

## CUNY Starts Program to Improve Community-College Graduation Rates

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By KARIN FISCHER

New York City will spend \$20-million over the next three years on an ambitious program at the City University of New York to increase graduation rates at its six community colleges.

Under the plan, announced in January by Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg in his State of the City speech, the university system will identify 1,000 newly admitted, low-income students interested in fields in which there are local employment needs. Groups of students will study and take classes together and will be provided with tutors and mentors. CUNY will also place the students in part-time jobs related to their fields of study.

The goal of the plan, known as Accelerated Study in Associated Programs, is for 50 percent of the participants to graduate and find employment within three years of beginning college, and for 75 percent to do so within four years, said Selma Botman, the university's executive vice chancellor for academic affairs. By comparison, only 16 percent of community-college students nationwide receive associate degrees within six years of beginning college, university officials said.

The first students will enroll at one of CUNY's community colleges this fall. They will be a mix of laid-off workers, freshly graduated high-school students from families with incomes below the poverty line, and low-income adults who have never attended college, Ms. Botman said. The students may come from dual-enrollment or adult-education programs. University officials will also seek recommendations from guidance counselors and community groups.

The students will study to become legal assistants or workers in the health-care, hospitality, or retail industries, and will take a full-time course load, or about 12 credits per semester. The university is working with local businesses to identify jobs for program participants, Ms. Botman said. CUNY will also provide vocational training.

Most students will take part in a summer orientation program to prepare them for college life. The summer program will also allow students to catch up academically. All participants are expected to be ready to take college courses, without needing remedial work, when the academic year begins. In addition the university will provide "enriched" courses to high-school students and to working adults this spring to help them prepare for college-level work.

College students will be placed in "learning communities" and will take classes together every morning or afternoon, or on certain days of the week. They will do most of their

homework on the campus, in groups, and will be assigned tutors, a faculty adviser, and a "job developer," who will help them find part-time employment.

Advisers will review each student's academic progress several times each semester and will provide extra help if needed.

### **Measuring Success**

One key to the program's effectiveness is whether the university can find appropriate work-based learning opportunities for the students, said Thomas R. Bailey, director of the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College. A more fundamental measure of success, he said, is whether the program changes the overall operation of the community colleges, not simply the educational experience of the 1,000 students selected to participate.

Mr. Bailey said that he did not know of any other community-college system that has combined all of the elements of the CUNY program, but that some of the individual components had shown promise in improving student success at colleges in the system and elsewhere.

Some of the university's two-year colleges have already instituted parts of the plan. Kingsborough Community College has organized students into learning communities to take classes and study, and LaGuardia Community College has matched students with internships or other work-based learning opportunities.

The university system, however, hopes that the "all inclusive" approach of combining academic and social support with a paycheck will prove to be a national model, Ms. Botman said. Often, she pointed out, community-college students' studies can be derailed by economic pressures.

The plan will be financed through a grant from the citywide Commission for Economic Opportunity, which was appointed by the mayor to identify ways to reduce poverty in New York.

In his speech, Mr. Bloomberg said the program would help working students "step forward to earn higher degrees, and then higher incomes."

"Right now," he said, "the demands of their jobs prevent far too many of them from completing their studies, and without degrees they often remain among our working poor."