

## CHAPTER 2.

# “HUMAN BEINGS ENGAGING WITH IDEAS”: THE 1960s SEEK PROGRAM AS A PRECURSOR MODEL OF ECOLOGICAL AND SOCIOCULTURAL WRITING PEDAGOGY AND ASSESSMENT

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**Research Problem:** Newly developed theoretical models of ecological assessment and sociocultural validity urge administrators and teachers to expand writing assessment goals beyond fairness and toward social justice. But application of these dense theories can be challenging without concrete models in which they have been successfully applied to real college programs.

**Research Questions:** How does the 1960s’ SEEK desegregation program at City College help us to better understand theories of ecological and sociocultural assessment? How do these assessment models help us to better understand SEEK’s racial and social justice goals and practices?

**Literature Review:** I ground this history in the larger civil rights struggle to desegregate America’s white colleges during the 1960s. I also bring forward objective and subjective theories of writing assessment that have developed (often in tension) within the educational measurement and Writing Studies fields over the last four decades. I focus on the ecological and sociocultural models that have rapidly developed within both fields since 2010.

**Methodology:** This is an archival micro-history and case study, documented with oral histories, some of which have been published on YouTube and are now being curated at the CUNY Digital History Archive. This combination of sources provides a poly-vocal

view of the interplay between the City College ecology, the SEEK ecology, the ecologies of individual writing classrooms, and the individual learning ecologies of several SEEK students.

**Conclusions:** The 1960s City College SEEK Program offers a useful example of a precursor program that consciously employed elements of presently emerging ecological and sociocultural theories and practices in its pedagogy and assessment with the express goal of fighting for racial and social justice.

**Qualifications:** SEEK is only one precursor model. It was grounded in the unique circumstances of its time and place. Recovery of the SEEK story fifty years later offers a partial view of all these ecologies. Much remains lost; memories have faded and many of the original SEEK leaders and teachers have already passed away, including Leslie Berger, Anthony Penale, Toni Cade Bambara, Barbara Christian and Addison Gayle.

**Directions for Further Study:** Further research into SEEK may provide a fuller account of this seminal program. Additional case studies of teaching and writing programs that have used forms of ecological and sociocultural assessment to seek social justice may yield both expanded theorization and a deeper understanding of those cases.

In the 1950s, Marvina White grew up in the Dyckman Houses projects on the northern tip of Manhattan. Always a good girl and a diligent student, Marvina loved her integrated neighborhood public elementary school until one day in third grade when she struggled to read a badly faded mimeograph.<sup>1</sup> Suddenly, Marvina's teacher lashed out at her: "Stand up, Stupid, and go to the back of the classroom! All you Negroes need to move back to Harlem!" Unable to understand her teacher's racism, the seven-year-old walked to the back of the room as instructed; but then she "burst into tears and ran down to the principal's office to try to confess" (White, January 25, 2015, p. 419).

After that day, Marvina was always plagued by self-doubts related to her race. "That moment though never really kind of left me. . . . I think, actually there was always a little bit of doubt implanted in me, around my being less than and maybe not really as smart or not as capable—and maybe I didn't really belong, maybe we shouldn't have been in the classroom . . ." (p. 419). When

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1 In addition to providing her video oral history in 2015 as part of my dissertation project, Marvina White kindly reviewed and commented on a draft of this chapter (email communication, November 21, 2016). She suggested using her first name throughout (email communication, November 29, 2016).

Marvina was eleven, it became her job to cook dinner for her family every night and “school took a back seat pretty much” (p. 418). Somewhere along the way, Marvina’s schools labeled her “as an underachiever” (p. 422).

I was a student who was kind of winging it, trying to manage, taking care of my brother, cooking food, making sure groceries were in, doing the laundry. . . . I was squeezing in my school work some kind of way for the most part. I was always looking for a way to save myself, this much I know. (pp. 421-422)

In high school, Marvina worked afternoons and weekends at a shoe store and saved her own money for college. But her parents had both dropped out of high school and her father had joined the merchant marine when he was fifteen. They expected their daughter to get married and feared that college would harm her chances. They refused to sign any loan forms and they even confiscated Marvina’s savings from her shoe store job as a rent payment.

Marvina graduated from high school with an academic diploma, but her grades were too low for the free but exclusive four-year colleges within the City University of New York system (CUNY) and she had no way to pay for any other college (White, email communication, January 27, 2015).

## RACIAL EXCLUSION ACROSS AMERICAN COLLEGES

If Marvina White had been born two years earlier, she would have been excluded from CUNY’s four-year colleges—and likely from any college, as had always been true for the vast majority of black students in America. We now designate historically black colleges and universities as HBCUs and Alexandria Lockett (2016) argues we should refer to all other colleges and universities as historically white, or HWCUs. But in 1964, racial exclusion within American higher education was not yet historical. A decade earlier, the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* had unanimously struck down racial segregation in public schools. “In these days it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education” (*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954, p. 493). In a 1956 Manhattan speech, Martin Luther King Jr. had praised *Brown* as a “glorious daybreak to end the long night of human captivity” (1956, p. 472). But King had warned that there would be defiant and determined resistance to integration, not only in its “glaring and conspicuous” southern forms, but also in its “hidden and subtle” northern forms (1956, p. 475).

In the decade after *Brown*, in line with King’s warning, northern and southern

white colleges all resisted racial integration, but in very different ways. Southern public colleges defiantly defended their systems of overt racial exclusion. Northern colleges rationalized their more subtle *de facto* racial exclusion through their uncritical acceptance of high school grades and SAT scores as “the best basis for evaluating a student’s potential for academic success,” even though these standards excluded most black students (Ballard, 1973, p. 81). In 1960, there were only 70,000 black students at all American white colleges, comprising only 2.4% of the total enrollment of 2.8 million. But African-Americans constituted close to 13% of the college age population, such that their equal proportional representation in white colleges should have been 364,000 (Molloy, 2016).

By early 1965, this racial exclusion was nowhere as glaringly obvious or as deeply and sadly ironic as at the campus of the City College of New York, which sat on a northern Manhattan hilltop looking down to the east across Harlem. Founded as a free public academy in 1847, City was by far the oldest college within the newly formed CUNY system and its reputation had been brightly burnished by its history of struggles for social justice. Yet even in the spring of 1965, City was overwhelmingly white (Ballard, 2014). Each day, the excluded black and brown sons and daughters of Harlem, Manhattanville and Hamilton Grange continued to watch streams of white students emerge from the subway entrances and climb the hill to City’s cloistered, hilltop towers.

But tensions were mounting. On the morning of July 16, 1964, James Powell—a fifteen-year-old, black middle-school student—was shot twice and killed by a white policeman outside Manhattan’s Robert Wagner Junior High School where Powell was attending summer classes (Jones, 1964). Three days later residents rallied on 125<sup>th</sup> Street to protest Powell’s death and a crowd gathered in front of the 123<sup>rd</sup> Street Precinct. The New York Police Department summoned reinforcements, barricaded the block and fired shots into the air. The protests then erupted into nine days of Harlem riots, all in the shadow of City’s hilltop campus (Montgomery & Clines, 1964). On February 21, 1965, Malcolm X was assassinated by black gunmen in the Audubon Ballroom at 165<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway, only twenty-five blocks north of City. On March 8, 1965, New Yorkers watched on television with the rest of the nation as Alabama state troopers and volunteer policemen tear-gassed and attacked peaceful protesters in Selma. The editor of *The New York Amsterdam* repeatedly accused City College of being “about as lily white . . . as the University of Mississippi” (Hicks, May 9, 1964, p. 9; cited in Blintz, March 18, 1965, pp. 1-2).

In the fall of 1965, City finally launched a “Pre-baccalaureate” (Pre-Bac) desegregation and social justice program which admitted 113 mostly black and Puerto Rican students from the surrounding communities and provided them with financial support, counseling, and a special teaching program that prepared

these new students to bridge into the mainstream college. All the 1965 Pre-Bac students had family annual incomes below \$5,000 (Levy & Berger, November, 1965; Levy, February 23, 1966). After a successful pilot year, the Pre-Bac program was renamed SEEK, meaning the Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge. SEEK received \$1.4 million in New York State and CUNY funding and it expanded across CUNY (Bowker, August 15, 1966). Marvina White applied and was accepted as one of City’s 190 Fall 1966 incoming SEEK students.

Fifty years later, Marvina’s face lights up as she remembers her first college class, a SEEK summer writing course taught by Barbara Christian:

there were probably about eight or nine of us in the room. Barbara assigned a couple of books: *Native Son*, *Invisible Man*. We listened to her; we read those books; . . . [it was] exciting as she walked around the room talking to us, looking us in our [eyes]. (White, January 25, 2015, p. 420)

For Marvina, “the whole experience was just one of human beings engaging with ideas” (p. 420). Christian responded to Marvina’s specific ideas about the readings, an experience she had never had before. The class had no grades:

It was really read, talk, write, listen to what the teacher thinks about what you’re saying, look at how you might write this paper better, look at how well you did this, whatever that particular thing was. But it was the most human experience I’ve ever had in the classroom. It was also everything I imagined college to be, everything, including the teacher. (p. 421)

## **SEEK AS A PRECURSOR MODEL OF ECOLOGICAL AND SOCIOCULTURAL WRITING ASSESSMENT**

Formal calls for “ecological” models of writing assessment date back at least to 1988, when Catherine Lucas Keech recognized the harmful effects of writing tests on teaching and learning and called for “ecologically, pedagogically and psychometrically sound evaluation” for writing at all school levels, even as she also scoffed at “the old, naïve idiosyncrasy in teacher responses to student writing” (1988a, p. 16). Keech suggested “a new synthesis of internal and external, qualitative and quantitative assessment” (1988b, p. 5).

Keech’s ecological model idea at first received little attention. Instead, writing assessment theory was trapped for decades within what Brian Huot in 2002 called the “positivist philosophy” of classical test theory, which assumed “that student ability in writing, as in anything else, is a fixed, consistent, and acontext-

tual human trait” (p. 83). Huot traced this theory back to psychometric research begun in the 1920s. This was a troubling foundation because those early testing researchers shamefully bent “objective” findings to serve overtly racist ends (Elliot, 2005; Kamenetz, 2015). While recognizing that “assessment must be a multi-disciplinary enterprise,” Huot also believed that “teachers and students need to have the most input about writing assessment and all important teaching decisions” (2002, p. 2). He also observed that writing assessment models continued to conflate fairness with mere reliability: “there is nothing within current assessment procedures which addresses, let alone ensures, fairness” (2002, p. 88).

Over the last thirty years or more, many writing teachers have resisted reductive writing assessment models that often employed timed multiple-choice or essay tests. Teachers instead developed portfolio assessment models (Huot, 2002; Kelly-Riley, 2011; Yancey, McElroy, & Powers, 2013). At SUNY Stony Brook in the mid-1980s, Peter Elbow and Patricia Belanoff replaced timed exit tests with portfolios as writing course assessments—arguing that timed tests failed to capture the robust nature of the construct of writing. Their portfolios included three revised essays, a reflective essay, and a timed, unrevised essay (1986). Elbow and Belanoff’s system was not perfect; they compromised individual teacher agency and acceded to objectivist assessment theories by requiring that course grades be ratified by other teacher/readers in mid-semester and semester-end mandatory teacher group review sessions. But in practice, the groups deferred to teacher grades 90% of the time (1986). Elbow and Belanoff reported that their teachers retained “almost complete power over grades” and many teachers assessed writing less often, grading fewer papers and offering more “useful comments” (1986, pp. 337-338).

Over the last two decades, digital portfolios have become increasingly common (Yancey, McElroy, & Powers, 2013) as writing teachers have recognized a “digital imperative” to teach new forms of composing and persuading (Clark, 2010). Eportfolios have challenged “our basic notions of . . . linear, verbal, single author texts” (Herrington & Moran, 2009, p. 2) and have created “a new exigence for assessment” grounded in a “new vocabulary, a new set of practices, and a new theory congruent with the affordances that eportfolios offer” (Yancey, McElroy, & Powers, 2013, p. 3). Over roughly the same time, writing assessment theory has embraced a broader view of fairness as a central concern, including the politics and negative consequences of testing on teaching and learning (Cheng & Curtis, 2004; Hillocks, 2002; Soliday, 2002) as well as the disparate impacts of assessment systems (Inoue, 2012; Inoue & Poe, 2012; Poe, Elliot, Cogan, & Nurudeen, 2014; Shor, 1997).

Despite advances in theory, old writing assessment models remain pow-

erfully entrenched. In Toth’s thorough survey of the development of directed self-placement practices in two-year colleges (Chapter 4, this collection), she observes that up to 99% of them have not adopted DSP models despite their clear advantages. Gomes maps a multiple-choice-test writing placement system used by a doctoral university where it unfairly targets international, multilingual students (Chapter 7, this collection). Karen S. Nulton and Irvin Peckham gather studies showing that a rising focus on accountability has pushed writing assessment at the K–12 level toward shallow tools and arbitrary cut-scores, with 47 of 50 states employing either multiple choice or timed, on-demand writing tests or both (Chapter 9, this collection).

Elliot sees troubling traces of objectivist Platonism surviving even in the 2014 AERA *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*, which often adores the abstract as it dismisses the material (Elliot, 2015). Elliot also castigates the 2014 *Standards* for continuing a tradition of denigrating teacher research and assessment, appearing to believe that teachers “lack rigor, intelligence or both” (2015, p. 582). The 2014 *Standards* add a new fairness chapter “to emphasize accessibility and fairness as fundamental issues in testing” (AERA, 2014), and Elliot argues that fairness is the principal concern of the 2014 *Standards*, “including technical properties of tests, reporting and use, elements impacting interpretation, and consequences of test use” (2015, p. 678).

As fairness has become a more central concern in writing assessment, interest in ecological models has grown and the writing assessment field has begun to reexamine “its own complicity in reproducing structures of social inequality” (Toth, Chapter 4, this collection). In 2010, the AERA annual meeting chose “Understanding Complex Ecologies in a Changing World” as its theme and AERA president Carol Lee challenged her colleagues to replace static, deficit models of learning with an approach that centered “diversity within and across ecological contexts” (Lee, 2010, pp. 643-644). Lee proposed a complex model in which individual learning ecologies are shaped by an interwoven “braid” of biological and cultural influences that in turn produce adaptive responses through multiple pathways—all of which are further shaped by interdependent levels of context (2010). In Lee’s model, each person’s learning ecology is a complex, dynamic and self-organizing “system of perceiving, feeling and thinking” which is shaped by individual personality, shifting senses of efficacy, assumed identities, ways of learning and using language, ranges of relationships, available resources, accrued and constructed knowledge, and bodily health (2010, p. 644). Lee even argued that studying “how . . . learning unfolds in the rich fullness of the ecologies of [people’s] lives is the quintessential purpose of a science of learning” (2010, p. 653).

In 2012, Wardle and Roozen argued for “ecological” writing program as-

assessment models that combine different research methods and voices to provide a “fuller, richer account” (p. 107). That same year, Inoue and Poe defined ecological models as employing writing assessments that are conscious of “the entire system, environment, and even agents” involved as well as the “shaping effects” of “various racial, socioeconomic, gender, and other sociopolitical formations” (2012, pp. 3-4). In 2015, Inoue further defined ecologies as organic, mutually constitutive and livable systems of change and action and White, Elliot and Peckham adopted a central ecological metaphor in their treatise on writing program assessment, recognizing “the need for a system of conceptualization that yields robust understanding of construct representation, affords a systems analysis framework to engage complex interactions, anticipates threats to the system, and allows planning within the local environment to achieve sustainable development and growth” (p. 32). Arguing for “humility” in assessment theory, White, Elliot and Peckham’s ecological framework also recognized that “only an informed instructor, watching a student develop over time, can hope to make a valid claim about the totality of the writing ability of that student” (2015, p. 32).

Educational Testing Service scholar Robert J. Mislevy now proposes adopting a “situated, sociocognitive perspective on learning” for educational assessment (2016, p. 267). Building on and expanding Messick’s view of construct validity, and echoing Lee’s complex ecological model of learning, Mislevy argues for a more robust construct validity (especially for more complex tasks) by considering “the interplay among” individual cognitive processes, social practices and interactions among people and things, and larger linguistic, cultural and substantive patterns (2016, p. 268). This interplay requires some individualized focus on each student’s “past experiences [which are] continually assembled, adapted, and revised to make meaning and guide action in each new situation” (Mislevy, 2016, p. 268). Mislevy recognizes that reliance on many larger cultural patterns may be “tacit” and asserts that his model would make them visible. Evaluating more complex tasks would require consideration of students’ “physical capabilities, language proficiency, requisite knowledge, cultural background, and familiarity with interfaces, genres, and evaluation standards” (Mislevy, 2016, p. 267). Mislevy believes that considering the interplay of these three cognitive/social/cultural domains is especially important where “advances in digital technology enable us to evoke, capture, evaluate, share, and integrate information ever more widely and rapidly” (2016, p. 265).

In support of their critical framing of ecological assessment, Inoue and Poe (2016) also endorse a “sociocultural model of validity.” They directly probe the tacit cultural assumptions of powerful agents within schools and assessment systems, challenging illusions of objectivity that conceal subjective agendas.



“Deflection of agents in conventional validity theory creates the illusion of objectivity. Decisions are objectified, leaving the outcomes to the individuals who experience the personal responsibility of assessment” (p. 118). Instead they see all validity arguments as “rhetorical in nature” and therefore subjective—grounded in “particular worldviews, values and dispositions” (p. 118). Similarly, J. W. Hammond and Keith L. Harms both warn us to be vigilant against the subtle, sincere, well-meaning forms of myopic “progressive racism” that have within the last century grounded deeply harmful monolingual and error-centric writing pedagogies (Chapters 1 and 2, this collection).

Inoue and Poe (2016) insist that “validity inquiries are not bloodless undertakings; the cares and concerns of people must be included among the claims, warrants and qualifications” (p. 119). And in order to resist “false objectivity,” they urge colleges to include “student and teacher voices in classroom and program assessment” (p. 119). They also argue that even a broad view of fairness is not a sufficient goal for assessment theory. Justice must be a distinct goal of the writing assessment community and they urge us to view social justice and fairness as “mutually beneficial projects” (pp. 118-119).

As a desegregation program within a white college, SEEK’s social justice goal was clearly understood: to prepare and empower previously excluded students to succeed to their maximum potential within a demanding and often hostile environment—even as conservative forces mounted determined resistance. Fifty years later, I suggest here that we can study SEEK as a precursor program that: 1) built a new ecological learning and assessment model within City College; 2) directly considered the interplay of individual, social and cultural domains in evaluating its students; 3) embraced a subjective, individualized approach that empowered writing teachers and students; and 4) openly critiqued and challenged the tacit, objectivist cultural assumptions that distorted student assessments at City College and across all university systems.

## **BALLARD AND BERGER SHAPE SEEK**

Although many hands shaped and supported SEEK, political scientist Allen B. Ballard and clinical psychologist Leslie Berger were its principal founders, leaders and theorists. Ballard had attended a black grade school in segregated Philadelphia (Ballard, 2011). He had then felt the isolation and pressures of being one of the first black undergraduates at Kenyan College (Ballard, 1973). Even in 1961, the University of Virginia withdrew a faculty position interview as soon as Ballard called to warn them he was black (Ballard, 2011). As a victim of racism and as a political scientist and historian whose early work focused on the Soviet Union, Ballard was adept at discerning and attacking the cultural biases and

racism hidden within “neutral” college assessment systems.

As a boy growing up in 1930s Austria, Berger watched his mother forced to sew yellow silk stars on their family’s clothes. Anti-Semitic abuses steadily escalated; in the spring of 1944, Berger was interned in Nazi concentration camps where his parents and almost his entire family were murdered before he was liberated in May of 1945 (Berger, n.d.). After the war, Berger immigrated to America and worked in a Brooklyn handbag factory during the day while he learned enough English to pass his night classes at Brooklyn College. In 1957, Berger earned his doctorate in clinical psychology and personality theory at the University of Michigan. He worked for a year as an instructor and staff psychologist at a University of Pittsburgh clinic and then spent three years as a staff psychologist and administrator at a Veterans Administration hospital in Montrose, New York. Berger began teaching courses at Brooklyn College in 1959. Like Ballard, Berger began teaching at City College in 1961. In 1963, he was board certified in clinical psychology (Berger, 1976).

As a clinical psychologist, Berger assessed patients one at a time. In 2010, Revelle, Wilt and Condon noted that “[c]linical psychology has always been concerned with individual differences” (p. 10). They observed that differential analysis deeply influenced all psychologists in the 1960s, following the influential work of Raymond Cattell and Hans Eysenck, who “emphasized individual differences broadly conceived . . . [attempting ] to integrate physiological, emotional, cognitive and societal influences on human behavior” (p. 8). As a Holocaust survivor, working-class immigrant, and clinical psychologist, Berger was well suited to develop an individualized, subjective student assessment system that also critiqued the social and cultural influences on academic success or failure in an unjust and often cruel world.

Together, Ballard and Berger focused on the individual differences of SEEK students as they critiqued and rejected the biases, myopia, and false assumptions embedded within static, “objective” academic standards that wrongly excluded or stigmatized many students as inferior. In effect, they called for and used what Mislevy, Inoue, and Poe now call a “sociocultural model of validity,” grounded in a subjective and interactive model of individual learning that anticipated Lee’s 2010 learning ecology model. These ecological and sociocultural models call for attention to the interactions between the ecologies of individual learners and the ecologies of cultures and educational systems. Ballard (the political scientist and historian) focused his critique on systemic and cultural biases while Berger (the clinical psychologist) attacked traditional admissions and instructional standards as incompetent and biased constructs of college potential—in large part because they could not measure the complex interplay of the individual, social, and cultur-

al causes of academic failure.

## **BALLARD AND BERGER CHALLENGE EXCLUSIONARY ADMISSIONS STANDARDS**

In his 1973 book, *The Education of Black Folk*, Ballard argued bluntly that the exclusion of black students from white colleges was deliberate and structural—part of a larger, century-long pattern of racism in American education that he traced in detail. College systems had “a duty to redress that historical imbalance” even where such redress required admission of students “ill-prepared both intellectually and financially” because that “educational imbalance [was] built upon a long history of injustice” that could not “easily be destroyed” and which also required more than mere “[p]eripheral attention” to entering students who were “suffering the consequences of that injustice” (p. 75). Rather, Ballard advised that “[e]very program should meet each student at his own level and lead him as far as possible academically without premature penalties or experiences of failure” (p. 98).

In a series of articles and speeches, Berger (1966) argued that high school transcripts and SAT tests unfairly reflected “middle-class cultural experience” and failed to identify disadvantaged applicants with potential college ability (p. 1). Rather, the best way to assess college ability was also the most direct measure: challenging students to perform college-level work (Berger, 1966). At the heart of Berger’s critique was his deconstruction of the complex, real-world causes of academic failure. He recognized that successful high school GPAs “usually” indicated the presence of ability, motivation, adequate study skills, and a supportive environment. But, he observed that low GPAs could be caused by deficiencies in “any or all of these variables” (1968, p. 382; see also Berger, 1969b). Moreover, they could also reflect “the inadequacies of our social and educational system,” or psychological or cultural characteristics (Berger, 1969a, p. 9). College admissions standards that focused on high school GPAs ignored “the educational and environmental realities of our poverty areas” in which “slum conditions and large city public schools have operated to prevent students from reaching their potential” (Berger, 1969b, p. 2).

Although he did not use assessment theory terminology, Berger essentially argued that admissions standards had weak construct validity in attempting to predict college potential. In this way, Berger directly anticipated Inoue’s recent call for complex and racism-aware constructs of failure that avoid “naturalizing and reifying” test scores and which instead recognize the complex causes of failure, including the roles of schools and teachers (Inoue, 2014). Indeed, for those students who bore the weight of racial and economic injustice, Berger argued

in essence that no combination of available admissions criteria could have robust predictive value; all such measures therefore unjustly excluded promising students. Instead, Berger argued that college potential could only be predicted through a “protracted and individualized college entrance process, in which a student’s educability can be assessed according to his actual performance under favorable conditions” (1968, p. 383).

Berger and Ballard’s theoretical challenges to admissions standards were directly reflected in SEEK’s actual admissions practices. In 1965, Ballard, Berger, and mathematician Bernard Sohmer carefully selected the 113 pilot program students; they cared little about SAT scores and searched within individual high school grades for some sign of intellectual “sparkles” (Ballard, 2014; Berger, 1969b). Most students were recruited through community agencies near City College, including “Haryou-Act, local Y’s, and . . . the educational committee of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico” as well as high school counselors (Levy & Berger, 1965, p. 19). But as Berger expanded his attacks on admissions standards and as SEEK spread across CUNY’s colleges, SEEK admissions soon became fully open. In the Fall of 1967, virtually all eligible applicants were accepted (Berger, 1968a). Then, as applications rose beyond available places, “we shifted to a totally random method of selection, and that’s the method we have continued to use” (Berger, 1969b, p. 5).

## **SEEK’S ECOLOGY OF CHALLENGE, CREATIVE TEACHING, AND HOLISTIC SUPPORT**

Once SEEK students had been admitted, Ballard and Berger designed a bridge program that was academically challenging, yet also holistically supportive and student-centered. Recognizing that social and cultural forces often caused student failure, SEEK offered financial support, counseling and tutoring—all to “develop an attitude in the student that will enable him to find pleasure in educational accomplishment and that will provide him with a reasonable expectancy of achieving professional status after graduation” (Berger, 1966, p. 3). In December of 1967, SEEK also began an employment development program that placed 600 SEEK students into summer jobs, including a training program at CBS News that led to full-time jobs and careers (Berger, 1968a; Covington, June 8, 2015; Wiltshire, November 20, 2015). To directly address the psychological and emotional harms of racism, SEEK students also met weekly with psychological counselors. In 1968, Ballard explained that the “[counseling] program remains the primary instrument for communication between the students and the college. The [counselors] perform the functions of faculty advisor, personal advisor, and [dispenser] of stipends to the students” (p. 8). In 1968, Berger

credited the counselors with promoting student success by successfully “individualizing the college experience for each student” and by reducing “frustration and failure” (1968a, p. 76).

SEEK’s holistic support services were similar to other educational opportunity bridge/support programs developed during the 1960s, including the federal CAMP and Special Services for Disadvantaged Students programs (now SSS/TRIO). But SEEK was also a semi-independent teaching program/department that developed its own course structures and bottom-up pedagogies. Berger theorized academic success as a mutual responsibility controlled in part by teachers and colleges—a critical stance which often required the college and faculty to change to meet students’ needs. If students were not succeeding, SEEK teachers were “expected to question themselves and explore different approaches” (1968, p. 386). This critical, bottom-up approach empowered teacher and student voices and required innovation. Berger saw SEEK as “a challenging experiment in creative teaching” (1966, p. 3).

Ballard and Berger were under extraordinary pressure to report almost constant programmatic assessments to CUNY faculty and administrators, New York legislators, and community groups (Berger, 1968a). Berger recognized the need for “continuous evaluation”; but he argued that SEEK should employ “research and assessment only insofar as they do not rigidify the program’s growth and development,” including “an atmosphere of openness in which classroom teachers and counselors alike can be encouraged to systematically explore and develop new approaches” (1968a, p. 75). Berger and Ballard’s reports focused on direct metrics of actual success: “retention rates, number of credits earned and grade average” (Ballard, 1968; Berger, 1968a, 1969c). Their use of criterion validity avoided creating any metrics that were external to the normal workings of the academic system and in essence deferred to faculty assessments as reflected within course grades across the curriculum. As a desegregation and bridge program, SEEK’s clear mission was to prepare its students to succeed in the mainstream college by persisting in their studies and meeting the collective expectations and judgments of the entire faculty. Berger and Ballard measured their programmatic success through the direct criteria of that student persistence and collective faculty judgment.

## **WRITING TEACHERS SHAPE SEEK**

SEEK’s writing courses were critical to its success. “The writing program was the essence of it” (Ballard, 2014, p. 413). Ballard and Berger knew nothing about writing instruction and they relied on writing teachers to develop successful, supportive and challenging pedagogies, course structures, and writing assess-

ments. At the same time, SEEK's new ecology did not develop in a vacuum; the SEEK writing teachers also reported to the conservative English Department and its chair, Edmond Volpe. Moreover, SEEK was a bridge program and the SEEK writing teachers knew they had to prepare their students to succeed within the larger, often hostile ecology of the mainstream college.

In 1965, Volpe assigned Anthony Penale, a 50-year-old lecturer who had taught night classes for several years, to be the first SEEK English director. Within the department and to his students, Penale was a "legendary" and "extraordinary" grammar teacher (Molloy, 2016, p. 505; see also Charlton, 1996). Volpe also hired the 26-year-old Toni Cade Bambara, who had just completed her master's degree at City College (Zeichner, 1965, October 7). In fall 1965, Penale and Bambara taught writing to all 113 SEEK students, each with two day sections and one evening section (Pre-baccalaureate, October 7, 1965). In the Spring of 1966, Penale and Bambara were joined by Barbara Christian, a 23-year-old Columbia Ph.D. student and prodigy from St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands; Christian had graduated from Marquette University in 1963 at age 19 (Molloy, 2016; Volpe, 1965). In 1966-1967 Volpe hired four more SEEK lecturers: Addison Gayle, Fred Byron, Amy Sticht, and Janet [Singer] Mayes (Mayes, 2016; Volpe, 1966). In mid-1967, Volpe hired Mina Shaughnessy as the new SEEK English director, replacing the then-ailing Penale (Shaughnessy, 1967). Other early SEEK writing teachers included David Henderson, Blanche Skurnick, and Alice Trillin (CCNY, 1968), and then June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Larry Neal, Raymond Patterson, and Adrienne Rich (CCNY, 1969; Jordan, 1981).

Berger had expected that the writing program would begin with grammar, but the SEEK writing teachers "insisted that actual writing be done" and that readings focus on "minority literature . . . in order to stimulate the students to write."<sup>2</sup> Bambara told Ballard she wanted her students to "write, write, write" (Ballard, email, September 2, 2015). Bambara, Christian, Gayle, and other SEEK writing teachers quickly developed successful individual pedagogies; they challenged—and even directly criticized—conservative forces within the English Department. The early SEEK teachers used different approaches to teach grammar; but overall, they deemphasized errors in favor of building confidence and fluency (Molloy, 2016). SEEK student Francee Covington remembers that her English classes with Christian, Bambara and Gayle were

a lot of work, but very well [worth the] effort to have what

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2 (Berger, 1969-70). Two sources from Berger's surviving files (preserved for 20 years after his death by his daughters Noelle Berger and Nicole Futterman) offer key insights into the first years of SEEK. Neither document identifies its author and I cannot tell if they were ever published or promulgated. I attribute the first as "Levy & Berger, 1965, November." I attribute the second as "Berger, 1969-70." For further explanation, see Molloy (2016) p. 67 at n.13.

is in your heart and your mind put on the paper by you and to have it critiqued, not criticized, but critiqued by someone with an enormous brain and an enormous heart like our instructors and it was an amazing experience. (Covington, June 8, 2015, p. 435)

Bambara’s “positive reinforcement” led Covington and Bambara to “be great friends.” When Covington launched a SEEK student newspaper, Bambara was its faculty advisor and contributed her own literacy narrative as an article (Bambara, 1968a). When Bambara published an anthology of black women writers, she included an essay by Covington (Covington, 1970). Covington also remembers Christian as

amazing. She was . . . a tiny person with so much knowledge and so much ability to analyze things. Not just to analyze the work that you were given or the work that you did participating in class, but giving things a larger context and “What does that mean?” “And what does this mean?” “And how does that relate to this?” “Okay, are you going to mention this as well . . . in your papers or you’re going to take a different stand?” (Covington, June 8, 2015, p. 435)

SEEK student Eugenia Wiltshire remembers: “all of these SEEK teachers were young, but they were so knowledgeable, and they taught in a way that was just easy to absorb. They were communicators, they weren’t instructors and they didn’t tell us what to think . . .” (Wiltshire, November 20, 2015, p. 449). Ballard recalls the SEEK writing pedagogy:

And those teachers meshed with the students in the sense that they took the students from where the students were, and moved them up the ladder to the point where they were ready for movement into the regular curriculum. How did they do that? They did it by first of all respecting the students—respecting the students’ background and respecting the students as individuals. And letting the students bring to the classroom, right, their own gifts and their own lives. And as the students did that, the teachers would then turn around and say . . . “Oh, it’s very good. But now, how can we make it better?” And at that point they would make it better . . . by adding in the rules of grammar, right?—and the rules of past participles and all those things that have to come in, right? They basically kind of make that on the basis of the structure

already, of the content, that had already come forth from the students. (Ballard, 2014, pp. 414-15)

Writing teachers also served as counselors and tutors. Some SEEK students could tell their writing teachers anything “that was happening” in their lives because they “had established a rapport” (Covington, June 8, 2015, pp. 434-435). Although she loved her English courses, Marvina White struggled in her first year and she found herself on probation. Marvina’s counselor, Betty Rawls, teamed up with Barbara Christian to call a meeting with Marvina’s parents to explain “what it was that [she] needed to be successful (White, January 25, 2015, pp. 422-423). In September 1967, SEEK opened a student residence hall where Marvina and many other students escaped their often difficult home circumstances. Marvina credits her teachers and the dorm as helping her to succeed and graduate. “[The] experience of living with other students and studying, actually having something called the study lounge and places we would all gather and talk about what [we were] reading or . . . gather and just do our work . . . was a dream” (White, January 25, 2015, p. 423).

## **SEEK COUNSELORS AND TEACHERS GUIDE STUDENTS’ PLACEMENT AND RETENTION CHOICES**

SEEK developed a system of course placements that combined teacher assessments with student self-placements guided by counselors. Individual programs for incoming SEEK students were developed based on placement tests administered by the academic departments and “preferences [students] expressed in personal interviews” (Levy & Berger, 1965, p. 20). In practice, the choices for incoming students were limited. For example, all Fall 1965 incoming SEEK students were placed into the same SEEK five-hour composition course. In total, the Fall 1965 SEEK students were placed into 266 sections of special SEEK courses: English Composition (113), Speech One (75), Elementary French (24), Elementary Spanish (29), and Math Review (25). They were also placed into 176 mainstream course sections: Phys. Ed (70), Art One (41), Music One (33), French and Spanish (25), and several math courses (7). Some SEEK students also were placed into “remedial reading” courses (Pre-baccalaureate, October 7, 1965).

Psychological counselors met with SEEK students weekly, including meetings to plan their course registrations for every new semester. Counselors were expected to provide “support and encouragement” and to “communicate a feeling of acceptance and respect,” but also to “assist with reality testing” (Berger, 1967, p. 2). Where students realized they had real gaps in knowledge, skills and sophistication, the counselor helped them to deal with those gaps:



The psychologist makes clear to the student that what has occurred is not the result of inferiority, worthlessness or inability. They begin to explore together ways of overcoming the academic deficiencies and they prepare a plan of action. This helps the student to reality test and encourages him by introducing the concept that his present state will pass. He is also helped to recognize his potential ability. The student must discover his limits through competitive action in this supportive environment. As the student becomes aware of his academic ability, he gains confidence in himself. (p. 5)

Berger saw this guided self-assessment as “a continuous process in which the student and the psychologist closely collaborate” (p. 2).

Within SEEK, teacher assessments were accorded substantial weight. For example, writing course placements for returning students were largely determined by their teachers’ assessments of success in previous writing courses, sometimes with input from students and the approval of the SEEK English Director. For example, in the midst of Spring 1969 student protests, only six students showed up for the final session of Adrienne Rich’s SEEK English One writing class. Four others had disappeared weeks earlier; Rich was unable to reach them and they had missed substantial work. Rich wrote to Shaughnessy, asking for help giving out summer assignments to the missing students so they could make up the incompletes. Rich graded the six students who completed the course; she sent Shaughnessy their final in-class essays and urged that one student be allowed to skip English Two. A second student had asked to skip English Two and Rich passed on the request to Shaughnessy. A handwritten note on Rich’s letter suggests Shaughnessy approved one skip and denied one. Rich also recommended that two other passing students receive “intensive grammar” tutorials in the fall and she noted that she also planned to work with them over the summer (Rich, Summer, 1969 ).

SEEK’s ongoing effort to craft individualized programs through consultation between students, counselors and teachers anticipated Daniel Royer and Roger Gilles’ 1996 directed self-placement writing course system at Grand Valley State University. DSP programs have proliferated in various forms since then as a means to promote student agency and recognize the human complexities underlying course selection (Isaacs & Molloy, 2010; Royer & Gilles, 1998). But SEEK’s DSP model extended beyond initial writing course placements to all courses and all semesters, based on a continuing conversation among students, counselors, teachers and administrators that both guided and empowered students. This system even gave students agency over leaving the program. If

“sufficient evidence [became] available indicating that a student [was] not educable on the college level,” SEEK counselors could help the student to develop an “alternative vocational objective” (Berger, 1967, p. 3). In this way, students effectively decided their own college potential based on their experience of attempting challenging work within a supportive environment, guided by sympathetic counselors and teachers who were dedicated to their success.

## THE CONSERVATIVE ECOLOGY OF CITY’S ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

The challenges faced by the SEEK writing lecturers were heightened because they were also supervised by City’s English Department, which in 1965 continued to espouse a first-year writing pedagogy that had been long mired in shallow, sentence-level formalism. City’s faculty had always cared about grammar and sentence-correctness, but composing and rhetorical instruction there had once been far richer and deeper. James Berlin credits the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century works of George Campbell, Hugh Blair, and Richard Whately as completely dominating “thinking on rhetoric in America” and as being “overwhelmingly dominant in American colleges” throughout the nineteenth century (Berlin, 1984, pp. 19, 34). The influence of Campbell and Blair is visible in the early City rhetoric course textbooks, such as the widely popular Samuel P. Newman’s *A Practical System of Rhetoric*. City’s students studied Whately directly in their logic classes (CCNY, 1855).

Rhetoric and writing instruction within American college English departments was reduced between 1875 and 1925 in three critical ways. First, oral and written composing, rehearsing and performing exercises were reduced to written composing. Second, frequent composing study and practice were limited to one or two courses. Third, complex rhetorical constructs of composing devolved to focus solely on style and sentence mechanics within reductive writing “modes” that merely narrated, explained or described. These stylistic rhetorics often devolved further to focus mainly on correcting sentence errors and completing grammar drills (Berlin, 1984; Connors, 1997). City College followed this larger pattern. By 1920, rhetoric and logic study across the curriculum was reduced to style and grammar study within two writing courses, English One and English Two; this structure remained unchanged until 1965. City’s 1920 Register described English One as a

laboratory course consisting of work done in class without home preparation, and with discussion and explanation of the principles involved. Frequent personal conferences with the

instructor will require extra time from the student. Credit for the course will not be given until a student can write grammatically and spell correctly. (CCNY, 1920, p. 94)

In 1930, a new zero-credit English Five course covered solely the “mechanics of correct writing.” This course was prescribed “for students who do not obtain a grade of C or better in English 1, and for such others as are reported to need the instruction” (CCNY, 1930). Although the English Department tweaked them over the next 35 years, these first-year writing courses remained in place until 1965.

In 1965, just as City began to admit significant numbers of black and brown students, a new aversion to teaching writing courses among English Department faculty and increased doubts about student abilities were reflected in several changes to the writing program. The faculty approved an English department proposal that eliminated English Two and reduced required writing courses to a single semester (CCNY, 1965a). The department then designed the remaining required writing course (English One) to focus on grammar instruction. English One teachers were urged to use Joseph Blumenthal’s 1962 workbook, *English 3200: A Programmed Course in Grammar and Usage* (CCNY, 1965b). Periodic grammar tests were suggested as a way to prepare students for similar grammar questions on the department’s mandated final exam (CCNY, 1965b). For good measure, the department then approved a new high-stakes grammar final exam section for all first-year writing courses. Students who failed the grammar test would automatically fail the writing courses (CCNY, 1965c).

Volpe also segregated the non-tenure track SEEK lecturers. For two years, he did not allow other English faculty members even to volunteer to teach SEEK classes. Only in March of 1967 did Volpe propose “permitting regular members of the department to teach in [SEEK] on a voluntary basis” as other departments had already done (CCNY, 1967a, p. 2). Gayle believed that the English Department had employed a strategy “to minimize contact between whites and [blacks] in an educational setting. It created a special branch of the department and hired a special staff of [black] teachers” while it discouraged both white applicants and regular faculty from teaching in SEEK (Gayle, 1971, p. 55). A decade later, Gayle recalled that SEEK lecturers had been “regarded as pariahs not only by the general faculty, but by the English Department to which we were assigned. We were given no office space, barred from serving on department committees, segregated at one far end of the campus” (Gayle, 1977, p. 115).

Not all English faculty subscribed to the official basic skills pedagogy, the new

exam, or the segregation of the SEEK teachers. Eugenia Wiltshire remembers learning process writing from Eve Merriam (Wiltshire, November 20, 2015). Novelist Mark Mirsky piloted a “voice” model English One with other creative writer-teachers (CCNY, 1971). In SEEK’s third year—once volunteering was allowed—six mainstream department teachers did volunteer; but Volpe assigned SEEK classes to only three of them (Volpe, 1972).

## SEEK’S STRETCHED COURSES AND “J” GRADES

Berger knew that “remedial courses taught in a narrow context, are usually the most deadening of courses.” He believed placing students into fully remedial coursework was a failed approach that survived due only to colleges’ “vacuousness or rigidity” (Berger, 1969-1970, p. 4). Instead, most SEEK courses were credit-bearing versions of mainstream first-year requirements (Ballard, 2014). These compensatory SEEK courses had fewer students and were stretched to meet “for one or two more hours per week than regular courses covering identical material” (Berger, 1966, pp. 2-3, 1968a; see also Levy & Berger, 1965). They advanced the program’s main goals of meeting students where they were, while challenging them to tackle college-level work as quickly as possible in a supportive environment (Berger, 1968a; 1969c). By 1967–1968, City College SEEK offered “basic, stretched out credit bearing courses to students in areas of English, Speech, Reading, Mathematics, Social Studies and Romance Languages” (Ballard, 1968, p. 1). By 1966–1967, SEEK also offered “remedial” courses that corresponded to the existing zero-credit mainstream remedial courses.

Unlike the mainstream college, SEEK did not eliminate English Two. This had the effect of stretching City’s new mainstream, single-semester writing requirement across two semesters for most SEEK students. A small number of SEEK students were placed directly into the single-semester mainstream writing course. (For example, in Fall 1967, about 35 out of the 173 incoming SEEK students were placed directly into the mainstream course (Berger, 1968a).) After 1965, some SEEK students were also placed into SEEK versions of the zero-credit English Five, which extended their required SEEK writing courses to three semesters.

At City, a “J” grade had long been a substitute for “F” in some circumstances. To avoid premature experiences of failure, Ballard and Berger repurposed “J” grades to replace all “F” grades in SEEK course sections. SEEK students could fail in their mainstream courses, but not in their SEEK courses. Berger explained that where a student improved “in English, but had not the time to cover the entire content of the course, he would not be given a failing grade but would start out from the point where he left off the following semester.” A “J” grade

meant “failure to complete the course without penalty” (Berger, 1969–1970, p. 6). In effect, SEEK used these non-punitive grades to stretch individual courses across semesters when needed.

At the same time, SEEK was a bridge program that gauged itself based on the actual success of its students when they advanced to mainstream coursework. SEEK courses had to challenge students in order to prepare them for the mainstream college. The “J” grades allowed supportive teachers to maintain high grading standards without fear of pushing students towards suspension or expulsion and they used “J”s frequently. For example, among all Fall 1967 SEEK courses, students received a total of 43 A’s, 130 B’s, 162 C’s, 59 D’s, 93 P’s (for pass), 182 J’s and 21 incompletes. In all Spring 1968 SEEK courses, students received a total of 50 A’s, 134 B’s, 161 C’s, 71 D’s, 232 P’s (for pass), 275 J’s and 16 incompletes (Ballard, 1968, App I.)

The SEEK writing teachers were also both demanding and supportive. For example, Covington remembers Gayle as

a tough marker and he took pride in being a tough marker. But he was also one of the instructors that we would sit around with and have coffee with and just laugh and joke and just talk about current events. And what was going on in black America particularly, really good. (Covington, June 8, 2015, p. 436)

In Fall 1967, 326 SEEK students took SEEK writing courses and teachers assigned a total of 78 “J” grades (Ballard, 1968, App I).

SEEK’s “stretched” writing course model anticipated the core concepts and structure of the 1992 Arizona State writing course stretch-model (Glau, 1996). But SEEK stretched courses in multiple subjects and it stretched writing courses in three ways: It added extra teaching hours within semesters. It stretched the new mainstream single-semester writing requirement into two semesters. And it used “J” grades to allow individual students to stretch courses across semesters with minimized penalties.

## **RESISTING TESTING AND RETAINING TEACHER AGENCY**

In a critical act of resistance, the SEEK writing teachers did not administer the “required” departmental final exams for English Five and English One. Some SEEK teachers gave final exams in some form. But Wiltshire, looking now at the May 1967 Departmental Exam, says she never saw “this poor excuse for a test” (CCNY, 1967b; Wiltshire, email communication, January 12, 2016). Marvin White also recalls no final exams in her SEEK writing courses and she

remembers taking no grammar tests of any kind (White, email communication, January 12, 2016). SEEK instructor Mayes gave no grammar exams in her SEEK writing courses and believes none of the 1960s SEEK teachers used any high-stakes grammar tests (Mayes, June 29, 2016). While this collective refusal at first may have been informal, by 1969 it appears to have hardened into a rule that SEEK students did not take the departmental final exam (Shaughnessy, 1969). Instead, the SEEK writing teachers controlled their own course teaching and grades. Covington remembers her SEEK writing course assessments:

[W]e of course were graded on class participation, everybody aced class participation because New Yorkers love to talk, so there you go. We had smaller papers and larger papers that we had to turn in. We . . . would have quizzes, we would have exams. I don't remember [a] large final exam, I remember a final paper and papers going through the course of the entire semester and that was good, because we had pressure for final exams in our other classes. (June 8, 2015, p. 436)

This SEEK teacher resistance to the English Department's mandated assessments offers one powerful example of the complex pressures, influences and struggles between conflicting programmatic ecologies within a larger college system and their direct impact on the learning ecologies of individual students. It reinforces Inoue and Poe's (2016) argument that assessment structures are never objective nor "bloodless undertakings." These teachers' voices and actions enabled SEEK to effectively resist high-stakes writing tests with poor construct validity and a false objectivity that veiled the tacit cultural agenda of the conservative English faculty (p. 119).

The SEEK writing teachers did not teach or grade in isolation. They attended regular teacher SEEK "staff meetings" where they discussed all their students (Kreigel, 1972, p. 173). Teachers also were expected to meet at least twice a semester and to "keep in touch" with their students' counselors (Berger, 1969–1970, p. 6). They also submitted mid-semester, informal narrative progress reports about each student (CCNY, 1970, Fall; Molloy, 2012). The teacher meetings sometimes involved uncomfortable but productive discussions. In at least one case, they even produced formal teacher research. In 1966, Gayle challenged Penale to approve an anthology of black authors, prompting a discussion among the SEEK teachers as to how students might react to the new readings. Gayle then used the readings in his courses, surveyed student responses and then published an article recounting their positive reactions (Gayle, 1968).

In these ways, SEEK's collaborative ecology empowered teachers and valued their judgment while it also established a culture and practice of open, collabo-

rative, and reflective teaching that remained focused on students’ success.

## SEEK SUMMER WRITING COURSES WITH NO GRADES

Starting in 1966, the SEEK writing teachers ran summer enrichment courses. It was one of these courses that Marvinna White remembers as her perfect introduction to college. Christian saw them “as a means of experimenting with different techniques of involving the students in writing” (Christian, 1968, p. 17). These courses bore no credit and students received no grades—no conventional student assessment at all. In fall 1968, Shaughnessy led the SEEK writing teachers to prepare a 39-page “Report on the 1968 SEEK English Summer Seminar.” Shaughnessy, Christian, Bambara, Gayle, Henderson, and Byron each wrote their own course narrative reports. Christian added four student essays. Henderson added one. The bottom-up pedagogy and teacher agency within the early SEEK program was apparent as each teacher adopted a different approach and different teaching goals. But the top-down influence of SEEK’s ecology was also clear as each teacher challenged students to tackle difficult material and found ways to build their self-confidence. The only programmatic assessments were discussions among the teachers and their shared teaching narratives.

The summer of 1968 was an agonizing time. On March 31st, Lyndon Johnson, mired in the lost cause of the Vietnam War, had announced he would not run for reelection. On April 4, Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated in Memphis. In late April, Columbia University students and other protesters had occupied administration buildings and took three administrators hostage for three days. Throughout the spring, worker strikes and student protests had erupted worldwide. On June 5, Robert Kennedy was assassinated in Los Angeles.

Meeting her class for returning students in June in the SEEK dorm, Bambara asked them to craft the course themselves. They chose the theme of “Colonialism, Neo-Colonialism, and Liberation” (Bambara, 1968b, p. 10). The students often took over class discussion, which centered on dissecting rhetorics of power. Bambara described these students “as painfully aware of the gaps in their education, frantically alert to their need to establish a viable position, a stance in what for them is a daily toe-to-toe battle with the uglier elements of this country” (10). And so, she crafted a course with “few limits, no specific end, personal, often agonizing” but worthwhile because “it lends itself to two-way learning” (pp. 10-11).

Bambara’s incoming students asked for help writing book reviews, some grammar “magic tricks” to defend against “ruthless red pencil marks,” and some academic vocabulary (1968b, p. 13). Instead, she began their class with LeRoi Jones’ “Cuba Libre” essay which led the students to a theme of “lies” that they

then pursued throughout the course. Students wrote response papers and kept personal journals. In the end, Bambara regretted that these students had only started to understand “that a subject cannot be adequately addressed” in a single, quick draft. She felt the students were more enthused by “how and why language is used and what it can effect,” but she wished she had dumped her readings and instead assigned papers about the “lies” theme “over and over in various disguises so that at the end they could fuse the papers and discover what a real composition looks like, how much time, energy, thinking, initial drafts go into the paper of substance” (p. 14).

Having been told by his students that they felt “deficient” or “weak” in reading, especially the classics, Byron’s aim was to provide them with this foundation (1968, p. 5). Using a traditional literature course approach, he required the most reading and writing, teaching three short stories, *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, eight Greek plays, and three Shakespeare plays. He used two handbooks “The Study of English” and “Gods and Goddesses in Art and Legend.” He assigned five main writing assignments as well as eight critical commentaries on the plays. He supplemented the readings with his own supportive materials, including stage diagrams.

Gayle (1968b) structured his courses as a seminar on naturalistic and existential literature, with a “corollary aim” to discover weaknesses and strengths in writing skills, introduce new writing concepts, and to develop student ideas “through literature” (p. 24). Using four novels and Piri Thomas’ memoir *Down These Mean Streets*, Gayle assigned two prompted papers that asked students to compare the books and apply them to current issues. He conferred with students about their first papers, reviewing grammatical errors—most of which he reported did not recur in the second paper.

As Christian’s students often believed they had nothing to write about, her teaching goal was to help them to “see, believe, and respond to the depth and subtlety” of their own worlds (1968, p. 17). An eviction scene in Ellison’s *Invisible Man* resonated “for they had all seen evictions” and their discussion generated “a great deal of writing” (p. 17). Some began to keep and share journals, writing for their own pleasure. From these journals, some drew revised pieces wanting “to perfect this new ability” (p. 17). When the students grew interested in discussions of jazz in the readings, Christian brought in records and they listened to work songs, blues and jazz together. More excited discussion followed Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*. Students copied Cleaver’s style to write similar vignettes. Christian attached four student essays to her report; she believed that “we had just gotten started [but] the jump to more rigorous writing could be made in a few weeks” (p. 18).

The SEEK English summer enrichment courses trusted the writing teachers



to effect meaningful teaching and learning without immediate student assessment. (Indeed their teaching goals would have been difficult or impossible to directly assess.) Yet the success of their summer courses was soon evident from their students’ actual success in other courses and their progress toward graduation. After taking the 1966 summer course, Marvina White struggled throughout her first year at City. But Christian introduced Marvina to a world of new ideas:

I spent a lot of time at her apartment with other students. . . . She connected me with an editor at the Village Voice to write an article for them. I accompanied her to any number of Black Arts Movement gatherings, especially at Larry and Evelyn Neal’s brownstone, went to jazz clubs. In other words, she was much more than a teacher working with me on my writing. (White, email communication, November 21, 2016)

As a teacher and a friend, Christian built Marvina’s confidence and encouraged her to believe she had as much potential as any other student—and as much right to study at City College.

## SEEK’S SUCCESS AND INFLUENCE

The City College SEEK program was an immediate success. After one year, 72% of the 1965 incoming class was still studying at City. Over one-half had a “C” average or higher—CUNY’s minimum grade for acceptable academic performance (Berger, 1966). In Fall 1967, 62 out of 83 SEEK students who were placed into a mainstream literature class earned grades of A, B or C, and a “roughly similar pattern of achievement prevailed” in mainstream history, biology and sociology courses (Ballard, 1968, p. 1). In the Spring of 1968, 69% of the City College third-year SEEK students (40/58) had earned at least 48 college credits and 53% (31/58) had earned at least 59 credits (Berger, 1968a). From September 1965 to June 1969, City College’s average SEEK student retention rates were: one semester (91.8%), two semesters (80.7%), three semesters (72.9%), four semesters (63%), five semesters (58.4%), six semesters (50.4%) and seven semesters (46.9%) (Berger, 1969c).

SEEK quickly expanded across CUNY’s four-year colleges and its success proved to be replicable. SUNY launched its SEEK program at SUNY Buffalo in 1967 and expanded a year later to three additional SUNY colleges with a \$2 million grant (Gould, 1968). In a 1969 Milwaukee speech, Berger offered SEEK as a national model to the first convention of “Educational Opportunity Programs in Higher Education.” CUNY’s SEEK was by then “considerably larger than

any other experimental program” (1969b, p. 7). By its fourth year, SEEK grew at CUNY from a pilot program with \$125,000 in funding and 100 students to an \$8.25 million program with about 3,000 students (Berger, 1969b). In 1968–1969 alone, SEEK admitted 1,800 new CUNY students (Berger, 1969b).

Marvina White, Eugenia Wiltshire and Francee Covington all graduated from City College in less than five years. White went on to teach college writing at City College, Princeton, and Stanford for 33 years (White, 2015; Molloy, 2016). Overall, close to 40% of the City College SEEK students in the 1965, 1966, and 1967 incoming classes graduated by mid-1972 (Frost, 1972). Even Volpe was forced to admit that “if we have not been gauging intellectual potential with our admissions standards, then we are perpetuating—in a democratic society—a caste system that we have presumed was based upon natural ability and intellect but turns out to be primarily a matter of social and economic background” (Volpe, 1972, p. 767).

Berger argued that the SEEK students’ successes proved his point that college admissions assessments were invalid and that student potential could not be predicted by “past achievements.” Rather, college success depended on the abilities of each college’s teaching and counseling programs to unlock student potential (Berger 1968a). Berger’s attacks on admissions criteria and the actual successes of the SEEK students provided critical support for CUNY’s 1969 adoption of its 1970 Open Admissions program. In December of 1969, CUNY Vice Chancellor Timothy S. Healy wrote that without “SEEK the idea of open admissions would never have been born; without SEEK the operation could well fail.”

After 1970, SEEK’s impact at CUNY was astounding: within a dozen years after SEEK launched in 1965, CUNY’s student body was fully racially integrated. Despite endless battles over budget cuts and many structural changes, the SEEK program has continued to fight for social and racial justice at CUNY for fifty years.

However, the struggle for social justice in writing pedagogy and assessment at CUNY proved to be a losing battle that ended in defeat in 1978 when CUNY launched a system-wide high-stakes, minimum skills reading, writing and mathematics testing system that has remained in place in various forms for 39 years (Molloy, 2016). CUNY finally began to dismantle that testing system in 2017.

## **A MODEL FOR JUST, ECOLOGICAL AND ROBUST CONSTRUCTS OF WRITING ASSESSMENT**

As I responded to and graded the website portfolios, essays, movies and research studies composed by my first-year writing students in the fall of 2016, I found myself often quietly guided by Berger, Ballard, Bambara, Christian and Gayle.

Across the drafts, many students gradually shared their struggles with their classmates and me; as digital rhetors, some have now chosen to make their work public. I read about extended families that supported each other as they struggled to escape public housing projects. Students taught me about racism and colorism in their home communities, school communities and online in Google search engines and Instagram sites. One student traced the ways that a flawed financial aid/meal plan system traps some students into food insecurity on our campus. Immigrants and the children of immigrants described facing poverty, isolation, endless indignities and legal uncertainties. Latinas struggle to escape the gender oppression and the machista culture that immigrated here with their families. Muslims struggle with a newly rising tide of American Islamophobia. Students with autism spectrum disorder struggle to navigate an incomprehensible college website. Others struggle with absent or divorced parents, family illnesses and deaths, or their own serious health conditions. Working single moms somehow balance full-time jobs, parenting, and demanding college classes. New college students wonder why their high schools taught them only to write five-paragraph essays with a relentless focus on fixing errors rather than teaching them to create, expand, examine, and reshape their own ideas—leaving them deeply underprepared for college writing assignments.

How do I respond to all that work, both during the semester and at its end? How do I become the “informed instructor” envisioned by White, Elliot, and Peckham who, having worked with students over fourteen weeks, “can hope to make a valid claim about the totality of” their writing abilities? (2015, p. 32). How do I develop a robust assessment construct that fully appreciates all that each student has accomplished when each digital portfolio is deeply and differently shaped by individual, social and cultural struggles and constraints, including the lapses and limits of my own teaching? Accepting Inoue and Poe’s challenge to pursue justice and fairness as complementary values, how can I be both fair to all and just to each?

For me, SEEK’s founders proved it can be done. More importantly, they offer us a real example of how to do it, even in the face of entrenched opposition. In this way, SEEK helps me to understand and apply new theories of ecological and sociocultural writing pedagogy and assessment—even as these theories help me to better understand SEEK.

In a remarkably short time, this small group of teachers built and theorized a physical and pedagogical ecology of the kind that Inoue now describes as a “mutually constitutive and livable [system] of change and action” and that Bambara then more simply called “two-way learning.” SEEK assumed that every high school graduate, given the appropriate supports and challenges, has the potential to succeed in a demanding college curriculum. As such, the SEEK ecology

expelled harmful and biased myths of meritocracy and embraced the kinds of conscious structural and pedagogical supports required to work for justice. It challenged its writing teachers to balance justice and fairness by working to support and challenge each individual student to overcome the often-cruel realities of an unjust world and to develop into a critical and creative writer and scholar. SEEK's ecology both enabled and challenged its remarkable writing teachers to reject shallow and harmful writing pedagogies and assessment tools and to instead attempt the difficult and complex work of teaching and assessing writing in ways that can foster real growth, achievement, and success for each student.

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