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Letter to *The New York Times*

Arthur B. Powell
Miriam Yevick

Dear Editor,

As respectively retired and current professors of mathematics at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, who taught and teach remedial mathematics besides other mathematics courses at the college level, we should like to express our extreme disagreement with the intention to drop such programs from colleges as reported in *The New York Times* ("Pataki-Giuliani Plan Would Curb CUNY College's Remedial Work," May 7, 1998).

University College on the Newark Campus (now administratively absorbed into the regular day school) is a special division devoted to part-time students who take an average of seven years to earn their degree. A large percentage of the students are from racial and ethnic minority groups and over half are women. The college is highly successful in propelling this student population of working adults from low-skilled wage earners into a broad variety of skilled and professional fields. With their better paying jobs, they more than repay national, state, and local governments in the form of higher tax contributions.

Even though I (Professor Yevick) am a research mathematician with a Ph.D. from M.I.T., I found this teaching, in which I engaged for some twenty-five years, highly rewarding. I felt great admiration for women who would get up at 5 a.m. to prepare dinner in advance, get the kids off to school and then head out to full-time jobs, and thence go to school and do homework at night determined to get that degree. Although their mathematics background was abysmal and the students suffered from extreme math anxiety, I was able to inspire in them a sense of self-confidence. My greatest satisfaction was to see a student's face light up with a flash of insight when I conveyed the meaning of mathematical concepts to them such as, for example, the notion of x 's and y 's in analogy with pronouns. I even developed a special course "Mathematics for Life and Society" (See *Technology Review*, October 1984, p. A21.) in which the basic skills were extracted from application to social and economic problems relevant to the daily lives of my students. Thus I

overcame the notion that remedial mathematics was a waste of time.

Teaching in the Newark College of Arts and Sciences, the day college, I (Professor Powell), trained in pure mathematics at the University of Michigan, am acquainted with the extraordinary efforts of students required to do developmental work in mathematics in college. For most students in this group their previous scholastic experiences have already severely diminished their academic self-esteem. More particularly, these previous experiences have all but eroded their sense of themselves as capable of understanding, doing, and much less applying mathematics. Nevertheless, during my 17 years of teaching in the day college, I have witnessed many students, once given the opportunity and coupled with innovative pedagogy, decide to engage mathematics beyond the degree requirements. Among these students, some have gone so far as to minor or major in mathematics or computer science. Furthermore, these students have gained invaluable insights into the complex task of learning mathematics. Some even have participated, while students, in research activities as researchers and have reported their results at professional conferences as well as published articles in academic journals and chapters in books on mathematics education.

Such results are only possible within a college setting. Here students can take college level courses simultaneously with remedial and developmental work and experience remediation as a first step towards the attainable goal of a college degree. We never did feel that our students did not belong in college. We can do no less than maintain and expand such programs at the college level to help salvage a student population whose intellectual potential would otherwise be shamefully neglected.

Miriam L. Yevick,
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