

CUNY to Seek Companies To Teach Remedial Classes

By KAREN W. ARENSON

The City University of New York will turn to an outside company to teach basic skills to students least prepared to do college-level work.

CUNY is about to seek bids from outside contractors — either commercial or nonprofit — to conduct a pilot program for 500 students, said Matthew Goldstein, the university's chancellor, in a memo to trustees on Friday.

"I view this as a way to diversify the opportunities to succeed for those of our students who, historically, have been the least successful," Dr. Goldstein said in the memo.

The program, to be called the College Outreach and Preparation Program, will be aimed at adult students who fail all three of CUNY's placement examinations in reading, writing and mathematics.

In recent years, about a fifth of entering freshmen, many of them adults who have been out of school for years, have failed all three tests. They are still allowed to enroll, but must devote most of their time to noncredit remedial courses.

Although most CUNY colleges still accept remedial students, under a policy being phased in over two years, students who fail any placement exams will be barred from its senior colleges but will still be able to enroll at its community colleges.

University officials said that those who enter after failing all three tests often have difficulty completing their degrees; only 12 percent of such students earn a community college degree from CUNY within eight years, compared with 47 percent of students who pass all of the placement tests or fail only one.

"We thought we would give it a try and see if anyone would have any more success working with these students than we do," said Louise Mirrer, CUNY's vice chancellor for academic affairs.

She envisions free-standing remedial institutes under CUNY's supervision, somewhat like the university's language institutes, where participants are not considered registered college students. After completing their specialized studies, they would enroll in college courses. Those who wished to remain college students, taking remedial courses offered by the colleges — and eligible for financial aid — could do so.

She said CUNY had begun to work

with an outside company on remedial classes several years ago. The program was cut short, however, when some college officials said the cost was too high.

Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani's task force on CUNY recommended last year that the university use outside contractors for remedial education. The panel said CUNY's programs were inadequate and concluded that private companies or other universities might do a better job.

But Dr. Mirrer said the decision to turn to an outside vendor was not a condemnation of CUNY's program, which is widely regarded as one of the best in the nation.

"What we offer works for a large number of students, but not for all," she said. "This will be one of a package of options."

Some faculty members criticized the plan as a step toward privatization. Bill Crain, a psychology professor at City College, called the plan a chance for private firms "to make money off our students."

Dr. Mirrer said students could try CUNY's remedial classes first, and then turn to the new program if they made little progress. Or they could go directly to the outside program.

The mayor's task force suggested the university pay for outside help, but the CUNY plan calls for students to pay their own fees. Dr. Mirrer said it was too early to specify those fees, but that outside companies usually charged more than CUNY. She added that the earliest the project could start would be this fall.