

Dear New York State legislators,

I hope this letter finds you well. I am Dr. Walter Lucken IV, Assistant Professor of English at Queens College where I am attached to the SEEK program. I have composed this written testimony to implore you to maintain level funding for the SEEK program headed into the next year. I will endeavor to remind you of the deep support SEEK brings to its students, and I also hope to make the case of the incalculable benefit it brings to our city, the state of New York, and our great nation as well. In short, SEEK will be a more crucial resource than ever before as we head into the coming decades, for reasons I detail below.

I believe it goes without saying that our city, state, and nation will continue to face deep challenges in the decades to come. We have been afflicted with a great many crises in recent years, be they social, ecological, economic, or even biological as the COVID-19 pandemic was concerned. These crises will continue to require competent leaders embedded within their communities, leaders who can provide guidance and insight to their peers as well. It is widely understood that SEEK provides incalculable benefit to its students, but what we often forget to emphasize here in New York City is the ways in which SEEK prepares our students to be thought leaders and nodes of change within their home communities, as was an integral component of our original mission. Every day, I impress upon my students their responsibility to be leaders in their communities and share the benefits of their education with others who may not have had such opportunities. If I may, I will take a brief moment to summarize how we prepare them to rise to this occasion.

Unlike many of their peers among our nation's future leaders, many of my students at SEEK are the first of their family to attend college and may be the first in their family to graduate high school. Some are the only member of their family who speaks English, carries United States citizenship, or even possesses the skill we English teachers call "print literacy", reading and writing. The faculty, counselors, and leadership of SEEK are intimately familiar with these realities and the ways in which they can sometimes impinge on any student's success in college. Owing to our familiarity with their circumstances, we are able to create lessons and courses which relate academic concepts to their lived experience and demonstrate the personal and professional heights they can reach if they remain steadfast in their pursuit of their degree. I tell my students every day that they can do anything they set their mind to, and that my goal is for them to reach my level of understanding of written English and the art of rhetoric. Every semester, they not only rise to this occasion but exceed it. They are truly our campus's greatest resource.

SEEK also provides a full spectrum of services and support mechanisms to prepare students for their roles as tomorrow's leaders. Sadly, many of our students face additional challenges and barriers to their success in college beyond their peers on campus, owing primarily to systemic factors and the continuing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Within SEEK, they have comprehensive access to academic support, counseling, wellness services, and in-class reminders of the resources they have available. Students often report that these resources are integral to their success and imbue them with a sense of responsibility to others as well. Every day I am reminded of the importance of collaboration and cooperation when I see how SEEK's culture

impacts our students and builds on their sense of obligation to their communities. What students learn from SEEK, above all else, is that when we succeed, we succeed together. The lessons of the Civil Rights movement in particular, and how its legacy continues to inform our work, are particularly important for us to remember when we consider the value SEEK brings to New York State.

To that point, SEEK also provides students with the opportunity to build lifelong relationships with each other and seek guidance and mentorship from our faculty, staff, and leadership. Since I have joined SEEK, I have had innumerable one on one conversations with students where I share insight from my journey to the professoriate and provide insight from the lessons I learned along the way. Several of my former students continue to check in with me about their goals and intellectual development, and I have also had the opportunity to involve my students in some of my research projects. At this moment I ask New York State legislators to consider the world-renowned academic pedigree of the City University of New York as well as the need for a diverse cohort of academics and leaders to confront the challenges of the years to come. I am a rhetorician by trade and SEEK creates the opportunity for me not only to support students with small class sizes and sustained attention to their development, but also share with them the best of the rhetorical tradition. Every day I teach my students to address their audience with respect, consider the viewpoint of the other side, and to use language ethically and with moral discernment. In turn, they go on to model these values to their peers, professional associates, and especially their classmates. In difficult times, SEEK students embody our program's values everywhere they go. This is another way in which our program provides an invaluable benefit to our state.

Finally, there is the financial benefit that SEEK provides our students, which ripples out into their families and communities and helps them build a solid foundation for the future. Our students have both short-term and long-term financial needs. In the short term, they often experience food and housing insecurity and help their parents with bills and groceries. SEEK provides a cushion which helps them focus on their studies and pay sustained attention to intellectual pursuits. In the long term, our students often lack the intergenerational wealth which would enable them to otherwise take risks in their careers and pursue homeownership. Many of my peers in the professoriate are struggling to buy houses in New York City this year, and when I first joined SEEK, I was awed and amazed to learn that one of our alumni had recently purchased her first house before turning 30! As you can see, the support we give our students creates benefits far beyond a given semester, and echoes throughout their lives far into the future.

Brevity is not my strong suit. I apologize for the length of this letter, and I also apologize that time and space will not permit me to fully convey the value of SEEK. I teach students every fall that the great Shirley Chisholm often said that the SEEK program was her proudest accomplishment in the NYS legislature. I implore all of you to heed her words today and maintain level funding for SEEK in the present.

Best,

Dr. Walter Lucken IV