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Good and bad news at CUNY

At a time when most of the news coming out of academia is depressing or worse, we were heartened to learn that the City University of New York has won a small victory in its efforts to restore standards at its community colleges. At issue is whether the university has the right to withhold diplomas from bilingual students who do not pass an examination demonstrating rudimentary proficiency in writing English. The controversy came to a head in May 1997 when the university denied diplomas to some five-hundred students at five community colleges within the cuny system because they had failed to pass the examination. One-hundred students at Hostos, a small community college in the South Bronx, sued the university. Judge Kenneth J. Thompson, Jr., of the State Supreme Court upheld their suit, ruling that requiring students to pass the examination shortly before graduation was “arbitrary,” “capricious,” and “unfair.”

Of course, that is exactly the sort of ruling—which appeals to “equality” and “democracy” when the issue is simple competence—that has done so much to destroy the quality of American education. Fortunately, the trustees of cuny, led by Herman Badillo, vice-chairman of the board, appealed the ruling. On December 8, 1998, a four-judge appellate-division panel overturned Thompson’s ruling and upheld the university’s right to withhold diplomas from “bilingual” students who actually turn out to be monolingual (or at least monoliterate) at best. Anne A. Paolucci, chairman of the cuny trustees, summed it up well when she observed that “the true beneficiaries of the decision are the students of Hostos, who must be assured that the completion of their academic requirements will have credibility in the workplace and at other institutions of higher education.” This decision in favor of upholding standards is only a small step, to be sure, but for once it is a step in the right direction.

Nothing is simple in academia these days, however. As *The New York Post* reported, no sooner had the appellate court done the right thing by the students of cuny than a coalition of “civil liberties” groups

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went to court to block the university's efforts to raise admissions standards. If you believe that a concern with "civil liberties" has nothing at all to do with seeking to raise admissions standards in an institution supposedly devoted to higher education, you are right. But it has a lot to do with egalitarian ideological warfare. This new suit seeks to invest final authority over cuny's admissions standards with the state Board of Regents—a panel, in the *Post*'s apt characterization, "in total thrall to the same gang of unionists, racist zealots, ivory-tower academics, and hack Democratic politicians that brought the once-world-class university to its present low state." Whether this preposterous suit will succeed remains to be seen. If it does, the primary writing examinations cuny requires will be in the department of epitaphs.

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