Testimony of Executive Vice Chancellor and University Provost
Alexandra W. Logue
The City University of New York
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“Evaluating the Impact of College Remediation at
Community Colleges and Other Postsecondary Institutions”
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EVC LOGUE: Good morning, Chairperson Rodriguez, and members of the Higher Education committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the impact of remediation on The City University of New York. This is a subject of critical importance to all of us at CUNY, and we look forward to sharing our experiences and impressions with you, and to answering any questions that you may have.

After my remarks, you will hear from the other members of our CUNY panel who will provide a full and comprehensive picture of this subject. They include: Senior University Dean for Academic Affairs John Mogulescu, who will describe CUNY’s work in precollege and postsecondary programs to help students achieve college readiness; the president of Bronx Community College, Dr. Carole Berotte Joseph, who will share with you the view of remediation from within a representative community-college campus; Dr. Donna Linderman, who serves as CUNY’s University Director for the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), which has offered some of the most encouraging results we have seen to date in helping students complete remediation and community-college degree programs; and Vice Chancellor for Community Colleges Eduardo Martí, who will situate the subject of this hearing not only in terms of CUNY’s community colleges, but also insofar as national trends and patterns are concerned.

But first, a brief overview. Similar to so many other urban, public, colleges, a majority of new CUNY freshmen 54% (51% for graduates of Department of Education high schools) enter CUNY needing at least some remediation. At our community colleges that figure is 79% (74% for graduates of Department of Education high schools). As a result of these
high percentages, CUNY spends some $30 million per year on remediation. That so many students need remediation is inextricably tied to our own, and other urban community colleges’ low graduation rates. At CUNY, 42% of students who enter our community colleges needing no remediation graduate in six years, but that value is only 25% for students who enter needing at least some remediation. As a result of their large numbers of students needing remediation, CUNY’s six community colleges have long struggled to improve their graduation rates.

Since the early 1990s, the six-year degree completion rate for freshmen entering associate programs has oscillated within a range of 25 percent to 28 percent. Recently, one-year retention rates have begun to rise, from 63% for students entering in fall 2005 to 68% for students entering in fall 2009. This rise is possibly due to recent innovations about which my colleagues will speak, and this rise signals hope for improvement in graduation rates.

Historically, typical remedial courses, at CUNY and elsewhere, have had low pass rates. Which means that students can spend several semesters or more completing their remedial courses. And the longer it takes students to finish their remediation and get to nonremedial, regular, credit-bearing college courses, the less likely such students are to ever graduate. The college experience is discouraging for these students, life has the possibility of getting in the way of school with every passing semester, and in New York State our students use up their financial aid while they are in remediation, so that, when they need remediation, they do not have enough financial aid to carry them through to graduation once they finally get to college-credit courses.
With so many of our students needing remediation, and with the success rates among these students being so poor, clearly, if we can improve our outcomes for remedial education we will be able to make significant headway in raising graduation rates and thus facilitating the academic and professional success of our students. That is why we at CUNY have devoted so much of our attention and funds to improving remediation.

And I am very pleased to tell you that in recent years we have developed some methods that significantly improve remedial education, methods backed by rigorous research, just some of which will be detailed by my colleagues on this panel.

We now know, for example, that, to best ensure success, students with significant remedial needs should be placed into our CUNY Start program, students with moderate remedial needs should be placed into learning communities, and students with limited remedial needs should be placed into our ASAP program. You will hear more about the CUNY Start and ASAP programs from my colleagues.

In general we know that our students are most successful academically when their programs have: structure (such as students moving through a program with limited choices), academic support (such as easily available free tutoring), what is known as intrusive advisement (advisors who reach out to students at the first sign that they are having difficulty, such as when a student misses several classes), intensive remedial instruction (occurring many hours per week for many weeks in a row), continuous
remedial instruction (in which students take remedial courses continuously until they have completed all remedial courses), and placement of the students into small groups or cohorts in which they form bonds with each other. Many of these attributes characterize the specific programs that I have mentioned: CUNY Start, Learning Communities, and ASAP, and they also characterize other special, successful programs that my colleagues will be describing to you.

Here is one specific example of what we have learned in terms of evidence-based methods for assisting our remedial students. During the past two years, my office, the CUNY central office of academic affairs, has funded six research projects investigating ways of improving pass rates in remedial mathematics. One of these projects was conducted by Professors Cunningham and Dias at Hostos Community College and has recently been completed. These faculty did a study in which students in remedial mathematics were assigned to course sections in which they did homework in a room either online on a computer or using regular paper-and-pencil, and there was either one or several tutors walking around the room assisting the students. The students who did the homework online with several tutors in the room did significantly better than the other students.

The unfortunate fact, however, is that though we know very well how best to help our remedial students, we lack the funds to implement these programs, and these program characteristics, for more than a limited number of students. In the example I just gave you, the online homework program and the extra tutors cost significant amounts of
money, and therefore we cannot provide all of the students with these academic supports. Unfortunately, due to the realities of our funding situation, we cannot bring the programs and techniques that we know work to scale to serve all students who need and deserve them.

As another example, there is a company that you can pay to do very effective intrusive advising with at risk undergraduate students, an intervention that significantly increases student retention and graduation rates. However, that service costs approximately $500 per student per year, funds that we just do not have. We are therefore trying to find ways to duplicate the services of that company at a much lower cost.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to speak with you today and for your ongoing support of CUNY, its remarkable faculty and staff, and our outstanding, and very deserving, students.