

Thank you, Chairs Krueger, Weinstein, Stavisky and Fahy for allowing me to submit written testimony in support of the College Discovery (CD) and Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) Programs at CUNY.

I am writing today to actively advocate for your continued support and expansion of CD and SEEK Programs. Originally a five-year experimental initiative, CD aimed to demonstrate that students, who were previously excluded from the University due to existing admissions criteria, could succeed in obtaining a college degree with the right supportive services. In 1969, the CD program transitioned from an experiment to a permanent University fixture focusing on developing community college students with high potential.

The counterpart to CD, SEEK began in 1965 at The City College of New York as a pre-baccalaureate initiative. Soon after, in 1966, the New York State legislature officially established SEEK as the Opportunity Program for senior colleges within the CUNY system. This legislative move was influenced by New York's social activists and forward-thinking politicians who sought to provide college access to students from high schools that did not adequately prepare them for collegiate rigor, and who also required financial assistance.

Since their inception almost 60 years ago, these programs continue to be beacons of hope and catalysts for transformation in the lives of countless students who, due to academic and socio-economic barriers, might otherwise be denied the opportunity to pursue higher education. CD programs are housed at six (6) CUNY community colleges - Borough of Manhattan Community College, Bronx Community College, Hostos Community College, Kingsborough Community College, LaGuardia Community College, and Queensborough Community College. The SEEK program is housed at three comprehensive colleges - College of Staten Island, Medgar Evers College, and New York City College of Technology, and at nine (9) senior colleges - Baruch College, Brooklyn College, City College, Hunter College, John Jay College, Lehman College, Queens College, School of Professional Studies and York College.

I consider these programs to be not only CUNY's but the nation's first vehicles of social mobility that continue to improve the upward mobility of thousands of students. Graduates of these programs are winning prestigious scholarships such as the Jeanette K. Watson, National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship, NYU MacCracken Fellowship, Thomas R. Pickering Foreign Affairs Graduate Fellowship, and Fulbright Awards. Our students have not only excelled academically but have also emerged as leaders within their campus communities, taking on pivotal roles in the University's Student Senate. Their exceptional achievements have been recognized through distinctions such as being named valedictorians and salutatorians, a testament to their hard work and dedication. Beyond their undergraduate accomplishments, many have pursued and completed advanced degrees at some of the nation's most esteemed institutions, some earning full scholarships, further showcasing the far-reaching impact and enduring legacy of their foundational experiences in our programs. Further, their professional accomplishments span a wide array of fields such as business, law, medicine, research, and notably, include an alumnus who held an influential position within the White House. Some alumni are currently members of the New York State Legislature, actively shaping policies to improve the lives of New Yorkers.

The CD and SEEK Programs are not merely academic initiatives; they are a comprehensive support system designed to address the multifaceted challenges faced by students from marginalized communities and those newly arrived in this country seeking to make a better life for themselves and their families. By providing academic support, financial assistance, counseling and advising, and career guidance, the programs are equipping students with the tools necessary to succeed in their academic and future professional endeavors.

Many of our students have powerful stories:

*An incoming student faced an unimaginable tragedy as his mother passed away upon his college entry, leaving him homeless. Despite these challenges, the SEEK program swiftly mobilized its resources and those of the college to secure housing and employment for him through a campus partnership. Amidst adversity, he pursued a rigorous STEM curriculum, achieving a remarkable 3.7 GPA, and earning a place in the college's Honors Program, steadfastly advancing towards his aspiration of a career in health services.*

*In another inspiring case, a student who arrived in the United States during her junior year of high school joined the SEEK Program with limited English skills. With determination, she overcame the language barrier and, by June 2023, graduated with a nursing degree. As the sole English speaker in her family, her role as a translator during the Honors Day ceremony was a poignant moment of pride and achievement.*

*One resilient student embarked on her academic journey at BMCC after three decades of domestic work, having immigrated to the U.S. at 18. Despite facing dire hardships, including financial betrayal by an addicted spouse and homelessness with a young child, she persevered. After finally passing the GED math exam, she joined the College Discovery Program, navigating through the challenges of COVID and online learning to earn her degree in May 2022. Her journey continued as she transitioned to the Hunter SEEK Program through the CD to SEEK Pipeline, recently receiving a \$2,500 scholarship and nearing her graduation from Hunter College.*

The tangible impact of these support programs is underscored by the impressive academic outcomes they facilitate. Notably, the College Discovery students' 2-year and 3-year graduation rates for first-time, full-time freshmen entering associate degree programs in Fall 2020 surpassed the CUNY-wide rates by 5 and 8 percentage points, respectively, illustrating the profound efficacy of these initiatives in promoting academic success.

Although the data for the SEEK Fall 2017 cohort suggests that SEEK graduation rates may trail behind the overall CUNY average, it's important to recognize that there are campuses within our network where SEEK students outperform their peers in the broader university population. Recent research on the impact of SEEK conducted by Ted Joyce (Professor of Economics, Baruch College), Alexandra Haralampoudis and Isabel Polon (CUNY's Office of Applied Research, Evaluation, and Data Analytics) found that SEEK participation is associated with a 5 percent increase in six-year graduation rates when controlling for observable student characteristics.

The benefits of the CD/SEEK Programs are manifold and far-reaching. Graduates of the CD and SEEK Programs support their communities as leaders and role models, inspiring the next generation and contributing to a cycle of positive change. The programs thus have a multiplier effect, extending benefits far beyond the individual students it serves.

The COVID-19 pandemic, much like its impact on the nation, has profoundly affected CD and SEEK students, who were already facing academic and financial challenges, being at 185% of the federal poverty guidelines. A study by Harvard economist Thomas Pane and collaborators from Dartmouth, the CALDER Center at the American Institutes for Research and the nonprofit testing group NWEA found that high-poverty schools that went remote for more than six months generated a .45 standard deviation loss, but there has never been any intervention that has generated a .45 standard deviation impact (Mahnken, 2022).

In response to these continued unprecedented educational challenges resulting from COVID, the CD and SEEK Programs are actively innovating to address and bridge the learning gaps that students carry into college. Campuses are rethinking their approaches to delivering the core pillars of the programs—tutoring, personal counseling and academic advising, and financial aid—by incorporating new, research-based, and high-impact practices specifically tailored to the needs of the CD and SEEK student population.

To address the challenges posed by learning loss and to foster student success, several innovative interventions are being implemented. These include the redesign of the summer program curriculum to better meet students' needs, the introduction of a mentoring program for all incoming students to provide guidance and support, and the establishment of an interdisciplinary STEM Summer Program specifically designed for continuing students aiming for degrees in fields that demand robust mathematical skills. These initiatives represent a comprehensive approach to not only counteract the continuing impacts of educational disruptions but also to improve student retention and achievement by continuously adapting to the evolving educational landscape.

In light of the overwhelming evidence of the programs' positive impact and its continued work to impact the current generations and those to come, I urge you to not only continue supporting the SEEK Programs, but I also urge you to consider increasing funding specifically to CD to expand its reach at the community colleges. Investing in both programs is an investment in our state's future, promising a more equitable, prosperous, and educated society.

I thank you for your attention to this critical matter and for your ongoing commitment to the education and well-being of all our citizens.

Sincerely,

Althea Forde  
Interim University Dean, Office of Special Programs