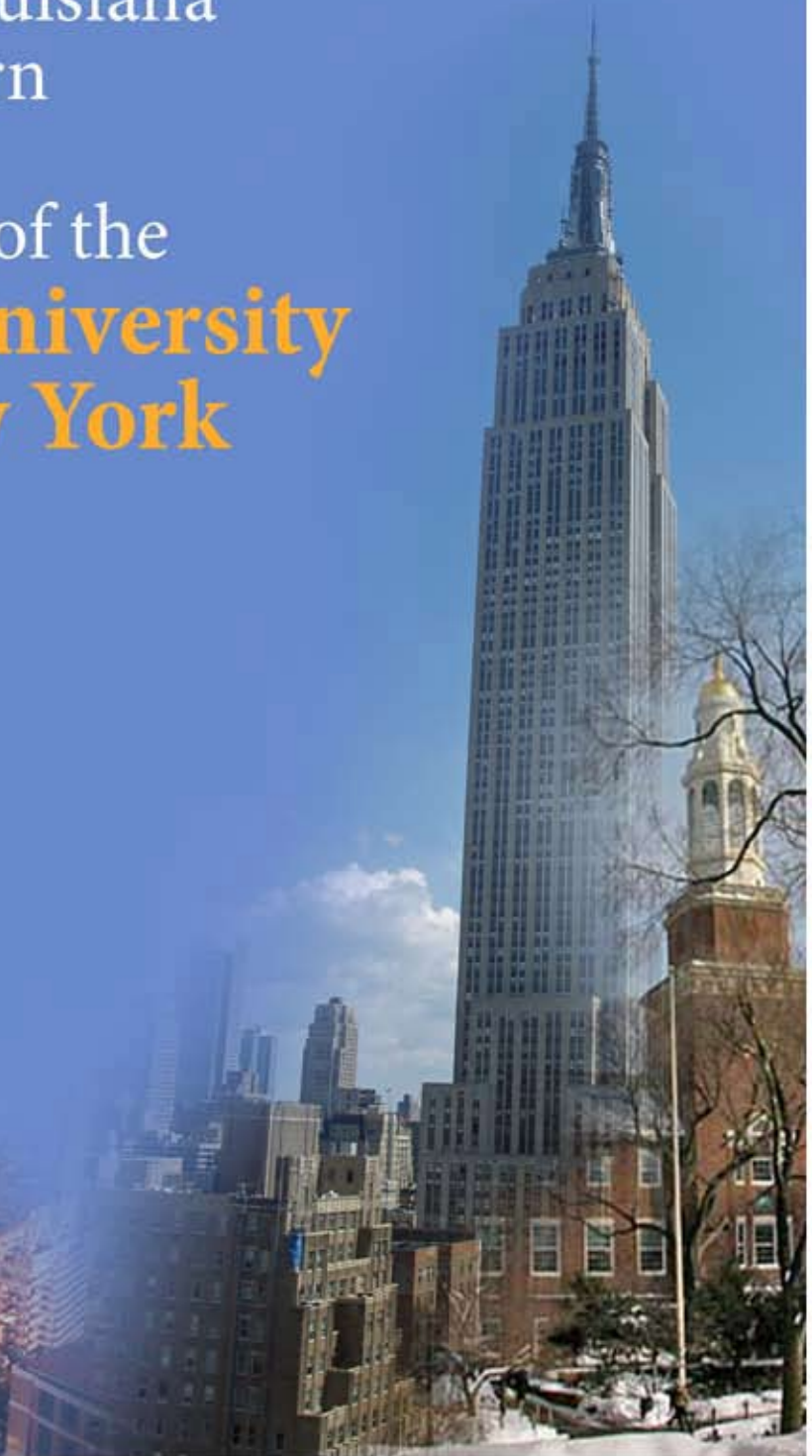




What Louisiana
Can Learn
from the
Rebirth of the
**City University
of New York**



Sandra E. Diaz



What Louisiana Can Learn from the Rebirth of the City University of New York

Sandra E. Diaz

The City University of New York is the largest urban public university system in the United States. With an enrollment of over 200,000, CUNY serves a diverse student population through its four-year colleges, comprehensive institutions, and two-year community colleges. The system has had a decidedly mixed history. A golden period from the Second World War through the 1960s produced a number of prominent alumni, including former Secretary of State Colin Powell and former Yale dean Donald Kagan, and a deserved reputation for academic excellence at low cost.

But things changed in the 1970s, when CUNY began a policy of open admissions, allowing nearly anyone with a high school diploma to enroll at any of the two and four-year institutions. The result? Costly remedial education for students unprepared for the rigors of college-level academics, high attrition rates, and significant decline in the value and prestige of the CUNY degree. By the 1990s, it became clear that serious reform was in order. And thanks to concerted efforts on the part of CUNY trustees, administrators, alumni, and friends, the city university is now experiencing a renaissance: Admissions standards have risen, remediation has been brought under control, both enrollment and students' academic achievement are up, and the system has a flourishing Honors College.

The reforms at CUNY serve as a reminder that with the right combination of smart policymaking and action on the part of the governing board, it is possible to turn a challenging situation into one with a promising future.





Remediation and Attrition: Unprepared Students and Institutional Mismatch

CUNY enacted open admissions in 1970 with the goal of increasing access. And indeed, in one year, the number of first-year students jumped from 24,000 to over 35,000.¹ However, given the uneven and unpredictable quality of New York's public K-12 schools, which supply most of CUNY's incoming students, large numbers of students were matriculating in four-year colleges without adequate preparation for college-level work.

According to *An Institution Adrift*, a report published in 1999 by a task force commissioned by the administration of then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani, 87 percent of CUNY community college freshmen failed tests to determine the need for remediation, compared with 40 percent nationwide. Seventy-two percent of CUNY's 4-year college freshmen failed one or more of these placement tests, compared with 22 percent of freshmen nationally who take one or more remedial courses. Altogether, 9,000-10,000 students went into remediation each year before the adopted reforms.²

The financial burden of remediation was significant, both to the institution and to the students themselves. Financial aid regulations mandating a certain number of college-level credits—remedial courses do not qualify students for such aid—led students to combine remedial courses with regular college coursework in order to afford school. This contributed in large part to high failure and dropout rates, since many unprepared students found themselves unable to keep up with the work. Meanwhile, the institutional costs of remediation for CUNY were three times the average for public university systems.³

The Turnaround

In 1999, the CUNY Board of Trustees voted to phase out remedial instruction at the four-year "senior" colleges (with the exception of summer programs, ESL students, and students in certain special programs) and to introduce tighter admissions standards. The board also selected a leader for the system who shared its commitment to reform—Matthew Goldstein, then president of Adelphi University—and charged him to create a CUNY system with higher academic standards.

System-wide open admissions were phased out beginning in 1999, and CUNY began to undertake a series of reforms of its remediation practices, which didn't end remediation entirely but concentrated it in two-year programs. For example, the College of Staten Island restricted remedial coursework to students enrolled in two-year programs, with a 15-month time limit on developmental coursework.⁴ Other institutions followed similar patterns—at the senior colleges, for instance, regularly-admitted students now must complete remedial work before attendance.⁵

What has been the result of the CUNY reforms? Despite what critics feared would happen with the end of open admissions, enrollment at CUNY is at its highest point since the mid-1970s. More students pass state exams for teaching certification. Average SAT scores for incoming freshmen are in the top third of scores nationwide, and twice as many incoming students have high school averages of 85 percent or higher than was the case ten years



ago.¹ Moreover, the concern of many opponents of reform that minority enrollment would drop also turned out to be unfounded.² CUNY's Macauley Honors College, founded in 2001 to concentrate on providing a challenging and stimulating intellectual experience for CUNY's most academically gifted students, is thriving, providing another high-profile sign of the system's renaissance.³

In addition to the Honors College, CUNY has also established a new and innovative Community College Initiative geared towards addressing enrollment increases and improving graduation rates. The college, funded in part by a grant from the Gates Foundation, will have a comprehensive first-year core curriculum requiring full-time attendance, mandatory summer programs and admissions interviews, and a small number of programs with pre-established articulation agreements with the senior colleges. The college will also integrate academic and student services and will have an Office of Partnerships designed to help students find internships and applied learning opportunities.⁴ The concept was tested through a pilot program called the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs across the existing community colleges, and participants in the pilot showed considerably higher levels of academic achievements than those who did not participate.⁵

Notably, CUNY did not forget the importance of high school preparation in ensuring college success and academic quality. One of the factors that made it possible to cut back on remediation was the expansion of the College Now program, a joint effort of CUNY and the New York City Department of Education, to all seventeen of CUNY's undergraduate colleges. College Now is a high school-college dual-enrollment program intended to help students meet high school graduation requirements and to prepare them to enroll in college-level coursework.⁶ This program, which currently serves over 30,000 students in high schools across the city, is an effort to put remediation in the high schools—where it belongs. A 2005 study showed higher test scores and retention rates for participants.⁷

Another factor aiding CUNY's renaissance has been the preservation of the core curricula at some of the system's most prominent campuses, particularly Brooklyn College. Despite attempts to water it down since its inception in 1980, the curriculum still requires that all students take common courses such as "Classical Cultures" and "The Shaping of the Modern World."⁸ This core curriculum provides a coherent foundation for future study as well as a common intellectual conversation for students. The core also allows students with differing backgrounds and preparation levels to share a common intellectual foundation—something extremely valuable in New York City. And not the least importantly, the core is designed to give students the tools they will need for their future employment and education: English composition, natural sciences, mathematics, and foreign language. All of these skills are indispensable for students as they prepare to compete in the global marketplace.

The core curricula of two CUNY schools, Brooklyn and Hunter Colleges, compare favorably to general education programs at many other universities—including many big-name schools such as Yale, Harvard, and Northwestern. On the American Council of Trustees and Alumni's college-guide website, WhatWillTheyLearn.com, only seven schools out of over a hundred receive a grade of "A" for their cores—and two of them were Brooklyn and Hunter. By comparison, institutions such as Colgate, Johns Hopkins, Rice, Vanderbilt, and Cornell all receive grades of "F"



Of course, while there have been many positive developments at the City University of New York since the mid-1990s, there is still considerable work to be done. The six-year graduation rates for Brooklyn College and Hunter College, for instance, are less than 50 percent. A recent report from the CUNY Council of Math Chairs found significant deficiencies in basic mathematical skills among freshmen at the system's senior colleges.¹ In order to preserve the gains made from the reforms of the late 1990s and early 2000s, CUNY will have to continue its efforts to attract strong and capable students, and will have to continue to offer students a rigorous core curriculum that prepares them to be effective workers and informed citizens.

Louisiana: Similar Challenges, Similar Solutions?

While the State of Louisiana faces considerably different conditions and challenges than New York City did in the late 1990s, there are some important lessons from the CUNY experience in addressing the issue of unprepared students and institutional mismatch.

Like New York City and its public schools, much of Louisiana's K-12 system does not adequately prepare students for the challenges of a college education. According to the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education's Measuring Up report, Louisiana has lower rates of high school completion, lower average test scores, and fewer students taking a college-preparatory curriculum than most other states. In addition, the report found that only about half of Louisiana high school students were being taught by teachers with a major in their subject.²

According to the same report, Louisiana's public higher education institutions have an average six-year graduation rate of less than 40 percent.³ The University of Louisiana System's graduation rate for the 2002 cohort was only 33 percent, and some institutions, such as Southern University at New Orleans, saw even fewer of their first-time, full-time students complete their degrees within six years.⁴ Meanwhile, enrollment in four-year institutions is three times that of two-year institutions—75 percent and 25 percent of students, respectively. Governor Jindal made it clear that one of the priorities of the Commission should be to more evenly distribute enrollment between four-year universities and community and technical colleges.⁵

This is important, especially when considering the needs of the Louisiana economy and the educational needs of the workforce. While many of the jobs in the service economy require four-year degrees, many more in Louisiana require two-year vocational degrees, according to a presentation by Curt Eysink, Director of the Louisiana Workforce Commission.⁶ These indicate a need for better alignment between the aptitudes of students and postsecondary enrollment.

What is the best way to accomplish this re-alignment? As the CUNY Board of Trustees did through its effort to reduce remediation in its four-year colleges, the best way is to increase admissions standards for students entering and transferring to four-year universities in Louisiana, while encouraging students who don't meet the requirements to enroll in two-year programs with the option of transferring.



Like the CUNY system, Louisiana’s public universities enroll many students who are underprepared for college academics, and are beset with low retention and graduation rates. And as with CUNY, it will take a concerted effort by policymakers, administrators, and governing boards in order to implement the necessary solutions, which include raising admissions standards at four-year universities and promoting two-year institutions as an alternative postsecondary option for students. It looks as though this is already starting to happen—according to recent reports, the University of Louisiana System will raise high school grade-point average and ACT requirements both for its Tier II and Tier III institutions.¹ This is an important step forward in addressing the issue of quality and cost-effectiveness in public higher education.


A comprehensive effort at reforming public higher education in Louisiana is also going to need a strong focus on the quality of undergraduate education and increased attention to reforming K-12 education and aligning it with the goals and standards of postsecondary education. Here are some broad themes to keep in mind:

- 1. The need for strong and effective policymakers.** As is the case in most states, the Governor of Louisiana has a great deal of influence over the direction of higher education, most notably in his power to appoint members of the State Board of Regents and the individual system boards of supervisors. In New York, it was gubernatorial (and, given the structure of CUNY, mayoral) appointments of several key members of the CUNY Board of Trustees that allowed the needed reforms to take place. The withering report on CUNY’s academic shortcomings issued by the mayoral task force was also crucial. Governor Jindal should likewise appoint members to Louisiana’s governing boards who share his vision for higher academic standards and a more cost-effective public higher education system.

Governor Jindal, in his capacity as the acting president of the University of Louisiana System, promoted the concept of “centers of excellence” in the system’s colleges and universities—strong academic and professional programs that are of particular importance to the needs of the state. These “centers of excellence” would be targeted for increased funding, while weaker or duplicative programs would be shut down.

Louisiana’s State Board of Regents should continue to pursue this “centers of excellence” theme through use of performance measures in determining the allocation of funding. According to a report by Education Sector, Louisiana “does not appear to link institutional performance with state funding levels.”² Establishing a clear connection between academic quality and funding can go a long way towards improving higher education.

State policymakers can also use funding and financial aid mechanisms to encourage degree completion—an area in which Louisiana has demonstrated success recently. According to a report by the Lumina Foundation, Louisiana’s Opening Doors program, which offered disadvantaged students scholarships to two-year colleges if they maintained a certain level of academic performance, showed some positive initial results.³ Though Opening Doors only lasted from 2004 to 2005, it may provide a model for using targeted scholarships and financial aid policies to promote student success.



On a larger level, individual states need to articulate and adhere to a state mission for higher education. This means determining what kind of institutional landscape is appropriate for the state given its unique economic, geographical, and demographic characteristics. As former South Carolina state representative and higher education expert Harry Stille has written:

A state higher education mission should set standards for each sector of institutions—the research, comprehensive, two-year community colleges and/or technical education colleges, private non-profit and for-profit institutions—reflecting their value to the state’s educational goals and aspirations. This mission should establish feasibility and affordability of programs and degree offerings.¹

- 2. The importance of engaged governing boards and focused administrators.** As was demonstrated at CUNY, the engagement of an institution’s governing board is absolutely necessary in order to enact reforms. The CUNY board made the initial votes to limit remediation and raise academic standards before appointing Chancellor Goldstein to carry out its vision. Without a shared commitment to reform on the part of both the board and the administration, a dramatic turnaround will not be possible.
- 3. A focus on the basics: the curriculum and undergraduate education.** One of the best ways to ensure a quality education is to enhance the general education curriculum. Students need exposure to college-level writing, mathematics, science, literature, American history, and foreign languages if they are to become educated citizens and productive members of the workforce. And Louisiana’s public universities already do a better than average job at meeting these requirements—for instance, Louisiana State University receives a grade of “B” on ACTA’s WhatWillTheyLearn.com for its strong requirements in English composition, foreign language, math, and science. Other Louisiana institutions fare relatively well in this area. For example, the Board of Regents of the University of Louisiana System mandate the following: 6 hours of English composition, 6 hours of Mathematics, 6 hours of Behavioral Science, 9 hours of Natural Science (including both biological and physical), 9 hours of Humanities, and 3 hours of Fine Arts. Some campuses go even further—for instance, McNeese State University in Lake Charles requires surveys of American history, while Grambling State University requires a World Literature course, a survey of Western Civilization, and a Modern World History course. Southern University at New Orleans requires students to take one of two US history survey courses.

The best strategy for Louisiana’s public university systems with regard to the core curriculum is to preserve the worthy requirements, and to find out ways to continuously improve and strengthen them system-wide. System boards could require that all institutions require American history surveys, or a survey of English, American, or world literature. Revising general education in such a way that minimizes the number of narrow, trendy courses that count for requirements can also help facilitate transfers between institutions. Some states, such as Minnesota and Illinois, have statewide articulation agreements, with a certain set of courses that are interchangeable at all institutions.

Improving the quality of general education is a way of reforming the undergraduate experience that does not require a large expenditure of resources—often, the courses necessary for such a core

curriculum already exist. The task is simply to devise and articulate a framework for these courses that allow for a coherent body of general knowledge for all students.

- 4. Promoting the quality of K-12 education.** One of the most formidable barriers to increased student success in postsecondary education in Louisiana is the inadequate preparation in the state's public high schools. Colleges and universities can help address these issues by establishing or strengthening partnerships between secondary and post-secondary institutions. CUNY's College Now program can serve as a model for these kinds of collaborations. There also needs to be better alignment between the curricular standards of secondary and post-secondary institutions in order to ensure that students who do choose to enroll in a four-year university are prepared for the work.

The Measuring Up report also takes Louisiana to task for failing to put teachers in secondary classrooms that are adequately trained in the subjects that they will teach. However, according to the Education Sector Higher Ed Accountability Report, Louisiana has seen considerable improvements in the alignment of state standards for teacher education with K-12 curricular goals and in evaluating the effectiveness of different teacher preparation programs.¹ These are all promising efforts, and the State Board of Regents should continue to monitor and strengthen its teacher education programs. In particular, the Regents should make sure that the academic and curricular standards of teacher training programs measure up to the academic rigor of other academic programs.

These types of reforms could end up saving valuable resources to the institutions of higher education. Better-prepared students are less in need of remediation courses, are less likely to drop out, and are thus more likely to provide the contributions to the state economy that are part of the *raison d'être* of public higher education.

The City University of New York's transformation has inspired another troubled public university system to undertake sweeping reforms just earlier this year. Earlier this year, the trustees of the University of the District of Columbia, another troubled urban public university, appointed Alan Sessoms, the former president of CUNY Queens College, as the institution's president and charged him with effecting genuine change. Almost immediately, Sessoms announced plans to split UDC, which had been struggling with low graduation rates and a sliding academic reputation, into two campuses: a two-year community college that would retain UDC's open admissions tradition, and a four-year "flagship" campus with admissions standards. The transformed UDC opened in August 2009, with students expressing an optimistic view of the school's future.²

That another public university is following CUNY's footsteps should serve as an encouragement for Louisiana as it seeks to re-evaluate and reform its institutions of higher education. If the CUNY experience can teach us anything, it is that informed leadership can influence higher education for the better.

Sandra E. Diaz is a program officer at the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, an independent, Washington, D.C.-based non-profit dedicated to academic freedom, academic quality, and accountability.



Footnotes

- 1 Marc Santora, "A Brownstone Becomes an Ivory Tower, and New York City is the Campus," *New York Times*, 8 September 2008 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/08/nyregion/08honors.html>>.
- 2 Schmidt, Benno C., et al, *The City University of New York: An Institution Adrift*, A Report of the Mayor's Advisory Task Force on the City University of New York, 1999, 21.
- 3 Ibid, 32-34
- 4 Carol Iannone, "Reform at CUNY: A Conversation with Dorothy Lang," *Academic Questions*, Winter 2004-05, 20
- 5 Kathleen Pesile, "Why UDC Is on the Right Path," *The Washington Post*, 22 March 2009 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/21/AR2009032101845.html>>.
- 6 Benno Schmidt, "CUNY: The Pride of the City," An Address by CUNY Chairman Benno C. Schmidt, Jr at the Harvard Club, 16 December 2003 <http://www1.cuny.edu/portal_ur/content/2003/chairman_12-16-03.html>.
- 8 Marc Santora, "A Brownstone Becomes an Ivory Tower, and New York City is the Campus," *New York Times*, 7 September 2008 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/08/nyregion/08honors.html>>.
- 9 "A New Community College Concept Paper Executive Summary," City University of New York, 15 August 2008 <http://www.cuny.edu/academics/oa/initiatives/ncc/ExecutiveSummary_111008.pdf>.
- 10 Marc Santora, "CUNY Plans New Approach to Community College," *New York Times*, 25 January 2009 <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/26/education/26college.html?_r=4>.
- 11 History and Philosophy, College Now, City University of New York <http://collegenow.cuny.edu/whatiscn/history_philosophy/>.
- 12 Eric Hofmann, "CUNY College Now: A Credit-Based Model that Improves College Retention," Presentation at the 2005 Education Trust National Conference, Washington, DC, 3 November 2005 <<http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.civicaactions.net/files/publications/files/Session10CUNYCollegeNow.ppt>>.
- 13 Core Curriculum, Brooklyn College, accessed 13 November 2009 <<http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/portal/core/core-overview.html>>.
- 14 Joel Schectman and Rachel Monahan, "CUNY's got math problem: Report shows many freshmen from city HS fail at basic algebra," *New York Daily News*, 12 November 2009 <http://www.nydailynews.com/ny_local/education/2009/11/12/2009-11-12_cunys_got_math_problem_many_freshmen_from_city_hs_fail_at_basic_algebra.html>
- 15 "Measuring Up 2006: The State Report Card on Higher Education, Louisiana," *The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education*, 2006, 5.
- 16 Joel Schectman and Rachel Monahan, "CUNY's got math problem: Report shows many freshmen from city HS fail at basic algebra," *New York Daily News*, 12 November 2009 <http://www.nydailynews.com/ny_local/education/2009/11/12/2009-11-12_cunys_got_math_problem_many_freshmen_from_city_hs_fail_at_basic_algebra.html> <?> Joel Schectman and Rachel Monahan, "CUNY's got math problem: Report shows many freshmen from city HS fail at basic algebra," *New York Daily News*, 12 November 2009 <http://www.nydailynews.com/ny_local/education/2009/11/12/2009-11-12_cunys_got_math_problem_many_freshmen_from_city_hs_fail_at_basic_algebra.html>
- 17 "Presentation to the Louisiana Postsecondary Education Commission," University of Louisiana System, 26 October 2009 <http://laperc.org/assets/presentations/ULS_LAPERC_10-09_print_version.pdf>, p. 48; "Revival on the River," Southern University and A&M College System, Presentation given to the Louisiana Postsecondary Education Commission, 26 October 2009 <http://laperc.org/assets/presentations/PERC_Presentation_10_26_09.pptx>.
- 18 "Governor Jindal Addresses First Postsecondary Education Review Commission," Office of the Governor, 10 August 2009 <<http://gov.louisiana.gov/index.cfm?md=newsroom&tmp=detail&articleID=1503>>.
- 19 Curt Eysink, "Workforce Needs of Postsecondary Education," Presentation to the Louisiana Postsecondary Education Commission, 10 August 2009 <<http://laperc.org/assets/presentations/EysinkPresentation.ppt>>.
- 20 Mike Hasten, "UL-System adopts higher admission, transfer standards," *The News Star*, 24 October 2009 <<http://www.thenewsstar.com/article/20091024/NEWS01/910240314>>.
- 21 Chad Aldeman and Kevin Carey, "Higher Ed Accountability Report: Louisiana," *Ready to Assemble: Grading State Higher Education Accountability Systems* (Washington, DC: Education Sector, 2009), 77.
- 22 "Four Steps to Finishing First in Higher Education: Step Two: Rewarding Students for Completing Courses and Degree or Certificate Programs," Lumina Foundation for Education, November 2009 <http://www.makingopportunityaffordable.org/sites/default/files/press-media/FourSteps_Step%20Student%20EMB.pdf>.
- 23 Harry C. Stille, "A Crisis in Higher Education in America," *Essays in Perspective*, American Council of Trustees and Alumni, Summer 2007 <<https://www.goacta.org/publications/downloads/Stille2007-3.pdf>>.
- 24 Chad Aldeman and Kevin Carey, "Higher Ed Accountability Report: Louisiana," *Ready to Assemble: Grading State Higher Education Accountability Systems*, 76.
- 25 Daniel de Vise, "A Different UDC Prepares for Debut," *Washington Post*, 4 August 2009 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/08/03/AR2009080302694.html?sid=ST2009080302796>>.