Although graduation rates in CUNY’s bachelors programs have been rising for some time, significant racial differences remain. The gap in 6-year graduation rates separating black from white students is now 19 percentage points and for Hispanic students, 17 points. The Office of Policy Research conducted a series of studies to measure the size of racial gaps, and to understand their origin in terms of socioeconomic background, high school preparation, and early academic experiences at CUNY. The results, based on 11 cohorts of first-time freshmen entering CUNY baccalaureate programs, are summarized below.

Controlling for Background Characteristics and High School Preparation Reduces — But Does Not Eliminate — Gaps

This policy brief presents data from the Fall 2004 cohort of first-time freshmen in CUNY baccalaureate programs to gauge the magnitude of gaps at CUNY in comparison to gaps nationwide. We then expand our sample to include more cohorts of students to try to explain these “raw” gaps by controlling for other factors that may influence a student’s likelihood of graduating. Using regression techniques, we analyze the performance (6-year graduation rates) of 11 cohorts of first-time freshmen in CUNY baccalaureate programs. In the end, controlling for background characteristics and high school preparation reduces — but does not eliminate — observed gaps.

Race Gaps

Nationally, black and Hispanic students graduate from high school, enroll in college, and complete college at lower rates than white and Asian students. According to data from National Center for Education Statistics, the 6-year graduation rate for the 2003 cohort year of baccalaureate students at public colleges was 39% for blacks, 47% for Hispanics, 61% for whites, and 68% for

Asians and Pacific Islanders.¹

Degree attainment differences among CUNY baccalaureate students mirror national patterns. In Figure 1, the first bar in each set shows that black and Hispanic baccalaureate students were the least likely to graduate of those in the Fall 2004 entering cohort, with an overall graduation rate of 38% and 40%, respectively. In contrast, 57% of whites and 56% of Asians completed their baccalaureate degrees within 6 years.

What Explains Race Gaps?

Differences in degree attainment nationwide can be explained, in part, by background characteristics such as socio-economic status, demographic characteristics, academic preparation in high school, and other characteristics. However, racial and ethnic disparities in baccalaureate attainment are not fully explained by background characteristics that can be easily observed.² An examination of CUNY students shows the same pattern.

Figure 2 presents the results of successive probit regression models examining the relative probability of graduation within 6 years for 11 cohorts of CUNY baccalaureate students (Fall and Spring entrants). The first set of bars shows that black students are 18% and Hispanic students are 16.8% less likely to graduate than white students when no controls are used (unadjusted rate).

Accounting for the fact that underrepresented minority students are more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds reduces this gap by 3.9 percentage points for black students and 1.5 percentage points for Hispanic students in the second model. (See Table 1 for a list of variables included in each of these statistical analyses.)

These gaps are further reduced when academic performance in high school is held constant in addition to the controls for demographic and socio-economic characteristics. The third set of bars in Figure 2 suggests that the graduation gap would be reduced another 4.2 percentage points for black students and 2.3 percentage points for Hispanic students if they had the same socio-economic characteristics and performed just as well in high school as white students.

The final set of bars in the graph shows that adding controls for early college performance – factors such as full-time attendance, summer course work, and grade point average in the first semester – further reduces the gap by 3.5 and 5.1 percentage points for black students and Hispanic students, respectively.

This final model — which accounts for family background, high school performance, and early college factors — explains about two-thirds of observed black graduation gaps and nearly half of the Hispanic gap: black and Hispanic students are still less likely to graduate within 6

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years than their white counterparts, by -6.4% and -7.9%, respectively. This indicates that we have not incorporated into our models all of the variables that might explain achievement gaps. Possibilities include measures of stereotype threat, willingness to borrow for education, work and family obligations, early childhood or middle school educational quality, choice of major, and propensity to transfer outside of CUNY.

It is worth noting that despite starting with a larger unadjusted gap (-18%), the gap between black and white students shrinks by much more than half after all controls are added. This compares to a smaller initial unadjusted gap for Hispanic students that shrinks by half when controls are added. In short, demographic and performance controls account for a larger portion of the black-white achievement gap than the Hispanic-white achievement gap in graduation rates.

**Policy Implications**

Black and Hispanic students are least likely to complete a baccalaureate degree within 6 years at CUNY. These graduation gaps can be explained in part by students’ demographic and socio-economic characteristics and high school preparation.

Through the Graduate NYC! Initiative, CUNY is engaged with the New York City Department of Education in a systematic effort to improve college readiness and success at CUNY. The initiative is working to improve curricular alignment between the two systems as well as advisement regarding preparation and application to college.

The analysis also points to the importance of the first semester and first year in college -- domains over which the University has direct influence. Programs that provide a range of academic and social supports, such as SEEK and the Black Male Initiative, show promise. Summer bridge programs, which build the academic skills of underprepared students and teach them how to navigate college, have proven to be successful.

Support systems that monitor student performance for risk factors such as withdrawals from a large proportion of classes and a low rate of credit accumulation may also reduce gaps when accompanied by tutoring or follow-up communications with a college advisor. Finally, supplemental instruction provided by successful peer mentors and life skills courses for students in need of remedial coursework have also shown promise.