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# Profile and Evaluation of the Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge Program at the College of Staten Island of the City University of New York.

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# ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research project was to investigate and deliver a report on the effectiveness of the Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge program (SEEK) at the City University of New York (CUNY), in helping high school graduates who are under-prepared for college to gain admission and excel in higher education. The report is intended to become part of a larger framework of literature assessing the effectiveness of positive or affirmative action programs, or programs of "preferential treatment," in helping historically marginalized and historically discriminated individuals gain access to what certain opportunities and privileges were once inaccessible to them. The research methodology used involved interviews, literature review, and statistical analyses, to collect information on the history, structure and visions of program administrators regarding SEEK, and the effectiveness of the program. The research demonstrates grounds on which to support the SEEK program within a broader agenda to democratize access to higher education. Furthermore, it transpires in the investigation that admissions and enrollment of SEEK students as well as non-SEEK students are and have been increasing since the 1990s. Thus the research would ultimately support an argument not only for maintaining funding for SEEK, but perhaps to also increase state funding of the program.

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# INTRODUCTION

In the modern liberal democracy, a comfortable adulthood is the objective of the adolescent of the aspirational classes. It is generally taken as axiomatic that the achievement of this objective depends to a considerable degree on the level of education of the citizen. Academic and public-policy research data consistently show a positive correlation between a college degree and lifetime earnings, and higher wages for college graduates relative to high school graduates without a college education. For the US, among recent such studies, one finds data from the Pew Research Center showing, in the generation of workers born in 1980 or later, high school graduates without a college degree earned a median income that stood at 61.5% of the median income of college graduates ($28,000 vs $45,500). Moreover, the Pew Research Center data show, even a limited amount of college is more favorable to earnings than no collegiate education at all. In 2013, the median income of those with some college education but no degree was 7% higher than the median for high school graduates with no college education ($30,000 vs $28,000). Further yet, the value of the college education has consistently and considerably gained relative to a lack thereof over the past several generations.

In the Pew Research Center data, it transpires that the earnings of a high school graduate was 81% that of a college graduate in 1965, 77% in 1979, 68% in 1986 and 64% in 1995 before arriving at 61.5% last year. Similarly, Shierholtz, Wething and Sabadish, of the Economic Policy Institute in Washington, D.C., show that where the unemployment rate for high school graduates was 31.1% for young high school graduates (age 17-20), it was 9.2% for young college graduates (age 21-24). Significantly, in their analysis, the value of a college degree relative to the lack of same also transpires in a negative context. Between 2000 and 2011, where the wages of young high school graduates declined by 11.1%, the wages of young college graduates declined by a considerably less severe 5.4%.

Statistics on the value of a college degree resonate in the public at large, because they are widely disseminated in popular media. A recent column in the New York Times was widely quoted in

both print and online publications for its assertive review of the Economic Policy Institute data, which reported that the 2013 hourly wages of college graduates were 98% higher than those of workers without a degree. The data here echo the historical trend identified by the Pew Research Center. College graduates' hourly wages were a more modest 89% higher five years earlier, yet lower at 85% in 2003, and 64% in the early 1980s.[1] Thus the public is aware of the stakes of a college education, and young high school graduates from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds can also want to partake of its benefits. Yet, structural obstacles exist that may systematically keep the poor high school graduate from achieving her aspiration to a higher education degree. Such obstacles may be poor academic records, insufficient funds, undesirable loan schemes, or work-schedules that conflict with academic pursuit. In the State of New York, she might succeed in her pursuit of a college degree through the Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) program.

SEEK is a higher education access program. Also known as an opportunity program, SEEK operates within the City University of New York (CUNY). CUNY is a system of community and senior colleges. CUNY's seven community colleges are two-year institutions that award Associate's Degrees. CUNY's eleven senior colleges are four-year institutions that award Bachelor's and Master's degrees. It is at CUNY's senior colleges that SEEK was born. However, the history of SEEK begins with its older twin-program College Discovery (CD), instituted at the community colleges. Preceding CD was what existed as the so-called *pre-baccalaurate program* in the mid-1960s.

Whereas CUNY has its roots in the liberal promise of 19th century secular humanism, the various access programs came out of civil society activism in the second half of the 20th century that spoke to structural social inequalities. These programs more specifically intended to extend to historically marginalized populations the material benefits of a collegiate education.

The present project is situated in a historical context that has seen systematic public defunding of social programs and a concomitant resurgence of social inequalities in the United States. Chapter 1

[1] David Leonhardt. 2014. "Is College Worth It? Clearly, New Data Says." The New York Times.

delineates the research interest and operational questions around the validity of the SEEK program, and the methods in which they are addressed.

There seems to be no texts dedicated to the history of the SEEK program. There are tangential or incidental references made to SEEK in various literatures published since the late 1960s. However, a proper history of the program helps to establish its meaning and significance. Chapter 2 reviews the presence of SEEK in the literature. Chapter 3 is dedicated to the history of the program. It is informed principally by first-hand accounts published online. Together with chapter 4 it sketches the profile of SEEK and its constituents.

Chapter 5 engages the main points of assessment, addressing the quantitative and qualitative effects and outcomes of SEEK, in terms of admissions, enrollment, and graduation rates between SEEK and non-SEEK students. The conclusion makes clear that SEEK students, who enter college at distinct academic and socio-economic disadvantages that may discourage graduation, are found to perform as well as their non-SEEK peers. It consequently argues that more funding should go to the program.



# CHAPTER 1 – RESEARCH QUESTION & METHODOLOGY

How effective is CUNY's SEEK program as an instrument of higher educational attainment by

underprivileged groups and individuals? An assessment of the SEEK program is very relevant and important today. CUNY has been affected by the fiscal austerity crisis of New York State and the United States in general. It has been losing funding since the early 1990s. Meanwhile, SEEK and similar access programs rely heavily on public funds. Social equality continue to be contested through state funding and other forms of public support of social programs such as SEEK that are intended to help the poor. An assessment of SEEK may provide hard evidence for social justice advocates, who must remain vigilant and well-equipped with pertinent data. Likewise, such an assessment may be of service to state officials. Academic data on SEEK may help politicians and policy-makers develop more informed and sound positions when deciding on either appropriating or cutting funds to such programs as SEEK.

SEEK is a valuable tool particularly for high school students today who may not be able to afford college due to lack of economic resources and academic preparation. While New York State funds to CUNY have been cut systematically since the early 1990s, tuition there has been rising. In 2011, the New York Times reported that trustees of the City University “approved [a] series of $300 annual tuition increases that will extend through 2015.” High and rising tuition is an obstacle for many who wish to pursue a higher education degree. Yet a college degree remains of crucial importance in improving income potential. The structures of programs such as SEEK, which is elaborated upon in Chapter 4, help high school students who might not be able to enter and graduate from college to attain a collegiate degree.

The description and statistical analysis of SEEK, in chapters 3, 4, and 5 of this paper, are built on interviews, literature reviews, as well as publicly available quantitative data on the program. I've conducted interviews with the Director of SEEK at CSI, Ms. Gloria Garcia, and the Administrative Assistant to the Director, Ms. Janet Rainer. Their insights provided me with the general structure of SEEK at CSI as well as their expectations of SEEK students there. I also interviewed New York State

Senator Diane J. Savino, who sits on the New York State Senate Committee on Higher Education, to get a glimpse of how statespersons view and value access programs such as SEEK that operate on public funding. I have also interviewed activist faculty and administrators within and without CSI concerned with equitable access to higher education. The qualitative data from these conversations inform my interpretation of the quantitative measures.

I mapped the history of the program provided in chapter 3 from my reading in the literature, the interviews, and from conversations with a handful of scholars currently working on SEEK, particularly Sean Molloy, a doctoral student in English Studies at the CUNY Graduate and University Center. A history of SEEK may help in determining whether or not it has effectively fulfilled its initial goals and purposes, and if not how the failure might be corrected. As Crabtree writes, “our view of history shapes the way we view the present, and therefore it dictates what answers we offer for existing problems” (1993). Newspaper and journal articles, and to a lesser extent statistical data all helped in this regard. Archived articles from the 1960s and the general period of the civil rights movement helped me to grasp the political and social atmosphere within which SEEK was created. The autobiography of Allen B. Ballard augmented by conversation with the author also proved very useful in this regard, by highlighting the causal factors of SEEK, and its effects.

I reviewed statistics provided by CUNY's Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA) on the University website to speak to the following hypotheses: 1) If students enroll through SEEK, they will graduate at the same rate as their non-SEEK peers; 2) If socio-economically disadvantaged students enroll through SEEK, they will graduate at a more successful rate than similarly disadvantaged non-SEEK peers. To test these hypotheses I analyzed data pertaining to CSI that would answer the following questions: 1) How many SEEK and non-SEEK students are admitted in a given year?; How many SEEK and non-SEEK students are enrolled in a given year?; How long does it take for students in each category to graduate?; How many disadvantaged non-SEEK students either

graduate or dropout?

CUNY also participates in a protocol called College Learning Assessment, which measures students' store of general education upon initial enrollment, and again upon graduation. The difference between the measurements signifies the amount of knowledge a student has gained during the collegiate experience. Initially, a look at CLA records would help assess whether or not disadvantaged students in the SEEK program are as equally “educated” as their peers at large in the graduating class, and also whether or not they perform better than their equally-disadvantaged non-SEEK peers. However for practical reasons explained in Chapter 5, the project had to leave out CLA records from the assessment.



# CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW[2]

Academic assessment of the efficacy of the SEEK program remains absent. No text exists that is solely based on the SEEK program. Of the literature that does take SEEK into account, the

[2] Part of this chapter has been submitted to the Department of Public Policy at the Central European University in fulfillment of the Thesis Proposal requirement for a Master's Degree in Public Policy in 2014.

primary aim is not to argue whether or not SEEK itself is efficient. For instance, some scholars have aimed, with SEEK in mind, to explore rather "how institutions offer their students resources that enable them to overcome the legacies of poverty and attitudes inimical to the culture of learning" (Francis et al.). Others have published studies only on particular features of SEEK, such as the "SEEK Mentoring Program" (Sorrentino 2006, 241) or remediation at CUNY Campuses (Parker and Richardson, Jr. 2005, 1; Gleason 2000; Mayor's Advisory Task Force on CUNY 1999, 6). In response to this lack, this text has synthesized as much information as possible found on the SEEK program from various sources so as to create a history and profile of the program. The ultimate purpose of the literature review has been to learn about the context in which the SEEK program emerged and existed, as well as to illustrate the causes and effects of the program, and to establish its meaning.

Newspaper articles, videos posted online, and journal articles constitute the extant literature that I reviewed. The political and social climate in which SEEK was created and implemented in the 1960s transpires in a body of articles published by, among others, the New York Times and the Campus, the student newspaper at the City College of New York (CCNY), the founding institution of CUNY. These articles variously document or discuss events or issues related to SEEK history. One 1975 New York Times article, for instance, reports on the call once made by a City University task force "for a revision of the administration of the University's SEEK program. One 1970 article reports on 61 City University Students, among them a 30-year old ex-convicted felon, another a previous college dropout, who had excelled in college partly due to the assistance of SEEK.

Allen B. Ballard's autobiography "Breaching Jericho's Walls" invokes the creation of the SEEK program. While other sources see the program in general terms, for instance, as a result of the civil rights movement, Ballard's autobiography describes in particular how SEEK eventually materialized particularly out of his very idea of the pre-baccalaurate program which preceeded it. "What became the prebaccalaureate program," he writes, "subsequently named SEEK...was my idea" (Ballard 2011 Loc.

3693/4158). He also provides reason as to why he developed such a program. For instance, he writes that “the lack of black students in my classes began to trouble me more and more—I had to do something about it” (Loc 3692/4158). This “lack” is a reflection of City College in the early 1960s, which former CUNY Chancellor Albert H. Bowker once characterized as an institution, at the time, “catering to primarily white students” (LCSEEK 2007, 0:40-0:50 minutes).

CUNY's website as well as various videotaped interviews conducted by CUNYTV75 for example imply that neither the program's mission nor its features have changed. The literature here shows that the program continues to enroll students who otherwise may not have been able to gain admission to college. It also reveals that the program today continues to help CUNY produce leaders and other important members of American society, such as judges, lawyers, and administrators in government and non-government institutions.



# CHAPTER 3 – HISTORY OF SEEK

The history of SEEK belongs to the history of the Civil Rights era in the United States. It is acknowledged as having “come out of the struggle of the sixties where [activists] fought for more blacks to be included in higher education” (LCSEEK 2007, 0:30-0:40 minutes). If the social

movements of the era were collectively a reaction to systematic segregation, racism, and discrimination in the United States, SEEK is indeed an outcome of these struggles.

In 1895, the United States supreme Court decision of the case Plessy v. Ferguson made law the 'separate but equal' doctrine in the United States. The trial rested on answering whether or not a “law mandating racial segregation” was unconstitutional (Illinois Institute of Technology Chicago-Kent College of Law 2011). The Court ruled that such a law “is within constitutional boundaries” (Ibid). This ruling helped to place the United States on a path towards a legally and systematically segregated American society. There became black-only and white-only public spaces and services, such as schools, hospitals, neighborhoods, shops and theaters. The type of society that became of the 20th-Century United States may be described as what Fanon (1963) theorizes as the “compartmentalized world” (5) of the colonial and apartheid societies of his day. In such a “world divided in two” Fanon posits, “it is clear that what divides [that] world is first and foremost what species, what race one belongs to” (Ibid.).

Policies aimed at keeping American society separated between blacks and whites resulted in disparate benefits from social institutions for blacks and whites. In addition to policies of segregation in all facets of American public life, policies and practices were implemented so as to also disenfranchise blacks. Anti-black gangs such as the Ku Klux Klan used systematic terror to discourage blacks from challenging racism and segregation. Formal measures such as so-called “Literacy Tests,” “Poll Taxes,” as well as other Restrictive and Arbitrary Registration Practices” (Anderson & Jones 2014) aimed to indirectly prevent blacks from participating in the American political process. Literacy Tests were tests where successful voting depended on the voter's literacy proficiency, and where “a ballot for the governor's race put in the box for the senate seat would be thrown out” (Ibid.). Such tests “had a large differential racial impact, since 40-60% of blacks were illiterate, compared to 8-18% of whites” (Ibid.) Other formal measures of indirect disenfranchisement, or indirect discrimination for that matter,

included Poll Taxes. Anderson & Jones write that “although these taxes of $1-$2 per year may seem small, it was beyond the reach of many poor black and white sharecroppers, who rarely dealt in cash” (2014). Further, citing Kousser (1998, 67-8), they write that “the Georgia poll tax probably reduced overall turnout by 16-28%, and black turnout in half.” What Anderson & Jones classify as “Restrictive and Arbitrary Registration Practices” include such prerequisites for voting as “long terms of residence in a district, registration at inconvenient times (e.g., planting season), provision of information unavailable to many blacks (e.g. street addresses, when black neighborhoods lacked street names and numbers), and so forth” (2014).

Due to these policies of racism, discrimination and segregation, the black interest effectively became unrepresented and/or underrepresented in American politics and government. Black life effectively became of poorer quality than the life of whites. Institutions reserved for blacks, by the time of the civil rights era, were of unviably poorer quality than institutions reserved for whites. Since the abolition of slavery, there gradually became an entire class of people in need and/or want of access to better living conditions, and better access to the so-called American Dream.

Demands for such access among blacks are thought to have been brought about by black participation in the Second World War. After fighting against injustice abroad, blacks returning to the United States had a greater and growing sense of entitlement to privileges once made inaccessible to them. Their desire for access to high-quality institutions such as those of higher education in hopes of attaining a better lifestyle, translated to a demand for access to institutions which for the most part were historically catering to whites. All in all, for many blacks what was needed were policies of integration, desegregation and anti-racism. Such policies became the objectives, and to a considerable extent the achievements of civil rights activists of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

The Brown v. Board decision of 1954 is thought to have ignited the Civil Rights movement. The Brown decision struck down the separate-but-equal doctrine. While this created the foundation for pro-

integration policies in all facets of American society, policies and court rulings in favor of integration existed as far back as the 1940s. According to a Justia description, the decision in the case Sipuel v. Board of Regents in 1948 ruled that colleges could not deny applicants based on race (2014). In 1950, the decisions in cases Sweatt v. Painter and McLaurin v. Oklahoma found in favor of the plaintiffs, who were both fighting against practices of racial discrimination. In both settings, the court ruled on grounds of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution that separate facilities for blacks were unconstitutional. Later policies advocating integration and equality included the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as well as Executive Order 10925 in 1961 that started Affirmative Action programs in the United States.

If these policies did not force integration, they nonetheless reflected the acceptance, readiness and willingness of public administrators to speak to the desires and proposals of civil rights activists. In 1963, according to Ballard, City College President Buell Ghallagher accepted the idea of the pre-baccalaureate program that would become SEEK. Before that Ghallagher had even asked a CCNY administrator, “to provide him with a plan for increasing the number of minority students” (Ballard 2011, Loc 3704/4158). Ghallager shepherded the pre-baccalaureate program through its approval by the faculty council of City College.

It is in this context that the SEEK program was eventually created. Ballard further, highlighting the flawed public policy ethics at the time, describes CCNY as a “white citadel on a hill, inaccessible to the black population in whose midst it stood and whose taxes paid for the education of white students and the salaries of white faculty and administrators” (Ballard 201l Loc 3643/4148). The situation became untenable and, as Ballard writes, “the standards of entrance to the college had to change to admit black students”(Ibid). The idea was to create “a college-based program that would admit a selected number of black and Hispanic students to CCNY, coach them up to a college level, then mainstream them into regular course. They would at the same time be given special courses and

financial aid for books and living expenses" (Ballard 2011, Loc 3693/4158).

Although the racial imbalance may have inspired Ballard to create the program, it would not only be intended for blacks and Hispanics. Rather, it was to aim at helping high school students who fit a socioeconomic rather than a racial or ethnic profile. Ballard mentions that the "revolutionary" quality of his idea rested on the fact that it would be instituted at a four-year institution "aimed directly at underprivileged students" (Ibid.) Blacks and Hispanics constituted much of the poor population of New York City. A committee would be responsible for handpicking "an equal mix of Puerto Rican and black students" (Ballard 2011, Loc 3732/4158). These would be the initial students selected from a group sent to the committee by the targeted high schools (Ibid).

Ballard further describes the "obligatory guidelines" of the program by which "no students were to be permitted to

> enroll in regular courses during the first semester—instead they'd be put in remedial courses: English, math, sciences, social sciences, and reading, and only after completing them all successfully would a student be mainstreamed into regular college work. Each student was also assigned to a personal counselor, and we maintained a ratio of one professional per fifty students. Attendance at all classes and counseling sessions was mandatory. Every student was given a stipend of fifty dollars per week, free textbooks, and a waiver of tuition and fees. It was a good deal. [Ballard 2011, Loc 3718/4158]

In 1964, a year after Ballard devised the idea of an access program, CUNY adapted, named and tested it as the College Discovery Program for its community colleges (CUNYTV75 2012, 4:35-4:45). In 1965, City College piloted it as the pre-baccalaureate program, which was the forerunner of the SEEK program at the four-year institutions (Ibid, 4:45-4:55).

Following the implementation of the College Discovery and pre-baccalaureate programs, a process to expand them throughout the system began. The expansion was itself a continued response to civil rights activism. As Mac Donald (1994) points out "As unrest tore through American cities, higher education came to be seen as means for diffusing the nation's social and racial cries. It was no longer enough for a college to educate: schools were "called on" to enfranchise minority groups through

admissions and curricular changes”

A new class of actors and stakeholders other than simply college administrators then became involved: statespersons. Former New York State Senator and New York City Deputy Mayor Basil Paterson, Former U.S. Congressman and Manhattan Borough President Percy E Sutton, as well as Anthony Travia to name a few became involved. At the time, there was strong opposition in New York State government to the idea of expanding the pre-baccalaureate program. Patterson, in an interview with the Shirley Chisholm Project (2012), recalls that nonetheless “every time Senators held sessions, there would be groups of high school students gathered in the gallery who could not get into the City University because New York State has no appropriate and sufficient funds” (0:05-0:30).

Ultimately, activists and supportive politicians were able to secure legislation that would transform the pre-baccalaureate program into the SEEK program throughout CUNY's four-year institutions. The decisive voice on the creation of SEEK eventually rested with the Speaker of the New York State Assembly, Democrat Anthony Travia, representing Assembly District 22, Brooklyn between 1944 and 1965, and the 38th District from 1966 to 1968. According to former New York City Mayor David Dinkins, Travia was hesitant, when the policy for SEEK was packaged and delivered to him. Dinkins, Assemblywoman Shirley Chisholm and Percy Sutton visited Travia at his hotel during what is now known as the “midnight march” and made it clear to him that “without the minority votes, he [later] might not be able to achieve a majority of the Assembly...” (Shirley Chisholm Project 2011, 1:20-30). If not for the sake of his mostly black constituency, it was by a political calculus that Travia decided to sign the bill in 1966 that initiated the SEEK program at CUNY. Referring to the success of the midnight march, Dinkins says, “it's that night the SEEK program was born” (Ibid, 0:20-030).

In the New York State policy-making process, bills become law only with the signature of the Governor. After both the New York State Senate and Assembly passed the bill, it was taken to

Governor Nelson Rockefeller, who, on July 5 1966, signed the bill into law.

Since its inception the SEEK program has been criticized for ultimately lowering standards at CUNY. The argument is as follows among its critics. With SEEK, students who are not able to take on college-level work are admitted to college. Consequently, instructors find it necessary, perhaps convenient, to lower their expectations as well as their standards in their classrooms so as to speak to the intellectual capabilities (or incapabilities) of these under-prepared students. MacDonald considers the SEEK program as the center of CUNY's "remediation industry" (1994), thus a factor in what she hypothesizes of CUNY's opportunity programs in the very title of an article as a "Downward Mobility."

The creation of SEEK was a political act born out of activism of historically oppressed groups. As such, the survival of the program will remain a contested political ground. That is why it is important to apprehend both the qualitative (i.e. the coming profile) and quantitative measures of the program's public value.



# CHAPTER 4 – PROFILE of SEEK at CUNY

CUNY is funded by both the State and City of New York. Funds made available to CUNY are provided partly by tax revenues to the state and city. Also calculated into CUNY's available budget is

tuition revenue as well as other fees and payments collected from CUNY students. CUNY divides and appropriates its operating budget to its community and senior colleges. While state-derived funds are granted to senior colleges, community colleges enjoy funding derived from the city. CUNY colleges may utilize funds appropriated them by the CUNY administration for operation and maintenance of activities and institutional features that may be integral to SEEK. For instance, as mentioned on CUNY's website, CUNY's budget is expended on the following functional areas (2014): Instruction and Departmental Research; Academic Support Services; and Student Services. Namely, funding affects "all faculty teaching" at CUNY as well as counseling services and "financial aid administration." By definition, the operation of SEEK depends, at least in part, on public funds and resources. CUNY as well as SEEK, through the agency of CUNY, are indeed the responsibilities of not only the City but also the State.

SEEK is designed to help students of poor economic and educational backgrounds attain a higher education degree. CUNY's website describes ideal candidates for SEEK as "high potential, low income students who otherwise might not be able to pursue a college degree because they are not academically well prepared for college level" (2014). Most of these students are Hispanics as of a 2013 record (Office of Special Programs 2013). The Office of Special Programs describes the SEEK students as: 9.2% White, 20.3% Black, 29.3% Asian, and 40.8% Hispanic.

A high school diploma is one eligibility requirement for a successful SEEK candidate. If not a high school diploma, the candidate may possess instead a "New York State approved General Equivalency Diploma" (Ibid). The candidate will have been a resident of New York State and "have an admissions index score that is below the cutpoint for regular admissions to a particular senior college" (Ibid). The candidate shall come from a household with a relatively low income. Cheryl Williams (2011), Associate University Dean for Special Programs, assures that "all of [SEEK] students have to meet an income eligibility which is quite low" (13:45-14:10). Further, an applicant whose household

income is too high but has a low academic profile may get into CUNY but not into SEEK (19:00-19:10). Altogether, the successful SEEK candidate must be both financially as well as academically disadvantaged and unprepared for the collegiate experience.

The successful SEEK candidate will have applied to CUNY in the same manner as all other non-SEEK students enrolled at CUNY. The CUNY website provides a “Freshman Applicants Admission Application Worksheet” to help high school students to prepare for a successful completion of CUNY's online application process. The following is information of the application process as provided by the worksheet as found on the website. To begin the application process, the candidate would first create a “CUNY Portal Account.” This completes the online-registration process. After completion of the “Welcome Screen” that follows, the candidate will finally arrive at the Admission Application, where information of applicant's biography and academic information as well as college choices are requested. Up to this point, Step 3 according to the Worksheet, the applicant will have already registered a social security number, date of birth, address of residence, citizenship and/or immigration status, as well as a maximum of six choices of CUNY colleges to attend.

“Section 4: SEEK/CD Information” begins the applicant's application to the SEEK program. Information on the online section is provided by yet another worksheet: “SEEK/College Discovery and Accelerated Study in Associate Program Opportunity Programs Worksheet” (2014). According to this worksheet, students aspiring to enter the SEEK program are required to fill out the “Eligibility Information” and “Family Income” sub-sections of the application. These sub-sections request information on “orphan” status, marriage status, legal/family dependencies, household headcount and income, as well as applicant's welfare benefits. Section Four also provides an “Income Eligibility Chart.” This chart, “effective as of Fall 2013,” illustrates the “Maximum Adjusted Gross Family Income (MAGFI)” that will further determine the qualification of applicants for the SEEK or CD programs, based on “Household Size.” For instance, an applicant whose household size is two with a

MAGFI of $28,694 would qualify for SEEK or CD. Another applicant applying from a household of eight with a 73,316-dollar MAGFI would similarly qualify. In addition to providing said information, the SEEK student would have fulfilled the SEEK application's “FAFSA Requirement.” FAFSA—Free Application for Federal Student Aid—is an application system for student financial assistance programs administered by the United States Department of Education. Once Section Four is completed, the applicant submits the Admission Application for “a non-refundable $65.00 application fee” (CUNY 2014). The fee, however, may be waived for a limited number of either SEEK and non-SEEK applicants.

After submission of the Application Form and the fee payment, all applicants are required to send “Supporting Documents” to CUNY. Such documents include a New York City Department of Education High School Transcript; SAT/ACT Score Report; Letters of Recommendation; Essays and Personal Statements. The SAT—Scholastic Assessment Test—as well as ACT—American College Testing—are standardized tests that high school students generally take prior to graduation.. The SAT and a further group discipline specific Subjects Test are “a suite of tools designed to assess your academic readiness for college” (The College Board 2014). A similar description is found for ACT on its website (ACT, Inc. 2014): “The ACT college readiness assessment is a curriculum- and standards-based educational and career planning tool that assesses students' academic readiness for college.” Public and private higher education institutions take SAT or ACT scores into account in admission decisions, although not all do

Together with household income of applicants to the SEEK program, SAT and ACT sores are conjugated with high school academic records to help SEEK admission panels decide whom they will accept to the program. As invoked by Williams, the lower the conjugated academic scores, the higher the chance of applicants not being admitted to CUNY's mainstream academic tracks, and the more likely the applicant would then be for admission into the SEEK program. According to the CUNY

website (2014) admission to SEEK is conditional until applicants have completed the University basic skills assessment tests in reading, writing, and mathematics unless they are exempted based on their SAT and/or Regents scores. If they do not meet the University requirements in the three assessed skills, provisionally-accepted SEEK students are required to attend a pre-freshman summer program. After the summer program, SEEK students who remain continue on their path towards attainment of a Bachelor's degree. They begin, like their non-SEEK counterparts, in the Fall.[3] The admission process is completed upon submission to the institution by the applicant of the applicable documentation to support the household count and income reported on the CUNY Admission Application.

According to Ms. Garcia, the SEEK Director at College of Staten Island, CSI is among a few CUNY institutions that invite students who seem that they might qualify for SEEK based on family income but did not complete the SEEK section of the CUNY application. The income information is taken from a review of FAFSA data available to the institution. At the time of my fieldwork, CUNY was considering standardizing the approach across the entire system. If the approach were to be implemented by the University for all applicable campuses, students would no longer be required to complete the SEEK segment of the CUNY Admission Application to be considered for the SEEK program. All students who appear to meet the household count and income criteria would be invited to submit the applicable documentation to be considered for admission to the program. This approach is seen by administrators as an initiative that would considerably increase the pool of candidates for the SEEK program.

SEEK is composed of multiple units of academic and financial support to help its students graduate. A look at the website of the College of Staten Island reveals the types of activities and opportunities available to SEEK students. For instance, the SEEK program instituted at CSI comprises “special programs,” “counseling support,” “The SEEK Learning Center,” and “Financial Aid Benefits”

[3] At the College of Staten Island, due to its origins as a two-year institution, students who fail the CUNY assessment tests may still be admitted to the program provided other admission criteria are me

(CSI 2014).

Upon acceptance into CUNY's SEEK program, SEEK students are paired with a professional counselor. The counselor discusses with the student study skills, and academic and professional goals. The counselor helps the student in arranging academic schedules. The counselor also helps the student with time management, overcoming procrastination, and stress management. Counselors, assisted by CSI's Career and Scholarship Center, are also responsible for assisting students with researching possible career opportunities. Students are referred to the Center “for career testing, assessment and goal planning” (CSI 2014). SEEK students also receive graduate school advisement.

The SEEK Learning Center is described on the website as an “academic support center” (CSI 2014). This Center has its own SLC Computer Lab, providing internet access, interactive instructional software, word processing databases, spreadsheet software, and email to name a few features. Individual tutoring and group workshops are also available at the Center. They are designed to “help student make the transition to college level courses and meet college level requirements. (CSI 2014).

The SEEK program at CSI has arranged “special projects” as well. The projects are designed to help students “develop their interests and talents outside of their classroom” (CSI 2014). One such project is the Strategies for Success Program. Through this program, SEEK students have an opportunity to earn extra money serving as tutors or mentors themselves, for elementary and intermediate school students. They work in this capacity “two afternoons a week throughout the academic year, receiving a stipend for their services” (CSI 2014). Income to students who participate in this special project is additional to income supplied by student financial assistance programs funded by the United States Department of Education or by New York State. While non-SEEK students receive a maximum of eight semester grants from the New York State Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), “SEEK students may receive two additional semesters of eligibility of TAP” (CSI 2014). Another opportunity yet for SEEK students to earn income is the SEEK Research Assistants Project (RAP), “conceived to

address two broad goals: to encourage students' interests in scientific/scholarly inquiry and to provide students with hands-on experience in research design and methods" (RAP 2012). Only those students whose grade point average is at least 2.75 on a scale of 4.0 are allowed to take advantage of this opportunity. Through RAP, students receive a stipend as they "serve as research assistants to faculty involved in research projects at CSI" (CSI 2014).

Similar to the Strategies for Success Program is the SEEK Mentoring Program. The Program couples either "a student in good academic standing or a professional from the College or the community with: incoming freshmen students; students on academic warning or probation; and/or students involved in the college's Black and Latino Male Initiative" (CSI 2014).[4] The purpose of this aspect of SEEK at CSI is to help students who are doing poorly to improve their grades. Another aim is to encourage and support students who are at risk of being expelled or dropping out to remain enrolled.

With an option to mentor in the SEEK mentoring program, SEEK students who are in good academic standing may also find themselves initiated into membership of the Chi Alpha Epsilon (XAE). This is a "national honor society for educational opportunity programs like SEEK" (CSI 2014). This project of SEEK encourages students to excel in the program and in college. For admittance into the Society a student must achieve and maintain a grade point average of 3.0. SEEK students may be compelled to attain this mark, as "XAE membership will be attractive to scholarship boards" (CSI 2014). Further, the website assures the college applicant that "XAE membership is a credential that will be attractive to employers and/or graduate schools."

These features of the SEEK program as instituted at the College of Staten Island reflect the profile of the SEEK program as instituted elsewhere in CUNY. Altogether, SEEK is prepared to help economically and academically disadvantaged students who come from a variety of cultural and racial backgrounds.

[4] This program was initiated by CUNY as the Black Male Initiative (BMI) in May 2004 to address the underrepresentation of black males in college studies.

We have established here that SEEK is the responsibility of the State and the City of New York. This is so, as the funds that go to support the program are derived from tax revenues. Although it is administered at institutions throughout the State of New York, we have used College of Staten Island, within the broader CUNY context, as our site of study. Extrapolating from the CSI case, we can posit that stakeholders of SEEK are not only SEEK students, instructors, elementary/intermediate school children, and counselors, but also all tax payers who are residents of the State of New York. Additionally, SEEK is a public service to the academically and financially disadvantaged populations of New York. It is designed to help them graduate. Should the SEEK program prove successful in its intent, its merits and value to its stakeholders would be in providing social stability and expanding the tax revenue base of New York State by helping make accessible the social and economic benefits of a college education to students who might not otherwise be able to enter and graduate from a four-year college.



# CHAPTER 5 – ANALYSIS OF SEEK at CUNY

This chapter is dedicated to the assessment of the SEEK program as it operates within the broader CUNY framework. The points of assessment and analysis are the admissions, enrollment,

graduation rates and grade point average of both SEEK and non-SEEK students, where comparison of the categories is possible. These points are observed in the scope of both CUNY as a whole and at the level of CSI. The first half of this chapter focuses on CUNY-wide statistics of both SEEK and non-SEEK students. This first section will provide the context within which the collegiate experience at CSI, which is addressed in the latter half of this chapter, exists. The original intentions of the research project included an observation of College Learning Assessment (CLA) data about both SEEK and non-SEEK students. However, this point of observation was soon abandoned upon notice by a CSI administrator involved with the administration of the CLA "that this year, the University (and CSI) were unable to reach the targeted cohort of seniors for the study. Second, the University, for many reasons, will be suspending the CLA as an assessment tool for the upcoming year, and will be examining other measures." The administrator, pointing out that the CLA has been operating only three years at CSI, further added that "my thinking is that with such a limited experience at the college in using CLA data, and given the University's concern on both the challenges in achieving a cohort of statistical significance, and of the administrative concerns limiting longitudinal conclusions, its usefulness for [the] purposes [of this project] seem even more limited."

To assess SEEK at CSI as presumably representative of the program in CUNY, the project has set the following criteria to determine the efficacy of SEEK. The attainment of a Bachelor's degree is considered here as "educational attainment," regardless of GPA of students. The efficacy of SEEK shall be measured principally in graduation rates. If SEEK students graduate at the same rate or near the rate of non-SEEK students, this paper will argue that SEEK is very effective in its mission to help economically and academically underprepared high school students attain an Higher education. The other points of observation will be used to further give breadth and depth to this assessment and analysis.

Difficult economic times in the years following the financial crisis of 2008 seem to have

affected admissions at CUNY significantly. CUNY level admissions had fewer shifts between 1990 and 1999 than between 1999 and 2013. Between 1990 and 1999, admissions at CUNY experienced three moments of decrease and two moments of increase. It decreased from 38,468 in 1990 to 37229 in 1991. It then increased to 40,776 by 1993 before going down and up once more through 1996. In the final year of the decade admissions at CUNY was at 37,541. While this decade did not witness a major difference in admissions at the start and end points of the period (1990, 1999), the subsequent decade experienced a larger difference in admissions between its start year and its end year. Yet later, in 2013, admissions at CUNY reached 58,486.[5] Admissions reached a peak of 60,993 in 2011. Disparate administrators in the admission process at CSI and at a the City College of New York (CCNY) explained that in periods of economic hardship CUNY admissions tend to increase as laid-off workers seek new skills at two-year colleges and more high school graduates and continuing students shut out of the job market choose to enroll in college to ride out the difficult economic times. The explanation is consistent not only with admission patterns during the years of crisis, but also conversely in the period of stable admissions during the years of steady economic growth in the 1990s. In this logic, CUNY demonstrated its historic mission to educate the working class of New York City. Moreover, the SEEK program, in serving particularly vulnerable groups, appears here to be fully congruent with the broader CUNY mission.

OIRA differentiates between “First-time Freshmen Regular”(FFR)[6] and “Firstime-freshmen SEEK/CD (FFS)” in its data. Remaining within the context of CUNY's senior colleges only, where SEEK operates, the number of admissions for the FFR population there increased by 32% from 12,015 in 1990 to 15,883 in 2013. However, in that span there were periods of reversal. In 2000, there were 11,536 FFR admissions - a four-percent decrease from the level of 1990. Looking at the data on the SEEK-only population, admissions of FFS students, unlike that of FFRs, decreased by 48% from 2,961

[5] Data observed from a 2014 OIRA report “Total New Undergraduate Students by Degree Pursued, Full-time/Part-time Attendance, and College.”

[6] Admissions to Undergraduate and Graduate Degree Programs by College

in 1990 to 1,997 in 2013. Thus admission to the SEEK program fell nearly in half in a period during which admission to CUNY in general increased nearly by a third. The year 2005 had the lowest record with 1,859 admissions of FFS students. The highest number of admissions was in 1990, the first year of the period under consideration. By all indications, the decrease was due to a shift in fiscal priority at the state level that resulted in a cut in funding to public education experienced throughout the 1990s.[7] In a February 1995 article on the New York State budget for the upcoming fiscal year (July 1, 1995-June 30, 1996), the New York Times reported that the "[CUNY] system's 12 four-year colleges [were] in jeopardy because of Gov. George E. Pataki's proposed $162 million cut in state financing for the next school year." My conversations with several CUNY administrators and aides in the New York legislature suggest that the cut in financing indeed negatively affected SEEK enrollment. Whatever the cause, Fall 1995 FFS admissions fell by 37% from the Fall 1994 level, from 2573 to 1881, and the level reached an all-time low of 1,682 in 1996, a 43% from the number of admissions in 1990. In Fall 2005, at 1,859 it was yet slightly lower than it had been in 1995. Dolores Straker, a CUNY executive in charge of the University's access programs, reflecting back to the time, conveys the compromising effect of fiscal austerity on the SEEK program: "We started looking at working with students we knew we would have the best success with [as] it's the only fiscally expedient to do that kind of thing. Although we did it with a lot of criticism that we might be leaving out students who traditionally should have been in the program" (CUNYTV75 2012, 21:45 minutes--22:05 minutes.

When we look at the record for the non-SEEK group, we find that their admissions was not as negatively affected by the financial crisis of New York City of the 1990s. Between 1991 and 1993, as FFS admissions were decreasing, FFR admissions were increasing, uninterruptedly from 1991 to 1994. FFR admissions increased by 2% from 11,090 in 1991 to 11,315 in 1992. By the following year, it had

[7] Admissions of FFS students had been falling from 1990 almost uninterruptedly until 1997, except for the 1993-1994 period. But the rate of decrease in that seven-year period was highest between Fall 1994 and Fall 1995. Between 1990 and 1991, admissions of FFS students had been decreasing by rates as small as one- or 5%. For instance, from 1991 to 1992, it decreased by 1% from 2,653 to 2,616. From 1992, the number decreased by 7% to 2,435 in 1993. It then increased by 5% to 2,573 in 1994.

increased another 6% to 12, 027. Between 1993 and 1994, FFR admissions increased further still by 4% to 12,611, after which, similar to FFS admissions, it decreased in Fall 1995, following then Governor Pataki's announcement of the immense budget cuts. However, while SEEK admissions had fallen a drastic 37% between 1994 and 1995, FFR admissions fell by only 5%. What is more, as SEEK admissions fell another 11% between 1995 and 1996, in that same period FFR admissions, by contrast, increased by seven percent. Thus, if Straker's comments indicate that the program had to focus its resources on the very most promising recruits, there is arguably a clear rationality whereby the SEEK program assists socioeconomically and academically disadvantaged college applicants within broader patterns of CUNY admissions. In other words, the SEEK program would not seem to expend resources assisting students who did not otherwise wish to attain a college education. The data here suggest that SEEK assists students who actively desire a collegiate degree.

According to the CSI OIRA's statistical report "Total Enrollment by Undergraduate and Graduate Level, Full-time/Part-time Attendance, and College" at the CUNY level, total enrollment of all undergraduate students in the senior colleges increased drastically from 113,488 in 1990 to 141,746 in 2013. Enrollment is affected by admissions of new students and the persistence of existing students. In 1991, the number of enrolled students, or headcounts, decreased to 111,764. It increased to 116,820 by 1994, before plunging below 107,000 in 2001. The period with the largest increase in enrollments was the period between 2001 and 2013. In this period, the head count increased from an all-time low of 106,180 in 2001 to an all-time high of 141,746 in 2013.

OIRA's report "Total Enrollment by Undergraduate and Graduate Level, Degree Pursued and College" provides data of enrollment based on degree pursued. This project took into account enrollments for students pursuing Bachelor's degrees, as this group is comparable to the SEEK group, whose members are in Bachelor degree granting institutions (senior colleges). According to the report, enrollment of students in bachelor's programs at CUNY's senior colleges decreased negligibly to

81,617 in 1991, from 82,028 in 1990. It increased by 5% of the 1990-count to 86,476 in 1995, before falling again to 80,304 in 2000. After this, it made a drastic increase uninterruptedly through the economic crisis of 2008 and the subsequent period of economic contraction known as the Great Recession, reaching a high 115, 320 in 2013. As previously indicated, administrators in the CUNY system would tend to attribute the surge in enrollment to difficult economic conditions from the mid-2000s through the 2010s.

In OIRA's report"Trends in SEEK/CD, First-time Freshmen Enrollment in Baccalaureate Programs: Fall 1990 - Fall 2013" we find that the number of enrolled SEEK students at CUNY went down from 2,434 in 1990 to 1,338 in 2013. In the year 2000, the number was recorded at 1,789. By 2013, the record holds that enrollment reached 1,338. Using the three common marker years – 1990, 2000, 2013 - for which we have data for both the general baccalaureate population and the SEEK population, we find that where bachelor's degree enrollment in general fell 2% between 1990 and 2000, it fell by nearly 36% for the SEEK population over the same period. Where general enrollment of bachelor-degree students increased by 44% from 2000 to 2013, it fell for the SEEK population by a further 25% for the period. We believe that the fall in SEEK enrollment can be attributed to the climate of public fiscal austerity that we associated earlier with the fall in SEEK admissions.

CUNY's data[8] show that, among all first-time freshmen entering baccalaureate programs in the Fall term between 2003 and 2009, the average percentage of each years' cohort graduating in four years is 20.97, with a range between 19.3% of the 2003 Fall cohort and 22.3% of the 2009 Fall cohort. The vast majority, we see, takes considerably more than the traditional four years to graduate. Of those, who entered in Fall 2003 56.5% graduated within 10 years. Looking at data for the SEEK population,[9] among SEEK students entering as first-time freshmen in the same period, an average 9.8% of each

[8] CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. 2014. "System Retention and Graduation Rates of Full-time First-time Freshmen in Baccalaureate Programs by Year of Entry:* Total University." Accessed 4 June 2014.

[9] CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. 2014. "System Retention and Graduation Rates of Special Program, Full-time First-time Freshmen in Baccalaureate Programs by Year of Entry:* Total University" Accessed 4 June 2014.

cohort year graduated within four years with a bachelor's degree. Between 40% and 53% of the cohorts from 2003 and 2009 are recorded as earning their degrees within 5, 6, 8 or 10 years. While CUNY does not provide more precision here for the SEEK cohorts or 5-year, 6-year- and 8-year graduation rates for the general population, the efficacy of the SEEK program can be inferred from the available data. It is understandable that only slightly less than 10% of SEEK students would graduate within the traditional four years compared to nearly 21% of the general population. While SEEK students, being historically disadvantaged do not graduate anywhere nearly as much as the general population with 4 years (9.8% vs 20.97%), over time they do catch up – they become college ready and graduate at a similar rate as the general population with 10 years. I posit that without SEEK, their 10-year rate would have continued to trail dismally at the10-year rate of the general population.

SEEK students are by definition students who have suffered socioeconomic deprivations and who have an inadequate secondary education. It should be expected that their academic would begin at a slower rate of progress than that of the general population. The value of the SEEK program to its constituents is to be read in the 10-year graduation rate, where the 53% for the SEEK population approaches the 56.5% for the general population. We believe this clearly indicates that over time the various programs that SEEK comprises help its students eventually achieve a rate of academic progress that approaches the rate of progress of the general population.



# CONCLUSION

We began with the question: How effective is SEEK in achieving its mission in helping academically and economically disadvantaged high school students attain an higher education degree?

This question should be part of a larger concern regarding the effectiveness of higher education access programs in helping students who otherwise might not have been able to attend college. This is important particularly since it is increasingly difficult for public schools to receive state funding. Part of the problem is due to the economic crisis of 2008 and the Great Recession that it led to. In such an economic climate that exists today, it is important for advocates of social justice to continue to fight to help increase support of programs designed to help poor people. Advocates will need the evidence that SEEK is effective ready at hand when negotiating and deliberating with decision makers, for example, at the New York State Senate, or the New York City Council, who are both responsible for the funding of public institutions such as CUNY and the access programs therein.

We looked at admissions, at enrollment, and at graduation data to evaluate SEEK within the broader CUNY framework. We saw that there is a strong correlation between economic climate and admission trends at CUNY. Moreover, the upward trend in admissions seen through 2013 continued unabated for academic year 2013-2014. Our review of broader enrollment patterns (including continuing students together with new freshmen and transfer students) echo admission trends. Without proper funding CUNY's constitutive institutions cannot accommodate this increase in new students and overall enrollment. CUNY has historically served, principally, families from the working and middle classes of New York City that could not otherwise afford to send their children to more expensive private institutions. This continues to be the CUNY mission.

Within the CUNY framework, the SEEK program is a structural instrument intended to advance the mission of educating residents of the City of New York who might not otherwise have an opportunity to attain a collegiate education. Yet the data show that admission of new SEEK students has not held as well as admission of new non-SEEK students. We believe this trend warrants critical attention. Various reports cogently indicate that poverty and income inequality have been rising every year in New York City since the financial crisis of 2008. The CEO Poverty Measure, 2005-2012, a

report from the Office of the Mayor, showed that the percentage of the population living below the poverty line rose from 19% in 2008 to 21.4% in 2012 (p. 11), with an additional nearly 13% living near poverty on an income no more than 25% greater than that of the poverty threshold (p.14). By all logic, demand for the services of the SEEK program would be greater, not lower within such a climate. Public policy makers at the University and the State level must remain vigilant regarding the viability of the SEEK program in its role of facilitating access to a college education for socioeconomically vulnerable students.

The position of this paper is that the graduation data cogently establish that SEEK is an effective program. The paper consequently posits that funds to the program be increased. To reprise a central argument of the Economic Policy Institute, “Today’s children, especially those from poor families, face multiple challenges to getting the education they need to succeed in life. These challenges reinforce existing inequalities in living standards, making it quite difficult for disadvantaged students to break out of the cycle of poverty.” SEEK must be funded adequately so that it can perform the societal functions envisioned for it by its founders and by the legislation that made it a program of the State of New York. SEEK is effective in helping high school students who at first are not ready for college to become college-ready, and to graduate within approximately similar timeframe as their non-SEEK counterparts. SEEK has helped thousands of people in New York earn a better living by helping them primarily to get a higher education degree. Famous poets, artists, leaders, activists and taxpaying New Yorkers have become who they are because of programs such as SEEK.



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