed in an earlier section, during the 2009–2010 academic year CUNY convened a committee of English faculty from across the system who worked together to create a new common writing placement/exit exam. The new exam, which faculty generally believed to be more strongly aligned with the skills students need to succeed in college-level English, was launched in the fall of 2010. Similarly, the university is now convening panels of mathematics faculty to design common standards in arithmetic and elementary algebra that will be the basis for departmental exams, and which will be more closely aligned with the college-level curriculum.

Cross-college working groups, such as those convened by CUNY, are valuable not only to promote consistency in the placement exam, but also to help community college and four-year college faculty communicate expectations and share curricular goals. Ideally, system-wide working groups would include not only math or English faculty, but also instructors in other high-enrollment departments—such as business, liberal arts, and the health professions—who would communicate their expectations regarding the reading, writing, and mathematics competencies necessary for entering students to succeed in their program. In reading and writing, this information could be used to design a developmental curriculum and corresponding exam that are more contextualized, integrating the types of reading and writing assignments that students will be expected to perform in social science, natural science, business, and other college-level courses (see Perin, 2011). In mathematics, an understanding of the expectations of content-area faculty would allow the system to design an exam that measures the minimal skills necessary for all students, with additional exam components required only for students entering math-heavy courses or programs of study. For example, students who are undecided or are on a liberal arts track might be required to demonstrate proficiency in the skills necessary to succeed in a basic statistics or quantitative literacy course—the type of course they are likely to take in order to fulfill the liberal arts math requirement. If a student then decides to switch to an engineering major, he or she would be required to demonstrate proficiency in an additional set of math skills prior to enrolling in math-heavy courses in the major.

The notion that institutions should create distinct math pathways for students in different programs of study has been embraced by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching,³³ which points out that the calculus-oriented curriculum of most mathematics developmental education programs is a poor fit for the skills required in most of today's occupations and professions. Working with 30 community colleges and universities, as well as key national organizations such as the American Mathematical Association of Two-Year Colleges, the Foundation has designed statistics-oriented and quantitative literacy-oriented pathways for developmental students entering non-STEM academic programs. In discussing the notion of such differentiated pathways with mathematics faculty from community colleges across the country, some have expressed concern about this notion, arguing that intermediate and advanced algebra skills (such as factoring quadratic equations) are important for all students to master, regardless of whether those particular skills are applicable to the student's chosen program of study. And indeed, perhaps most academics would agree that every college-educated person ought to possess the critical-thinking skills and logical step-by-step processes required to solve intermediate and advanced algebra problems. Yet a barely passing score on a standardized math exam does not guarantee that a student possesses these particular skills. Moreover, given that most entering students are unlikely to already possess these skills at the desired level, it is important to recognize that algebra instruction is not the only method of teaching and building critical and logical thought processes. These skills and strategies can be taught in statistics courses, quantitative literacy courses, social and natural science courses, philosophy courses, and potentially in any academic college-level course. This line of thinking suggests that colleges and larger institutional systems should not depend on developmental math placements and coursework to guarantee these skills, but rather employ curriculum-based strategies to inculcate these skills among all entering students, within both developmental and college-level courses.

Overall, to reduce confusion and maximize alignment, large systems may find it helpful to encourage faculty to work together—across both colleges and different academic departments—to define learning outcomes in key developmental and college-

³³ For more information, see <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/developmental-math>

level courses. These learning outcomes can provide the basis for common placement exams that tap the minimal math, reading, and writing skills necessary to succeed in English and in other key introductory courses, while allowing content-area departments the flexibility to require additional levels of proficiency as needed. By creating consistency through cross-college discussion and collaboration rather than through externally-imposed fiat, a system can continue to honor its individual institutions' goals and values, rising above the struggle between consistency and autonomy. And by integrating the concerns and issues of each college, the system's policy is more likely to be effective for all colleges, reducing the degree to which colleges will push back against full implementation of the policy at their own institution. Moreover, common system-wide placement or exit exams do not necessarily imply that all colleges must have exactly the same developmental sequences. Although evidence from this report and others (e.g., Edgecombe, 2011a; Jenkins et al., 2010) suggests that shortened developmental sequences may result in equal or greater student success, as yet there is no clear prescription regarding the "best" design for developmental programming. Accordingly, it makes sense for systems to allow individual colleges the flexibility to experiment with developmental courses and sequences—and to support colleges' attempts to shorten sequences through accelerated programming, tutoring, test preparation workshops, or other means, as discussed in more detail below.

7.2 Efficient Assessment that Aligns with Treatment

CUNY's fall 2010 deployment of the new writing exam, which provides scores in five different skill domains, demonstrates that an exam can remain efficient while incorporating more diagnostic value. However, in order for these diagnostic exams to be worth the small tradeoff in efficiency, the additional information they provide must be leveraged to provide more effective treatment. Across the country, many institutions are interested in the notion of linking diagnostic testing to specific instructional modules, so that a student needs to take only the modules in which they scored poorly, rather than taking an entire three- or four-credit course. It is important to note, however, that this modularized approach has not yet been rigorously tested, and thus it is not clear whether it would accelerate student success. Indeed, if taken to its furthest extent, modularized

instruction could result in drilling students on subskills that are isolated from their conceptual and applied context; and according to pedagogical theories on situated cognition and contextualization (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Johnson, 2002), such approaches do not allow for the transfer of skills to other courses and real-world tasks. Thus it may be important to find a balance between tailoring content to an individual's needs and integrating that content together with broader concepts and related skills. Below, we outline some possible ways to strike a balance that could be both institutionally efficient and instructionally effective.

In terms of writing, a diagnostic exam can provide colleges with a clearer understanding of developmental students' skill profiles. To effectively leverage this information, the testing and placement system could not only identify each student's writing weaknesses but also restructure the delivery of the writing curriculum to explicitly address specific weaknesses. For example, schools could require a lab component for each developmental writing course, with lab hours fulfilled by attending the academic learning center to receive additional support and practice in targeted areas of weakness. This strategy would require faculty to work together with the learning center to develop appropriate support for key areas of weakness. Students would be placed in the level of developmental writing indicated by the placement exam, but after students enroll in the appropriate class, instructors could take advantage of first-day testing to administer additional surveys or more-targeted diagnostics, then use that information in coordination with the learning center to assign students to specific lab sections, tutors, workshops, or tutoring-based assignments. As many underprepared students have problems not only with specific skills but also with time management, metacognitive reflection, and other general academic strategies (see Karp, 2011), developmental course curricula could also include strategy development and metacognitive skill building for all students.

In terms of mathematics, the Virginia community college system's developmental math redesign, currently underway, provides an illustration of how a system could potentially leverage diagnostic testing (Virginia's Community Colleges, 2010). A redesign team including mathematics and content-area faculty from across the Virginia system defined nine "pre-college" mathematics units, ranging from operations with

positive fractions to quadratic equations, parabolas, and systems of linear equations and inequalities. Consistent with our recommendations in the section above, the redesign team recommended that career and technical education programs would have the discretion to determine the units required in their own area, while liberal arts programs would require units 1–5 and STEM and business areas would require units 1–9. The Virginia system is designing an exam that will diagnose student performance in each of the nine units, and each unit will correspond with one developmental course credit. Theoretically, by allowing students to take only the modules they need, students will be able to complete developmental education more quickly. Given that many students take the opportunity to drop out between courses, however, there may be some psychological benefit to bundling several needed competencies together into one course. Moreover, scheduling and financial aid requirements may discourage offering nine different one-credit courses. In Virginia, then, colleges will maintain the flexibility to mix and match units in ways that meet the college’s administrative efficiency needs as well as the needs of their own student population. Some colleges may choose to implement hybrid or lab-based styles with the aim of allowing students to proceed through units at a quicker or slower pace, while others may choose a more traditional structure in which the whole class covers the same material at the same pace.

Overall, systems may be able to strike an ideal balance between efficient and effective assessment by testing students on a manageable number of key competency areas, such as the five writing competencies identified by CUNY, or the nine math units identified by Virginia’s community colleges. Colleges can then adapt their developmental course structures and supports to provide specific treatments to address weaknesses in each competency. At the same time, colleges must ensure that such modular approaches do not degenerate into drilling students on isolated subskills. Accordingly, colleges may wish to explicitly incorporate a variety of applied contexts and connections into each module, contextualize modules within the student’s specific program area, or integrate developmental modules as additional required components within higher-level developmental or introductory-level college courses. In developmental math, modularized approaches may also incorporate structured student collaboration and the solving of problems using multiple representations and solution strategies—two

pedagogical approaches that are tied to higher student outcomes in mathematics (Hodara, 2011). For systems concerned with the quality of modularized or otherwise accelerated approaches, well-designed exit exams can help ensure that new, innovative, or non-course-based treatments remain as effective as the traditional block of sequenced courses.

7.3 Supporting Progression While Maintaining Academic Standards

Our analysis of developmental sequence length across the six CUNY community colleges suggests that shorter sequences do no harm to students (and in some cases, may help students) in terms of the likelihood of eventually enrolling in and passing college-level math and English. This descriptive evidence accords with a growing body of data on accelerated developmental courses (e.g., Edgecombe 2011a; Jenkins et al., 2010). In her review of accelerated strategies, Edgecombe explains that colleges typically take one of two approaches to spur student progression through the developmental sequence: (1) “rationalizing” the developmental curriculum, by eliminating redundant content across courses and modifying the remaining content to be more closely aligned to the college curriculum; and (2) “mainstreaming” developmental students into college-level math or English courses while providing additional supports, such as a companion developmental-credit support section.

Faculty may worry that accelerated strategies allow less prepared students to enter college-level courses. In turn, when faced with less prepared students, a college-level instructor may feel pressured to “water down” the course by adjusting the rigor of assignments, creating looser grading rubrics, and generally allowing more exceptions in terms of deadlines and other expectations. As noted in the previous section, however, a developmental exit exam that is solidly aligned with college-level material would ensure that accelerated approaches produce students with the same level of skill as do traditional developmental sequences. Thus, in order to support student progression while maintaining high academic standards, the most obvious solution may be to encourage colleges to experiment with shortened sequences, including the use of non-course-based strategies such as test-preparation workshops, while also requiring students to pass a high-quality well-aligned exam prior to enrollment in key introductory courses. A major drawback to this strategy, however, is that the exit exam requirement may thwart

experimentation with mainstreaming programs, some of which seem quite effective (e.g., Jenkins et al., 2010). For example, given the exit requirement at CUNY, only two schools offered a mainstreaming option and only under very specific circumstances.³⁴

A more difficult but also more effective and consequential strategy to ensure high academic standards in college-level courses might be to institute rigorous requirements into the curriculum that cannot be circumvented by an individual instructor who is feeling pressure from his or her students to water down the course. These requirements can be implemented at both the institutional level and the departmental level. First, at the institutional level, many colleges require that their students take a certain number of “writing-intensive” courses in order to graduate. Similar requirements could be instituted in terms of “reading-intensive” courses. Recent research indicates that most students take very few writing- and reading-intensive courses during their college career, but the fact that participation in such courses is correlated with the development of critical thinking and complex reasoning skills over time (Arum & Roksa, 2011) implies that colleges should be more proactive in setting requirements to take such courses, as well as requirements for faculty to participate in teaching such courses. Second, at the departmental level, faculty can work together to establish common learning outcomes across course sections that tap not only content knowledge but also higher-order critical-thinking and analytic reasoning skills. The process of defining learning outcomes is a key step forward in terms of helping faculty from different disciplines communicate and align expectations across courses in terms of key reading, writing, and math skills (see Perin, 2011). Moreover, measuring these learning outcomes on a consistent basis can help faculty within each department identify gaps between their own academic standards and their students’ performance using a metric that is much more clear, consistent, and informative than end-of-semester letter grades (see Jenkins, 2011). Such clear and actionable information would allow faculty to design an agenda for learning outcome improvements that may include curricular redesign, a more strategic use of campus learning resources, or a more focused and targeted use of faculty professional development.

³⁴ I.e., two schools allowed entering students with a writing score of 6 who also passed the reading exam to advance to a special section of college-level English.

7.4 Final Thoughts

Across the country, institutions struggle with how to improve the effectiveness of developmental education. Attempts at reform can come to an impasse when stakeholders—including the system, individual colleges within the system, and faculty and students within each college—champion seemingly irreconcilable points of view. In this report, we identify three common sources of tension that arise: system-wide consistency versus institutional and departmental autonomy, efficient versus effective assessment, and the support of student progression versus the enforcement of academic standards. We use the example of one large community college system to bring those tensions into relief and discuss how they might be resolved. Overall, in order to reconcile competing points of view and create a developmental system that can be consistent yet flexible, both efficient and effective, and support progression while maintaining academic standards, we recommend that systems consider four approaches.

First, faculty across disciplines within a system should work together to create well-defined learning outcomes for key introductory courses. Second, these learning outcomes should then serve as a basis to design common placement exams for the general education curriculum. Exams should include a manageable number of diagnostic components, and system policy should allow for the addition or subtraction of test components based on a student's program of study. Third, with these high-quality, well-aligned exams in hand, colleges can then experiment with shortened and accelerated developmental sequences, learning support modules, contextualized developmental courses, and other innovations. And fourth, colleges should rely not only on placement exams to ensure academic rigor but should also encourage faculty within each department to work together to design common learning outcomes that can serve as a foundation for continuous improvements in the quality of teaching and learning. As Jenkins (2011) points out in his review of institutional improvement, colleges can create time and space for this critical faculty-driven work by redefining professional development and departmental service, focusing these activities more sharply on defining, aligning, and improving departmental learning outcomes.

More broadly, our three-tensions framework can help systems and individual colleges identify some of the sources of conflict and dysfunction in their developmental

approach. Leaders can then convene college stakeholders to discuss these tensions in the open, in a supportive and non-threatening environment. By acknowledging that both sides of each tension represent valid goals and by discussing how those tensions might be reconciled to maximize both goals, colleges may be able to move forward dramatically in their conceptualization of an optimal developmental education system, setting the groundwork for real improvements in policy, programming, and eventual student success.

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Appendix A: Technical Definitions

Several technical terms appear throughout the report; we define these below.

Cohort: A cohort is a group of students who enter college in a given semester. A fall cohort is defined as all first-time certificate- or degree-seeking students who initially enrolled in the summer or fall of a given academic year. A spring cohort is defined as all first-time certificate- or degree-seeking students who initially enrolled in the spring of a given academic year. In this report, we examine the following cohorts: fall 2004, spring 2005, fall 2005, spring 2006, fall 2006, spring 2007, fall 2007, and spring 2008. We tracked each cohort's course enrollments and outcomes across their first several years of enrollment at CUNY.

Gatekeeper: A gatekeeper course is a college-level, introductory math or English course that students must take to fulfill their math and English program requirements. These courses also serve as prerequisites to more advanced math and English courses. Each college had only one or two English gatekeeper courses but had a much wider array of math gatekeeper courses, ranging from four to 11 courses per school. Some math gatekeeper courses were prerequisites for higher-level math courses required of students in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM) fields, while others served as terminal math elective courses that liberal arts majors could take to fulfill their program's math requirement. The term *gatekeeper* is similar to the term *gateway*, which is used by CUNY to refer to specific introductory courses. In English, the terms *gatekeeper* and *gateway* are synonymous. In math, the term *gatekeeper* refers to a wider variety of math courses, while CUNY's label, *gateway*, refers only to introductory college-level math courses that serve as prerequisites to more advanced math courses within majors that require more advanced math.

English-exempt: According to CUNY central policy, entering community college students who earned a 480 on the SAT critical reading, a 20 on the ACT English, or a 75 on the New York State English Regents exam were considered college-ready in English and, therefore, exempt from taking the COMPASS reading and writing placement exams. We call these students *English-exempt*.

Math-exempt: According to CUNY central policy, entering community college students who earned a 480 on the SAT math, a 20 on the ACT math, or a 75 on the New York State Math A, Math B, Sequential II, or Sequential III Regents exam were considered college-ready in math and, therefore, exempt from taking the COMPASS pre-algebra and algebra placement exams. We call these students *math-exempt*.

ESL/Non-ESL: All colleges had separate writing sequences for students who speak English as a second language. Courses in these sequences are termed *ESL courses*. This report does not include any analyses on students in ESL courses; a subsequent report will discuss these students and their progression in more detail. In this report, we focus on students in developmental writing sequences. We term these courses *non-ESL* writing courses to distinguish them from ESL writing courses.

Non-STEM/STEM students: The CUNY dataset includes information on the academic program and degree that each student selected when they entered a CUNY community college. In math, four colleges had a different developmental sequence for students intending to enter math-heavy programs of study. These programs, which require math gatekeeper courses with more rigorous prerequisites (i.e., higher placement scores, scoring above the cutoff on an additional placement exam, and/or an additional developmental education course) are termed STEM programs or majors (even though not all of these programs were in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics fields). Students at these four colleges who chose a STEM program are termed *STEM students*. We term all other students as *non-STEM students*, including all students at the two colleges that have the single developmental math sequence regardless of program choice.

Non-STEM developmental math sequence: As discussed in the definition of *non-STEM/STEM students* (above), four schools had distinct STEM³⁵ and non-STEM developmental math sequences. At the remaining two schools, which made no distinction among developmental students in terms of their intended program of study, the math developmental sequence was classified as *non-STEM*.

³⁵ We present the progression analysis of students through the STEM developmental math sequence in Appendix F, Figure F1.

Appendix B: Qualitative Methodology

A team of CCRC researchers, including the authors of this report, collected the qualitative data, first receiving approval for the study from the Teachers College Institutional Review Board and the City University of New York Institutional Review Board. We also received letters of support from each of the six CUNY community colleges and the CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, the office that provided us with the administrative data for the quantitative analyses.

We followed a process for gathering general and program-specific information on institutional priorities, policies, and practices that was developed through CCRC's National Field Study (Bailey & Morest, 2006). According to this protocol, researchers first define the pool of appropriate respondents and conduct semi-structured interviews and, second, examine relevant documentary evidence such as policy handbooks, program pamphlets or websites, and other published communications.

For this study, we defined the pool of appropriate respondents as assessment coordinators, developmental education coordinators, higher level administrators, and English and math developmental education and gatekeeper faculty. Our lead contacts at each of the CUNY community colleges helped us identify these individuals at their college. We contacted potential respondents, making it clear that their participation in this study was voluntary and that if they agreed to participate, we would work to ensure their confidentiality by using general job functions as pseudonyms and by masking identifying information wherever possible. We interviewed about 11 respondents per institution for a total of 67 interviews. The majority of respondents at each college were faculty. Most interviews took place face-to-face at the respondent's college, although some were conducted by telephone and generally lasted for about one hour. Prior to each interview, we described the purpose of the study and interview, and participants read and signed an informed consent. CCRC researchers took notes during the interviews, and if participants consented, we recorded their interviews as well.

The interview covered the following topics: official assessment and placement policies, policies in practice, perception of student responses to assessment, the role and effectiveness of assessment, and the organization and delivery of developmental

education at the college. Each respondent was asked at least 20 questions, and the interview questions varied based on the respondent's position. Examples of questions asked of faculty respondents include:

1. What are the college's policies regarding how students advance out of developmental coursework?
2. Would you have concerns if the assessment cutoffs were raised or exemption policies made more stringent? If yes, please describe your concerns. What about if they were lowered or made less stringent?
3. Do you think there is a better way to assess students? If yes, what is it? Why doesn't your college do assessment that way?
4. Do you feel students who enter your college-level course are ready for that level of academic work, or not? If they have taken basic skills courses, do you feel that these courses have prepared them for the work in your class, or not?

The second source of data was documentary evidence. We reviewed each college's website and college catalog for information relevant to the study, such as placement policies and developmental course offerings. We also collected and reviewed memos and official documents that outlined system-level and institutional-level assessment and placement policies. After gathering these data, the authors of this report analyzed the interview notes, recordings, and documentary evidence to answer our broad research questions; identify common themes, reactions, and perceptions; and understand and document system-level and institutional-level policies and practices. We describe the findings that emerged from analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data in this report.

Appendix C: Report Data

Our full sample consists of 74,772 first-time, degree-seeking students who entered the six CUNY community colleges from fall 2004 to spring 2008, tracked to fall 2009. Box C1 reports the sample sizes for each cohort.

Box C1
Term of Freshmen Entry to CUNY Community College

Fall 2004	11,845	16%
Spring 2005	6,279	8%
Fall 2005	11,754	16%
Spring 2006	5,784	8%
Fall 2006	12,604	17%
Spring 2007	6,161	8%
Fall 2007	13,793	18%
Spring 2008	6,552	9%

For the quantitative analyses conducted for this report, we utilized three sources of data: course transcript data, placement exam data, and qualitative data on placement rules at each community college.

Course transcript data includes every course each student in our sample took from fall 2004 to fall 2009. For this report, we tracked enrollment only in math and English developmental education and gatekeeper courses. To identify developmental education and gatekeeper courses in the dataset, we first reviewed the six community colleges' course catalogs, compiling the course numbers and names of all developmental education and gatekeeper courses from fall 2004 to fall 2009. Then, we coded each course by its subject and course level. All gatekeeper courses were coded level 0. The highest level developmental course was coded level 1; if a sequence only had one developmental course, it was considered a level 1 course. The lowest course in a two-course developmental sequence or the middle course in a three-course developmental sequence was coded level 2. Finally, the lowest course in a three-course developmental sequence was coded level 3.

Placement exam data includes every exam score, date, and test location for every COMPASS pre-algebra, COMPASS algebra, COMPASS reading, and CUNY/ACT

writing exam for each student in our sample. We distinguished between pretests in each subject, or the tests taken prior to college entry (used to place students into courses in their first semester), and posttests in each subject (used to determine if students can exit the developmental education sequence). For all entrants, any tests taken within two weeks after the first day of the first term at the given school were considered pretests. For example, for fall entrants at four colleges with terms beginning the last week of August, we counted any test taken before September 15 as a pretest. A small proportion of students had more than one pretest: 5% of students had more than one pre-algebra or algebra exam pretest, 7% had more than one reading pretest, and 9% had more than one writing pretest. The student's highest pretest score in each subject was considered their official placement exam score used to determine their first semester course assignments. All tests that are not pretests are considered posttests. A higher proportion of students took multiple posttests: 16% of students have more than one pre-algebra posttest, 17% of students have more than one algebra posttest, 20% of students have more than one reading posttest, and 22% of students have more than one writing posttest. Again, the student's highest posttest score in each subject was considered their official exit exam score used to determine if they could exit the developmental education sequence.

Qualitative data sources include interviews with respondents who discussed placement exam rules at their college, as well as official college documents that outlined cutoff scores and placement rules. Utilizing qualitative data for each year of entry, college, and subject, we documented the cutoff score that placed students into college-level courses and the cutoff score ranges that placed students into each course in each developmental education sequence. We determined the first semester course assignments for each student based on their highest pretest score on each placement exam and our documented year- and college-specific placement exam cutoff scores for each course. For example, the developmental education referral rates reported in Box 1 are based on these documented year- and college-specific placement exam cutoffs. That is, 64% of students had a pre-algebra and/or algebra score that was below the year-specific, college-specific cutoff to place into gatekeeper math; 56% of students had a writing score that was below the year-specific, college-specific cutoff to place into gatekeeper English; and 24% of

students had a reading score that was below the year-specific, college-specific cutoff to place into gatekeeper English.

Box C2
CUNY CC Developmental Referral Rates, 2004–2008 Cohorts

None	18%
Math only	22%
Writing only	12%
Reading only	1%
Math & writing	24%
Math & reading	3%
Writing & reading	5%
Math, writing, & reading	15%

As an additional descriptive, we include Box C2, which presents developmental referral rates by the number of subjects each student was referred to, also based on year-specific, college-specific placement rules. The highest proportion of CUNY community college students were assigned to both developmental math and writing (either ESL or non-ESL writing). The next most frequent developmental education assignment was to developmental math only. Assignment to developmental reading (either ESL or non-ESL reading), either alone or in combination with other developmental courses, was less common because most students scored above the placement cutoff on the COMPASS reading exam.

Appendix D: Developmental Course-Taking Requirements

Based on the documented year- and college-specific cutoff scores into each level of developmental education and gatekeeper courses, we determined, for both math and English, if developmental students: (1) enrolled in the developmental education course they were referred to, (2) took too high of a course, (3) took too low of a course, or (4) did not enroll in a course in that subject at all. We considered students' math and English developmental course enrollments in their first semester, as well as their first math and English courses within two years of their college entry. Tables D1 and D2 illustrate how our classification rules would categorize four hypothetical students (the six schools were assigned labels A through F in random order). Keep in mind that in 2005 and 2007, placement exam cutoffs were increased in reading and math, respectively; thus students with the same scores may have had different course referrals depending on their year of entry. In addition, in math, particularly on the algebra exam, colleges had different placement exam cutoffs.

Table D1
Categorization of Developmental Math Course-Taking

Student (Major)	School	Entry date	Math placement scores	Dev ed math referral	Dev ed math enrollment in first semester	Category (first semester)	First dev ed math enrollment within 2 yrs of entry	Category (within 2 yrs of entry)
1 (non-STEM)	F	Fall 2004	Pre-algebra = 29 Algebra = 26	Level 1	Did not enroll	Took none	Level 1	Took recommended
2 (non-STEM)	F	Fall 2007	Pre-algebra = 29 Algebra = 29	Level 2	Level 2	Took recommended	Level 2	Took recommended
3 (non-STEM)	B	Spring 2005	Pre-algebra = 32 Algebra = 35	Level 1	Did not enroll	Took none	Did not enroll	Took none
4 (STEM)	C	Fall 2006	Pre-algebra = 27 Algebra = 21	Level 2	Did not enroll	Took none	Level 3	Too low

Table D2
Categorization of Developmental Writing Course-Taking

Student	School	Entry date	English placement scores	Dev ed writing referral	Dev ed writing enrollment in first semester	Category (first semester)	First dev ed writing enrollment within 2 yrs of entry	Category (within 2 yrs of entry)
1	F	Fall 2004	Writing = 6 Reading = 64	Level 1	Did not enroll	Took none	Gatekeeper English	Too high
2	F	Fall 2007	Writing = 4 Reading = 59	Level 1	Level 1	Took recommended	Level 1	Took recommended
3	B	Spring 2005	Writing = 7 Reading = 66	This student is not included in the English developmental course-taking sample because s/he placed into gatekeeper English.				
4	C	Fall 2006	Writing = 4 Reading = 65	Level 2	Did not enroll	Took none	Level 2	Took recommended

Below, we provide additional detail on the analyses presented in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1: The math course-taking analysis sample size includes all non-exempt students referred to developmental math (N = 45,745). To infer course assignment, we needed all relevant math pretest scores; accordingly, we defined the initial sample as students who took both a pre-algebra and algebra pretest (N = 59,932). For three out of the four colleges with STEM sequences, we did not have the placement test data used to determine course assignment into the additional developmental course required of STEM students, so we treated these three additional developmental courses as gatekeeper courses. Students who placed into gatekeeper math (or one of these three developmental math courses for STEM students) based on their pre-algebra and algebra exam scores were excluded from the sample (N = 12,462). We also excluded the students referred to developmental math who were math-exempt (N = 1,725), given that the individual college and the system would disagree in terms of whether these students enrolled in courses that were “recommended,” “too high,” or “too low.”

Figure 2: The English course-taking analysis sample size includes all students referred to non-ESL developmental writing (N = 26,302). To define the sample, we began with all students who took the writing placement exam (N = 57,525). We excluded students assigned to an ESL course (N = 15,949) and students who scored above the writing cutoff (N = 15,274), resulting in a final sample of 26,302 students.

Appendix E: Persistence and Attrition

Creating accurate measures of dropout or retention in higher education is difficult, as students often stop out and then return, or transfer from one college to another (Hagedorn, 2005). In our dataset, we observe course enrollments from fall 2004 to fall 2009; for the more recent cohorts (e.g., those who entered in spring 2008), the short length of follow up poses a challenge in terms of determining whether students who are not present after their first semester have merely stopped out or whether they dropped out entirely. Therefore, in constructing a measure of persistence for this analysis, we included only students who entered in the 2004–2005 and 2005–2006 academic years (N = 35,646); for these cohorts, we can track enrollment over a four-year time frame. We tracked course enrollment across the entire CUNY system (i.e. the two-year, four-year, and graduate schools); thus students who stopped out but returned and/or transferred to any CUNY college within the four-year time frame are not counted as dropouts, nor are students who left CUNY after earning a degree. However, we were not able to track students who transferred to another college outside of the CUNY system; accordingly, our measure of drop out may be slightly inflated, as it may include students who left the CUNY system to attend another college.

Below we provide more detailed information on the analyses presented in Figures 3, 4, and 5.

Figure 3: This analysis is restricted to students in the fall 2004 to spring 2006 cohorts who barely failed or barely passed the algebra and writing placement exams. We examined the proportion of students in these categories who did not enroll in any courses after their first term within four years of entering college.

For the algebra exam, the *barely failed* sample includes students who scored no more than 4 points below the year-specific, college-specific cutoff to place into developmental or gatekeeper math (N = 1,934). The *barely passed* sample includes students who scored at the cutoff or no more than 3 points above the cutoff to place into developmental or gatekeeper math (N = 1,588). The dropout rates for these two categories of students after their first term are very similar.

For the writing exam, the *barely failed* sample includes students who scored a 6 on the writing placement exam (N = 11,476). The *barely passed* sample includes students who scored a 7 or 8 (N = 5,907). (We included students who scored an 8 because the sample size of students who scored a 7 is quite small: only N = 2,309.) The dropout rate for students who barely failed the writing exam is significantly higher ($p < .001$) than for those who barely passed.

Figure 4: This analysis examines outcomes within four years of entry for students in the fall 2004 through spring 2006 cohorts who were referred to developmental writing. While this sample includes 12,886 students, the figure portrays only students who dropped out after their first term (N = 2,523), persisted at least four years (N = 3,136), or earned an associate or bachelor's degree within four years (N = 1,582). The remaining students (N = 5,645) persisted between two and six terms, but then left the CUNY system and did not return within the four-year time frame.

Figure 5: This analysis examines outcomes within four years of entry for students in the fall 2004 through spring 2006 cohorts who were referred to developmental math. While this sample includes 22,319 students, the figure portrays only students who dropped out after their first term (N = 4,044), persisted for at least four years (N = 5,868), or earned an associate or bachelor's degree within four years (N = 2,695). The remaining students (N = 9,712) persisted between two and six terms, but then left the CUNY system and did not return within the four-year time frame.

Appendix F: Progression Through Developmental Education

The progression analysis tracks student enrollment through the developmental education sequence and into gatekeeper courses within a two-year time frame. For the developmental math sequence, we follow the progression of students who enrolled three levels, two levels, and one level below gatekeeper math. For the non-ESL developmental writing sequence, we follow the progression of students who enrolled two levels and one level below gatekeeper English. We report five outcomes for each of these starting points: the proportion of students who (1) left the sequence of courses within the two-year time frame because they failed a developmental course in the sequence, (2) left the sequence of courses within the two-year time frame because they did not enroll in the next developmental course in the sequence, (3) finished the sequence, but did not enroll in the gatekeeper course within the two-year time frame, (4) enrolled in the gatekeeper course, but did not pass, and (5) enrolled in and passed the gatekeeper course.

Below, we provide additional details on the analyses presented in Figures 6 and 7, as well as in Table 1. Supplementary analyses (Figure E1 and Table E1) provide additional context for the analyses presented in the main report.

Figure 6: The total Figure 6 sample size ($N = 37,713$) includes the following students: students who enrolled in a developmental math course at the two colleges that had a single math sequence regardless of program choice ($N = 14,128$) and, at the four colleges that have separate sequences for STEM and non-STEM majors, the non-STEM majors who enrolled in a developmental math course in the non-STEM sequence ($N = 23,685$). Therefore, students who chose STEM programs at the four colleges with STEM-specific math sequences are excluded from analysis ($N = 5,038$). The course progression of the STEM students is presented in Figure F1 below.

Among the students included in this analysis, only 6% ($N = 2,380$) started in a developmental math course that was three levels below gatekeeper, because only one school had a three-level developmental math sequence during our time frame. The same proportion (47%) started two levels below ($N = 17,725$) as one level below ($N = 17,708$).

Figure 7: This sample includes all students who enrolled in a non-ESL developmental writing course at their college ($N = 30,555$). Only 25% ($N = 7,726$) started

two levels below in the developmental writing sequence, while 75% (N = 22,829) started one level below gatekeeper.

Figure F1, STEM math progression: Figure F1 presents the progression results for students who chose a STEM degree program at the three colleges with separate developmental requirements for STEM majors (N = 5,308). The majority of these students, 56% (N = 2,981), started two levels below in the developmental sequence while 25% (N = 1,351) started three levels below, and 18% (N=976) started one level below. The progression results through developmental math are slightly better for STEM students than non-STEM students: overall, 46% failed a developmental course, 18% did not enroll in the next course in the sequence, 7% finished developmental education but did not enroll in gatekeeper, 6% enrolled in gatekeeper but did not pass, and 22% passed gatekeeper.

Figure F1
Progression of Students Through the STEM Developmental Math Sequence

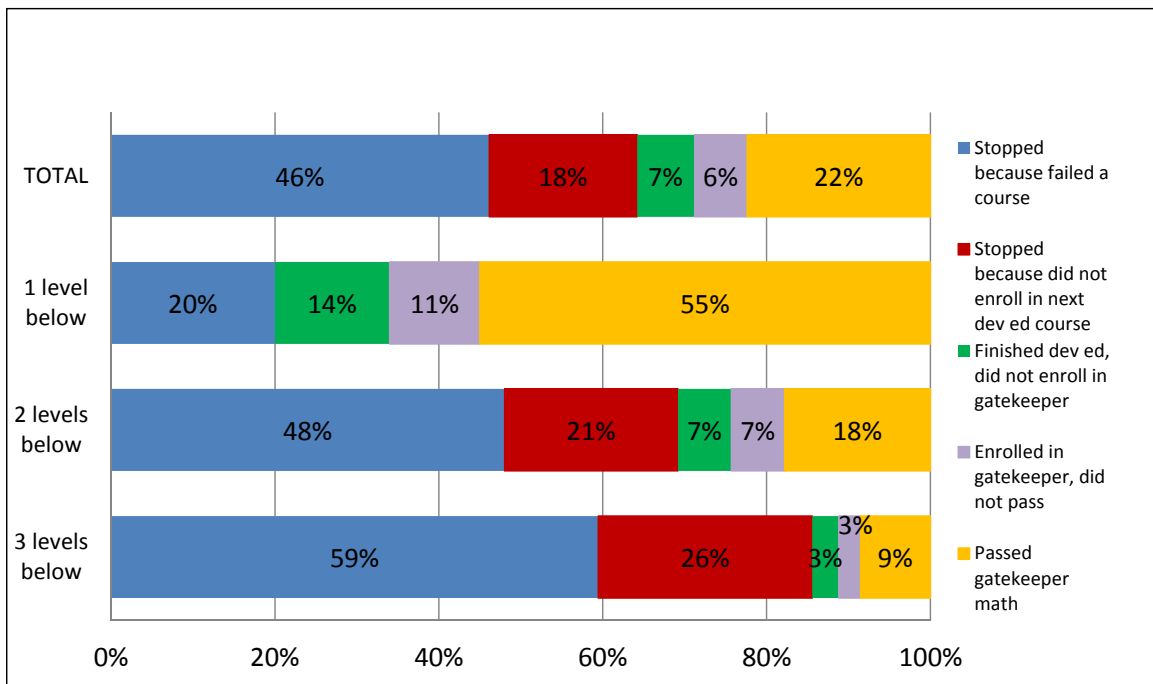


Table 1: The final table in the progression section reports the number of months and retests it took students to pass the algebra and writing exit exams within two years of entry. Estimates for students referred to higher levels of developmental education are

more reliable, as they are based on much larger numbers of students (given that few students referred to lower levels of developmental education eventually take and pass the exit exam). The *Algebra* columns include: students who were referred one level below gatekeeper math and passed the algebra exam within two years of entry according to year- and college-specific cutoffs (N = 6,626), students who were referred two levels below and passed the algebra exam (N = 2,595), and students who were referred three levels below and passed the algebra exam (N = 38). The *Writing* columns include: students who were referred one level below gatekeeper English and passed the writing exam within two years of entry according to year- and college-specific cutoffs (N = 11,843) and students who were referred two levels below and passed the writing exam (N = 2,140).

Table F1, Passing the exam within four years of entry: We also examined the number of months and retests required to pass the algebra and writing exit exams within four years of entry. This analysis includes only the earlier cohorts (fall 2004 to spring 2006), which can be tracked for at least four years. The *Algebra* columns include: students who were referred one level below gatekeeper math and passed the algebra exam within four years of entry according to year- and college-specific cutoffs (N = 3,834), students who were referred two levels below and passed the algebra exam (N = 1,597), and students who were referred three levels below and passed the algebra exam (N = 19). The *Writing* columns include: students who were referred one level below gatekeeper English and passed the writing exam within two years of entry according to year- and college-specific cutoffs (N = 6,121) and students who were referred two levels below and passed the writing exam (N = 1,322). Comparing the results presented below to the results in Table 1 in the body of the report demonstrates that in math, students referred to the second or third level take considerably more time to exit remediation when we extend the tracking period to four years, and across all levels and subjects, students in the 75th and 95th percentile retook the exam more often and took many more months to pass the exit exam when tracked over a four-year time frame versus a two-year time frame.

Table F1
Number of Months and Retests Required to Pass Exit Exam (Within Four Years of Entry)
(Fall 2004–Spring 2006 Cohorts Only)

<i>Referral Level</i>	Algebra					Writing				
	5th	25th	median	75th	95th	5th	25th	median	75th	95th
1 Level Below										
Months to pass	3	3	4	10	29	2	3	3	10	27
# of retests	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	2	3
2 Levels Below										
Months to pass	4	8	15	22	35	3	6	9	15	29
# of retests	1	1	1	2	3	1	1	1	2	3
3 Levels Below										
Months to pass	3	6	12	20	34	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
# of retests	1	1	1	2	3	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Appendix G: Additional Analysis—Persistence by Progression Category

The progression analysis raises a number of questions regarding how each of the five progression outcomes is related to persistence over the long term. First, among students who chose not to enroll in the next course in the developmental sequence, what proportion actually dropped out, versus those who persisted in school while avoiding their developmental requirements? How does their long-term persistence compare to students who failed a course, students who finished the sequence but did not enroll in gatekeeper, and students who did not pass gatekeeper? Second, several of the analyses in our report suggest that developmental students may benefit from shorter sequences that accelerate student progression through developmental education. One theory behind the potential effectiveness of accelerated sequences is that they afford lesser opportunity for life events and other outside commitments to pull students away from school prior to completing the sequence (Edgecombe, 2011a). However, while an extended amount of time in developmental education may pose additional burdens to students compared with an extended amount of time in college-level coursework, outside circumstances can pull students away from community college at any point in their career. Thus accelerating student progression through *all* types of community college coursework—both developmental and college-level courses—could be important to student retention and completion. To explore this notion using CUNY data, we examine whether developmental students who successfully progressed into credit-bearing coursework early in their college career demonstrate lower attrition over the long term than their counterparts who did not and whether long-term attrition is fairly constant over time for students who began community college in developmental education.

To address these questions, we include an additional analysis illustrating the persistence over a four-year time frame of students from earlier cohorts (fall 2004 to spring 2006) who enrolled in the non-STEM developmental math and developmental writing sequences.

Explanation of figures: Figures G1 and G2 indicate the proportion of students in the fall 2004 to spring 2006 cohorts who were still enrolled in the CUNY system in each term, beginning with their term of entry, followed for four years. We defined student

persistence according to the last term students were enrolled within the four-year time frame, and we track students through fall and spring terms. For example, a fall 2004 entrant who took courses in term 1 (fall 2004) and term 3 (fall 2005) but did not reappear again across the four-year time frame would be classified as persisting to term 3 (regardless if they took courses in term 2 (spring 2005) or not). The last data point in each figure represents the proportion of students who were still enrolled at the end of our four-year time frame or who had earned an associate or bachelor's degree within four years of entry.

Figure G1
Attrition of Students Who Enrolled in Developmental Math (N = 20,806)

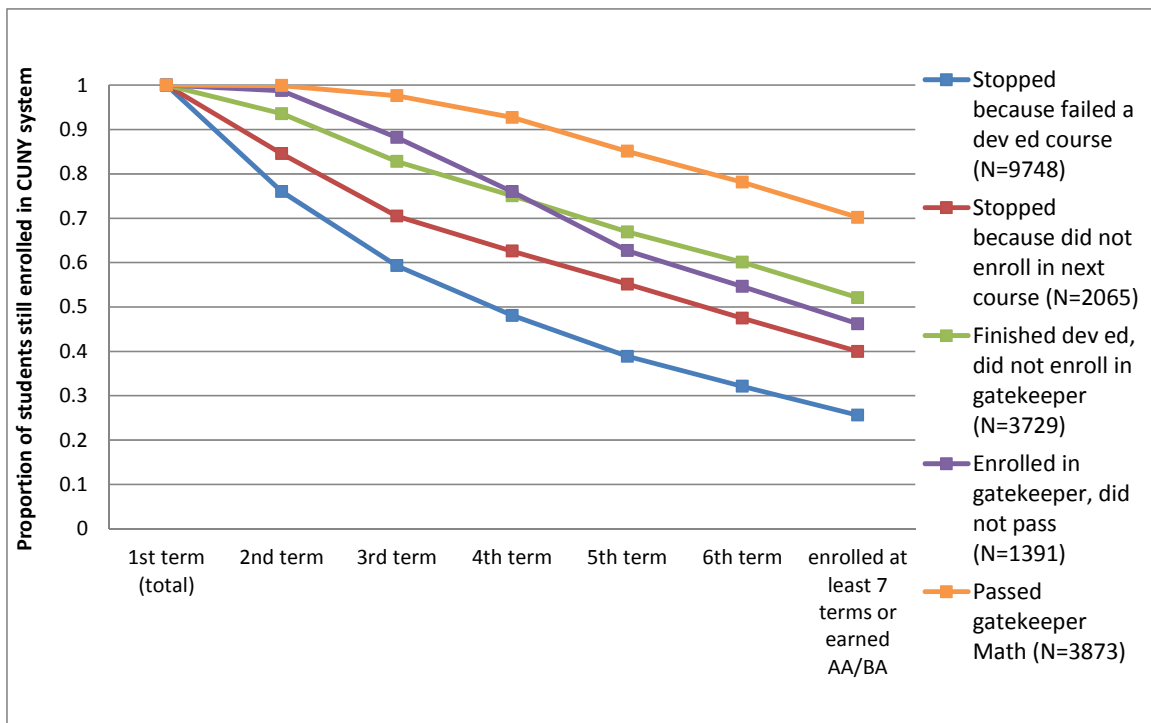
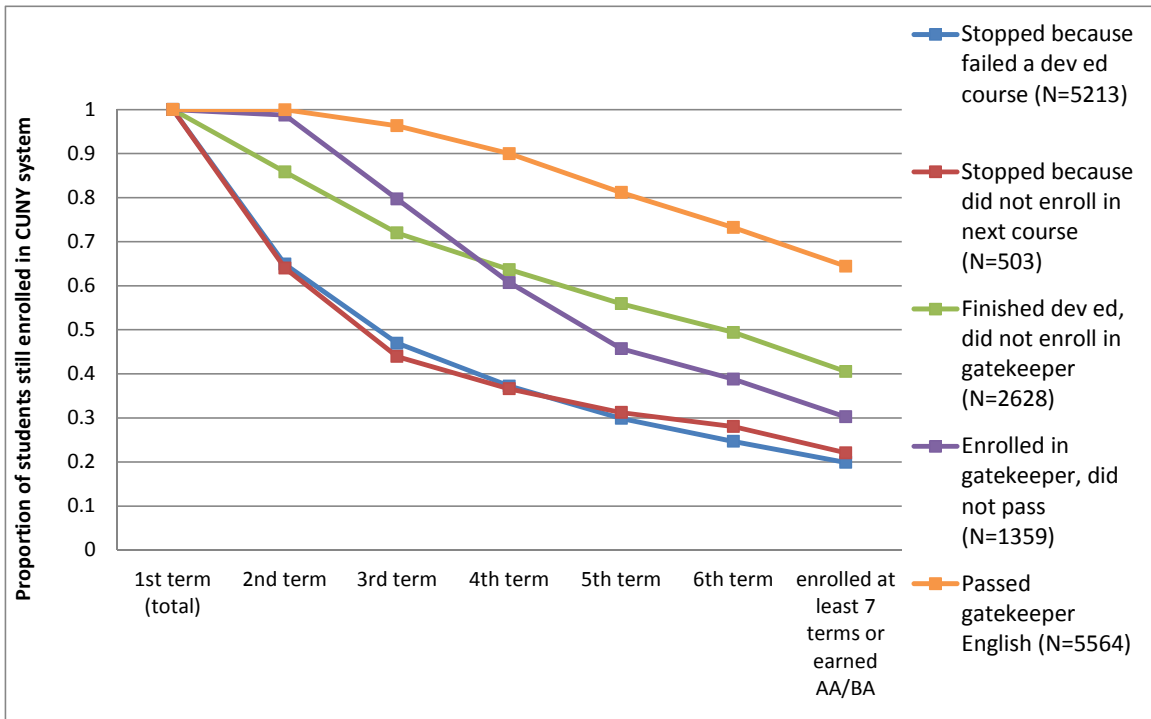


Figure G2
Attrition of Students Who Enrolled in Developmental Writing (N = 15,267)



Students who stopped out of the sequence: Approximately 63% of developmental math students who did not enroll in the next developmental math course in the sequence within two years did *not* drop out during this time frame; instead, they persisted in college for at least two years but delayed taking their developmental math requirements during this time. These students persisted at higher rates than students who failed a developmental math course. Specifically, 32% of these students were still enrolled at least four years after entering college and 8% earned an associate or bachelor’s degree, while 24% of students who failed a developmental math course were still enrolled and only 4% earned an associate or bachelor’s degree. Over the long term, students who delayed some of their developmental course-taking persisted at similar rates as students who finished the developmental math sequence but did not enroll in gatekeeper (35% persisted at least four years and 18% graduated) and students who did not pass gatekeeper (32% persisted at least four years and 15% graduated).

In developmental writing, however, students who did not enroll in the next developmental writing course had similar rates of attrition compared to students who

failed a developmental writing course. Only a small number (N = 503) of developmental writing students did not progress to the next developmental writing course in the sequence within two years from entry,³⁶ but among these students, 63% left college within two years from entry, leaving only 37% who remained in college while avoiding their developmental writing requirements. Over the long term, 20% of these “writing delayers” persisted at least four years and only 2% earned an associate or bachelor’s degree; similarly, 18% of students who failed a developmental writing course persisted at least four years and 2% graduated. Compared to writing delayers, students who completed the writing sequence but failed gatekeeper English had only slightly better outcomes: 26% remained in college for at least four years and 5% graduated. Students who completed their developmental writing requirements but did not enroll in gatekeeper English within two years fared much better than developmental writing delayers: 31% persisted at least four years and 9% graduated.

Overall, delayed enrollment is connected to attrition much more strongly when the subject is writing rather than math. One possible explanation for this finding is that delayed enrollment in the next math course is not a clear signal of a student’s propensity to leave college, given that students can enroll in some degree program requirements that do not require developmental and/or college-level math prerequisites. However, since developmental writing courses serve as prerequisites to many more college courses, not enrolling in the next writing course in the sequence has more serious consequences and may signal other characteristics and behaviors related to dropping out of college.

Rate of attrition across time: Overall, students who passed gatekeeper courses within two years of entry were most likely to persist or graduate across the four-year period. However, it is important to note that, although persistence is substantially higher for these students, over time their term-to-term attrition rates (i.e., the slope of their lines in Figures G1 and G2) begin to equalize with developmental students who failed or delayed their courses. For example, over the first three terms, only 2% of students who passed gatekeeper math left college compared with 12% of students who did not pass gatekeeper, 17% of students who did not enroll in gatekeeper, 30% of students who did

³⁶ Four colleges had a two-course developmental writing sequence. This outcome therefore applies only to students at these four colleges who enrolled in and passed the lowest level writing course but did not enroll in the highest level writing course within two years from entry.

not enroll in the next developmental math course, and 41% of students who failed a developmental math course. However, later term-to-term attrition rates are more similar: 8% of developmental math students who passed gatekeeper dropped out after their fourth term, compared with 12% of students who failed gatekeeper, 8% of students who finished the sequence but did not enroll in gatekeeper, 8% of students who did not enroll in the next developmental math course, and 9% of students who failed a developmental math course.

Summary: Among students referred to math developmental education, delay in math course-taking was not necessarily a strong signal of the student's propensity to drop out early; however, among those referred to English developmental education, delay in English course-taking seemed a much stronger signal of early dropout. Overall, students in different progression categories were widely divergent in their propensity to drop out over the first two semesters. After that point, however, the pull of attrition seemed to be fairly constant for most groups of students across all the remaining time points of the study, typically pulling away an additional 8%–10% of students each semester. This observation supports the notion that accelerating student progression through *all* types of community college coursework—both developmental and college-level courses—could be important to eventual student completion and success.

Appendix H: The Role of Sequence Length

Below we provide additional information on the Figure 8 analyses. All analyses compare the gatekeeper pass rates within two years of entry for students who scored in the same placement exam range but received different developmental education treatments. We also include a supplementary analysis (Table H1) that compares the average number of equated credit hours³⁷ for the set of sequences discussed below.

Figure 8a: Across all six colleges, students who failed the pre-algebra placement exam were referred to the lowest level developmental math course. At one college with a three-course non-STEM developmental math sequence, the lowest level was three levels below gatekeeper, while at four colleges that had a two-course non-STEM developmental math sequence, the lowest level was two levels below gatekeeper. To utilize this variation in development math programming, we restricted the sample to students who failed the pre-algebra placement exam and enrolled in the lowest level developmental math course in the non-STEM sequence at their college within two years of college entry (N = 15,700), comparing the gatekeeper pass rate of students who failed the pre-algebra placement exam and started three levels below (N = 2,243) with the gatekeeper pass rate of students who failed the pre-algebra placement exam and started two levels below (N = 13,457).

Figure 8b: This analysis further restricts the above sample to students who scored a 21 or below on the pre-algebra placement exam and enrolled in the lowest level developmental math course in the non-STEM sequence at their college within two years of college entry (N = 7,153). The figure compares the gatekeeper pass rate of these students who enrolled three levels below (N = 1,135) with the gatekeeper pass rate of these students who enrolled two levels below (N = 6,018).

Figure 8c: In fall 2007, CUNY central raised the cutoff score to pass the pre-algebra exam from 27 to 30. As a result, prior to fall 2007, students who scored a 27, 28, or 29 on the pre-algebra exam passed; and at five colleges, if they failed the algebra exam, they were referred to the highest developmental math course in the non-STEM sequence. In 2007–2008, students who scored a 27, 28, or 29 failed the pre-algebra exam,

³⁷ Since developmental courses do not bear credit, CUNY refers to the number of classroom hours for developmental courses as “equated credit hours.”

and at these same five colleges, the students were then referred to the second level developmental math course in the non-STEM sequence. Therefore, we restricted the sample to students who scored in the 27–29 range at the five colleges and enrolled in a developmental math course in the non-STEM sequence within two years of college entry (N = 1,836), comparing the gatekeeper pass rate of students who started one level below prior to 2007 (N = 1,655) to the gatekeeper pass rate of students who started two levels below in 2007–2008 (N = 181).

It is important to note that in the 2007–2008 school year, the majority of students in those five schools who scored in the 27–29 range started one level below gatekeeper anyway (N = 580), primarily due to grandfathering of students who took the exam prior to August 2007. Of these students, 18% (N = 96) passed gatekeeper math.

Figure 8d: Students who scored a 2, 3, or 4 on the writing placement exam (and were not referred to ESL) were referred to the lowest (or second) level of developmental writing at four colleges; the remaining two colleges only had one level of developmental writing, thus students at these colleges who scored a 2, 3, or 4 (and were not referred to ESL) were referred to take one level of developmental writing. To utilize this variation in non-ESL developmental writing programming, we restricted the sample to students who scored in the 2–4 range on the writing placement exam and enrolled in a developmental writing course within two years of college entry (N = 6,938), comparing the gatekeeper pass rate of students who scored in the 2–4 range and started two levels below (N = 4,420) to the gatekeeper pass rate of students who scored in the 2–4 range and started one level below (N = 2,518).

Figures 8e and 8f: This analysis compares students in a similar score range who took a level 1 developmental education course in their first semester to students who took a 20-hour intervention in their first semester. Our dataset did not have variables to identify 20-hour interventions; instead, we identified students who potentially took a 20-hour intervention by the following criteria: (1) they took a placement exam prior to entry, (2) they took an exit exam before their second semester, and (3) they took no course in that exam subject in their first semester. We assume that these students took a 20-hour intervention before their second semester rather than a developmental course.

Figure 8e: For math, we restricted the score range to students who passed the pre-algebra placement exam but failed the algebra placement exam by year-specific, college-specific standards. Therefore, the *20-hour algebra intervention* sample includes students who passed pre-algebra, failed algebra, took no developmental or gatekeeper math courses in their first semester, and then retested on the algebra placement exam prior to their second semester (N = 334). Out of these students, 40% (N = 132) enrolled in gatekeeper and 34% (N = 113) passed. The comparison sample consists of students who passed pre-algebra, failed algebra, and enrolled in a level 1 developmental math course in their first semester (N = 13,232). Out of these students, 37% (N = 4,859) enrolled in gatekeeper and 27% (N = 3,617) passed.

Figure 8f: For writing, we restricted the score range to students who scored a 6 on the writing placement exam. Therefore, the *20-hour writing intervention* sample includes students who scored a 6 on the writing placement exam; took no developmental writing, ESL, or gatekeeper English courses in their first semester; and retested on the writing placement exam prior to their second semester (N = 758). Out of these students, 70% (N = 533) enrolled in gatekeeper and 64% (N = 487) passed. The comparison sample consists of students who scored a 6 on the writing placement exam and enrolled in a level 1 developmental writing course in their first semester (N = 13,297). Out of these students, 53% (N = 7,057) enrolled in gatekeeper and 43% (N = 5,778) passed.

Table H1, Average number of equated credit hours: Figure 8 shows that students who enrolled in shorter sequences had higher gatekeeper pass rates than students who scored in the same range on the placement exam and enrolled in longer sequences. For the most part, the shorter sequences were also fewer equated credit hours, but one school had a shorter sequence that was more equated credit hours than the longer sequence. So, overall, do the shorter sequences in Figure 8 really translate to fewer in-class hours? To explore this question, we calculated the average number of equated credit hours required to complete each of the sequences referred to in Figure 8. The table below illustrates that, on average, students who enrolled in shorter sequences had to take fewer hours of developmental coursework than did students scoring in the same range who enrolled in longer sequences. The difference in the average number of equated credit hours is smallest for students failing the pre-algebra placement exam and scoring 21 or below, and

who had to complete a three-course versus two-course developmental math sequence. Not surprisingly, the difference is largest for students who took a 20-hour intervention versus an upper level developmental math or writing course in their first semester.

Table H1
Average Number of Equated Credit Hours

Figure	Average Number of Equated Credit Hours ^a		Difference
8(a) <i>Failing Pre-algebra</i>	<u>3 levels below</u> 11	<u>2 levels below</u> 9.9	1.1
8(b) <i>Pre-algebra <= 21</i>	<u>3 levels below</u> 11	<u>2 levels below</u> 9.9	1.1
8(c) <i>Pre-algebra 27-29</i>	<u>2 levels below</u> 8.8	<u>1 level below</u> 5.4	3.4
8(d) <i>Writing <= 4</i>	<u>2 levels below</u> 9.9	<u>1 level below</u> 6.8	3.1
8(e) <i>Passing pre-algebra, Failing algebra</i>	<u>1 level below</u> 4.4	<u>20-hour intervention</u> 0	4.4
8(f) <i>Writing = 6</i>	<u>1 level below</u> 5.0	<u>20-hour intervention</u> 0	5.0

^aThe average number of equated credit hours is a weighted average calculated as follows:

$$\frac{\sum(\text{Hours}_i * \text{Enrollment}_i)}{\text{Total Enrollment}}$$

Where *Hours* = total equated hours required to complete sequence at college *i*, *Enrollment* = number of students who scored in the placement score range and started in sequence at college *i*, and *Total Enrollment* = total number of students who scored in the placement score range and started in sequence across colleges