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At City College, a Battle Over Remedial Classes for English and Math

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By CAROL POGASH



Don Q. Griffin, the chancellor of City College of San Francisco, presides over a campus split by a furor over remedial classes.

At City College of San Francisco, one of the country's largest public universities, thousands of struggling students pour into remedial English and math classes — and then the vast majority disappear, never to receive a college degree.

When Steve Ngo, a 33-year-old college trustee, learned that many minority students, among others, faced two-and-a-half years, or five semesters, of remedial English classes and a year and a half of math at the two-year college, he was shocked into action. His campaign for a one-year sequence of remedial courses ignited a campus furor, with students and a few trustees on one side and faculty members, irate about the intrusion of trustees on academic turf, on the other.

Mr. Ngo's less-than-collegial campaign was expected to prevail. On Thursday night, Don Q. Griffin, the college's chancellor, was to present a proposal for a shortened remedial curriculum, designed to get students into college-level courses more quickly.

While the battle — which Hal Huntsman, the former president of the Academic Senate, likened to a civil war — was about trustees' dictating policies to professors, everyone agreed that the achievement gap, with blacks and Latinos on one side and whites and most Asians on the other, needed fixing.

Some 90 percent of new C.C.S.F. students who take the placement test are unprepared for introductory English 1A; 70 percent are not ready for basic math. There are more remedial math and English classes at the school than college-level classes, the chancellor said. As with [community colleges](#) around the country, C.C.S.F., which has 100,000 students, has adopted a role well outside its mission of boosting students into four-year colleges.

Some freshmen do not know that “one-half and .5 represent the same number,” said Dennis Piontkowski, chairman of the mathematics department. “We don’t want to keep students in math classes forever, but you can’t just snap your fingers and bring them up to college level.”

Students are leaving high school with a diploma, but “most are testing at middle-school reading comprehension” and many at elementary-school level, said James Sauvé, an English department instructor in charge of revising the remediation classes.

The college’s 2009 equity report showed that just 4 percent of black students and 7 percent of Hispanic students who began English remedial classes at the bottom rung eventually completed English 1A. The rest are lost, either failing to enroll, failing a class or dropping out. The number for white students — 12 percent — is not much better.

“If you put people in remediation and they don’t succeed, what’s the point?” said Steven Spurling, the assistant director of institutional research, who crunched the numbers. “If you elongate the educational process, people will eventually drop out.”

Nationally, City College of San Francisco’s two-and-a-half year remedial English sequence is one of the longer routes, said Thomas Bailey, director of Community College Research Center at [Columbia University Teachers College](#).

Katie Hern, a Chabot College English instructor who researches remediation, said: “Placement becomes destiny. Students who take Chabot’s more intensive one-semester English remediation course pass college-level English at twice the rate of those who took the college’s two-semester course.”

For faculty members “who devoted their lives to helping students learn,” Ms. Hern said, “it’s hard to accept that providing more courses can be harmful.”

Beth Cataldo, a basic-skills coordinator at C.C.S.F., said that to blame the length of the remedial classes for student dropout, was “a little naïve.”

“It’s a community issue,” Ms. Cataldo said. “We have a whole underclass of the undereducated who tend to be African American and Latinos.”

“Here we are in the most progressive city in the nation, and nobody’s talking about it.”

Lerone Matthis, a business major, took six semesters of remedial math before he could take college-level math classes. With two children and a job, Mr. Matthis, who once was homeless, said he was “one of the more motivated students.”

“I’ve had great teachers in English and a few in math,” he said.

Not every course was helpful, though.

Mr. Matthis pointed to one essay and reading class that, he said, “was nothing but [global warming](#),” adding, “I didn’t become a better writer from that class.”

He said that extending the sequence of remedial classes was “a runaround,” and that he had a lot of friends who “just gave up.”

On top of these practical issues, the college’s 2009 equity report found that larger percentages of black, Filipino, Latino, Pacific Islander and Southeast Asian students wanted four-year degrees than did their Asian and white counterparts. Yet, according to the report, those same groups — except for Southeast Asians — transfer to four-year schools at significantly lower rates than Asians and whites. The graduation or transfer rate for blacks is 24 percent; for Latinos it is 23 percent. For white non-Hispanics, it is 31 percent.

Those statistics, and the students’ concerns, galvanized Mr. Ngo, a trustee who is a Vietnamese-American lawyer who is not easily intimidated “The board has a role in saying the system has to change,” he said. “Why else are we here?”

With two other young board members — Chris Jackson, 27, who is black, and Joshua Nielsen, 25, the former president of the student body, Mr. Ngo organized “equity hearings,” forums for students to voice their concerns about the achievement gap.

Mr. Ngo then produced a draft resolution that directed the English and math departments to offer a sequence of pre-college English and math classes “in a length no longer than two semesters.”

Faculty members were outraged. One called Mr. Ngo a fascist. The trustee was accused of violating the education code and of “imperiling” the college’s accreditation, an accusation that the chancellor said he was not aware of. Mr. Ngo received e-mail that attacked his “top-down attempt at micro managing,” and that said he had polarized the campus, setting off “a firestorm of faculty anger.”

At a special Academic Senate meeting in March to address the issue, Mr. Nielsen, the student trustee, tried to speak in support of a shorter remedial program before his microphone was cut off and security was called. Resentful professors criticized Mr. Ngo’s resolution, countering with one of their own, which resolved to work collegially to close the achievement gap and specifying that in academic matters, faculty members “have primacy.”

Mr. Ngo does not agree with that point of view. “They think it’s their college,” he said later. “They don’t think they have to be accountable to the public.”

Still, he withdrew his draft and apologized to the faculty, although he said he had no real regrets for what he had done.

In the spring, Chancellor Griffin “told the bunch of sides to cut it out,” said Mr. Sauvé, the English professor.

In a college-wide memo that tried to smooth the situation, the chancellor said there would be major changes in English and math remediation course sequences. He told the math and English departments to come up with solutions for spring 2011.

At Thursday night’s trustees’ meeting, the chancellor was expected to make public the math and English department plans for shortened, more intensive sequences of remediation classes to begin next spring. The English department was expected to continue its two-and-a-half year track while giving students a choice of a new intensive one-and-a-half year program. The math department was expected to keep its current track of a year and a half of remediation, while also offering more condensed classes to allow students to complete the cycle in a year.

Mr. Ngo said that if he had not drafted his resolution, there would be no new offerings in the spring.

“I would have been patted on the head and told to move along,” he said. “And when my term ended, nothing would have changed.”

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